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Navigation, Intertextuality, and In-Between Spaces: Expressions of Identity in Malika Mokeddem's *N'zid*

the first text in Malika Mokeddem's corpus to bear a title in Algerian Arabic. Connotations of the term "n'zid" as a birth, a continuation, and an evolution announce a (re)discovery of selfhood and a thematic variation on her previous works (Mokeddem 30, 160). The title's transgression of oral dialect through inscription alludes to this divergence and signals directions for reading *N'zid* as a postcolonial, feminist expression of identity. As the geographical setting for this text, the Mediterranean Sea evokes intertextual references to *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses* that promote *N'zid's* multiple perspectives. This diverse approach is at once defined and problematized through additional allusions to Arthur Rimbaud, Helene Cixous, and Abdelkebir Khatibi: writers with common ties to Algeria who explore intersections between language, identity, and self-expression. The inclusion of Western and non-Western influences in *N'zid* reflects Mokeddem's own diverse origins and reinforces certain tensions that underscore the work of many North African authors writing in French. John D. Erickson describes this narrative technique as a characteristic of nomadic thought that rejects discursive hierarchies while it cultivates a fundamental, underlying movement between selected discourses: "[T]he authors of [Maghrebian] novels seek the repossession of the poisoned wells of language through a discourse that constitutes itself on the very basis of otherness while discarding the binary other/self ..., and which neutralizes master narratives by the leveling of hegemonic discourses" (79). According to Erickson, intertextuality and "spatial and temporal disjunction" are integral components of the postcolonial or postmodern text (74-75). In *N'zid*, the protagonist Nora's lingering amnesia and solitary maritime navigation on the Mediterranean situate her in a spatio-

temporal interval that resists classification while it cultivates a fertile space for creation. Her nomadism and negotiation of certain linguistic, literary, and artistic realms allow Nora to recover from a traumatic experience, reconstruct her past memories, and reclaim her multifaceted identity.

N'zid begins in *medias res*, with a description of Nora as an anonymous woman who awakens on the deck of a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean Sea: "entre deux eaux comme un poisson harponné ... elle flotte en totale apesanteur" (between two waters like a harpooned fish ... she is floating in complete weightlessness)¹ (Mokeddem 11). This initial spatio-temporal interval ("entre deux"), and use of hotnodegesis, announce a suspended sense of instability, distance, and aporia. Resembling a *tabula rasa*, this interval offers unlimited potential for reconstruction and recalls selected narrative techniques from *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*. Nora's original inability to refer to herself in the first person seems to be symptomatic of her amnesia, since she lacks the "temporal distance between the story and the narrating instance" that, as Gerard Genette has argued, requires a narrator to rely upon retrospection (168). Nora does not begin to reclaim her lost capacity for retrospection until midway through the text. The term "deux eaux" that is used to describe the Mediterranean appears in the *Qur'an* in reference to the sea whose waters "Allah aurait séparées en creant entre elles une barrière infranchissable" (Allah would have separated by creating an impassable barrier between them) (Chebel 265-66). Allah's imposition of an impenetrable barrier separating the sea into two halves creates a symbolic juxtaposition between desirable and undesirable fluid spaces. As the figure of a harpooned fish floating in the middle of these two spaces, Nora must choose a body of water in order to ensure her continued survival. Her selection will ultimately determine her fate. At the beginning of *N'zid*, however, her amnesia and its aftereffects prevent her from making this choice. The interstice or in-between space in which Nora awakes is not static, since it carries an inherent potential for exchange, negotiation, and self-discovery that Homi K. Bhabha has described as "providing] the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood — It is in the emergence of the interstices ... that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (1-2). According to Bhabha, this space is conducive to the exploration of "a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy" (4). Open to negotiation as well as navigation,

this interstitial space "carries the burden of the meaning of culture" (38). Nora's voyage on the Mediterranean, her assumption of multiple ethnicities and identities, ability to communicate in several languages, and tripartite connections to France, Algeria, and Ireland, promote this type of unilateral cultural hybridity and reinforce her nomadic status. Her fluid sense of nationality stems from her amnesia, dehydration, and a past traumatic act whose lingering physical and psychological traces complicate her recovery. As part of the process to regain her lost memory, rediscover her own identity, and reconstruct past events, Nora attempts to identify her relationship to "J," whose mysterious, scribbled note of apology she discovers in the boat's cabin.² Using the boat's travel log and a map, Nora eventually determines her approximate geographical location and original destination at the port of Oran. Her ability to trace her past locations reinforces Nora's nomadic identity: "The nomad's identity is a map of where s/he has already been; s/he can always reconstruct it a posteriori, as a set of steps in an itinerary" (Bradiotti 14). Temporality is evoked predominantly through the effects of solar and lunar positions on color variations of the sea: "La mer occupe l'espace et le temps, les confond en une même sidération de la lumière" (The sea encompasses time and space, confuses them in a single luminous spark) (Mokeddem 24). The all-encompassing sea constitutes a leitmotiv in *N'zid* that functions on spatio-temporal, structural, and symbolic levels. Limited contact with other characters, particularly a fellow sailor named Loïc, allows Nora to regain some sense of her former self, but her solitary moments of maritime navigation and acts of artistic creation lead directly to the recovery of her lost memory.

Intertextual references to *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses* reinforce the figurative potential of the sea in *N'zid*, providing a critical framework through which Nora is able to begin the reconstruction of her identity: "Supposons qu'Ulysse soit une femme. Une femme d'aujourd'hui. Algérienne" (Let's suppose that Ulysses is a woman. A contemporary woman. Algerian) (Mokeddem, dustjacket). Mokeddem deliberately recasts Ulysses as Nora, a contemporary Algerian woman whose Penelope is her Algerian lover and lute player, Jamil. The characters of Calypso, (Loïc), and the Sirens, (anonymous, male voices

1 All translations from French are my own unless otherwise indicated.

2 The similarities between the first names of her lover, Jamil, and a Parisian art dealer, Jean, complicate this process. In one sense, Nora's search for "J" might also be seen as a quest to reconnect with herself, since the French term for "I," ("je"), also begins with the letter "j".

emitted in various languages from the boat's radio), extend a practice of gender reversal in *N'zid* that encourages a postcolonial examination of identity, gender, ethnicity, and history. Nora is on a dual Ulyssean quest to unite her discoveries of the external world with her internal self. Her disconnected sense of self and exclusion from any particular community underscore her existence as a postcolonial, nomadic figure. Algeria symbolizes Nora's and Jamil's Ithaca, yet, as the destination that Nora never reaches and where Jamil is assassinated, it is the antithesis of a celestial homeland. Nora's inability to return home is a direct result of her fragmented identity that precedes her amnesia at the outset of the text. She seems destined, then, to remain in a fluxional, nomadic state. This type of "nomadic movement between different lands, cultures and languages" is, according to John D. Erickson, an agent for positive change leading to a "cultural pluralism" (80). In Nora's situation, this geographical, cultural, and linguistic plurality offers her a fundamental mobility for the creation of her identity.

Initially unable to remember her career as a comic book artist and her residence in Paris, Nora adopts several aliases. The etymologies of these pseudonyms, and their order of appearance in *N'zid*, trace Nora's evolution from a state of dormant rebelliousness as a French artist named Myriam Dors, (whose surname is a morphological derivation of the French verb "dormir," meaning "to sleep"), through a stage of monstrosity or deformation as a Lebanese painter named Ghoula, (a childhood nickname meaning "monster" or "ogre" in Arabic), to a state of being alive (as a Greek woman named Eva Poulos) (Mokeddem 64). The various ethnicities evoked through these aliases reinforce Nora's status as a cultural and linguistic nomad (Bradiotti 8). Nora's given name, which means "light" in Arabic, is also connected to her Irish origins: "C'était le prénom de la femme de James Joyce. Elle était originaire de Galway, comme mon père" (Nora was James Joyce's wife's first name. She came from Galway, like my father) (Mokeddem 111). The etymology of Nora Carson's birth name, and its references to both her father's heritage as well as to Joyce, create a symbolic fusion of her Algerian and Irish identities while alluding to the play of light on the sea. As the product of this union, Nora tries to cope, as do her parents, within a linguistic and cultural space cultivated in French. She describes the selection of her name as a parental attempt to unite two opposing forces:

Ma mère était algérienne. Quand je suis née, ils ont essayé de trouver un prénom qui convienne à tous. Il paraît que la recherche a été très longue, cause de disputes homériques. Bien sûr, la Concorde sur un mot n'a pas empêché le reste.

Je n'ai jamais compris comment ces deux-là avaient pu vivre ensemble. ... Il venait des brumes et des pluies du Nord, de la langue gaélique. Elle arrivait du Sud, du soleil et de l'arabe. Ils fracassaient ensemble le français. (Mokeddem 111)

My mother was Algerian. When I was born, they tried to find a name that would suit everyone. Apparently, Homeric disputes caused it to be a lengthy search. Of course, the agreement on one word did not prevent the rest. I never understood how those two could have lived together. ... He came from the foggy, rainy North, from the Gaelic language. She was from the South, the sun and Arabic. They demolished French together.

Nora's parents' Homeric disputes over a name for their only child allude to the impossibility of sustaining a union between polar opposites, despite the difficult adoption of the French language as a common, yet foreign, method of communication. Her parents' failed marriage holds negative repercussions for Nora:

Leur appartenance respective à l'Occident et à l'Orient, deux mondes longtemps demeurés antinomiques, fait que leur union est un miracle, mais voué à l'échec; le fruit qui en naîtra, l'enfant du miracle, devait fatalement payer la rançon de sa différence, un déchirement entre ses deux identités. (Jabbour 278)

Their respective adherence to the West and to the East, two longstanding paradoxical worlds, creates a miraculous union that is nonetheless destined for failure; the fruit that is borne from this union, the child of this miracle, is forced to pay the price for her difference, a rupture between her two identities.

As a result, Nora seems fated to suffer an identity crisis. Her parents exist in a "third space of enunciation," where they entertain difference and negotiate a communal identity through their attempts to establish themselves in France (Bhabha 36-37). This interstitial third space is unstable however, for Aicha returns to Algeria, and Samuel dreams of setting sail for Ireland. Their figurative recreation of an Orientalist relationship recalls a pre-colonial ideology whose implicit power configurations mitigate the possibility of a peaceful union. Unlike Ai'cha, whose fatal decision to return to her native country led to the dissolution of her family and ultimately to her own death, Nora's tripartite identity, (Algerian, Irish, and French), dissolves binary oppositions between East and West, thereby complicating her search for selfhood. She finds solace in an internal imaginative space that refuses

language and cultivates the visual arts as a primary mode of expression. The deliberate subversion of characters from *The Odyssey*, and the incorporation of selected elements from *Ulysses*, initiate a deconstructive process at the outset of *N'zid* that eventually leads to Nora's reconstruction.

Nora's given name, with its etymological connections to Algeria, Ireland, and the Mediterranean, suggests a convergence of geographical spaces and ethnic identities that she initially finds unsettling and stagnating. Her temporary adoption of different aliases, authentic diverse heritage, and autobiographical connections to Mokeddem, define her as a cultural hybrid or "multiply organized" postcolonial woman who crosses cultural and linguistic boundaries in order to create a space for her own expression of selfhood (Lionnet 5). In *Postcolonial Representations*, Françoise Lionnet has described this creative act as a "dynamic process of transformation" that "is engaged in the deconstruction of hierarchies, not in their reversal. The aim, in the end, is to reconstruct new imaginative spaces where power configurations, inevitable as they are, may be reorganized to allow for fewer dissymmetries in the production and circulation of knowledge" (5-6). In Lionnet's view, writers such as Malika Mokeddem participate as agents in the subversion of existing hierarchies and power dynamics implicit in their connections to multiple communities. Their active process of reconstruction is both postcolonial and feminist, since it calls for a woman's declaration of herself, in her own language.

As she explains in an interview, Mokeddem's departure from the Sahara of her earlier publications and selection of the Mediterranean Sea as the setting for *N'zid* stems from personal and professional motivations:

L'intolérance, les menaces de violence m'ont poussée un jour à la (la Méditerranée) traverser. Bon gré, mal gré, je suis devenue une enfant (*sic*) de la rive nord aussi. Ma confrontation avec l'Autre, sur l'autre rive, m'a révélée a moi-même, à la fois semblable et différente. Elle m'a fait découvrir la profondeur de mon altérité: une universalité dont le premier germe avait été déposé en moi, dès l'enfance, par une langue *traversière*. (Mokeddem 20)

Intolerance and threats of violence motivated me to cross it (the Mediterranean) one day. For better or for worse, I became a child of the north shore as well. My confrontation with the Other, on the other shore, revealed to me that I was both the same and different. It led to my discovery of my alterity: a universal quality whose initial seeds had been planted in me as early as my childhood, by a *traversing* language.

Her geographical displacement from the southern to the northern shores of the Mediterranean, in the opposite direction of Nora's voyage, promotes the investigation of her own identity through personal, linguistic, and cultural contact with the Other. It builds upon traditional significations of the Mediterranean as an intermediary, fluid space of *métissage*, and a source of life and death. As a parallel to the desert, the sea shares common attributes of unlimited exploration, freedom of mobility, travel, and discovery: "la langue flamboyante du désert, espace jumeau de la mer" (the flamboyant language of the desert, the spatial equivalent of the sea), declares Nora (Mokeddem 164). Despite her initial reservations about leaving the Algerian desert, Mokeddem realizes that she has selected a desirable space, the waters which lead her through a Derridian interaction with the Other, to an unexpected recognition of fundamental commonalities that transgress her internal feelings of alterity. The inherently mobile and universal qualities of language promote this type of geographical, linguistic, and ethnic border crossing. According to Yolande Helm, the concept of *metissage* is fundamental to Mokeddem's writing because it represents the region where she now resides as well as her approach to the writing process:

Le métissage est un concept important chez Malika Mokeddem car si elle a commencé sa vie dans le désert, espace du possible où se forment des alliances entre Berbères, Juifs, Arabes et Français, elle vit à présent dans la région méditerranéenne, espace géographique particulièrement hybride et métissé puisqu'il est le lieu de rencontre de cultures diverses du Nord et du Sud. Son écriture tissée a la lisière de l'oralité et de l'écriture transgresse ainsi les frontières et ... les interdits. (*Envers et contre tout* 10)

Metissage is an important concept for Malika Mokeddem, because although her life began in the desert, the space of possibility where alliances between Berbers, Jews, Arabs, and French are forged, she now lives in the Mediterranean region, a particularly hybrid and mixed geographical space since it is the meeting place of diverse cultures from the North and the South. Her writing, woven on the edge of orality and writing, transgresses borders and taboos.

Helm draws direct connections between the cultural diversity of Mokeddem's life and the variety of influences that contribute to her writing. Although *N'zid* cannot be classified as a traditional autobiography, and Nora

is not a literary manifestation of the author, selected elements from Mokeddem's personal life do influence this text. The characters' displacement between Algeria and France, for example, alludes to a nomadic sense of self that Homi K. Bhabha has described as "a return to the performance of identity as iteration, the re-creation of the self in the world of travel, the resettlement of the borderline community of migration" (9). The connections between identity and travel reinforce the postcolonial situation through their focus on borders and border crossings, which in turn influence national identities and communities. "The concept of nation itself changes, becoming a cultural pluralism, a cultural mosaic that comprises a discourse interwoven with a multiplicity of voices" (Erickson 80). Mokeddem's figurative use of a "langue traversière" ("itinerant language") allows her to cross these borders and to maintain Nora's status as an "être de frontière" ("boundary figure") (Mokeddem 161).

Beyond significations of geographical displacement, the Mediterranean Sea's symbolic force as a source of maternal protection and nourishment is evidenced on a linguistic level in *N'zid*, through the homonymic similarity of the French terms for "sea" ("mer") and "mother" ("mere"). Nora's repeated acts of diving into the sea suggest a psychological desire to return to the womb: an impulse underscored by multiple connotations of the French term "eaux" that refers to waters as well as to amniotic fluid. For Nora, swimming in the sea represents a developmental regression or second pre-Oedipal phase, prior to a child's linguistic acquisition, where the mother's voice serves as a primal point of contact (Moi 112):

Fracassé, le passe heurte en bloc présent, sentiments, doutes et tabous, disloque la narration en dates, en faits, en noms lourds comme des cailloux. Le chœur de la mer murmure une mémoire au creux d'un coquillage: Aïcha. (Mokeddem 139)

Shattered, the past collides completely with the present, emotions doubts, and taboos. It dismantles narration in dates, events, and names, heavy like stones. The chorus of the sea murmurs a memory in the crux of a seashell: Aïcha.

The metaphor of the sea undermines a formal sense of narration through a deliberate collapse of past and present temporalities that excludes chronology or linearity. It is extended to poetic qualities of orature and memory, valorized through voices like a Greek chorus or the Sirens, that call out the name of Nora's deceased mother, Aïcha. Ironically perhaps, Aïcha's death precedes the opening pages of *N'zid*, yet her name means "alive" in Arabic (Mokeddem

155). Aïcha's absence, as Robert Elbaz has argued, has a traumatic effect on Nora: "C'est donc à partir de ce chaos des origines qu'une nouvelle mise en ordre mémorielle devient possible" (It is thus from this chaos of origins that a new organization of memory becomes possible) (253-54). The original chaos to which Elbaz refers is not limited to Aïcha alone, however, for Nora's father, Samuel, and her lover, Jamil, are also deceased. The physical absence of these three characters, while psychologically destabilizing, situates Nora in an Algerian community by negation: through what Abdelwahab Meddeb has identified as "l'interruption généalogique" (genealogical interruption) and "la situation d'orphelin" (the orphan's situation) that affect "l'ensemble algérien, dans ses multiples appartenances" (the whole of Algeria in its multiple senses of belonging) (287). Nora's status as an orphan and a boundary figure complicates her recovery from amnesia, and reinforces her geographical and spatio-temporal intervals. Conversely, her position strengthens the symbolic presence of Samuel, Aïcha, and Jamil through remembrance and artistic acts of drawing and painting. Zana, a source of collective feminine memory of Algeria, serves as a foil to Aïcha and as Nora's surrogate mother. She is the only living character whose vocal presence, replicated in stylized speech through telephone conversations, links Nora to key elements of her past. Zana's voice and the chorus of the sea are instrumental to Nora's eventual ability to reclaim a sense of herself as an Algerian woman.

In addition to a maternal connection to the sea, Nora's "retour à la mer" implies intertextual references to Arthur Rimbaud:

Nora offre son visage à la fureur de la mer avec bonheur. Tous les nomades connaissent cette ivresse, tendue entre joie et douleur, entre deux aspirations divergentes: la disparition et la renaissance. (Mokeddem 188)

Nora offers her face to the fury of the sea with happiness. All nomads are familiar with this drunkenness, suspended between joy and pain, between two divergent aspirations: disappearance and rebirth.

References to a state of drunkenness and to conflicting emotions of joy and distress, and death and rebirth, reinforce the interval or "entre deux" of the opening lines of *N'zid*. These juxtapositions echo primary themes and emotions from Rimbaud's poetry, particularly "Le Bateau ivre," where, in a state of heightened passion, the poet announces a desire to break free from tradition and dive into the sea: "Et des lors, je me suis baigné dans le Poème/ De la Mer" (Rimbaud 90) (And from then on I bathed in the Poem of the Sea)

(Fowlie 117). In this celebrated poem of a maritime voyage, poetry and the sea are united in a single metaphor of fluidity, movement, and reverie. "The boat's immersion in the sea perfectly exemplifies the romantics' desire to abolish the barriers between subject and object, to achieve a unity of spirit," asserts John Houston (71). This desired spiritual union between boat and sea extends to the poet, whose act of swimming in the sea, in search of an internal connection to his identity, recalls Nora's actions in *N'zid*. Rimbaud's reputation as a rebellious nomad, whose personal quest for a means of self-expression through subversion and provocation, serves as a parallel to Nora. Romantic aesthetic connections to the visual arts and to music influence Nora's solitary acts of artistic creation as well as her description of the sea:

La mer est un luth, les vagues des cordes tendues entre les rives, le corps de Meduse, une note de musique qui s'allume à leurs mouvements. Elle plonge dans les graves profonds, remonte la stridence des sons, implore les yeux de tous les etres d'ecailles— (Mokeddem 180)

The sea is a lute, the waves the strings stretched between the shores, the body of Medusa, a musical note that illuminates according to their movements. She dives into the dark depths, carries the shrill sounds back to the surface, implores the gaze of all of the scaly creatures....

Her comparison of the sea to a lute, which echoes *The Odyssey*, reinforces the connections between *N'zid* and "Le Bateau ivre," suggests the presence of Romantic lyric poetry, and unites the leitmotiv of the sea to an artistic space of negotiation. The figure of Medusa, a term for a jellyfish in French, is an aquatic nomad who serves as a bridge between the sea, mythology, and artistic creation.

Intersections between poetry and visual images constitute another commonality linking Rimbaud and *N'zid*. Critical readings of Rimbaud's poetry, and its abundant use of imagery, have produced a broad range of interpretations. Despite their various perspectives, scholars generally seem to concur on the importance of the visual in Rimbaud's poetry that can be detected in the richness of his metaphors as well as in the freedom of his expressions. Nora proposes similar relationships between art, music, writing, and the sea:

Nora lui parle du dessin, de la peinture, de la mer. Jamil hoche lentement la tete et s'extasie dans la langue imagee des gens du desert: "Entre la quille d'un bateau

et la mine d'un crayon, le monde est vaste. Aussi vaste que le ventre d'un luth." (Mokeddem 162)

Nora speaks to him of drawing, painting, and the sea. Jamil slowly nods his head and delights in the visual language of the desert peoples: "Between a boat's keel and a pencil's graphite, the world is vast. As vast as the insides of a lute."

Nora's recollection of a conversation with Jamil about her feelings of entrapment in the desert, alterity, and immobility, reinforce her desire to break free from ancestral, poetic, and visual traditions. Her urge for liberation is underscored here through references to a boat's keel and to a lute that recall "Le Bateau ivre." Jamil's declaration establishes a symbolic continuum between the sea, ("la quille d'un bateau"), and drawing, ("la mine d'un crayon"), which, like music and lyric poetry, offers a vast interstitial space for creativity and self-expression. Colloquial connotations of the terms "quille" ("legs"), and "mine" ("face"), together with "ventre" ("stomach"), evoke corporeal connections to the sea, poetry, and drawing that constitute an important step in Nora's recovery process. As she remarks in this same passage: "Il ne peut y avoir d'amour, d'identification a une terre sans liberté de mouvement. Celle du corps et de la pensée" (There cannot be love, a sense of homeland without freedom of movement. That of the body and of the mind) (Mokeddem 162). Corporeal and cerebral freedom are thus essential to Nora's search for an identity and a homeland.

Mokeddem's and Rimbaud's mutual links to Algeria constitute an additional point of contact between these two writers. In his book *Rimbaud et L'Algérie*, Hedi Abdel-Jaouad describes Rimbaud's public criticism of the French colonial presence in Algeria through the publication of an early poem in Latin entitled "Jugurtha," in which, borrowing from mythology, he recreates a confrontation between Abdel Kader (as the legendary Roman hero, Jugurtha), and the French: "En effet, ce poème ... démontre clairement que l'Algerie est, des le debut, doublement presente dans son imagination poétique" (In effect, this poem clearly demonstrates that Algeria is doubly present in his poetic imagination from the very beginning) (14). In his analysis of "Jurgutha," Abdel-Jaouad explores Rimbaud's techniques of building upon intertexts and subverting mythology in order to denounce the French colonization of Algeria, thereby provoking a French readership. He concludes that this approach earned Rimbaud the reputation as a precursor of Maghrebian literature written in French:

Rimbaud aura donc incarné le double héritage culturel dont se réclame l'écrivain maghrébin de langue française, L'Orient et l'Occident. Il aura surtout été le modèle d'authenticité (dans le sens que lui donne Sartre) de celui qui a refusé l'ordre colonial et s'est assumé "nègre" et "barbare." Il aura incarné aussi, pour le poète maghrébin, le Voyant, celui qui a cherché, par un dérèglement systématique de la langue dominante, à créer un langage nouveau pour exprimer son identité différentielle. C'est en ce sens qu'on peut dire que Rimbaud aura été la muse inspiratrice de la littérature maghrébine de langue française et, partant, de la littérature francophone. (29)

Rimbaud will have thus embodied the double cultural heritage that the Maghrebian writer in French will have claimed—The Orient and the Occident. He will have especially been the model of authenticity (in the Sartrean sense) of the one who refused the colonial order and adopted the terms "Negro" and "Barbaric." He will have also embodied, for the Maghrebian poet, the role of Visionary, the one who searched, according to a systematic disturbance of the dominant language, to create a new language in order to express his differential identity. It's in this sense that one can say that Rimbaud will have been the inspirational muse of Maghrebian literature written in French, and, from there, of Francophone literature.

Rimbaud's anti-colonial stance and innovative, if not unorthodox, use of language establish him as an inspirational force and model for Maghrebian literature written in French. His deliberate search for a means of self-expression, connections to the Orient as well as the Occident, and refusal of established order parallel Nora's heritage and recovery process. In a manner similar to Rimbaud, Nora explores the poetic potential of language in order to find a suitable method of self-expression.

Nora's separation from language and selection of iconic modes of communication accord her a certain freedom of exploration that transgresses a homogeneous identity. Her paintings and drawings are manifestations of her imagination and fragmented memories that become an essential part of her recovery process. In this way, Nora maintains a literal and figurative "rapport de trace" (a trail or a trace) to multiple aspects of her past:

Quand on a conscience qu'on est dans l'oubli, il est important de mener une opération d'anamnèse. Et des lors, le rapport qu'on entretient avec l'ancien devient très libre, très pacifié. C'est un rapport de trace. (Meddeb, "Algerie," 282).

When a person is conscious of their forgetfulness, it is important to conduct a process of remembering. And from that point on, the connection that one maintains with the ancient becomes very free, very pacifying. It's a connection of traces.

The connections to her origins that Nora follows by setting sail for Oran are exemplified in her relationship with the Mediterranean, her recognition of influences from Antiquity and mythology, her preference for artistic methods of self-expression, and her links to the Arabic language as articulated in the text's tide. These multiple paths surface visually and corporeally in Nora's solitary moments of painting and drawing as well as in her facial tattoo. According to Abdelwahab Meddeb, the search for Algerian or Arabic origins is a necessary step toward a complete understanding of one's multifaceted identity ("Algerie" 292-93). Diving into the sea and sailing on the Mediterranean reconnect Nora to her maternal language, and prepare her to evolve beyond a pre-Oedipal stage where she will be able to articulate her own identity, in her own voice.

Nora escapes from linguistic limitations or exclusions and their implicit connections to a homogenous ethnic community by cultivating her natural talents for painting and drawing. Her child-like preferences for visual rather than linguistic modes of communication underscore her pre-Oedipal condition:

Je n'aime pas les mots. Surtout dans ma voix. Us m'écrasent et m'étouffent. Je préfère la légèreté du dessin. Des l'enfance, le dessin a été ma façon de ne choisir aucune de mes langues — Ensuite, j'ai mis une voix d'eau entre les langues. Pour les terrifier ou les lier? Je n'en sais trop rien. (Mokeddem 113)

I don't like words. Especially in my own voice. They crush and suffocate me. I prefer the lightness of drawing. As early as childhood, drawing has been my way of avoiding making a choice between any of my languages. Then, I put a water voice in between my languages. In order to frighten them or link them together? I don't really know.

Nora's selection of pictorial methods of self-expression allows her the freedom to refuse any particular language or identity, and to remain child-like, nomadic, and in-between. Her figurative opposition between the weightiness of words and the relative weightlessness of drawing further emphasizes this preference while echoing her corporeal levity from the opening lines of *N'zid*. Her depiction of drawing as "light" also recalls the Arabic etymology of her

first name and its connections to solar and lunar reflections on the sea. Drawing allows Nora to (re)trace her heritage and uncover past memories. The figurative "water voice" ("voix d'eau") separating her multiple languages is a homonymic play on words using the French terms for "voice" ("voix") and "pathway" ("voie"), both of which are linked to metaphors of the sea, navigation, and orality. Questioning her motivations for imposing a barrier between her multiple languages, Nora's use of a "voix d'eau" recalls the "deux eaux" ("two waters") from the opening lines of this text as another example of an in-between space. The abstract qualities of her paintings and drawings accentuate Nora's indecision and dynamic tension through their refusal of mimesis. Her overwhelming desire to return to her childhood is evidenced in her conflicting urges to dive into the sea and to paint:

Elle regarde tour à tour la mer et le portrait de son père. Le besoin de peindre, celui de se Jeter à l'eau, la regagnent aussi indissociables qu'irrépressibles, dans la même tranquillité. Elle saisit pinceaux et fusains sans idée aucune de ce que ses mains vont produire. (Mokeddem 71)

She looks alternately at the sea and the portrait of her father. The inextricable yet irrepressible desire to paint, the desire to dive into the water, overtake her with the same sense of restlessness. She seizes brushes and charcoal without any idea of what her hands are going to produce.

The symbolic division between maternal impulses, (the sea), and paternal impulses, (the portrait of her father), complicates Nora's identity crisis. Her insatiable need to retrace both her Algerian and Irish heritages reinforces her amnesia and impedes a clear remembrance of her past. Painting and drawing are externalized autonomous manifestations of internal conflicts and unresolved childhood traumas that will eventually allow her to "blanchir" ("to whiten") or to cope with her past, and embrace the multiple facets of her identity:

Les médecins appellent "blanchir" le fait de te donner des pommades et des médicaments pour faire disparaître cette saleté de cloques suintantes. Longtemps, j'ai pensé que ce mot, blanchir, était réservé au jargon médical. Un jour, j'ai découvert une blanchisserie. ... C'est comme 93 que je suis entrée dans le dessin. C'est le papier qui m'a définitivement "blanchi." (Mokeddem 154-55)

Doctors call "to whiten" the act of prescribing salves and medicines in order to heal oozing blisters. For a long time, I thought that this word, to whiten, was

reserved for medical jargon. One day, I discovered a Laundromat. ... That's how I entered into the world of drawing. It's paper that definitively "whitened" me.

In another play on words, Nora describes the impetus for her artistic talents as stemming from a need to heal psychological wounds. Her selection of the term "blanchir" is provocative, since Nora's visual acts of self-expression are also inextricably tied to her skin. Nevertheless, her acts of filling blank pages with drawings and paintings are cathartic, for they allow her to recover from past traumas and to fill in the gaps of her lost memory.⁴ During one of her solitary moments of artistic creation, Nora paints a portrait of Aicha:

Le visage de sa mère, elle l'entame par les yeux. Des yeux immenses, consumés par la fusion du rire et de la détresse, de la volonté et du renoncement. Durant un moment, Nora se perd dans leur contemplation. Puis, elle se concentre, essaie de continuer, de retrouver le nez, la bouche ____ En vain. ... Nora est incapable de donner des traits, un corps à ce regard tourmenté. (Mokeddem 171)

She begins the portrait of her mother's face with her eyes. Two immense eyes, consumed by the fusion of laughter and distress, willingness and refusal. For a moment, Nora loses herself in their contemplation. Then, she concentrates, tries to continue, to find the nose, the mouth—in vain. ... Nora is incapable of giving features, a body, to this tormented look.

Nora's fascination with her mother's eyes indicates an initial attraction to this fragmented maternal representation whose juxtaposing emotions imply the existence of inherited or suppressed psychological conflicts. Her depiction of Aicha's eyes and hair symbolizes her mother's physical beauty, while the absence of a mouth suggests an imposed silence. This visual portrait of Aicha parallels the fatal consequences of her return to Algeria. Nora's contemplation of Aicha's face does not trigger fear, as if to avoid the evil eye, but rather a recollection of the Arabic word "aine," which refers to "eyes" and "source" (Mokeddem 171). Recalling the metaphor of the sea, Aicha's eyes represent a source of life, memory, and imagination that is repressed by her physical

4 For another example of the provocative use of the term "blanc," see Assia Djébar's *Le Blanc de l'Algérie* or *Algerian White*.

absence and silence in this passage. Created autonomously during solitary moments of heightened emotion, Nora's abstract, fragmented likenesses of her parents stem from a combination of recovered memories, imagination, and natural artistic talent. The absence of family photographs and physical descriptions of Nora's parents prevents a determination of the degree of mimetic realism in these portraits. Nevertheless, they can be considered as provocative acts, since the artistic depiction of human faces is generally understood to be a transgression of Islamic religious practice (Chaulet-Achour & Kerfa 33, Meddeb 35).

When Nora attempts to create a self-portrait, she draws her own face on the body of a jellyfish:

Sous la pointe de son crayon, une méduse a pour la première fois un visage humain, le sien. Elle danse à la plainte d'un luth. ... [Elle] est déformable à l'infini et transparente, légère. Juste quelques gorgées de mer. ... Ma méduse, à moi, n'a rien de ta Gorgone qui s'est laissée bouffer la tête par des serpents et momifier dès les premiers parchemins puant le moisi. (Mokeddem 114-15)

Under the tip of her pencil, a jellyfish displays a human face for the first time—her own. She is dancing to the tune of a lute. ... She is infinitely formless and transparent, light. Just a few mouthfuls of seawater. ... My medusa is not like your Gorgon with snakes for hair and who mummifies people like the first parchments that smell of mold.

Nora's personification as a jellyfish reinforces her maternal connections to the sea. It maintains a resistance to stagnation and classification through the inherent formlessness, transparency, and illuminating potential of this aquatic creature. The French term for a jellyfish, "méduse," refers to the mythological figure of Medusa. Unlike the Gorgon, however, Nora's jellyfish destabilizes Medusa's traditional immobilizing capabilities and recalls Helene Cixous's "Le Rire de la Meduse"—a feminist manifesto for the practice of *l'écriture féminine*:

On nous a figées (les femmes) entre deux mythes horribles: entre la Meduse et Pabime. ... P]l lui suffit de ne plus écouter les sirènes (car les sirènes, c'étaient des hommes) pour que l'histoire change de sens. Il suffit qu'on regarde la méduse en face pour la voir: et elle n'est pas mortelle. Elle est belle et elle rit. (Cixous 47)

They (men) riveted us (women) between two horrifying myths: between the Medusa and the abyss. That would be enough to set half the world laughing,

except that it's still going on. ... [T]hey have only to stop listening to the Sirens (for the Sirens were men) for history to change its meaning. You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing. (Marks & De Courtivron 255)

Cixous's subversion of the Medusa myth, from a deadly figure to a source of laughter and beauty, parallels Nora's self-portrait and echoes her fragmented depiction of Aicha. Her allusion to masculine Sirens reinforces intertextual links between "Le Rire de la Meduse," *N'qd*, and *The Odyssey*. On a personal level, Cixous and Mokeddem share an Algerian heritage, connections to Oran, residence in France, and a scholarly interest in James Joyce.⁵ Additionally, both writers cultivate a creative, dynamic space of feminine writing that is linked to the mother "as source and origin of the voice to be heard in all female texts. Femininity in writing can be discerned in a privileging of the *voix*" (Moi 42, 112). Cixous's and Mokeddem's mutual reliance on the primacy of the mother's voice appears to lie at the center of their feminist expressions of selfhood.

As an aquatic nomad, Nora's jellyfish shares the sea's capacity as a source of memory:

Non seulement elle est nomade, mais elle est surtout transparente; elle exclut toute notion d'intériorité. Mais en outre, elle est élémentaire, dans tous les sens du terme. ... Qui porte en lui toute l'histoire de la mémoire génétique à travers les âges.... C'est-à-dire que toutes ces couches mémorielles se manifestent sur sa peau. La méduse, en fait, est toute peau, et toute eau. (Elbaz 264)

Not only is the jellyfish a nomad, but she is especially transparent, she excludes all notion of inferiority. Furthermore, she is elementary in every sense of the word. She holds the entire history of genetic memory across the ages. That is to say that all of the layers of memory manifest themselves on her skin. The jellyfish is, in fact, all skin and all water.

This artistic symbol of an inherently mobile, elementary creature evokes Mokeddem's ties to her nomadic origins and suggests a corporeal method of self-expression similar to Cixous's laughing Medusa. The jellyfish's fundamental connection to the sea, essential freedom of mobility, corporeal

Helene Cixous's doctoral thesis is entitled *L'Exil de James Joyce ou l'art du remplacement* (Paris: Grasset, 1968).

weightlessness, ability to produce light, and cutaneous genetic manifestations exemplify and synthesize various realms that Nora negotiates in her attempts to regain her identity. These sites of negotiation exemplify Nora's status as a nomadic subject whose existence Rosi Braidotti has defined as a "site of multiple connections" (36), engaged in a Deleuzian and Guattarian process of "becoming-woman" who subverts "set conventions" (5) in her search to "restore a sense of inter subjectivity" (36). The goal of the nomadic subject, as Braidotti explains it, is to open up "spaces where alternative forms of agency can be engendered" (7).

The large bruise that Nora discovers on her face at the beginning of *N'zid* points to the skin as a source of memory and identity: "[U]n enorme hematome semblable a un champignon vineux devore la moitie droite du front et de la joue" (An enormous hematoma resembling a purplish-red mushroom devours the right half of her forehead and cheek) (Mokeddem 12). In reaction to this physical sign of a recent trauma in her own reflection, Nora instinctively removes all of her clothing and dives into the sea. The corporeal position of Nora's facial bruise, with its variations on the color blue, suggests its function as a tattoo with metaphoric connections to the sea as well as to her Algerian, nomadic heritage. According to Abdelkebir Khatibi, the term "tattoo" is of Polynesian origin whose first syllable, "ta," means "to draw" (72). From an etymological perspective then, a tattoo can be considered as an artistic inscription on the human body:

Le tatouage s'inscrit ainsi dans le corps en une certaine mouvance du geste et de la trace idéographique et pictographique. Il s'inscrit dans la fissure entre phonie et graphie, fissure qui définit le sens habituel de l'écriture. (Khatibi 75-76)

The tattoo is inscribed on the body through a certain mobility of gesture as well as of an ideographic and pictographic trace. It is inscribed in the interstices between sound and graphic, an interstice that defines the habitual sense of writing.

Khatibi describes a tattoo as a corporeal inscription residing in the interstice between the voice and the written word that serves, like Nora's painting and drawing, as a visual mode of communication and self-expression. Resembling the Southern cross that she discovers on the boat (14), Nora's tattoo is an iconic sign of her Algerian identity: "[S]es tatouages rest[en]t une marque indelebile et ininterrompue de son passé, de sa jeunesse et de son heritage"

(Her tattoos remain as an indelible and uninterrupted mark of her past, her childhood, and her heritage) (Helm, "Le Grain de l'image", 112). Her tattoo gains significance as a dynamic manifestation of herself that exists, as does the jellyfish, in a space between her past and future, writing and painting, and life and death. As if to exemplify a Romantic union with her boat, Nora's act of palimpsest, her re-inscription of a new name on her boat's hull, is an extension of her facial tattoo (16). The presence and corporeal inscription of this tattoo, like Zana's voice through which Nora (re)discovers Aicha's death, represents a past traumatic act that she cannot initially recall, but that she must reclaim as part of her recovery process. Recalling the jellyfish that holds its genetic memory on its skin, Nora's tattoo is a cutaneous trace of her memory and identity:

J'ainie penser que la peau est déjà une mémoire, une identité à elle seule. C'est peut-être pour ça que certains voyants peuvent lire les destins, les traces de la vie dans les lignes de la main. (Mokeddem 153)

I like to think that skin is already a memory, an identity in and of itself. Maybe it's for this reason that certain visionaries can read a person's fate, their life traces, in the lines of the hand.

Contrary to a palm reader who foresees a person's future in the lines of their hand, Nora (reconnects to various aspects of her past through her facial tattoo. As she slowly appropriates the multiple aspects of her own complex identity and recovers from this initial trauma, her tattoo varies in size, color, and appearance: "La trace de l'hématome se réduit maintenant a un tatouage vert et jaune qui court du haut du front au lobe de l'oreille, a la racine des cheveux" (The trace of the hematoma is now reduced to a greenish-yellowish tattoo that runs from the top of the forehead to the earlobe, beginning at the roots of her hair) (Mokeddem 190). The evolution of Nora's tattoo, and reference to the roots of her hair, signal the mythological image of Medusa, the jellyfish, and her self-portrait. Multiple connotations of the French term "racine," that refer to the roots of a person's hair as well as to one's heritage, accentuate the significance of the Medusa figure in this text. Following Cixous's Medusa, Nora's appearance grows more beautiful as the text progresses.

"The Franco-Maghrebian resides in the entre-deux, in the hyphen, [because] ... Pie/she] is by definition uprooted, a *déraciné*, not even an exile ... whose status is as precarious as it is suspicious, ... who refuses to be trapped

in any one single category or definition, and for whom genealogy, language, nationality, country, and religion are nonfixed entities" (Abdel-Jaouad, *Remembering Africa*, 261).⁶ Nora's amnesia, navigation on the Mediterranean, and selection of visual modes of self-expression epitomize her uprooted status. Her negotiation of various linguistic, literary, and artistic realms maintains her interstitial placement and ensures her continued nomadic mobility. Selected intertextual examples from *The Odyssey*, *Ulysses*, Rimbaud, and Cixous initiate a deconstructive process that leads to Nora's reconstruction of her identity. These borrowings from Western influences exemplify Mokeddem's status as a postcolonial writer and a nomad, and situate her among other North African women writers such as Leila Sebbar, Assia Djebar, and Mai'ssa Bey, who include references to Western and non-Western texts in their works. "Nomadic authors are *bricoleurs* who take their material wherever it befits their purpose, whether it is a European language, technological constructs or genres, or tribal customs," asserts John D. Erickson (83). Her refusal of language and natural inclination for painting and drawing offer Nora a creative outlet for self-expression that transcends an explicit sense of adherence to any one nationality or community. As a cutaneous inscription of her Algerian identity, Nora's facial tattoo evolves as she regains her lost memory, implying that it will eventually disappear altogether. Her decision to set sail for Ireland at the end of *N\id* reinforces her desire to embrace her multifaceted identity, remain mobile, and declare a fundamental need for freedom. As Valerie Orlando notes in the epilogue to her book *Of Suffocated Hearts and Tortured Souls*, "Mokeddem leaves her heroine in flux, drifting in an uncertain space on the edge of self-discovery" (182). The ambiguity at the end of *N\id* is thus a deliberately positive sign of continued mobility and potential creativity. Mokeddem's choice to use a written form of Algerian Arabic as the title of this text is perhaps, like Nora's tattoo, the inscription of a similar process of self reappropriation.

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6 For additional interpretations of the "entre deux" in Malika Mokeddem's texts, see Pierrette Frickey (2000) and Yolande Helm (1999).

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