

Becoming a (trans)national celebrity writer? Negotiating proximity and distance/(dis)location in the nonfictional work of Leïla Slimani between 2017 and 2021

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Abstract

This thesis explores Franco-Moroccan writer Leïla Slimani's understudied 'non-fictional' texts published between 2017 and 2021: *Sexe et mensonges* (2017; 2021), *Paroles d'honneur* (2017), and *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* (2021). As the texts cut across genre and geography, dealing with a variety of themes from sex, sexuality, and gender, to cultural encounters, contemporary art, and museums, this thesis interrogates Slimani's engagement with different spatial contexts – namely, genre, geography, and gender – throughout these four years. By book-ending this 'non-fiction' period, after *Chanson douce* (2016) and before *Regardez-nous danser* (2022), this thesis maps Slimani's trajectory, exploring how her literary celebrity has rapidly grown in France, Morocco, and beyond. It considers issues of audience expectation in the context of constrained agency placed on writers perceived to be of North African heritage in France. Consequently, this thesis interrogates whether Slimani's reception is enhanced in most quarters because she is seen as politically 'unthreatening' in the French context. It argues that Slimani's engagement with the aforementioned spatial contexts – through dislocation, disidentification, absence, or presence – reveals limits to her positionality that are often overlooked by critics. This thesis maintains that these limits should be accounted for since Slimani engages with various transnational, socio-cultural, and political spheres from within the French cultural and political mainstream. These spheres mostly centre on France and Morocco, where unequal negotiations of power still play out, revealing the tensions of authorial (self-)fashioning; namely, how audience expectation affects Slimani's trajectory and vice versa. This thesis demonstrates that what Slimani engages with influences how cultural representations are spatially mapped to different audiences in France, Morocco, and beyond. By doing so from a position of ideological and cultural proximity to France, this is not without consequence as Slimani risks replicating and solidifying normative, Eurocentric socio-cultural and political frameworks.

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Introduction

‘Plus j’écris et plus je me sens excommuniée, étrangère.’¹

Underpinning this thesis are the tensions between authorial agency and cultural determinism that arise when writers like Franco-Moroccan author Leïla Slimani (1981), on whom this study focuses, engage with the questions of identity in a multidirectional, spatio-temporal, and often global context. These identity questions are constructed by themselves and others, contributing to their authorial (self-)fashioning. Over the past twenty years or so, artists and writers with North African heritage have become increasingly visible in the media and public sphere(s) in France.² According to Ramona Mielusel, ‘more than any other minority group in France, they are involved in various art manifestations in today’s cultural scene [...], including literature, cinema, stand-up, music, and the fine arts.’³ Whilst the majority of North African *émigrés*, as well as people born into existing immigrant communities in France, tend to live in the *banlieues* or suburbs of the main French cities, these artists have carved out a place for themselves in mainstream culture, often expressing (or being called to express) their opinions on integration, secularism, segregation, and extremism.⁴ For example, Franco-Moroccan author Leïla Slimani (1981), on whom this thesis focuses, has experienced a meteoric rise to literary fame in France, Morocco, and beyond over the last decade.⁵ As a committed writer and journalist, Slimani’s jump to international celebrity and establishment in the contemporary literary field was

¹ Leïla Slimani, *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* (Paris: Stock, 2021), p. 149.

² Ramona Mielusel, *Franco-Maghrebi Artists of the 2000s: Transnational Narratives and Identities* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2019), p. 8. The artists may have been born in France or settled in France.

³ Mielusel, *Franco-Maghrebi Artists*, p.149.

⁴ Mielusel, *Franco-Maghrebi Artists*, p.149. Here, ‘mainstream’ culture can be understood as ‘a prevailing direction or dominant norm in terms of opinion, political ideology, popular taste or representation.’ Not to be confused with other terms such as ‘popular’ or ‘middlebrow’, being part of mainstream culture arguably represents more than expressing popularity or respecting certain traditions and commonly-held values of an audience. It suggests a ‘commercial imperative’ that is related to creative practices in addition to industrial practices of production and distribution both nationally and globally. See Will Higbee, *Post-beur Cinema: North African Émigré and Maghrebi-French Filmmaking in France since 2000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), pp. 28-29.

⁵ Terms such as ‘Franco-Moroccan’ (or the more generalised ‘Franco-Maghrebi’) are potentially problematic. In the French context, the hyphen between the two words potentially connotes a distinction between Franco-French populations (‘French-born’ citizens or the so-called *Français de souche*) and French nationals of Moroccan origin. The term also carries the potential to compress various categories of individuals together. For example, Moroccans who have immigrated to France in adulthood or those born in France with Moroccan heritage. Whilst this term can refer to both categories and has its limitations, for the purpose of this thesis, in the context of Slimani it will be used to denote a simultaneous attachment or legacy (and belonging) to France and Morocco.

solidified by winning the prestigious Prix Goncourt for her second novel, *Chanson douce*, in 2016. The novel became an immediate best-seller, selling hundreds of thousands of copies in France in its first year of publication.⁶ By the end of 2017, the novel had been translated into eighteen languages with a further seventeen more planned for publication.⁷ The same year, Slimani was appointed the official representative of *la francophonie* by President Emmanuel Macron.⁸ In 2018, French *Vanity Fair* named Slimani the second most influential person in France, ahead of football superstar Kylian Mbappé, filmmaker Céline Sciamma, and Emmanuel Macron.⁹

Born in Rabat, Morocco, Slimani was raised in a bourgeois, French-speaking household by her otolaryngologist mother and late economist father, Othman Slimani (who also served as Morocco's minister of economy), moving to Paris at seventeen to study at *Sciences Po*. Beyond her ties to Morocco, Slimani has French heritage and dual Franco-Moroccan citizenship. Slimani's maternal grandmother, Anne Ruetsch (1921-2016) was born and raised in Alsace. In 1944, she met her future husband, Lakhdar Dhobb, a Moroccan colonel serving in the French Colonial Army. After the war, she moved with him to Meknès, Morocco. Slimani's heritage and genealogy impact how she engages with these two national identities, affecting the construction of her public persona. Indeed, the broader spatio-temporal, (post)colonial histories tying the two countries together influence how Slimani and others construct questions of identity.¹⁰

This introduction aims to give a brief overview of Slimani's œuvre to date, as well as some examples of her key socio-political interventions in Franco-Moroccan discursive spheres

⁶ Khalid Lyamlahy, 'On the Imperfections of the Perfect Nanny', *World Literature Today*, 31 January 2018 <<https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/blog/book-reviews/imperfections-perfect-nanny-khalid-lyamlahy>> [accessed 11 March 2024].

⁷ Lauren Collins, 'The Killer-Nanny Novel That Conquered France', *The New Yorker*, 25 December 2017 <<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/01/the-killer-nanny-novel-that-conquered-france>> [accessed 07 July 2021]. In 2018, the novel was published under two distinct titles in the UK and the USA: *Lullaby* for the British edition and *The Perfect Nanny* for the American version. *The Perfect Nanny* was one of *The New York Times Book Review*'s ten best books of 2018.

⁸ Ava Djamshidi, 'Emmanuel Macron nomme l'écrivaine Leïla Slimani à la Francophonie', *Le Parisien*, 06 November 2017 <<https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron-nomme-l-ecrivaine-leila-slimani-a-la-francophonie-06-11-2017-7374876.php>> [accessed 13 March 2024].

⁹ Anon., 'Les 50 Français les plus influents du monde en 2018', *Vanity Fair*, 20 November 2018 <<https://www.vanityfair.fr/pouvoir/medias/story/classement-vanity-fair-les-50-francais-les-plus-influents-du-monde-en-2018/4521>> [accessed 12 March 2024].

¹⁰ See Olivia Marks, 'Author Leïla Slimani Invites Vogue Into Her Literary World', *British Vogue*, 20 January 2019 <<https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/leila-slimani-interview>> [accessed 04 August 2021] and Kim Willsher, 'Leïla Slimani: "This book is a mirror to make the elite look reality in the face"', *The Guardian*, 16 February 2020 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/16/leila-slimani-interview-sex-and-lies-women-morocco>> [accessed 16 April 2021]. Slimani has referenced her upbringing in Morocco in various interviews and non-fictional writing. For example, see Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 142-43.

and beyond. These examples link to key themes explored in this thesis: gender, national identity and culture, religion, and the position/role of the writer intervening in contemporary socio-political debates. It also aims to outline the various transnational socio-historical and cultural spheres Slimani intervenes in (French, Moroccan, and elsewhere) to offer some contextual background to Slimani as a contemporary Franco-Moroccan writer. It will then summarise the thematic content of the texts chosen for analysis in this thesis, before analysing recent scholarship on Slimani's fictional and non-fictional work to locate this thesis in the current field of study. Next, it will outline the key research questions and main theoretical underpinnings of the thesis, followed by the methodology. Lastly, it will address the main arguments of the thesis and provide a content summary of the three chapters. Overall, this thesis aims to highlight the importance of considering Slimani's literary output since winning the Goncourt in terms of her authorial trajectory, regarding an 'early' and 'later' Slimani, thereby offering something new to the academic debate surrounding her work. Reflecting on how normative expectations surrounding cultural value influence authorial (self-)fashioning in transnational French fields of cultural production, this thesis begins to engage with a spatial understanding of Slimani's positionality and celebrity that is culturally and politically rooted in the Hexagon, albeit in transnationally facing contexts. These approaches are central to the thesis as a whole.

Slimani's oeuvre and key socio-political interventions

To date, Slimani's work cuts across fiction and non-fiction, operating within various transnational literary, cultural, and political spheres in France, Morocco, and beyond. Prior to publishing her first novel, Slimani was a journalist at *Jeune Afrique* and, until April 2020, was regularly contributing articles to *Le Monde*.¹¹ In 2014 and 2016, she published the novels *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* followed by *Chanson douce* respectively.¹² In 2017, Slimani moved away from the novel to publish two works compiling interviews about women's experiences of sex and sexuality in Morocco: the ethnographic *essai/enquête Sexe et mensonges : la vie sexuelle*

¹¹ See Anon., 'Leïla Slimani', *Le Monde* <<https://www.lemonde.fr/signataires/leila-slimani/>> [accessed 04 April 2024].

¹² The former narrates the story of Adèle, whose sex addiction drives her to neglect her job as a journalist and her roles as a mother, wife, and friend. The latter is inspired by real events in 2012 in New York, telling the story of a 'bobo' couple who hire a woman to look after their two young children so that their mother can return to work as a lawyer.

au Maroc and the *bande dessinée* *Paroles d'honneur*.¹³ A re-edition of *Sexe et mensonges* was published in 2021 in France under the new title *Sexe et mensonges : histoires vraies de la vie sexuelle des femmes au Maroc*. The same year, Slimani published *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit*, a non-fictional essay forming part of Edition Stock's *Ma nuit au musée* series, where the author/artist spends a *nuit blanche* in a museum, reflecting upon the experience.¹⁴ Latterly, Slimani continued her fictional endeavours, and in 2020, she released *Le pays des autres : la guerre, la guerre, la guerre*, the first instalment of a proposed three-part trilogy on Moroccan national history, inspired by her own family history. The second volume, *Regardez-nous danser*, was published in 2022.¹⁵

However, Slimani's interventions in transnational spheres have not been limited to her literary output, and she often publicly intervenes in various socio-political debates and cultural contexts in France, Morocco, and beyond. Slimani has also written in English for media outlets such as *The Guardian* and in 2023, she chaired the panel of judges for the International Booker Prize.¹⁶ An example of Slimani's interventions in prolific socio-political debates in France can be seen following the *Charlie Hebdo* shooting in January 2015 and the November 2015 attacks in Paris.¹⁷ In the aftermath of each attack, Slimani published articles for *Le 1*: 'Une armée des plumes' on 19th January 2015 and 'Intégristes, je vous hais' on 18th November 2015. In the

¹³ BD will be used onwards to refer to *bande dessinée*. Moreover, whilst I understand 'women' as anyone who self-identifies as so regardless of their assigned sex at birth, it is unclear who Slimani includes in this definition across her writing. Given that she does not appear to make this explicit anywhere in her works, it can be argued that Slimani resides in an understanding that problematically restricts women to those assigned female at birth.

¹⁴ *LPDFLN* will be used onwards to refer to the text.

¹⁵ At the time of writing this thesis, the title and release date of the final volume were unconfirmed. The first two volumes in the series have been translated into English and Spanish. It is important to note that this is not an exhaustive list of Slimani's published works since 2014; however, those mentioned above are arguably the most well-known and well-read texts in her oeuvre. Other texts include a collection of texts Slimani has written for *Le 1* (a French weekly newspaper founded in 2014), *Le diable est dans les détails*, ed. by Éric Fottorino (Paris: Le 1/L'Aube, 2016), as well as *Comment j'écris : une conversation avec Éric Fottorino* (Paris: Le 1/L'Aube, 2018). See also, *Simone Veil, mon héroïne* (2017) which Slimani published with illustrator Pascal Lemaître in homage to French feminist pioneer Simone Veil (1927-2017). These three texts published by Le1/L'Aube have subsequently been translated into English and collated in *The Devil is in the Detail and other writings*, trans. Helen Vassallo (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023). Slimani has also produced a two-part BD series with illustrator Clément Oubrière, inspired by the life of French surgeon Suzanne Noël (1878-1954): *À mains nues : Tome 1 (1900-1921)* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2020) and *À mains nues : Tome II/II (1922-1954)* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2021).

¹⁶ For example, Leïla Slimani, 'An extraordinary role model': Maryse Condé remembered by Leïla Slimani', *The Guardian*, 03 April 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2024/apr/03/an-extraordinary-role-model-maryse-conde-remembered-by-leila-slimani>> [accessed 04 April 2024].

¹⁷ *Charlie Hebdo* is a satirical French weekly newspaper based in Paris. The attack took place on 7th January 2015, when two gunmen, thought to belong to the Islamist terrorist group Al-Qaeda, forced their way into the paper's offices, killing eleven people and injuring eleven more. Just a few months later, on 13th November 2015, a series of coordinated attacks were carried out in the nation's capital which left 300 people injured and 130 dead. See Mielusel, *Franco-Maghrebi Artists*, p.1.

former, Slimani champions the right of freedom of expression for authors; she insists on the importance of writing and literature as acts of resistance by weighing in on the national debate sparked by Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*, which happened to be published on the same day as the attack.¹⁸ In the latter, Slimani criticises the hypocrisy of government leaders and writes a love letter to her then home Paris, calling on readers (and herself) '[...] d'être entiers, d'avoir du panache [...] d'être vraiment français' in the face of religious extremists.¹⁹ Slimani seems to suggest there is a core, innate sense of national identity or French-ness shared among French people, which opposes the moral degradation of religious extremists and their subsequent 'un-Frenchness.' This call for a sense of national unity or common ground highlights the politically fraught nature of questions surrounding French identity and religion (especially Islam) in France's contemporary socio-political climate, as will be shown later in subsequent chapters.

Indeed, Slimani has not only entered debates surrounding religious extremism in France. For example, following the eruption of the global Me Too/Balance Ton Porc movements in 2017 in France, actress Catherine Deneuve and ninety-nine other women criticised these movements, defending the 'liberté d'importuner', claiming the campaigns

¹⁸ Slimani, *Le diable est dans les détails*, pp. 19-26. Michel Houellebecq is a controversial French writer. His sixth novel, *Soumission*, imagines France as a Muslim state in 2022. Charged with Islamophobia by some quarters of French society, the novel provoked an intense debate in France (particularly given that the cover page of *Charlie Hebdo* on 6th January 2015 was a caricature of Houellebecq). For further discussion about the debate that ensued in the wake of the book's publication and the attacks (and the controversial nature of Houellebecq's writing and positioning), see Betty Louis, 'Who is afraid of Michel Houellebecq? The answer: almost everyone', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 56. 1 (2019), 37-52 (pp. 40-44) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2019.4>> and Per-Erik Nilsson, 'Fuck Autonomy: Neo-Orientalism and Abjection in Michel Houellebecq's *Soumission*', *European Review*, 27. 4 (2019), 600-14 <<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1062798719000206>>. In the article, Slimani also references writers Salman Rushdie and Kamel Daoud who have both provoked controversy in their depictions of Islam in their respective writing. Indian-born British-American Rushdie published *The Satanic Verses* in 1989. The novel sparked worldwide controversy and ultimately led to Rushdie being issued a *fatwa* from Ayatollah Khomeini, Iran's former spiritual leader. See Ana Cristina Mendes, 'Salman Rushdie: The Accidental Intellectual in the Mediascape', in *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe: Critics, Artists, Movements, and their Publics*, ed. by Sandra Ponzanesi and Andriano Joé Habed (London; New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020), pp. 143-57 (pp. 147-48). Similarly, after publishing *Meursault, contre-enquête* (2013), Algerian writer Daoud was issued a *fatwa* by the radical Islamist Abdelfatah Hamadache Ziraoui, leader of *Le front de l'éveil islamique salafiste* (an unofficial organisation), who accused him of waging a war against the sacred values of Islam. See Claire Devarrieux, 'L'auteur Kamel Daoud visé par une fatwa', *Libération*, 17 December 2014 <https://www.liberation.fr/livres/2014/12/17/l-auteur-kamel-daoud-visé-par-une-fatwa_1165863/> [accessed 15 May 2024]. I have written about the polemics of Daoud's writing elsewhere, see Isla Paterson, 'Playing to the West only? Representations of Picasso, the gendered body and Islamism in Kamel Daoud's *Le peintre dévorant la femme*', *International Journal of Francophone Studies*, 24. 1-2 (2021), 89-148 <https://doi.org/10.1386/ijfs_00031_1> and 'À quel(s) public(s) s'adresser ? À propos de la réception de *Cologne, lieu de fantasmes* (2016) et du *Peintre dévorant la femme* (2018) de Kamel Daoud dans l'espace discursif franco-maghrébin', *Revue des Sciences Humaines*, 351. 3 (2023), pp. 219-32.

¹⁹ Slimani, *Le diable est dans les détails*, p. 39.

infantilised women whilst fuelling an environment of totalitarianism and sexual puritanism.²⁰ In the proceeding backlash, Slimani was quick to respond with an article in *Libération* ‘Un porc tu nais ?’, where she defended ‘le droit de ne pas être importunée.’²¹ Slimani’s feminist interventions are not limited to the French context; in 2019, alongside Moroccan writer and filmmaker Sonia Terrab, Slimani launched *Le Collectif 490 des Hors-la-loi* manifesto, initially published in *Le Monde* and *TelQuel*.²² The manifesto references Article 490 of the Moroccan penal code which can imprison people for up to a year for having sexual relations outside of marriage. More than 470 Moroccans signed the piece, encouraging Moroccan leaders to engage in an open dialogue about individual liberties and decriminalise sexual relations outside of marriage.

At times, Slimani’s interventions have been subject to controversy. For example, in 2018, Slimani published an opinion piece in *Le Monde* criticising Macron for not defending immigrants more strongly following an exchange he had with a veteran in Verdun was circulated online.²³ At the time, it caused a stir on the internet; whilst some defended Slimani, many of the comments were charged with misogyny, racism, and Islamophobia, accusing her of insulting France and denying her any claim to ‘Frenchness.’²⁴ Moreover, in 2020, Slimani saw herself embroiled in a public debate in France following a *journal de confinement* she published in *Le Monde* in March 2020.²⁵ The reactions on social media and in the French press were violent, accusing her, alongside writer Marie Darrieussecq, of embodying an arrogant

²⁰ Catherine Millet, Ingrid Caven, Catherine Deneuve and others, ‘« Nous défendons une liberté d’importuner, indispensable à la liberté sexuelle »’, *Le Monde*, 09 January 2018 <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/01/09/nous-defendons-une-liberte-d-importuner-indispensable-a-la-liberte-sexuelle_5239134_3232.html> [accessed 18 September 2021].

²¹ Slimani, ‘« Un porc, tu nais ? »’, *Libération*, 12 January 2018 <https://www.liberation.fr/france/2018/01/12/un-porc-tu-nais_1621913/> [accessed 18 September 2021]. ‘Un porc tu nais ?’ likely references the Balance Ton Porc movement in France. In English, this roughly translates as ‘expose the leech.’

²² *TelQuel* is a French-language Moroccan weekly news magazine that is generally considered to be more independent from the Moroccan government than other Moroccan news outlets. For the manifesto, see Leïla Slimani, Sonia Terrab and others ‘« Nous, citoyennes et citoyens marocains, déclarons que nous sommes hors la loi »’, *Le Monde*, 23 September 2019 <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2019/09/23/nous-citoyennes-et-citoyens-marocains-declarons-que-nous-sommes-hors-la-loi_6012648_3232.html> [accessed 04 April 2024].

²³ Leïla Slimani, ‘« Emmanuel Macron aurait pu défendre les immigrés avec plus de vigueur »’, *Le Monde*, 10 November 2018 <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2018/11/10/leila-slimani-m-macron-ce-veteran-cette-voix-amere-ce-ton-aigre-je-les-reconnais_5381635_3232.html> [accessed 16 April 2021].

²⁴ Slimani, ‘Emmanuel Macron.’

²⁵ See Leïla Slimani, ‘Le « Journal du confinement » de Leïla Slimani, jour 1 : « J’ai dit à mes enfants que c’était un peu comme dans la Belle au bois dormant »’, *Le Monde*, 18 March 2020 <https://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2020/03/18/le-journal-du-confinement-de-leila-slimani-jour-1-j-ai-dit-a-mes-enfants-que-c-etait-un-peu-comme-dans-la-belle-au-bois-dormant_6033596_3232.html> [accessed 14 June 2021].

Parisian elite disconnected from the realities of the Covid-19 crisis.²⁶ Slimani since decided to leave social media and delete her accounts ‘to protect herself and her ambition from the keyboard warriors and the powerful strangers on the other side of her screen.’²⁷ In addition to leaving social media, Slimani also left Paris, moving to Lisbon with her family in 2021.²⁸ In terms of wider questions about locating Slimani, examining her writing alongside public interventions helps to interrogate the extent to which she occupies a position of proximity to the French cultural and political mainstream. It also helps to explore how this proximity impacts Slimani’s trajectory, particularly given that she appears to be a transnationally-facing, Franco-Moroccan, celebrity author.

Slimani as Franco-Moroccan writer: socio-political, historical and cultural contexts

Turning to contextualise Slimani as a Franco-Moroccan writer who spent her childhood and teenage years in Morocco and much of her adult life in France, there has been a long history of exchange between France and Morocco (and the Maghreb more widely). This contextualisation is vital to understanding the complexities of Slimani’s lived experience as a Franco-Moroccan woman of considerable socio-cultural status, who moves in transnational and transcultural literary spheres. It also helps to analyse how she is labelled and viewed in France, Morocco, and beyond. For this thesis, the transnational (notably, in the French context) can be defined as an exploration of

cultural multiplicity and social connectedness both within France itself and across its borders. Foregrounding a relationship with other cultures in horizontal and vertical flows that cross national boundaries, [...] transnationalism [can be understood] as both

²⁶ See Diane Ducret, “‘Journal de confinement’ : la vie un peu trop rose de Leïla Slimani”, *Marianne*, 19 March 2020 <<https://www.marianne.net/agora/humeurs/journal-du-confinement-la-vie-un-peu-trop-rose-de-leila-slimani>> [accessed 14 June 2021] & Christophe Bourdon, ‘Mon journal du confinement à moi’, *RTBF*, 20 March 2020 <<https://www.rtb.be/article/mon-journal-du-confinement-a-moi-10463334>> [accessed 14 June 2021].

²⁷ Amanda Randone, “‘I Became A Free Woman’: Leïla Slimani On Leaving Social Media”, *British Vogue*, 07 November 2020 <<https://www.vogue.co.uk/arts-and-lifestyle/article/leila-slimani-on-leaving-social-media>> [accessed 04 April 2024].

²⁸ Émilie Lanez, ‘Leïla Slimani, l’exil portugais’, *Paris Match*, 06 February September 2022 <<https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Livres/Leila-Slimani-l-exil-portugais-1786120>> [accessed 13 March 2024].

lived social phenomenon, evident in the lives of diasporic communities or in the cultural production of translingual writers, but also a way of seeing the world.²⁹

This allows for a critical interrogation of the ‘nation’ in a ‘comparative, global context.’³⁰ In the context of ‘transnationalising’ French studies, Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury maintain that it ‘means being attentive to key social, political and intellectual themes such as migration, globalization, diasporas, multilingualism, multi-ethnicity and multiculturalism.’³¹ Indeed, in terms of cultural production and thought, it can be argued that ‘creative and intellectual endeavour depend – and have always depended – upon the sorts of cross-fertilization (themselves often known as transcultural) that are central to transnational encounters.’³² Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih suggest that transnationalism carries a liberating potential to rethink networks of cultural exchange between nations, whereby connections can be made between marginal spaces, bypassing national centres.³³ This suggests that human agency forms an active part of such transnational processes, which exist outside of dominant modes of cultural exchange. Thinking of the transnational in these terms helps to unpick Slimani’s position as a Franco-Moroccan writer. As this thesis argues, whilst Slimani is transnationally facing, she is nonetheless writing largely from and to France in terms of geographical and ideological proximity. The decision to focus on the transnational helps to highlight how it is perhaps more useful to understand Slimani as a (trans)national writer. This emphasises the tensions surrounding her authorial (self-)fashioning that ultimately prevent her from bypassing the French national centre. This dynamic also impacts her writing and reception in a wider, global context.

Siobhán Shilton acknowledges that, since the 1980s, there has been a distinct increase in artistic cultural production of works probing the complex cross-cultural identities that have

²⁹ Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies: An Introduction’ in *Transnational French Studies*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), pp. 1-31 (p. 11). As Forsdick and Launchbury highlight, the question of defining the transnational has received much critical attention across the arts, humanities, and social sciences. Several works outlining the field of transnational studies highlight its critical limitations, notably in approaches over privileging concepts of the national or analysing solely within its parameters. For example, see *The Transnational Studies Reader: Intersections and Innovations*, ed. by Peggy Levitt and Sanjeev Khagram (London: Routledge, 2007).

³⁰ Tyler Stovall, *Transnational France: The Modern History of a Universal Nation* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2015), p. 2.

³¹ Forsdick and Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies’, p. 12.

³² Forsdick and Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies’, p. 12.

³³ Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih, ‘Introduction: Thinking through the Minor, Transnationally’, in *Minor Transnationalism*, ed. by Françoise Lionnet and Shu-Mei Shih (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), pp. 1-23 (pp. 5-12).

stemmed from Franco-Maghrebi encounters.³⁴ In the Franco-Moroccan context, this exchange has been explicitly marked by French colonialism in Morocco. The Alawite dynasty has ruled Morocco since the seventeenth century, yet this was interrupted between 1912 and 1956 when French colonialists established the French Protectorate in Morocco.³⁵ Susan Slyomovics highlights how the reinstating of the monarchy in 1956 was not historically inevitable; rather, the King's restoration was dependant on 'complex political and social forces that propelled Muhammed V, exiled by the French, into the symbol for the Moroccan nation during the struggle for independence.'³⁶ Slyomovics maintains that although there has been dynastic continuity from the pre-Protectorate sultanate to the contemporary era, 'the path from colony to nation has forced each country subjected to French colonization to confront change and renovation.'³⁷ Indeed, since independence, the King's return from exile marked the start of a 'transitional process of decolonization', where the 'monarchy had the material and symbolic power to successfully consolidate its position during this transitional phase.'³⁸ From the outset in 1956, the King developed a multiparty pluralistic political structure that prevented challenges from single dominant parties such as Istiqlal, the mass anti-colonial nationalist party

³⁴ Siobhán Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters: Gender and Genre in Franco-Maghrebi Art* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), p. 1. This trend appears to extend to Franco-Maghrebi writers who began emerging onto the mainstream French literary scene in the 1980s and 1990s (see Mielusel, *Transnational Narratives*, p. 13). Writers such as Azouz Begag, born in Lyon in 1957 to Algerian parents, have also actively been involved in national and transnational cultural and political spheres. Begag's first novel, *Le Gone du Chaâba* (1986), tells the story of the experiences of North African immigrants and their children living in France's *bidonvilles* in the late 1950s and 1960s. He also served as the delegate minister for equal opportunities in France under Dominique de Villepin from 2005-2007. Begag resigned from his position after openly confronting Sarkozy about his politics regarding the 2005 riots in France and the aftermath. More recent examples of well-known Maghrebi authors in the French public sphere include Moroccan writer Abdellah Taïa (1973) who has been based in Paris since 1999. His work explores themes relating to (but not limited to) gender, sexuality, and desire. His most well-known texts include *Mon Maroc* (2000), *L'Armée du salut* (2006), *Infidèles* (2012), and *Un pays pour mourir* (2015). For further reading about Taïa's work, see *Abdellah Taïa's Queer Migration: Non-Places, Affect, and Temporalities*, ed. by Denis M. Provencher and Siham Bouamer (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2021).

³⁵ The Spanish Protectorate in Morocco was also established in 1912 by a treaty between France and Spain that converted Spanish influence and presence in Morocco into a formal protectorate. It consisted of a northern strip on the Mediterranean and the Strait of Gibraltar and a southern part around Cape Juby, bordering the Western Sahara (then known as the Spanish Sahara). The northern zone became part of independent Morocco shortly after Morocco gained independence from France in 1956, and the southern zone joined independent Morocco in 1958. See Jonathan Wrytzen, *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca; London: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 274-75. In addition, for an account of the interaction between Spanish colonialism and Moroccan nationalism, see Eric Calderwood, *Colonial al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2018).

³⁶ Susan Slyomovics, *The Performance of Human Rights in Morocco* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005), p. 13. Mohammed V ruled from 1956 until he died 1961. He was succeeded by his son Hassan II who ruled until 1999. The current king, Mohammed VI, has ruled since 1999.

³⁷ Slyomovics, *The Performance of Human Rights*, p. 13.

³⁸ Wrytzen, *Making Morocco*, p. 273.

which, at the time, was Morocco's largest political party.³⁹ By the early 1960s, the balance of power had shifted towards a 'de Gaullist style of presidential monarchy with vast executive and legislative power.'⁴⁰

One of the King's priorities following independence was to frame Moroccan national identity around the Arabisation and Islamisation nation-building program that had been championed by urban nationalists since the 1930s.⁴¹ This consisted in the promotion of Arabic at a pedagogical and state level; by 1962, Arabic was constitutionally enshrined as Morocco's national language. However, Arabisation did not erase problems of conflicting identities in Morocco. This policy marginalised the Amazigh (Berber) language and culture whilst French retained a privileged place, particularly among the elite and in state administration.⁴² Moreover, tensions surrounding the ethnoreligious definition of the Moroccan nation meant much of Morocco's minority Jewish population left for Israel, Europe, and North America immediately before or following independence.⁴³ In terms of Islam, by 1958, whilst post-independence Moroccan civil and penal codes remained inspired by French colonial laws, the legal regulations of Moroccan family law, grounded in 'Islamic principles', were codified in the *Mudawana* or Morocco's personal status (or family) code. This particularly focused on gendered differentiation that allocated different legal and economic rights to men and women and played an important symbolic role in reinforcing the Moroccan state's 'Islamic' credentials. For example, men were privileged 'in questions of marriage, divorce, and child custody while subjecting women to men's guardianship and permissions throughout their lives.'⁴⁴

The legacies of the politicisation of identities in the (post)colonial political field in Morocco continue to influence contemporary renegotiations of identity. The authoritarian reign of Hassan II (1961-1999), also known as the repressive *années de plomb* (years of lead), was characterised by widespread fear, police surveillance, censorship, self-censorship, forcible disappearances, political imprisonment, and torture. During the 1980s, several grassroots organisations began challenging how Moroccan identity had been configured post-

³⁹ Wyrzten, *Making Morocco*, p. 282. Istiqlal had been banned in 1952 and was able to operate again upon Moroccan independence.

⁴⁰ Wyrzten, *Making Morocco*, p. 284.

⁴¹ Wyrzten, *Making Morocco*, p. 286.

⁴² Wyrzten, *Making Morocco*, p. 286-87.

⁴³ Wyrzten, *Making Morocco*, p. 288-90.

⁴⁴ Zakia Salime, *Between Feminism and Islam: Human Rights and Sharia Law in Morocco* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), p. 3.

independence, centred on Arabo-Islamic ethno-religious unity and commitment to the monarchy.⁴⁵ Moreover, in the last four decades, women's rights, Amazigh, and Islamist movements – each in their own way – have all called for a renegotiation of the gendered, ethnic, and religious aspects of Moroccan identity.⁴⁶ Indeed, Marzia Caporale maintains that today, contemporary Moroccan culture represents

a fluid society still seeking an equilibrium, [oscillating] between adherence to its strong Arab/Muslim cultural heritage and a growing determination to embrace the Western world and its values. The dialectic tension between the local and the global and its effects on society are echoed in the intellectual discourse currently taking place in the country.⁴⁷

Nevertheless, the impacts of France's colonial presence in Morocco (and the Maghreb more broadly) on contemporary iterations of identity politics are not spatially limited to Morocco. Slimani moved to France at seventeen and has spent most of her adult life living in Paris. Contemporary France can be understood as a paradoxical nation: for example, a country where millions of immigrants live – particularly those descending from former French colonies – but which is also home to one of the longest-standing extremist right-wing political movements in the West.⁴⁸

The French nation has struggled to come to terms with its colonial past, in particular, about its part in the traumatic Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962).⁴⁹ Benjamin Stora has shown how the war was followed by an extensive period of 'collective amnesia' in

⁴⁵ Here I only aim to give a brief overview of Morocco post-independence for contextualisation as further discussion goes beyond the scope of this thesis. For more detailed accounts of the socio-cultural and political history of Morocco during the colonial and postcolonial eras, see Slyomovics, *The Performance of Human Rights*; Wyrzten, *Making Morocco: Nation, Society, and Culture in North Africa* ed. by James McDougall (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Pierre Vermeren, *Histoire du Maroc depuis l'indépendance* (Paris: La Découverte, 2016).

⁴⁶ Wyrzten, *Making Morocco*, p. 303. For example, 2004 saw the reform of women's rights in the personal status code, and in the 2011 constitutional reform, Amazigh was made an official language alongside Arabic.

⁴⁷ Marzia Caporale, 'Moroccan Narratives of Dystopia: Representations of Tangier in Leïla Kilani's film *Sur la planche*', in *Urban Bridges, Global Capital(s): Trans-Mediterranean Francosphères*, ed. by Claire Launchbury and Megan C. MacDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), pp. 53-66 (p. 53).

⁴⁸ Emile Chabal, *France* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2020), p. 1. The use of terms like 'the West' or 'Western' (as well as other signifiers like 'Muslim' or 'Arab') to describe societies and cultures can be reductive due to the homogenising nature of the terms; hence, for the purpose of this thesis they will be used with a degree of caution.

⁴⁹ During the French colonial period, Algeria was considered officially to be an integral part of France, rather than a colony.

France.⁵⁰ Academics have looked to metaphor to describe the complex relationship between France and its former colonies and how the colonial legacies continue to impact contemporary French society, culture, and politics. Often presented as a *fracture coloniale* that has since mutated into *ruptures postcoloniales*, it has largely been since the late 1990s and early 2000s that France's colonial history has been the subject of divisive public discussion. For example, revelations of torture used by the French Army during the Algerian War burst into the public sphere in June 2000.⁵¹ Although there was nothing particularly new about the revelations, this 'triggered an extraordinary media debate on torture, a chain reaction of confessions by ex-soldiers, and a continuous ferment of political controversy that raged in France and Algeria down to the trial and condemnation of General Paul Aussaresses in January 2002.'⁵² At a similar time, there was a 'burgeoning interest among the "children" of African and Caribbean immigrants in the history and memorialization of slavery and colonialism [...].'⁵³

Furthermore, the controversial *loi du 23 février 2005* which invoked the 'positive aspects' of the French colonial 'experience', represented the culmination of French concerns and anxieties over national identity.⁵⁴ The law provoked intense public discussions about France's colonial legacy or 'guerre de mémoires.'⁵⁵ Postcolonial interest groups, such as the *Indigènes de la République* (2005), were created in opposition to the state's positive promotion of the colonial legacy. Nicolas Bancel maintains that this emphasised the polarisation between certain marginal groups in France rejecting colonial nostalgia and a right-wing government

⁵⁰ See Benjamin Stora, *La Gangrène et l'oubli : la mémoire de la guerre de l'Algérie* (Paris: La Découverte, 1991).

⁵¹ Florence Beaugé, 'Comment "Le Monde" a relancé le débat sur la torture en Algérie', *Le Monde*, 17 March 2012 <https://www.lemonde.fr/afrique/article/2012/03/17/le-monde-relance-le-debat-sur-la-torture-en-algerie_1669340_3212.html> [accessed 31 July 2024].

⁵² Neil Macmaster, 'The Torture Controversy (1998-2002): Towards a "new History" of the Algerian War?', *Modern and Contemporary France*, 10. 4 (2002), 449-59 (p. 450) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/0963948022000029538>>. Paul Aussaresses, a French general and intelligence officer, admitted to and defended the systematic use of torture in Algeria during the war.

⁵³ Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, 'Introduction: A Decade of Postcolonial Crisis: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid (2005-2015)', in *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid*, ed. by Nicholas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, trans. Alexis Pernsteiner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 1-39 (p. 21).

⁵⁴ For the law, see Anon., 'Loi portant reconnaissance de la Nation et contribution nationale en faveur des Français rapatriés', *Légifrance* <<https://www.legifrance.gouv.fr/loda/id/JORFTEXT000000444898>> [accessed 20 May 2024]. For further discussions around the *fracture coloniale* and *ruptures postcoloniales*, see *La fracture coloniale*, ed. by Pascal Blanchard, Nicolas Bancel, and Sandrine Lemaire (Paris: La Découverte, 2005) and *Ruptures postcoloniales : les nouveaux visages de la société française*, ed. by Nicolas Bancel and others (Paris: La Découverte, 2010).

⁵⁵ This was particularly in relation to Algeria and the memory of the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962). See Benjamin Stora, 'Entre la France et l'Algérie, le traumatisme (post)colonial des années 2000', in *Ruptures postcoloniales : les nouveaux visages de la société française*, ed. by Nicolas Bancel and others (Paris: La Découverte, 2010), pp. 328-43 (p. 332).

attempting to validate French colonial presence.⁵⁶ Indeed, Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas suggest that 2005 represented a turning point in more ways than one. It was the first time French people were able to learn about the colonial past in journals, magazines, special editions of academic journals, and academic books. However,

the thirst for knowledge was soon crushed by the concerted efforts of neoreactionary and nostalgic discourse and the deafening silence of the state on these and related issues. The colonial question as such was yet again and, for the most part, marginalized over the next decade or so. At the same time though, the migratory question became a “problem” in far-right political discourse, but extended far beyond into mainstream politics, and in the 2007 presidential elections, identity issues were very much at stake. That same year, the place of Islam in society became a major political “issue.”⁵⁷

Bancel, Blanchard, and Thomas suggest that since this period, France has experienced a ‘postcolonial crisis’ that has paved the way for more recent crises in the nation’s history, such as the 2015 terror attacks and the current identity wars playing out.⁵⁸ Whilst the respective histories of decolonisation in Morocco and Tunisia are markedly different to Algeria (both remained protectorates until 1956), attitudes towards the Maghrebi diasporic community in France tend to collapse the specific, diverse histories and cultures of the Maghreb into one cultural entity (and the heterogeneity of the Arab and Muslim worlds more broadly). One of the logical outcomes of decolonisation has been the

dual-based memory that defines postcolonial immigrants: they are the fruit of a history in which they are the descendants not only of migrants but also of native subjects of the empire. At the same time, they are inserted into a French society that neither recognizes this dual affiliation nor, for that matter, colonial or postcolonial history, the latter also

⁵⁶ Nicolas Bancel, ‘France, 2005: A postcolonial turning point’, *French Cultural Studies*, 24. 32 (2013), 208-19 (pp. 210-11) <<https://doi.org/10.1177/0957155813477794>>.

⁵⁷ Nicolas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, ‘Introduction: A Decade of Postcolonial Crisis: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid (2005-2015)’, in *The Colonial Legacy in France: Fracture, Rupture, and Apartheid*, ed. by Nicholas Bancel, Pascal Blanchard, and Dominic Thomas, trans. Alexis Pernsteiner (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), pp. 1-39 (pp. 4-5). The 2005 law saw the Right rowing back on what had happened under Lionel Jospin’s time as Prime Minister (1997-2002): the opening up of some of the French state archives on the Algerian War of Independence (and especially the Paris police archives for the period 1958-1962), as well as timid steps towards recognising the 17th October 1961 massacre in Paris. See Jim House and Neil MacMaster, *Paris 1961: Algerians, State Terror, and Memory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 310-34.

⁵⁸ Bancel and others, ‘Introduction: A Decade of Postcolonial Crisis’, pp. 4-5.

serving to explain the physical presence of these populations and the debasing representations that cling to them.⁵⁹

Indeed, contemporary discussions in France about internal and external events and crises, such as the ‘War on Terror’, the *banlieue* riots of 2005, the 2011 law banning the burqa, or the 2015 terrorist attacks, ‘reveal(s) an increasing fear of cultural – and particularly Islamic – difference. Negative perceptions of Islam, with which the Maghrebi diasporic community is frequently associated, have intensified following the events of 9/11.’⁶⁰ In French society, there is a tendency to exclude cultural practices deemed ‘alternative’ in the name of *laïcité*.⁶¹ For example, in 2004, the French government prohibited people wearing ‘conspicuous signs’ of religious affiliation in public schools. Despite including a range of religious clothing, the ban was aimed primarily at Muslim girls wearing hijabs.⁶² Another example emerged in 2016 when thirty French cities banned people wearing the bathing suit known as a ‘burkini’ from public beaches. Siobhán Shilton maintains that efforts to ban the burkini highlight the extent of French fears of perceived Arab and/or Muslim ‘difference’ in public spaces.⁶³ This echoes the regulation of women’s clothing during the French colonial period. As Neil MacMaster demonstrates, this phenomenon can be contextualised in the Algerian War of Independence. MacMaster maintains that for over fifty years, the repressive French colonial administration strategically deployed representations of Algerian women and their bodies that sustained an image of their intellectual and material inferiority. Yet, during the War, the colonial apparatus made a dramatic shift to promote an ‘emancipation’ policy. Aiming to win over the Algerian population to the French side and legitimise French military presence in the country, the push for emancipation was rooted in a Eurocentric, assimilationist model which attempted to ‘civilise’ – or rather ‘Westernise’ – the Algerian woman to represent her French (bourgeois)

⁵⁹ Bancel and others, ‘Introduction: A Decade of Postcolonial Crisis’, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Shilton, *Transcultural Encounters*, p. 1.

⁶¹ A founding pillar of the French Republic since 1905, *laïcité* is the secular Republican principle intended to promote inclusion according to the self-professed French Republican values of equality and universalism.

⁶² For discussions around the ‘headscarf affairs’ in France since 1989, see Maxim Silverman, *Deconstructing the Nation: Immigration, Racism, and Citizenship in Modern France* (London: Routledge, 1992); Françoise Gaspard, *Le foulard et la république* (Paris: La Découverte, 1995); Nicky Jones, ‘Religious Freedom in a Secular Society: The Case of the Islamic Headscarf in France’, in *Freedom of Religion under Bills of Rights*, ed. by Paul Babie and Neville Rochow (Adelaide: University of Adelaide Press, 2012), pp. 216-38; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Antoine Boulangé, ‘The hijab, racism and the state’, *International Socialism*, 29 November 2004 <<http://isj.org.uk/the-hijab-racism-and-the-state/>> [accessed 21 May 2024].

⁶³ Siobhán Shilton, ‘Identity and “Difference” in French Art: El Seed’s Calligraffiti from Street to Web’, in *Post-Migratory Cultures in Postcolonial France*, ed. by Kathryn A. Kleppinger and Laura Reeck (Liverpool University Press, 2018), pp. 239-56 (p. 239).

counterpart.⁶⁴ Within this policy, emphasis was placed on unveiling, given that the veil was seen as an especially public ‘sign of the very essence of Islamic society, the perception of an “uncivilised” order that was based on the subjugation of women, despotism, polygamy, the harem and sexual perversion.’⁶⁵

The contextualisation of Slimani as a Franco-Moroccan author, who grew up in Morocco and has spent most of her adult life living in and writing from France, is essential to exploring her work and understanding the transnational, transcultural, and transpolitical spheres in which she intervenes and is received. It arguably highlights the spatio-temporality inherent in how interactions of national and transnational identities play out locally and globally. In the context of Slimani’s celebrity being born over a relatively short period of time since 2014 from a French geographical and cultural centre, there are inevitable consequences for how her profile impacts, and is impacted by, what she writes and how she is received. To account for the socio-cultural position Slimani occupies in France, Morocco, and beyond, this thesis will look at some of the understudied ‘non-fictional’ work in Slimani’s corpus. Slimani has published several non-fictional texts since the start of her literary career. For example, her first literary publication appeared in 2014 with Moroccan publisher Malika Editions. The non-fictional text, *La baie de Dakhla: Itinérance enchantée entre mer et desert* (2014), examines the transition to democracy in Morocco’s Dakhla region. Slimani also published a collection of her journalistic work for Le 1, *Le diable est dans les details*, in 2016. However, this thesis focuses on a selection of Slimani’s non-fictional texts published after the *Chanson douce* success in 2016 and before the arrival of the second volume in the Moroccan trilogy (2022). In particular, this thesis chronologically situates and analyses *Sexe et mensonges* (2017; 2021), *Paroles d’honneur* (2017), and *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* (2021) to engage with the processes contributing to the curation, development, and maintenance of her literary celebrity status in a transnational context.

Thematic overview of *Sexe et mensonges*, *Paroles d’honneur*, and *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit*

As previously noted, *Sexe et mensonges* appears as an ethnographic *essai* or *enquête* where Slimani compiles interviews about women’s experiences of sex and sexuality in Morocco. In

⁶⁴ Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the ‘Emancipation’ of Muslim Women, 1954-62* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009), pp. 2-6.

⁶⁵ MacMaster, *Burning the Veil*, p. 397.

the text's introduction, Slimani explains that whilst she was touring *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (a novel about a woman who is a sex addict) in Morocco in 2014, the book sparked intense reactions concerning sex and sexuality during publicity events. As many women came to her, keen to discuss and share their experiences, Slimani wanted to 'restituer [cette parole], comme le témoignage poignant d'une époque et d'une souffrance.'⁶⁶ Her aim was not to write 'une étude sociologique ni de faire un essai sur la sexualité au Maroc.'⁶⁷ The text comprises fifteen individual accounts of (mostly) women living in Morocco. Slimani intersperses these accounts with several mini essays which offer a contextual background to the testimonies, focusing on themes such as Islam and sex. In the same year that the first edition of *Sexe et mensonges* was released (2017), Slimani, working collaboratively with visual artist Laetitia Coryn, published the BD *Paroles d'honneur*. Slimani maintains that she was excited by the prospect of adapting *Sexe et mensonges* into a BD when the publisher Les Arènes proposed the idea, and maintains that, 'c'était l'occasion pour moi de raconter cette histoire comme une fiction, d'incarner mes personnages, mais aussi de donner à voir la beauté de ces femmes et de mon pays.'⁶⁸

Slimani's 2021 essay *LPDFLN* is a largely autobiographical text, based in the Punta della Dogana art museum in Venice, which offers an introspective reflection on what it means to be confined as a writer, the importance of literature in her life, as well as reflections on her childhood growing up in Rabat, Morocco. The essay begins in Paris in 2018, two years after Slimani published *Chanson douce*, before moving to Venice in 2019. Despite being physically located in different geographical centres moving from Morocco to Italy, looking at how Slimani engages with different spatial contexts (in terms of genre, geography, and gender) over time since the Goncourt success encourages a reflection on the way that Slimani's authorial trajectory as a celebrity writer has developed and solidified.

Writing about Slimani's oeuvre: performativity and authorial positionality

This thesis aims to fill an important gap in academic work on Slimani. At the time of writing, the existing scholarship exploring *Sexe et mensonges* / *Paroles d'honneur* is limited to a few

⁶⁶ Leïla Slimani, *Sexe et mensonges : Histoires vraies de la vie sexuelle des femmes au Maroc* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2021), p. 21.

⁶⁷ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 21.

⁶⁸ Leïla Slimani and Laetitia Coryn, *Paroles d'honneur* (Paris: Les Arènes, 2017), p. 4.

articles, as well as a couple of reviews.⁶⁹ There is even less scholarship focussing on *LPDFLN* and, on writing this thesis, there only appeared to be one review, by Marie-Agnès Sourieau.⁷⁰ Comparing *Sexe et mensonges* to Anne Garréta's *Pas un jour* (2002), Joanne Brueton argues that Slimani uses heuristic narratives to conduct a survey of female desire 'whose reality is only legible in literature.'⁷¹ This, Brueton maintains, allows Slimani to perform her 'lived sexual experience through a carefully manufactured textual machine that grants [Slimani] freedom. Only through the straitjacket of a fictional system can the reader glean the reality of female subjectivities so long obscured by myth.'⁷² Similarly, Kate Nelson alludes to the question of performativity when comparing *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*. Yet, she does so by suggesting that Slimani's positionality, authorial voice, and privilege affect the construction (and reading) of these narratives as (non)fictional archives presented across two mediums, particularly when they are transposed out of Morocco for a European audience.⁷³ This thesis explores similar themes concerning how Slimani engages with and performs representations of gender in various spatio-temporal, transnational contexts. In addition, it considers how notions of performative authorial positionality emerge in Slimani's (self-)positioning in multiple transnational discursive spheres – socio-cultural, literary, and political – in France, Morocco, and beyond. Like Brueton and Nelson's respective works, this thesis draws on notions of performativity to explore the relationship between text, author, positionality, and reception. In this way, performativity can be understood within Judith Butler's conception of gender performativity. They define it as an

expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates. [...] [T]he performativity of gender revolves around this metalepsis, the way in which the anticipation of gendered essence produces that which it posits as outside itself. [...]

⁶⁹ See Joanne Brueton, "'Cherchez la fiction': Stories of Self-Realization in Anne Garréta's *Pas un jour* and Leïla Slimani's *Sexe et mensonges*", *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 58. 2 (2021), 164-77 <<https://doi.org/10.3828/ajfs.2021.14>>; Kate Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences on a French-Moroccan Archive: Medium, Audience, and Self in Leïla Slimani's *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*', *Expressions maghrébines*, 21. 2 (2022), 57-71 <[doi:10.1353/exp.2022.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/exp.2022.0021)>; Didier Epsztajn, 'Leïla Slimani: *Sexe et mensonges*. *La vie sexuelle au Maroc*', *Nouvelles Questions Féministes*, 37. 2 (2018), 119-22 <<https://doi.org/10.3917/nqf.372.0119>> and Edward Ousselin, '*Sexe et mensonges* : *la vie sexuelle au Maroc*', *Dalhousie French Studies*, 112 (2018), 169-70 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/45172545>> [accessed 21 May 2024].

⁷⁰ Marie-Agnès Sourieau, 'Le parfum des fleurs la nuit par Leïla Slimani (review)', *The French Review*, 96. 1 (2022), 257 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/tfr.2022.0203>>.

⁷¹ Brueton, 'Cherchez la fiction', p. 164.

⁷² Brueton, 'Cherchez la fiction', p. 164.

⁷³ Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences.' For this thesis, 'positionality' denotes the social, political, and cultural contexts contributing to an individual's expression of identity, whereas 'position' might imply a fixed opinion or declaration about a certain issue or theme.

[P]erformativity is not a singular act, but a repetition and a ritual, which achieves its effects through its naturalization in the context of a body, understood, in part, as a culturally sustained temporal duration.⁷⁴

Whilst issues of gender, race, nationality, and class cannot be reduced to simple analogies of one another, Butler highlights how identity is constructed through a continuous process of internalisation and external reproduction.⁷⁵ Not only does Butler allude to a fluidity in terms of identity expression, but they also suggest that there is some personal agency in articulating and receiving the discursive practices which constitute the performance of identity (in Butler's case, a gendered one). This suggests that, to some extent, the performance of identity can be understood as an act of personal agency that interrelates with external factors.

However, this thesis moves away from exploring themes such as performativity in isolated examples in Slimani's oeuvre to consider the wider spatial implications of Slimani's understudied work, particularly her later 'nonfictional' writing post-Goncourt. This is important given that current research tends to study Slimani's texts in isolation, largely focusing on her early fictional work (*Dans le jardin de l'ogre* and *Chanson douce*). For the most part, this research pertains to the representations of motherhood, domestic bourgeois family life, gender, self-realisation, and self-hood in the two novels (but particularly *Chanson douce* following the Goncourt). For example, locating *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* within a literary tradition of adultery novels from Gustave Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857) to Leo Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* (1873), Gabrielle Parker argues that Slimani's originality in the text goes beyond a shattering of taboos concerning women's agency. Parker maintains that Slimani's 'subversive' stylistic approach in the text allows for an investigation into addiction, which paves the way for a better understanding of 'female desire, solitude, and the search for authenticity.'⁷⁶ Likewise, Hope Christiansen explores the intertextuality between Slimani's novel and Flaubert's *Madame Bovary* (1857), arguing that a close reading uncovers a likeness in narrative technique, themes, characterisation, and motifs.⁷⁷ Nevertheless, Christiansen's

⁷⁴ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 2006), p. xv.

⁷⁵ Academics such as Dorinne Kondo have questioned whether performativity theory can be transferred onto questions pertaining to race and identity construction. For example, see Kondo, *About Face: Performing Race in Fashion and Theater* (New York, London: Routledge, 1997).

⁷⁶ Gabrielle Parker, 'Madame Bovary X!', or "on a le droit de vouloir être un objet", *L'Esprit Créateur*, 59. 3 (2019), 47-59 <<https://doi.org/10.1353/esp.2019.0031>>.

⁷⁷ Hope Christiansen, 'A *Madame Bovary* for a new millennium: Leïla Slimani's *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (2014)', *Revue d'études littéraires du Canada atlantique*, 120 (2022), 79-94 <<https://doi.org/10.7202/1089968ar>>.

analysis appears limited to a purely textual comparison of the novels and does not locate the text in contemporary socio-cultural contexts, as this thesis aims to do.

Regarding *Chanson douce*, the gendered notions of (domestic) space and how Slimani represents them in the text have received wide critical attention. For example, Julie Rogers and Siobhán McIlvanney respectively focus on caregiving and motherhood in *Chanson douce*. Whilst Rogers proposes that the novel encourages the reader to reconsider the ethics and pressures of gendered caregiving in contemporary society, McIlvanney maintains that Slimani's engagement with maternal ambivalence promotes a considered and contextualised awareness of the multiple and contradictory experiences that constitute mothering.⁷⁸

Moreover, scholars have also looked to locate questions concerning the representations of domestic bourgeois life in *Chanson douce* within contemporary socio-cultural, transnational contexts. Lorenza Starace highlights how authors like Slimani, whom she positions as an '(im)migrant author' and 'francophone intellectual', are received in often paradoxical and contradictory ways by their communities of origin and the French literary milieu. Consequently, Starace suggests that the novel epitomises 'the unresolved tensions of "becoming-transnational" of French and Francophone studies.'⁷⁹ In a similar transnational framing, Sarah Arens compares *Chanson douce* to Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho* (2003), considering the grotesque aesthetics of the texts in the context of global literary markets and circulation.⁸⁰ Arens considers how representations of the grotesque in the novels' narratives place new importance on the role of the audience (as readership). Whilst this readership is global, she suggests that it is largely Western orientated. Arens further considers how the public performance of their identities as celebrity literary authors is key to understanding how the writers re-configure the grotesque as a 'globalised' aesthetic, which 'extends to a re-thinking of what African literature in French and its authors are today on the world literary market.'⁸¹ This thesis engages with similar questions relating to Slimani's reception and readership as a

⁷⁸ Julie Rogers, 'Deviant Care: *Chanson douce* and the Killer Nanny', *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 57. 3 (2020), 381-95 <<https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2020.32>> and Siobhán McIlvanney, 'Working through maternal ambivalence: the wake-up call of *Chanson douce*', *Modern & Contemporary France*, 31. 3 (2023), 361-77 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/09639489.2022.2144184>>.

⁷⁹ Lorenza Starace, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*: Paradoxes of identity and visibility in the *littérature-monde*', *Francosphères*, 8. 2 (2019), 143-65 (p. 143) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2019.11>>.

⁸⁰ Alain Mabanckou (1966) is a well-known Franco-Congolese writer who has published extensive novels, poems, and essays and is currently a Professor of Literature at UCLA. In 2012, he received the Grand Prix Littéraire Henri Gal, awarded by the Académie française for an author's entire oeuvre, and in recent years has twice been nominated for the Man Booker International Prize.

⁸¹ Sarah Arens, 'Killer Stories: "Globalizing" the Grotesque in Alain Mabanckou's *African Psycho* and Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*', *Irish Journal of French Studies*, 20 (2020), 143-72 (p. 144) <<https://doi.org/10.7173/164913320830841692>>.

celebrity writer occupying transnational literary discursive spheres. Indicating how other artists are framed in similar ways, it highlights the implications of being anchored to a French ideological and cultural centre and of labels such as ‘Francophone.’

Nevertheless, this thesis builds on existing gaps in the scholarship that have the potential to overlook Slimani’s authorial trajectory in such discussions. Therefore, it investigates how Slimani engages with a dislocation in *Sexe et mensonges*, *Paroles d’honneur*, and *LPDFLN* (in chronology and geography moving from Paris to Morocco [particularly Rabat] to Venice, across and between these spaces), as well as how this is significant to further understanding and locating Slimani’s authorial positionality and the different socio-political reactions in France, Morocco, and beyond.

By nature of the geographical location and framing of *Sexe et mensonges*, *Paroles d’honneur*, and *LPDFLN* and their thematic foci, this study deals with representations of location in positionality, genre, place-making, and gender. There has yet to be a study into the spatiality of these texts (and Slimani’s oeuvre more broadly), in terms of how her writing engages with concepts relating to space, place-building, and (dis)location, and what the implications are. This thesis attempts to locate Slimani’s texts within discussions of the spatial – figurative or literal – to explore whether Slimani’s changing engagement with such contexts (directly, indirectly, or through dislocation, disidentification, absence, and presence) reveals limits to her positionality that need to be accounted for. This is particularly pertinent considering her position as a Franco-Moroccan celebrity writer moving in and between various, overlapping transnational socio-cultural and political spatial contexts (France, Morocco, and beyond).

In the few existing critical scholarly pieces, Slimani has been criticised for adhering to French Republican ideology. Jasmine Cooper argues that in *Chanson douce* Slimani ‘holds up a mirror to French society’ by exploring the burden of gendered labour in a class context, directly challenging postfeminist claims that gender equality has been reached. However, Cooper also suggests that ‘Slimani subsumes discussions of racial difference into a polemic which privileges gender and class inequalities, ultimately seeing her capitulate to French Republican values’, as postfeminist logic merges with France’s colour-blind universalism.⁸² Likewise, in Annabel Kim’s analysis of *Sexe et mensonges*, she notes how the work was

⁸² Jasmine Cooper, ‘Hiding in Plain Sight: Intersectional Violence and Postfeminism in *Chanson douce* (2016) by Leïla Slimani’, *Nottingham French Studies*, 61. 3 (2022), 256-74 <<https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2022.0359>>.

originally published by a Parisian publisher for a French audience (rather than a Moroccan one). Subsequently, the English translation opened the focus to an Anglo-American audience. In terms of the text's content, Kim argues that 'by taking on a Moroccan subject with an eye to a French audience, Slimani effectively threads a needle that elevates French Enlightenment values (cited several times in the work as universal values) by casting Moroccan sexual oppression against the backdrop of a freer West [...].'⁸³ Building on these lines of criticism, this thesis aims to highlight the significance of a French ideological centre for Slimani's positionality in a transnational context to provide a more critical approach to Slimani's work, uncommon in wider academic and media discourses.

To explore the implications of how Slimani engages with different spatial contexts – in terms of geography, genre, and gender – as a celebrity Franco-Moroccan writer in various transnational spheres, this thesis will address the following research questions:

1. Regarding reception, how was Slimani positioned in the various fields of cultural production she occupies in France, Morocco, and beyond following the publication of *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (2014) and *Chanson douce* (2016)? In comparison, how does Slimani's self-positioning highlight tensions between authorial self-fashioning and positioning by others? (Chapter 1)
2. What are the implications of labels that frame Slimani in terms of nationality, ethnicity, and perceived proximity to 'otherness', particularly in a Franco-European context, for constructing and understanding her literary celebrity? And how does proximity to, or a perceived distance from, the French cultural and political ideological mainstream impact Slimani's authorial (self-)fashioning? (Chapter 1)
3. Moving away from Slimani's earlier fictional work located in Paris to focus on a Moroccan subject ethnographically, in order to engage with the spatiality of form and adaptation: How does Slimani engage with questions of omission and absence/presence in curating the (non)fictional life narratives presented in *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*? What does this reveal about Slimani's authorial voice and processes of performative distancing? (Chapter 2)
4. In the context of a BD adapted and co-produced with artist Laetitia Coryn, what are the politics and implications of intermedially 'fictionalising' and representing

⁸³ Annabel L. Kim, 'Leïla Slimani's taboos', *Public Books*, 05 January 2021
<<https://www.publicbooks.org/leila-slimanis-taboos/>> [accessed 28 April 2021].

investigative life narratives concerning gender and sexuality in *Paroles d'honneur* for audiences in France and Morocco? (Chapter 2)

5. Following Slimani's chronological and geographical shift to Venice with *LPDFLN*, how does Slimani's geographical gaze interact with spatial representations of Paris, Venice, and Rabat through fictional 'place-building' relating to urban spaces, museums, and gender? (Chapter 3)
6. To what extent do the different lenses through which Slimani encounters these spaces project an imbalanced ethnographic gaze on Morocco? What are the implications of this gaze for audiences in France, notably in the context of representing the politics of museological practices, gender, and space in Muslim-majority societies? (Chapter 3)

Disciplinary and theoretical approaches and methodology

This thesis mainly situates itself within the discipline of French and Francophone studies, specifically in the field of contemporary French-language literature. By the nature of Slimani's Franco-Moroccan heritage and her global reach, her work needs to be considered between a transnational and postcolonial lens. Although concepts of the postcolonial and the transnational are not synonymous, they intersect and interrelate. Transnational dislocation and multidirectionality feature prominently in Slimani's authorial trajectory, particularly in the works explored in this study. However, the interface with the postcolonial is also pertinent to this thesis because Slimani's transnational displacements can be contextualised in the (post)colonial relationship between France and Morocco. This relationship is relevant to Slimani's oeuvre and how she is positioned today by various audiences and critics in France, Morocco, and beyond. In broader discussions about who a postcolonial writer represents in the 21st century and how (self-)expectations contribute to defining such categories, this context is particularly important. Nevertheless, locating Slimani more in transnational terms offers some way out of the binarisms and essentialisation of national, cultural, and/or ethnic identities often associated with being labelled a 'postcolonial' or 'Francophone' writer. Thus, to some extent, this thesis deals with the dynamics, histories, and representations of community formation, identity, and interaction, notably in the context of France as a nation-state continuously defined by transnational tensions closely related to the legacies of (post)colonialism.

Located at the interface of the postcolonial and the transnational, the methodology of this thesis associates the sociology of literature with other disciplinary fields such as celebrity studies, visual studies, and museum studies. Firstly, as this thesis partly represents an analysis of cultural production, it uses Pierre Bourdieu's definition of 'cultural capital.' In addition, engaging with sociologists like Gisèle Sapiro, who explores the social context of literary production and reception in France and its impact on contemporary constructions of the writer, is essential to studying (a selection of) Slimani's non-fictional texts chronologically. This helps to map the development of Slimani's broader authorial trajectory and wide-ranging fictional and non-fictional literary output. Applying these questions in the context of celebrity studies addresses how Slimani *became* literary celebrity; in other words, how her global renown was constructed and consolidated over a relatively short period. Therefore, the crossover of celebrity studies and the sociology of literature assists in demonstrating how the process of *becoming* literary celebrity implicates symbolic, commercial, and cultural value across various transnational spheres of cultural production related to accumulated cultural capital. Returning to the postcolonial helps to understand how, in some cases, the figure of the celebrity writer embodies articulations of otherness and difference, particularly in the West. The work of postcolonial theorists and scholars, including Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Graham Huggan, and Zahia Smail Salhi, supports this analysis. Their scholarship provides a critical framework for assessing how Slimani's initial reception was contextualised in France – chiefly constructed and framed by perceptions about her Moroccan heritage – and how this has impacted her authorial trajectory.

Following Slimani's authorial trajectory engaging with different mediums (namely in *Sexe et mesonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*), this thesis also incorporates adaptation and transmedia studies. This is particularly relevant to how Slimani adapts an *essai/enquête* to a BD and engages with a specific interplay of forms. In this context, the thesis incorporates visual studies, namely work by scholars specialising in the aesthetics and politics of the BD/comics form, such as Scott McCloud, Hillary Clinton, and Sidonie Smith, to probe the spatial implications of form, the politics of location in genre, and embodiment in the texts. These theoretical fields support an analysis of how Slimani strategically engages with different forms of communication and how intermedial processes of fictionalisation impact audience reception in France, Morocco, and beyond. Here, it is necessary to consider the impacts of different socio-cultural contexts on how the BD is understood, produced, and received in France and Morocco. To address the implications of BD production and consumption in both national contexts, this

thesis looks to academics and cultural critics such as Mohamed-Sghir Janjar, Libbie McQuillan, Ann Miller, Kenza Sefrioui, and Alexandra Gueydan-Turek. Their work provides key sociological insights that help to investigate how engaging with the BD form through graphic life narration and embodied authorial presence inevitably has consequences for Slimani's (self-)fashioning as a celebrity writer. In broader terms, combining methodological approaches from the sociology of literature with transmedia/adaptation and visual studies offers key reflections on Slimani's positionality. The interface of these areas of study helps to demonstrate the significance of strategically writing the author – in this case, Slimani – in and across different forms like the BD and highlights how this process affects readerships in France and Morocco.

Finally, moving beyond the space of the page as a critical site of investigation to consider how Slimani engages with spatiality in the context of Venice and the museum in *LPDFLN*, the methodology of this thesis also integrates French cultural and critical theory and museum studies. This further supports the critical investigation into how Slimani's authorial trajectory has been shaped by and reflects the socio-cultural contexts in which it exists. Studies into the process of place-building help to highlight the subjective nature of spatial experience as humans produce and are produced by the space around them. This thesis considers the work of various cultural theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and the political philosopher Étienne Balibar. This aids in evaluating how Slimani renegotiates spatial models of Paris, Venice, and Rabat by fictionally 'place-building' in a process related to urban spaces, museums, and gender in *LPDFLN*. These theories have not been applied to Slimani's work before, notably in terms of how she represents place-building in *LPDFLN*. Returning to Slimani's trajectory as a writer, *LPDFLN* is geographically dislocated from her previous works set in France or Morocco and engages with representations of the city and the museum. Therefore, understanding place-building in these terms helps to interrogate how the text is built around the text, including the author. In addition, locating *LPDFLN* in the context of museum studies demonstrates what it means to engage with certain Eurocentric museum histories in literature. Research by academics like Christina Kreps and Katarzyna Pieprzak on the cross-cultural perspectives and practices of museum histories and the place of art and museums in Morocco is essential to understanding how Slimani's representations accentuate her positionality. Indeed, reflecting on the cultural narratives associated with Slimani's representations of the conceptual museum is useful for revealing the socio-cultural contexts in which she writes and is received.

The main analytical framework of this thesis constitutes a close textual analysis of *Sexe et mensonges*, *Paroles d'honneur*, and *LPDFLN*. This method is beneficial in analysing how Slimani has engaged with her positionality in different ways since 2014. It is also useful to probe how Slimani interacts with different audiences when exploring issues relating to gender, culture, and nationality. However, textual analysis presents limitations because it can be influenced by the reader's positionality. I am aware of the considerable privilege that comes with being a white, British person and the potential biases I may have, so I do not intend to speak for any socio-cultural or political experience outside of my own. Moreover, it might be viewed as limiting to focus on one author in the context of wider contemporary socio-cultural and political discussions concerning celebrity writers with Maghrebi heritage in transnational French fields of literary production. Whilst there may be similarities for different reasons, it could be problematic and reductive to transpose Slimani's case – and the intricacies that come with it – to other authors of French expression simply because of a shared national or linguistic heritage.⁸⁴

However, this thesis focuses on Slimani because she occupies a particularly significant, visible, yet complex place in transnational media and academic discussions. Her visibility and success across multiple transnational and linguistic spheres (for example, the Francophone, Anglophone, and Hispanophone) are unlike any other contemporary writer of French expression. I will locate the texts in their contemporary socio-cultural contexts, considering how they may impact Slimani as a writer. These contexts chiefly concern local and intersecting French and Moroccan histories, which interact with iterations of contemporary socio-political culture in France, Morocco, and beyond. Hence, to provide a wider analysis of Slimani's positionality that goes beyond the textual, I will also examine the reception of *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* and *Chanson douce*, which appears in the form of academic reviews and articles, reviews and interviews with Slimani in Francophone, Hispanophone, and Anglophone media outlets, as well as comments in the press from prominent figures across literary and political establishments in France, Morocco, and beyond. In addition, to gain further insight into how

⁸⁴ Here, I am thinking of authors such as (but not limited to) Abdellah Taïa or Meryem Alaoui (1975). Alaoui is a Moroccan novelist of French expression who published her first novel, *La vérité sort de la bouche du cheval*, in 2018. That year, the novel was one of fifteen finalists for the Goncourt. Alaoui attended the same school as Slimani (Lycée Descartes in Rabat) and has worked for *TelQuel* and *Nishan* (the Arabic version of *TelQuel*). Having spent some time living in New York, she has now returned to live in Morocco. Given that Slimani and Alaoui are a similar age and appear to occupy similar social positions in terms of growing up among the political classes of Rabat (Alaoui's father is poet and former Moroccan MP Driss Alaoui M'Dghari), a comparison of their works could be a possible site for further study.

Slimani positions herself (especially in relation to the texts studied in this thesis) I attempted to interview her in August 2023. The interview was scheduled but unfortunately did not take place.⁸⁵

As part of the research for this thesis, I went on a site visit to Venice in April 2022 to visit the Punta della Dogana and the city, funded by a WRoCAH Small Award. I felt that it was important to experience a place before critically engaging with it, especially when interrogating how people are connected to, implicated in, and responsible to place. Therefore, as I had not visited the city before, the primary aim of the trip was to experience Venice and the museum by walking and keeping a brief travel journal.⁸⁶ Although much of the broader context about Venice came from the reading and research I did before and after the visit, the experience helped me to (re)consider my subjective experience of place-building, and by extension, Slimani's. Furthermore, visualising and locating Slimani's descriptions of the city and the museum in my own experiences made it easier to write about and reflect on her work critically.

In a similar fashion, this thesis has also been influenced by the time I spent in Casablanca from September to November 2022, where I had the opportunity to work with Kenza Sefrioui and Hicham Houdaïfa, co-founders of independent publishing house En Toutes Lettres (ETL). This trip was made possible by the Research Employability Project I undertook as part of my WRoCAH-funded studentship.⁸⁷ During my time with ETL, I primarily translated extracts from their titles in French into English to market the translation rights to Anglophone audiences. I was also able to visit Rabat and Meknès and attend cultural events with ETL in

⁸⁵ This was not due to my own reasons. See Appendix for the list of questions that were prepared for the interview.

⁸⁶ For further reading on walking as a research methodology, see Stephanie Springgay and Sarah E. Truman, *Walking Methodologies in a More-than-Human World: WalkingLab* (London: Routledge, 2017).

⁸⁷ En Toutes Lettres, based in Casablanca, specialises in essays and other nonfictional work in French and Arabic exploring social and cultural issues in Morocco by writers, researchers, and journalists. For an overview of the collections published by ETL, see En Toutes Lettres, 'Collections', *En Toutes Lettres* <<https://etlettres.com/collections/puc/>> [accessed 03 June 2024]. Kenza Sefrioui is a cultural journalist, literary critic, and publisher. She holds a PhD in Comparative Literature from the Sorbonne IV University, with the thesis: *La Revue Souffles (1966-1973): Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* (Casablanca: Éditions du Sirocco, 2013) (winner of the Prix Gran Atlas in 2013). From 2005 to 2010, Sefrioui wrote the literary column of the *Journal hebdomadaire* (a French-language, Moroccan weekly magazine which ran from 1997-2010) and has worked with *TelQuel*. Recent publications include: *Le livre à l'épreuve, les failles de la chaîne au Maroc* (Casablanca: En Toutes Lettres, 2017) and *Casablanca, nid d'artistes* (Casablanca: Malika Editions, 2018) which she co-authored with Slimani. Hicham Houdaïfa is a journalist who has worked for numerous press organisations such as *Al Bayane* (a daily French-language Moroccan newspaper), *Afrique Magazine* (an international francophone monthly news outlet), and *Journal hebdomadaire*. He contributes to *La Vie économique* (a weekly French-language Moroccan newspaper) and oversees the *Enquêtes* collection at ETL. The aim of the Research Employability Project is to allow PhD students to spend some time away from their immediate area of research, working in a non-academic organisation to apply various research skills and practice transferable skills in a new environment.

Casablanca, such as L’Boulevard music festival.⁸⁸ Like the site visit to Venice, it was important that I had some place-based experience of Morocco before writing about it, given that a significant proportion of Slimani’s work deals with Morocco in some way or another. Indeed, as this thesis engages with Slimani’s spatial representations of Moroccan society and culture, I was grateful to be able to see, experience, and be part of these spaces whilst being mindful of my positionality and privilege. I met journalists and other cultural actors, which would likely not have been possible had I just been visiting as a tourist. This experience broadened my understanding, knowledge, and awareness of Moroccan history, culture, and society in ways that have undoubtedly contributed to the wider context of this thesis and how it interrogates the socio-cultural location of Slimani’s texts and her positionality.

Chapter summaries

To engage with the research questions, this thesis is split into three chapters. Chapter 1 explores Slimani’s location as a celebrity writer who moves in various transnational literary, cultural, and political spheres in France, Morocco, and beyond, and how this relates to her authorial (self-)fashioning. This chapter maintains that in the context of *becoming* literary celebrity, Slimani’s authorial self-fashioning and positioning appear inherent to, and dependent on, the various transnational spheres she moves in and across. By looking at how Slimani was received (notably in certain Franco-European contexts), following the publication of *Dans le jardin de l’ogre* (2014) and *Chanson douce* (2016) and her subsequent entry onto the French literary and cultural scene to widespread critical acclaim, Chapter 1 argues that there is a tendency to locate Slimani in terms of perceptions about her national and ethnic ‘origins.’ These perceptions focus on the Moroccan side of her heritage in more prominent ways than the French. Slimani often appears to be situated within a binary: either a celebrated public intellectual, breaking taboos and speaking on issues – for the most part pertaining to sexuality and gender – in the Maghreb more generally, or an ‘islamophobe, vendue à l’Occident.’⁸⁹ Slimani is aware of this framing and has, at times, outwardly rejected notions of fixed positionality, demonstrating the tensions of intervening transnationally as a celebrity writer. This chapter explores the expectations placed on writers perceived to be of North African heritage like Slimani in transnational French literary fields of production. In turn, these expectations appear to emphasise the symbolic,

⁸⁸ For further discussion about this festival, see Chapter 3, p. 103.

⁸⁹ See Kim, ‘Leïla Slimani’s taboos’ and Slimani, *Sexe* (2017), p. 183.

cultural, and commercial value associated with perceived proximity to ‘otherness’ in Franco-European (and more broadly, Western) literary markets, contributing to the transmission, acquisition, and accumulation of cultural capital. In the context of Slimani *becoming* literary celebrity, Chapter 1 therefore demonstrates how the perceptions, expectations, and constraints of producing literature in transnational French spheres – from the media, certain cultural and political institutions, and herself – began to impact Slimani’s authorial (self-)fashioning as a celebrity writer over time. By going beyond reductive readings of Slimani’s positionality that appear to oversimplify the complexities and specificities of her socio-cultural location, this chapter highlights how Slimani exhibits proximity to French culture and politics, which interacts with (and potentially complicates) her public-facing positionality. Furthermore, it demonstrates the problematic and limiting nature of labelling Slimani as solely a ‘Francophone’ or ‘Moroccan’ author when considering her multi-directional gaze.

As this thesis moves from how Slimani is contextually located (and locates herself) at the start of her celebrity authorial trajectory into the textual analysis of some of her non-fictional work in chronology, Chapter 2 considers the intermedial, spatial gaze Slimani brings to form in *Sexe et mensonges* (2017; 2021) and *Paroles d’honneur* (2017). Just one year after her Goncourt success, Slimani moves away from the fictional novel set in Paris to engage with a Moroccan subject dealing with gender, sex, and sexuality through an ethnographic essay and a BD. Through an exploration of the politics of locating and performing investigative life narratives in and across two mediums, this chapter argues that Slimani’s authorial presence is significant in curating and presenting the life narratives in *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur*. Indeed, as the question of form appears crucial to analysing how Slimani presents and engages with the various life narratives, this chapter highlights how the multifaceted nature of form cannot be treated separately from Slimani’s intentions behind the texts, even if she claims that *Paroles d’honneur* is fictional and *Sexe et mensonges* is not. In the framework of (non)fictional investigative aesthetics, it is consequently culturally and politically significant that Slimani moves the (non-)fictional life narratives in and across the ethnographic *essai/enquête* to the BD (and back again with the publication of the second edition of *Sexe et mensonges*). This chapter suggests that there are multiple displacements, or deterritorialisations, in how the narratives are visually adapted in *Paroles d’honneur*. This is particularly evident in how Slimani spatio-temporally frames people and events (including her narrative presence) and collaborates with Laetitia Coryn to create the BD. This arguably highlights the process of intentionality behind the two versions and demonstrates how

Slimani's authorial voice appears through proximity and distance not only to the narratives being retold but also to the reader. Therefore, Chapter 2 argues that tensions emerge between the shaping and unravelling of the two aesthetic forms at the interstices of time and space. These tensions likely have implications for the different readerships engaging with Slimani's two texts, where accessibility appears limited to audiences already existing in France and upper-middle-class Moroccan readers. This returns to the notion of Slimani's performative process of *becoming* celebrity explored in Chapter 1, whereby her trajectory appears to be influenced by perceptions of otherness related to a certain marketable cultural value in French transnational contexts.

Finally, Chapter 3 builds on the idea that the spatial contexts of form, genre, performance, and fictionality are significant to the evolution of Slimani's authorial trajectory over time, to consider her geographical gaze on fictionalised representations of space and place in *LPDFLN* (2021). As the text begins in Paris two years after *Chanson douce*'s publication, this chapter explores the significance of Slimani's geographical move from Paris to Venice. It maintains that throughout *LPDFLN*, Slimani enacts a process of 'place-building', whereby she turns the Venetian *space* into Venice the *place* as she renegotiates spatial models of the aquatic city. In this way, space becomes a practiced place or fiction. Slimani arguably presents Venice as a neutral point that allows multiple cultural subjectivities to emerge and cohabit with one another, primarily in the context of her French and Moroccan identities. This chapter suggests that Slimani's gaze idealises spatial encounters with Venice, which fail to untangle the city from representations that pertain to a simplified, binary cultural encounter. This suggests that location in geography inevitably matters given that Slimani reflects on her experiences relating to museums and gendered urban spatial models in Paris and Rabat from Venice. Moreover, as Slimani's night at the museum forms an integral part of *LPDFLN*, this chapter shows how Slimani's engagement with the Punta della Dogana dislocates the *space* of the museum into the *place* of the museum in a wider conceptual, cultural context, analysing how she frames museological place-making in Morocco compared to elsewhere. It argues that Slimani does not appear to interrogate problematic Western museological ideology and practices, which she represents as aspirational. Consequently, Slimani's gaze risks reinforcing Eurocentric narratives overlooking the significance and importance of the local, favouring a 'West and the rest' discourse. In turn, this contributes to a process that others Moroccan art in a Western context, foregrounding a temporally displaced, ethnographic gaze on museums and art in contemporary Morocco. Similarly, as Slimani moves out of the museum space to consider the

notion of the *flâneur* in the context of accessing urban spatial frameworks, she reflects on her experiences of gendered spatial models in Paris compared to Rabat. This chapter argues that Slimani risks an imbalance that has the potential to reinforce generalised Western assumptions rooted in Orientalist expectations, particularly those concerning the politics of gender and space in Muslim-majority societies. Thus, this chapter maintains that Slimani gazes at these spaces through three lenses: her engagement with Venice appears superficial as she becomes a tourist with no specialist knowledge; Paris is removed from an ethnographic exploration and seems to represent somewhere she is most at home (despite not being her ‘home’ country); and finally, her gaze on Rabat (and Morocco more generally) appears to be distanced even though it is autobiographical (twenty years previous) and more ethnographic.

Overall, this thesis aims to highlight how Slimani presents and engages with different spatial contexts – in terms of genre, geography, and gender – through her understudied ‘non-fictional’ texts between 2017 and 2021. By book-ending this recent ‘nonfiction’ period, this thesis explores the processes by which Slimani’s celebrity has been born over a relatively short period of time. It situates Slimani’s trajectory and considers the extent to which she appears to be interested in *becoming* celebrity and maintaining this status, as well as how this process influences (and is influenced by) her profile, reception, and what she writes. This is pertinent when considering how notions of expectation create the potential for constrained agency. Consequently, this thesis questions whether Slimani’s reception is enhanced in most quarters because she is not seen as politically ‘threatening’ in the wider French context. This thesis suggests that how Slimani engages with the aforementioned spatial contexts (either directly or indirectly, or through dislocation, disidentification, absence, or presence), reveals limits to her positionality. These limits arguably need to be accounted for given that Slimani, as a celebrity writer, moves in and across various transnational socio-cultural and political contexts. As Slimani is Franco-Moroccan, these transnational discursive spheres mostly centre around (but are not limited to) France and Morocco, where unequal negotiations of power continue to play out. These negotiations of power reveal the competing pressures of writing in French transnational fields of cultural production, particularly in terms of audience expectations and the impact on Slimani’s trajectory. Indeed, what Slimani appears to engage with or not affects how iterations of culture are spatially mapped and represented to different audiences (including the various French-speaking audiences in France and Morocco, but also the translations of Slimani’s work means there is further potential for differing possible receptions in English, Arabic, Spanish, and Italian, to name a few, for example). As Slimani appears to do this from

a position of proximity to the French cultural and political mainstream, this is not without consequence as she risks replicating and solidifying normative Eurocentric socio-cultural and political frameworks.

Chapter 1 - *Becoming literary celebrity: Slimani's emergence as rising star in the wake of Dans le jardin de l'ogre (2014) and Chanson douce (2016)*

As previously stated, Leïla Slimani is a celebrated writer and journalist in France, Morocco, and beyond. For the purpose of this chapter, a celebrity can be understood as someone who, due to intense media representation, can 'attract attention, generating some surplus value or benefit derived from the fact of being well known (highly visible) [...] in at least one public arena.'⁹⁰ This surplus value or benefit may be power, money, or ideological influence.⁹¹ Graeme Turner and P. David Marshall both highlight how celebrities are signs, constantly being interpreted and negotiated by consumers.⁹² This is likely due to their 'glamour' and their capability to 'impact [...] public consciousness', allowing audiences to attach meaning to a public persona.⁹³

In terms of the figure of the writer, Chris Rojek suggests that literary celebrity is achieved through a perception of a real and individual accomplishment in terms of the 'quality' of the writing itself, rather than being ascribed or attributed to a writer.⁹⁴ In other words, a literary celebrity is someone whose 'achieved' fame is directly related to the literary works they have produced.⁹⁵ However, the fame of the celebrity writer goes well beyond initial readerships of their work, as public appearances and media interventions foster 'an interplay between the author's "mediatised" persona [...] and their published texts, both past and future.'⁹⁶ As with other forms of celebrity, the figure of the famous author thus appears to enter auxiliary forms of circulation through this process of mediatisation, impacting their future literary output and other interventions.⁹⁷ For this chapter, literary celebrity might then be defined as 'the state of self-perpetuating well-knownness that can come to surround a producer of literary fiction and trigger commodification of this individual across a number of

⁹⁰ Robert van Krieken, *Celebrity Society* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 10. The discussions around how to define 'celebrity' are large within the theoretical field of celebrity studies and go beyond the scope of this thesis.

⁹¹ P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power: Fame in Contemporary Culture*, 2nd edn (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), pp. 3-7.

⁹² Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity* (London: SAGE, 2004), pp.24-26; P. David Marshall, *Celebrity and Power*, pp. 56-61.

⁹³ Chris Rojek, *Celebrity* (London: Reaktion, 2001), p. 10.

⁹⁴ Rojek, *Celebrity*, pp. 17-18.

⁹⁵ Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid and Ann Steiner, 'Literary celebrity reconsidered', *Celebrity Studies*, 5. 1-2 (2014), 32-44 (p. 35) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2014.887533>>.

⁹⁶ Diana Holmes, 'Negotiating the middlebrow: women writers and literary stardom in contemporary France', *Celebrity Studies*, 7. 4 (2016), 493-508 (p. 493) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1233706>>.

⁹⁷ Holmes, 'Negotiating the middlebrow', p. 493.

industries.’⁹⁸ Besides the author, this ‘well-knownness’ is kept alive through publishing, promotion, distribution, in tandem with audiences.

Moreover, Anders Ohlsson, Torbjörn Forslid, and Ann Steiner demonstrate how local – particularly national – understandings and representations of literature and celebrity affect the different ways the two are constructed.⁹⁹ This suggests that specific spatio-temporal, cultural contexts are imperative to understanding what and who makes a celebrity writer. Whilst the meaning of what and who constitutes a celebrity writer might be unstable depending on these different contexts, it appears that Slimani’s visibility is representative of a processual *becoming* celebrity, shaped by literary performance. This process is also embodied by the symbolic and commercial value placed on certain iterations of culture in specific and intersecting public spheres, contributing to the acquisition and accumulation of cultural capital.

For the purpose of this thesis, ‘cultural capital’ can be understood in relation to Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of cultural production. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital is always unevenly distributed because it flows in a symbolic economy of cultural value, constructed within a series of interconnected hierarchal structures. In this manner, a complex process of legitimation mediated by interactions between those who produce symbolic goods and those who consume them stimulates the transmission, acquisition, and accumulation of cultural capital. These legitimation struggles occur within ‘fields’ of cultural production.¹⁰⁰ Bourdieu defines the field of literary cultural production as

[...] the site of struggles in which what is at stake is the power to impose the dominant definition of the writer and therefore to delimit the population of those entitled to take part in the struggle to define the writer. [...] In short, the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, i.e. *inter alia*, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorized to call themselves writers; or, to put it another way, it is the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products (we are dealing with a world of belief and the consecrated writer is one who has the power to consecrate and to win assent when he or she consecrates an author or a work – with a preface, a favourable review, a prize, etc).¹⁰¹

⁹⁸ Rebecca Braun, ‘Fetishising intellectual achievement: the Nobel Prize and European literary celebrity’, *Celebrity Studies*, 2. 3 (2011), 320-34 (p. 321) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2011.609340>>.

⁹⁹ Anders Ohlsson and others, *Literary celebrity reconsidered*, pp. 36-38.

¹⁰⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘The Field of Cultural Production, or: The Economic World Reversed’, *Poetics* (Amsterdam), 12. 4 (1983), 311-56 (p. 322-24) <[https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X\(83\)90012-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/0304-422X(83)90012-8)>.

¹⁰¹ Bourdieu, ‘The Field of Cultural Production’, p. 323. Emphasis in the original.

As Graham Huggan notes, the writer themselves is only one of the many ‘agents of legitimation’, others could include publishers, booksellers, reviewers, and individual readers. Huggan argues that ‘these agents are all contenders in the struggle to validate particular writers; and the writers themselves vie for the right to attain and, in turn, confer recognition and prestige.’¹⁰² Although Bourdieu’s framework has received some criticism for ‘its overschematized distinctions and, in particular, for its attempt to fix the class positions of different consumer publics’, the model helps understand how writers like Slimani ‘operate within an overarching, if historically shifting, field of cultural production.’¹⁰³

This chapter explores Slimani’s location as a celebrity writer moving in various transnational fields of literary and cultural production, interrogating how this relates to her authorial (self-)fashioning. As Slimani’s arrival on the French literary and cultural scenes was met with widespread critical acclaim, it explores the reception of *Dans le jardin de l’ogre* (2014) and *Chanson douce* (2016) in France, Morocco, and beyond. These reactions highlight the tendency to position Slimani in terms of perceptions about her national and ethnic origins, emphasising a cultural value associated with certain representations of ‘otherness’ in transnational French fields of literary production. In the context of Slimani’s trajectory, this chapter aims to start probing Slimani’s situation as a celebrity writer. In other words, how do the perceptions, expectations, and constraints of producing fictional and non-fictional literature in transnational spheres – from the media, certain cultural and political institutions, and herself – begin to impact Slimani’s authorial (self-)fashioning over time?

This chapter attempts to go beyond possibly reductive and oversimplistic framings of Slimani’s positionality that fail to account for her complexities as a celebrity writer intervening in multiple, ever-changing transnational literary, cultural, and political contexts. It highlights the problematics and limitations of labelling Slimani as a Francophone author and/or a Moroccan author, notably in the French (and wider European) context. In addition, this chapter addresses Slimani’s involvement with Macron’s government and *la francophonie* to investigate whether she occupies a position of ideological proximity to French culture and politics, and if so, to what extent. It also seeks to explore how proximity to or distance from the French cultural and political ideological mainstream influences Slimani’s authorial (self-)fashioning, particularly as a writer intervening in transnational fields of cultural production.

¹⁰² Graham Huggan, ‘Writing at the Margins’, in *Bourdieu and Postcolonial Studies*, ed. by Raphael Dalleo (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), pp. 17-52 (p. 21).

¹⁰³ Huggan, ‘Writing at the Margins’, p. 21.

What it means to name: perceptions, expectations and value (judgements) placed on Slimani

When examining a celebrity literary figure like Slimani who is enmeshed in contemporary culture, the processes and implications of naming or categorising are significant in moulding the texts around the texts and creating the public-facing persona of the celebrity author. Flagging how critics interacted with her work in France following her entry onto the literary scene in 2014, Slimani references being labelled as a Maghrebi author (despite holding dual Franco-Moroccan nationality):

Aujourd'hui, si vous êtes un écrivain maghrébin, même quand vous n'écrivez pas sur le sujet, même si vous avez écrit douze livres qui n'ont rien à voir, vous pouvez être certain qu'en interview on va vous demander ce que vous pensez de l'islam, du Proche-Orient, du burkini, etc. [...]. Au moment de la parution de mon premier livre, j'avais d'ailleurs été choquée de voir que certaines librairies le classaient dans le rayon « Maghreb-Moyen-Orient » simplement à cause de mon nom [...]. Moi, bien sûr, ça va, je suis binationale, et je suis très attachée au Maroc. Mais quand on est français, qu'on est né ici, ça doit être très difficile d'être constamment assigné à son origine.¹⁰⁴

Slimani evokes a dislocation or tension between how she positions herself, compared to how she is positioned by others, suggesting that her work is often read through a lens that makes assumptions about her connection to religion solely based on her Moroccan heritage. In terms of locating Slimani, this consequently appears to place her as a spokesperson for issues concerning the representation and politicisation of Islam (particularly in the West) across North Africa and the Middle East.¹⁰⁵ Expressing shock at seeing her work classified in a separate 'Maghreb-Moyen-Orient' section, Slimani perhaps implies that her work should be shelved

¹⁰⁴ Leïla Slimani quoted in Sophie Pujas, 'Leïla Slimani: "Le Maghreb vit dans la culture de l'hypocrisie et du mensonge"', *Le Point*, 15 September 2016 <https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/leila-slimani-le-maghreb-vit-dans-la-culture-de-l-hypocrisie-et-du-mensonge-15-09-2016-2068548_3.php> [accessed 12 March 2024].

¹⁰⁵ Slimani's reference to the 'burkini' is particularly relevant to the 2016 context in which she writes following the 'burkini ban.' Initially, French authorities justified the ban by claiming the burkini went against republican values of *laïcité*, symbolising Islamist extremism and women's oppression. Manuel Valls publicly supported the ban stating, 'Marianne, le symbole de la République, elle a le sein nu parce qu'elle nourrit le peuple, elle n'est pas voilée parce qu'elle est libre. C'est ça, la République.' Although the ban was eventually lifted, the international press generally framed it as Islamophobic and discriminatory. See Shilton, *Identity and "Difference" in French Art*, p. 239; Anon., 'Marianne et le sein nu : une historienne épingle Valls pour sa tirade', *Le Parisien*, 30 August 2016 <<https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/marianne-et-le-sein-nu-la-tirade-de-manuel-valls-fait-reagir-30-08-2016-6079473.php>> [accessed 18 August 2020] and Giulia Evolvi, 'The veil and its materiality: Muslim women's digital narratives about the burkini ban', *Journal of Contemporary Religion*, 34. 3 (2019), 469-87 (pp. 469-70) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13537903.2019.1658936>>.

among ‘French’ literature.¹⁰⁶ Although Slimani does not explicitly reference any particular authors, the difficulty facing writers born in France, but who are often othered because of perceptions around their heritage or ‘origins’, is reminiscent of how Marie NDiaye is situated. Despite being born in France to a Senegalese father and French mother and referring to herself as ‘exclusivement Française’, NDiaye has often been classified as a Francophone writer rather than a French one. In addition, critics have often attempted to locate her work within African or postcolonial traditions (NDiaye states she has only been to Senegal twice).¹⁰⁷ Elsewhere, Slimani has echoed this sentiment in the context of arriving in France, aged seventeen, to study at *Sciences Po*: ‘C’est en France que je suis devenue une Arabe. Une beur. [...] D’un coup, en arrivant en France, j’étais d’origine maghrébine, issue d’un territoire indéterminé, sans frontières, sans différences ou subtilités.’¹⁰⁸ Slimani quotes novelist and critic Maryse Condé (1934-2024), stating ‘[...] c’est à Paris que j’ai pris conscience de ma couleur de peau, que j’ai compris que j’étais noire.’¹⁰⁹ In this context of perception and expectation, Slimani suggests that despite representing ‘une femme émancipée et pas inquiétante, plus attachée encore que les Français eux-mêmes aux idées de laïcité et d’universalité’, she was ‘comme eux mais avec une pointe d’exotisme.’¹¹⁰ It is significant that Slimani likens herself to Condé in relation to how perceptions around ethnic, national, and gendered difference affect experiences of identity formation in the French Hexagon. This implies that Slimani sees herself within a double bind, positioned as one and the same but different. Here, the concept of ‘sameness’ seems to relate to Slimani’s proximity to French cultural codes, both in terms of understanding and practice.¹¹¹ In this case, how Slimani is located and positioned by others appears in dialectical tension to how Slimani publicly positions herself.

¹⁰⁶ Nowadays, Slimani’s work is probably more likely to be found among ‘French’ contemporary literature in bookshops in France.

¹⁰⁷ Whilst discussions around NDiaye’s position go beyond the initial scope of this thesis, the problematics of the ‘Francophone’ label will be discussed later in this chapter. For further reading, see Andrew Asibong, *Marie NDiaye: Blankness and Recognition* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 5-9; Jasmine Vojdani, ‘Marie NDiaye gets under the skin: The French writer’s refusal to overexplain makes her books even more unsettling’, *Vulture*, 16 October 2023 <<https://www.vulture.com/article/marie-ndiaye-profile-vengeance-is-mine.html>> [accessed 13 March 2024] and Thérèse Migraine-George, *From Francophonie to World Literature in French: Ethics, Poetics, and Politics* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013), pp. 63-91.

¹⁰⁸ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 132.

¹⁰⁹ Maryse Condé quoted in Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 132. Condé was born in the French overseas department of Guadeloupe and moved to Paris to study literature.

¹¹⁰ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 132-33.

¹¹¹ Slimani’s adherence to French universalist values and the implications for authorial (self-)positioning will be discussed later in this chapter.

However, this tension also seems related to problematic French preconceptions that assume Slimani shares a homogenous cultural identity with people across North Africa purely because of her Moroccan heritage. Likely aware of how this framing extends beyond the Hexagon to other national and cultural contexts (albeit in different ways), when asked by a Spanish journalist in 2023 whether her writing was fundamentally influenced by a ‘French’ literary tradition and whether she considered herself to be a French writer, Slimani responded:

probablement; soy una escritora francófona, francesa, marroquí, mujer, africana, mediterránea, magrebí... Creo que tengo muchas identidades como escritora.

[probably; I think I have many identities as a writer: Francophone, French, Moroccan, woman, African, Mediterranean, Maghrebi...].¹¹²

Slimani undoubtedly alludes to a tension between proximity and distance regarding identity formation and its associated politics, particularly regarding public perceptions of literature in changing transnational socio-cultural locations. By claiming multiple national, regional, and gendered identities as a writer, Slimani also appears to reject the notion of a fixed positionality. In doing so, it seems that Slimani indicates an awareness of how audiences locate her in different ways in various transnational contested fields of literary and cultural production. In terms of Slimani’s authorial (self-)fashioning, this tension indicates that she consciously attempts to (dis)locate herself within these competing fields.

Following the publication of Slimani’s first two novels, it appears that the mainstream French media celebrated these early texts as literary successes, contextualised by her Goncourt win. For example, in *Le Figaro*, journalist Anne Fulda characterised Slimani as

une jeune femme moderne bien dans son temps qui utilise un langage pur, précis, a une syntaxe parfaite qu’elle parsème parfois d’expressions plus triviales [...] Une jeune femme de son temps mais qui déteste cependant la lecture sur tablette numérique et reste attachée aux livres, qu’elle corne, annote et plie.¹¹³

¹¹² Elena Pita, ‘Leïla Slimani: “Los racistas hoy no tienen miedo de admitir y demostrar que lo son”’, *El Periódico de España*, 15 June 2023 <<https://www.epe.es/es/abril/20230615/leila-slimani-entrevista-racismo-islam-feminismo-88449496>> [accessed 10 April 2024]. My own translation. This interview took place when Slimani was promoting *Miradnos bailar*, the Spanish translation of *Regardez-nous danser* in Spain.

¹¹³ Anne Fulda, ‘Leïla Slimani, la douce ogresse’, *Le Figaro*, 08 December 2016 <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/lifestyle/2016/12/08/30001-20161208ARTFIG00263-leila-slimani-la-douce-ogresse.php>> [accessed 09 May 2024].

Likewise, in *Le Monde*, Eric Loret and Stéphanie Dupays described Slimani as ‘tout juste 35 ans, journaliste passée par la khâgne et Sciences Po, [elle] avait déjà été fort remarquée l’an passé pour *Dans le jardin de l’ogre* [...] qui mettait en scène une bourgeoise nymphomane.’¹¹⁴ They suggest Slimani is remarkably young to achieve such a literary success, foregrounding her academic achievements and literary trajectory as far as the Goncourt. In addition, *Le Nouvel Obs* engaged with the notion of Slimani rapidly rising as a young, new literary star, stating that

en seulement deux romans, la Franco-Marocaine, [...] s’impose comme une nouvelle voix de la littérature n’hésitant pas à explorer des territoires sombres, de la nymphomanie dans son premier livre [...] au coup de folie d’une nounou bien sous tout rapport dans ce deuxième roman.¹¹⁵

Slimani is pictured as ground-breaking, boldly establishing herself on the literary scene in novel ways following *Dans le jardin de l’ogre* and *Chanson douce*, notably through the novels’ dark themes. Slimani’s age comes out strongly in these examples: presented as a ‘bright young thing’ which is heavily gendered, or at least a more gender-neutral ‘next best thing.’ Moreover, writing for *L’Express*, Marianne Payot asserted that it was ‘pas facile [...] d’effrayer Leïla Slimani, joli brin de femme révélant une force de caractère peu commune. Née à Rabat, cette diplômée de Sciences po, passée par khâgne, n’entend pas jouer les beurettes de service.’¹¹⁶ Payot emphasises Slimani’s physical appearance, juxtaposed against an ‘uncommon’ strength of character. Once again, focus is brought to Slimani’s gender and academic trajectory.

Appearing in different mainstream French media outlets, these reactions would be associated with slightly different readerships in terms of their political stances, affecting both readers’ perceptions and expectations of Slimani. For example, in terms of French dailies, *Le Monde* is the premier centre-left newspaper in France, whilst *Le Figaro* has traditionally held a conservative editorial stance and is more readily associated with the French upper and middle classes. The weekly magazine *L’Express* occupies a centre-right position, whereas *Le Nouvel*

¹¹⁴ Eric Loret and Stéphanie Dupays, ‘Le prix Goncourt est décerné à Leïla Slimani’, *Le Monde*, 03 November 2016 <https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2016/11/03/le-prix-goncourt-est-decerne-a-leila-slimani-pour-chanson-douce-le-renaudot-a-yasmina-reza-pour-babylone_5024851_3260.html> [accessed 10 May 2024]. *La khâgne* or otherwise known as *classes préparatoires littéraires* is a two-year academic program in the French post-baccalaureate system, which specialises in literature and the humanities.

¹¹⁵ Anon., ‘Le Goncourt et le Renaudot font le choix des femmes’, *Le Nouvel Obs*, 03 November 2016 <<https://www.nouvelobs.com/topnews/20161103.AFP0890/le-goncourt-et-le-renaudot-font-le-choix-des-femmes.html>> [accessed 10 May 2024].

¹¹⁶ Marianne Payot, ‘Leïla Slimani, un Goncourt rayonnant’, *L’Express*, 09 November 2016 <https://www.lexpress.fr/culture/livre/leila-slimani-un-goncourt-rayonnant_1848563.html> [accessed 10 May 2024].

Obs leans centre-left. Despite these different political tendencies, the reactions mentioned above appear to position Slimani's early novels within the context of who and what she represents in the French literary scene. Although this is by no means an exhaustive list of all the reactions to Slimani's early fictional work in the French mainstream media, these examples all emphasise Slimani's gender, age, and intellect. This is made clear by how they foreground the success of Slimani's academic trajectory because of her connection to traditional, prestigious French educational institutions. The tone of these reactions implies that Slimani's emergence onto the French literary scene offers something new and exciting; however, it is simultaneously presented as 'unthreatening' because of her ties to traditional national literary and cultural education. Slimani's connection to these institutions thus affords her a certain level of legitimacy. Additionally, Slimani's gender and age are framed as noteworthy, not only in terms of her quick success but also in the thematic choice of her early novels. This suggests that what Slimani writes and who she represents likely go against commonly held assumptions about authors like herself in relation to gender and age. In these examples, how they locate Slimani relates to expectations about her positionality.

It is also worth stressing that Slimani's ties to Morocco and France are evoked (notably by Payot for *L'Express*). This theme is seen elsewhere in relation to how Slimani and her early work were positioned in the mainstream French media and beyond. For example, following the publication *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, Moroccan writer Tahar Ben Jelloun stated in *Le Point*, 'une Marocaine [Slimani] ose et ne prend aucune précaution. Elle y va sans filet et sans pudeur, en même temps, c'est ce qui fait l'intérêt du livre.'¹¹⁷ Implying that Slimani is transgressive for writing without 'pudeur', Ben Jelloun also centres the novel's theme as transgressive: 'une addiction, pas n'importe laquelle, la plus perverse, la plus dangereuse, celle du sexe.'¹¹⁸ Whilst

¹¹⁷ Tahar Ben Jelloun, 'Ben Jelloun : le livre du sexe et des plaisirs', *Le Point*, 19 August 2014 <https://www.lepoint.fr/culture/ben-jelloun-le-livre-du-sexe-et-des-plaisirs-19-08-2014-1854818_3.php#11> [accessed 08 March 2024]. Tahar Ben Jelloun is generally well-known among French literary audiences as a Moroccan author of French expression and intellectual. He has lived in France since 1971 after being imprisoned for five years in Morocco for political writing and activism. See Nina Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrébin in the Aftermath of the Arab Spring', *Contemporary French and Francophone studies*, 20. 1 (2016), 141-49 <<https://doi.org/10.1080/17409292.2016.1120562>>.

¹¹⁸ Ben Jelloun, 'Ben Jelloun : le livre du sexe et des plaisirs.' *Dans le Jardin de l'ogre* tells the story of Adèle Robinson, a journalist and young mother living in Paris, bored and struggling to meet the expectations and demands of urban bourgeois life. Caught between her marriage and a compulsive sex addiction, Adèle initiates casual sexual encounters with strangers that are always in bleak and sometimes dangerous contexts. Whilst she attempts to control her addiction, her double life falls apart when her husband discovers her actions.

framing the novel (and Slimani) as transgressive, Ben Jelloun foregrounds Slimani's connection to the Maghreb:

En général, les Maghrébins qui écrivent commencent par se raconter. Nous sommes tous, ou presque tous, passés d'abord par l'autobiographie, que ce soit Abdelkébir Khatibi (*La Mémoire tatouée*), Abdelhak Serhane (*Messaouda*) Abdallah Taïa (*L'Armée du salut*) ou moi-même avec *Harrouda*. Leïla Slimani rompt la tradition. Son histoire se passe en France avec des personnages français et avec un sujet qui peut se trouver partout [...].¹¹⁹

Ben Jelloun references several well-known Moroccan authors of French expression, grouping them (including himself and Slimani) as 'les Maghrébins' rather than Moroccans.¹²⁰ The authors cited vary significantly in age and generation, presumably writing from different spatio-temporal and social contexts.¹²¹ For example, Ben Jelloun was born in 1944 whereas Slimani was born in 1981. Despite their generational differences, Ben Jelloun suggests that Slimani belongs to a Moroccan literary tradition, which he appears to suggest is synonymous with a Maghrebi one. It might be that Ben Jelloun is trying to 'claim' Slimani for Morocco within the context of nationalist discourses.

Yet, whilst Ben Jelloun alludes to the idea that Slimani can be placed within this group of writers because of her ties to Morocco, he suggests that the thematic location of her debut novel marks a break from this tradition. In addition, Ben Jelloun does not refer to Slimani's difference in gender, despite mentioning no other women. Concerning the implications of such labels, Slimani is seen to be transgressing expectations as a writer because of perceptions about

¹¹⁹ Ben Jelloun, 'Ben Jelloun : le livre du sexe et des plaisirs.'

¹²⁰ This might problematically homogenise diverse North African populations under one ethno-cultural umbrella. As Ben Jelloun is writing for *Le Point*, he speaks to a largely French readership. The implications of such statements become even more significant when considering that *Le Point* is a conservative, centre-right *hebdomadaire* based in Paris. It has a history of xenophobia and Islamophobia particularly concerning the representation of North African populations in France. For example, the late editorial writer Claude Imbert said in 2003, '[...] je suis un peu islamophobe. [...] je ne suis pas le seul dans ce pays à penser que l'islam – je dis bien l'islam, je ne parle même pas des islamistes – en tant que religion apporte une débilité d'archaïsmes divers, apporte une manière de considérer la femme, de déclasser régulièrement [...] la femme [...]' See Henri Maler, 'Claude Imbert, islamophobe déclaré', *ACRIMED*, 28 October 2003 <<https://www.acrimed.org/Claude-Imbert-islamophobe-declare#nb1>> [accessed 08 March 2024].

¹²¹ For example, Abdelkébir Khatibi (1938-2009) is arguably one of the most prolific Moroccan intellectuals of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, who engaged with a range of issues such as Moroccan politics, transnationalism, multilingualism, decolonisation, and interculturality. His most notable works include: *Le roman maghrébin* (1968), *La mémoire tatouée* (1971), and *Maghreb pluriel* (1983). For further reading, see *Abdelkébir Khatibi: Postcolonialism, Transnationalism, and Culture in the Maghreb and Beyond*, ed. by Jane Hiddleston and Khalid Lyamlahy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020). See p. 9, footnote 34 for further information on Taïa.

her national and ethnic heritage in France. This is pertinent given that the term ‘Maghreb’, as Abdelmajid Hannoum demonstrates, is a postcolonial denomination ‘with specific meanings, the genealogy of which can be found in colonial times [...]’.¹²² In other words,

the Maghreb was a French colonial invention, which means that the incessant effort to make sense of it, to conceptualize it, to reconfigure it, to describe its geography and trace its contours was mainly the work of French colonial agents, officers, and scholars [...].¹²³

Hannoum thereby highlights how the Maghreb – as spatial invention – would not have existed ‘without the colonial and postcolonial engagement of a powerful colonial perception.’¹²⁴ This perception, inherently linked to the coloniality of the category, continues to shape the region today.¹²⁵ Ben Jelloun’s reference to Slimani as a Maghrebi writer perhaps addresses French-centric perceptions of the region, which tend to subsume the heterogeneous cultures and people of the Maghreb within one perceived spatial and cultural ‘community.’¹²⁶

After Slimani received *La Mamounia* prize (2015) for Moroccan fiction in the French language (awarded by the famous luxury La Mamounia hotel in Marrakesh) for *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*, English writer Boyd Tonkin asked, ‘has an erotic novel by a woman ever won a major honour in the Muslim Arab world before?’¹²⁷ Describing Slimani as an ‘expatriate’ living in France with the ‘gravitas of Gallimard in Paris behind her’, Tonkin added,

No one I consulted could point to a precedent. In its understated fashion, *La Mamounia* had hosted a quiet revolution. [...] Slimani’s compassionate portrait of sex addiction joins a growing shelf of works by Arab women writers that challenge taboos in a region where patriarchal norms and habits tend to survive every regime-change.¹²⁸

¹²² Abdelmajid Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb: between Africa and the Middle East* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), p. 2.

¹²³ Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb*, p. 23.

¹²⁴ Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb*, p. 28.

¹²⁵ Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb*, p. 28.

¹²⁶ It is worth noting that anti-colonial movements also used the Maghreb category to unite in fighting the French state. See Hannoum, *The Invention of the Maghreb*, p. 244.

¹²⁷ Boyd Tonkin, ‘Leïla Slimani’s *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*: Eroticism in a repressed world’, *The Independent*, 22 October 2015 <<https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/books/features/leila-slimani-s-dans-le-jardin-de-l-ogre-eroticism-in-a-repressed-world-a6704646.html>> [accessed 08 March 2024].

¹²⁸ Tonkin, ‘Leïla Slimani’s *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*.’

Tonkin problematically ignores that Slimani is also a French national as much as she is Moroccan. Unlike Ben Jelloun, Tonkin foregrounds Slimani's ethnicity specifically in relation to her gender rather than her national or regional ties. Although Tonkin does not explicitly state the region he refers to beyond vague and problematic assumptions, he presents Slimani as transgressing socio-cultural and religious moral codes, precisely because she is seen as an 'Arab woman' coming from the 'Muslim Arab world.'¹²⁹ Whilst Ben Jelloun locates Slimani within a 'Maghrebi' literary tradition, Tonkin places Slimani within a tradition of 'Arab women' writers. Despite this different framing, the implications of such labels likely position Slimani as a 'foreigner' either in France or gazing towards it.

Furthermore, the jury of the prize consisted of several well-known international Francophone literary figures: French writer and critic Christine Orban, American novelist Douglas Kennedy, Franco-Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou, Belgian writer Vincent Engel, Moroccan writer and journalist Réda Dalil, and Moroccan academic Karima Yatribi.¹³⁰ The jury's president Christine Orban stated that they unanimously praised Slimani for 'son audace à aborder un sujet peu traité, qui plus est par une femme musulmane et écrit d'une façon brillante, avec beaucoup de psychologie.'¹³¹ Once again, it appears that Slimani is framed as a taboo-breaker because of her perceived socio-cultural location as a 'Muslim woman.' In addition, it is significant that the jury comprised international Francophone literary figures instead of only French-speaking Moroccan critics or writers given that the prize focused on Moroccan literature in French.

Despite coming from different socio-cultural, national, and geographic contexts, these critics converge to frame Slimani in identitarian terms. They appear to locate Slimani and her debut novel in an idea of identity that, to varying degrees, is firmly rooted in perceptions of 'difference' concerning nationality, ethnicity, and gender. The merging of these markers also seems to assume a religious connection to Islam. Slimani appears to be understood as belonging to some sort of ethno-cultural 'tradition', which she is breaking from to different extents. This

¹²⁹ Terms like 'Muslim Arab world' are problematic because of their homogenising nature.

¹³⁰ See La Mamounia Marrakech, 'Sixième édition du prix littéraire de La Mamounia', *Facebook*, 14 August 2015

<https://www.facebook.com/LaMamouniaMarrakech/posts/876826162400561/?locale=pt_BR&paipv=0&eav=AfYFnxJc3wUiNKPzPfUMp9sR8TMYxNYCzew_YF45KafvtSNxsq9GEHGkLOvPVy76KHQ&_rdr> [accessed 08 March 2024].

¹³¹ Sarah Leduc, 'Un roman sur l'addiction sexuelle féminine récompensé au Maroc', *France 24*, 29 September 2015 <<https://www.france24.com/fr/20150928-prix-mamounia-marrakech-maroc-recompense-roman-addiction-sexuelle-feminine-leila-slimani>> [accessed 08 March 2024].

‘tradition’ (whether Moroccan, Maghrebi, Arab, Muslim, or gendered, and the intersections of these labels) seems to exist outside of France and despite other differences like age, generation, and lived experience.

The tendency to position Slimani in such ways and the impact this has on her (self-)fashioning evokes Graham Huggan’s understanding of the celebrity writer in contemporary global celebrity culture:

the figure of the *celebrity writer* is as much a real-life embodiment of social desire as a virtual product of media machinery – a desire that isn’t necessarily sexualized, but certainly can be, for example in the case of writers deemed to come (or fashioned as coming) from “exotic” backgrounds, and/or whose “exotic” looks are played on to create a series of tantalizing effects.¹³²

Huggan suggests that the figure of the celebrity writer can represent a marketable cultural commodity in particular contexts, whereby celebrity presence is shadowed by issues of representation that pertain to questions of ethnicity and gender. Although Huggan’s analysis is located in a specific postcolonial Anglophone context, it undoubtedly encapsulates wider tendencies in transnational literary markets and how encounters with ‘otherness’ and ‘difference’ are articulated, particularly in the West.¹³³ This is reminiscent of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), where he asserts that the perpetuation of colonial ideology upholds Eurocentricity, which means only Europe can articulate the ‘Orient’ (and specifically Islam) as a way of exerting control. In this instance, the subject is the Orient being made known to the West in a way that makes it more ‘palatable’ (in other words, less fearsome), rather than the ‘Orient’ itself. The outcome, Said maintains, is a process of orientalisation: the Orient is orientalist simultaneously as the site of Orientalist focus and in a way that compels Western readers to accept such representations constructed by Orientalists. This process is mutually

¹³² Graham Huggan, ‘Re-evaluating the Postcolonial Exotic’, *International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, 22. 7 (2020), 808-824 (p. 812) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/1369801X.2020.1753552>>. Emphasis in original.

¹³³ For example, literature by black authors in Italian/in Italy makes for an interesting comparison. Caterina Romeo flags how the Italian editorial market, as well as the media and academia, established the nation’s literary and cultural sphere as white through a process which naturalised native authors’ whiteness. Consequently, in the early 1990s when African Italian postcolonial writers began ‘infusing this space with their blackness – by becoming the subjects, rather than only being the objects, of representation in the Italian literary space, and by telling stories from the migrants’ perspective – resistance to this intrusion was mainly enacted through the delegitimization of their writings [...] and their confinement within the non-literary space of autobiographical writing.’ See Caterina Romeo, ‘Racial Evaporations: Representing Blackness in African Italian Postcolonial Literature’, in *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity*, ed. by Cristina Lombardi-Diop (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), pp. 221-36 (pp. 224-25).

reinforced by the perceived cultural and political practices of the West through teaching, rhetoric, traditions, and societies.¹³⁴

Within a similar representational framework, Zahia Smail Salhi explores the notion of ‘Occidentalism.’ For Salhi, Occidentalism encompasses how the East-West encounter (and by default, the West) is portrayed by formerly colonised people. Therefore, Occidentalists writers speak in/directly to the Occident.¹³⁵ Although Orientalism’s colonial roots continue to affect interactions between East and West, Salhi maintains that Occidentalism is not a simple reverse of Orientalism. This would suggest that there is an equal balance of power between the two entities when it is, in fact, asymmetrical: ‘the Orientalist versus Occidental condition is one of hegemony in which one was and still is the superior “Self” and the second was and still remains the inferior “Other.”’¹³⁶ Salhi argues that some Occidentalists works might ‘either totally disfigure and alienate the Orientals whom they depict or encourage a whole process of working towards the replication of these Orientalist clichés to attract the Occidental reader and tourist.’¹³⁷ An example Salhi gives of this phenomenon of self-Orientalisation is the literary success of Ben Jelloun’s *L’enfant de sable* (1985) and *La nuit sacrée* (1987) in France. It appears that in both Orientalism and Occidentalism, the Other is being performed in a process that is always unequal. To put it another way, Salhi proposes that some iterations of Occidentalism – as a multifaceted concept – simplify the Orient, reducing it to Occidental stereotypes.¹³⁸

In the wider context of French identity politics and literary reception, Kathryn A. Kleppinger argues that by 2004, a media phenomenon was established in France that meant ‘reader expectations of novels by authors from the North African population in France had solidified around themes of urban poverty and immigrant identity confusion.’¹³⁹ Kleppinger highlights how discussions around North African immigrant identity politics in literature date

¹³⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1995), pp. 57-69.

¹³⁵ Zahia Smail Salhi, *Occidentalism: Literary Representations of the Maghrebi Experience of the East-West Encounter* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), p. 1.

¹³⁶ Salhi, *Occidentalism*, pp. 11-14.

¹³⁷ Salhi, *Occidentalism*, p. 6.

¹³⁸ Salhi, *Occidentalism*, pp. 34-36.

¹³⁹ Kathryn A. Kleppinger, *Branding the ‘Beur’ Author: Minority Writing and the Media in France* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2016), p. 2. These debates go back a long way, started by Alec G. Hargreaves’ book *Immigration and Identity in Beur Fiction: Voices from the North African Immigrant Community in France* (Oxford: Berg, 1997). See also, Sylvie Durmelat, ‘Petite histoire du mot beur: ou comment prendre la parole quand on vous la prête’, *French Cultural Studies*, 9. 26 (1998), 191-207
<<https://doi.org/10.1177/095715589800902604>>.

back to 1983, when Mehdi Charef's *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* became the first novel by an author of North African (in Charef's case, Algerian) heritage to be the focus of significant media attention and promotion.¹⁴⁰ Since 1983, authors such as Azouz Begag, Soraya Nini and Rachid Djaïdani have also been heavily promoted in the French media (press, television, radio).¹⁴¹ Kleppinger demonstrates how contemporary media presentation of these authors projected 'the most sensitive social and political concerns of the era' onto their writing.¹⁴² The concerns, addressed and discussed in interviews with these writers, largely pertained to the 'most pressing immigration-related social and political questions' of the past thirty plus years, such as: language use (between French and Arabic and sometimes Berber), personal experiences of racism, whether the writers felt more 'French' or 'North African', and what they thought would 'solve' the 'immigrant problem.'¹⁴³ Indeed, their prevalence in audiovisual media (such as news programmes, talk shows, and special investigation programmes) in France indicated 'their perceived social relevance.'¹⁴⁴

Although they share French nationality, Slimani's trajectory is different from the authors mentioned above, temporally, spatially, and socially as a contemporary Franco-Moroccan writer who grew up in Rabat and moved to Paris at seventeen. It would be oversimplistic and reductive to imply that Slimani is received in the same context. However, it is evident that literary critics, journalists, and academics discuss Slimani's positionality in terms of the extent to which she is seen (or should be seen) as a 'spokesperson' for Moroccan and other North African populations in France. This contextualisation is relevant to how Slimani is received and positioned in France and beyond (for example, in other transnational contexts such as the U.K. or U.S.), feeding into contemporary discussions about what it means to be a member of contemporary French society. Undoubtedly, these questions of national belonging have been influenced by France's colonial history. Indeed, as the 2015 Charlie Hebdo terrorist attacks have arguably shown, 'questions of representation and journalistic discourse around the Arab population have continued to remain sensitive and divisive issues

¹⁴⁰ Mehdi Charef (1952) is a French writer, director, and screenwriter of Algerian descent.

¹⁴¹ Kleppinger, *Branding the 'Beur' Author*, p. 3. See p. 9, footnote 34 for further information on Azouz Begag. Writer Soraya Nini was born in Toulon in 1961 and published *Ils disent que je suis une beurette* in 1993, she has Algerian heritage. Rachid Djaïdani (1974) is a French writer, actor, director, and screenwriter. His first novel, *Boumkoeur* was published in 1999. He has an Algerian father and a Sudanese mother.

¹⁴² Kleppinger, *Branding the 'Beur' Author*, p. 3.

¹⁴³ Kleppinger, *Branding the 'Beur' Author*, p. 3.

¹⁴⁴ Kleppinger, *Branding the 'Beur' Author*, p. 3.

with very real social and political consequences.¹⁴⁵ This suggests that certain commentators perhaps approached Slimani and her early work with predetermined ideas regarding the subject matter, her critical gaze, and whom she is assumed to represent.

This framing has arguably fed into the way Slimani's early work is located beyond initial representations in the media. Academic Alessandro Giardino argues that 'l'œuvre romanesque de Leïla Slimani est bien ancrée dans la tradition du roman marocain au féminin.'¹⁴⁶ Through an analysis of Slimani's first two novels, *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (2014) and *Chanson douce* (2016), Giardino refers on several occasions to trends in the 'roman francophone féminin' that he claims Slimani's work belongs to, aligning her with authors such as Elisa Chimenti, Nedjma, Fatima Mernissi, Noufissa Sbaï, Sihem Bencheikroun and Rajae Benchemisi.¹⁴⁷ Giardino argues that 'Slimani partage avec ces écrivaines l'insistance sur les couleurs, les goûts et les odeurs de la Méditerranée, aussi bien que plusieurs éléments fantastiques enracinés dans la tradition folklorique marocaine.'¹⁴⁸ The discussion around whether Slimani's work shares thematic traits with the aforementioned authors goes beyond the confines of this thesis; however, Giardino's grouping appears indicative of a wider framing that spatially and culturally situates Slimani's early fictional work in the context of a Moroccan 'tradition', particularly in French-facing contexts.

Furthermore, in one of the few pieces critical of *Chanson douce*, academic Khalid Lyamlahy argues that the widespread commercial success of the novel 'occluded some of the most problematic aspects of the best-seller.'¹⁴⁹ Lyamlahy states:

Slimani and I were both born and raised in Morocco, and we were both educated at French schools, but we certainly don't share the same view on the role of fiction in negotiating the question of identity and difference in the age of migration and displacement. *The Perfect Nanny* is a novel that indirectly contributes to the dynamics of exclusion and differentiation: the stranger is the marginalized character of the main narrative, the forgotten subject of distorted representations.¹⁵⁰

¹⁴⁵ Kleppinger, *Branding the 'Beur' Author*, p. 7.

¹⁴⁶ Alessandro Giardino, 'Les Étrangères de Leïla Slimani: Marocaines "dévoilées" et femmes de révolte', *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, 33. 2 (2018), 147-59 (p. 149) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26860346>> [accessed 14 March 2024].

¹⁴⁷ Giardino, 'Les Étrangères de Leïla Slimani', pp. 149-50.

¹⁴⁸ Giardino, 'Les Étrangères de Leïla Slimani', p.149.

¹⁴⁹ Lyamlahy, 'On the Imperfections of the Perfect Nanny.'

¹⁵⁰ Lyamlahy, 'On the Imperfections of the Perfect Nanny.'

Lyamlahy alludes to the idea that he and Slimani might share a sense of solidarity or have a similar positionality due to the similarities of their respective upbringings in Morocco. In this way, Slimani's 'Moroccanness' appears to be foregrounded as relevant to and representative of what she writes, questioning the impact of her writing on 'North African' populations living in France. This is not an isolated criticism of Slimani; for example, she was accused of being a 'collabeurette' or a 'native informant' by some critics, particularly following the publication of *Sexe et mensonges* in 2017.¹⁵¹

In contrast to Lyamlahy, American journalist and author Lauren Collins praises Slimani for making little mention of current events in France in *Chanson douce*; yet also emphasises Slimani's Moroccan heritage over her French ties. Collins argues that Slimani's 'reticence is [...] ideological, a pushback against the notion that the Moroccan or the Afghan writer must grapple with political issues while the American or the French one is left to explore the questions of an individual life.'¹⁵² In a similar celebratory tone, scholar Jennifer Howell praises the way the novel appears to depart from immigration issues, offering a broader, post-identitarian exploration of social and class struggles in contemporary France, whilst foregrounding Slimani's Moroccan heritage as inherently tied to her ethnicity. Howell maintains that whilst:

[...] Slimani is of Moroccan origin, neither she nor her publishers have capitalised on her ethnicity. Her novel does depict immigration and, more specifically, North African immigration: for instance, Myriam refuses to hire an Arabic speaking nanny, and Louise befriends Wafa, a Moroccan nanny she meets at the park. Slimani's treatment of domestic labour in France reflects, however, a social reality and does not represent an open treatise on immigration.¹⁵³

These contrasting reflections from Lyamlahy, Howell, and Collins all suggest the issue of representing migration is significant in Slimani's work as a Moroccan writer, arguably casting

¹⁵¹ Fatiha Boudjahlat, 'Leïla Slimani, nouvelle cible de la censure antiraciste', *Le Figaro*, 31 August 2017 <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/vox/societe/2017/08/31/31003-20170831ARTFIG00310-fatia-boudjahlat-leila-slimani-nouvelle-cible-de-la-censure-antiraciste.php>> [accessed 25 March 2024]. The term 'collabeurette' blends the French 'collaborateur' (collaborator) with 'beurette' (the feminised version of 'beur', a pejorative, colloquial term in French used to designate European-born people whose parents or grandparents immigrated from countries in the Maghreb). The following pages will further explain the term 'native informant.' For a more in-depth discussion of *Sexe et mensonges*, see Chapter 2.

¹⁵² Collins, 'The Killer-Nanny Novel That Conquered France.'

¹⁵³ Jennifer Howell, 'Chanson douce', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 22. 2 (2017), 301-03 (p. 302) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1288695>>.

her as a Moroccan critic/intellectual looking towards France.¹⁵⁴ In the context of Slimani's early fictional work, this framing demonstrates how her positionality has been debated in terms of whether she should be seen as a 'spokesperson' for Moroccans (and North African populations more broadly) in France. Indeed, the discussion focusing on how Slimani engages with questions of immigration in *Chanson douce* is likely indicative of certain expectations based on assumptions about Slimani's proximity to Morocco and the Maghreb more generally. These assumptions appear directly related to her perceived ethnic and gendered difference in transnational French mediascapes (and beyond).

In addition, flagging a similar tendency of critics to engage with labels that assign degrees of otherness to Slimani in a French context, academic Lorenza Starace suggests that Slimani 'inhabits the role of the Francophone intellectual', comparing her to other writers such as Marie NDiaye, Maryse Condé, and Lyonel Trouillot. These authors, as Starace states, express resistance to the 'Francophone' label.¹⁵⁵ By analysing *Chanson douce* in the context of debates about *littérature-monde en français*, Starace maintains that 'authors coming from postcolonial countries [like Slimani]' must play an 'often paradoxical role' in the contemporary literary field: 'either accused of cultural imperialism by their "communities of origin" or relegated to the marginality of "francophone literature" by the French literary milieu, the reception of (im)migrant authors is fraught with paradoxes and contradictions.'¹⁵⁶ Starace highlights the opposing expectations placed on someone entering French literary and cultural spheres from a position of perceived visible 'difference.' However, whilst Starace appears to attempt to move beyond anticipating 'certain literary stances on the basis of a writer's sociopolitical provenance', she arguably falls into the same trap by positioning Slimani as an immigrant writer/intellectual coming to France, who is located within certain rigid cultural binarisms.¹⁵⁷ This view seems to suggest that although there are competing pressures affecting Slimani's engagement with France's transnational fields of literary production and her self-positioning, it is limited to a one-directional gaze.

¹⁵⁴ Given that the focus of this chapter looks at how audiences locate Slimani (and how this relates to her authorial self-positioning), an in-depth discussion of the representation of immigration and racial difference in *Chanson douce* goes beyond the scope of this thesis. See Cooper, 'Hiding in Plain Sight.'

¹⁵⁵ Starace, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*', pp. 144-45.

¹⁵⁶ Starace, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*', p. 144.

¹⁵⁷ Starace, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*', p. 146.

This is reminiscent of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's conceptions of the 'native informant' – who claims or is deemed to speak for others – arguing that

when we come to the concomitant question of the consciousness of the subaltern, the notion of what the work *cannot* say becomes important. In the semiosis of the social text, elaborations of insurgency stand in the place of "the utterance." The sender – "the peasant" – is marked only as a pointer to an irretrievable consciousness.¹⁵⁸

For Spivak, 'native informants' are those belonging to the Indian elite, acting for first world intellectuals interested in the voice of the Other.¹⁵⁹ Spivak proposes that 'real' subaltern experiences are not always readily available for translation. Consequently, this demonstrates the problematics of overlooking who is speaking on behalf of the subaltern. Spivak articulates that whilst the ability to 'speak up' is typical of an 'organic intellectual', the speaker distances themselves from the initial subaltern condition they represent.¹⁶⁰ In this way, Spivak seems to indicate that the cultural 'sender' is alienated from their original position of subalternity. This calls into question the validity of the colonised individual's subjectivity once they move away from this original position.

However, it is necessary to question how helpful it is to frame and label Slimani as a 'native informant' in France. Slimani's socio-economic background needs to be considered; she holds Franco-Moroccan citizenship and refers to her bourgeois, Francophone upbringing in Morocco in interviews and her non-fictional writing. Her otolaryngologist mother and late economist father (who also served as Morocco's minister of economy) raised her in Rabat before she moved to Paris.¹⁶¹ In this regard, Slimani's self-positioning is apparent in how she writes about growing up in Rabat in *LPDFLN* (2021):

¹⁵⁸ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London: Routledge 2013), pp. 66-111 (p. 82). Emphasis in original.

¹⁵⁹ Spivak, 'Can the subaltern speak?', p. 79.

¹⁶⁰ Antonio Gramsci characterised an intellectual as an educated and influential individual who belongs to a particular historical formation or social group or public – either hegemonic or struggling to achieve hegemony. Whilst anyone can be an intellectual according to Gramsci, he theorised the difference between 'traditional' and 'organic' intellectuals. An organic intellectual belongs to a particular social class, rather than being part of the traditional intelligentsia (who sees itself as a class existing outside of society). Organic intellectuals aim to change the status quo and fight for equality and justice by directing the ideas and aims of the class to which they 'organically' belong. See Antonio Gramsci, 'The Intellectuals', in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, trans. Q Hoare and G Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), pp. 3-2.

¹⁶¹ Olivia Marks, 'Author Leïla Slimani Invites Vogue Into Her Literary World', *British Vogue*, 20 January 2019 <<https://www.vogue.co.uk/article/leila-slimani-interview>> [accessed 04 August 2021].

Mon ami l'écrivain Abdellah Taïa est né à Salé, ville ouvrière voisine de Rabat dont elle est séparée par le fleuve Bouregreg. Rabat la bourgeoisie jauge sa populeuse jumelle avec mépris et on ne traverse pas si facilement la frontière qui sépare ces deux villes. Abdellah vient d'un quartier pauvre de Salé [...]. [...] Nous nous sommes dit que si nous n'étions pas devenus écrivains, que si nous n'avions pas émigré, nous ne nous serions sans doute jamais connus.¹⁶²

Slimani acknowledges the bourgeois roots of her upbringing and how this has distanced her from the experiences of poorer, working-class Moroccans. Indeed, moving to Paris has arguably solidified her social-economic background. She admits that 'her life looks a lot like that of the thirtysomething "[...] *bobos*" [...] parents she writes about [...]: living in an apartment in Pigalle, enjoying drinks and dinners with friends.'¹⁶³ This coupled with her position as an internationally renowned writer has probably given her significant cultural capital. In this context, the aforementioned critical readings of her work by journalists and academics in French and Anglophone media and academic spheres appear somewhat rigid in their social and political location. They do not appear to fully respond to the nuances of Slimani's Franco-Moroccan, bourgeois position; whilst it is inherently Moroccan, it is one of the many lived experiences of growing up in Morocco.

Spivak's work serves as a reminder of how power imbalances distort encounters with otherness in broader relations between 'West' and 'East.' It can be argued that this impacts how celebrity writers like Slimani translate and occupy transnational discursive spheres, demonstrating the competing pressures they may face. Regarding Morocco-based reactions to Slimani's early fictional work in the French-language Moroccan press, there appears to be a similar tendency to foreground Slimani's Moroccan identity.¹⁶⁴ In an article for *TelQuel* announcing Slimani had been shortlisted for the Goncourt, Jules Crétois makes no mention of Slimani's nationality, focusing on an analysis of *Chanson douce* which celebrates 'le regard perçant [de Slimani] sur les rapports familiaux et sociaux à l'heure de la modernité.'¹⁶⁵ However, following the Goncourt win, *TelQuel* described 'la Franco-marocaine Leïla Slimani'

¹⁶² Leïla Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 142-43.

¹⁶³ Marks, 'Author Leïla Slimani Invites Vogue Into Her Literary World.'

¹⁶⁴ It is important to recognise that Arabic-language media reactions might not be identical to those in French. Looking at Arabic-language reactions to Slimani in Morocco (and beyond) would present a fruitful site for further study.

¹⁶⁵ Jules Crétois, "'Chanson douce", le livre qui pourrait valoir un Goncourt à Leïla Slimani', *TelQuel*, 08 September 2016 <https://telquel.ma/2016/09/08/chanson-douce-le-livre-qui-pourrait-valoir-un-goncourt-a-leila-slimani_1513539> [accessed 06 August 2024].

as the most read ‘auteure francophone’ in 2016.¹⁶⁶ Likewise, an article for *Bladi.net* maintained that winning the Goncourt was ‘une consécration pour l’auteure française d’origine marocaine.’¹⁶⁷ In addition, writing for *L’Observateur du Maroc et d’Afrique*, Kawtar Firdaous stated, ‘journaliste et écrivaine franco-marocaine, Leïla Slimani est une vraie pépite de la scène littéraire francophone.’¹⁶⁸ In contrast, referring to Slimani’s appearance on the front cover of *Elle France* in January 2017 and making no reference to her French heritage, *Femmes du Maroc* reported that ‘l’écrivaine marocaine se confie sur sa vie de super star post-Goncourt.’¹⁶⁹ Alongside highlighting Slimani’s literary skill, her proximity to Morocco is evident in these reactions: presented in varying degrees ranging from labelling her as French with Moroccan heritage, to dual Franco-Moroccan, and solely Moroccan. Without a doubt, for some Moroccan journalists, this tendency would more likely be rooted in a desire to foreground Slimani’s Moroccan identity than in a process of othering, especially in the aftermath of her Goncourt success and rise to international fame.

It is worth noting that Slimani is regularly referred to as ‘Franco-Moroccan’ from across the spectrum of the respective French and Francophone Moroccan mediascapes.¹⁷⁰ Whilst it is

¹⁶⁶ Anon., ‘La Franco-marocaine Leïla Slimani, auteure francophone la plus lue en 2016’, *TelQuel*, 01 February 2017 <https://telquel.ma/2017/02/01/franco-marocaine-leila-slimani-auteure-francophone-lue-en-2016_1533805> [accessed 08 May 2024] and Benjamin Bousquet, ‘Le prix Goncourt décerné à Leïla Slimani pour « Chanson douce »’, *TelQuel*, 03 November 2016 <https://telquel.ma/2016/11/03/prix-goncourt-decerne-leila-slimani-chanson-douce_1521916> [accessed 08 May 2024].

¹⁶⁷ Anon., ‘La franco-marocaine Leïla Slimani remporte le prix Goncourt pour son livre « Chanson douce »’, *Bladi.net*, 03 November 2016 <<https://www.bladi.net/leila-slimani-prix-goncourt,46584.html>> [accessed 08 May 2024].

¹⁶⁸ Kawtar Firdaous, ‘« Chanson douce » de Leïla Slimani’, *L’Observateur du Maroc et d’Afrique*, 03 November 2016 <<https://lobservateur.info/article/5552/Culture/chanson-douce-de-leila-slimani>> [accessed 06 August 2024].

¹⁶⁹ Anon., ‘Leïla Slimani en couverture d’*Elle*’, *Femmes du Maroc*, 18 January 2017 <<https://femmesdumaroc.com/archives/leila-slimani-en-couverture-de-elle>> [accessed 06 August 2024].

¹⁷⁰ For further examples in the French-language Moroccan press, see Rania Laabid, ‘Leïla Slimani : « Je suis heureuse de supporter l’image d’un Maroc ouvert et cosmopolite »’, *Femmes du Maroc*, 27 November 2023 <<https://femmesdumaroc.com/video/leila-slimani-je-suis-heureuse-de-supporter-limage-dun-maroc-ouvert-et-cosmopolite>> [accessed 08 May 2024]; Anon., ‘Leïla Slimani : “La force du cinéma marocain réside dans cette jeune génération de réalisateurs”’, *Menara*, 29 November 2023 <<https://www.menara.ma/fr/article/leila-slimani-la-force-du-cinema-marocain-reside-dans-cette-jeune-generation-de-realisateurs>> [accessed 08 May 2024]; Anon., ‘La romancière franco-marocaine Leïla Slimani présidera le jury de l’International Booker Prize’, *TelQuel*, 23 August 2022 <https://telquel.ma/instant-t/2022/08/23/la-romanciere-franco-marocaine-leila-slimani-presidera-le-jury-de-linternational-booker-prize_1781387/> [accessed 08 May 2024] ; Anon., ‘La Franco-marocaine Leïla Slimani, auteure francophone la plus lue’; Bousquet, ‘Le prix Goncourt décerné à Leïla Slimani’; Anon., ‘La franco-marocaine Leïla Slimani remporte le prix Goncourt’; Kawtar Firdaous, ‘Leïla Slimani ou l’art de décortiquer l’ambiguïté des sentiments’, *L’Observateur du Maroc et d’Afrique*, 07 March 2024 <<https://lobservateur.info/article/109916/culture/leila-slimani-ou-lart-de-decortiquer-lambiguite-des-sentiments>> [accessed 08 May 2024] and Anon., ‘Le FIFM dévoile les membres du jury: présence de Camille Cottin, Leïla Slimani et Alexander Skarsgård’, *Le Desk*, 27 October 2023 <<https://mobile.ledesk.ma/encontinu/le-fifm-devoile-les-membres-du-jury-presence-de-camille-cottin-leila->

unclear whether the ‘Moroccan’ framing of Slimani ‘trumps’ the ‘Franco-Moroccan’ in terms of frequency, it appears as though she is very rarely if ever referred to as ‘French’ – without also referring to her Moroccan heritage in some way – across various national and/or linguistic spheres.¹⁷¹ The tendency to situate Slimani as a Moroccan intellectual/writer looking towards France – with varying degrees of proximity to French nationality – from multiple critical standpoints across various transnational, socio-cultural spheres highlights how, in Slimani’s case, markers of national or ethnic identity are nearly always placed on her work. Whether this is the result of a representational process of othering, or, in the case of some Moroccan journalists, wanting to foreground Slimani’s Moroccan identity, presenting Slimani in such ways arguably solidifies certain value judgements which carry and maintain cultural currency, notably in France. These judgements overlook the nuances of Slimani’s position as a writer occupying multiple transnational spheres with a particular lived experience of France and Morocco. The reactions, namely those in French and Anglophone contexts, do not appear to consider how representational processes of othering potentially constrain Slimani. They thus overlook how these processes are emblematic of and contribute to maintaining a marketable cultural capital associated with a perceived proximity to otherness, notably in Eurocentric, French literary contexts. Hence, these reactions – wittingly or not – contribute to the same processes, forming an integral part of how Slimani’s literary celebrity is constructed and understood in France, Morocco, and beyond.

[slimani-et-alexander-skarsgard/](#)> [accessed 08 May 2024]. For examples in the French press, see Vanessa Schneider, ‘Encensée, engagée, révoltée... Leïla Slimani, auteure à facettes’, *Le Monde*, 15 November 2019 <https://www.lemonde.fr/m-le-mag/article/2019/11/15/adaptation-de-son-goncourt-au-cinema-nouveau-roman-defense-des-libertes-des-femmes-leila-slimani-sur-tous-les-fronts_6019224_4500055.html> [accessed 29 April 2021]; Pierre Wadoux, ‘Au Théâtre de Lorient, Leïla Slimani fait escale avec Simon Delétang’, *Ouest-France*, 23 January 2024 <<https://www.ouest-france.fr/bretagne/lorient-56100/au-theatre-de-lorient-leila-slimani-fait-escale-avec-simon-deletang-daa7107e-b78d-11ee-879f-a9fd2809e51>> [accessed 08 May 2024]; Anon., ‘Leïla Slimani appelle les Marocains à se rebeller contre la répression de l’homosexualité’, *Le Point*, 04 November 2016 <https://www.lepoint.fr/societe/leila-slimani-appelle-les-marocains-a-se-rebeller-contre-la-repression-de-l-homosexualite-04-11-2016-2080663_23.php#11> [accessed 08 May 2024]; Mabrouck Rachedi, ‘« Le pays des autres », de Leïla Slimani : l’identité en dehors des cases’, *Jeune Afrique*, 14 April 2020 <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/927256/culture/le-pays-des-autres-de-leila-slimani-lidentite-en-dehors-des-cases/>> [accessed 08 May 2024]; Marie-Laure Delorme, ‘L’écrivaine Leïla Slimani : « Vive le Maroc ! »’, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, 10 December 2022 <<https://www.lejdd.fr/sport/lecrivaine-leila-slimani-vive-le-maroc-130488>> [accessed 08 May 2024]; Lise Martin, ‘Leïla Slimani : « La société marocaine est schizophrène »’, *Grazia*, 08 September 2017 <<https://www.grazia.fr/news-et-societe/news/leila-slimani-la-societe-marocaine-est-schizophrène-158100.html>> [accessed 08 May 2024].

¹⁷¹ I only found one example describing Slimani as ‘l’auteure française d’origine marocaine’ on *Bladi.net*. See p. 51, footnote 167.

Naming without naming: Universalism, *la francophonie* and implicit/indirect othering in the French cultural and political mainstream

As mentioned above, Slimani is aware of being othered in various transnational French spheres, and latterly, at times, has rejected a fixed positionality in response. In this respect, Slimani's personal and professional endorsement from the Parisian literary scene before publishing *Chanson douce* is relevant to her authorial (self-)fashioning and trajectory. Inevitably, this has affected how Slimani's public engagement with identity-based questions has shifted over time, outlining the tensions between her self-positioning and positioning by others. In the context of being a writer celebrated internationally whose rise to fame was sparked in France, it is necessary to consider the implications of France's 'national' public sphere and the dominant ideologies that traverse it, chiefly in terms of what cultural production is deemed 'valuable' in mainstream discourses. Dominant French socio-political and cultural discourses are predominantly rooted in a self-proclaimed commitment to mythological revolutionary, egalitarian, and republican concepts linked to enlightenment thought and secularist ideology. Indeed, the French Republican model purports to downplay identity differences among its citizens. However, national ideologies restrict identity choices, and as Jean Beaman states, 'French Republicanism determines how individuals are identified – as French or foreigner.'¹⁷² For example, ethnic categories are not codified by law in France, which means it continues to be difficult for ethnic minorities to be able to assert a French identity.¹⁷³

In terms of how national identity interacts with cultural expression, Diana Holmes notes how French national identity 'has long been sustained by a belief in the unique excellence of French culture, and particularly literary culture.'¹⁷⁴ Although this predated the establishment of France's Republican model,

the doctrine of republican universalism along with centralised control of education and strong state support for the cultural sector [...] underpins the identification of "Frenchness" with a demanding but elevating "high" culture, theoretically made available to all citizens through education and state cultural policy.¹⁷⁵

¹⁷² Jean Beaman, *Citizen Outsider: Children of North African Immigrants in France* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017), p. 69.

¹⁷³ Beaman, *Citizen Outsider*, p. 69.

¹⁷⁴ Diana Holmes, 'Negotiating the middlebrow: women writers and literary stardom in contemporary France', *Celebrity Studies*, 7. 4 (2016), 493-508 (p. 493) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1233706>>.

¹⁷⁵ Holmes, 'Negotiating the middlebrow', pp. 493-94.

Regarding processes of implicit or indirect othering, this raises questions about what it means to be associated with the French literary, cultural, and political mainstream, and how this affects the public performance of authorial positionality. After winning the Goncourt, reactions to Slimani's work and public persona revealed another tendency. An article in *Le Monde*, entitled 'Femme, jeune et née à l'étranger : Leïla Slimani, un profil atypique parmi les Prix Goncourt', stated that 'la lauréate 2016 modernise le portrait type des auteurs récompensés [...]'.¹⁷⁶ At the time of winning, Slimani was only the twelfth woman to receive the award since it was created in 1903, so what and whom Slimani represents (as a Franco-Moroccan woman) broke from those typically 'celebrated' by the Goncourt (usually white, French men).

Ben Jelloun, former winner of the Goncourt himself and part of the 2016 Goncourt selection panel, asserted: 'elle [Slimani] n'a pas fait le roman maghrébin que l'on attend sur la situation de la femme, le couscous et tout le folklore.'¹⁷⁷ He further maintained that in lieu of taking any political stance, 'la littérature' was the 'seul critère' taken into account by the Goncourt jury, declaring that 'c'est fini, l'époque où on s'appelait au téléphone pour les votes.'¹⁷⁸ Ben Jelloun celebrates Slimani for seeming to break from what might be understood as a marketable 'Maghrebi' literary tradition, alluding to the expectations placed on writers like Slimani in the French national context. Yet, as he only refers to *le roman maghrébin*, Ben Jelloun could be referencing any number of authors across various spatio-temporal locations and contexts in North Africa.¹⁷⁹ In a similar tone, polemical Algerian writer of French expression Kamel Daoud maintained that 'elle [Slimani] n'est pas dans l'identitaire littéraire, ses romans nous reposent de ce que nous sommes.'¹⁸⁰ Daoud seems to claim 'universal'

¹⁷⁶ Anne-Aël Durand, 'Femme, jeune et née à l'étranger : Leïla Slimani, un profil atypique parmi les Prix Goncourt', *Le Monde*, 03 November 2016 <https://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/11/03/femme-jeune-et-nee-a-l-etranger-leila-slimani-un-profil-atypique-parmi-les-prix-goncourt_5025019_4355770.html#:~:text=Le%C3%AFla%20Slimani%20a%20%C3%A9t%C3%A9%20r%C3%A9compens%C3%A9e,depuis%20sa%20cr%C3%A9ation%2C%20en%201903> [accessed 21 March 2024].

¹⁷⁷ Romain Jeanticou, 'Goncourt 2016: Leïla Slimani primée pour "Chanson douce"', *Télérama*, 03 November 2016 <<https://www.telerama.fr/livre/goncourt-2016-leila-slimani-primee-pour-chanson-douce,149612.php>> [accessed 11 March 2024].

¹⁷⁸ Jeanticou, 'Goncourt 2016: Leïla Slimani primée pour "Chanson douce."'

¹⁷⁹ For example, in the context of 'la situation de la femme', the work of Moroccan feminist author and sociologist Fatima Mernissi (1940-2015) centres on gender relations in Morocco and other Muslim-majority countries. She is well known in France and beyond; notable works include *Beyond the Veil: Male Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (1975) and *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood* (1994). Algerian novelist Assia Djebar (1936-2015) is another prominent writer in France and beyond whose fictional work often explores the lives of women in Algeria, such as in *La soif* (1975) and *Les enfants du nouveau monde* (1962).

¹⁸⁰ Kamel Daoud quoted in Émilie Lanez, 'Leïla Slimani, l'exil portugais', *Paris Match*, 06 February 2022 <<https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Livres/Leila-Slimani-l-exil-portugais-1786120>> [accessed 13 March 2024].

valency for Slimani's work, thereby providing relief for people like him – as an Algerian writer – who are often essentialised or on whom certain expectations are placed.

At the same time, however, Ben Jelloun suggests that Slimani's break from tradition was extraneous to the selection panel's choice as he attempts to remove these discussions from politicised, identitarian framings. Likewise, Bernard Pivot, former president of the Académie Goncourt, commented on Slimani's Goncourt win:

D'habitude, l'académie Goncourt récompense des livres du passé. Cette année, elle élit un livre qui parle du présent, du quotidien, et de ses problèmes, comme cette question de déléguer l'autorité et l'amour à une personne étrangère à la famille. Beaucoup pourront se reconnaître dans ce livre.¹⁸¹

Pivot suggests that Slimani's novel differs from what is traditionally celebrated by the Goncourt, both in terms of theme and style. He foregrounds the novel as being universal in its appeal to different audiences because it deals with notions of the everyday. Indeed, Ben Jelloun and Pivot seem to imply that Slimani's treatment of the 'everyday', rather than appearing to engage with 'politics', is part of her cultural appeal in the French literary sphere. It is worth noting that, contrary to Ben Jelloun's and Pivot's suggestion, portrayals of the everyday can be intensely political, for example when seen through a feminist gaze. Annie Ernaux's work would be one example of this, but it can also be seen within Slimani's own writing.¹⁸² Although Ben Jelloun and Pivot locate Slimani as universal, they hold her in tension between notions of proximity (sameness) and distance (difference).

As Nina Wardleworth highlights, Ben Jelloun, an accepted part of the Parisian intelligentsia, has been awarded several literary prizes including the Prix Goncourt (1987) for *La nuit sacrée* and is known for his outspoken stance on issues such as racism, Islamophobia, and immigrant rights in the French press.¹⁸³ Moreover, Patrick Crowley demonstrates how the

¹⁸¹ Laurent de Saint Perier, 'Leïla Slimani : une « Chanson douce » qui fait du bruit', *Jeune Afrique*, 07 November 2016 <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/371873/culture/leila-slimani-chanson-douce-bruit/>> [accessed 11 March 2024].

¹⁸² See Diana Holmes, 'Everyday Adventures: Annie Ernaux, Colette and Popular Culture in the Feminine', *Nottingham French Studies*, 48. 2 (2009), 15-29 <<https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2009-2.004>>; Lyn Thomas, 'Voix Blanche? Annie Ernaux, French Feminisms and the Challenge of Intersectionality', in *Making Waves: French Feminisms and their Legacies 1975-2015*, ed. by Margaret Attack, Alison S. Fell, Diana Holmes, and Imogen Long (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 201-14; McIlvanney, 'Working through maternal ambivalence' and Rogers, 'Deviant Care.'

¹⁸³ Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrébin', p. 142.

commercial stakes are high for contenders of the top literary prizes in France.¹⁸⁴ Gisèle Sapiro shows that winners of the Goncourt can expect to sell a minimum of 100,000 copies, whilst most winners sell many more.¹⁸⁵ Sapiro maintains that publishers have developed ‘more and more sophisticated and costly strategies of launching books [...] along with means of controlling the intermediaries: publicity in the media, close relations with the critics and the members of literary juries, representation of their houses in the juries.’¹⁸⁶ Crowley argues that the consecration process has become increasingly dependent on a writer’s presence in visual media promoting their books, in addition to their self-image as ‘author.’ Thus, prizewinning books catch the attention of librarians and translators outside of France.¹⁸⁷ Importantly, Crowley notes that the big publishing houses in Paris have dominated the list of winners since the beginning of the twentieth century.¹⁸⁸ For example, by 2023, thirty-eight authors from Éditions Gallimard had won the Goncourt. It is notable that prior to the 2012 Goncourt announcement, an article was published in *Le Monde* stating that the selection panel had been reformed under Bernard Pivot and the focus now was the quality of the book, rather than a publisher’s ‘identity.’¹⁸⁹

Returning to the relationship between how Slimani positions herself versus how various audiences position her, publishing houses like Gallimard carry a significant literary and cultural weight. Both *Dans le jardin de l’ogre* and *Chanson douce* were published by Gallimard (as well as the first two volumes of Slimani’s proposed trilogy on Moroccan national history *Le pays des autres : la guerre, la guerre, la guerre* [2020] and *Regardez-nous danser* [2022]). Before publishing *Dans le jardin de l’ogre*, Slimani participated in writing workshops at Gallimard after initial manuscripts for a novel were rejected by Éditions Seuil:

[...] la première fois que j’ai poussé la porte de chez Gallimard, c’était pour assister à un atelier d’écriture animé par mon actuel éditeur, Jean-Marie Laclaventine. [...] Quand vous êtes dans une posture qui est celle de l’apprenant face à celui qui vous apprend –

¹⁸⁴ Patrick Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today: Markets, Centres, Peripheries, Transition’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 50. 3 (2013), 411-24 (p. 421) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2013.30>>.

¹⁸⁵ Gisèle Sapiro, ‘The literary field between the state and the market’, *Poetics*, 31. 5 (2003), 441-64 (p. 451) <<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2003.09.001>>.

¹⁸⁶ Sapiro, ‘The literary field’, p. 451.

¹⁸⁷ Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 421.

¹⁸⁸ Crowley, ‘Literatures in French Today’, p. 421.

¹⁸⁹ Raphaëlle Bacqué, ‘Goncourt : avec les autofélicitations du jury’, *Le Monde*, 06 November 2012 <https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2012/11/06/goncourt-avec-les-autofelicitations-du-jury_1786379_3260.html> [accessed 12 April 2024].

là, en l'occurrence, Jean-Marie Laclaventine –, finalement cela vous revigore, vous redonne de la force parce que vous vous êtes mis dans cette posture de modestie.¹⁹⁰

This suggests that Slimani has a close relationship with Gallimard and her editor, evidenced by the fact that she has released several books with the publisher. Alluding to the relationship between editor and writer as a hierarchical exchange of knowledge and expertise, Slimani implies that Laclaventine holds a certain status and importance in the French fields of literary production.

However, although Slimani indicates working with Laclaventine before submitting her first manuscript to Gallimard, in an interview with *TelQuel* when asked whether Ben Jelloun acted as Slimani's mentor to help her get a foot in the door at the publisher, Slimani expressed that

Je suis entrée chez Gallimard par moi-même, en envoyant mon manuscrit. Mais il est vrai que Tahar m'a immédiatement manifesté son soutien et son intérêt. Il m'a donné des conseils très précieux, que je n'oublierai pas. Je l'avais interviewé plusieurs fois lorsque j'étais à Jeune Afrique. Notre considération mutuelle est devenue une amitié. [...] Il a toujours été d'une très grande générosité avec moi, et ce n'est pas anodin dans nos métiers. C'est quelqu'un de très important pour moi.¹⁹¹

Although Slimani stresses that being published by Gallimard was of her own doing, she highlights the importance of Ben Jelloun's support personally and professionally. In this way, Slimani had the personal and professional endorsement of key figures in the Parisian literary elite (through Ben Jelloun, Pivot, and Laclaventine) from the very beginning of her career. This suggests that, to some extent, their input and support have influenced Slimani's writing and, by extension, her authorial (self-)fashioning.

Moreover, in the context of how Slimani publicly engages with identity-based questions, following the publication of *Chanson douce*, she expressed an early desire to establish herself within a French literary tradition, which appeared culturally and geographically centred on Paris and its recognisable literary canon:

¹⁹⁰ Slimani, *Comment j'écris*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁹¹ Leïla Slimani quoted in Thomas Savage, 'Leïla Slimani: "Je suis entrée chez Gallimard par moi-même"', *TelQuel*, 03 November 2016 <https://telquel.ma/2016/11/03/leila-slimani-suis-entree-chez-gallimard-meme_1521973> [accessed 14 June 2024].

J'ai connu Paris par la littérature. Ma rencontre avec Paris, c'est une rencontre qui s'est faite par Balzac, par Zola, par Maupassant [...]. Chaque quartier était lié à la littérature. Donc, moi-même, quand j'écris sur Paris, j'ai envie de m'inscrire dans cette ligne parce que je trouve extraordinaire le fait que Paris soit une ville totalement habitée par le roman. [...] Je sais que les lecteurs aussi – parisiens ou non, d'ailleurs – sont sensibles à cette inscription.¹⁹²

Slimani references well-established and renowned writers of the French literary canon, touching on the idea that these authors are universally acknowledged and celebrated by readers in Paris and beyond. This suggests that, to some extent, Slimani anticipates the expectations of her readership, who, in this case, appear located in a Hexagonally-orientated, French literary and cultural context. By referencing readers outside of Paris who are culturally aligned with those who are Parisian, Slimani alludes to a universal reader experience of the literary tradition in which she aims to establish herself. However, this universal experience seems anchored in a cultural location specific to France, which, in turn, carries certain perceptions and expectations.

Alongside stating an explicit desire to be identified within a French literary tradition, Slimani's institutional ties with Laclaventine and Gallimard indicate a connection between how she perceives audience expectations and publicly engages with identity. This is significant in the context of Slimani rejecting notions of a fixed positionality elsewhere. Discussions around contemporary expressions of French Universalist ideology help to understand the implications of certain factions of the Parisian literary elite framing Slimani's early fictional work in non-identitarian or universal terms. Since the publication of *Dans le jardin de l'ogre*, Slimani has ceaselessly defended a claim for intellectual autonomy over any ethnic and/or national attachments. To a certain extent, this appears to be a refusal of positionality regarding the perception and politicisation of autobiographical identity. For example, she states, 'when I write I'm not a woman, I'm not a Muslim, I'm not a Moroccan. I can reinvent myself and I can reinvent the world.'¹⁹³ This refusal implies that Slimani consciously attempts to (dis)locate herself outside of a fixed positionality in intersecting transnational fields of literary production.

¹⁹² Slimani, *Comment j'écris*, pp. 19-20.

¹⁹³ Leïla Slimani quoted in Lisa Allardice, 'Leïla Slimani on her shocking bestseller, *Lullaby*: "Who can really say they know their nanny?"', *The Guardian*, 26 January 2018
<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/jan/26/leila-slimani-lullaby-interview#:~:text=Lullaby%20might%20begin%20with%20the,through%20every%20working%20parent's%20heart.>> [accessed 12 Marcy 2024].

Similarly, in 2019 in an interview with a New York news outlet (*Gothamist*), Slimani declared that ‘I don’t believe in race. [...] In France we never use this word. [...] You have a nationality, or you have maybe an ethnicity, an identity, but I don’t like this word [race].’¹⁹⁴ In a similar fashion, Slimani has since repeatedly defended a *féminisme universaliste* elsewhere in her writing, outwardly stating that:

J’ai cédé longtemps à l’idée que vouloir imposer mes vues relevait d’une certaine condescendance. Aujourd’hui, je pense que seule importe la légitimité de ce que je défends. Je m’appuie sur des valeurs universelles et je réfute absolument l’idée que l’identité, la religion ou quelque héritage historique que ce soit dépossèdent des individus de droits qui sont universels et inaliénables.¹⁹⁵

Given this declaration arrives four years after the publication of *Chanson douce*, Slimani indicates previously feeling compelled to meet her audience’s expectations and reluctant to assert her universalist beliefs. It is unclear what period Slimani refers to and whether this relates to publishing her early fictional work. However, it suggests that Slimani shifts how she publicly engages with identity-based questions depending on the transnational context. This is perhaps due to feeling less pressure as a successful novelist.

Universalism occupies a central place in contemporary French Republican ideology. Somewhat echoing Slimani’s universalist declaration above, Emmanuel Macron stated in a 2021 interview for *Elle*,

je suis du côté universaliste. Je ne me reconnais pas dans un combat qui renvoie chacun à son identité ou son particularisme, les difficultés sociales ne sont pas uniquement structurées par le genre et par la couleur de peau, mais aussi par l’inégalité sociale, l’assignation à résidence éducative entre autres.¹⁹⁶

Critics such as Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang warn how adhering to universalist assumptions, as per Macron’s publication declaration, centres whiteness. For example, by analysing universalist manifestations of Enlightenment and antiracist thought, they argue that

¹⁹⁴ Rebecca Carroll, ‘REBEL: Author Leïla Slimani Explains Why She Doesn’t Like The Word “Race”’, *Gothamist*, 27 February 2019 <<https://gothamist.com/arts-entertainment/rebel-author-leila-slimani-explains-why-she-doesnt-like-the-word-race>> [accessed 25 March 2024].

¹⁹⁵ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 167-68.

¹⁹⁶ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p.167; Anon., ‘Emmanuel Macron s’inquiète d’une “société qui se racialise”’, *Franceinfo*, 01 July 2021 <https://www.francetvinfo.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron/emmanuel-macron-s-inquiete-d-une-societe-qui-se-racialise_4685569.html> [accessed 06 October 2023].

De tous les empires européens de l'ère moderne, aucun n'a plus que la France occulté la sauvagerie coloniale derrière le voile de sa mission « civilisatrice » : l'universalisme classique est à la fois une fausse monnaie et un instrument de conquête, l'arme du crime et la rivière où on la jette. Des colonies aux outre-mers et aux banlieues, l'universel et l'ordre républicain sont les noms politiquement corrects du contrôle social et de la domination. La raison pseudo-universaliste n'est autre que la raison coloniale : elle n'est pas l'universalisme comme projet pour l'humanité, mais une idéologie de l'universel au service de la supériorité européenne.¹⁹⁷

Suaudeau and Niang's 'la raison pseudo-universaliste' describes the widespread performative adoption of contemporary universalism across French society, which is deeply rooted in the civilising mission of colonial ideology. Characterised by an alarmist and declinist rhetoric, this pseudo-universalism splits the world into two categories:

Côté universaliste, les garants de l'unité et de l'indivisibilité de la République, esprits sages éclairés par les immortels rayons des Lumières ; côté obscur, un ramassis de profiteurs, d'irresponsables et de manipulés qui fracturent la communauté nationale en important en France des thématiques et des concepts jugés totalement étrangers à [l'histoire française].¹⁹⁸

As Assa Traoré expresses: 'Aux États-Unis, on parle de système racial; en France, on parle uniquement de social, on masque.'¹⁹⁹ Despite this apparent focus on social identity in the French sphere, as previously mentioned, it seems as though insufficient attention has been given to Slimani's bourgeois background, particularly following the publication of her early fictional work.²⁰⁰

Nonetheless, an example of French-Republican blindness to discrimination can be seen in the extraordinary case that Niang was involved with, namely the racist fresco by Hervé Di Rosa (1991) hanging in the Assemblée Nationale 'commemorating' the 1794 abolition of slavery. Attending the Assemblée Nationale in 2018 to present her documentary, *Mariannes Noires*, to members of the French parliament, Niang was struck by the fresco displayed in the

¹⁹⁷ Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang, *Universalisme* (Paris: Éditions Anamosa, 2022), p. 18.

¹⁹⁸ Suaudeau and Niang, *Universalisme*, pp. 15-16.

¹⁹⁹ Angela Davis and Assa Traoré, 'Angela Davis et Assa Traoré: regards croisés', *Ballast*, 27 May 2020 <<https://www.revue-ballast.fr/angela-davis-et-assa-traore-regards-croises/>> [accessed 15 April 2024].

²⁰⁰ As mentioned on pp. 6-7, it is only latterly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic that Slimani's connection to class seems to have been publicly criticised in France.

Palais Bourbon.²⁰¹ It presents the caricature of two human heads with black skin and exaggerated red lips. The heads are looking at a chain breaking between them, extending from their necks.²⁰² The panel is part of Di Rosa's mural series depicting key moments in French legislative history. In 2019, Niang co-wrote an op-ed asking the Assemblée Nationale whether the fresco, depicting 'une imagerie hésitant entre Banania et « Tintin au Congo »' and reducing 'les Noirs à une vision humiliante et déshumanisante', represented an appropriate way of collectively commemorating the first abolition of slavery in 1794.²⁰³ They petitioned to have the fresco removed given its perpetuation of racist stereotypes and its misleading historical portrayal of abolition.²⁰⁴ Di Rosa defended his work in the media, arguing that removing the mural was an act of censorship.²⁰⁵ This reaction was echoed by his supporters, particularly in media outlets like *Le Figaro*, who claimed that critics did not understand Di Rosa's aesthetic.²⁰⁶

Niang highlighted the intense reactions sparked by their intervention:

We meant to open a debate on the subject; beyond the object, what does this say about the memory of slavery in France? But the debate was impossible. In the aftermath, close to 300 articles were published on the topic, and of those maybe two tried to understand the debate we were trying to raise.²⁰⁷

²⁰¹ Mame-Fatou Niang, 'De la particularité française de la négrophobie', in *Racismes de France*, ed. by Omar Slaouti and Olivier Le Cour Grandmaison (Paris: La Découverte, 2020), pp. 151-69.

²⁰² For the image, see Lauren Collins, 'The Campaign to Remove a Shocking Painting from the French National Assembly', *The New Yorker*, 12 April 2019 <<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-campaign-to-remove-a-shocking-painting-from-the-french-national-assembly>> [accessed 29 April 2024].

²⁰³ Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang, '« Banalisation du racisme à l'Assemblée nationale : ouvrons les yeux »', *Le Nouvel Obs*, 04 April 2019 <<https://www.nouvelobs.com/bibliobs/20190404.OBS11119/banalisation-du-racisme-au-c-ur-de-la-republique-ouvrons-les-yeux.html>> [accessed 15 April 2024].

²⁰⁴ Clara Robert-Motta, 'Une pétition demande le retrait d'une toile qui "banalise le racisme" à l'Assemblée nationale', *Les Inrockuptibles*, 08 April 2019 <<https://www.lesinrocks.com/actu/une-petition-demande-le-retrait-dune-toile-qui-banalise-le-racisme-lassemblee-nationale-146187-08-04-2019/>> [accessed 29 April 2024]. For the petition, see Julien Suaudeau and Mame-Fatou Niang, 'Le racisme n'a pas sa place sur les murs de l'Assemblée nationale', *Change.org*, 03 April 2019 <https://www.change.org/p/le-racisme-n-a-pas-sa-place-sur-les-murs-de-l-assembl%C3%A9e-nationale?recruiter=830576914&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copypink&utm_campaign=share_petition> [accessed 29 April 2024].

²⁰⁵ Emmanuelle Jardonnet, 'Taxé de racisme, l'artiste Hervé Di Rosa dénonce des « censeurs »', *Le Monde*, 08 April 2019 <https://www.lemonde.fr/culture/article/2019/04/08/taxe-de-racisme-herve-di-rosa-denonce-des-censeurs_5447314_3246.html#:~:text=%C2%AB%20Quelle%20que%20soit%20leur%20couleur,%C3%A0%20un%20simple%20code%20formel%20%C2%BB.>> [accessed 29 April 2024].

²⁰⁶ Thomas Hermans, 'Pétition contre une fresque célébrant l'abolition de l'esclavage à l'Assemblée nationale', *Le Figaro*, 09 April 2019 <<https://www.lefigaro.fr/arts-expositions/petition-contre-une-fresque-celebrant-l-abolition-de-l-esclavage-a-l-assemblee-nationale-20190409>> [accessed 29 April 2024].

²⁰⁷ Grégory Pierrot, 'Facing France's Ghosts: A Conversation with Mame-Fatou Niang', *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 19 July 2021 <<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/facing-frances-ghosts-a-conversation-with-mame-fatou-niang/>> [accessed 15 April 2024].

Not only does this demonstrate the extent to which colour-blind universalist ideology is part of mainstream political ideology in France, but the explosive nature of the debate also highlights the political and cultural value of engaging (explicitly or not) with such questions, given their presence in contemporary debates across French society.²⁰⁸

Regarding the implications of this ideological underpinning for Slimani's public engagement with identity-based questions, the bio-blurb to *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* states: 'Leïla Slimani est née en 1981, elle vit à Paris. *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* est son premier roman.'²⁰⁹ Slimani has previously mentioned that her name unmistakably locates her as someone of Maghrebi heritage.²¹⁰ Yet, this brief bio makes no mention of her connection to Morocco and focuses on 'fashioning her as a dyed-in-the-wool Parisian.'²¹¹ It is worth flagging that Slimani has chosen to publish under her own name, that is there are cases where authors have adopted a pseudonym such as Nedjma.²¹²

Returning to *Chanson douce*, Howell argues that although 'Slimani is of Moroccan origin, neither she nor her publishers have capitalised on her ethnicity.'²¹³ However, in comparison, the English-language editions of *Chanson douce* reference her Moroccan nationality as well as her maternal status, stating in an expanded bio: 'the first Moroccan (and pregnant) woman to win France's most prestigious literary prize.'²¹⁴ This suggests that Slimani and her publishers are aware of the changing perceptions around ethnicity, nationality, and authorial identity in different transnational contexts, shifting their presentation accordingly.

²⁰⁸ It is worth noting that the continued official refusal to use ethnic criteria to measure and address discrimination in France would be another case in point here.

²⁰⁹ Leïla Slimani, *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014), p. 7. The paperback edition of the novel – which typically comes out a year or two later – only shifts to add details about Slimani's other publications including *Chanson douce*, *Sexe et mensonges*, and *Paroles d'honneur*.

²¹⁰ Leïla Slimani quoted in Sophie Pujas, 'Leïla Slimani.'

²¹¹ yasser elhariry, 'Hyphens and Hymens: francoarab Literature of the Maghreb', in *A Companion to African Literatures*, ed. by Olakunle George (New Jersey: John Wiley and Sons, 2021), pp. 133-49 (p. 138).

²¹² Moroccan writer 'Nedjma' published her first novel, *L'amande*, in France in 2004. The novel recounts the story of Badra, a young Moroccan woman who escapes an arranged marriage to live with her aunt in Tangier and who begins to explore her sexuality. Nedjma has since published several works with the most recent, *Les coquelicots*, published in 2023. Remaining anonymous, she defines herself as the 'première musulmane à écrire des romans érotiques' and consequently '[elle] vi[t] dans la peur de la fatwa.' See Grégoire Leménager, "'Première musulmane à écrire des romans érotiques, je vis dans la peur de la fatwa'", *Le Nouvel Obs*, 17 March 2015 <<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/romans/20150317.OBS4785/premiere-musulmane-a-ecrire-des-romans-erotiques-je-vis-dans-la-peur-de-la-fatwa.html>> [accessed 30 April 2024] and INA Arditube, *Interview Nedjma "L'amande"* – Archive INA, Youtube, 16 June 2014, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lpdu4ic8Xh0>> [accessed 30 April 2024].

²¹³ Howell, 'Chanson douce', p. 302.

²¹⁴ Leïla Slimani, *Lullaby*, trans. Sam Taylor (London: Faber & Faber, 2018) and Slimani, *The Perfect Nanny*, trans. Sam Taylor (New York: Penguin, 2018).

Although, in the French colour-blind context, this awareness of ethnic ‘difference’ appears to be present still, albeit not directly named.

The issue of indirect naming also speaks to implicit processes of othering accompanying Slimani’s involvement and recognition in French political discursive spheres (as well as the ‘strictly’ literary). When socialist politician Manuel Valls declared his candidacy for the French presidency in 2016, he stated

L’esprit français, c’est la culture, la création, notre magnifique exception, notre patrimoine, nos paysages, notre créativité, la French Tech reconnue sur tous les continents, mais aussi notre langue, le français : celui de Rabelais, d’Hugo, de Camus, de Césaire, de Beauvoir, de Patrick Modiano ou Leïla Slimani.²¹⁵

Valls capitalises on Slimani’s quick rise to fame in the French literary world and evokes a literary precedent, placing her among some of the most well-known and celebrated figures of literature in French. Highlighting how the French language is spoken across the world, Valls suggests that the geographical reach of French goes together with a singular French culture and heritage, intrinsically related to creativity, creation, and language, of which Slimani is a part. This image of French culture is presented as exceptional and superior, evoking notions of geographical expansion moving outwards from France.

Slimani’s endorsement by the political elite continued in 2017 when she was appointed the official representative of *la francophonie* by President Emmanuel Macron.²¹⁶ According to an unnamed advisor, Slimani was offered the role because ‘[elle] incarne le visage de la francophonie ouverte sur un monde pluriculturel. Et c’est une femme engagée. Elle fait partie d’une nouvelle génération que le président veut faire émerger.’²¹⁷ It appears that the French state (as represented here by Valls and Macron) present Slimani’s cultural (and political) value as directly related to her literary success in France. In turn, Slimani is presented as having a particular connection to the French language, and by extension, a proximity to French culture. Yet, this proximity appears contingent on how Slimani is perceived to be different – likely as

²¹⁵ Freddy Mulongo, ‘Evry : Manuel Valls déclare sa candidature à la présidentielle !’, *Le Club de Mediapart*, 06 December 2016 <<https://blogs.mediapart.fr/freddy-mulongo/blog/061216/evry-manuel-valls-declare-sa-candidature-la-presidentielle>> [accessed 21 March 2024].

²¹⁶ Ava Djamshidi, ‘Emmanuel Macron nomme l’écrivaine Leïla Slimani à la Francophonie’, *Le Parisien*, 06 November 2017 <<https://www.leparisien.fr/politique/emmanuel-macron-nomme-l-ecrivaine-leila-slimani-a-la-francophonie-06-11-2017-7374876.php>> [accessed 13 March 2024].

²¹⁷ Djamshidi, ‘Emmanuel Macron.’

a Franco-Moroccan woman – and her willingness to intervene publicly in certain transnational, cultural, and political discursive spheres.

In terms of the politicisation of culture and language, particularly in the context of *la francophonie* and French Republicanism, Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury illustrate how the French language plays a key role in perceptions and definitions of the French nation.²¹⁸ Given that French operates as a global language across the world (in Quebec and French Guiana in the Americas, across North, West, and central Africa, as well as in Asia, the Pacific and the Indian Ocean, and the Middle East), *la francophonie* has come to describe this ‘wider French-speaking space in which the French language coexists [...] with multiple other forms of expression, ranging from national and regional languages (including many Creoles) to diverse dialects.’²¹⁹ Forsdick and Launchbury maintain that for the French state, *la francophonie* and its associated institutions (such as the *Académie française*, *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* [OIF], and the *Institut français*) aim to preserve the transnational reach of French, particularly against the hegemony of English. Within this context, *la francophonie* has come to suggest a certain *diversité culturelle*, simultaneously maintaining the idea that French holds a monolingual status as a world language.²²⁰ Although, as Forsdick and Launchbury argue, in both a national and a domestic context, it is becoming increasingly clear that the linguistic centre cannot be maintained, particularly given that this centre ‘has arguably never been more than an ideological manifestation of the ethnolinguistic nationalism that emerged most notably in the wake of the French revolution.’²²¹

This tension between sameness and difference is seemingly uncritically evidenced on the official webpage of the OIF, which states that ‘le principal vecteur de la Francophonie’ is ‘la langue française, dans la diversité de ses expressions et des cultures qu’elle porte.’²²² Forsdick notes a similar conflict within the ‘oxymoronic pairing’ of the relationship between

²¹⁸ Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies: An Introduction’ in *Transnational French Studies*, ed. by Charles Forsdick and Claire Launchbury (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2023), pp. 1-31.

²¹⁹ Forsdick and Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies’, pp. 12-13.

²²⁰ However, as Forsdick and Launchbury highlight, it is worth noting that being associated with the French-speaking world can act as a form of resistance to the dominating prevalence of the English language, particularly in contexts where English has been historically imposed on populations. They cite the example of the OIF approving the Republic of Ireland’s application to become an observer member of the organisation in 2018. Forsdick and Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies’, p. 13.

²²¹ Forsdick and Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies’, p. 13.

²²² Anon., ‘Une histoire de la francophonie’, *Organisation Internationale de la Francophonie* <<https://www.francophonie.org/une-histoire-de-la-francophonie-23>> [accessed 18 March 2024].

the ‘French’ and the ‘Francophone’, which is often understood as demarcating the ‘metropolitan’ and ‘non-metropolitan.’²²³ This pairing simultaneously

conceals a series of assumptions about linguistic normativity, national cultures, and the persistence of centre-periphery relationships in the postcolonial world. Highly ambivalent in this pairing is the little remarked conjunction “and”, linking “French” and “Francophone”, the status of which – either conjunctive or disjunctive – remains unclear, and which as a result potentially plays the role of either barrier or bridge.²²⁴

Concerning the implications of labelling certain literatures and writers within dichotomic, hierarchical, neocolonial structures, since the 1990s, scholars have paid extensive critical attention to the meaning and significance of the distinction between ‘Francophone’ and ‘French’ in terms of fields of study, exploring the implications of monocultural visions of French language, literature, and culture.²²⁵ Jacques Coursil and Delphine Perret have argued that the label ‘Francophone’ is more likely to be applied to the literature coming from the countries formerly colonised by France, than the literature coming from France’s neighbouring French-speaking countries. This problematically places France and Europe at the centre, establishing a distance from those perceived to be ‘Other’ by pushing them out to the periphery.²²⁶

In 2007, this sentiment was echoed in the French public arena when the literary manifesto *Pour une littérature-monde en français* was published in *Le Monde*.²²⁷ Criticising *la francophonie* throughout, forty-four writers – including Ben Jelloun, Maryse Condé, Edouard

²²³ Charles Forsdick, ‘Mobilising French Studies’, *Australian Journal of French Studies*, 51, 2/3 (2014), 250-68 (p. 261) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/AJFS.2014.20/>>.

²²⁴ Forsdick, ‘Mobilising French Studies’, p. 261.

²²⁵ This is an extensive discussion that goes beyond the scope of this thesis. See *Post/Colonial Conditions: Exiles, Migrations, Nomadisms*, ed. by Françoise Lionnet and Ronnie Scharfman, special issues of *Yale French Studies*, 82-83 (1993) and *French and Francophone: The Challenge of Expanding Horizons*, ed. by Faris Laroussi and Christopher L. Miller, special issue of *Yale French Studies*, 103 (2003). Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy suggest these examples highlight how questions of travel and mobility have been central to the desire of many French/Francophone studies academics to de-centre an understanding of French studies that exclusively faced France. See, Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy, ‘What Does *Littérature-monde* Mbeuean for French, Francophone and Postcolonial Studies’, in *Transnational French Studies: Postcolonialism and Littérature-monde*, ed. by Alec G. Hargreaves, Charles Forsdick, and David Murphy (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2010), pp. 1-11 (p. 2).

²²⁶ Jacques Coursil and Delphine Perret, ‘The Francophone Postcolonial Field’, in *Postcolonial Theory and Francophone Literary Studies*, ed. by H. Adlai Murdoch and Anne Donadey (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2005), pp. 197-207 (pp. 200-01).

²²⁷ Muriel Barbery and others, ‘Pour une “littérature-monde” en français’, *Le Monde*, 15 March 2007 <https://www.lemonde.fr/livres/article/2007/03/15/des-ecrivains-plaident-pour-un-roman-en-francais-ouvert-sur-le-monde_883572_3260.html> [accessed 15 March 2024].

Glissant, Alain Mabanckou, and Boualem Sansal – signed the manifesto calling for the decolonisation of French-language literature and seeking to liberate writing in French from its ‘pacte exclusif avec la nation.’²²⁸ In the manifesto, the writers demonstrated the tension at the core of *la francophonie*’s history which fluctuates between ‘the centralizing linguistic oneness that constitutes its *carte d’identité* and the global diversity that it purports to champion.’²²⁹

The manifesto provoked passionate scholarly debate in the form of international conferences, newspaper articles, and academic publications, either embracing or criticising these writers’ declaration of the ‘end’ of *la francophonie* and the accompanying beginning of *une littérature-monde en français*.²³⁰ Former president Nicolas Sarkozy, who, at the time, was a presidential candidate for the upcoming elections, weighed in on the debate, declaring that ‘la francophonie n’est pas morte.’²³¹ Calling for a celebration of ‘une francophonie vivante et populaire’, Sarkozy positioned *la francophonie* solely as a way ‘pour la langue française de tenir tête à l’anglais sans complexe.’²³² Acting as ‘a Trojan horse for French hegemony’, Sarkozy’s celebration was ‘couched in a nationalist rhetoric that stresse[d] the intact prestige of France.’²³³ Starace highlights how Sarkozy’s attempt to exploit the increasing debate about *la francophonie* represents the extent to which politics can instrumentalise literature, particularly within postcolonial contexts.²³⁴ This example of the political nature of *la francophonie* – both in application and understanding of the concept –arguably serves to demonstrate how the value judgements placed on ‘French’ and ‘Francophone’ as diametrically opposed labels are conceptualised, politicised, and capitalised on within the context of nationalism, othering, and perceived proximity to ‘Frenchness.’

The news of Slimani’s appointment as *représentante personnelle d’Emmanuel Macron pour la Francophonie* was criticised by Franco-Congolese writer Alain Mabanckou who

²²⁸ Barbery, ‘Pour une “littérature-monde.”’ Forsdick and Launchbury show how, despite its intentions, the manifesto perpetuated certain franco-centric biases by highlighting the significance of Parisian publishers and the well-established culture of literary prizes in France. They argue that the landscape of French literature is more complex than the signatories alluded to, maintaining that new publishing industries are appearing in former French colonies and that literature in French has experienced the growing effects of multilingualism, which has consequently continued to develop innovative translingual responses. See Forsdick and Launchbury, ‘Transnationalizing French Studies’, p. 18.

²²⁹ Migraine-George, *From Francophonie to World Literature in French*, p. xxxii.

²³⁰ Migraine-George, *From Francophonie to World Literature in French*, p. ix.

²³¹ Nicolas Sarkozy, ‘Pour une francophonie vivante et populaire’, *Le Figaro*, 22 March 2007 <https://www.lefigaro.fr/debats/2007/03/22/01005-20070322ARTFIG90021-pour_une_francophonie_vivante_et_populaire.php> [accessed 18 March 2024].

²³² Sarkozy, ‘Pour une francophonie vivante et populaire.’

²³³ Migraine-George, *From Francophonie to World Literature in French*, p. xxxii.

²³⁴ Starace, ‘Leïla Slimani’s *Chanson douce*’, p. 163.

maintained that ‘la Francophonie est malheureusement encore perçue comme la continuation de la politique étrangère de la France dans ses anciennes colonies.’²³⁵ Confronted with Mabanckou’s statement during an interview on *France Culture* in 2018, Slimani declared that ‘il a totalement raison, je pense [...] qu’il met le doigt sur quelque chose qui est essentiel, c’est-à-dire sur la valorisation de la diversité, il faut pas penser la francophonie comme une espèce de chose où la France serait au centre [...]’.²³⁶ Aware of the polemical potential of publicly aligning oneself with the question of *la francophonie*, Slimani has continued to echo this sentiment when asked about her involvement with Macron. In a interview with *France Culture* in 2019, Slimani, whom the interviewer referred to as ‘notre Madame francophonie’, was confronted with the question of what ‘la France veut faire de la francophonie.’²³⁷ In response, Slimani insisted that ‘[la France] n’est pas le centre et la centralité de la francophonie’, rejecting a (neo)colonial centre-periphery model which places France at its centre and the empire of *la francophonie* at the margins.²³⁸ In 2022, Slimani continued to maintain this position:

Dès le départ, nous nous sommes mis d’accord avec le président de la République autour de l’idée de transformer l’image de la Francophonie, qui ne se cantonnerait pas à l’aspect institutionnel ou à l’expédition des affaires courantes. Notre vision était celle d’une Francophonie transversale et moderne, qui ne place plus la France au centre et les autres pays à la périphérie, mais traite chacun en égal. La langue française n’est pas figée, elle est parlée sur des territoires très divers, elle se créolise, et c’est ce qui la rend riche.²³⁹

²³⁵ Alain Mabanckou, ‘Francophonie, langue française : lettre ouverte à Emmanuel Macron’, *Le Nouvel Obs*, 15 January 2018 <<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/actualites/20180115.OBS0631/francophonie-langue-francaise-lettre-ouverte-a-emmanuel-macron.html>> [accessed 18 March 2024]. Mabanckou also published an article with Achille Mbembe which gave an outline of the history of *la francophonie*, arguing that the term’s origins were inherently ideological, and its historical objective was nothing more than ‘l’utilisation de la langue coloniale dans le but d’imposer la loi d’un pouvoir sans autorité à des peuples vaincus militairement.’ See Alain Mabanckou and Achille Mbembe, ‘Le français, notre bien commun ?’, *Le Nouvel Obs*, 12 February 2018 <<https://bibliobs.nouvelobs.com/idees/20180211.OBS2020/le-francais-notre-bien-commun-par-alain-mabanckou-et-achille-mbembe.html>> [accessed 18 March 2024].

²³⁶ Slimani quoted in Guillaume Erner, ‘Leïla Slimani : Un nouvel horizon pour la francophonie ?’, *L’invité des Matins*, Radio France, 15 February 2018, <<https://www.radiofrance.fr/franceculture/podcasts/l-invite-des-matins/leila-slimani-un-nouvel-horizon-pour-la-francophonie-7342047>> [accessed 19 March 2024].

²³⁷ Slimani quoted in Olivia Gesbert, ‘Leïla Slimani : Dans “Chanson douce”, je voulais montrer que l’espace domestique est politique’, *France Culture*, 15 March 2019, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d9HPhESrQw8>> [accessed 19 March 2024].

²³⁸ Gesbert, ‘Leïla Slimani.’

²³⁹ Leïla Slimani quoted in Soufiane Khabbachi, ‘Leïla Slimani : « Je veux être à la hauteur de la vision que mon père avait du Maroc »’, *Jeune Afrique* 08 March 2022 <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/1319079/politique/leila-slimani-je-veux-etre-a-la-hauteur-de-la-vision-que-mon-pere-avait-du-maroc/>> [accessed 17 March 2022].

Slimani made this statement five years after being appointed Macron's *représentante*, appearing to call for a freer, more open understanding and application of *la francophonie* centred on the notion of equality. Adina Stroia maintains that Slimani 'se méfie de ce terme [la francophonie] qui est à tour de rôle limitant et claustrophobe, et qui empêcherait, à rebours des objectifs qu'elle poursuit, une véritable ouverture sur le monde.'²⁴⁰ Once again, this seems to indicate the extent to which Slimani is aware of the polemical nature of publicly engaging with *la francophonie* and the francophone question both conceptually and in practice, as she attempts to justify her involvement over time.

In terms of publicly demonstrating proximity to the French state and its associated cultural institutions, Slimani has continued to make international appearances within the role. In March 2021, Slimani was the face of the *Semaine de la langue française et de la francophonie* and the following year made appearances as part of 'Le mois de la Francophonie' at the *Institut Français de Londres*.²⁴¹ Starace argues that Slimani's involvement with *la francophonie* under Macron's government appears to be rooted in the same ideology underpinning Sarkozy's intervention in 2007 and places Slimani at the heart of a new discourse on French culture and its relationship to its colonial history.²⁴² Slimani's engagement with debates about France and its relationship to *la francophonie* appear to be complicated by the fact that her literary success has been capitalised on by the French state. A tension between proximity and distance to the French cultural and political mainstream emerges in how Slimani has intervened in transnational spheres following her Goncourt success. Indeed, the proximity appears to encourage implicit/indirect othering where perceptions about Slimani's 'difference' are not directly named but are very much present in the value judgements placed on her work, and how her post-Goncourt involvement in certain French cultural and political spheres is positively assessed and promoted.

Therefore, how Slimani is framed by the cultural and literary Parisian centre and its associated French political institutions arguably reflects the broader context of French colour-blind universalist ideology, influencing her *becoming* literary celebrity. This implies that, for writers like Slimani intervening in the French field of cultural production and its associated

²⁴⁰ Adina Stroia, 'Faire rêver le monde avec Leïla Slimani (entretien)', *Francosphères*, 12. 2 (2023), 177-90 (p. 179) <<https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2023.13>>.

²⁴¹ See Anon., 'Leïla Slimani, marraine de la Semaine de la langue française et de la francophonie', *Gouvernement de la République française*, 02 March 2021 <<https://tinyurl.com/6ezjcy4>> [accessed 13 March 2024] and Stroia, 'Faire rêver le monde.'

²⁴² Starance, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*', p. 164.

transnational spheres, there is a political and cultural value in engaging with debates relating to neo-colonial histories and national identity, notably in a way that upholds the ideological foundations of the French state (whether directly or indirectly). This value, and its associated cultural capital, is related to the perceptions, expectations, and constraints associated with producing literature in transnational fields of literary production. In other words, Slimani appears to be implicated in a process of naming through not naming – of implicit or indirect othering –, which holds symbolic and cultural capital in France. As Slimani appears to other and is othered herself, certain readerships are implicated in this process whose expectations are framed by the same contemporary, normative, universalist, anti-identitarian French Republican ideology. This highlights the potential to constrain Slimani's agency as she negotiates the tensions between positionality and visibility in transnational French cultural and literary spheres.

Conclusion: Slimani's authorial (self-)fashioning after *Chanson douce*

In conclusion, this chapter maintains that Slimani is a celebrity writer in France and beyond. In Slimani's case, the performative process of *becoming* literary celebrity demonstrates the extent to which her authorial (self-)fashioning appears inherent to, and dependent on, the various cultural and political spheres she moves in and across, however contradictory they may seem. This also extends to how the number and shape of these spheres can shift over time. The reactions to Slimani's early fictional work, especially in Hexagonally-facing Francophone and Anglophone media and academic discourses, suggest there is a tendency in these spheres to locate Slimani as 'foreign' to France, solely because of perceptions about her ethnic, national, and gendered identity. As this chapter has shown, the extent to which discussions around *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* and *Chanson douce* focus on Slimani's positionality based on assumptions about who and what she represents across various transnational, socio-cultural spatial contexts seem to highlight how signifiers of 'Arabo-Muslim' difference are represented and debated prolifically in contemporary Franco-European politics and culture (and beyond). There is no doubt that such framings play into reductive and harmful tropes that have real-life consequences for racialised populations marginalised in countries like France. In addition, they could potentially relegate Slimani to a literary and cultural periphery.

However, this chapter demonstrates how readers' expectations interplay with the mediatization and marketing of a writer. In France, this influences the cultural value of being

perceived as a writer of North African origin or heritage. In this way, it is unhelpful to categorise Slimani as simply a ‘Moroccan’, ‘Francophone’, or ‘postcolonial’ writer/intellectual. This is not only due to the potentially problematic implications such markers hold in the French context, but also because these critical framings overlook the nuances and complexities of Slimani’s lived experience. Slimani appears to move in transnational literary and cultural spheres as a Franco-Moroccan woman of considerable social and cultural status. Therefore, this chapter argues that by locating Slimani in a peripheral position (a Moroccan critic looking towards France, either positively or not), these framings – perhaps unwittingly – play into the same cyclical processes that place cultural capital on certain representations of otherness.

As this chapter has shown, Slimani is aware of how her work is often framed in such ways and has repeatedly rejected any identitarian reading of her work and a fixed positionality. Therefore, her role as a writer and ability to fashion her authorial self must be considered. Contrary to the aforementioned discussions around Slimani’s work, in reality, the author does not seem to occupy a peripheral position to the French cultural mainstream. Although transnational, her visibility and celebrity seem firmly rooted in the Hexagon, as much within its physical boundaries as its ideological ones. This can be attributed to the fact that her international fame was physically launched from France after winning the Goncourt in 2016, but also how French cultural and political institutions have since capitalised on this success.

This chapter highlights how Slimani’s interventions on issues concerning race, gender, and nationality appear to be complicated by her involvement with Macron’s *la francophonie* and the wider French political institutions it upholds. Here, Slimani seems to engage in a balancing act between proximity and distance in the French cultural and political mainstream. The ways Slimani was received and positioned post-Goncourt, namely in French fields of literary production, imply a sellable quality is at stake when and how she engages with certain debates. This sellable quality concerns Slimani’s marketability as a celebrity writer and highlights the multifaceted nature of authorial (self-)fashioning. In Slimani’s case, multiple socio-cultural factors seem at play in creating and locating her authorial positionality following the success of her early fictional work transnationally. This context highlights how perceived notions of ‘distance’ or ‘difference’ in terms of nationality and ethnicity contribute to the transmission, acquisition, and accumulation of cultural capital in certain French cultural, literary, and political milieus. Therefore, French cultural and political institutions likely contribute to maintaining an implicit ‘distance’ surrounding Slimani’s public authorial (self-

)fashioning. This also opens the question of how much Slimani herself has contributed to this self-positioning with these institutions and audiences. This thesis argues that these contexts need to be taken into consideration to provide a more rounded assessment of Slimani's later work that goes beyond simply situating her positionality as either endorsing a 'naïve universalism', or rejecting 'a situated postcolonial epistemology.'²⁴³ Thinking about Slimani's celebrity in spatial terms arguably helps to unpick what it might mean to be Hexagonally aligned or situated, both ideologically and geographically, in transnational currents of exchange. Hence, in part, this thesis follows how Slimani's positionality has evolved since the mid-2010s.

The following chapter will follow Slimani's trajectory chronologically, looking at *Sexe et mensonges* (2017; 2021) and *Paroles d'honneur* (2017). Focusing on spatial questions of omission, as well as the issue of absence and presence through an exploratory comparison of form, it will build on ideas explored in this chapter that speak to performative processes of distancing in how Slimani curates her authorial voice in (non)fictional life narratives. It will consider how Slimani's authorial voice is pertinent to curating the life narratives, regardless of the medium they are presented in, even if she attempts to enact a performative narrative distance. In terms of authorial (self-fashioning), it will suggest that the multifaceted nature of form and narrative cannot be separated from the performative intentions behind the text(s), even if one claims to be fictional and the other not. This is particularly relevant when considering the implications of marketing a Moroccan subject to a largely French audience.

²⁴³ Starance, 'Leïla Slimani's *Chanson douce*', p. 146.

Chapter 2 - Intermedial genres: Absence, presence, and the spatiality of form in *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*

In 2017, Slimani published two works compiling interviews about women's experiences of sex and sexuality in Morocco. As previously mentioned in the introduction to this thesis, the first, *Sexe et mensonges : La vie sexuelle au Maroc*, appears as an ethnographic *essai* or *enquête* and the second, *Paroles d'honneur*, a BD. In the introduction to *Sexe et mensonges*, Slimani explains that during the Moroccan book tour for *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* in 2014, many women came to her to share their experiences regarding sex and sexuality. As a result, Slimani aimed to 'restituer [cette parole], comme le témoignage poignant d'une époque et d'une souffrance.'²⁴⁴ After the first edition was published in 2017, by 2021, Slimani had released a second edition with Les Arènes under the new title: *Sexe et mensonges : histoires vraies de la vie sexuelle des femmes au Maroc*.²⁴⁵ The text is comprised of fifteen individual accounts of (mostly) women living in Morocco.²⁴⁶ Interspersing these accounts are several mini essays by Slimani that appear to contextualise the testimonies, focusing on themes such as 'L'islam : une religion anti-sexe ?' and 'Un débat identitaire : le contre-modèle occidental.'²⁴⁷

Alongside the publication of the first edition of *Sexe et mensonges* in 2017, Slimani produced the BD *Paroles d'honneur* with visual artist Laetitia Coryn. The BD is split into three chapters ('Libérer la parole', 'Le fol été 2015', 'Le regard de l'autre'), followed by an epilogue.²⁴⁸ In the foreword to the book, Slimani seems to alert the reader to a changing degree of fictionality, depending on the form of the presented narratives:

Quand la maison d'édition Les Arènes m'ont proposé de l'adapter en roman graphique, j'ai été très enthousiaste. C'était l'occasion pour moi de raconter cette histoire comme une fiction, d'incarner mes personnages, mais aussi de donner à voir la beauté de ces femmes et de mon pays. [...] À ces femmes, anonymes, nous avons inventé des visages. Et nous les avons, je l'espère, sorties de l'ombre où on les confine trop souvent.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 21.

²⁴⁵ Other changes made to the first edition and their implications will be discussed further in this chapter.

²⁴⁶ Slimani has changed some women's names to protect their identity. In addition, two of the dedicated testimonies are given by men, as well as a discussion with film director Nabil Ayouch in the chapter 'Une société au bord de la crise de nerfs : le fol été 2015.' See Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 95.

²⁴⁷ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 145-69.

²⁴⁸ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*.

²⁴⁹ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 4.

Adaptation across genres is common such as novel to film; here *témoignage* to BD. However, as Kate Nelson notes, it is difficult to locate these works in distinct genres given that Slimani describes *Sexe et mensonges* as ‘des histoires vraies’ and *Paroles d’honneur* as ‘une fiction’ and a ‘roman graphique.’ In the framework of expanding conceptions of the archive, Nelson uses the term ‘(non)fiction archives’ to acknowledge the difficulty of classifying these works.²⁵⁰ For the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to the works in the context of investigative (graphic) (non)fiction life narratives to best account for the difficulty in locating the respective works in predefined genres. Although the texts appear to occupy blurred spaces in terms of genre and fictionality, the different forms the presented narratives take across the two mediums appear more clear-cut due to their stark visual differences. Yet, what this means for the processes of fictionalisation and adaptation remains complex. One represents a purely textual format of interview and commentary, whilst the other entwines text and hand-drawn images. This fundamental difference cannot be overlooked, however obvious or simplistic it may seem. In general terms, the main difference in the BD is that the reader ‘voices’ the story and internalises the narration.

Echoing Pierre Bourdieu’s assertion that form brings out ‘un réel plus réel’ concerning social reality and experience, Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan state that ‘form [...] is a tool to examine the sedimentation of citations that shape our access to the real.’²⁵¹ Similarly, in Annie Ernaux’s published writer’s diary, she reflects on what forms can do and how they can ‘faire sentir l’épaisseur du réel.’²⁵² This focus on forms *in* the world and how they shape political and social experience(s) is paramount to an understanding of form that goes beyond a simply (material) aesthetic object or genre more broadly. Crowley and Jordan maintain that

as the social and material world changes, new experiences require new formal solutions and form continues to be driven forwards, propelled into elasticity as authors attempt to convey something of the elusive matter of life while remaining in dialogue with tried-and-tested forms that already harbour cultural meanings.²⁵³

²⁵⁰ Nelson, ‘Deconstructing the Influences’, p. 58.

²⁵¹ Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan, ‘Introduction’ in *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th- and 21st-century French Literature and Thought*, ed. by Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 1-17 (pp. 12-13).

²⁵² Annie Ernaux, *L’Atelier noir* (Paris : Éditions des Busclats, 2011), p. 17.

²⁵³ Crowley and Jordan, ‘Introduction’, p. 6.

This suggests that literary form has a wider socio-political importance and can speak to a broader context of sense-making in the world that is not fixed; rather, it is ‘permanently taking shape, coalescing, unravelling, eroding and open to contingency.’²⁵⁴ Indeed, this relationship between aesthetic form and social form highlights the multiplicity, mobility, and instability of forms and how they interact dialogically. Considering the transformative potential of form undoubtedly raises questions about how form plays a performative role in linking text to experience, ‘or the postulation of alternatives to the real as currently or generally configured [...]’.²⁵⁵ The notion of performance can act as a reminder of why it is necessary to maintain critical vigilance when considering the form of a text, particularly when thinking about an author’s positionality and (self-)fashioning.

In the context of transforming an *essai/enquête* into a BD, the question of the performativity of adaptation is therefore pertinent. Linda Hutcheon maintains that ‘adaptations have an overt and defining relationship to prior texts, [...] [and] usually announce this relationship.’²⁵⁶ Adaptation, ‘as a creative and interpretive transposition of a recognizable other work or works’, is thus ‘a kind of extended palimpsest and, at the same time, often a transcoding into a different set of conventions.’²⁵⁷ Contemporary studies into adaptation are extensive and have been largely dominated by discussions focusing on fiction-to-film and ‘fidelity’ to the source, which go beyond the scope of this thesis.²⁵⁸ However, exploring the ever-widening range of forms of narrative adaptation, Hutcheon argues that, in the age of transmedia,

adaptational strategies demand that we show or tell stories, but in others, we interact with them. The verbal transitivity of showing and telling [has been] replaced by the prepositional engagement of the “with” that signals something as physical and kinetic as it is cognitive and emotional.²⁵⁹

This implies that the space of adaptation is a process that is both performative and interactive, and highlights how comparing the source text and the adaptation elucidates both elements, notably in the context of audience interaction. Returning to the transformative potential of form

²⁵⁴ Crowley and Jordan, ‘Introduction’, pp. 2-3.

²⁵⁵ Patrick O’Donovan, ‘Certeau’s Landscapes: What Can Images Do?’ in *What Forms Can Do: The Work of Form in 20th and 21st-century French Literature and Thought*, ed. by Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2020), pp. 255-69 (p. 256).

²⁵⁶ Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, 2nd edn (New York: Routledge, 2013), p. xx and p. 3.

²⁵⁷ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 33.

²⁵⁸ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. xx and p. xxvi.

²⁵⁹ Hutcheon and O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. xx.

in aesthetic, social, and cultural terms, formal conventions constrain and enable; they limit and uncover new possibilities. In the case of the BD, for example, new layers of interactivity are afforded to the medium through the visual quality of the grids and the way the reader can ‘voice’ the story. Here, ‘voicing’ refers to the way that the comics medium implicates voluntary audience participation through closure. As comics panels rupture time and space across unconnected moments, closure allows the reader ‘to *connect* these moments and mentally construct a continuous, unified reality.’²⁶⁰ Thus, readers ‘project a mental model of the storyworld evoked by the narrative.’²⁶¹ In other words, ‘every act committed to paper by the comics artist is *aided* and *abetted* by a *silent accomplice*. [...] An *equal partner in crime* known as the reader.’²⁶²

Furthermore, transmedial storytelling, a concept intertwined with adaptation, emphasises the commercial nature of adaptational strategies. In its most fundamental form, transmediality can be understood as a ‘migration of information across different media.’²⁶³ Transmediations therefore represent intermedial processes: ‘the interaction of similarities and differences between media and the changes that may occur in communicative material when it is transported from one media type to another.’²⁶⁴ Elizabeth Evans further defines the basic characteristic of transmediality as ‘the increasingly popular industrial practice of using multiple media technologies to present information [...] through a range of textual forms.’²⁶⁵ This enables ‘multiple revenue streams and numerous sites of engagement.’²⁶⁶ Arguably then, whilst

²⁶⁰ Scott McCloud and Bob Lappan, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: William Morrow, 1994), p. 67. Emphasis in original.

²⁶¹ Karin Kukkonen, ‘Comics as a Test Case for Transmedial Narratology’, *SubStance*, 40. 1 (2011), 34-52 (p. 43) <<https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.2011.0005>>.

²⁶² McCloud and Lappan, *Understanding Comics*, p. 68. Emphasis in original.

²⁶³ Mikael Askander, Anna Gutowska, and Péter Kristóf Makai, ‘Transmedial storyworlds’, in *Intermedial Studies: An Introduction to Meaning across Media*, ed. by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirmacher (Routledge: London; New York, 2022), pp. 265-81 (p. 267).

²⁶⁴ Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirmacher, ‘Intermedial studies’, in *Intermedial Studies: An Introduction to Meaning across Media*, ed. by Jørgen Bruhn and Beate Schirmacher (Routledge: London; New York, 2022), pp. 3-27 (p. 3).

²⁶⁵ Elizabeth Evans, *Transmedia Television: Audience, New Media, and Daily Life* (New York: Routledge, 2011), p. 1. Discussions about transmedia and how it overlaps with questions of adaptation are extensive and go beyond the scope of this thesis. O’Flynn highlights the difficulty of differentiating between adaptation and transmedia in practice, despite relatively clear definitions of the terms and their differences. She argues that ‘a transmedia production exists across multiple platforms and discrete components understood together comprise an integrated, interconnected narrative whole, though they are encountered separately.’ See Hutcheon and O’Flynn, *A Theory of Adaptation*, p. 181. For further discussion of the concept, see Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato, ‘Introduction: Transmedia Studies – Where Now?’, in *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, ed. by Matthew Freeman and Renira Rampazzo Gambarato (London: Taylor and Francis, 2018), pp. 1-12.

²⁶⁶ Freeman and Gambarato, ‘Introduction’, p. 1.

different forms allow for new, transformative possibilities in terms of narrative and storytelling, they also facilitate the targeting of various audiences through diverse media. As Marie-Laure Ryan frankly states, transmedial storytelling can be seen as ‘a way to get us to consume as many products as possible.’²⁶⁷ For this chapter, understanding adaptation as a performative, intermedial process engaged with, and inseparable from, questions of audience interactivity, reception, and, to a lesser extent, commercial value, is essential to locating *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur* in the context of Slimani’s authorial trajectory.

It is through this lens which considers the intermedial *va-et-vient* of literary form that this chapter will focus on the investigative life narratives presented in and across *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur*. The question of omission, or illusion, as well as the issue of absence and presence, appear significant in how multiple forms are implicated in a performative process of fictionalisation, and interact with one another dialogically. As Slimani moves the (non)fictional life narratives in and across the *essai/enquête* to the BD (and presumably back again with the publication of the second edition of *Sexe et mensonges*) within the framework of (non)fictional investigative aesthetics, there appear to be multiple displacements, or deterritorialisations in how the narratives are retold through adaptation. This chapter explores the politics of locating and performing investigative life narratives across two different mediums. By analysing how people and events are framed temporally and spatially, this chapter investigates the tensions between shaping and unravelling different aesthetic forms at the interstices of time and space in *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur*. In this way, it asks the extent to which the spatiality of *Paroles d’honneur* (in the form of graphic life narratives in a BD) allows for a different understanding of the life narratives presented as standalone experiences in *Sexe et mensonges*. In this context, it is also necessary to consider which texts have been omitted from *Paroles d’honneur*, as well as the politics of ‘fictionalising’ narratives as a BD that Slimani has already ‘curated.’ What does it mean to see Slimani visually mapped on the pages of the BD? How are the lines of fiction/non-fiction blurred (or not)? What are the cultural meanings attached to these distinct formal styles? And what are the consequences of this for readerships in France and Morocco? Finally, the question of artistic collaboration is especially pertinent here, so this chapter also considers the role that graphic artist Laetitia Coryn plays in shaping the narratives, particularly in the context of audience expectations and established cultural meanings. Therefore, this chapter demonstrates that, in

²⁶⁷ Marie-Laure Ryan, ‘Transmedial Storytelling and Transfictionality’, *Poetics Today* 13. 3 (2013), 361-88 (p. 384) <<https://doi.org/10.1215/03335372-2325250>>.

the wider context of how Slimani engages with the performative process of *becoming* literary celebrity, it is essential to consider the asymmetrical transnational and socio-cultural location *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur* exist in and speak to. Indeed, this chapter asks whether the texts, notably *Paroles d'honneur*, are physically and ideologically orientated towards France, and if so, to what extent. In this context, it argues that the associated symbolic, cultural, and commercial value of engaging with Eurocentric discourses cannot be overlooked.

Slimani's textual narrative presence in *Sexe et mensonges*

Slimani's authorial voice is evident at the start of *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur* through her textual-visual presence. In *Sexe et mensonges*, Slimani inserts herself as the narrator in the introduction. This appears to establish a framework with which the reader can read the 'testimonies':

Mon but ici n'est pas d'écrire une étude sociologique ni de faire un essai sur la sexualité au Maroc. D'éminents sociologues, d'excellents journalistes font ce travail ô combien difficile. C'est que je voulais, c'était livrer cette parole brute. Cette parole vibrante et intense, ces histoires qui m'ont bouleversée, émue, qui m'ont mise en colère et parfois révoltée. J'ai eu envie de donner à entendre ces tranches de vie, souvent douloureuses, dans une société où beaucoup d'hommes et de femmes préfèrent détourner les yeux. En me racontant leur vie, en acceptant de briser des tabous, toutes ces femmes m'ont en tout cas signifié une chose : leur vie a de l'importance.²⁶⁸

The language Slimani uses is direct and she is explicit about her intentions behind the text, stating that she does not intend to present it as a sociological work. Instead, Slimani's aims appear to be firmly rooted in the affective potential of the testimonies as she perceives and reacts to them personally and politically, compared to the social sciences. At the same time, Slimani must be aware of the wider audience for these testimonies that she hopes to create through their publication. Although, Slimani appears to prioritise her own experiences of the interviewees' narratives, which are presented in a political context. For example, Slimani cites the Moroccan penal code when discussing sex outside of marriage in Morocco, adding:

En écoutant ces femmes, j'ai eu envie de donner à entendre la réalité de ce pays, qui est bien plus complexe, bien plus douloureuse que ne voudraient nous le faire croire les

²⁶⁸ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 21-22.

autorités. Car, si l'on s'en tient à la loi telle qu'elle existe et à la morale telle qu'elle est transmise, il faudrait croire que tous les célibataires du Maroc sont vierges.²⁶⁹

Once again, Slimani appears directive in presenting her narrative voice as investigative commentary to the reader. Slimani's use of the third person plural elicits a sense of an established, universally shared understanding between her response to reality as she perceives it and the assumed positionality of the reader. Slimani directs the reader towards the interviewees' narratives by stating 'toutes [les femmes qui témoignent], vous le verrez, font parfois preuve d'ambiguïtés, elles se contredisent, s'émancipent puis baissent la tête.'²⁷⁰ Moreover, by quoting various articles of the Moroccan Penal Code that criminalise any extramarital (hetero)sexual activity, same-sex relationships, and abortion, Slimani possibly attempts to establish a sense of investigative authority in the framing of the life narratives as political. Accordingly, if Slimani's perception of 'taboo-breaking' is socio-political, this might suggest that *Sexe et mensonges* can be understood as a personal project attempting to be politically *engagé*.

Nevertheless, Nelson demonstrates how the interviews in *Sexe et mensonges* cannot be read purely as testimony, as this overlooks the dynamic, fluctuating nature of literature. This dynamism, in the form of re-editions and translations for example, allows literature to be reinvented to mirror socio-cultural trends or personal agendas.²⁷¹ Likewise, Brueton shows how the element of performative storytelling in *Sexe et mensonges* is significant, arguing that 'literature is neither mimetic nor static [...], it is productive, equipping the reader with the tools to investigate why some selves are more palatable, more available, more orthodox.'²⁷² This might also link to the significance of orality within Moroccan culture.²⁷³ Moreover, Brueton points to a trend in literature in French that looks to a 'renewed attention to the external stimuli that inform the imaginary' as 'transnational relations between the Hexagon and its francophone cousins [...] have resulted in greater interdisciplinarity between literature and the social sciences.'²⁷⁴ To varying degrees, Brueton asserts that, authors such as Abdellah Taïa, Marie NDiaye, Annie Ernaux, and Édouard Louis 'have embraced an investigative aesthetic that transforms the authorial voice into that of ethnographer, social commentator, journalist and

²⁶⁹ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 25.

²⁷⁰ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 25.

²⁷¹ Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences', p. 59.

²⁷² Brueton, 'Cherchez la fiction', p. 167.

²⁷³ For example, see Fatima Sadiqi, *Women, Gender, and Language in Morocco* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2003).

²⁷⁴ Brueton, 'Cherchez la fiction', p. 165.

activist’ (Ernaux has been doing this for a long time, NDiaye also to a lesser extent for example).²⁷⁵ Laurent Demanze sees this as the ‘nouvel âge de l’enquête’ where lived experiences become the critical stage for creative production.²⁷⁶

Likewise, Dominique Viart sees this as a *littérature du terrain*, which

se tourne vers des pratiques issues des sciences sociales : entretiens, observations et repérages, fouille d’archives, investigation *in situ*, collecte de récits ou de témoignages, recherche et production documentaire, etc. [...] Une inflexion majeure s’opère alors : loin de *raconter* ou de *représenter* le réel, ces œuvres envisagent la littérature comme moyen de *l’éprouver*, de *l’étudier* voire de *l’expérimenter*.²⁷⁷

In this context of investigative aesthetics, the representation of ‘reality’ is seemingly more akin to a carefully curated performance enabled by the configurations of the text, which constitutes subjects discursively (rather than ‘truthfully’). Brueton maintains that ‘such a scientific approach transforms the literary into more of a taxonomy of reality, primed to catalogue experiences, testimonials, statistics and documentation as a fertile archive of fiction.’²⁷⁸

In *Sexe et mensonges*, Slimani’s investigative form appears seductive in how it curates the illusion of ‘truthful’ subjects – including her investigative voice – through performance and therefore requires a certain level of critical awareness to be fully understood. This can also possibly be seen in the differences between the two editions of *Sexe et mensonges*. In the second edition, Slimani includes a preface that dates from May 2021:

Au Maroc, le livre a suscité un vif débat. Certains, bien sûr, m’ont accusé de salir mon pays en dévoilant l’intimité des femmes marocaines et en réclamant leur droit à disposer de leur corps et à avoir une sexualité librement consentie. Mais le livre a aussi reçu de nombreux soutiens de la part de militants, de sociologues ou d’intellectuels qui se sont joints à moi pour dénoncer la situation des libertés sexuelles dans notre pays et l’immense hypocrisie qui y règne à ce propos.²⁷⁹

In terms of authorial (self-)fashioning, publishing a revised edition of *Sexe et mensonges* with a new preface suggests that Slimani attempts to mediate her relationship with readers. Slimani

²⁷⁵ Brueton, ‘Cherchez la fiction’, p. 165.

²⁷⁶ Laurent Demanze, *Un nouvel âge de l’enquête* (Paris: Corti, 2019).

²⁷⁷ Dominique Viart, ‘Les Littératures du terrain’, *Revue critique de fiction française contemporaine* 18 (2019), 1-15 (p. 2) <<https://doi.org/10.4000/fiction.1275>>. Emphases in original.

²⁷⁸ Brueton, ‘Cherchez la fiction’, p. 166.

²⁷⁹ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 11.

references the initial reactions to the publication of the first edition in Morocco and alludes to receiving support from Moroccan sociologists and intellectuals. For example, Moroccan sociologist Sanaa El Aji (who appears in both *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*) published her doctoral thesis, *Sexualité et célibat au Maroc : pratiques et verbalisation*, in 2017, and has appeared alongside Slimani to promote their works and discuss sex and sexuality in Morocco at events held at the Institut du Monde Arabe (2018) and the Foire du Livre de Bruxelles (2020).²⁸⁰ Talking about the 'taboos' associated with writing about sex in Morocco, El Aji stated that 'the two new taboos are religion and sex. People get hysterical about them.'²⁸¹ In addition, Ben Jelloun maintained that the text

est composé de paroles libres, de témoignages qui livrent ce que des femmes ont sur le cœur. [...] Malheureusement, le reste de la société n'a pas cette parole libre. Il y a une résistance pour la liberté et pour l'individualité. Le "je" n'a pas d'existence.²⁸²

Here, Ben Jelloun refers to wider Moroccan society and, similar to how he responded to Slimani's earlier fictional work (as discussed in Chapter 1), suggests that she is breaking taboos in terms of women's experiences in Morocco, allowing them to 'speak out.' As Chapter 1 has shown, Ben Jelloun's comments need to be approached with some caution, given that he has lived in France since 1971 and is an accepted part of the Parisian intelligentsia.²⁸³

However, Slimani also indicates how the book was negatively received by some, namely by the more conservative, religious factions of Moroccan society, who she claims accused her of not being 'une vraie musulmane.'²⁸⁴ In the wider context of Moroccan reactions to *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*, *TelQuel* showed various people living in

²⁸⁰ See Anon., 'Sexualités et libertés individuelles au Maroc', *Institut du Monde Arabe* <<https://www.imarabe.org/fr/rencontres-debats/sexualite-et-libertes-individuelles-au-maroc>> [accessed 15 August 2024] and Flora Eveno, 'Droits de femmes : Conversations intimes avec Leïla Slimani', *RTBF*, 08 March 2020 <<https://www.rtbf.be/article/droits-des-femmes-conversations-intimes-avec-leila-slimani-10450915>> [accessed 15 August 2024].

²⁸¹ El Aji quoted in Elif Shafak, 'Leïla Slimani's *Sex and Lies*: a brave and honest look at the lives of Moroccan women', *The New Statesman*, 26 February 2020 <<https://www.newstatesman.com/culture/2020/02/le-la-slimani-s-sex-and-lies-brave-and-honest-look-lives-moroccan-women>> [accessed 15 August 2024].

²⁸² Anon., 'Leïla Slimani et Tahar Ben Jelloun : le Maroc face à ses tabous', *Paris Match*, 19 September 2017 <<https://www.parismatch.com/Culture/Livres/Leila-Slimani-et-Tahar-Ben-Jelloun-le-Maroc-face-a-ses-tabous-1350299>> [accessed 13 August 2024].

²⁸³ Wardleworth, 'The Roman Maghrébin', p. 142.

²⁸⁴ Cécile Daumas, Anastasia Vécrin and Dounia Hadni, 'Leïla Slimani : « Il est réducteur de lier la question de la misère sexuelle seulement à l'islam »', *Libération*, 01 September 2017 <https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2017/09/01/leila-slimani-il-est-reducteur-de-lier-la-question-de-la-misere-sexuelle-seulement-a-l-islam_1593573/> [accessed 26 April 2024].

Casablanca extracts from the BD *Paroles d'honneur*.²⁸⁵ Despite varying in age and social class, they were asked to respond to the same images. Responding to a scene depicting masturbation, a 20-year-old from the socio-economically deprived suburban Hay Mohammadi district said:

La masturbation c'est mal pour le corps, car il peut y avoir des maladies sexuelles. J'ai appris ça à l'école et puis c'est ce que dit notre religion. Et puis toute relation en dehors du mariage est haram. Les gens n'ont pas envie de se marier donc ils font ça. Mais pour moi, c'est choquant et je ne suis pas d'accord avec cela.²⁸⁶

Likewise, a 23-year-old from the city centre, arguably a more middle-class urban area, stated that:

Je n'ai jamais essayé [la masturbation]. C'est interdit par notre culture et notre religion et puis je n'en ai pas envie. Je suis vierge et le sexe n'est pas vraiment important pour moi. Si je dois me masturber, ce sera après le mariage, c'est tout. Mais si des copines à moi le font, je ne serai pas choquée. Chacune fait ce qu'elle veut. Mais croyez-moi la plupart des filles qui le font n'oseront jamais vous le dire !²⁸⁷

Although mixed in their response, they highlight the texts' potential to cause controversy for some people in Morocco, a Muslim-majority society where religion and culture are closely tied together. This is particularly the case with depicting subjects such as sex, masturbation, and virginity.

Nevertheless, it appears that the text was not only criticised by those aligned with more conservative, religious views in Morocco. *Jeune Afrique* quoted Moroccan sociologist Mehdi Alioua stating that, 'il [le livre] en est ressorti une vision éculée et misérabiliste de la sexualité dans le monde arabe, alors que même les sociologues n'ont pas vraiment de statistiques pour rendre compte de la réalité.'²⁸⁸ Alioua added that Slimani

²⁸⁵ Whilst reactions to *Paroles d'honneur* cannot simply be transposed to *Sexe et mensonges* given that they are different publications, *Paroles d'honneur* would likely not exist without *Sexe et mensonges*, dealing with the same content and themes. This suggests that reactions to *Paroles d'honneur* are, to some extent, connected to the reception of *Sexe et mensonges*, particularly regarding the wider contemporary socio-cultural contexts in which they move.

²⁸⁶ Margaux Mazellier and Sarah Cheriet, "Sexe et mensonges" : les témoignages de Marocains après la lecture de la BD de Leïla Slimani', *TelQuel*, 08 September 2017 <<https://telquel.ma/2017/09/08/sexe-et-mensonges-les-temoignages-de-marocains-apres-la-lecture-de-la-bd-de-leila-slimani> 1560555> [accessed 20 June 2024].

²⁸⁷ Mazellier and Cheriet, "Sexe et mensonges."

²⁸⁸ Léo Pajon, « Sexe et mensonges » : au Maroc, des interdits qui se contournent ?, *Jeune Afrique*, 31 October 2017 <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/485243/culture/sexe-et-mensonges-une-vision-biaisee-et-miserabiliste-de-la-societe-marocaine/>> [accessed 08 August 2023]. The use of être in the conjugation of ressortir was used in the original quote.

[...] a suscité beaucoup de déception chez une partie de ses lecteurs marocains francophones, qui l'avaient mise sur un piédestal lors de la sortie de ses romans [...]. Ils ont eu le sentiment que ce livre sur le Maroc ne leur était pas destiné, et qu'on s'adressait plutôt à un public français en lui disant ce qu'il avait envie ou était capable d'entendre.²⁸⁹

This line of criticism was not restricted to reactions in Morocco. As previously mentioned in Chapter 1, in France, Houria Bouteldja, founder of and former spokesperson for the Parti des indigènes de la République, labelled Slimani as a 'native informant' in response to the text's publication.²⁹⁰ In *Jeune Afrique*, François Soudan accused Slimani of deliberately engaging with themes that would be gratuitously offensive to ordinary Moroccans in order to find the favour of a French elite. Soudan stated that 'pour être médiatiquement bankable en ce moment sur la rive gauche de la Seine, le bon Arabe se doit d'être laïque, islamophobe, de préférence libertin et si possible menacé [...] dans son pays d'origine.'²⁹¹ Elsewhere, this thesis has looked at the notion of the native informant in the context of Slimani's reception notably in France; however, these critical responses to the publication of the first edition of *Sexe et mensonges* (and *Paroles d'honneur*) in Morocco and France show the texts' potentially polemical nature across various transnational, socio-political contexts.²⁹²

Slimani's reference to the debate sparked by the text's publication in 2017 appears significant given that in between publishing the two editions of *Sexe et mensonges*, in 2019, Slimani launched *Le Collectif 490 des Hors-la-loi* manifesto with Moroccan writer and filmmaker Sonia Terrab.²⁹³ Their statement came after Moroccan journalist Hajar Raissouni, accused of engaging in extramarital sex and having an abortion, was arrested and sentenced to

²⁸⁹ Pajon, '« Sexe et mensonges. »'

²⁹⁰ Lauren Elkin, 'Good Girls', *London Review of Books*, 21 February 2019 <<https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v41/n04/lauren-elkin/good-girls>> [accessed 16 August 2021].

²⁹¹ François Soudan, 'Dior n'est pas marocain', *Jeune Afrique*, 14 April 2017 <<https://www.jeuneafrique.com/424084/societe/dior-nest-marocain/>> [accessed 20 June 2024].

²⁹² See pp. 46-52 for further discussion of labelling Slimani as a 'native informant.'

²⁹³ This is reminiscent of previous famous manifestos in France, such as the pro-abortion *Le Manifeste des 343* (1971), penned by Simone de Beauvoir and published in *Le Nouvel Observateur*, in which 343 women publicly declared they had had an abortion (abortion was illegal at the time). The petition called for the legalisation of abortion and free access to contraception, paving the way for the *Loi Veil* (named after Simone Veil) in 1975 which decriminalised abortion. Signatories included prominent literary and cultural figures such as Françoise Sagan and Marguerite Duras. See Marie Slavicek and Charlotte Herzog, '« Être enceinte sans le vouloir, c'était une catastrophe » : le manifeste des 343 raconté par des signataires', *Le Monde*, 05 April 2021 <https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2021/04/05/etre-enceinte-sans-le-vouloir-c-etait-une-catastrophe-le-manifeste-des-343-raconte-par-des-signataires_6075576_3224.html> [accessed 13 August 2024].

one-year imprisonment.²⁹⁴ The text, published in *Le Monde* and *TelQuel*, denounced the ‘liberticidal laws’ of Morocco’s penal code (in particular Article 490) and called for a national debate on individual freedoms.²⁹⁵ It is noteworthy that the text was simultaneously published in France and Morocco, perhaps representing an attempt to increase the visibility of the issue on the international stage to encourage international sympathy. The initial signatories stated that ‘Nous, citoyennes et citoyens marocains, déclarons que nous sommes hors-la-loi. Nous violons des lois injustes, obsolètes, qui n’ont plus lieu d’être. Nous avons eu des relations sexuelles hors mariage. Nous avons subi, pratiqué ou été complices d’un avortement.’²⁹⁶ Increasing social resistance and pressure meant Raissouni was later pardoned by the King in October 2019. Slimani and Terrab received the Prix Simone de Beauvoir pour la liberté des femmes as representatives of the collective in 2020.²⁹⁷

It is worth mentioning that Slimani returns to the Hajar Raissouni affair, as well as other Moroccan feminist trends emerging between 2017 and 2021, in the second edition of *Sexe et mensonges*.²⁹⁸ This appears after Slimani locates the text’s reception in Morocco within a wider, global context of events that took place in 2017. Slimani mentions the Harvey Weinstein scandal that sparked the #MeToo movement:

En Europe et aux États-Unis, les opinions publiques prennent conscience non seulement des multiples violences dont les femmes sont victimes mais du fait que leur parole est, depuis, trop longtemps, muselée, déconsidérée, étouffée. Or, j’avais moi-même acquis la conviction, après ces rencontres avec des femmes marocaines, que la prise de parole et le récit de soi étaient le premier pas vers l’émancipation. [...] Il fallait dire pour mettre sous les yeux des lecteurs la réalité d’une situation génératrice de drames

²⁹⁴ Ruth Michaelson, ‘Moroccan journalist jailed for “illegal abortion” pardoned by king’, *The Guardian*, 16 October 2019 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/oct/16/moroccan-journalist-hajar-raissouni-jailed-pardoned-abortion>> [accessed 21 June 2024].

²⁹⁵ Slimani, Terrab, and others, ‘Nous, citoyennes et citoyens marocains.’

²⁹⁶ Slimani, Terrab, and others, ‘Nous, citoyennes et citoyens marocains.’ The initial signatories of the manifesto included notable figures such as graphic artist and activist Zainab Fasiki, politician Nabila Mounib, sociologist and writer Sanaa El Aji, visual artist Yto Barrada, and Kenza Sefrioui. In addition, many men signed in solidarity including poet, writer, and activist Abdellatif Laâbi, film director Nouredine Ayouch, Abdellah Taïa, and Tahar Ben Jelloun.

²⁹⁷ Dounia Hadni, ‘Collectif des « hors-la-loi » : « Si vous nous mettez tous en prison, qui va faire rayonner votre Maroc ? »’, *Libération*, 11 January 2020 <https://www.liberation.fr/planete/2020/01/11/collectif-des-hors-la-loi-si-vous-nous-mettez-tous-en-prison-qui-va-faire-rayonner-votre-maroc_1772104/> [accessed 04 April 2024]. The Prix Simone de Beauvoir is an international human rights prize for women’s freedom. Since 2008, it has been awarded to individuals or groups fighting for gender equality and opposing human rights breaches.

²⁹⁸ See Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 14-15.

sociaux : les avortements clandestins, les viols impunis, la marginalisation de celles qui font le choix d'une vie libre.²⁹⁹

This implies that Slimani's writing is closely related to the socio-political interventions she makes in Morocco and beyond. Indeed, by referencing certain local and global socio-cultural currents running through and across the four years between publishing the two editions, and using the first-person singular, Slimani spatio-temporally reframes her investigative narrative voice to emphasise the text's timeliness and importance. This reframing, which locates the first edition and its critics in domestic and transnational contexts, reinforces Slimani's presence in curating and presenting the ensuing interviews. As the local appears to be firmly rooted in the global in terms of how gendered emancipation can or should be achieved, Slimani seems to lay out a rubric for reading the second edition that leans towards a universalised framework of experiences.

Moreover, Slimani shifts the dedication in the first edition from 'à toutes les femmes qui sont confiées à moi/Qu'elles en soient remerciées' to 'à toutes les femmes musulmanes, pour lesquelles je rêve d'un avenir radieux et libre' in the second edition.³⁰⁰ In addition, Slimani removes the last page of the first edition's conclusion, which addresses critics who '[l']accusent] d'être islamophobe par opportunisme ou de ne pas respecter les valeurs conservatrices du Maroc. Et, argument suprême, on [lui] reproche d'être une vendue à l'Occident.'³⁰¹ In contrast, the second edition ends with a line present in both versions: 'reste au législateur à mettre tout en œuvre pour que chacun, quelle que soit sa vision personnelle de la vertu ou de la pureté, puisse vivre dignement et en sécurité sa vie sexuelle.'³⁰² Perhaps the most obvious change can be seen in the how the text's subtitle shifts from 'la vie sexuelle au Maroc' to 'histoires vraies de la vie sexuelle des femmes au Maroc.' Slimani's focus seemingly moves from how she personally relates to the life narratives presented in the book, to how she situates them in contemporary local and global feminist currents. This potentially highlights how the authorial voice plays a significant role in the shaping, curating, and reinvention of 'non-fictional' narratives for shifting motives. Given that the second edition arrived four years after the first edition and *Paroles d'honneur*, Slimani's attempt to distance herself from an overt narrative presence might suggest that she aims to move *Sexe et mensonges* away from being viewed as

²⁹⁹ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 12-13.

³⁰⁰ Slimani, *Sexe* (2017), p. 9; Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 9.

³⁰¹ Slimani, *Sexe* (2017), p. 183.

³⁰² Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 238.

a politically personal project to one that is universally political.³⁰³ This is particularly significant following her involvement with *Le Collectif 490 des Hors-la-loi* in Morocco in between publishing the two editions, possibly representing another attempt to reject any sort of fixed positionality. To this extent, the investigative aesthetic of the *essai/enquête* allows Slimani's narrative presence to shift, reinforcing the text's objectives over time. It would appear, therefore, that the second edition of *Sexe et mensonges* is as much a response to the debate that surrounded the first edition's publication in Morocco and beyond, as it is representative of Slimani's own ever-changing subjectivity and positionality in these transnational contexts. This consequently has an impact on how subjects are constructed, fictionalised, presented, and performed through the life narratives in the text.

Performing absence and presence: embodiment and the Self in *Paroles d'honneur*

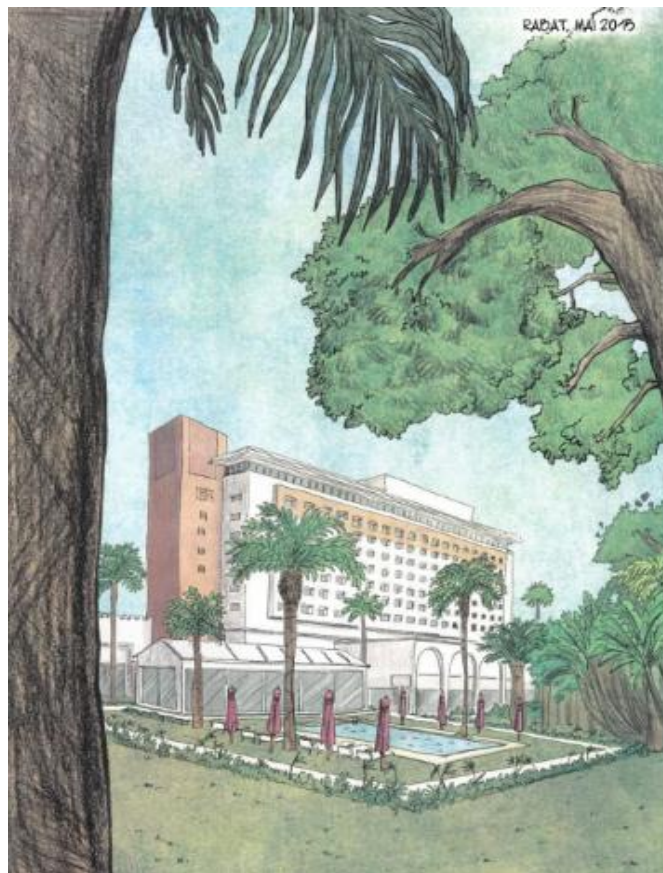


Figure 1

³⁰³ Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences', p. 60.



Figure 2

In contrast to the more explicit textual role Slimani plays in framing the written narratives of *Sexe et mensonges*, she is instantly recognisable as a visual character in *Paroles d'honneur*. As previously mentioned, Slimani maintains that *Paroles d'honneur* is ‘une fiction’, framing her character in the book as such.³⁰⁴ The BD opens with a full-page frame depicting the Sofitel in Rabat. Although the reader would not necessarily know the exact location of the hotel, it appears to be peaceful and calm, presumably away from the city’s hustle and bustle (Figure 1).³⁰⁵ It is arguably significant that the first chapter, *Libérer la parole*, opens with an image of the spatial context from which the narratives will unravel, particularly given that the panels on the following page appear to draw readers’ focus from the exterior garden of the hotel, into the bar where Slimani’s character is first visible (Figure 2).³⁰⁶ Artist Laetitia Coryn employs a

³⁰⁴ Nadine Eghels, ‘Paroles d’honneur : interview de Leïla Slimani lors du festival « Les rencontres inattendues »’, *Notélé*, 31 August 2021 <<https://www.notele.be/si164-media101254-paroles-d-honneur-interview-de-leila-slimani-lors-du-festival-%C2%A0lesrencontres-inattendues%C2%A0.html>> [accessed 11 July 2023].

³⁰⁵ For Figure 1, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 7.

³⁰⁶ For Figure 2, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, pp. 8-9.

realistic drawing style that makes Slimani's character easily recognisable. Although unlikely given Slimani's celebrity in France, Morocco, and beyond, if there was any uncertainty about her character, the reader is also briefly visually signposted to her first novel *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* (Figure 2). Slimani's character is inserted into the narrative in conversation with an unnamed woman – the reader later discovers her name is Nour – who begins to recount her past experiences on the following pages (Figures 2 & 3).³⁰⁷



Figure 3

There appears to be a *va-et-vient* between Slimani's conversation in the present moment (a hotel in Rabat in 2015) and Nour's memories, set in their respective spatio-temporal contexts. The elongated panels locating the reader in Nour's memories (for example, the beach in Figure 3 and the forest in Figure 4) contrast with the smaller, staccato-like panels that depict Nour and Slimani's conversation in the 'present' spatio-temporal timeline.³⁰⁸ In addition, the colouration of the panels representing Nour's memories are brighter and more vivid than the

³⁰⁷ For Figure 3, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, pp. 12-13.

³⁰⁸ For Figure 4, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, pp. 14-15.

more neutral colouring of the panels depicting Nour and Slimani in the hotel bar. This likely reminds the reader of where and who the narrative comes from, suggesting there is an element of neutrality, or critical distance, in the act of retelling from the spatio-temporal moment Slimani's character occupies. Compared to the opening of *Sexe et mensonges*, at first glance, *Paroles d'honneur* does not seem to present the reader with a particularly political rubric with which to tackle the ensuing narratives. Slimani appears to take a more distant role as a fictional character helping to mediate or navigate the narratives to the reader. This appears to align with Slimani's framing of *Paroles d'honneur* as a fictional representation of the individual stories.



Figure 4

However, through analysing graphic life narratives, Hillary Chute explores how comic texts can model a feminist methodology in their form particularly when they involve life writing. Chute highlights the links between life writing and feminist theory, focusing on the question of embodiment as a central preoccupation of feminist studies (and of narrative and

sexuality studies more broadly).³⁰⁹ This process of enacting a feminist methodology in form through embodiment can be seen

[...] in the complex visual dimension of an author narrating herself on the page as a multiple subject. The proliferation of different bodies and voices of an author (say, a child body, an adult body, and separate adult narratorial voices in speech and in overarching narration) existing in the space of a single page, for example, collapsing or protracting temporal dimensions, is a feature of autobiographical comics that is hard to replicate in other mediums.³¹⁰

Chute suggests that spatially locating iterations of the embodied self on the page is significant, forcing the reader to ‘confront a non-overdetermined materiality of the body and the proliferation, or multiplicity, of selves that are both driving concerns of feminist narrative.’³¹¹ As Chute demonstrates, embodiment in comics manifests itself through the mark of the hand on the page, but also through the ‘proliferation of narrating bodies in space on the comics page [...]’ that pertains to a hybrid subjectivity.³¹² Hence, graphic life narratives depicted in the medium of comics establish ‘an expanded idiom of witness’, whereby a practice of testifying ‘sets verbal languages with and against visual language to embody individual and collective experience, to put contingent selves and histories into form.’³¹³

In this context, it is helpful to consider Leigh Gilmore’s understanding of the public and political aspects of speech, where ‘the nexus of trauma and gender [acts] as the terrain of political speech, even when that speech explicitly draws on a rhetoric of private life.’³¹⁴ When considering the visual and verbal elements that make up the aesthetic fabric of the comics medium, this formulation of speech is arguably more relevant in the context of feminist life narrative because the act of drawing one’s body (or, in the case of *Paroles d’honneur*, someone else drawing it) can represent an act of political speech. Therefore, this stresses the aesthetic and political significance of having the self spatially plotted or mapped on the page.

³⁰⁹ Hillary Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative: Mapping Bodies, Feminism, and Form’, in *Narrative Theory Unbound: Queer and Feminist Interventions*, ed. by Susan S. Lanser and Robyn Warhol-Down (Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2015), pp. 194-209 (p. 200).

³¹⁰ Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative’, p. 200.

³¹¹ Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative’, p. 200.

³¹² Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative’, p. 201.

³¹³ Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative’, p. 201.

³¹⁴ Leigh Gilmore, ‘Jurisdictions: I, Rigoberta Menchú, The Kiss, and Scandalous Self-Representation in the Age of Memoir and Trauma’, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28. 2 (2003), 695-718 (p. 715) <<https://doi.org/10.1086/342594>>.

Foregrounding issues of positionality and perspective, this is reminiscent of Adrienne Rich's 'politics of location.'³¹⁵ In the essay, Rich highlights how the intersections of gender, sexuality, race, religion, and nationality are significant when locating one's own feminine-presenting body in place, space, and history. Rich thus attempts to dismantle notions that claim a universal experience of 'womanhood' and global 'sisterhood.' By moving beyond conceptualisations of subjectivity as solely gendered, this also treats subjectivity as firmly embodied.³¹⁶ Academics have criticised Rich's writing on the politics of location, arguing that she remains committed to white feminism centred in a North American context and ignores her own privilege.³¹⁷ However, in the case of *Paroles d'honneur*, it helps to prevent abstracting generalised categories from the narratives that are entangled with (fictional) representations of Slimani's embodied experience.

Although Slimani's embodied character in *Paroles d'honneur* is not present in the narrative to autobiographically reflect on her own life, it is arguably aesthetically and politically significant that she appears alongside other 'fictionalised' embodied narratives taken from *Sexe et mensonges*. This is particularly important considering how Slimani's character seemingly protracts and/or contracts temporal dimensions in the BD. At the same time, Slimani does so by attempting to maintain a certain narrative distance, or neutrality, compared to *Sexe et mensonges* in terms of her investigative, affective connection to the stories. Hence, on the surface, Slimani appears to be more actively involved in the narrative shaping of *Sexe et mensonges* compared to *Paroles d'honneur*. Yet, thinking about the politics of location shows how such a reading might be oversimplistic, given that it does not account for Slimani's positionality as the author, fictional or not.

For example, in *Sexe et mensonges*, Slimani introduces 'Zhor', a 28-year-old woman she initially met online:

J'étais au Maroc pour présenter mon roman et elle avait entendu parler de mon travail. J'avais également entendu parler d'elle, par une amie commune. Nous nous sommes donné rendez-vous devant la gare. Sur le quai, j'ai vu arriver une jeune femme aux

³¹⁵ See Adrienne Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry: Selected Prose, 1979-1985* (London: Virago, 1987), pp. 210-31.

³¹⁶ Rich, *Blood, Bread and Poetry*, pp. 210-31.

³¹⁷ See Caren Kaplan, 'The Politics of Location as Transnational Feminist Practice', in *Scattered Hegemonies: Postmodernity and Transnational Feminist Practices*, ed. by Inderpal Grewal and Caren Kaplan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 137-52 and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003)

cheveux très courts, habillée à la dernière mode. Elle dégageait une grande assurance. Sa façon de se déplacer, de s'adresser aux gens, tout en elle tendait à prouver qu'elle s'était battue pour se faire une place. Et qu'elle était bien décidée à se faire respecter. Nous nous sommes assises sous les arbres, dans le jardin d'un petit hôtel situé aux bords de la gare.³¹⁸

Slimani offers an insight into her initial impressions of Zhor. The description seems to highlight Zhor's physical appearance and the way she holds herself in the bustle of Rabat's main train station. Slimani draws the reader's attention to how Zhor is dressed, focusing on her fashionable clothes and short hairstyle. By bringing the reader's attention to these markers of physical appearance, Slimani signals that they are noticeable, and therefore significant, in the space of urban travel and transition in Rabat, embodied by the train station. Slimani thereby implies that Zhor's self-presentation is despite the environment she presently occupies in Morocco. This is significant because Slimani arguably draws attention to the location of Zhor's embodied experience in a physical place; the complicated and ever-changing way that physical appearance and self-presentation interact with how individuals experience different public space(s). Slimani's admiring gaze on Zhor's physical presence appears to shift as they move from the bustling train station to a presumably more secluded, private space of the hotel garden where their discussion takes place. The focus is no longer on how Zhor's physicality occupies the urban space in the 'freely' accessible city; rather, it seems to be less significant as they occupy a more private, secluded, and presumably more exclusive space away from the central urban gaze.

Likewise, as the testimony continues, Zhor recounts being raped by three men on her walk home from school. In between quoting Zhor's account, Slimani offers her thoughts:

Difficile de savoir ce que pense vraiment Zhor. Elle prend du plaisir à choquer, à parler sur le même ton de son viol ou de sa découverte des plaisirs de la masturbation. Je sais bien qu'il y a une part de jeu là-dedans.³¹⁹

Slimani's commentary not only physically frames Zhor's retelling in terms of textual presence but also how it presents Slimani's subjective understanding of Zhor's account to the reader. This seems to highlight Slimani's personal link to the narratives being told in *Sexe et*

³¹⁸ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 77.

³¹⁹ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 81.

mensonges and speaks to the formal space that, in this case, the investigative essay allows for in terms of affective commentary.



Figure 5

Contrastingly, in *Paroles d'honneur*, the scene in Rabat train station is omitted and Zhor's account is woven into Nour's narrative, rather than occupying a standalone space in the book (Figure 5).³²⁰ On the following pages, Zhor narrates how the men raped her as a teenager (Figure 6).³²¹ Her adult self that narrates the episode is only present in the beginning and ending panels (Figures 6 and 7).³²² Although Zhor's words remain almost identical to her account in *Sexe et mensonges*, the medium of the BD arguably reframes the narrative in the following intermedial and affective ways. For example, Nelson asserts that the emotional content of the story changes across mediums as Coryn depicts an older Zhor dispassionately recounting the episode, whilst the younger Zhor living the event appears to be terrified and ashamed.³²³ Nelson

³²⁰ For Figure 5, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, pp. 18-19.

³²¹ For Figure 6, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, pp. 20-21.

³²² For Figure 7, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 22.

³²³ Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences', p. 61.

suggests that *Sexe et mensonges* prioritises the story of a ‘placid woman recounting a violent sexual assault’; however, *Paroles d’honneur* focuses on an ‘ashamed, lonely, traumatized teenager with no place to heal.’³²⁴ When combined, Nelson maintains that these representations reveal the multifaceted repercussions the sexual assault had on Zhor. In turn, Nelson uses this example to argue that *Sexe et mensonges* prioritises how Slimani experiences the interviewees’ narratives, whereas the BD ‘uses images to foreground the interviewees’ emotion.’³²⁵ Although, this would only be apparent upon reading both texts, which is not a given for the average reader.



Figure 6

However, as seen in Figures 5 and 7, Slimani’s character is still visually present in the framing of Zhor’s narrative. In this episode, the shift in affective focus reframing the narratives arguably goes beyond a simple reliance on the visual retelling of the story. Nelson does not refer to the significance of Slimani’s character appearing spatially situated in time between the panels representing teenage Zhor, and adult Zhor recounting the story. Scott McCloud

³²⁴ Nelson, ‘Deconstructing the Influences’, p. 61

³²⁵ Nelson, ‘Deconstructing the Influences’, p. 61

demonstrates how ‘comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments.’³²⁶ In this way, McCloud contends that the panel generally indicates a division of time or space. This suggests that the reading of comics involves perceiving time spatially because ‘in the world of comics, *time and space are one and the same*.’³²⁷ In the case of *Paroles d’honneur*, the spatial perception of time is further emphasised by seeing a contrast between the younger and older Nour.



Figure 7

³²⁶ McCloud and Lappan, *Understanding Comics*, p. 67.

³²⁷ McCloud and Lappan, *Understanding Comics*, pp. 99-100. Emphasis in original.

Similarly, Chute highlights how one of the key defining features of the comics form is often understood in its ability to turn time into space, which represents a sort of “choreographing and shaping time” through the sculpting of the page into panels and tiers – *boxes of time* that are framed and spatially juxtaposed on the page.³²⁸ This spatial representation of time means that past and present moments can be made palimpsestic, crushed up against one another, and blurred in panels traditionally understood as representing one temporal register.³²⁹ Indeed, as seen in Figure 7, the narrative momentarily returns to the conversation between Slimani and Nour in the ‘present.’ Nour’s character references the case of Amina Filali, a 16-year-old Moroccan girl who took her own life after her family forced her to marry the man who had raped her when she was fifteen. The next panel shows people protesting Article 475 of the Moroccan penal code which, at the time, de-criminalised a rape if the rapist later married the victim.³³⁰ As Figure 7 shows, Slimani’s character only offers a brief response: ‘certains hommes ne comprennent pas la différence entre faire le choix d’avoir une sexualité et consentir à un acte sexuel [...] Il faut que la peur et la honte changent de camp.’³³¹

Textually, this is markedly different from the way that Slimani comments on Zhor’s narrative in *Sexe et mensonges*. Chute argues that in comics, the frames present a narrative; however, this narrative is threaded through with absence within the white spaces of the gutter. So, the manifest contouring of the frame seemingly creates a striking aesthetic distance within graphic narratives. Nevertheless, this distance is simultaneously offset by the act of reading and looking at a text created by hand, fostering an intriguing aesthetic intimacy.³³² Chute maintains that the effect of the gutter is for the ‘reader to project causality in these gaps that exist between the punctual moments of the frames.’³³³ This suggests that the narrative skeleton of the BD allows for an intimate, recursive reader experience, which can blur the lines of fiction and nonfiction in a discursive and productive way. Thereby, this provokes the reader to

³²⁸ Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative’, pp. 202-04. Emphasis in original.

³²⁹ Hillary Chute, *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), p. 7.

³³⁰ Filali’s death sparked protests in Morocco and widespread outrage nationally and internationally. Two years after her death, the Moroccan parliament decided to modify Article 475, and it was edited in 2014. See UN Women, ‘Abrogation of the Second Paragraph of Article 475 of the Penal Code (Prevent Child Marriage)’, *Global Database on Violence Against Women* <<https://evaw-global-database.unwomen.org/fr/countries/africa/morocco/2014/abrogation-of-the-second-paragraph-of-article-475-of-the-penal-code-prevent-child-marriage#:~:text=One%20of%20the%20measures%20taken,this%20protection%2C%20particularly%20for%20children>> [accessed 18 July 2023].

³³¹ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 22.

³³² Chute, *Graphic Women*, p. 6.

³³³ Chute, *Graphic Women*, p. 8.

participate in those ‘interpretative spaces that are paradoxically full and empty’, meaning that the medium encourages the reader to ‘voice’ the stories, or internalise the narration.³³⁴ Moreover, Slimani’s embodied presence spreads across multiple layers of possible temporalities through Zhor’s episode in *Paroles d’honneur*. In what perhaps seems to mirror the textual absence of her involvement with framing the narratives in *Sexe et mensonges*, the panels depicting Slimani and Nour are not framed, and the background is white (Figure 7). As there is neither a frame nor background, the larger images of Slimani and Nour extend into the gutter, juxtaposed with the other, smaller frames of Zhor recounting her story at the bottom of the page. It seems particularly significant that Slimani’s intervention concerning Zhor’s story appears devoid of a distinct spatio-temporal marker on the page. Although this may seem to project an affective narrative distance or neutrality on behalf of Slimani’s character, it also paradoxically appears to create a sense of intimacy where the reader can internalise the narrative, given that Slimani appears to simultaneously be inside and outside of the framed narrative(s). As her character’s involvement extends beyond the spatio-temporal location of Zhor’s narrative, the line between where Slimani’s authorial voice ends and the fictional representation of herself begins is confused or blurred. Thus, Slimani’s presence appears universal, extending beyond the confines of the BD’s pages. On the one hand, this reiterates the notion of (authorial) subjectivity as multiple, unstable, and not linear, constantly renegotiating and shifting. However, given that Slimani is still visibly recognisable on the page, and considering how the space of the page is offered to her character, the empty space of the gutter cannot likely represent a neutral narrative location, particularly when it allows the reader to project causality into those gaps where Slimani’s presence can be seen or felt. This absence appears to thread an invisible or unspoken narrative through these gaps, which undoubtedly demonstrates the extent to which Slimani’s authorial voice is intimately connected to the way the narrative episodes are read in *Paroles d’honneur*. This occurs despite Slimani simultaneously appearing to performatively distance herself from what might be seen as a more ‘active’ narrative involvement in *Sexe et mensonges*. The multifaceted nature of form and narrative cannot be separated from the purposeful intentions behind the text(s), showing the extent to which Slimani actively deploys form in an intermedial process of fictionalisation under the guise of a legitimate, universal narrative neutrality.

³³⁴ Chute, ‘The Space of Graphic Narrative’, p. 1

Asymmetrical transnational, socio-cultural locations: language, form, and audience in *Paroles d'honneur*

What are the implications of performing a nonfictional or 'universal' neutrality? Who is projecting causality into the gaps of the BD pages? And how does this formally extend beyond Slimani's embodied presence in *Paroles d'honneur*? Thinking about absence and presence, or omission and inclusion, is integral to exploring how the spatiality of the BD allows for Slimani's authorial intentions to manifest in different ways to *Sexe et mensonges*, and how they might be read differently across the intended audience(s). Slimani states that *Paroles d'honneur* was created 'pour la jeunesse, pour la prochaine génération', but it is unclear where this youth is located or whether it traverses national and/or linguistic borders.³³⁵ Despite alluding to the educational intention of the BD, this also speaks to the wider understanding of comics as a form invested in accessibility, particularly for young people. In this context, Chute discusses the significance of the printing and subsequent wide distribution of comics, and Sidonie Smith states that

young people across the globe [...] consume styles of comics as they consume friendships on social networking sites and display celebrity attachments through fashion, thereby producing strains of global youth culture through consuming habits and the rearrangements of desire those habits release.³³⁶

Smith also maintains that graphic narration sails multidirectional currents across the globe daily. In other words, its communities of origin are heterogeneous, taking unpredictable routes through worldwide dissemination. Smith asserts that the diverse genres of graphic narration '[...] sometimes run parallel, sometimes intersect, sometimes swerve in their travels to publics, archives, and markets here and there.'³³⁷ This would imply that the consumption of the comics medium across the globe is linked to the production of youth culture. A prolific example of this can be seen in American youth culture. For example, Bradford W. Wright studies how comic books in the U.S. have been the domain of the young (children, teenagers, and young adults). Wright explores how during the 20th century, particularly in the post-war decade, the cultural

³³⁵ Eghels, 'Paroles d'honneur : interview de Leïla Slimani.'

³³⁶ See Chute, *Graphic Women*, p. 11 and Sidonie Smith, 'Human Rights and Comics: Autobiographical Avatars, Crisis Witnessing, and Transnational Rescue Networks', in *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*, ed. by Michael A. Chaney (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2011), pp. 61-72 (p. 61).

³³⁷ Smith, 'Human Rights and Comics', p. 61.

history of comics books ‘helps to trace the emergence, challenge, and triumph of adolescence as both a market and a cultural obsession.’³³⁸

Although this transnational context is significant to Slimani’s situation as a Franco-Moroccan author writing to multiple, multidirectional readerships in France, Morocco, and beyond, it would be an oversight to suggest that *Paroles d’honneur* exists outside of the local specificities contributing to its creation. The perception that images are universal, thus rendering the comics form more accessible, particularly for younger people, cannot simply be transposed to any socio-cultural location. *Paroles d’honneur* was originally published in French by Parisian publishing house Les Arènes. According to Nelson’s personal communication with literary agent Sophie Langlais, *Paroles d’honneur* has only been translated into German, Italian, Swedish, and Czech.³³⁹ In comparison, a Moroccan version of *Sexe et mensonges* (in French) was produced by Casablanca-based publisher Le Fennec a few weeks after the publication of the French version, and the Arabic edition of *Sexe et mensonges* appeared in 2019 (which Slimani apparently insisted on).³⁴⁰ An English version of the text was also published in 2020, although the title was unfortunately translated to *Sex and Lies: True Stories of Women’s Intimate Lives in the Arab World*. This appears to collapse women’s experiences across North Africa and the Middle East into a singular cultural unit and efface the Moroccan specificity of Slimani’s work. Returning to discussions in Chapter 1, this illustrates how Slimani’s work cannot be removed from audience expectations in different transnational socio-cultural locations. These expectations are likely fostered by the fields of cultural production they exist within, whereby representing certain communities, cultures, and geographical locations in a certain way is symbolically and commercially valuable.³⁴¹ It is undoubtedly significant that there has yet to be an Arabic version of *Paroles d’honneur*, given that this would allow for widened accessibility in Morocco in particular. Mohamed-Sghir Janjar explores how even more than sixty years after Moroccan independence, French continues to have a significant political importance in Morocco, seen in educational institutions, scientific

³³⁸ Bradford W. Wright, *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America* (Baltimore; London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003), p. xvi.

³³⁹ Nelson, ‘Deconstructing the Influences’, p. 65.

³⁴⁰ Nelson notes that the content of the Moroccan edition appears identical to the French first edition. See Nelson, ‘Deconstructing the Influences’, p. 65.

³⁴¹ For example, the similar tendency to collapse North African and Middle Eastern experiences in certain Anglophone contexts can be seen in some reactions to Slimani’s early fiction work (Chapter 1, p. 41).

and technological training, as well as in administration, the media, and the economy.³⁴² The role of French in high levels of political and economic decision-making in government continues to maintain the social prestige associated with the language in Morocco today.³⁴³

However, despite the prevalence and privileged position of French in certain socio-political and economic milieus in Morocco, Janjar points to numerous socio-linguistic studies that demonstrate how the contemporary socio-linguistic field in Morocco is continuously shifting and changing.³⁴⁴ In recent years, the use of French has continuously declined, in favour of standard Arabic and Darija.³⁴⁵ Even though French is taught as the first foreign language in the Moroccan education system, students' command and knowledge of the language is ever decreasing.³⁴⁶ Indeed, as Ahmed Boukous shows, French tends to be used passively among young speakers as their use of the language is largely centred on hearing, rather than reading or writing.³⁴⁷ Furthermore, in terms of language use and literary publishing, the number of books published in Arabic has continued to grow; in 2017, 87 percent of books published in Morocco were in Arabic. Janjar largely attributes this to the number of young authors who were in the Moroccan state education system.³⁴⁸ Although this presents a generalised view of how young people in Morocco are exposed to and engage with French, it does indicate that, for the most part, young people educated in Moroccan state schools would be able to access and engage with content in Arabic or Darija more easily than in French.³⁴⁹

In addition, the cultural and institutional significance attached to the BD in France is important. The BD in France benefits from generous state subsidies and is internationally associated with quality, artistry, and adulthood.³⁵⁰ During the mid-1960s, the medium exploded

³⁴² Mohamed-Sghir Janjar, 'Une division du travail intellectuel sur une base linguistique', in *Maroc : la guerre des langues ?*, ed. by Kenza Sefrioui (Casablanca : En Toutes Lettres, 2018), pp. 57-67 (p. 58).

³⁴³ Janjar, 'Une division du travail intellectuel', p. 59.

³⁴⁴ Janjar, 'Une division du travail intellectuel', p. 59.

³⁴⁵ See Jan Jaap de Ruiter and Karima Ziamari, *Le marché sociolinguistique contemporain du Maroc* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014).

³⁴⁶ See Jean-Pierre Chauffour, 'Le Maroc à l'horizon 2040', *Arab National Development Planning Portal*, 2018 <https://andp.unescwa.org/sites/default/files/2021-10/SodaPDF-compressed-211066FR_reduce_0.pdf> [accessed 09 August 2023].

³⁴⁷ Ahmed Boukous, 'L'avenir du français au Maghreb', in *L'Avenir du français*, ed. by Jacques Maurais, Pierre Dumont, Jean-Marie Klinkenberg, Bruno Maurer, and Patrick Chardenet (Paris: Éditions des archives contemporaines, 2008), pp. 205-09.

³⁴⁸ Janjar, 'Une division du travail intellectuel', p. 64. Until the 1970s, there had been a fairly equal distribution of literary production in Arabic and French.

³⁴⁹ For example, the study does not look at how specificities such as class, race, gender, religion, socio-economic status, and location might interact with language use.

³⁵⁰ Libbie McQuillan, 'The Francophone Bande Dessinée: An Introduction', in *The Francophone Bande Dessinée*, ed. by Charles Forsdick, Laurence Grove, and Libbie McQuillan (Amsterdam: Brill, 2005), pp. 7-13 (p. 8).

with the widely publicised Asterix phenomenon. With the arrival of the new adult BD in the 1970s, the medium was quickly and commonly accepted as an adult activity, having previously been relegated to the sphere of children's pastimes as part of post-WW2 censorship legislation. By 1989, a state-funded home for BD was built in Angoulême and the BD became a 'showpiece promoting French culture in embassies around the world.'³⁵¹ As Libbie McQuillan explores, the process of state-led institutionalisation established and legitimised the Francophone BD in the cultural canon.³⁵² Ann Miller attests that, despite remaining unclear whether state recognition sought to consecrate BD as an art form, or simply to acknowledge its commercial significance as a consumer product competing with contemporary American cultural mass production, 'the inclusion of a museum dedicated to preserving the *patrimoine* [...] through the collection of original *bande dessinée* pages does, however, associate the medium with official culture.'³⁵³ This suggests that BD holds a particular position within institutionalised French cultural production, which would be understood and recognised by French readers, including Slimani.

In comparison, BD in Morocco has experienced a very different trajectory. Kenza Sefrioui looks at how BD production in Morocco has largely been characterised by a (re)telling of Moroccan socio-political and cultural history since the early 2000s.³⁵⁴ Sefrioui marks the publication of Abdelaziz Mouride's *On affame bien les rats* (2000) as 'la naissance de la bande dessinée au Maroc.'³⁵⁵ Speaking of Mouride's seminal work, Bichr Bennani (co-founder of Tarik Éditions) stated that

on a créé Tarik éditions pour le publier [...] Cela n'aurait pas été possible sous l'ère Basri. On ne savait pas si ça aller [*sic*] passer, mais on a tenté le coup. On a décidé de le faire en coédition avec Paris Méditerranée, au cas où ça aurait bloqué au Maroc.³⁵⁶

³⁵¹ McQuillan, 'The Francophone Bande Dessinée', p. 8.

³⁵² McQuillan, 'The Francophone Bande Dessinée', p. 11.

³⁵³ Ann Miller, *Reading Bande Dessinée: Critical Approaches to French-language Comic Strip* (Bristol; Chicago: Intellect Ltd, 2007), p. 42. Emphasis in original.

³⁵⁴ Miller, *Reading Bande Dessinée*, p. 42.

³⁵⁵ Kenza Sefrioui, 'Balbutiantes bulles', *MEDiakitab*, June 2013

<<https://mediakitab.com/publication/balbutiantes-bulles/>> [accessed 14 November 2023]. Abdelaziz Mouride was a far-left activist, journalist, and artist. As a former member of the 1970 *Mouvement du 23 Mars*, he was arrested in 1974 and sentenced to twenty-two years imprisonment. His time in prison inspired *On affame bien les rats* which exposed prison conditions in Morocco and heavily criticised the *années de plomb* under Hassan II's reign. His initial drawings were smuggled out of prison and first published pseudonymously in Belgium under the title *Dans les entrailles de ma patrie*. Mouride eventually completed and published the BD in Morocco in 2000.

³⁵⁶ Bichr Bennani quoted in Sefrioui, 'Balbutiantes bulles.' For context, Driss Basri served as interior minister from 1979 to 1999. Basri worked closely with Hassan II from the beginning of the '80s to the end of the '90s.

The authoritarian regime of Hassan II (1961-99) marked the repressive socio-political period otherwise known as the *années de plomb*. During this period, but particularly from the 1960s to the 1980s, Morocco saw extensive human rights violations against regime dissidents and democracy activists.³⁵⁷ State violence was characterised by disappearances, indefinite imprisonment, torture, arbitrary detention, and political assassinations. It also included censoring freedom of speech and other civil liberties. Accordingly, this not only influenced arts production during the period but also in the immediate aftermath of Hassan II's reign and the following years. (Self-)censorship remained prevalent as freedom of expression was still limited to being deemed 'unthreatening to the King and his control over religious affairs.'³⁵⁸ Likely signalling how fears of governmental repercussions continued to limit artistic production beyond the *années de plomb* (and continues to do so albeit to lessening degrees), this indicates why BD production in Morocco only appeared to emerge in the early 2000s. In the years following Mouride's *On affame bien les rats*, several works emerged exploring similar aspects of Morocco's socio-political and cultural history. For example, Mohammed Nadrani's *Les Sarcophages du complexe* (2005), *L'Emir Ben Abdelkrim* (2007), and *La Capitale des roses* (2009), in addition to Larbi Babahadi's *L'Hadj Belaïd* (2008) and *Les Racines d'Argania* (2010).

However, despite this increase in Moroccan BD production since the early 2000s, it has remained relatively small. As Sefrioui notes, by 2013, only around ten Moroccan BDs had been published in the previous twenty years. This greatly contrasts with other countries on the African continent such as Cameroon, Senegal, and the Democratic Republic of Congo where BD artists can make a living from small, inexpensive newspaper publications.³⁵⁹ Due to difficulties in the Moroccan publishing industry – for example, low sales, lack of bookshops, second-hand booksellers disappearing, and distribution difficulties – BD readership numbers have remained low.³⁶⁰ Sefrioui also attributes low readership numbers in Morocco to the fact

³⁵⁷ See Cynthia J. Becker, 'Art, self-censorship, and public discourse: contemporary Moroccan artists at the crossroads', *Contemporary Islam*, 3 (2009), 143-66 <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0085-z>> and Marguerite Rolinde and Abderrahim Berrada, *Le mouvement marocain des droits de l'homme : entre consensus national et engagement citoyen* (Paris: Karthala, 2002).

³⁵⁸ Becker, 'Art, self-censorship, and public discourse', p. 144. This refers to the beginning of King Mohamed VI's reign in 1999.

³⁵⁹ Sefrioui, 'Balbutiantes bulles.'

³⁶⁰ Sefrioui, 'Balbutiantes bulles.' Alexandra Gueydan-Turek also points to the structural shortcomings that have hindered BD growth in the Maghreb more broadly such as the high cost of publications and capillary distribution and sales networks. See Alexandra Gueydan-Turek, 'Le Renouveau de la bande dessinée maghrébine contemporaine', *Nouvelles Études Francophones*, 34. 1 (2019), 45-59 (p. 47) <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/26860370>> [accessed 06 September 2023].

that the form is often associated with children's literature and has also been used for communicative and educational purposes.³⁶¹ For example, IRCAM (Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture) published the first comic in Amazigh *Tagellit Nayt Ufella* (2005) by Meryem Demnati and the organisation Leadership féminin produced *Raconte-moi la nouvelle moudawana* (2005) in French and Darija to teach young Moroccans (including those living abroad) about the family code. Yet, as Sefrioui asserts, these examples appear to privilege message over form and are arguably 'loin de constituer des œuvres susceptibles d'ancrer le 9^{ème} Art dans la culture visuelle et littéraire du Maroc.'³⁶²

Moreover, regarding the wider critical framing of Moroccan BD, Alexandra Gueydan-Turek highlights how BD in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia is largely understood as a peripheral genre existing outside of the region. Within this critical framing, BD from North Africa is seemingly produced by diaspora populations and intended for an 'educated' readership generally located in France.³⁶³ This understanding can largely be traced back to the number of prolific Algerian artists such as Aïder, Slim, Boudjellal, and Gyps who fled Algeria for France in the 1990s due to the civil war there and produced almost exclusively Francophone content in exile.³⁶⁴ Consequently, Gueydan-Turek demonstrates how the few specialists interested in the field tend to locate North African BD as looking northwards towards Europe, particularly France. Thus, BD in the Maghreb seems to be placed largely within the context of postcolonial fracture(s) along a vertical North-South axis, which focuses on language, nationality, and histories in relation to France.³⁶⁵

Nevertheless, this understanding is arguably restrictive as it assumes homogeneity across Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian BD production and consumption in an exclusively francocentric framework. As Gueydan-Turek argues, this critical framework does not recognise the growing significance of contemporary multilingual BD in the region, where increased horizontal socio-cultural exchanges – for example with the Middle East – have destabilised the image of North African BD existing solely on the fringes of French production.³⁶⁶ For example, in Morocco, festivals such as the *Forum International de la Bande Dessinée de Tétouan* are dedicated exclusively to BD, where artists from Africa, the Middle

³⁶¹ Sefrioui, 'Balbutiantes bulles.'

³⁶² Sefrioui, 'Balbutiantes bulles.'

³⁶³ Gueydan-Turek, 'Le Renouveau', p. 45.

³⁶⁴ Gueydan-Turek, 'Le Renouveau', p. 45.

³⁶⁵ For example, see Mark McKinney, *Redrawing French Empire in Comics* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2013).

³⁶⁶ Gueydan-Turek, 'Le Renouveau', p. 46.

East, Europe, and the Americas exhibit and exchange their work with each other and international critics and researchers.³⁶⁷

Furthermore, in recent years, several fanzine initiatives have been established in Morocco, and the country has seen a growth in Arabic-language content. For example, in 2012, Hicham Habchi and Mehdi Yassire (aliases Pyroow and Koman) paved the way for digital production by publishing *Ramadan Hardcore* online in Arabic.³⁶⁸ In 2013, Salah Malouli brought together a group of Moroccan multidisciplinary artists to set up the Skefkef Collective in Casablanca to encourage BD production and promote its accessibility across the Maghreb. This represented the first Moroccan independent comics magazine written in Darija.³⁶⁹ Additionally, in Casablanca, the annual music festival L'Boulevard run by the non-profit organisation EAC-L'Boulevard (*Education artistique et culturelle*) aims to promote and develop contemporary music and urban culture in Morocco. During the festival, the organisation also publishes the collector's edition *L'Kounache*.³⁷⁰ The multilingual magazine is dedicated to alternative creative production across all mediums, including BD.³⁷¹ As a result, these recent developments towards alternative, more accessible publishing formats (through language, digital content, fanzines, or independent magazines) appear to demonstrate how BD illustrators

³⁶⁷ Anon., 'Forum International de la Bande Dessinée de Tétouan', *Facebook* <https://www.facebook.com/FIBaDeT/?locale=fr_FR> [accessed 02 October 2023]. There appears to have also been a university-led BD festival in Kenitra; however, it is unclear whether this is still running. See Martin Levalois, 'Le 4ème festival universitaire de la Bande Dessinée de Kenitra le 7 juillet', *Le Magazine du Manager*, 03 July 2010 <<https://lemagazinedumanager.com/1144-le-4eme-festival-universitaire-de-la-bande-dessinee-de-kenitra-le-7-juillet.html>> [accessed 02 October 2023].

³⁶⁸ *Ramadan Hardcore* is a weekly series illustrating humorous situations inspired by daily life during Ramadan in Morocco. See Ramadan Hardcore, 'Ramadan Hardcore', *Facebook* <<https://www.facebook.com/RamadanHardcore>> [accessed 21 November 2023].

³⁶⁹ In addition to playing an active role in the new pan-Arab movement and the growth of comics since the regional uprisings of 2011, the collective is also involved in the Moroccan artistic and cultural scene and youth movement. Their work overlaps various aspects of comics and urban art and simultaneously echoes notions of the local which are reflected through the language and dialects used in the comics (Darija and Amazigh), as well as in Casablanca's urban environments and subcultures. Their work deals with issues such as identity, representation, and censorship. See Anon., 'Engaged Moroccan Comics 18', *American University of Beirut* <<https://www.aub.edu.lb/cacs/Pages/Engaged-Moroccan-Comics-18.aspx>> [accessed 21 November 2023] and Skefkef, 'Skefkef', *Facebook* <<https://www.facebook.com/skefkefmag>> [accessed 21 November 2023].

³⁷⁰ *L'Kounache* translates as 'notebook' in Darija.

³⁷¹ See Anon., 'Histoire', *Boulevard* <<https://2023.boulevard.ma/histoire/>> [accessed 22 November 2023]; Anon., 'L'Boulevard... Pourquoi l'hommage à Tonton ?' *Les Éco*, 05 September 2018 <<https://leseco.ma/culture/pour-sa-18e-edition-l-boulevard-rend-un-hommage-posthume-a-tonton.html>> [accessed 22 November 2023] and Nadia Kiwan, 'Moroccan Multiplicities: Performing Transnationalism and Alternative Nationalism in the Contemporary Urban Music Scene', *Cahiers d'Études Africaines*, 54, 216 (2014), 975-97 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/24476191>> [accessed 23 November 2023].

and scriptwriters in Morocco are attempting to overcome some of the aforementioned challenges they face, which restrict Moroccan BD to a ‘minor’ form.³⁷²

Returning to *Paroles d'honneur*, these structural issues facing BD creation in Morocco might go some way to explain why French publishing house Les Arènes proposed and published the BD. If the question of freedom of expression remains an issue for scriptwriters and illustrators in Morocco, particularly when depicting themes related to sex, sexuality, and religion, Slimani's work may not have been easily published. Likewise, Moroccan visual artist and activist Zainab Fasiki published *Hshouma : corps et sexualité au Maroc* (2019) with Parisian Éditions Massot.³⁷³ Fasiki's work also deals with questions of sex and sexuality in Morocco. Reflecting on the socio-linguistic barriers that arise when publishing in French, she states:

Je n'ai pas écrit ce livre en langue marocaine, car nous n'avons même plus les mots justes en darija pour parler de sexualité. [...] Par exemple, aucun terme n'existe en darija pour décrire les organes génitaux avec objectivité ou la sexualité avec respect. Ce vocabulaire existe en arabe, en amazigh et en français (considéré comme une des langues principales depuis la colonisation), mais la plupart des familles marocaines ne parlent pas ces langues. Le darija est le plus courant au Maroc, donc s'il n'a pas les mots pour nommer les tabous, comment allons-nous réussir à les briser ?³⁷⁴

Although Fasiki does not further elucidate why her text was published in France, her awareness of the limitations of publishing in French in terms of language suggests that, in this instance, publishing in France may have allowed for greater freedom in terms of expression and representation in a way that was not possible in Morocco. However, as Fasiki highlights and as previously discussed, traditional BD formats are not particularly accessible in Morocco, especially French-language publications.

In contrast, Slimani does not appear to acknowledge how access to *Paroles d'honneur* in Morocco (particularly for young people) might be limited due to linguistic and publishing

³⁷² For example, censorship, accessibility, high publication costs, and distribution difficulties. The question of freedom of expression arguably remains a fundamental issue facing BD production in Morocco today. For example, scriptwriters and illustrators depicting nudity or religious scenes can be met with resistance from as early as the printing press during the publishing process. See Sefrioui, ‘Balbutiantes bulles.’

³⁷³ See Zainab Fasiki, *Hshouma : corps et sexualité au Maroc* (Paris: Éditions Massot, 2019). Using only black, red, and white, Fasiki's part graphic novel, part illustrated manifesto, part sex education book, seeks to collapse the Moroccan concept of *hshouma*. This roughly translates as ‘shame’ but includes a wider social understanding and perception of bodies, gender, and sexuality. A discussion of how Darija treats words related to sex and sexuality goes beyond the scope of this thesis; however, Fasiki demonstrates an awareness of how linguistic expression and reception can be limited depending on the language used in Morocco.

³⁷⁴ Fasiki, *Hshouma*, p. 7.

formats. This arguably becomes significant when considering how there appear to be alternative ways for BD to reach young people and youth culture more generally in Morocco, which are perhaps more viable and accessible through established creative networks. As BD in Morocco is not institutionally established in the same way that it is in France, Slimani seems to locate *Paroles d'honneur* in a traditional, francocentric mapping of the BD medium. Consequently, she does not appear to recognise or go beyond the limitations of transposing this to the Moroccan context. Accordingly, Slimani's declaration that *Paroles d'honneur* was intended for the 'prochaine génération' might best be interpreted as one looking towards or already existing within France, and to an upper middle-class Moroccan audience. Within this context, the spatiality of *Paroles d'honneur* does not seem to act as a neutral point for Slimani to play out the narratives from *Sexe et mensonges*, particularly to multiple readerships across France, Morocco, and beyond. This is pertinent when contextualised within Slimani's trajectory, considering how the performative process of *becoming* literary celebrity writer appears to hinge on perceptions around symbolic, cultural, and commercial cultural value in the field of cultural production (as explored in Chapter 1).

‘Ways of Seeing’: collaboration with Laetitia Coryn in *Paroles d'honneur*

The question of artistic collaboration and how it contributes to the formal structuring of *Paroles d'honneur* is also significant, particularly in the context of authorial positionality, audience(s), and reception. It is essential to consider the implications of refracting Slimani's work through the lens of graphic artist and illustrator Laetitia Coryn. For Charles Green,

artists appear in their art, voluntarily placing themselves center stage in self-portraits but also at the margins of all their other works, constructing themselves through brush marks, in signature style, by individual preferences, and through repeated motifs—in short, from the intersection of subjectivity with medium.³⁷⁵

If the artist appears in their work through different shades of intentionality, then the interaction between subjectivity and medium is particularly relevant to collaboration. Green maintains that artistic collaboration represents a unique and evident example of how the figure of the artist can be manipulated, given that collaboration ‘involves a deliberately chosen alteration of

³⁷⁵ Charles Green, *The Third Hand: Collaboration in Art from Conceptualism to Postmodernism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. ix.

artistic identity from individual to composite subjectivity.³⁷⁶ Subsequently, Green suggests that new understandings of artistic authorship can appear in artistic collaborations ‘that may or not be consistent with the artists’ solo productions before they take up collaborative projects.’³⁷⁷

Moreover, Grant H. Kester shows how although collaboration in its simplest meaning suggests ‘working together’, ‘in conjuncture with’, or engaging in a ‘united labour’, it can also be clouded by associations with betrayal and treasonable cooperation. By extension, the association with cooperation might eventually lead to notions of cooperative witness and a ‘complicitous submission to authority.’³⁷⁸ Kester continues, stating it is ‘telling that within the continuum of terms [used] for working together, each carries with it a counter-meaning: a warning, so to speak, of its ethical undecidability.’³⁷⁹

Whilst Green and Kester are primarily looking at international contemporary art from the 1960s to 2000s, thinking about how authorial/artistic identity shifts from the individual to form a composite subjectivity through collaboration, and what this means in terms of intention, positionality, and power is relevant to the collaborative BD. Indeed, McCloud offers advice for those wishing to write stories for others to draw in the comics medium. He suggests that ‘even if you **team up** with someone to create comics, your stories will be at their strongest if they feel like they were created with a **single-minded** purpose.’³⁸⁰ This seems to highlight how, in the case of collaboration between scriptwriters and illustrators, a need for a sense of ‘oneness’ is paramount to the way that composite subjectivity manifests itself on the pages of the BD, as well as how it responds to specific, local contexts. Although there appears to be an assumption that the writer and illustrator will share a common direction, this probably does not always equate to an equal distribution of influence and power over the shared narrative.

In the case of *Paroles d'honneur*, the collaborative nature of the work seems to represent a pragmatic choice given that Slimani is a writer and not an illustrator. Thus, collaboration appears to offer Slimani the possibility of shared resources, knowledge, and experience. However, to successfully collaborate on a project such as *Paroles d'honneur*, the writer and illustrator would arguably need compatible outlooks. Before creating *Paroles d'honneur*, Coryn went to Morocco where

³⁷⁶ Green, *The Third Hand*, p. x.

³⁷⁷ Green, *The Third Hand*, p. x.

³⁷⁸ Grant H. Kester, *The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context* (Durham; London: Duke University Press, 2011), pp. 1-2.

³⁷⁹ Kester, *The One and the Many*, p. 2.

³⁸⁰ Scott McCloud, *Making Comics: Storytelling Secrets of Comics, Manga and Graphic Novels* (New York: Harper, 2006), p. 149. Emphases in original.

[elle a] pu accompagner Leïla [Slimani] dans sa famille et dans trois villes différentes : Rabat, Casablanca et Tanger. [Elles y ont] rencontré des féministes, des historiens, théologiens, journalistes, ou tout simplement des gens issus de différents milieux, du tisserand à la femme d'affaires. Pendant une semaine, [elle a] pris des photos, observé le monde qui [l']entourait, pour imaginer comment [elle allait] mettre en scène le texte de Leïla.³⁸¹

Coryn emphasises the intentional and collaborative nature of the project, whereby she works with and alongside Slimani to visually represent the original text (*Sexe et mensonges*). Coryn and Slimani travel to Morocco together, but the research trip appears to be directed by Slimani's connections and relationship(s) to Morocco. This implies that Coryn is somewhat dependent on and influenced by how Slimani introduces her to Morocco.

In addition, when asked what she knew about Moroccan society, Coryn responded:

Pas grande chose à vrai dire et absolument rien sur la question de la sexualité. J'étais une feuille vierge sur laquelle il fallait qu'on écrive une histoire. J'en ai appris un peu plus à travers Leïla, sa famille, ainsi qu'une amie qui travaille au Maroc en tant que chercheuse.³⁸²

Coryn highlights arriving at the project with little knowledge of Moroccan society and culture, particularly regarding sex and sexuality. Before working with Slimani to illustrate *Paroles d'honneur*, Coryn had previously collaborated with French psychiatrist and sexologist Philippe Brenot to create *Sex Story: La première histoire de la sexualité en BD* (2016), a comic book about the cultural history of sex from an exclusively Western perspective.³⁸³ Despite demonstrating Coryn's experience of representing questions about sex and sexuality in the BD medium before *Sexe et mensonges*, it appeared to be largely rooted in a Western context. Reflecting on her experience in Morocco, Coryn goes on to express that,

³⁸¹ Aïda Semlali, 'Laetitia Coryn : « Les jeunes au Maroc ont majoritairement soif de liberté en matière de sexualité »', *HuffPost Maroc*, 16 September 2017 <https://web.archive.org/web/20170918172938/https://www.huffpostmaghreb.com/2017/09/16/laetitia-coryn-leila-slimani-bande-dessinee-paroles-dhonneur_n_18015238.html> [accessed 03 October 2023].

³⁸² Semlali, 'Laetitia Coryn.'

³⁸³ The original text has since been given a new title, *L'incroyable histoire du sexe – Livre 1 – En Occident* (2020), in an expanded two-part BD series with the additional text entitled *L'incroyable histoire du sexe – Livre 2 – de l'Afrique à l'Asie* (2020).

[...] il me reste encore tout à apprendre car il y a de nombreux aspects de cette société que je n'ai pas pu voir. Or, pour découvrir et connaître réellement un pays et ses mœurs, il faut y passer beaucoup de temps.³⁸⁴

This is reminiscent of John Berger's assertion that 'the way we see things is affected by what we know or what we believe. [...] We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice.'³⁸⁵ Berger continues that 'every image embodies a way of seeing. Yet, [...] our perception or appreciation of an image depends also upon our own way of seeing.'³⁸⁶ Although the context of Berger's writing resides in the act of looking at, or seeing, visual representations in Western art, he suggests that a gaze cannot be neutral. Similarly, Paul Earlie states that 'the objectivity of the historian [...] is threatened as much by their own psyche's repression of ideational content as by their suppression (or conversion) of affect.'³⁸⁷ Here, the historian represents a collector or disseminator of stories. In Coryn's case, she too is arguably implicated in the collection and dissemination of the narratives intermedially adapted to the BD. This suggests that Coryn's artistic identity is not only influenced by her own socio-cultural positionality but also by Slimani's way of seeing and (re)presenting Morocco. In turn, this accentuates how, when combined with Slimani's words, Coryn's positionality and artistic identity affect how the narratives are filtered from source to reader, embedding them with different meanings inside the collaborative context.

Furthermore, Coryn appears to partially recognise this question of positionality and composite subjectivity (in terms of nationality), expressing that:

de manière plus globale pendant ce voyage, en tant que Française, je n'avais forcément pas le même point de vue qu'une Marocaine. Il a donc fallu que je me remette en question pour essayer de comprendre et de m'ouvrir, sinon je n'aurais pas pu accompagner pleinement Leïla pour la réalisation de la BD. Ce fut pour moi un voyage très édifiant.³⁸⁸

As a white, French, cis-gender woman, Coryn's positionality is undoubtedly significant in the context of visually representing aspects of Moroccan culture and society. This raises questions about why Slimani did not recruit an artist based in Morocco. It is important not to make

³⁸⁴ Semlali, 'Laetitia Coryn.'

³⁸⁵ John Berger and others, *Ways of Seeing* (London: British Broadcasting Corporation and Penguin Books, 1972), p. 8.

³⁸⁶ Berger, *Ways of Seeing*, p. 10.

³⁸⁷ Paul Earlie, *Derrida and the Legacy of Psychoanalysis* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 128.

³⁸⁸ Semlali, 'Laetitia Coryn.'

generalised assumptions about Slimani's intentions; however, her choice to collaborate with Coryn is notable, especially given that the collaborative act involves a deliberately chosen or intentional shift in artistic identity from individual to composite subjectivity. As the collaborative project grew out of *Sexe et mensonges* and Coryn appears to rely on Slimani's guidance, Slimani probably has more power and influence in producing and representing the 'single narrative.' In this regard, *Paroles d'honneur* constitutes an unevenly weighted co-production; Slimani ultimately has more input than Coryn.

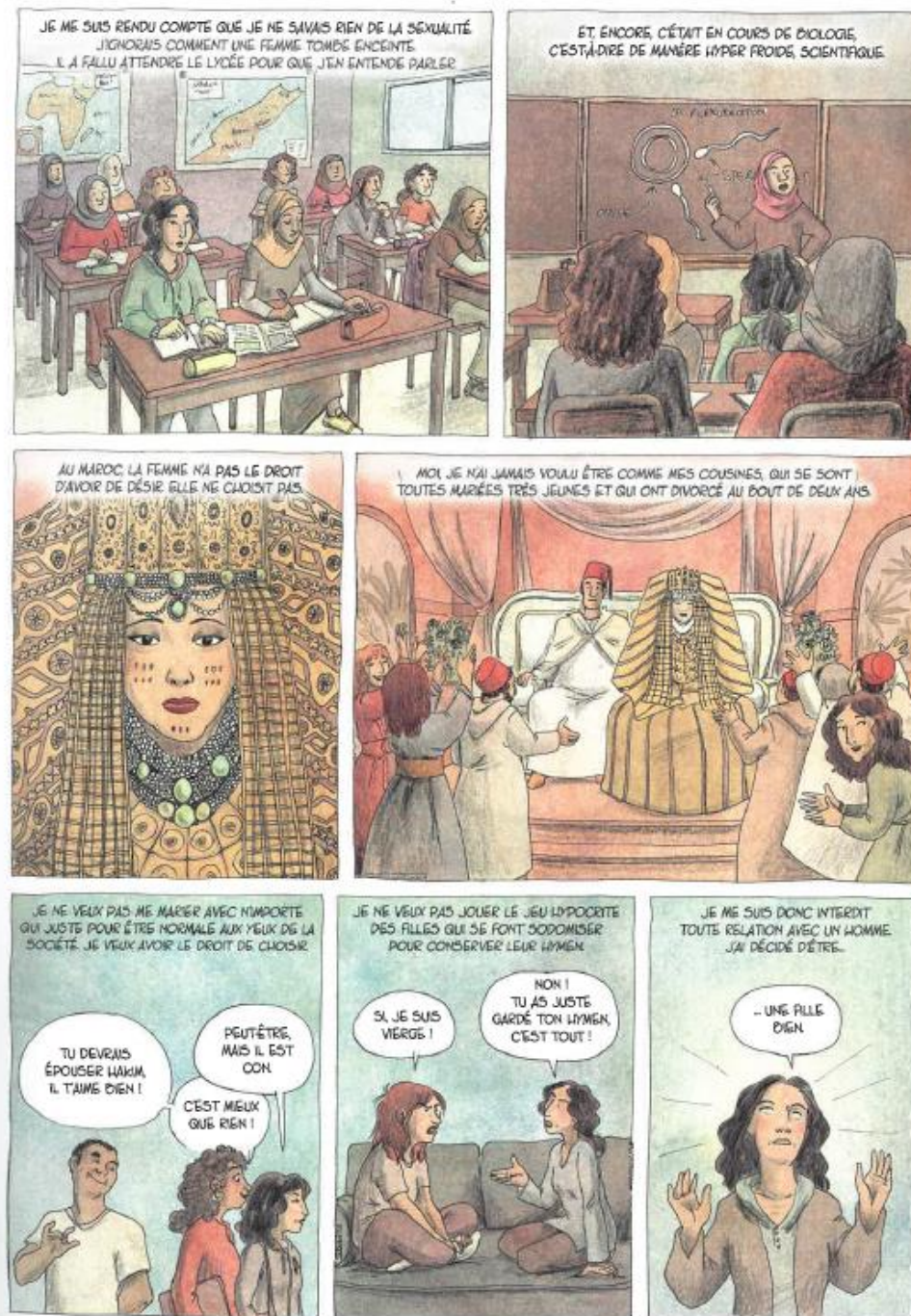


Figure 8

Yet, the collaboration allows for new iterations of artistic authorship to emerge in the intermedial adaptation, offering subtle changes in how Slimani's narratives are presented at the intersection of subjectivity and medium. Figure 8 depicts a scene where Nour narrates her perception of gendered roles in Morocco.³⁸⁹ It homes in on the question of marriage and virginity and largely follows the dialogue presented in *Sexe et mensonges*. In the essay, Nour is quoted saying,

je veux pas être comme mes cousines qui se sont toutes mariées très jeunes et qui ont divorcé au bout de deux ans. Je ne veux pas me marier avec n'importe qui, juste pour être normale aux yeux de la société. Je veux avoir le droit de choisir.³⁹⁰

Nour goes on to state that 'rester célibataire ne me dérange pas', as she moves on to discuss her experience as a single working woman.³⁹¹ However, as Figure 8 demonstrates, the narrative diverges from *Sexe et mensonges*. This arguably proposes multiple possible character pathways which seem to reveal, as Nelson suggests, the two-fold Western-leaning lens applied to the narratives.³⁹² A panel presents an unnamed Moroccan woman appearing to wear a *lebsa lfasiya* (a traditional wedding dress from the Fez region), with the narrative bubble 'au Maroc, la femme n'a pas le droit d'avoir de désir. Elle ne choisit pas.'³⁹³ Nour's narration subsequently appears to be written onto the unnamed character rather than actively commenting on the marriage scene depicted in the following panel. This evokes gendered connotations of passivity and domination being inherently linked to Moroccan culture, irrespective of class, religion, ethnicity, or sexuality. Coryn presents the bride's expression as forlorn, the traditional Fassi dress appearing to weigh down on her physically and metaphorically in a static moment that prevents movement. Audiences outside of Morocco might recognise the traditional wedding attire from Fez as being culturally 'Moroccan.'³⁹⁴ As a result, Coryn's image might be taken as representative of Moroccan cultural practices more broadly, particularly among readers unfamiliar with the country's regional cultural specificities.

³⁸⁹ For Figure 8, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 15.

³⁹⁰ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 54.

³⁹¹ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), p. 54.

³⁹² Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences', p. 61.

³⁹³ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 15.

³⁹⁴ There are various types of traditional wedding wear originating from various regions and cultures within Morocco, for example: the *Lebsa R'batia* (from Rabat) or the *Soussia* (Amazigh dress). See Jihad Dardar, 'Marrying Love and Fashion: Wedding Dresses in Morocco', *Morocco World News*, 18 July 2020 <<https://www.morocoworldnews.com/2020/07/310720/marrying-love-and-fashion-wedding-dresses-in-morocco>> [accessed 17 October 2023].

Returning to Figure 8, the bottom three panels appear juxtaposed against the images of the bride/wedding scene. Nour's narrative frames the panel, stating 'je veux avoir le droit de choisir', whilst the image below shows a woman suggesting that Nour marries a friend because 'c'est mieux que rien.'³⁹⁵ As Nelson notes, the final panel has no reference in *Sexe et mensonges*.³⁹⁶ Arguably, this shows how Coryn's illustrations refract and (re)shape the narratives. Nour expresses: 'je me suis donc interdit toute relation avec un homme. J'ai décidé d'être ... une fille bien.'³⁹⁷ The image portrays Nour's character with her palms raised, facing the sky, her eyes looking upwards. There appears to be a golden glow radiating from her head, emphasised with black lines marking outwards. Nour's clothing looks lighter and less restrictive than the traditional wedding dress depicted above, and she is drawn in movement, able to move her body freely. This pose possibly connotes saint symbolism in Christian art, namely Catholicism. Indeed, Nelson asserts that this problematically 'maps Catholic sainthood onto a Muslim-born character.'³⁹⁸ In contrast to the image of the bride, Nour appears to exist outside of any obvious marker of cultural difference or location, both in terms of her spatial location (the simple blue background) and her clothes (the neutral colours and simple style). Coryn perhaps attempts to represent a neutral space from which Nour can reflect on questions about gender, sex, and desire in Morocco. Nevertheless, by alluding to religious practices more readily associated with Europe and presenting these in ways that might be read as more 'neutral', Coryn's depictions risk engaging with French universalist feminist assumptions rooted in European hegemony.

Another example of how Coryn's illustrations mediate the narratives through collaboration and intermedial adaptation is evident at the end of *Paroles d'honneur*. A particular sequence shows Slimani visiting a bar in Casablanca to interview a sex worker.³⁹⁹ The dialogue is directly quoted from the interview with 'F.' in *Sexe et mensonges* and Slimani's character is absent from the exchange.⁴⁰⁰ As the dialogue remains identical, Coryn's lens appears to shift the perspectival framing of the narrative subtly. In *Sexe et mensonges*, Slimani does not give any descriptive details about the bar and makes no mention of *La Corniche* in

³⁹⁵ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 15.

³⁹⁶ Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences', p. 61.

³⁹⁷ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 15.

³⁹⁸ Nelson, 'Deconstructing the Influences', p. 62.

³⁹⁹ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, pp. 76-77.

⁴⁰⁰ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 125-30.

Casablanca.⁴⁰¹ As seen in Figure 9, Coryn appears to depict the bar space as closed and claustrophobic; there is no natural light, and the bodies are close together.⁴⁰² The air appears thick, heavy with smoke, and the feeling of physical proximity between the people in the closed, dark environment evokes the idea that this is a hidden space, existing outside of the realms of social acceptability.



Figure 9

⁴⁰¹ *La Corniche*, part of the Ain Diab neighbourhood, is the seafront promenade in Casablanca that spreads over several kilometres facing the Atlantic. There are numerous private beach clubs, hotels, restaurants, bars and nightclubs.

⁴⁰² For Figure 9, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 76.

In contrast, the sex worker's story continues over images of Slimani walking along the light, open space of Casablanca's *La Corniche* (Figure 10).⁴⁰³ Nelson explains that 'the first panel shows Slimani looking out over the Mediterranean Sea, a space accessible to her that leads to her primary home. The sex worker dreams of Slimani's reality – the ability to cross



Figure 10

⁴⁰³ For Figure 10, see Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles*, p. 77.

the Mediterranean – an irony that goes unnoticed in *Sexe et mensonges*.⁴⁰⁴ This ‘irony’ is perhaps left unnoticed in *Sexe et mensonges* because Slimani is facing the Atlantic in *Paroles d’honneur*, not the Mediterranean. Nelson’s slippage is problematic because it potentially maps assumptions about migration routes towards Europe onto the narratives presented by Slimani and Coryn. Indeed, hegemonic narratives about im/migration in European media and political discourses have sensationalised the image of the ‘Border Spectacle’, which focuses on the trope of Mediterranean Sea crossings and includes topoi of dramatic rescues, shipwrecks, and body bags.⁴⁰⁵ As Nataša Kovačević argues, despite only 10 percent of all undocumented migrants arriving in Europe by sea, it has become the ‘literal and metaphorical locus of the migrant drama.’⁴⁰⁶ Furthermore, Kovačević maintains that

focusing on the sea as central to the migrant journey makes invisible not only the EU border policing that occurs much before migrants reach the Mediterranean, in “third countries” that receive EU aid to intercept and detain migrants, but also the broader geopolitical context that leads to mass migration in the first place, including the ongoing neocolonial dynamic between the global North and the global South.⁴⁰⁷

In this respect, migration seems to be treated as an exceptional event abstracted from the context of this structural violence. Ida Danewid argues that this contributes to a liberal ‘ethics based on mourning and welcoming migrants as universal humans – rather than as victims of a shared, global present built on colonialism, racism, and white supremacy.’⁴⁰⁸

On the one hand, Nelson mistaking the Atlantic for the Mediterranean shows that she has not been to Casablanca. On the other, it signals how Coryn’s depictions of the sea, alongside Slimani’s dialogue expressing a desire to go to Europe, might feed into such Eurocentric imaginaries that locate migration from North African countries like Morocco

⁴⁰⁴ Nelson, ‘Deconstructing the Influences’, p. 68.

⁴⁰⁵ Nicholas De Genova employs the term ‘Border Spectacle’, arguing that by presenting the border as ‘the main scene of the crime,’ the Border Spectacle ‘conjures up the fetish of transgression’ by continuously ‘augment[ing] and embellish[ing] the mundane and diminutive human mobility of migrants with the ‘mystique of an obnoxious and unpardonable transgression.’ See De Genova, ‘Spectacles of migrant ‘illegality’: the scene of exclusion, the obscene of inclusion’, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36. 7 (2013), 1180-98 (pp. 1183-89) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01419870.2013.783710>>.

⁴⁰⁶ Nataša Kovačević, ‘Dissolving into the sea: cinematic migrants and the problem of agency’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 22. 4 (2019), 428-45 (p. 428) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790.2019.1693110>>.

⁴⁰⁷ Kovačević, ‘Dissolving into the sea’, p. 429.

⁴⁰⁸ Ida Danewid, ‘White innocence in the Black Mediterranean: hospitality and the erasure of history’, *Third World Quarterly*, 37. 8 (2017), 1674-89 (p. 1683) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1331123>>.

exclusively within and across the Mediterranean Sea as a clandestine point of ‘crisis.’⁴⁰⁹ Accordingly, this represents an unequal South-North route of passage where France (and other European countries like Spain, Italy, or the U.K.) are positioned as the given privileged destinations. The combined images and dialogue in this sequence potentially centre Europe as the ‘solution’ (in this case, to the perceived restrictive nature of Moroccan gender norms), feeding into wider contemporary European discourses of migration. Here, in the process of intermedial adaptation, the collaborative nature of *Paroles d’honneur* arguably comes into focus in the way that Slimani’s authorial voice is reinforced by, but also refracted through, Coryn’s artistic contribution.

Collaboration continued: who is speaking for whom and to whom in *Paroles d’honneur*

As mentioned in Chapter 1, Slimani associates herself with a *féminisme universaliste* throughout *Sexe et mensonges*.⁴¹⁰ Kim discusses how *Sexe et mensonges* was initially published by a Parisian publisher for a French audience and emphasises the implications this has in terms of encouraging French exceptionalism.⁴¹¹ Evidence of this can be seen in the text as Slimani firmly adheres to universal values, placing them within the context of religion, feminism, and French Enlightenment thought:

Pour les islamistes [...], le féminisme universaliste n’est rien d’autre qu’un cheval de Troie de l’Occident. Pour eux, les principes des Lumières sont un leurre. [...] Et si vous vous risquez à dire que oui, vous enviez à l’Occident la liberté sexuelle, l’égalité des sexes, le fait de pouvoir, pour une femme, marcher tranquillement dans la rue la nuit, vous êtes considérée comme une traîtresse. Et sans doute vous servira-t-on cet argument ô philistin : « Une femme qui s’affiche en bikini, est-elle plus libre qu’une femme voilée ? Les femmes occidentales sont-elles vraiment plus heureuses ? »⁴¹²

⁴⁰⁹ Indeed, there is ‘migrance’ from the Atlantic coast, especially from southern Morocco, Mauritania, and Senegal, going to the Canary Islands. The term ‘migrance’ refers to the migrant’s situation or existential state, see Mary Gallagher, ‘De la condition du migrant à la migrance à l’œuvre’, in *La migrance à l’œuvre : Repérages esthétiques, éthiques et politiques*, ed. by Michael Brophy and Mary Gallagher (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2011), pp. 11-24 (p. 11). For further reading on these migrational routes, see Ruben Andersson, *Illegality, Inc.: Clandestine Migration and the Business of Bordering Europe* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2014).

⁴¹⁰ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 167-68. See also Chapter 1, pp. 58-59 of this thesis.

⁴¹¹ Kim, ‘Leïla Slimani’s taboos.’

⁴¹² Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 163-64.

Slimani delineates a binary between Islamists and the West. This suggests an innate incompatibility in terms of cultural ideologies, specifically within the context of feminism, gender, and sexuality. Slimani does not explain where these Islamists are located or what specific Western countries she is referring to, which arguably risks conflating Islamists with Muslim-majority countries in a homogenising and reductive ‘Western’ versus ‘Islamic’ socio-cultural binary. Slimani also seems to allude to the problematic and incorrect assumption that there is gender equality in ‘the West.’

There is also the fact that Slimani seems to attempt to ‘give voice’ to Moroccans (mostly women) from her own, socially privileged position of power. For example, Slimani acknowledges her privilege in *Sexe et mensonges* (2021). However, she frames this admission as somewhat irrelevant to her duty to practise universal ideology, which exists outside of class and culture:

J’ai beaucoup de chance, et peut-être devrais-je me contenter d’en jouir. [...] Car j’ai eu mes parents, j’ai grandi dans mon quartier, j’ai lu autant de livres que je voulais, j’ai voyagé, étudié. Mais je dois dire que j’ai rencontré au Maroc des centaines de personnes qui n’avaient pas eu tout cela, et qui, pourtant, croient qu’il faut vivre et laisser vivre, et que chaque homme a droit à la dignité et à la protection. Ça n’est pas une morale de bourgeois ou d’Occidental, ça n’est en rien contraire à ce qui fait le cœur de la culture marocaine. Le chemin des Lumières n’est l’apanage d’aucun peuple ni d’aucune religion, il devrait être notre horizon à tous.⁴¹³

As Kim highlights, by positioning French Enlightenment values as neutral and normative, ‘[Slimani] assumes the position of advocate (She Who Gives Voice to the Voiceless) in a benevolent and conscientious exercise of her privilege as a French Moroccan who is able to move freely between both worlds.’⁴¹⁴

However, in *Paroles d’honneur*, Slimani does not appear to make the same admission, only referencing her ‘envie de partager cette parole brute [...] de donner à entendre ces tranches de vie, souvent douloureuses, dans une société où beaucoup d’hommes et de femmes préfèrent détourner les yeux.’⁴¹⁵ In the context of the collaborative BD, most of the text in *Paroles d’honneur* is transposed directly from *Sexe et mensonges*, suggesting that Coryn’s artistic posture seems to be rooted in and influenced by Slimani’s authorial voice. Therefore,

⁴¹³ Slimani, *Sexe* (2021), pp. 112-13.

⁴¹⁴ Kim, ‘Leïla Slimani’s taboos.’

⁴¹⁵ Slimani and Coryn, *Paroles d’honneur*, p. 3.

collaborating with Coryn accentuates how Slimani's authorial intentionality is visually refracted through the BD. The visual nature of Coryn's representations, as evidenced in the previous section, arguably emphasises certain aspects of Slimani's universalist footing that are perhaps problematic. This makes space for potential interpretations that further dislocate *Paroles d'honneur* outside of Morocco and closer to France in a way that glosses over Slimani's own privileged position.

This is particularly significant given that widespread discourses around (in)visible, racialised feminine-presenting bodies, and what they mean to and for Republican values and rights discourses in France, would have been prominent at the time of the text's production.⁴¹⁶ Sidonie Smith explores the politics of crisis witnessing and reproduction in crisis comics circulating transnational human rights and rescue networks. Smith demonstrates how rights advocates 'exploit the apparent simplicity and easy accessibility of the comic form to make rights discourses and politics legible to large and diverse audiences.'⁴¹⁷ She points to the trend of certain crisis comics that

address a cosmopolitan readership in developed countries. These readers are addressed as privileged, safe subjects to be enlightened about conditions elsewhere, and their reading rehearses a form of rescue of the other through the invitation to empathetic identification and outrage. In both situations, genre can be thought of as social action, contributing to the "social work" of publicizing rights discourse, distributing rights identities, and interpellating the reader as a subject of rights activism.⁴¹⁸

Smith's use of terms to signify 'cosmopolitan' readers in 'developed' countries is perhaps dated, potentially carrying problematic assumptions associated with Western narratives of developmental 'progress.' However, she demonstrates how the BD medium legitimises using and consuming certain rights narratives, highlighting their commercial value. Such narratives maintain a rescue politics in which rights activism is associated with managing empathetic identification, rather than undoing structural inequalities and eliminating exploitation in and across national borders.

Smith further explores the layers of collaboration that exist to produce such works, from NGOs who function as a 'coaxer seeking the story', to interviewers, editors, and translators.⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ For example, the 2016 'burkini' ban. See Introduction, p. 14 and Chapter 1, p. 35, footnote 105.

⁴¹⁷ Smith, 'Human Rights and Comics', p. 62.

⁴¹⁸ Smith, 'Human Rights and Comics', pp. 63-64.

⁴¹⁹ Smith, 'Human Rights and Comics', p. 64.

These actors ‘coproduce the form the life story will take and the experiential history that will be included and excluded.’⁴²⁰ There is then the illustrator who visualises the story/ies, ‘distributing it in frames and gutters, [...] attaching affect to the width of a line or the design of the page. Collectively, all these actors coproduce the personal story, reframing it as boxes of victimization.’⁴²¹ Smith suggests that by imagining bodily difference in the boxes of simultaneous witnessing and victimisation, these graphic narratives ‘erase differences in local conditions on the ground’, recruiting gendered and racialised stereotypes to drive the narrative and direct the identification of the reader.⁴²² This foregrounds a fraught relationship between the boxes of witnessing and the neoliberal commodification of contemporary life narratives and suffering, which arguably raises questions about mediating the problematics of appropriating other people’s stories for graphic narration. Pointing to contemporary graphic memoirs that address the sometimes hidden and/or hypervisible bodies and histories represented in and through stereotypes, Smith argues that the notion of difference is established in the stylised frames of the BD and consequently unsettles everyday cultural framings.⁴²³ This raises important questions about artistic collaboration, representation, and reader interpretation of the otherness that is subsequently attached to those ‘who become objects against which routine violence is directed – by the West, by states, by society.’⁴²⁴ Still, as Smith demonstrates, this instrumentalisation of graphic life writing is more often than not operating through systems of remediation and authentication management. In turn, this reproduces asymmetrical power dynamics across the divide of rescue politics, creating the binary in which there are those who ‘know, teach, and manage and those who suffer and respond.’⁴²⁵

Although *Paroles d’honneur* does not represent a crisis comic the same way as Smith outlines above, the collaborative space of the BD – in this case as an intermedial adaptation – appears to facilitate a convergence of positionalities that have the potential to refract expressions of Eurocentric universalism linguistically and visually. Slimani and Coryn collaborate from different lived experiences of Morocco, but ultimately the co-production is directed by Slimani’s authorial voice, and her positionality is refracted through Coryn’s illustrations in the BD adaptation. Although this process of refraction encourages new ways for audiences to internalise and interact with the narratives in *Paroles d’honneur*, Slimani risks

⁴²⁰ Smith, ‘Human Rights and Comics’, p. 64.

⁴²¹ Smith, ‘Human Rights and Comics’, p. 64.

⁴²² Smith, ‘Human Rights and Comics’, p. 65.

⁴²³ Smith, ‘Human Rights and Comics’, p. 68.

⁴²⁴ Smith, ‘Human Rights and Comics’, p. 68.

⁴²⁵ Smith, ‘Human Rights and Comics’, p. 70.

engaging with performative practices of observation, re-representation, and rights discourses through adaptation and collaboration. As the BD was published in France, ‘giving voice’ to mostly Moroccan women in this context seems to be culturally loaded. Consequently, *Paroles d’honneur* appears physically and ideologically orientated towards France, existing within and speaking to certain imbalanced transnational, socio-cultural dynamics of power. This is relevant in the wider context of Slimani’s authorial trajectory and *becoming* literary celebrity over time. The symbolic, cultural, and commercial value associated with ‘ethnographic’ texts seen to be engaging with ‘palatable’ Eurocentric discourses, particularly those concerning Western feminisms and the politics of rescue, likely has impacted and continues to impact Slimani’s literary output.

Conclusion: Slimani’s trajectory moving across genre and geography

In conclusion, it would seem that Slimani’s authorial voice plays an important role in curating the life narratives in and across *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur*. If the question of form is essential to exploring how Slimani presents and engages with the life narratives in the texts, the multifaceted nature of form and narrative cannot be separated from the purposeful intentions behind the texts, even if one claims to be fiction and the other not. This is important given that *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur* appeared a year after Slimani’s Goncourt success, marking Slimani’s step from the fictional novel set in Paris, to an ethnographic essay and BD engaging with a Moroccan subject in the context of gender, sex, and sexuality. In this case, the spatial gaze Slimani brings to form and medium highlights the cultural and political significance of transforming and adapting the life narratives in the *enquête/essai* to the BD (and back again with the re-edition of *Sexe et mensonges* in 2021). This suggests that by employing (non)fictional investigative aesthetics in *Sexe et mensonges* in particular, Slimani fosters an intermedial *va-et-vient* that displaces the narratives across *Paroles d’honneur* through intermedial, adaptive fictionalisation. This dislocation appears to distance Slimani from how she experiences the narratives in *Paroles d’honneur*. As the reader ‘voices’ the narratives whilst Slimani’s character is visually mapped on the pages of the BD, how Slimani’s involvement is directed to the audience is reframed.

By adapting the original text to the BD, there appear to be multiple displacements or deterritorialisations in how Slimani retells the narratives intermedially in *Paroles d’honneur*. This is particularly evident in how Slimani’s narrative presence is mapped and embodied on the pages of the BD, as well as how Slimani frames people and events temporally and spatially

through collaborating with Laetitia Coryn. Arguably, this demonstrates Slimani's processes of intention behind the different mediums. Slimani's authorial voice simultaneously manifests itself through proximity and distance to the narratives that are retold and adapted intermedially, as well as to the reader. As such, it seems that Slimani attempts to legitimise her authorial presence by occupying a position of performative neutrality when linking the life narratives to the texts and presenting them to the reader.

Moreover, the two editions of *Sexe et mensonges* and the first edition's adaption to *Paroles d'honneur* reveal certain tensions as these two aesthetic forms are shaped and unravelled at the interstices of time and space. In the wider context of BD accessibility, the idea that the medium does not afford Slimani narrative neutrality becomes more pertinent when considering who would perhaps be more able to project causality into empty spaces on the page, and consequently create meaning. It would appear that accessibility to the BD and its prospective space as a resource for 'la prochaine génération' would, in reality, be limited to audiences already existing in France and upper-middle-class Moroccan readers. Thus, *Paroles d'honneur* would probably have a greater marketing potential and reach in France, which highlights how the space of the BD cannot act as a neutral point for Slimani to play out the narratives from *Sexe et mensonges*, particularly to multiple readerships across France, Morocco, and beyond.

Therefore, in the context of Slimani's wider trajectory as a celebrity writer, it is pertinent that Slimani published *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur* in the wake of her Goncourt success. On some level, the texts appear to represent formal vehicles through which Slimani could experiment with her own authorial presence in ways that may not have been possible without being recognised as a successful writer beforehand. However, as a Franco-Moroccan writer who, as discussed in Chapter 1, would arguably be expected to write about certain themes, notably in France, the choice to move to an ethnographic essay and BD to focus on a Moroccan subject and explore gender, sex, and sexuality cannot be ignored. Therefore, this choice is perhaps related to how perceptions of otherness in France are played on and marketed to gain cultural capital.

Chapter 3 continues exploring these themes, following Slimani's trajectory by analysing *LPDFLN* (2021). It will build on questions highlighted in this chapter relating to the spatial contexts of form, genre, performance, and fictionality – and how these are relevant to the way that Slimani's authorial trajectory develops – to reflect on how Slimani engages with a geographical gaze on fictionalised representations of space and place. Chapter 3 maintains that through a process of fictionalised 'place-building', Slimani reflects on her experiences

relating to art, museums, and gendered urban spatial models in Paris and Rabat from Venice and the Punta della Dogana art museum. It argues that Slimani encounters these spaces through three lenses: Venice appears superficial as Slimani engages as a tourist; Paris, removed from an ethnographic investigation, seems to represent somewhere she feels most at home; and lastly, Rabat appears to be distanced temporally, culturally, and geographically, even though her gaze on the city is autobiographical, it appears more ethnographic. In this context, Chapter 3 explores whether Slimani once again risks an imbalance that potentially reinforces generalised Western assumptions, which play into problematic discourses surrounding the politics of gender and space in Muslim-majority societies.

Chapter 3 – Dislocating gazes across geography: Representations of Venice, the museum, and gendered spatial frameworks in *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit*

Slimani's 2021 essay *LPDFLN* forms part of Edition Stock's *Ma nuit au musée* series, where the author writes about a night spent alone in a museum or other cultural institution. Other writers/artists in the series include Kamel Daoud, Bernard Chambaz, Enki Bilal, Santiago H. Amigorena, Léonor de Récondo, Adel Abdessemed & Christophe Ono-dit-Biot, and Lydie Salvayre.⁴²⁶ Slimani's text is mostly autobiographical, located in Venice's Punta della Dogana art museum. Slimani introspectively reflects on questions surrounding what it means to be confined as a writer and how literature is important in her life, diving into memories from her childhood spent in Rabat, Morocco. As previously mentioned, Slimani is probably best known for *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* and *Chanson douce*. In both texts, she appears to deal with complicated pictures of experiences of modern 'womanhood', largely within the context of the closed, bourgeois, contemporary Parisian apartment.⁴²⁷ She also evokes the different *quartiers* – affluent and poor –, as well as the (dis)locations across gender, class, and race occurring in these urban spaces.⁴²⁸ As Caroline Ibos asserts in her work discussing the problem of globalisation in the care chain in contemporary capitalism, 'le microcosme de l'appartement parisien nous révèle les relations géopolitiques à l'œuvre dans le monde globalisé.'⁴²⁹

In terms of the spatial nature of geopolitical relations at both micro and macro levels, it is noteworthy that *LPDFLN* begins in Paris in 2018, two years after Slimani published *Chanson douce*. The spatial implications of the text become apparent in the way that Slimani physically dislocates it from Paris to Venice, simultaneously moving across genres. The French word 'essai' can be translated as 'essay' when talking about a short book; however, it can also mean 'test', 'try', 'trial', and 'attempt.' As Andy Stafford and Charles Forsdick note,

the conventional understanding of the term – as tentative, unsystematic exploration – stresses the genre's provisional nature, its refusal of any claims to comprehensiveness.

⁴²⁶ Elsewhere I have explored Kamel Daoud's *Le peintre dévorant la femme* (2018) within the context of writing for multiple publics, see Paterson, 'Playing to the West only?' A further site for study could look at the *Ma nuit au musée* series as a whole.

⁴²⁷ It is important to note that the term 'womanhood' can be problematic and reductive in the way it can assume a universal experience on those assigned female at birth, who may or may not identify with the term.

⁴²⁸ See Cooper, 'Hiding in Plain Sight.'

⁴²⁹ Caroline Ibos, *Qui gardera nos enfants ?* (Paris: Flammarion, 2012), p. 14.

The *essai* exploits the devices of anecdote, illustration and humour; it is addressed to a wide and often general audience.⁴³⁰

Discussing the performance of the essay, they maintain that ‘the essay then is a form of (deep) reflective thought, of “pointless” toying with ideas, which makes humans into “accidental” philosophers.’⁴³¹ As a result, the performance of provisionality likely becomes the essay’s defining quality. Stafford and Forsdick suggest that ‘perhaps the essay’s performance must be to underline its provisionality (a performative contradiction if there ever was one), to gesture towards the literary (not just Literature).’⁴³² This implies that the essay’s performance is both cause and effect of its own creation, in the sense that it pre-empts what it may or may not say. Given that a writer highlights the genre’s provisional, performative nature in both the thought and execution of the essay, it can be argued that it shapes into something paradoxical, unbound by the usual constraints of other writing such as journalism. Writing about Elizabeth Hardwick, Merve Emre asserts that ‘[...] Hardwick repressed and indulged the temptation to fictionalize. How could she help it? Between the person and the page lies the prism of fiction, always. No genre can avoid it.’⁴³³ Echoing the intermedial process of fictionalisation Slimani enacts in *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur* explored in Chapter 2, Emre suggests that in the context of essay writing, the writer might actively attempt to distance their gaze from the ‘fictional.’

The question of genre goes beyond the scope of this chapter; however, in the context of fictionalisation, considering the essay’s provisional, performative nature spatially opens up discussions about the relation between place and space and the fictionality of place-building. Using various cultural theorists such as Henri Lefebvre, Michel de Certeau, and Étienne Balibar, this chapter considers *LPDFLN* in the context of Slimani’s geographical gaze on fictionalised representations of space and place, as well as how this relates to her authorial trajectory. It explores the significance of Slimani’s physical move from Paris to Venice and how this affects her gaze on the two cities. Throughout *LPDFLN*, Slimani appears to be continuously ‘place-building’: turning the Venetian *space* into Venice the *place*. If space

⁴³⁰ Andrew Stafford and Charles Forsdick, ‘Preface’, in *The Modern Essay in French: Movement, Instability, Performance*, ed. by Andrew Stafford and Charles Forsdick (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2005), pp. 7-22 (pp. 7-8).

⁴³¹ Stafford and Forsdick, ‘Preface’, p. 9.

⁴³² Stafford and Forsdick, ‘Preface’, p. 16.

⁴³³ Merve Emre, ‘The Act of Persuasion’, *The New York Review*, 21 April 2022 <<https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2022/04/21/the-act-of-persuasion-elizabeth-hardwick/>> [accessed 25 May 2022]. Elizabeth Hardwick (1916-2007) was an American literary critic, novelist, short-story writer, and co-founder of The New York Review of Books.

becomes a practised place, or fiction, where Slimani appears to present Venice as a fluid negotiator, or bridge, across and between her French and Moroccan cultural identities, then location inevitably *matters*. This chapter therefore examines how Slimani renegotiates spatial models of Venice, as well as the effects of (dis)location, or distance, on how she gazes at and interacts with the aquatic city. It asks the extent to which Slimani's gaze presents Venice as a neutral space allowing multiple cultural subjectivities to emerge and cohabit with one another; it probes whether this favours an idealisation of Venetian spatial models that fails to uncouple the city from reductive (re)presentations of a simplified, binary cultural encounter.

Moreover, given that the museum space is integral to the conception of *LPDFLN*, this chapter examines how Slimani represents the Punta della Dogana and notions of the museum more generally, particularly in a cultural context stretching across Morocco, France, and beyond. This chapter probes how Slimani dislocates the *space* of the museum into the *place* of the museum and analyses how her gaze frames museological place-making in the Moroccan context compared to elsewhere. It asks whether Slimani interrogates problematic Western museological practices and ideology, or whether she ultimately reconstructs them as aspirational, although largely inaccessible, in the Moroccan context. In terms of what constitutes 'authentic' contemporary art, does this contribute to a process of othering Moroccan art in a Eurocentric, Western context?

Finally, this chapter explores how Slimani's geographical gaze extends to gender. From outside Venice and inside the Punta della Dogana, Slimani appears to place the notion of the *flâneur* in the gendered context of accessing urban spatial frameworks. By looking at how Slimani subsequently engages with her own experience of gendered urban spatial models in Paris compared to Rabat, this chapter asks whether she risks an imbalance. As seen in Chapter 2, this imbalance potentially foregrounds an ethnographic gaze which, when directed to a largely French readership, speaks to and reinforces generalised Western assumptions rooted in Orientalist expectations, particularly those concerning the politics of gender and space in Muslim-majority societies like Morocco.

Overall, this chapter maintains that Slimani encounters these spaces through three lenses or gazes. Slimani gazes at Venice superficially, as she becomes a tourist with no apparent expert knowledge. In comparison, Slimani appears to suggest Paris is where she sees herself most at home, avoiding an ethnographic exploration of the city. Lastly, Slimani seems to present a distanced gaze on Rabat (and, at times, Morocco more generally) related to childhood

and adolescent memories, which although rooted in autobiography from twenty years previous, appear more ethnographic.

Building bridges: creating new subjectivities through dislocation from Paris to Venice

Following the publication of Slimani's early fictional work set in Paris and (non-)fictional publications located in Morocco, Slimani's shift to a non-fictional essay situated outside of either geographical, or socio-cultural context is undoubtedly significant, as she once again moves across geographical spaces and genres. Slimani writes this geographical shift into the essay's corpus as the text begins its meanderings from what she presents as the familiarity and comfort of Paris, before transposing the reader to Venice. Slimani's first impressions of the floating city carry a sense of discomfort at the prospect of writing about it, where established representations seem to weigh oppressively on the author:

Il n'y a rien de plus effrayant, pour un écrivain, que ces sujets sur lesquels il semble que tout a déjà été dit. [...] Je ne peux pas me contenter de célébrer la beauté de la ville, décrire mon émotion, utiliser des expressions comme « la Sérénissime » ou « la cité des Doges ». Impossible de parler des eaux stagnantes, de la mélancolie, de l'humeur rieuse de Goldoni, de la beauté qui s'offre à chaque coin de rue. Je pourrais citer Thomas Mann, Philippe Sollers, Ezra Pound, Jean-Paul Sartre. Mais je ne serais pas très avancée.⁴³⁴

Slimani evokes Venice's historical and cultural potency in representations of the city across art and literature. These representations perhaps act as an oppressive weight for the author, and she highlights the creative pressure to offer new perspectives as a writer. In doing so, Slimani appears to 'write' herself into a line of prominent writers – mostly white, European men – who have written about the city. Other writers who have used Venice to inspire their work include Charles Dickens, Marcel Proust, and Italo Calvino.⁴³⁵ As Sophia Psarra maintains, 'it may be that the creative potency of Venice emanates from its exceptional capacity to contain a

⁴³⁴ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 31.

⁴³⁵ See Charles Dickens, *Pictures from Italy* (1846); Marcel Proust, *À la recherche du temps perdu*, vol. 5 (1923); Italo Calvino, *Invisible Cities*, trans. William Weaver (London: Vintage, 1997) (originally published in 1972) and Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, trans. Patrick Greagh (London: Penguin, 2002) (originally published in 1988).

multiplicity of visions and systems of reality, provoking imaginative engagement.⁴³⁶ Psarra suggests that despite the city's unstable (environmental) boundaries and foundations, its projected human history as a self-made city is long and stable.⁴³⁷ The many myths about the aquatic city, she argues, underlines the difficulty in unravelling Venice from its many representations.⁴³⁸ In this context, Psarra evokes the notion of cities as collective imaginaries, where Venice *the space* (the urban arrangement) encounters Venice *the place* (how it is understood and represented in the human imaginary). Attempting to separate these entangled concepts can, Psarra argues, diminish the physical space Venice inhabits, as well as perceptions surrounding Venice the imagined place.⁴³⁹

This is reminiscent of Henri Lefebvre's notions of physical city encountering the city of the imagination. For Lefebvre, in the wake of the 1968 unrest in France,

l'espace n'est qu'un *medium*, milieu et moyen, instrument et intermédiaire. [...] Il n'a jamais d'existence « en soi », mais renvoie à quelque chose d'autre. A quoi ? Au temps, existentiel et simultanément essentiel, débordant ces déterminations philosophiques, à la fois subjectif et objectif, fait et valeur.⁴⁴⁰

As Verena Andermatt Conley explains, Lefebvre suggests that

space is no longer a neutral background against which humans move about, but is what humans *produce* as, in turn, it shapes or even produces them. It is both a medium in which things are fashioned and a milieu in which they find their place.⁴⁴¹

Similarly, Michel de Certeau discusses the anthropological spaces of the everyday, distinguishing them from the geometrical. In de Certeau's conceptions of space, inhabitants create their own spatial fictions by inventing ecological resolutions to the problems around them in systems of power and domination. So, if 'l'espace est existentiel' and 'l'existence est spatiale', de Certeau maintains that

⁴³⁶ Sophia Psarra, *The Venice Variations: Tracing the Architectural Imagination* (London: UCL Press, 2018), p. 4.

⁴³⁷ Psarra, *The Venice Variations*, pp. 5-6.

⁴³⁸ Psarra, *The Venice Variations*, p. 15.

⁴³⁹ Psarra, *The Venice Variations*, p. 15.

⁴⁴⁰ Henri Lefebvre, *La révolution urbaine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), p. 101. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴¹ Verena Andermatt Conley, *Spatial Ecologies: Urban Sites, State and World-Space in French Cultural Theory* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2012), p. 11.

cette expérience est relation au monde ; dans le rêve et dans la perception, et pour ainsi dire antérieure à leur différenciation, elle exprime « la même structure essentielle de notre être comme être situé en rapport avec un milieu », – un être situé par un désir, indissociable d'une « direction de l'existence » et planté dans l'espace d'un paysage. De ce point de vue, « il y a autant d'espaces que d'expériences spatiales distinctes ». La perspective est déterminée par une « phénoménologie » de l'exister au monde.⁴⁴²

De Certeau asserts that the invention of space occurs in dreams and perception, where an individual's unconscious combines with active experiences in urban life. This emphasis on space and time suggests that how an individual injects space into place depends on their existential position in a landscape at that given moment. Both Lefebvre and de Certeau highlight how individual subjectivity constructs the spatial model of the city in a productive yet fictive process.

Étienne Balibar, although not usually associated with spatial theorists, also taps into the notion of fictional spaces within the context of cultural confrontations or encounters in the French nation-state, national borders, migration, and national identities. Balibar's analysis is directly linked to materiality, experience, and individual and collective action as he calls for institutions to '[...] manage the spatial dilemmas wrought by demographic saturation and loss of sustainable resources.'⁴⁴³ Moreover, Balibar suggests that there are 'fictional places' where there is a need to rearticulate urgent questions: '[...] la fiction est la production du réel à partir de l'expérience elle-même, connaissance et action indissociablement mêlées, insurrection débouchant sur la constitution (et la transformation des constitutions existantes).'⁴⁴⁴ These fictional places change continuously because reformulation simultaneously critiques collective conditions and takes action through performative enunciations. Contextually, the spatial implications of Balibar's work involve physical and mental territories, nation-states, and borders. Conley highlights how Balibar maintains the responsibility of intellectuals to change existing institutional spaces from within their national borders, given that globalisation has meant the constraints placed on French people extend well beyond the national borders of the country.⁴⁴⁵ Within this framework, for Balibar, identities constantly multiply and

⁴⁴² Michel de Certeau, *L'invention du quotidien : 1. arts de faire* (Paris: Gallimard, 1990), pp. 173-74.

⁴⁴³ Conley, *Spatial Ecologies*, p. 129.

⁴⁴⁴ Étienne Balibar, *Droit de cité : Culture et politique en démocratie* (Paris: Éditions de l'Aube, 1998), p. 15.

⁴⁴⁵ Conley, *Spatial Ecologies*, pp. 128-29.

must be linked to active, spatial practices in and against which they function transversally, between layers. [...] It is not a question of making identities disappear but of giving individuals and groups the means and the opportunities to identify and “dis-identify,” that is, to open mental and physical *spaces* and to *travel* in their identities.⁴⁴⁶

Applying these ideas to Slimani’s conceptions of Venice, she too alludes to the notion of Venice as a conceptual entity formed in the individual mind, and Venice in the collective imagination. Slimani seems to present Venice as singular, yet multiple, turning her attention to the city’s notorious struggle with over-tourism: ‘Venise a l’air d’un décor de carton-pâte et je ne peux m’empêcher de remarquer la laideur des vitrines, la tristesse des restaurants aux menus hors de prix.’⁴⁴⁷ Slimani juxtaposes the weight of Venice’s cultural importance against a sense of melancholy in how the city is consumed by the tourism industry and globalisation:

Le touriste n’est plus qu’un consommateur parmi d’autres qui veut « faire » Venise et ramener de son voyage des autoportraits pris avec une perche où la ville n’est qu’un décor d’arrière-plan. Nous sommes condamnés à vivre dans l’empire du même, à manger dans des restaurants identiques, à arpenter les mêmes boutiques sur tous les continents. En trente ans, la population de Venise a été réduite de moitié. Les appartements, ici, sont mis en location pour les voyageurs de passage.⁴⁴⁸

Slimani not only appears pessimistic in her projection of Venice’s future but also in that of the collective ‘global’ tourist as a transnational figure condemned to consume almost identical experiences worldwide. The collective ‘nous’ suggests a multiplicity of repeated interactions with Venice, of which Slimani is a part. In turn, this produces representations of the city in a cyclical relationship. This likely indicates that Slimani views the aquatic city as existing within, and across, the tensions between the material and the immaterial.

As Psarra notes, ‘to many people, today’s Venice is about a maze of alleys, spaces crowded with people, cruise ships dwarfing dilapidated palaces, looming environmental threats, an egregious lack of modern conveniences and inhabitants in defence against a tourist invasion.’⁴⁴⁹ Indeed, Dario Bertocchi and Francesco Visentin show how tourism affects the historic city in a flow of continual transformation and repositioning. For example, this can be

⁴⁴⁶ Conley, *Spatial Ecologies*, p. 133. Emphasis in original.

⁴⁴⁷ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 33.

⁴⁴⁸ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 35.

⁴⁴⁹ Psarra, *The Venice Variations*, p. 6.

seen in the retail makeup of the city, where established networks of small shops, workshops, and manufacturers have been replaced by businesses mainly geared towards tourism traffic, which has little direct relevance to Venetian culture. In the wider Mediterranean area, the mounting conflict between host communities and tourists has provoked the emergence of new urban social movements such as the Network of Southern European Cities against Touristification (which includes cities such as Venice, Barcelona, and Florence). Historic cities like Venice have thus become commodified as unsustainable tourism practices, economic pressures exemplified by gentrification, and the effects of short-term holiday rentals intensify across all urban areas. Bertocchi and Visentin also show how the act of tourism itself has changed; today, almost everyone is a potential tourist and therefore complicit in maintaining unsustainable tourist practices.⁴⁵⁰

In the context of how existing representations construct ‘authenticity’, Slimani presents the singular Venetian ‘experience’ or space for tourists as fiction, much like an immersive theatre production. The potential reach of her comments is arguably broadened well beyond Venice, which suggests that the collective tourist imaginary, arising from how images of the city are formed through representations and symbols, affects how people interact with it and vice versa. This returns to Lefebvre’s and de Certeau’s notions on the subjectivity of spatial production, which combine both perception and experiences for an individual to insert place into space. In addition, the fact that so few tourists spend any real length of time in Venice arguably complicates the formation of a meaningful idea of place for them. This often-fleeting interaction would be built on, and contribute to, representations of the imagined city in transient, and potentially unsustainable, ways. Therefore, the collective, yet singular, tourist understanding of Venice appears to interact with experiences of the city as a space of multiple passages (not only in terms of tourism), which opens possibilities for reinterpretation.

Slimani continues her reflection on consumerism and tourism, comparing Paris and Venice once again:

⁴⁵⁰ Dario Bertocchi, and Francesco Visentin, “‘The Overwhelmed City’: Physical and Social Over-Capacities of Global Tourism in Venice”, *Sustainability*, 11. 24 (2019), 1-19 <<https://doi.org/10.3390/su11246937>>. During my site visit to Venice, I noticed in particular the tourism practice of gondola rides. Presumably, these boats were the main means of transport for Venetians pre-motorboats; however, now they have seemingly come to represent an expensive, consumable tourist experience. The people driving the gondolas were made up exclusively of men (from what I saw) dressed in ‘traditional’ costumes. A thirty-minute experience on the canals seems to become a way of experiencing an ‘authentic’ Venice, despite not appearing to be an accessible or common mode of transport for people living in the city. It is interesting to consider how ‘authenticity’ is constructed concerning existing representations in processual terms, as people leave Venice (re)presenting and (re)producing this as an ‘authentic’ experience to other future visitors.

Hier [*April 2019*], Notre-Dame a brûlé. [...] Je me dis que Notre-Dame s'est peut-être suicidée. Épuisée, lessivée face à tous ceux qui veulent la consommer, elle s'est immolée par le feu. [...] Venise est aussi en train de mourir. La contempler, c'est contempler une agonie. [...] Je me figure ses palais ensevelis dans l'eau et la vase, ses souvenirs de gloire oubliés de tous, ses places pavées réduites à néant. Venise porte en elle les germes de sa destruction et c'est peut-être cette fragilité qui en fait la splendeur.⁴⁵¹

Despite the temporal and physical shift from the familiarity and comfort of Paris, Slimani seems to suggest there is a connection, or a bridge, between these two European centres. As Slimani reminds the reader of the 2019 setting, the language personifies Notre-Dame and Venice, which suggests the cities are living and breathing entities. Although this does not represent anything new in terms of how writers talk about cities, Slimani implies that despite having long, established histories, the two cities are reactive to the changes in the world around them. By comparing these European cities side-by-side within the context of global mass-consumption, Slimani teases out a similarity; she suggests that both cities represent Euro-Mediterranean centres of continuous transits and passages or *aller-retours* inspired by tourism, as opposed to other factors.

The theme of the *aller-retour* with France and more broadly, the West, continues later as Slimani reframes her conceptions of Venice through the exchange of cultures and goods:

Cette ville faisait partie de l'Orient autant que de l'Occident. Sur la place Saint-Marc, j'avais des réminiscences du Caire et d'Istanbul. [...] Dans certaines ruelles, je me croyais au cœur d'une de ces médinas que les architectes concevaient comme des labyrinthes pour que s'y perde l'envahisseur. J'étais à Fès ou à Samarcande.⁴⁵²

Slimani suggests that Venice represents a liminal space of an East-West cultural divide (understood in very loose geographical terms here), a 'cité cosmopolite, s'y côtoyaient les Juifs, les chrétiens et les Maures.'⁴⁵³ This is not particularly original; Venice is often spoken about in terms of cultural mixing and/or cultural coexistence without mixing due to the city's history of complex social, political, economic, and cultural interactions. For example, in her study into art and life in renaissance Venice, Patricia Fortini Brown describes Venetian culture in terms

⁴⁵¹ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 92-94.

⁴⁵² Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 126-27.

⁴⁵³ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 126.

of a ‘collage’, ‘montage’, ‘palimpsest’, or ‘aggregate.’⁴⁵⁴ Similarly, regarding the influence of Byzantine art on Venetian painting of the Renaissance period, Peter Humfrey references the ‘melting-pot of Venetian culture.’⁴⁵⁵ Discussions about Renaissance Venice go beyond the scope of this thesis. However, by alluding to varying degrees of cultural mixing, these descriptions foreground Venetian life and culture as historically interconnected and layered, suggesting various elements interact and overlap to contribute to a whole. Yet, the notion of separation also highlights the presence of cultural coexistence without mixing. In this context, Slimani states that

Venise est une ville sans terre. Sans terroir et sans autre richesse que le sel. On se nourrit du dehors, de l’extérieur, de l’étranger. J’y vois le symbole de ma propre histoire. Peut-être est-ce là que je vis, dans un lieu qui ressemble à cette presque île pointue.⁴⁵⁶

Slimani evokes the trading history of Venice – both in terms of culture and goods – and implies that the floating city is stateless, both in the sense of not being geographically rooted to the earth and in the way that multiple cultures have interacted with it throughout history. Despite Venice’s inevitable demise from tourism and rising sea levels, Slimani alludes to the notion that Venice represents a kind of global utopia or Eden.⁴⁵⁷ Slimani, therefore, implies that Venice represents a space that she can relate to, which allows her to interrogate and mediate the multiple facets of her Franco-Moroccan identity, perhaps away from Paris (as somewhere she knows well).

However, once more, Slimani appears to compress the panoply of ‘Eastern’ experiences across North Africa and the Middle East into a cultural monolith. Despite being surprised at being classified with literature from the ‘Maghreb-Moyen-Orient’ at the start of her career just because of her Moroccan name (as shown in Chapter 1), elsewhere Slimani has herself practised a similar collapsing of cultural specificity. This was evidenced in Chapter 2, for

⁴⁵⁴ Patricia Fortini Brown, *Art and Life in Renaissance Venice* (London: Laurence King Publishing, 1997), pp. 23, 26, and 37.

⁴⁵⁵ Peter Humfrey, *Painting in Renaissance Venice* (New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 1995), p. 9.

⁴⁵⁶ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 127.

⁴⁵⁷ In terms of the wider literature on Venice and its demise, Serenella Iovino highlights how long before Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1912), death has been a recurrent trope in art and writing located in the city. She highlights how this theme extends beyond the fictional and is seen in the ‘menacing waters and fluxes of energy generated by global warming; unsustainable tourism and gigantic cruise ships; the anti-ecological engineering systems carried out to control the increasing high tides; or common human activities, interfering day by day with the delicate ecosystem of the lagoon.’ See Serenella Iovino, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), p. 48. Khalid Lyamlahy’s *Évocation d’un mémorial à Venise* (2023) interweaves fiction and reality in a short novel based on the real event of a young Gambian refugee, Patch Sabally, drowning himself in Venice’s Grand Canal in January 2017.

example, where the English title translation of *Sexe et mensonges* erased the text's Moroccan subject in favour of being representative of the wider 'Arab World.'⁴⁵⁸ Returning to Slimani's engagement with Venice, compressing various urban representations from North Africa and the Middle East is likely problematic, given that it erases expressions of individual identity across the many countries, regions, religions, and cultures these cities interact with. In addition, it arguably reduces and limits cultural encounters into a West-East binary. Indeed, by presenting Venice as a neutral point of contact across religions and cultures, Slimani seems to ignore the issues of segregation that can be seen in the city's history. From an urban history point of view, Venice was full of borders. For example, in 1516, the Venetian Republic ordered that the Jewish people of Venice be segregated from the rest of the Venetian population, and they were restricted to a small island in the north of the city. Although, as Daniel B. Schwartz shows, this was not the first instance where Jewish populations in Europe were forced to live separately from Christians in a restricted area, it did mark the beginning of the connection between the notion of segregation and the word 'ghetto.' Theories regarding the etymology of 'ghetto' are contested; however, the most widely held suggests that it derives from the Venetian verb *gettare* (to throw or cast) which could imply the copper foundry that once occupied the area where the Jewish people would be forced to live.⁴⁵⁹ Shaul Bassi maintains that there was 'a strict regulation of the Jewish population restricted to living there but, at the same time, there was a degree of autonomy and partial self-governance.'⁴⁶⁰ Bassi further demonstrates how five ethnic groups of Jewish people came to merge in the Venetian Ghetto (from Italy, Germany, Portugal, Spain, and the Ottoman Empire) which 'became a vital social and cultural laboratory.'⁴⁶¹ Whilst discussions around the Venetian ghetto go beyond the scope of this chapter, they help to consider the complexities around questions of neutrality at cultural meeting points. The migrations involved here were not chosen (in the sense of tourism); rather, they were imposed (for example, Jews fleeing persecution in the Iberian Peninsula or elsewhere in Italy). This suggests that Slimani's gaze on Venice is somewhat superficial as she becomes a tourist with limited specialist knowledge of the city's history.

⁴⁵⁸ See Chapter 2, p. 98.

⁴⁵⁹ Daniel B. Schwartz, *Ghetto: The History of a Word* (Cambridge, MA; London: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 1.

⁴⁶⁰ Shaul Bassi, 'The Venetian Ghetto and Modern Jewish Identity', *Judaism*, 51. 4 (2002), 469-80 (p. 469) <<https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/venetian-ghetto-modern-jewish-identity/docview/200400561/se-2?accountid=14664>> [accessed 01 May 2022].

⁴⁶¹ Bassi, 'The Venetian Ghetto', p. 472.

Superficially gazing at Venice: an imbalanced *aller-retour*

Returning to *LPDFLN*, the twenty texts in the *Ma nuit au musée* series range from 104 (Enki Bilal's *Nu avec Picasso* [2020]) to 304 pages in length (Ananda Devi's *La nuit s'ajoute à la nuit* [2024]).⁴⁶² Slimani's essay totals 128 pages, so she possibly did not have the space to explore all of Venice's complex and nuanced urban history, particularly in relation to the different communities living there. Although it is perhaps significant that Slimani does not mention Moroccans living in Italy at all in the essay, especially since that, as of 2018, Moroccans formed the third largest migrant group in the country (following Romanians and Albanians).⁴⁶³ Indeed, as Slimani appears to present Venice as a neutral space allowing multiple cultural subjectivities to emerge and cohabit with one another, she arguably favours an idealisation of Venetian spatial models. This idealisation subsequently fails to uncouple the city from reductive (re)presentations of a simplified, binary cultural encounter. As previously discussed, thinkers like Lefebvre and de Certeau demonstrate that as individuals insert space into place through a cyclical, productive process involving perception and subjectivity, Venice cannot represent a neutral background in which Slimani moves about, even if there is a displacement from somewhere she knows well like Paris. In this way, the process of inserting space into place appears to become the medium through which Slimani's perceptions of Venice are fashioned and given meaning.

Furthermore, by applying the spatial implications of Balibar's conceptions of identity formation and fictional spaces to Slimani's *aller-retour* between Venice and Paris, the question of dis-identification emerges to implicate distance and dislocation. As Conley demonstrates, Balibar understands art as a type of distancing intended to reveal identity conflicts occurring both in the spectator and in their immediate environment.⁴⁶⁴

⁴⁶² At the time of writing this thesis, there are twenty texts published in the *Ma nuit au musée* series; however, new titles are regularly being so this number is likely subject to change. See Stock, 'Ma nuit au musée', *Stock* <<https://www.editions-stock.fr/livres-ma-nuit-au-musee/>> [accessed 12 December 2023]. In an article discussing Devi's *La nuit s'ajoute à la nuit*, where she spends a night in Montluc prison in Lyon, it mentions that 'l'autrice aurait pu choisir un lieu de confort, culturel à souhait, ou bien culturel, ou cultissime.' This suggests that authors in the series have some choice in deciding what place to be confined in, rather than just being assigned a location. See Roger-Yves Roche, 'Souffrir mille morts', *En attendant Nadeau*, 27 August 2024 <<https://www.en-attendant-nadeau.fr/2024/08/27/souffrir-mille-morts-ananda-devi/>> [accessed 07 September 2024].

⁴⁶³ Francesca Decimo, 'The Transnational Making of Population: Migration, Marriage, and Fertility between Morocco and Italy', *Journal of International Migration and Integration*, 22. 1 (2021), 289-310 (p. 292) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s12134-019-00736-2>>.

⁴⁶⁴ Conley, *Spatial Ecologies*, p. 142.

Art distances its participants in order to have them regulate their own conflicts, including those, in psychoanalytical terms, of “another scene” in which the unconscious is shown regulating cultures and societies. Distancing is a spatial category that dramatizes conflicts of identity that are invariably grounded in fictional places (*lieux de fiction*).⁴⁶⁵

In this sense, individual conflicts of identity always appear rooted in fictional places because of their subjective nature. The confluence of identity conflicts within and around a subject highlights how individual experiences of identity formation are unique. This tension between the internal and the external suggests that distancing functions as a way of (dis)identifying, whereby internal and external subject perception is regulated. Therefore, distancing as a spatial category appears to operate as a performative process that has the potential to overstate the conflicting nature of competing identity formations, which in turn reproduces and reconstructs their fictional locations.

Thus, it can be argued that the displacement to Venice and immediate distance (in this case) from Paris – both temporally and geographically – exacerbates the internal identity conflicts Slimani evokes in *LPDFLN*. However, given that Slimani’s engagement with the aquatic city rests to some extent on her own ‘fictional’ conceptions as a tourist, the frictions of these competing identities are laid bare and simplified into stark binaries. In other words, a dislocation from Paris to Venice cannot offer a neutral space to reflect on competing cultural identities, given that the distance is somewhat performative. Slimani projects her gaze from Paris, somewhere she appears to be more ‘at home’, to Venice as a tourist with no specialist knowledge about the city. In doing so, Slimani arguably risks (re-)representing binaries that simply transpose a Paris-centred gaze onto Venice.

Western concepts, ethnographic gazes? Representing the museum and contemporary art from the Punta della Dogana

Discussions around the dynamic between place, space, and conflicts of identity in relation to Venice inevitably lead to questions about how Slimani represents the Punta della Dogana and

⁴⁶⁵ Conley, *Spatial Ecologies*, p. 142. Emphasis in original.

notions of the museum more generally.⁴⁶⁶ Taking her first impressions of the outside of the building, Slimani evokes its former use as a customs house:

Vue du ciel, la Douane de mer ressemble à un bateau brise-glace, avec sa proue pointue et ses imposants entrepôts, dessinés au XVII^e siècle par Giuseppe Benoni. On dirait que le bâtiment va se mettre à glisser sur l'eau, qu'il va se mouvoir, se faire bateau, caravelle, voilier aux mains d'un équipage en mal d'aventures.⁴⁶⁷

The name – Punta della Dogana – is revealing. The 'Point of the Customs House' characterises its relationship with other cultures and its historical role as gatekeeper of culture, migrations, and exports in Venice. By using the metaphor of the icebreaker, Slimani suggests the building's exterior is in a state of anticipation, on the edge of setting sail. The image of the icebreaker also evokes notions of carving, of moving progressively forwards with intention and purpose without stopping. This produces images of a transitory space unblocking pathways and *passages* from A to B. As Slimani enters the building, the naval/water-related imagery continues:

L'ensemble, d'une superficie totale de cinq mille mètres carrés, donne une impression d'austérité, de vide. À l'intérieur de ce triangle isocèle de cent cinq mètres de côté, l'espace est divisé en neuf nefs de dix mètres de large. Les pièces les plus imposantes se trouvent au centre : une grande salle carrée, aux parois de béton, matière chère à l'architecte japonais [Tadao Andō].⁴⁶⁸

Within the images of exploration and adventure by sea and the trading of 'exotic' goods, there appears to be a colonial undertone to Slimani's representations. The museum seems to represent a floating, exploratory space internally and externally, especially given that it sits on the confluence of the tip of the artificial city:

J'imagine sans peine l'époque où ce bâtiment servait de douane pour les marchandises arrivées par la mer. J'entends le bruit des cargaisons qu'on déverse, les cris des hommes qui travaillent à peser, contrôler, emballer. Je vois les bateaux, immenses caravelles, accoster ici, le ventre plein d'épices, de tissus précieux et de denrées exotiques. Le bâtiment est vivant, rongé par la nature, les briques sont recouvertes de sel. Par endroits,

⁴⁶⁶ For the museum, see Pinault Collection, 'Palazzo Grassi - Punta Della Dogana', *Pinault Collection* <<https://www.pinaultcollection.com/palazzograssi/en>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

⁴⁶⁷ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 39-40.

⁴⁶⁸ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 40-41.

sur le mur, ont poussé des fleurs blanches. C'est comme si j'étais au cœur d'un organisme vivant. Que j'avais été avalée par une baleine.⁴⁶⁹

Contradicting the text's earlier descriptions of the Punta della Dogana's exterior and architectural structure, which represent the building as a man-made entity (the ship), static not in its movement but in its materiality, Slimani seems to present the museum's interior as an ecological being that is being taken over by nature. This image suggests the interior exists beyond human control in a variable state, indicating the subjective, processual nature of space creation, where place is inserted into space dialogically through individual perception and experience.

Although the combination of the human and the ecological is significant in and of itself, associating the Punta della Dogana with this intersection is not novel. Split between the Punta della Dogana and the Palazzo Grassi – both private museums owned by French billionaire François Pinault –, Damien Hirst's *Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable* exhibition (2017) detailed the fictional discovery of an ancient shipwreck off the coast of East Africa in 2008.⁴⁷⁰ One critic described the inside of the Punta della Dogana as 'reminiscent of the inverted bowels of an ancient ship clad with timber buttresses setting the tone.'⁴⁷¹

It is perhaps telling, therefore, that the Pinault collection has chosen to invest in artists and writers who adhere to representations of the museum's spatial interior in ways that blur the borders between the oceanic, the ecological, and the human, given that this would contradict the problematic nature of private museums like those in the Pinault collection. In the case of the *Treasures* exhibition (2017), the project was co-financed by Pinault and Hirst. As a co-financer and collector of Hirst's work, Pinault has been criticised for promoting the art of an artist whose work he already owns, consequently promoting Hirst's market value. This raises the question about whether Pinault's foundation would have enjoyed any financial incentives or tax breaks for housing his own private collection in Venice.⁴⁷² Despite extending beyond the scope of this thesis, discussions about Hirst's exhibition arguably demonstrate the extent to

⁴⁶⁹ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 41.

⁴⁷⁰ See Rob Hunter, 'Treasures from the Wreck of the Unbelievable Review', *MoMA* <<https://www.moma.co.uk/treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-review/>> [accessed 12 July 2022]; Tiernan Morgan, 'Damien Hirst's Shipwreck Fantasy Sinks in Venice', *Hyperallergic*, 10 August 2017 <<https://hyperallergic.com/391158/damien-hirst-treasures-from-the-wreck-of-the-unbelievable-venice-punta-della-dogana-palazzo-grassi/>> [accessed 12 July 2022].

⁴⁷¹ Hunter, 'Treasures from the Wreck.'

⁴⁷² Morgan, 'Damien Hirst's Shipwreck Fantasy.'

which the Punta della Dogana as a private museum is curated by its owner for profit, and how this might affect the curation of the museum's spatial ecologies, its accessibility, and visitors' engagement with the space.

Furthermore, at the end of the text, Slimani writes 'merci à Martin Béthenod de nous avoir accueillis à la Punta Della Dogana et d'avoir si généreusement partagé avec moi son regard sur Venise et sur l'Art contemporain.'⁴⁷³ This suggests the text in part was guided by Béthenod's perceptions of the Punta della Dogana and its art collections. Béthenod, former Managing Director of the Bourse de Commerce (Collection Pinault - Paris) and Director of the Palazzo Grassi – Punta della Dogana, stated in a 2019 interview with *Purple Magazine* that 'the world of contemporary art is an ecosystem that works well only when there is a balance between dimensions: the institutional and the private; the commercial and the noncommercial; the intellectual and what one would call the entertainment dimension.'⁴⁷⁴ It is significant that Béthenod also turns to the ecological metaphor when describing the commercialisation of contemporary art given that he occupies a privileged position among the artistic and cultural elite. This implies that there is an attempt to naturalise – or legitimise – a fundamentally capitalist venture within the Punta della Dogana museum space. As Slimani seems to adhere to this ecological representation of the Punta's interior, she too risks naturalising the privatised museum space, overlooking how this might be problematic. In addition, naturalising the space in this way appears to remove the Punta della Dogana from any kind of meaningful cultural criticism.

Although Slimani does not interrogate the museum's private status in the context of elitist, privileged, and (in)accessible physical and cultural architectures, it is noteworthy that Slimani describes a sense of discomfort in the museum setting:

Dans ce musée, je n'ai pas peur mais je me sens mal à l'aise, gourde. Je vois bien que je dérange, que je n'ai rien à faire là, que je trouble le repos de quelqu'un ou de quelque chose. [...] J'enlève mes chaussures car le bruit de mes talons me dérange. Je voudrais me faire toute petite.⁴⁷⁵

Slimani creates a growing sense of physical discomfort about spending the night alone in the museum. This feeling seems to manifest through an awareness of her physical body and how

⁴⁷³ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 151.

⁴⁷⁴ Olivier Zahm and Martin Béthenod, 'The Pinault Collection', *Purple Magazine*, Spring/Summer 2019 <<https://purple.fr/magazine/paris-issue-31/pinault-collectionmartin-bethenod/>> [accessed 14 July 2022].

⁴⁷⁵ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 51-52.

it interacts with the empty spaces around her. As Slimani evokes the sound of her footsteps, the reader hears their echo in the museum and experiences her reactions in real time.

Slimani traces back her present sense of discomfort, reflecting on her relationship with museums as a child growing up in Morocco:

Dans les années 1980, il n'y avait pas de musée à Rabat. Enfant, je n'ai jamais visité une exposition et le milieu de l'art me paraissait réservé à une élite, celle d'un autre monde.⁴⁷⁶

After leaving Morocco to live in France, she maintains that 'les premières fois que je me suis rendue dans un musée après mon installation à Paris, j'étais impressionnée, un peu mal à l'aise.'⁴⁷⁷ Linking these reflections back to the present moment (approximately twenty years later) she writes:

La vérité, c'est que cette impression de malaise ne s'est pas totalement dissipée. Les musées continuent de m'apparaître comme des lieux écrasants, des forteresses dédiées à l'art, à la beauté, au génie où je me sens toute petite. J'y éprouve un sentiment d'étrangeté, une distance que je cherche à cacher derrière une fausse nonchalance. Le musée reste pour moi une émanation de la culture occidentale, un espace élitiste dont je n'ai toujours pas saisi les codes.⁴⁷⁸

Slimani continues to evoke a sense of physical discomfort and unease entering museum spaces in France and the West more generally. By locating the (non-)existence of the museum in Morocco compared to the West in cultural terms, Slimani appears to present an ethnographic gaze on her own experiences. Contradicting her earlier descriptions of the Punta della Dogana connoting ecological movement, Slimani constructs the conceptual museum as an impenetrable, centralised architectural structure, which statically and hierarchically locates art and culture as objects. The imagery Slimani uses juxtaposes the metaphorical size of the museum space – in terms of its cultural weight and importance in the West – against her own physical size. Evoking a sense of inferiority, Slimani appears to present the conceptual and physical sites of the museum as bastions of Western elitism. These bastions remain culturally impenetrable to the author despite being someone who exists within French nationality and culture. Subsequently, Slimani highlights feeling othered during these cultural interactions, the

⁴⁷⁶ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 53.

⁴⁷⁷ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 53.

⁴⁷⁸ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 55-56.

sense of spatial segregation marked by the museum's architectural structures. This suggests that only certain people can access and feel comfortable in the museum space due to its conceptual ties with Western culture. Yet, it is significant that Slimani does not appear to explicitly locate or interrogate the Punta della Dogana in these discussions, particularly given that she had private, night-time access to the museum, a privilege almost certainly not afforded to the average visitor.

To a certain extent, Slimani's assessment aligns with certain discourses that situate narratives of museum history firmly within Western cultural production and mirrors prevalent discourses of failure and inaccessibility surrounding museums in Morocco. Christina Kreps shows how Western academic discourses tend to consider the concept of the museum and the practice of collecting and preserving objects deemed valuable as distinctly Western cultural inventions and concerns.⁴⁷⁹ For example, Susan Pearce maintains that 'museums are a characteristic part of the cultural pattern of modern Europe, and of the European influenced world.'⁴⁸⁰ According to Pearce, although objects/material have been collected and displayed across the world, the museum's birthplace is firmly located in Europe and the modern era. Similarly, Kevin Walsh discusses how the museum is an invention of European 'modernity', symbolising and reflecting associated discourses such as scientific objectivism, reason, and rationality, as well as conceptions of time rooted in ideas relating to evolutionary models of societal and cultural developmental 'progress.'⁴⁸¹

However, as Kreps shows, whilst narratives of museum history may be rooted in historical fact, it is also important to consider how such narratives have contributed to constructing a Eurocentric museum ideology and reproducing the model of the Western museum globally.⁴⁸² Indeed, this ideology is arguably rooted in Eurocentric epistemological biases and assumptions, which overlook other cultural models, reflecting and reinforcing a belief in the superiority of Western systems of cultural heritage preservation. As Kreps maintains, although the concept of the museum is 'generally constructed as a modern western cultural form, museological-type behaviour is a long-standing cross-cultural phenomenon.'⁴⁸³

Slimani's suggestion that museums are conceptually and architecturally Western risks reinforcing a narrative that overlooks the local in favour of a reductive dichotomy between

⁴⁷⁹ Christina Kreps, *Liberating Culture: Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Museums, Curation, and Heritage preservation* (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 1.

⁴⁸⁰ Susan Pearce, *Museums, Objects, and Collections* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1992), p. 1.

⁴⁸¹ Kevin Walsh, *The Representation of the Past: Museums and Heritage in the Post-Modern World* (London: Taylor and Francis, 2002), pp. 7-38.

⁴⁸² Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, p. 20.

⁴⁸³ Kreps, *Liberating Culture*, p. 2.

Morocco and the West. This notion is particularly relevant when considering how different understandings and iterations of museological practices going beyond Eurocentric models exist in the Moroccan context, which Slimani does not appear to engage with. For example, Katarzyna Pieprzak looks at the historical trajectory of different iterations of the museum as an institution in Morocco since independence. Pieprzak demonstrates how the state, corporations, banks, and private individuals have manipulated, remodelled, and used the institution of the museum through their various and competing relationships to ‘modernity’ and the processes of modernisation and globalisation in Morocco.⁴⁸⁴ After independence in 1956, the Moroccan state repurposed French colonial museums – and their accompanying discourses about Moroccan cultural deterioration and the necessity for cultural safeguarding – into national museums in an attempt to naturalise Moroccan national history. Pieprzak maintains that this was a way of symbolising a state-led commitment to processes of ‘modernisation’ within an international context.⁴⁸⁵

Returning to Slimani’s assertion that there were no museums in Rabat during the 1980s, Pieprzak illustrates how, at this time, neoliberal economic policies replaced state modernisation discourse. This allowed corporate art museums to emerge, housed within corporate headquarters, as financial institutions began to invest in art ‘arguably as a spur to national development but ultimately to help themselves by creating global identities.’⁴⁸⁶ It is without a doubt that these corporate art museums would have been largely inaccessible to Slimani and the wider Moroccan population more generally. However, during the late 1990s, Pieprzak notes that the Belghazi Museum opened, a private art museum ten miles outside Rabat. Appearing to opt out of processes of ‘modernisation’ and Western discourses of development, Pieprzak argues that the Belghazi museum took the neoliberal privatisation of culture to an extreme by curating a ‘cabinet of curiosities that functions as a cave to protect Moroccan arts from the outside world and its unsuitable publics.’⁴⁸⁷ Although the Belghazi museum claims to liberate culture from hegemonic narratives of the nation-state and shield Moroccan culture from the unpredictability of development and globalisation in Morocco, Pieprzak emphasises how the museum deals in the politics of exclusion. Representing a gated community closed to the public at large, ‘the Belghazi cabinet adopts an elitist model that controls access to its collection and

⁴⁸⁴ Katarzyna Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco* (Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), p. xxi.

⁴⁸⁵ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. xxi.

⁴⁸⁶ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. xxi.

⁴⁸⁷ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. xxi.

renders much of it invisible to local communities.’⁴⁸⁸ This historical trajectory of the museum as an institution, as Pieprzak points out, likely reflects the increasing exclusion of the Moroccan public from art and cultural heritage as the divide between rich and poor is becoming starker. Indeed,

visible museums in Morocco have become progressively less visible to the Moroccan public at large. This dynamic [...] ultimately confirms the complaints of Moroccan museum critics that there are no museums in Morocco and that ordinary Moroccans are kept at a distance from art and cultural patrimony.⁴⁸⁹

However, even though Slimani’s claims regarding the lack of museums in Rabat during the 1980s appear to fit into wider historical discussions about the limited accessibility of museums in Morocco, it is evident there have been significant changes in museum practices and spaces in Morocco over the past thirty years, which Slimani seemingly omits from her discussion. In reality, ‘although a singular imagined Western modernity and a singular imagined universal art museum may have evaded or been neglected in Morocco, museums in Morocco exist in multiple materials and discursive forms that question this lack and attempt to move beyond it.’⁴⁹⁰ In the broader context of writing with an ethnographic gaze on Morocco to a largely Hexagonally-orientated readership (as explored in Chapter 2 in the context of *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d’honneur*), it is significant that Slimani does not reflect on the considerable development of the contemporary art scene in Morocco over the past thirty years, namely in terms of museological practices. For example, the Mohammed VI Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rabat – one of fourteen museums under the National Foundation of Museums of Morocco – opened in 2014. In addition, the independent and non-profit Museum of African Contemporary Art Al Maaden opened in Marrakech in 2018.

Moreover, there appear to be multiple intersecting incarnations of museums in Morocco that exist outside of more ‘traditional’ – or Western – understandings of museum spaces. For example, Pieprzak cites how art is taken to the streets in Morocco, representing zones of contact with ephemeral outdoor museums. These include contemporary artistic and cultural festivals taking place across Morocco during the summer, where street performances and displays

⁴⁸⁸ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. 84. There does not appear to be an official website for the Belghazi Museum except for an Instagram account. Musée Belghazi (@museebelghazi), ‘Musée Dar Belghazi’, *Instagram* <<https://www.instagram.com/museebelghazi/?hl=en>> [accessed 20 August 2024].

⁴⁸⁹ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. xxi.

⁴⁹⁰ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. 177.

combine components of technology, folklore, the ‘traditional’, and the ‘modern’ to articulate heterogeneous and plural enunciations of Moroccan contemporary culture.⁴⁹¹

Another example of the ways in which contemporary art has converted urban environments into energetic spaces of social exchange and transformation in Morocco can be seen with *La Source du Lion* art collective, founded in 1995 in Casablanca by Hassan Darsi, Mohamed Fariji, and Rachid L’Moudenne. The collective describes itself as

plus qu’une structure de production artistique, c’est un espace d’incubation et d’élaboration de projets qui favorise la recherche et l’exploration par les multiples formes de la création artistique contemporaine, un lieu de rencontres et de dialogue. Les projets qu’elle développe sont imaginés autour du concept « Passerelle artistique », une situation d’échanges engageant l’art et les artistes dans des processus confrontés au contexte local – social, politique, économique, environnemental et culturel...⁴⁹²

Using museological practices such as collecting, cataloguing, preserving, exhibiting art, and educating the public, *La Source du Lion* has launched various projects over the last thirty years, namely *le projet du Parc de l’Hermitage* in Casablanca in 2002. Formerly a botanical garden during the French protectorate, the park had been abandoned in a state of ruin when the project began in 2002. Workshops were held with artists and non-artists alike to construct an architectural model of the space, and restoration of the many layers of the park’s history began. The Villa des Arts also hosted an exhibition for the project and the group engaged in open dialogues with the city’s mayor about the park’s future. In addition, a small building in the park was restored to be used as an art activity and environmental awareness space for children.⁴⁹³ Pieprzak argues that the project was successful in terms of creating and co-curating memory, given that the garden became the site of storytelling circles and art workshops.⁴⁹⁴ This project suggests that in Moroccan culture, even twenty or so years ago, art was far from being ‘un monde lointain, dont les œuvres se cachaient derrière des hauts murs des musées européens’ as Slimani readily suggests.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹¹ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. 127.

⁴⁹² Anon., ‘À propos de La Source du Lion’, *La Source du Lion* <<http://www.lasourcedulion.com/pr%c3%a9sentation.html>> [accessed 09 January 2024].

⁴⁹³ *La Source du Lion* continued working on the project until 2005, when the Mohamed VI Foundation for the Environment proposed to complete the project. Initially, the final landscaping plans included artist and community projects; however, in 2008, the agency contracted by the state revealed a different, much less creative park plan that removed the projects collaboratively designed by the collective and local neighbourhood groups. For a detailed account of the project and its outcomes, see Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, pp. 148-51.

⁴⁹⁴ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. 150.

⁴⁹⁵ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 54.

In terms of understanding conceptions of the museum beyond Slimani's perhaps limited and dated representations, Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager maintains that museums represent successful mediums of creating and communicating memories and messages, as well as rewriting histories, and 'negotiating existing and emerging interculturalities.'⁴⁹⁶ Moreover, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's describes the museum as a 'form of internment – a tomb with a view.'⁴⁹⁷ This appears to contrast with how culture is performed environmentally, or spatially, in festivals or alternative outdoor sites of artistic and cultural contact.⁴⁹⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett continues that although 'museum exhibitions can also be considered a form of environmental theater – visitors moving through the space experience the *mise-en-scène* visually and kinesthetically – they tend to proceed discursively. Arts festivals are generally less didactic and less textual', requiring 'selective disattention, or highly disciplined attention, in an environment of sensory riot.'⁴⁹⁹ This flexible engagement with the ephemeral appears to move beyond the confines of a physical museum space built to withstand time. Erin Manning suggests that 'an engagement with the ephemeral represents all that is anathema to rationalist discourses that attempt to confine knowledge within prescribed disciplines and systems of understanding.'⁵⁰⁰ Therefore, it would appear that in Morocco,

rather than producing poorer imitations of grandiose and outdated national architectures imported from the West, these curators have developed a proliferation of museological projects that meaningfully engage both local and global communities. Outdoor and ephemeral, literary and portable, or essentially nomadic and radical, these museums are not merely urban edifices or monuments but rather critical scapes of engagement.⁵⁰¹

In this way, smaller-scale interventions led by collectives such as *La Source du Lion* arguably disrupt or displace dominant, traditional Western conceptions of the museum, which position culture and art as objects that need to be firmly and statically situated (or monumentalised) in centralised architectural structures.

⁴⁹⁶ Julia Khrebtan-Hörhager, 'Musée du Quai Branly: The Heart of Darkness in la Cité de la Lumière', *Communication, Culture and Critique*, 11. 2 (2018), 315-40 (p. 317) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ccc/tcy006>>.

⁴⁹⁷ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 57.

⁴⁹⁸ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, p. 59.

⁴⁹⁹ Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination Culture*, pp. 57-59.

⁵⁰⁰ Erin Manning, *Ephemeral Territories: Representing Nation, Home, and Identity in Canada* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), p. 6.

⁵⁰¹ Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, p. 177. The relationship to the Moroccan state and – presumably – a desire to remain as autonomous possible from it is also worth mentioning in this context. Pieprzak discusses contemporary Moroccan artists' frustrations with the state and its symbolic institutions. See Pieprzak, *Imagined Museums*, pp. 159-77.

Returning to how Slimani's representations of the place and state of the museum in Morocco fit into this discussion, her assessment perhaps emphasises how Western iterations and understandings of the museum have not been particularly accessible to most Moroccans historically. However, Slimani does not acknowledge how alternative museological practices and projects exist in Morocco outside of Western frameworks that spatially map museums and art institutions as hierarchical structures of knowledge. Consequently, she potentially reinforces a cultural division between the popular and the elite. Arguably, by suggesting that the (meta-)physical museum is uniquely Western, without meaningfully interrogating how this may also manifest in the Punta della Dogana, or engaging with alternative museological practices in Morocco, Slimani appears to privilege Eurocentric and Western biases in museological practice. In turn, this undoubtedly dislocates how the *space* of the museum becomes and reframes the *place* of the museum. Slimani does not appear to interrogate the place of the museum beyond (re-)practising and reinforcing aspirational – albeit largely inaccessible – Western ideal of progressive 'modernity.' Moreover, Slimani does not interrogate how the museum space (whether in France, Morocco, or Venice) is arguably more accessible to her than it would be to most Moroccans, particularly given that this has inevitably changed over time. Her position as an established celebrity writer from a privileged, bourgeois, Franco-Moroccan background gives her full access to the Punta della Dogana alone at night, as well as those traditional museum spaces in France and beyond, in ways that would not be possible for many people in Morocco.

The space of the museum conceptually and physically embodied by the Punta della Dogana also feeds into questions about how Slimani's ethnographic gaze engages with contemporary art, whilst not entirely overlapping. Slimani admits that 'pas un seul instant je n'ai pensé que je pourrais avoir quelque chose d'intéressant à écrire sur l'art contemporain. Je n'y connais pas grand-chose. Je m'y intéresse peu.'⁵⁰² Likewise, the state of being in the museum prompts her to reflect further:

Je ne connais pas grand-chose à l'art contemporain. L'art, contrairement aux livres, a fait une entrée tardive dans ma vie. Chez ma grand-mère, les murs étaient encombrés de croûtes d'un goût douteux. Des natures mortes tristes à mourir, [...] et puis surtout, un portrait grandiloquent de mon grand-père en uniforme de spahi [...]. Mes parents, eux, s'intéressaient aux peintres contemporains marocains. Je me souviens des personnages naïfs de la peintre Chaabia ou des œuvres d'Abbès Saladi, dont les

⁵⁰² Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 20-21.

créatures monstrueuses à tête d'oiseau ou de cheval ont hanté mes cauchemars d'enfant.⁵⁰³

Slimani indicates experiencing little exposure to contemporary art growing up in Morocco. Stating that her only interactions with art were through her parents and grandparents, Slimani references two of Morocco's most famous contemporary artists of the 20th Century: Chaïbia Talal and Abbès Saladi.⁵⁰⁴ Yet, Slimani appears to contradict her assertion that she did not engage with contemporary art as a child by evoking memories of Saladi's work affecting her to the point of nightmares. In this case, Slimani's reference to 'l'art contemporain' might be read to mean Western contemporary art. This reading is also evident in how she distinctly references the 'Moroccan-ness' of the art her parents enjoyed, whilst the art she associates with her French grandmother appears somewhat 'stateless.' Despite perhaps representing an expression of Slimani's ties to France and Morocco, this ethnographic framing risks rooting the category of 'contemporary art' in the West. Such a representation of a separation between the 'West and the Rest' appears simplistic, given that art is often a borrowing of different styles.

Furthermore, in the context of what constitutes 'authentic' contemporary art, Slimani appears to maintain the narrative that others Moroccan art as she reflects on its place in Moroccan society:

À cette époque, l'art était encore regardé à travers un prisme très occidental et ces peintres marocains que mes parents aimaient n'avaient pas la visibilité qu'ils ont acquise dans les années 2000, avec la vogue de l'art africain. Des grands tableaux, des sculptures célèbres, je n'avais vu que des reproductions dans mes livres d'histoire ou dans des fascicules de musée que mes parents avaient pu rapporter de l'étranger.⁵⁰⁵

Slimani implies that 'Western' art belonged to a cultural elite that was separate from 'African' art during her childhood. In this cultural framing, Slimani suggests that Moroccan culture 'tournait autour de la littérature et du cinéma', going some way to explain why '[elle a] été obsédée par la fiction.'⁵⁰⁶ In this way, Moroccan art appears to be othered in what constitutes

⁵⁰³ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 52-53.

⁵⁰⁴ Chaïbia Talal (1929-2004) was a self-taught artist known for her brightly coloured, abstract representations of women. For examples of her work, see Anon., 'Chaïbia Talal', *WikiArt* <<https://www.wikiart.org/en/chaibia-talal>> [accessed 05 July 2024]. Abbès Saladi (1950-1992) often depicted stylised scenes from Morocco in figurative and surrealist ways. For examples, see Anon., 'Abbès Saladi', *Artnet* <<https://www.artnet.com/artists/abb%C3%A8s-saladi/>> [accessed 05 July 2024].

⁵⁰⁵ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 53-54.

⁵⁰⁶ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 54.

‘authentic’ contemporary art, as well as in terms of its cultural significance and relevance compared to other ways of consuming culture in Morocco.

Nevertheless, following Morocco’s independence in 1956, there was an intense period of artistic production during the 1960s and 1970s, shaped by the experimental teaching methods of the Casablanca Art School. Based at the École des Beaux-Arts, the school was led by artists Farid Belkahia, Mohammed Chabâa, Mohamed Melehi and others. Cynthia J. Becker notes that ‘these influential figures developed a new visual vocabulary that broke from French colonial art education to creatively manipulate the Arabic script and the visual poetics of Sufism while integrating motifs and symbols from Morocco’s Berber heritage.’⁵⁰⁷ Whilst the repressive regime of Hassan II (1961-1999) meant artistic production was subject to (self-)censorship, largely unable to challenge the status quo, the artistic legacy of the Casablanca Group ‘dominated the work of academically trained artists within Morocco [...]’.⁵⁰⁸ Following Mohammed VI’s accession to the throne in 1999, Morocco’s artistic community has been influenced by the subsequent democratic trend towards political liberalisation in recent years and has moved beyond the aesthetics of the Casablanca group. Artists such as Mohammed Mallal, Mahi Binbine, Younès Rahmoun, Fatima Mellal and Lalla Essaydi

use their work to expose the political, religious, and social systems of the past and to express their hopes for the future. This new generation of Moroccan artists [tests] the role of Islam in the contemporary political climate, to question the authoritarian power of the monarch, to promote the rights of women, and to recognize their country’s ethnic and linguistic pluralism.⁵⁰⁹

Not to mention the fact that, in terms of visibility, Mahi Binbine, Younès Rahmoun, and Lalla Essaydi exhibit their work in prominent galleries domestically and abroad. Although Amazigh painters such as Mohamed Mallal and Fatima Mellal tend to exhibit in more popular forums such as Moroccan Amazigh cultural associations.⁵¹⁰ As previously discussed, more

⁵⁰⁷ Cynthia J. Becker, ‘Art, self-censorship, and public discourse: contemporary Moroccan artists at the crossroads’, *Contemporary Islam*, 3 (2009), 143-66 (p. 143) <<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11562-009-0085-z>>.

⁵⁰⁸ Becker, ‘Art, self-censorship, and public discourse’, p. 144.

⁵⁰⁹ Becker, ‘Art, self-censorship, and public discourse’, p. 165. Mohammed Mallal is an Amazigh activist, poet, musician and schoolteacher. As Becker notes, artists who use their paintings to promote their Amazigh heritage often remain largely unknown. See Becker, ‘Art, self-censorship, and public discourse’, p. 147. Mahi Binbine is an artist who returned to Morocco in 2002 following a self-imposed exile, creating large works incorporating sculpture and painting. Younès Ramoun, a Tetouan-based artist, works across different practices such as drawing, installations, and video. Fatima Mellal is an Amazigh carpet weaver-turned-painter based in the Dadès Valley in Morocco whose work celebrates Amazigh culture and rural life. Photographer and painter Lalla Essaydi, now living in the USA, focuses on deconstructing oppressive gender-based stereotypes through culturally subversive works.

⁵¹⁰ Becker, ‘Art, self-censorship, and public discourse’, p. 165.

‘traditional’, Western-style conceptions of museums historically have not been very accessible to most Moroccans. Therefore, in the context of Slimani’s childhood during the 1980s, her suggestion that there would have been limited access to contemporary art in Morocco during this time is somewhat relevant.

However, as previously mentioned, Slimani does not reflect on how the contemporary art scene in Morocco has changed considerably since she was a child over the past thirty years. In addition, Slimani does not question how increasing Western interest in ‘African’ art over the past decades is, in some respects, potentially problematic. These are perhaps not purposeful omissions on Slimani’s behalf given that, in 2018, she co-authored a book with Sefrioui, *Casablanca, nid d’artistes*, which explores the capital’s contemporary cultural and artistic scene and showcases a vast range of artists spanning generations and disciplines.⁵¹¹ In the foreword, Slimani states:

[...] Casablanca est un foyer artistique vivace et multiforme. [...] Pleine de cicatrices, traversée de fêlures, Casablanca est à un tournant de son histoire. Après vingt ans de décrépitude et de développement anarchique, la ville blanche semble renaître de ses cendres. Et cela, elle ne le doit pas seulement à une volonté politique mais à une conjonction d’énergies venue notamment des milieux artistiques.⁵¹²

Slimani is likely aware of the significance of local contemporary artistic scenes in Morocco. However, *Casablanca, nid d’artistes* was published by a Moroccan publishing house in Casablanca and is not easily accessible in the U.K. or France.⁵¹³ A detailed account of contemporary art in Morocco would possibly go beyond the scope of Slimani’s discussions in *LPDFLN* in a way that a text with a specific focus like *Casablanca, nid d’artistes* allows for, both in terms of length and audience. *LPDFLN* was published in France by a Parisian publishing house, so some of *LPDFLN*’s readers might not be aware of contemporary Moroccan art beyond a few internationally renowned names like Chaïbia Talal and Abbès Saladi. The question of audience awareness and knowledge might explain why Slimani only engages with the museum and contemporary art in Morocco from the perspective of childhood memories in Rabat and experiences of being in museums in France later in life. More recent examples of local artistic and museological practices in Morocco would likely be more relevant to broader discussions about the place of the museum and contemporary art in Moroccan

⁵¹¹ Slimani and Sefrioui, *Casablanca*. Slimani initiated the project which Sefrioui continued.

⁵¹² Slimani and Sefrioui, *Casablanca*, pp. 10-11.

⁵¹³ I was gifted a copy during my time in Casablanca.

society. Nevertheless, in this case, the temporal distance of Slimani's gaze is significant given that she seems to examine museums and contemporary art in Morocco more ethnographically than in France or the West. This ethnographic gaze, rooted in experiences from approximately thirty years ago, appears imbalanced when relayed to audiences in France. Slimani implies that museums and contemporary art are Western in concept and practice and is mildly critical of how this context fosters elitism and inaccessibility (including how this makes her feel othered). However, she does not interrogate the place of museums and contemporary art in specific cultural terms, either in France or the Punta della Dogana itself. As a result, this omission arguably means that Slimani risks centralising a 'West and the rest' cultural model.

Walking the city: the (in)visible *flâneuse* and the gendered implications of spatial models in Paris and Rabat

The notion that Slimani engages with Morocco in more ethnographic terms – albeit temporally displaced – compared to France or the West is significant when considering how she interacts with the gendered implications of walking the city outside the museum. Alerting the reader to the experience of walking, Slimani seems to distance herself from the collective 'nous' of mass tourism in Venice as she shifts perspective to the singular 'je':

Je marche au milieu de la foule. Je comprends qu'il me suffit d'être là, de me laisser happer par le présent. Je me sens heureuse, étonnamment sereine. Je n'existe plus au milieu de cette multitude venue du monde entier. J'ai l'impression de disparaître, de me dissoudre dans la foule et c'est une sensation délicieuse.⁵¹⁴

This shift into the present, first-person singular is noteworthy as it changes temporal and perspectival focus for the reader. The narrative focus appears to switch from the collective, more generalised imaginaries of Venice and how they are impacted by over-tourism, to Slimani's perspective of walking through the city in 'real time', before making her way to the Punta della Dogana:

Je m'assois à la terrasse d'un restaurant. Je commande des sardines, des pâtes à la courge, une escalope milanaise et de petites palourdes au persil et à l'ail. Je bois un verre de vin rouge. Je voudrais entamer une conversation avec la femme qui me sert et

⁵¹⁴ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 36.

dont les grands yeux tristes sont cerclés de cernes violets. Je voudrais lui dire que je m'apprête à être enfermée et que pour une fois je n'ai pas peur.⁵¹⁵

Alluding to the fact this experience is a choice, rather than an imposition, Slimani continues, sur la terrasse d'un restaurant, des couples profitent de la douceur de cette nuit d'avril. La Dogana n'est pas très loin. Je n'entends que le bruit de mes chaussures sur le pavé et celui des vaguelettes qui tapent contre les bateaux amarrés. Je suis une jeune fille qui entre au couvent.⁵¹⁶

Compared to Slimani's earlier descriptions of tourists interacting with Venice, the syntax appears to become shorter and more clipped. This is striking in the way that it possibly allows the reader to mirror the experience of Slimani's thoughts and feelings as she explores Venice.⁵¹⁷ Indeed, the way that Slimani references banal activities such as eating, drinking, and listening to the sounds of the city around her indicates how engagements with the present begin with the senses. This contrasts with how Slimani describes the inside of the museum explored earlier in this chapter and alludes to the idea that the physical body becomes the first sight of interaction with the space around it. As the reader follows Slimani's journey to the museum, a sense of anticipation builds around the prospect of spending a night in the museum alone.

However, Slimani appears to elicit the idea of being invisible among the throngs of people from all over the world visiting Venice. The association with invisibility does not appear negative here, rather it appears desirable. In the context of Slimani's celebrity, particularly in France, and the fact that *LPDFLN* appeared after her meteoric rise to fame following the publication of *Chanson douce*, this is understandable. Being in the crowd in Venice, in comparison to Paris for example, Slimani is less likely to be recognised and thus becomes 'faceless' in the crowd.

Slimani seems to confirm the notion of being 'faceless' in the crowd by quoting Charles Baudelaire in *Le Peintre de la vie moderne* (1863). Baudelaire describes the experience of the urban walker through Constantin Guys:

⁵¹⁵ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 37-38.

⁵¹⁶ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 38-39.

⁵¹⁷ To gain an insight into Slimani's experience of Venice, I kept a brief travel journal of my time there. I found it almost impossible to provide any immediate lengthy reflections about how I was experiencing the city. Most of the notes I took were of short feelings or reactions to the people and environment around me that sprung into my mind. It was only when I returned and revisited *LPDFLN* that I noticed this similarity with the way that Slimani explores the present.

La foule est son domaine, comme l'air est celui de l'oiseau, comme l'eau celui du poisson. Sa passion et sa profession, c'est d'épouser la foule. Pour le parfait flâneur, pour l'observateur passionné, c'est une immense jouissance que d'élire domicile dans le nombre, dans l'ondoyant, dans le mouvement, dans le fugitif et l'infini. Être hors de chez soi, et pourtant se sentir partout chez soi ; voir le monde, être au centre du monde et rester caché au monde.⁵¹⁸

Given that Baudelaire occupies a substantial space in the French literary and cultural canon, the intertextuality with the writer is significant as it returns to the notion, explored in Chapter 1, of Slimani attempting to write from and to a French literary tradition.⁵¹⁹ It is also marked in the way that Baudelaire understands the *flâneur* as a man (an artist) who seeks refuge in a crowd; however, Slimani too seems to enjoy the possibility and sensation of disappearing into the crowds of tourists in Venice. As Lauren Elkin suggests, the term has changed meaning over time, demonstrating the many contradictions of the concept.⁵²⁰ For example, Gustave Flaubert's depictions of *flânerie* did not necessarily signify leisure and freedom, mirroring his feelings of social discomfort.⁵²¹ Elizabeth Wilson suggests that in literature,

the *flâneur* was represented as an archetypal occupant and observer of the public sphere in the rapidly changing and growing great cities of nineteenth-century Europe. He might be seen as a mythological or allegorical figure who represented what was perhaps the most characteristic response of all to the wholly new forms of life that seemed to be developing: ambivalence.⁵²²

By engaging with a nebulous, gendered, concept like the *flâneur*, Slimani can reflect on her own gendered experience of (in)visibility in public spaces when faced with the prospect of spending a night *enfermée* in the Punta della Dogana:

⁵¹⁸ Charles Baudelaire cited in Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 36.

⁵¹⁹ Further examples of how Slimani associates her work with a French literary tradition can be seen in how she uses other writers' interactions with Venice. For example, Slimani quotes French writer and poet Valéry Larbaud (1881-1957) and French writer Patrick Deville. See Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 33 & p. 35.

⁵²⁰ Lauren Elkin, *Flâneuse: Women Walk the City in Paris, New York, Tokyo, Venice and London* (London: Vintage, 2016), pp. 10-11.

⁵²¹ Patricia Pankhurst Ferguson, *Paris as Revolution: Writing the Nineteenth Century City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), p. 81.

⁵²² Elizabeth Wilson, 'The Invisible Flâneur', *New Left Review*, 191 (1992), 90-110 (p. 99), <<https://newleftreview-org.eu1.proxy.openathens.net/issues/i191/articles/elizabeth-wilson-the-invisible-flaneur>> [accessed 27 April 2022].

Beaucoup de mes amis écrivains – surtout des hommes, d’ailleurs – me racontent que l’écriture est, pour eux, indissociable de la course ou de la marche. Ils font du jogging en forêt, sur les boulevards ou des promenades de fin de journée. [...] Je ne suis pas sûre de savoir marcher comme ça. Je n’ai rien d’une flâneuse qui erre le cœur léger, sans s’inquiéter d’un but à atteindre ou des gens qu’elle croiserait. J’ai peur des hommes qui pourraient me suivre. Les joggeurs me font sursauter. Je me retourne souvent quand j’entends des pas derrière moi. Je ne m’aventure pas dans les rues que je ne connais pas.⁵²³

Unlike the previous reference to Baudelaire’s *flâneur*, it is noteworthy that Slimani uses *flâneuse* – the feminine version of *flâneur* – to reflect on her gendered experiences. This suggests that although identifying with the notion of the *flâneuse* is a possibility for Slimani, it is perhaps a rarity in the Venetian context. In addition, the rhythm of the text appears to change pace as the syntax returns to a more lyrical, reflective style. This undoubtedly allows Slimani to elicit a lingering sense of discomfort at walking around the city (in this case, Paris): a feeling inextricably linked to her situation in gender. The outdoors consequently becomes a dangerous space where Slimani is on high alert:

La première fois que j’ai pris le RER à Paris, l’homme assis en face de moi a dégrafé son pantalon et s’est masturbé en me fixant du regard. Un autre a coincé son pied dans la porte de mon immeuble, un soir tard, et je ne dois mon salut qu’à un voisin arrivé en même temps que moi. Pendant longtemps, j’ai rêvé d’être invisible. J’imaginai des stratagèmes et j’enviais les garçons qui ne connaissaient pas ces peurs-là.⁵²⁴

Slimani highlights the distinction of power between how (presumably, in this case) cisgender men are free to move about urban public spaces in a way that positions women as inferior sexual objects or prey. However, returning to Slimani’s earlier representations of the Venetian space as somewhere that allows her to become invisible, this might suggest that because Slimani does not know Venice, she is less aware of the dangers that many women and feminine-presenting people presumably face there, as much as in Paris.⁵²⁵

⁵²³ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 50-51.

⁵²⁴ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 51.

⁵²⁵ It is important to note that Slimani does not make this distinction between those who identify as women and those who may not identify with the term but who might experience misogyny in similar, different, and intersecting ways due to their gender presentation or assigned sex at birth. Where Slimani refers to women, I also add the term ‘feminine-presenting people’ because it is important to recognise that not all experiences of

Slimani continues this reflection by quoting French feminist writer, filmmaker, and cultural critic Virginie Despentes who declares ‘nous sommes du sexe de la peur’ in *King Kong Théorie* (2006).⁵²⁶ In the original text, Despentes recounts the story of how aged 17, three men raped her and a friend. The original passage reads:

Ça fait plus d’une heure qu’on parle avec eux, ils ont juste l’air de branleurs, amusants, vraiment pas agressifs. Cette proximité, depuis, parmi les choses indélébiles : corps d’hommes dans un lieu clos où l’on est enfermées, avec eux, mais pas semblables à eux. Jamais semblables, avec nos corps de femmes. Jamais en sécurité, jamais les mêmes qu’eux. Nous sommes du sexe de la peur, de l’humiliation, le sexe étranger. C’est sur cette exclusion de nos corps que se construisent les virilités, leur fameuse solidarité masculine, c’est dans ces moments qu’elle se noue.⁵²⁷

Despentes evokes the spatiality of different bodies in gendered contexts in terms of how they are perceived and interact with the spaces around them. A relationship between proximity and exclusion held in relational tension appears to emerge, whereby physical proximity does not necessarily equate to inclusion of those deemed other (in this case feminine-presenting bodies). This relationality shows that the implications of certain bodies situated in space contribute to the formation and reinforcement of harmful places of identity and vice versa. Indeed, it appears significant that Slimani quotes Despentes, not only as it probably highlights how Slimani positions herself within a French literary tradition, but also in terms of how Slimani appears to engage with her own experiences of proximity and exclusion concerning gendered experiences of fear.

These are genuine fears for women and feminine-presenting people moving about in urban spaces in France. As Lauren Bastide notes, in 2018 for an Ifop survey looking at French women and harassment in public places, 81 percent of women surveyed said they had experienced sexual harassment in the street, with an increase on public transport. Similarly, in a 2015 overview on sexual harassment and violence on public transport organised by the *Haut Conseil à l’Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes*, 100 percent of women using the Paris metro had experienced sexual harassment or assault (with more than half of these cases

misogyny sit within the category ‘woman.’ I am also aware that there are limitations to this term and do not intend to generalise experiences or expressions of femininity.

⁵²⁶ Virginie Despentes cited in Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 51.

⁵²⁷ Virginie Despentes, *King Kong Théorie* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2006), p. 34.

happening before the age of 18).⁵²⁸ Therefore, Slimani locates the notion of transit in the context of sexual harassment in the Parisian public sphere, suggesting that when she is outside the comfort and familiarity of her writing 'nid', she is often moving from A to B.⁵²⁹

In comparison, Slimani presents a similar reading of gendered spatial frameworks and dominant spatial practices in urban spaces in Morocco, particularly in Rabat and Casablanca. It is noteworthy that this reflection appears from inside the Punta della Dogana. In the past, Slimani has projected an ethnographic gaze onto questions about sex, sexuality, and gender in Morocco, as discussed in Chapter 2 regarding *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*. Confronted with a *galant de nuit* flower displayed in the museum by Moroccan artist Hicham Berrada, Slimani is reminded of the smells of her childhood in Rabat:

Je connais bien cet arbre. Au Maroc, c'est une plante familière, chantée par les poètes et tous les amoureux. [...] Je songe que la nature a des tours étranges. Les fleurs n'apparaissent qu'une fois l'ombre venue, comme si l'arbre voulait préserver sa beauté, la garder secrète, ne pas l'exposer aux regards comme je rêve, moi aussi, de me tenir loin du monde.⁵³⁰

It seems that Slimani likens the flower's natural rhythm to a desire to distance herself from the perceptions of others. Arguably, this is not possible given her position as a celebrity writer, so idealising the cover of darkness as a space of protection that would minimise her engagement with the external world can likely only represent an illusory space.

In the context of disappearing spaces and memory, Slimani continues exploring the notion of inaccessibility represented by the *galant de nuit*:

À Rabat, il y avait un galant de nuit près de la porte d'entrée de ma maison. [...] Il suffit que je ferme les yeux pour me souvenir de ce parfum entêtant et sucré. Les larmes me montent aux paupières. Les voilà, mes revenants. La voilà, l'odeur du pays de l'enfance, disparu, englouti.⁵³¹

Slimani creates a strong emotional link between the senses and memory recollection, the flower's scent appearing to provoke an almost immediate physical emotional reaction. This

⁵²⁸ Quoted in Lauren Bastide, *Présentes: Ville, médias, politiques...Quelle place pour les femmes ?* (Paris: Allary, 2020), pp. 33-34.

⁵²⁹ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 50.

⁵³⁰ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 69-70.

⁵³¹ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 70-71.

emotionality seems directly related to recalling whispered memories of people and places that no longer exist in Slimani's reality. By speaking to the people who have disappeared from her life like her father, Slimani alludes to feeling disconnected from her memories and past perception of spaces in Morocco, as well as from how she can relate to the process of place-building. Slimani subsequently reflects on the spaces she accessed during the night in Morocco, turning the symbolic spaces that the *galant* represents into the practised places of her teenage experiences:

Le galant de nuit c'est l'odeur de mes mensonges, de mes amours adolescentes, des cigarettes fumées en cachette et des fêtes interdites. C'est le parfum de la liberté. L'arbre était là, juste devant la porte en fer que je poussais, le plus doucement possible, pour aller retrouver mes amis. [...] À l'adolescence, je découvrais les bars, les cabarets, les discothèques, les fêtes dans un cabanon sur la plage, les rues sombres et vides de ma capitale torpide. À une certaine heure de la nuit, les gentilles filles retournaient chez elles et les autres entraient en scène. À cette époque, les prostituées m'ont fascinée, troublée, bouleversée.⁵³²

There is a clear gendered nature to the spatial practices that Slimani appears to witness and engage with as a teenager. This is highlighted by the reference to *les gentilles filles* and *les autres* within the context of sex workers, which places the behaviour of women and feminine-presenting people in public spaces – notably at night – within a restrictive moral binary.

Moreover, Slimani's reflection on the perception of gendered spatial practices in public at night moves to consider the broader gendered spatial implications of accessing public spaces in Rabat during the day. Slimani writes,

J'ai été élevée comme un animal d'intérieur. [...] Enfant, je passais le plus clair de mon temps à la maison. J'étudiais. La ville de Rabat n'offrait pas beaucoup de loisirs et mes sœurs et moi nous distrayions en lisant ou en regardant des films. Ce n'était pas seulement la nuit qui était un territoire interdit, c'était le dehors. Les filles n'avaient rien à faire dans les rues, sur les places, dans les cafés dont les terrasses, je m'en souviens, n'étaient occupées que par des hommes. Une fille qui se déplaçait devait aller d'un point A à un point B. Sinon, c'était une traînée, une délurée, une fille perdue. [...] Les filles étaient Ève pour l'éternité.⁵³³

⁵³² Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 72.

⁵³³ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 75-76.

Like earlier representations of gendered interactions with public spaces in Paris, Slimani suggests that gendered spatial frameworks in Rabat become practised places of continuous transit for women and feminine-presenting people. This implies that questions of gendered urban accessibility are particularly significant for the writer. In this context, Slimani implies that the practised city of Rabat is gendered in two visible ways: firstly, in places like cafés predominantly filled with men and, secondly, in how people move across the city. Slimani indicates that women (and feminine-presenting people) must justify their presence in the city in terms of a public/private space dichotomy. This presumably contrasts with the spatial and temporal purposelessness afforded to men occupying city spaces.

However, when representing the gendered spatial segregation in Rabat, Slimani appears to focus on the question more ethnographically than in Paris. In Paris, Slimani centres on how experiences of sexual harassment and fear play into processes of place-building in the city in a way that does not appear related to French ideological or cultural practices. Questioning her own motivations for wanting to be *enfermée* in the museum as ‘la féministe, la militante, l’écrivain qu[’elle] aspire à être’, Slimani quotes Moroccan sociologist Fatema Mernissi in *Rêves de femmes* (1996):⁵³⁴

Quand Allah a créé la terre, disait mon père, il avait de bonnes raisons de séparer les hommes et les femmes [...]. L’ordre et l’harmonie n’existent que lorsque chaque groupe respecte les hudud. Toute transgression entraîne forcément anarchie et malheur. Mais les femmes ne pensaient qu’à transgresser les limites. Elles étaient obsédées par le monde qui existait au-delà du portail. Elles fantasmaient à longueur de journée, elles se pavanaient des rues imaginaires.⁵³⁵

Mernissi’s text represents a fictive account of her childhood growing up in a traditional harem in Fez during the 1940s and early 1950s. By referring to Allah, Mernissi locates this tradition within Islamic religious and cultural practices. Slimani does not acknowledge the fictional aspect of *Rêve de femmes* and references Mernissi’s work only as ‘consacré à son enfance, dans un harem de la médina de Fès.’⁵³⁶ Reflecting on Mernissi’s text, Slimani writes:

Je n’ai pas grandi dans un harem et on ne m’a jamais empêchée de vivre ma vie. Mais je suis le produit de ce monde et mes arrière-grand-mères étaient des femmes qui

⁵³⁴ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 77.

⁵³⁵ Fatema Mernissi quoted in Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 78. Hudud can translate to (invisible) borders or boundaries.

⁵³⁶ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 78.

croyaient à la nécessité de ces frontières. Elles ont rêvé sans doute, dans l'espace confiné qui était le leur, d'une vie plus vaste, plus ample. [...] Je n'ai jamais subi ce que mes ancêtres ont subi, mais demeurait malgré tout, dans mon enfance, cette idée que les femmes étaient des êtres immobiles, sédentaires, qu'elles étaient plus en sécurité à l'intérieur qu'à l'extérieur.⁵³⁷

Although Slimani makes it clear that she has never experienced any physically enforced spatial segregation like Mernissi represents in *Rêves de femmes*, she alludes to generational ties that historically and culturally link her to the gendered notion of the harem. By evoking her ancestors and their understanding of gendered socio-cultural norms, Slimani positions herself as a product of this gendered socio-cultural spatial practice. In turn, Slimani implies that the spatial question of the harem extends beyond its physical borders (along with its historical representations), trickling down into the psyche of women through the ways that they are socialised and perceived – both internally and externally – in contemporary Morocco. As Slimani alludes to a process that reproduces internalised gendered spatial practices across time and space, she foregrounds the notion that the symbolic concept of the harem has continued widespread socio-cultural implications for gender relations, and consequently processes of place-making, in contemporary Morocco. By incorporating the work of a globally renowned Moroccan sociologist like Mernissi alongside her own autobiographical experiences and perceptions, Slimani likely attempts to solidify and legitimise this reading.

More broadly speaking, the gendered nature of spatial practices in Morocco, including the gender roles, relationships, perspectives, and expectations of these spatial frameworks, has changed substantially since Moroccan independence in 1956. Citing Mernissi, Rachel Newcomb maintains that the spatial seclusion of women was a feature of urban Moroccan society (particularly among the urban elites) until the 1940s.⁵³⁸ In the years leading up to and following independence, increased access to education for girls and the participation of women in the workforce, as well as a growth in urbanisation and a rise in the average marriage age, meant that women were more visible in the public arena.⁵³⁹ However, as Newcomb notes, this

⁵³⁷ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, pp. 78-79.

⁵³⁸ Rachel Newcomb, 'Gendering the City, Gendering the Nation: Contesting Urban Space in Fes, Morocco', *City & Society*, 18. 2 (2006), 288-311 (p. 295) <<https://doi.org/10.1525/city.2006.18.2.288>>.

⁵³⁹ Habiba Chafai, 'Contextualising Street Sexual Harassment in Morocco: A Discriminatory Sociocultural Representation of Women', *The Journal of North African Studies*, 22. 5 (2017), 821-40 (p. 825) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2017.1364633>>. Women were also visible in the case of pro-independence street protests. See Alison Baker, *Voices of Resistance: Oral Histories of Moroccan Women* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), pp. 6-10.

did not mean that all women were excluded from public life prior to these changes. Indeed, ‘the spaces in which women moved depended upon environment, economics, and social class, and were not easily reducible to a set of rules or prescriptions.’⁵⁴⁰ For example, when describing the seclusion of urban elite women, French colonial officials and historians imposed Eurocentric notions of public and domestic space onto local contexts in the North African region. This meant that, despite playing a significant role in regional economics through manufacturing or handicraft activities for example, domestic economic production from women was often ignored, undocumented, and consequently underrepresented in French colonial statistics.⁵⁴¹

In terms of the spatial implications of gender relations in contemporary Morocco, Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji demonstrate how by the early 2000s, the traditional, strict public/private spatial dichotomy had been reorganised, despite remaining gendered. They argue:

The space complexities render a rigid dichotomization of space too reductionist, as it does not account for lived reality. Women’s work outside the home and migration (either from rural to urban areas or from Morocco to Europe) have created deep social mutations that have resulted in more interactions between the public and private spaces and a reestablishment of men and women in a common space given their collective participation in social dynamics.⁵⁴²

Whilst women are significantly more visible in public spaces than they were fifty years ago in Morocco, Habiba Chafai demonstrates how access to and experience of public space can sometimes result in violence in a gendered context.⁵⁴³ A national survey conducted by the Ministry of Family, Solidarity, Equality and Social Development in 2019 assessed the prevalence of violence against women in Morocco. The results showed that nearly 55 percent

⁵⁴⁰ Baker, *Voices of Resistance*, pp. 6-10.

⁵⁴¹ Julia Clancy-Smith, ‘A Woman Without Her Distaff: Gender, Work, and Handicraft Production in Colonial North Africa’, in *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*, ed. by Margaret Lee Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker (London: Routledge, 1999), pp. 25-62 (p. 28). For further reading about the links between gender and the politics of identity during the French Protectorate, see Johnathan Wyrzten, *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 219-47.

⁵⁴² Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, ‘The Feminization of Public Space: Women’s Activism, The Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco’, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 2. 2 (2006), 86-114 (p. 93) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2006.2.2.86>>.

⁵⁴³ Habiba Chafai, ‘Everyday gendered violence: women’s experiences of and discourses on street sexual harassment in Morocco’, *The Journal of North African Studies*, 26. 5 (2020), 1013-32 (p. 1016) <<https://doi.org/10.1080/13629387.2020.1743184>>.

of women had experienced some form of violence, with 12.4 percent of women between the ages of 18 and 64 experiencing violence in public spaces.⁵⁴⁴ According to Chafai, the prevalence of anti-street harassment initiatives, such as a 2017 campaign launched by the *Tahadi* association to stop sexual harassment on Casablanca's public transport, speak to the widespread nature of street sexual harassment.⁵⁴⁵

To a certain extent, this assessment of gendered access to urban spatial frameworks in Morocco appears to align with Slimani's childhood reflections in Rabat. As Slimani evokes a sense of fear about the gendered dangers of public space, it is undeniable that this is a reality for many different women (and feminine-presenting people) in Morocco. This arguably demonstrates how reorganising space does not necessarily equate to gender equality. Despite reflecting on gendered spatial practices in Paris in similar ways, a difference emerges in how Slimani seems to stress that these views and practices are culturally entrenched and specific to Morocco.

This is unquestionably significant given the connotations of the harem in historic Western Orientalist discourses. In the French colonial imaginary, Morocco came to represent 'an ancient and inaccessible Moorish culture', where 'its symbolic status had been established by Delacroix's watercolors and canvases, images later revised by rare visitors like Benjamin Constant and Henri Regnault.'⁵⁴⁶ Regarding representations of the harem, gendered representations of space were key themes in Orientalist depictions of Morocco, particularly the notion of 'unveiling.' For example, Henri Matisse (1869-1954) spent several months in Morocco between 1912-13, producing paintings and drawings, many of which represented women in the context of 'stripping off' the veil, as was the 'usual expedient of the Christian colonial image maker working in North Africa.'⁵⁴⁷ This is reminiscent of Malek Alloula's polemical *Le harem colonial* (1981), which unmasked French colonial obsessions with the veiled woman in Algeria (represented as the Other) through colonial postcards from the early 1900s.⁵⁴⁸

⁵⁴⁴ Chafai, 'Everyday gendered violence', p. 1016.

⁵⁴⁵ Chafai, 'Everyday gendered violence', p. 1017.

⁵⁴⁶ Roger Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics: Art, Colonialism, and French North Africa, 1880-1930* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), p. 8.

⁵⁴⁷ Benjamin, *Orientalist Aesthetics*, p. 171.

⁵⁴⁸ Malek Alloula, *Le harem colonial : Images d'un sous-érotisme* (Paris: Séguier, 2001), p. 9. There is a complex debate surrounding sexualised visual material produced in colonial and neo-colonial contexts, which goes beyond the initial scope of this thesis. See also Pascal Blanchard and others' highly polemical *Sexe, race & colonies* (Paris: La Découverte, 2018). Although French colonial interactions with Algeria cannot simply be

The implications of the gendered Orientalist gaze can doubtless be felt today in Morocco, France, and beyond, as images of the harem, the Odalisque, and the veil have arguably left a permanent mark on perceptions of gender and space in Muslim-majority societies more generally. Furthermore, as these perceptions are repeated and reproduced in the arts and the media, the lives of women and feminine-presenting people in these societies continue to be impacted. Reina Lewis notes that ‘the stereotype of the odalisque, the oppressed yet sexualised inmate of the Oriental harem, continues to structure rescue narratives of civilizational alterity that inform attitudes to contemporary Muslim women and men.’⁵⁴⁹ As Spivak famously stated in relation to colonialism in India, systemic colonial violence was disguised in a rescue narrative posited as ‘white men are saving brown women from brown men.’⁵⁵⁰ Whilst it is important to be aware that not all Moroccans are Muslims, as a Muslim-majority country where Islam is culturally embedded in society, Western tendencies to assume a homogenous Islamic identity onto these populations cannot be overlooked. Sherene Razack asserts that this rhetoric is recycled in contemporary Western narratives, packaging representations of Islam into a binary of the figure of the ‘imperilled Muslim woman’ against the ‘dangerous Muslim man.’⁵⁵¹ This mode of governance is thus deployed in the West’s ‘ongoing management of racial populations.’⁵⁵² For example, in France the question of the visible, veiled Muslim woman oppressed by a husband, brother, or father has become a polemical contemporary issue, namely in debates about veiling/unveiling, human rights, and the intersections with Western feminisms. It is important to note here that wearing the headscarf can give access to more of the public sphere for some Muslim women (in Morocco but also in France), highlighting the complex strategies that enable them (socially speaking) to study at university for example.⁵⁵³

transposed onto Morocco, these examples demonstrate how the voyeurism of the French colonial project in North Africa (and elsewhere) was rooted in heterosexual, phallogocentric presumptions. These presumptions defined notions of femininity through a certain scopophilic desire. See Alia Al-Saji, ‘Voiles racialisés : la femme musulmane dans les imaginaires occidentaux’, *Les Ateliers de l'Éthique*, 3. 2 (2008), 39-51 (pp. 40-46) <<https://doi.org/10.7202/1044595ar>>.

⁵⁴⁹ Reina Lewis, ‘The Harem: Gendering Orientalism’, in *Orientalism and Literature*, ed. by Geoffrey P. Nash (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), pp. 166-84 (pp. 168-69).

⁵⁵⁰ Spivak, ‘Can the Subaltern Speak?’, pp. 92-93.

⁵⁵¹ Sherene Razack, *Casting Out: The Eviction of Muslims from Western Law and Politics* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), p. 6.

⁵⁵² Razack, *Casting Out*, p. 6.

⁵⁵³ For Morocco, see Fatima Sadiqi and Moha Ennaji, ‘The Feminization of Public Space: Women’s Activism, The Family Law, and Social Change in Morocco’, *Journal of Middle East Women’s Studies*, 2. 2 (2006), 86-114 (p. 92) <<https://doi.org/10.2979/mew.2006.2.2.86>>. For further discussion about the impacts of the headscarf ban in France and how it has become a ‘tool of exclusion’, see Rokhaya Diallo, ‘What has 20 years of banning headscarves done for France?’, *The Guardian*, 12 April 2024 <<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2024/apr/12/ban-headscarves-france-secularism-exclusion-intolerance>> [accessed 27 August 2024].

It would therefore appear that Slimani's representations of how historic gendered notions of spatial segregation permeated her childhood and adolescence in Rabat carry culturally loaded connotations despite the temporal distance, particularly when placed in a Eurocentric context. Whilst Slimani does not explicitly claim to speak for any other gendered experience aside from her own and that of her ancestors, it would arguably be an oversight to suggest that her reflections on the harem can be separated from Western assumptions that have the potential to encourage harmful Orientalist narratives. This is pertinent in the context of *LPDFLN* being published by French publisher Éditions Stock (Paris), and wider neo-colonial Orientalist narratives that continue to be reproduced in contemporary art, media, and politics worldwide. Furthermore, as Slimani evokes similar notions of fear for women interacting with public spaces in Paris and Rabat, she risks suggesting there is a shared, universal gendered experience. This does not account for the different, intersecting ways that people of different genders and gender expressions also experience misogyny. In addition, it is arguably significant that Slimani engages with the concept of the harem when she is physically *enfermée* in the museum, compared to her Parisian encounters with gendered urban space(s) which arise from moving freely outside in Venice. In this way, there appears to be an illusion of neutrality afforded to the backdrop of gendered interactions with the Parisian urban space, specifically concerning how women interact with and conceptualise its spatial ecologies. Slimani is critical of how women are perceived and treated in Parisian urban spaces; however, she does not appear to offer any historic or cultural explanations for the perpetuation of gender discrimination, which undeniably has an impact on how issues such as sexual assault repeatedly play out in gendered spatial frameworks in France today.

In contrast, Slimani implies that the spatial tradition of the harem is historically rooted in Moroccan society and culture through references to her ancestors and Mernissi's (fictional) account. This likely explains why public spaces might feel unsafe and inaccessible for women in Morocco (and feminine-presenting people). However, by suggesting that this private versus public dichotomy is ethnographically rooted in a particular spatio-cultural practice, Slimani risks presenting a homogenised, reductionist view of interactions between gender and space in Morocco that is likely imbalanced. This imbalance cannot be overlooked given that some readers in France, for example, might approach Slimani's text with preconceived Orientalist assumptions, either subconsciously or not. Feeding into loaded cultural narratives that present the 'helpless' Muslim woman as needing to be saved from a 'dominating' and 'dangerous' male figure, the image of the harem might then be read as ubiquitous and representative of how

women experience gender relations in Morocco more broadly. This relates to questions explored in Chapter 2 and demonstrates that whilst Slimani's experience is Moroccan, it is just one of the many lived experiences of how people might relate to gendered urban spatial frameworks in Morocco. Although Slimani attempts to understand her own experience of the spatial practices that have shaped her relationship to gender and place-building across France and Morocco, the imbalanced notion that gendered spatial frameworks in Rabat are culturally inherent to Morocco and Moroccans would probably be more 'graspable' for readers that favour and consume Western cultural codes. Ultimately, Slimani's gaze on Paris does not appear to be very ethnographic; in other words, there is little distance implied (critical or otherwise). In comparison, whilst autobiographically rooted in her own childhood and adolescent experiences in Morocco and therefore temporally displaced, her gaze on Moroccan society is quite ethnographic.

Conclusion: dislocated gazes across geography

To summarise, the dislocation to Venice, and consequent immediate distance from Paris with *LPDFLN* – both temporally and geographically – is significant in the context of Slimani's authorial trajectory as a celebrity writer in France, Morocco, and beyond. Slimani's move to an essay in the *Ma nuit au musée* series was perhaps only made possible due to her celebrity following the success of *Dans le jardin de l'ogre* and *Chanson douce*, given that the series includes other well-known writers and artists in the French context. Chronologically, the shift in genre and geography (following her early fictional work set in Paris and the ethnographic *essai/enquête* and BD set in Morocco) is further displaced. This dislocation is significant given that the text begins in a place Slimani appears to know well, Paris, two years after *Chanson douce*'s publication, and jumps to Venice a year later, seemingly outside of her geographical ties to France and Morocco. Slimani engages with a process of 'place-building', whereby she turns the Venetian *space* into Venice the *place*, negotiating spatial models of the aquatic city which allow multiple cultural subjectivities to neutrally co-emerge, particularly in the context of her French and Moroccan identities. Yet, returning to the work of Lefebvre and de Certeau, spatial models of the city are constructed by individual subjectivity in a productive, yet fictive process, whereby an individual inserts *space* into *place*. Moreover, Balibar's conceptions of identity formation and fictional spaces indicate that the process of distancing acts as a form of (dis)identification in regulating internal and external subject perception. Therefore, if

distancing as a spatial category is a performative process, then the conflicted nature of competing identity formations has the potential to be overstated. In this way, Venice cannot represent a neutral background in which Slimani moves about, even if there is a displacement from somewhere she knows well like Paris. It can be argued, therefore, that Venice appears to represent a cipher, rather than the ultimate centre of the text, and Slimani's gaze on the city largely rests as a tourist with no real specialist knowledge about the city. The performative distance from Paris as the text is displaced to Venice exacerbates the internal identity conflicts Slimani evokes in *LPDFLN*, failing to untangle the aquatic city from representations that evoke a simplified, binary cultural encounter.

Slimani's night at the museum operates at the core of the text's existence, so if the location in geography inevitably matters in terms of the gaze(s) Slimani brings to the text, then how Slimani uses Venice and the Punta della Dogana to engage with the museum spatially and conceptually significant, particularly in the context of cultural encounters. Through dislocation, Slimani arguably inserts meaning – or space – into the place of the Punta della Dogana, situating discussions in a wider cultural context regarding museological place-making in Morocco compared to elsewhere. In doing so, Slimani appears to suggest the conceptual and physical museum is inherently Western and privileges Eurocentric and Western biases in museological practice. The place of the museum does not appear to be questioned beyond a (re-)practising and reinforcing of aspirational – albeit inaccessible – Western notions that overlook the local to favour a 'West and the rest' discourse. Consequently, this contributes to a process that others Moroccan art in broader discussions about what represents 'authentic' contemporary art in the Western context.

Likewise, by engaging with the notion of the *flâneur* in terms of accessing urban frameworks, Slimani considers her experiences of gendered spatial models in Paris and Rabat as she moves between the internal space of the Punta della Dogana and the external city space of Venice. Yet, the question of gaze returns as Paris appears to be removed from an ethnographic exploration of gendered access to the public sphere, given that Slimani implies little distance, critical or otherwise. In comparison, Slimani presents gendered spatial frameworks in Morocco more ethnographically, even though these representations relate to her childhood and adolescent experiences. The temporal distance from Slimani's childhood perhaps should not be overlooked, given that, at the time of writing *LPDFLN*, Slimani had been living in France since she was seventeen, so, to some extent, her gaze is temporally distanced or 'dated.' Indeed, Slimani's representations risk reinforcing generalised Western assumptions

rooted in Orientalist expectations, particularly those related to the politics of gender and space in Muslim-majority societies.

In the context of being a celebrity author writing (for the most part) in a French cultural and literary context, it is notable that Slimani presents a more ethnographic gaze on Morocco from a 'distance' in *LPDFLN*. This is particularly important following the publication of *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*, both set in Morocco and framed in similar ethnographic ways. Slimani's geographical gaze on Venice and the Punta della Dogana reveals limits to her positionality that impact how iterations of Moroccan culture are spatially mapped to audiences mostly in France. Since her early fictional work, writing about Morocco has coloured Slimani's authorial trajectory in considerable ways and cannot be separated from the processes of *becoming* and maintaining literary celebrity. It is worth stressing that, at the start of *LPDFLN*, Slimani references being at the early stages of writing the first instalment of the proposed fictional trilogy loosely based on her family history in Meknès, Morocco.⁵⁵⁴ As discussed in Chapter 1, Slimani is arguably expected to write about her connection to Morocco in some way or another when publishing in France. This is due to perceptions and assumptions based on Slimani's connection to the 'Maghreb' that generally focus on the Moroccan side of her heritage over the French. However, Slimani is arguably aware of these expectations – existing to varying degrees since her entry onto the French literary scene in 2014 – and would recognise the commercial and symbolic value of engaging with such themes, notably in French fields of cultural production. As a Franco-Moroccan author moving in various transnational spheres, writing to these expectations from a position of proximity to the French cultural mainstream is not without consequence in terms of replicating and centring normative Eurocentric socio-cultural frameworks, even if there is a perception of distance from somewhere like Venice.

⁵⁵⁴ Slimani, *LPDFLN*, p. 13.

Conclusion

In summary, this thesis has explored how Slimani represents and interacts with different spatial contexts in her understudied ‘non-fictional’ texts between 2017 and 2021. Emphasising the processes by which Slimani’s celebrity has been born over a relatively short period in France and beyond, and the effect this has had on her engagement with various spatial contexts, this thesis has revealed limits to her positionality, often overlooked by journalists, academics, and literary critics in France, Morocco, and beyond. Central to the project’s research questions has been the desire to make a contribution to existing writing on Slimani, that avoids reproducing binary cultural interpretations, but conveys the specificities, nuances, complexities, and contradictions of her positionality as a Franco-Moroccan writer of considerable social status developing over time in a transnational context. Therefore, this conclusion summarises this study’s key ideas and main arguments, as well as its wider contribution to knowledge and potential avenues for further investigation.

This thesis began by looking at Slimani’s position as a celebrity writer, moving in and across various transnational literary, cultural, and political spheres in France, Morocco, and beyond. The figure of the literary celebrity, as seen in Chapter 1, is as much about an author’s state of being well-known as it is about how this ‘well-knownness’ is commodified and maintained. Reading this concept in processual terms allows for an understanding of how different factors – publishing, promotion, distribution, political and cultural institutions, and readers’ expectations – mutually reinforce and affect one another over time. Whilst a literary celebrity can be transnational, this thesis has shown that domestic relationships to literature and culture in France have also affected Slimani’s trajectory. In doing so, this thesis has, to some extent, located Slimani in discussions of literary celebrity, contributing to wider discussions about the implications of contemporary celebrity writers operating in transnational fields of cultural production. Slimani’s visibility following her early fictional work appeared to mark the start of a processual *becoming* celebrity in transnational spheres from a specific French context, which placed a certain symbolic commercial and cultural value on Slimani’s literary performance.

As discussed in Chapter 1, Hexagonally-facing Francophone and Anglophone media and academic discourses generally tended to position Slimani and her early fictional work in relation to perceptions about her national, ethnic, and gendered identity. This meant that the Moroccan side of her heritage was foregrounded in more prominent ways than her connection

to France. Despite varying in their socio-cultural and transnational spatial contexts (France, the U.K., and beyond), these discussions focused on whether Slimani represented a Moroccan or North African writer/intellectual. This focus demonstrates the extent to which signifiers of ‘Arab-Muslim’ difference – assumed or otherwise – are present in contemporary Franco-European cultural and political discourses. It also shows that there is some cultural value attached to representations of difference in these discursive fields of cultural production. In France, how readers’ expectations interplay with the mediatisation and marketing of a writer perceived to be of North African heritage undoubtedly feeds into the acquisition and accumulation of ‘cultural capital’, as defined by Bourdieu’s fields of cultural production. Thus, this demonstrates the core argument of this thesis that Slimani’s literary output following the Goncourt success needs to be considered in terms of trajectory – an ‘early’ and a ‘later’ Slimani – influenced by a sellable, multifaceted, authorial (self-)fashioning, which exists within the limits of constrained agency. By thinking about Slimani in terms of accumulated cultural capital and its implications, this thesis has intended to contribute to wider contemporary discussions surrounding the representation of writers, notably those of North African heritage, in contemporary transnational French contexts.

The particularities of Slimani’s lived experience as a Franco-Moroccan woman of considerable socio-cultural status moving in transnational literary spheres mean that it is unhelpful to categorise her as solely a ‘Moroccan’, ‘Francophone’, or ‘postcolonial’ writer/intellectual. Whilst literary critics, journalists, and academics in France, the U.K., and the U.S. tended to debate Slimani’s positionality in terms of representing a ‘spokesperson’ for Moroccans (and North African populations more generally) in France, this thesis has also asked whether Slimani chooses to act as a spokesperson for Moroccan society. In this context, engaging with Spivak’s work on the ‘native informant’ helps to lay bare how such categorisations perhaps play into the same processes – reminiscent of Said’s conceptions of Orientalism – which buy into and place value on perceptions of otherness in France and the West more broadly. Ultimately, Slimani cannot be understood as a Moroccan critic looking towards France from the periphery, even when she speaks on Moroccan ‘issues’ to a largely French audience. This understanding overlooks the significance of Slimani’s proximity to the French national and cultural centre, including the implications this has on her literary output and public interventions.

Slimani is aware of how her work is framed in various transnational socio-cultural and political contexts and fields of cultural production. For example, as Chapter 1 shows, Slimani

has publicly rejected identity-based labels (notably those about nationality or ethnicity) or has simultaneously claimed multiple ones. Accordingly, Slimani appears to reject a fixed positionality as she attempts to consciously (dis)locate herself across competing fields in transnational spheres, demonstrating the tensions of authorial (self-)fashioning. This thesis has shown that, whilst Slimani's visibility and celebrity appear to occupy transnational currents, her positionality is largely anchored to the physical and ideological boundaries of the Hexagon. This is as much due to the fact that Slimani's international success was launched from France's literary centre – with all its cultural and symbolic value –, as it is due to the way that French cultural and political institutions have since capitalised on her success since 2014.

In the Eurocentric French context, Slimani appears to become the 'acceptable face' of otherness for many journalists, academics, and critics. As Kim suggests: '[Slimani's] investment in Enlightenment (read, French) values, combined with her racial and sexual difference, allows the French literary and cultural establishment to remain conservative while appearing to be progressive. [...] As the sensational success of Slimani shows, France can see color and isn't afraid to use it.'⁵⁵⁵ Likewise, as Jasmine Cooper highlights, Slimani's positionality in debates about universalism and feminism in France is 'particularly freighted and complicated' by the fact that her success has been capitalised on by the French state.⁵⁵⁶ This thesis has sought to build on these critical readings of Slimani's positionality, aiming to contribute to broader discussions about the political and cultural value of engaging with debates about French identity from within the institutions representing the French state, either domestically or abroad. Slimani continues to work in such contexts; for example, commenting on her involvement as co-writer of the Paris Olympics 2024 opening ceremony, she stated

[...] it was [...] a question of soft power — that what we were going to express, the way that we were going to describe French identity, to describe France, was going to have a political impact.⁵⁵⁷

⁵⁵⁵ Kim, 'Leïla Slimani's taboos.'

⁵⁵⁶ Cooper, 'Hiding in Plain Sight', p. 261. Cooper offers a compelling analysis of the ways that postfeminist logic intersects with French colour-blind universalism in *Chanson douce* to collapse dialogue about racial difference into a polemic privileging class and gender disparities, thus seeing Slimani yield to French Republican values.

⁵⁵⁷ Slimani quoted in Amanda Randone, "'It's a Very Feminine Ceremony": Leïla Slimani on Writing for the 2024 Olympics', *Vogue Arabia*, 26 July 2024 <<https://en.vogue.me/culture/leila-slimani-interview-olympics-opening-ceremony-2024/>> [accessed 29 August 2024]. The use of 'we' is interesting here, too. Slimani worked with renowned historian Patrick Boucheron and television screenwriter Fanny Herrero (known for the acclaimed French dramedy, *Dix pour cent*). In the context of artistic collaboration, as explored in Chapter 2, the shift of artistic identity from individual to composite subjectivity affects expressions of positionality and power.

This context is relevant to how Slimani appears to be transnationally facing, but, in reality, maintains dominant modes of cultural exchange that cannot bypass the French national centre. Slimani does so by exhibiting proximity to the French cultural and political mainstream and the ideologies traversing it, as well as engaging with a performative distance from these centres. Slimani and her publishers would likely be aware of this tension, including how it would engage certain readerships in France, namely those whose expectations are framed by contemporary, normative, universalist, and anti-identitarian French Republican ideology.

Perceptions surrounding Slimani's 'difference', whether explicitly named or not, are imperative to discussions generated around her work. This highlights the expectations that, to some extent, place potential constraints on Slimani's agency in a process of implicit or indirect othering. Holding symbolic, cultural, and commercial value in French fields of cultural production, these expectations capitalise on difference, be it gendered or ethnic, affecting the accrual of cultural capital. Arguably, to varying degrees, French cultural and political institutions, the media, and Slimani herself all contribute to maintaining this notion of 'difference' or 'distance', which is simultaneously closely associated with the French cultural and political mainstream. Evidence of this arises in the way that Slimani defends her Francophilia and attachment to French universalist values publicly and throughout her writing since 2014.

Therefore, in terms of reconceptualising the perhaps limited, existing ways of framing Slimani within academia – but also more widely – it is helpful to understand the author as a (trans)national celebrity, who is largely ideologically located in France. This spatial understanding of Slimani's positionality as mainly Hexagonally situated is essential to exploring her later non-fictional works. This is particularly important given that they deal with questions of national, ethnic, and cultural identities (especially regarding Morocco and Moroccans) from this French ideological centre more explicitly than her early fictional texts. In this context, Slimani's decisions to leave social media in 2020, and relocate to Lisbon in 2021 to escape 'the demands of Parisian literary celebrity', and work on the third volume of the recent *Le pays des autres* trilogy become even more pertinent.⁵⁵⁸ By book-ending Slimani's recent, understudied, 'nonfiction' period between 2017 and 2021, Chapters 2 and 3 have shown that Slimani engages with the spatial contexts of genre, geography, and gender in ways that

⁵⁵⁸ Leslie Camhi, "'It's impossible to tell the story of Morocco without employing sensuality': An interview with author Leïla Slimani", *Vogue*, 14 September 2022 <<https://www.vogue.com/article/leila-slimani-interview-in-the-country-of-others>> [accessed 16 July 2024].

represent a performative balancing act between proximity and distance to the French cultural and political mainstream.

It is clear that the tension between how others locate Slimani and how she locates herself influences her profile, writing, and reception in various transnational currents. Chronologically speaking, this affects how her celebrity career has been established and maintained over a short period. Indeed, it is significant that *Sexe et mensonges* (2017) and *Paroles d'honneur* (2017) were published just one year after the Goncourt, marking a shift from the fictional novel set in Paris to an ethnographic essay and BD focusing on a Moroccan subject in relation to gender, sex, and sexuality. Chapter 2 aimed to expand on existing scholarship exploring these works (Nelson, Brueton), providing a more in-depth analysis of the texts, contextualising them in relation to Slimani's trajectory, and opening wider discussions about the significance of form, genre, and intermedial processes of adaptation in Slimani's oeuvre in transnational French contexts. As Chapter 2 explored, Slimani's engagement with questions of omission and absence/presence demonstrates how her authorial voice is implicated in a performative process of distancing, evident in how she curates the (non)fictional life narratives in *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*. Chapter 2 showed how Slimani's affective relationship to the narratives changed over time. The second edition of *Sexe et mensonges* arrived four years later in 2021, following her involvement with *Le Collectif 490 des Hors-la-loi* in Morocco, and responded to the first edition's critics. Slimani's attempt to distance herself from an overt narrative presence in the 2021 edition indicates an awareness of how authorial (self-)fashioning plays an important role in shaping and directing authorial trajectory, likely representing another attempt to reject a fixed positionality.

Furthermore, the spatial gaze Slimani brings to form across the two mediums emphasises how form and narrative cannot be separated from her authorial intentions, despite her claims that *Paroles d'honneur* is a fictive adaptation of *Sexe et mensonges*. Although Slimani has repeatedly rejected identitarian readings of her work, placed in the Moroccan context, the spatial implications of form underline the cultural and political significance of intermedially transforming and adapting life narratives. As Slimani employs a (non)fictional investigative aesthetics in *Sexe et mensonges*, she creates a *va-et-vient*, which dislocates the narratives in a process of fictionalisation as they are visually mapped and retold in and across *Paroles d'honneur*.

In terms of how performative displacements, or deterritorialisations, appear to distance Slimani from her affective relationship to the narratives adapted in *Paroles d'honneur*, it is notable that the reader 'voices' the narratives whilst Slimani's character is visually mapped and embodied on the pages of the BD. Here, Slimani's authorial voice is intermedially reframed in the way that it is directed to the audience, which is not without consequence. Compared to *Sexe et mensonges*, Chapter 2 has highlighted how this extends to Slimani's spatio-temporal framing of people and events in the BD in collaboration with Laetitia Coryn. Returning to John Berger's assertion that to look is an act of choice bound to the specificities forming an individual's positionality, who and what Coryn represents is arguably loaded. As a white, French, cisgender woman observing and re-representing (mostly feminine-presenting) Moroccan people and spaces through imagery, the neo-colonial connotations relating to race, gender, sexuality, and religion are significant.

In the wider context of Slimani's authorial trajectory, the choice to employ Coryn, whether from Slimani or her publishers, spotlights who the author is writing for, given that a French audience would likely be more aware of Coryn than of a Moroccan artist. Slimani and Coryn collaborate from different lived experiences of Morocco, but ultimately this does not seem to matter given that the co-production is directed by Slimani's authorial voice. In this way, Coryn's illustrations refract Slimani's positionality. Whilst this process of filtering and archiving carries subtle new shapes and meanings for how audiences internalise and engage with the narratives in *Paroles d'honneur*, it does not go beyond a performative engagement with practices of observation, re-representation, and transnational rights discourses (albeit in subtly different ways to *Sexe et mensonges*), which have cultural value in France. Thus, Slimani's authorial voice manifests itself through proximity and distance to the narratives being retold and adapted, as well as to the reader, in an attempt to demonstrate narrative 'neutrality.'

The notion that the spatiality of the BD does not offer Slimani narrative neutrality is possibly more significant in the context of who is likely to read *Paroles d'honneur*. The question of audience expectation and how it can constrain a writer's agency emerges again, given that access to the BD would be limited to audiences in France and upper-middle-class Moroccan readers. This means that *Paroles d'honneur* probably has a greater marketing potential and reach in France than it would in Morocco, highlighting how in transnational contexts, the space of the BD cannot neutrally represent narratives from *Sexe et mensonges* to multiple readerships. On the surface, the texts might appear to represent formal vehicles through which Slimani can experiment with authorial presence in ways that would likely not

have been possible pre-Goncourt. However, as discussed in Chapter 1, the expectations placed on an author like Slimani to write about certain themes and topics in France (i.e. gender, sex, and religion in Morocco and the Maghreb more broadly) reframe the implications of chronologically shifting from the fictional novel set in Paris to an ethnographic essay focusing on a gendered Moroccan subject.

Likewise, Slimani's celebrity doubtless would have facilitated her appearance in Stock's *Ma nuit au musée* series with *LPDFLN* in 2021. The spatio-temporal dislocation from Paris to Venice is relevant to mapping Slimani's authorial trajectory as a (trans)national celebrity writer in France, Morocco, and beyond. In chronological terms, *LPDFLN* marked another geographical genre shift in Slimani's literary corpus after her early fictional work set in Paris and the ethnographic *essai/enquête* and BD set in Morocco. The idea of distance, or dislocation, arises again as the text begins in a place Slimani knows well, Paris, two years after the publication of *Chanson douce*, jumping to Venice two years later, which first appears outside of her geographical ties to France and Morocco.

In terms of following Slimani's trajectory, the notion of fictionality – in the spatial contexts of form, genre, and performance – appears in her geographical gaze on representations of space and place in *LPDFLN*. By engaging with the work of critical thinkers such as Lefebvre and de Certeau, Chapter 3 highlighted the processes whereby individual subjectivity constructs representations of place within spatial models of the city. More specifically, it discussed how this fictive and productive process, where individuals insert space into place, is essential to exploring Slimani's engagement with urban spatial models in Venice. It appears that Slimani participates in a process of 'place-building': turning the Venetian *space* into Venice the *place*. As a result, she represents spatial models of Venice that suggest multiple cultural subjectivities emerge and interact with one another neutrally, particularly those relating to her French and Moroccan identities.

Nonetheless, understanding the process of distancing as a form of (dis)identification, as theorised by Balibar, is essential in this context. As internal and external subject perception is regulated, the performative nature of distancing as a spatial category becomes clear. This shows how the conflicted nature of competing identity constructions can potentially be overstated. Therefore, as Slimani's gaze on Venice is largely influenced by being a tourist who has no real specialist knowledge about the aquatic city, Venice appears to become a cipher, rather than the text's centre. The city cannot represent a neutral background for Slimani to

examine various cultural identities, despite the apparent displacement from somewhere she knows well like Paris. In other words, the internal identity conflicts that Slimani evokes in *LPDFLN* are exacerbated by the performative distance from Paris, meaning that she fails to untangle Venice from representations that reproduce a simplified, binary cultural encounter between East and West.

This suggests that location in geography *matters* in terms of the gaze Slimani brings to her writing over time. Therefore, this thesis has attempted to spark a critical engagement with the question of geography in Slimani's texts. It has shown that further attempts to map Slimani's authorial trajectory would likely need to consider her geographical gaze on the question of (dis)location, given that it appears inseparable from how she engages with her authorial positionality transnationally. In terms of the wider area of study, applying this framework to other fictional and nonfictional works in Slimani's corpus (in isolation or comparatively) would provide a fruitful site of investigation, especially in light of the Moroccan trilogy.

Returning to *LPDFLN*, the concept of spending a night locked in a museum is the reason behind the text, so Chapter 3 investigated how Slimani uses Venice and the Punta della Dogana to engage with spatial and conceptual representations of museums with respect to cultural encounters. Dislocated from the Punta della Dogana, Slimani inserts meaning into the space of the museum, which is culturally contextualised around museological place-making in Morocco, compared to France (and more generally, the West). Slimani alludes to feeling unable to access museum spaces growing up in Rabat, implying that the museum – both physically and conceptually – emanated from Western culture and was almost non-existent in Morocco. However, Slimani seems to privilege Eurocentric biases in museological practices as aspirational. In doing so, she risks reinforcing narratives that overlook the significance and importance of the local, favouring a 'West and the rest' discourse. Furthermore, this discourse extends to how Slimani frames Moroccan art regarding what is deemed 'authentic' contemporary art in the Western context. When considering how museological practices and iterations of contemporary art existing within and beyond historically 'Eurocentric' models are present in contemporary Morocco, this cannot be overlooked. Thus, Slimani foregrounds a temporally displaced, yet ethnographic gaze on museums and art in contemporary Morocco from Venice.

Moreover, as Slimani moves between the internal space of the Punta della Dogana and the external city space of Venice, she enlists the notion of the *flâneur* to consider her experiences of gendered spatial models in Paris and Rabat. Nevertheless, although Slimani criticises the gendered implications of occupying public spaces in Paris, her gaze on the city appears removed from any ethnographic exploration. On the contrary, Slimani's exploration into gendered spatial frameworks in Morocco comes from inside the museum space in a recall of childhood memories. Despite being rooted in experiences from twenty or so years ago, Slimani's gaze appears to be ethnographic. Chapter 3 demonstrated how the temporal proximity to Paris and distance from Slimani's childhood in Rabat suggest that her gaze on Morocco, whilst speaking to her lived experience, is dated. In terms of writing to audiences largely in France, Slimani risks speaking to generalised Western assumptions anchored in Orientalist expectations, notably those relating to discourses about the politics of gender and space in Muslim-majority societies.

In the wider context of Slimani as a (trans)national celebrity author writing mostly in and from a French cultural and literary context, there are consequences to engaging with an ethnographic gaze on Morocco from a position of performative 'distance.' This is particularly pertinent as *LPDFLN* followed *Sexe et mensonges* and *Paroles d'honneur*. Despite only locating the latter two in Morocco, Slimani presents a similar ethnographic gaze on the gendered aspects of Moroccan culture across the three texts. This suggests that Slimani's geographical gaze on Venice and the Punta della Dogana reveals limits to her positionality, which affect the way that representations of Moroccan culture are spatially mapped to readers who are, for the most part, in a Hexagonally-orientated context. Therefore, Slimani's visibility in France and beyond allows her to write about Morocco more ethnographically: arguably, this would not have been possible before the Goncourt. As this thesis has shown, this is not without consequence as Slimani risks replicating and solidifying normative, Eurocentric socio-cultural, and political frameworks, both in terms of writing within certain fields of cultural production and largely catering to their associated expectations.

Slimani has been writing about Morocco across her fictional and nonfictional works in various ways, forming an integral part of her *becoming* (and maintaining) literary celebrity in the transnational French context. Indeed, at the time of writing this thesis, Slimani has published two tomes of the proposed fictional trilogy loosely based on her own family in Morocco. Hence, a further area of study would be to apply this framework, which sees the performative process of *becoming* literary celebrity and how it manifests spatially in Slimani's

oeuvre as integral to understanding her authorial trajectory, to the novels in the trilogy. Slimani's turn to fictionally representing her family history might constitute an attempt to make sense of how her identities have been constructed historically as a Franco-Moroccan woman. This thesis has shown that Slimani's secularist and normative position, alongside her social position, helps her in French literary and cultural spheres as an 'acceptable' face of otherness. However, another area for study might question the extent to which being associated with Morocco might help her more than if she had connections to Algeria, for example. This is relevant in the context of French neo-colonial histories, affecting whether Moroccan writers might be seen as more 'recuperable' in contemporary French culture and politics. Although there is a tendency in France to subsume various Maghrebi cultural and national identities under one category, the average French reader would likely know less about politics in Morocco than in Algeria.⁵⁵⁹

Overall, this thesis has not set out to deny Slimani's experiences as a Franco-Moroccan woman who undoubtedly has experienced misogyny and racism in France, Morocco, and beyond. Nor has it set out to deny experiences of discrimination and prejudice occurring daily in France, Morocco, and elsewhere. However, this study has shown the importance of treating the spatiality of Slimani's work with a degree of caution. The consequences of Slimani's celebrity being born over a short period in the decade since 2014 from the French geographical and cultural centre highlight how her profile impacts, and is impacted by, her reception and what she writes in the various transnational and transcultural spheres she occupies. Slimani cannot be viewed as representative of Morocco and Moroccans in France (and more broadly in the West) simply because of her Moroccan heritage. This understanding fails to account for the socio-cultural position and status she occupies in France, Morocco, and beyond, as well as the processes that contribute to the development, curation, and maintenance of her (trans)national celebrity status. Therefore, in terms of constructing authorial identity for women writers in the

⁵⁵⁹ This is due to Algeria's civil war (1991-2000) and discourses about the rise of religious extremism in France, as well as public discussions surrounding the *guerre de mémoires* and the role of the French Army during the Algerian War of Independence (1954-62). For example, in 2018 President Emmanuel Macron admitted that the French state was responsible for the torture and death of a member of the Algerian Communist Party, Maurice Audin, in 1957. This was the first time the systematic torture of Algerians by the French Army was officially acknowledged by France. See Dominique Sopo, 'Monsieur Macron, le temps de la vérité est venu', *Huffington Post*, 20 June 2018 <https://www.huffingtonpost.fr/politique/article/monsieur-macron-le-temps-de-la-verite-dans-l-affaire-audin-est-venu_125682.html> [accessed 19 July 2024] and Kim Willsher, "'My father was tortured and murdered in Algeria. At last France has admitted it'", *The Guardian*, 16 September 2018 <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/16/algeria-france-war-macron-apology-murder-michele-audin-interview>> [accessed 19 July 2024].

contemporary period, the fluid, shifting nature of Slimani's gendered, national, and ethnic identities perhaps needs to be understood in terms of Rosi Braidotti's 'nomadic subject.'⁵⁶⁰ Given that feminist focus on embodiment is closely related to a radical rejection of essentialism, Braidotti suggests that a subject is inscribed in a historical moment whilst also being 'connected and relational and carved beyond an ideal of a subject that is anchored in identification.'⁵⁶¹ Therefore, the nomadic body is multi-layered and heterogenous, and contrasts 'the oppositions created by a dualistic mode of social constructivism, [...] [acting] as a threshold of transformations. It is the complex interplay of the highly constructed social and symbolic forces.'⁵⁶² This concept enriches the understanding of how multiple axes of differentiation (like gender, ethnicity, class, and others) intersect and interact with one another simultaneously to create Slimani's authorial identity at a given moment in time, helping to avoid binarisms and rejecting the essentialisation of identities.

As a Franco-Moroccan writer, the transnational socio-cultural and political discursive spheres Slimani occupies mostly focus on (but are not limited to) France and Morocco, where unequal negotiations of power across the Global North and South continue to play out. These negotiations of power reveal competing pressures, particularly those concerning how expectations placed on certain authors affect their work. The wider implications of Slimani's work as a changing body of texts forming her authorial trajectory show the extent to which notions of expectation create the potential for constrained agency. Indeed, this thesis has revealed how Slimani's reception is enhanced in most quarters because she is perceived as politically less 'threatening' in the wider French context. Although Slimani might be seen to break taboos – notably those about gender, sex, sexuality, and feminism in a Moroccan context – doing so from a French ideological and cultural centre means there is an inevitable bias. This bias potentially plays into and reinforces harmful cultural stereotypes. What Slimani appears to engage with or not has consequences for how various audiences will spatially map representations of cultures transnationally, within and beyond France. These audiences include the various French-speaking readerships in France and Morocco but also the translations of Slimani's work in English, Arabic, Spanish, and Italian to name a few. Translation occupies a

⁵⁶⁰ See Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory*, 2nd edn (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) <<https://www.perlego.com/book/774982/nomadic-subjects-embodiment-and-sexual-difference-in-contemporary-feminist-theory>> [accessed 07 April 2025].

⁵⁶¹ Ana Carolina Minozzo, 'Rosi Braidotti's "Nomadic Subjects"', in *The Palgrave Handbook of Psychosocial Studies*, ed. by Stephen Frosh, Marita Vyrgioti, and Julie Walsh (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2024), pp. 137-57 (p. 137).

⁵⁶² Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*.

crucial position in contemporary global literary markets, as its economic, social, and cultural reach extends well beyond any national borders. As mentioned, most of Slimani's corpus has been translated into several languages, which opens space for future research to interrogate the role of translation in building her status as a literary celebrity beyond the French-speaking world. Entering other markets and engaging with vistas existing outside of the socio-political and cultural French sphere through translation undoubtedly impacts Slimani's authorial (self-)fashioning and cultural production. In terms of the contemporary political situation in France, Slimani's proximity to and engagement with the French political and cultural centre needs to be interrogated and questioned now more than ever. The legislative elections in July 2024 demonstrate the extent to which far right-wing politics have grown significantly in terms of public popularity and parliamentary representation.⁵⁶³ In France, many see President Macron as privileged and out of touch with the everyday realities of ordinary people outside of the Parisian bubble.⁵⁶⁴ The full impacts of this election are yet to be determined; however, it has already highlighted a normalisation of racist, xenophobic, Islamophobic, anti-immigration, and anti-LGBTQIA+ rhetoric in the French political arena and beyond. This will inevitably have ramifications for France's position in Europe and the wider world, as well as how writers, activists, and intellectuals negotiate and try to make sense of the current socio-political climate, both domestically and in wider transnational currents.

⁵⁶³ The *Rassemblement National* failed to achieve a majority during the July 2024 elections. However, the broad leftwing alliance, the *Nouveau Front Populaire* – created to contest the 2024 French legislative election following the gains of far-right parties in the 2024 European Parliament election in France – fell well short of an absolute majority in the *Assemblée Nationale*.

⁵⁶⁴ Katya Adler, 'The far right came close to power in France. What about the rest of Europe?' *BBC*, 07 July 2024 <<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c4ng03lnv0vo>> [accessed 19 July 2024].

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Questions - FAHC 22-144

Questions:

1. Par rapport aux publics divers qui lisent vos livres, comment interagissent-ils avec vous et votre écriture dans des lieux différents ?
2. Comme j'ai déjà mentionné, je me suis lancée dans vos œuvres à travers *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* (paru en 2021) après avoir étudié un texte de Daoud publié dans la même série « Ma nuit au musée » chez Stock. J'étais très intéressée par la manière dont le texte évoque l'espace urbain de Venise ainsi que l'espace du musée de la *Punta della Dogana*. Pourquoi avez-vous décidé d'aller à Venise et à ce musée en particulier ?
3. Le texte évoque aussi la puissance culturelle et historique des représentations artistiques et littéraires de la ville. Comment avez-vous abordé de telles représentations de Venise avant et après votre visite ?
4. Est-ce que cela a eu un impact sur votre façon d'écrire sur Venise ?
5. Dans le texte, vous faites référence à l'incendie de Notre-Dame en 2019, et le texte contient d'autres renvois à Paris et à votre vécu dans cette ville. D'après vous, est-ce qu'il y a des similitudes entre Venise et Paris ?
6. Dans d'autres interviews que j'ai pu consulter, vous parlez du processus d'invention des personnages : mais comment inventez-vous des lieux spatio-temporels, par exemple le Maroc des années 1950 ou le Paris et la Venise contemporains ? Comment les recherches sur un lieu et une période font-elles partie du processus de création ?
7. Quel genre de recherche faites-vous avant la rédaction d'un texte ? Par exemple, lecture d'études existantes, entretiens avec des experts, iconographie, etc...
8. Les textes que vous avez publiés avant de sortir *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* semblent traiter sous forme romanesque du vécu complexe des femmes qui évoluent dans

l'espace souvent fermé de l'appartement parisien bourgeois et contemporain. Est-ce que l'espace vénitien vous a permis d'explorer les identités culturelles d'une manière différente de celle de Paris ?

9. Par rapport à la forme romanesque, la forme de l'essai a-t-elle influencé la manière dont vous avez représenté l'espace urbain vénitien et le musée ? Et si oui, de quelles manières ?
10. Dans *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* vous écrivez « Je n'ai rien d'une flâneuse qui erre le cœur léger, sans s'inquiéter d'un but à atteindre ou des gens qu'elle croiserait ». Quel est votre rapport à l'espace public dans des villes telles que Paris, Venise, Rabat et Casablanca ?
11. Est-ce que le fait d'être devenue plus visible en tant qu'écrivaine célèbre a changé la façon dont vous accéder à et vivez différents lieux urbains ?
12. Comment percevez-vous votre positionnalité à cet égard ?
13. Lorsque vous parlez de vos expériences à Paris dans *Le parfum des fleurs la nuit* et dans des articles journalistiques comme « Un porc tu nais » (qui a été publié en réponse aux mouvements Me Too et Balance Ton Porc), il semble qu'il y ait une tension entre la visibilité médiatique, l'enracinement matériel et social, et l'appartenance. C'est ce que vous avez l'intention de faire ? Pour vous, que signifie être vraiment invisible (ou visible) dans une société en tant qu'écrivaine, femme franco-marocaine ?
14. J'ai lu quelque part que vous avez déménagé à Lisbonne. Cette distance que vous vous êtes imposée (notamment par rapport à la France) a-t-elle affecté votre rapport à l'écriture et votre processus d'écriture ? Et si oui, de quelle manière ?
15. En considérant la manière dont on « cartographie » des corps différents dans la littérature ainsi que dans des lieux physiques et socioculturels, j'ai pensé à *Sexe et mensonges* (2017) et aux *Paroles d'honneur* (2017). Annabel Kim (professeur de français à Harvard) a écrit que vos textes non-fictionnels semblent traiter d'« un récit qui représente le vécu des femmes et leurs désirs comme des sujets tabous » (invested

in the narrative that casts women's lives and desires as taboo subjects). Que pensez-vous de cette déclaration ? Est-ce que c'est ce que vous avez eu l'intention de faire ?

16. Comment avez-vous sélectionné les témoignages dans *Sexe et mensonges* ?
17. Y avait-il des témoignages qui ne figurent pas dans l'édition finale du texte ? Si oui, pourquoi ?
18. La traduction anglaise du titre (Sex and Lies : True Stories of Women's Intimate Lives in the Arab World (2020)) semble effacer la spécificité marocaine du texte. Qu'est-ce qui a motivé ce choix ?
19. En ce qui concerne l'accueil de *Sexe et mensonges* au Maroc, le sociologue Mehdi Alioua suggère et je cite « [qu'une partie de vos lecteurs marocains francophones] ont eu le sentiment que ce livre sur le Maroc ne leur était pas destiné, et qu'on s'adressait plutôt à un public français en lui disant ce qu'il avait envie ou était capable d'entendre. » Que répondez-vous à cette affirmation ? Est-ce que le texte est destiné à un public précis ?
20. D'après vous, la réaction de Mehdi Alioua est-elle répandue ?
21. Vous avez aussi publié *Sexe et mensonges* sous forme de bande dessinée qui s'intitule *Paroles d'honneur*. Vous avez décrit *Sexe et mensonges* comme « des histoires vraies » et *Paroles d'honneur* comme « une fiction ». En ce qui concerne la mise en fiction des récits, en quoi la bande dessinée se distingue-t-elle de l'essai ou de l'enquête ?
22. Cette transformation esthétique a-t-elle affecté la présentation des témoignages ? Et pensez-vous que cela modifie la lecture de tels récits lors de ce passage entre les deux genres ? Je pense en particulier aux représentations d'événements traumatisants, par exemple l'agression sexuelle que subit Zhor.
23. C'était comment de collaborer avec l'artiste Laetitia Coryn ?

24. Votre propre rapport aux récits individuels a-t-il changé au cours de la production de la bande dessinée avec Laetitia Coryn ?
25. On reconnaît immédiatement votre personnage dans *Paroles d'honneur*, et même si vous avez dit que l'œuvre est « une fiction », quel est l'effet pour les lecteurs de vous voir dessinée de manière plutôt réaliste sur la page aux côtés d'autres visages et corps « fictifs » ?
26. Quels sont les enjeux politiques de la représentation visuelle des corps pour la plupart féminins dans les pages de *Paroles d'honneur* ?
27. J'ai lu qu'on a transformé *Paroles d'honneur* en une pièce de théâtre lors du festival « Rencontres inattendues » à la cathédrale de Tournai en 2021. Pouvez-vous m'en dire plus à ce sujet ? Avez-vous participé à ce projet ? Est-ce qu'on peut consulter le texte de ce spectacle ?
28. Par rapport à vos projets futurs, est-ce qu'il y a d'autres genres ou bien d'autres formes d'écriture que vous auriez envie d'essayer ?