

Self-Other Encounters and Ordeals of Aspiration among Young Moroccan Immigrants in Spain

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Abstract: North African youth who join their parents in Spain in childhood or adolescence face challenges unlike those of the older generation. Moving through institutional spaces and processes, from public school to post-secondary training and work, first-generation youth exercise cultural and linguistic bridging capacities while facing continual challenges as representatives of a racially stigmatized minority. This article focuses on life story narratives from Moroccan young people living in the southeast municipality of El Ejido since the late 1990s to highlight how Self-Other encounters – a well-established framework in Maghrebine ethnography – and goals of upward mobility shape experiences of coming-of-age in an unwelcoming context. I apply Bakhtin’s notion of *Bildungsroman* to explore first-generation interviewees’ narratives as a series of ordeals, adaptive responses, and growing self-knowledge and autonomy.

Keywords: Aspiration, *Bildungsroman*, Immigration, Narrative, Morocco, Self-Other, Spain, Youth.

Introduction

Karima’s forthright confidence suited the high-ceilinged sheen of the Renault showroom where we sat talking one summer afternoon in 2017. Two formative decades in the southeastern Spanish municipality of El Ejido (Almería) had made her fluent in the local argot, and she spoke with the open vowels and distinctive prosody of the region. She described herself, however, as *marroquí pura y dura* – Moroccan through and through. She dreamed of moving to a city at least as big as her family’s native Tangier, preferably bigger. The transnational businesses she imagined working for would be a far cry from El Ejido’s commercial and farming establishments. And the work she imagined doing would be wholly unlike the physical labor required by area greenhouses and processing plants, where her parents had worked for decades.

Karima’s internship at Renault signified a qualitative change in the trajectory of her life story. She had failed secondary school, embittered and disaffected after years of bullying. It had begun when she was just twelve and kept up until she aged out at seventeen. “They picked on me because I was Moroccan,” she said. “I kept going [to school] only because my mom insisted.”¹ Her mother,

1. Quotations are my own translations from the original Spanish. Participant names are pseudonyms.

meanwhile, knew nothing of the ordeal. Karima kept it all to herself, adopting bravado to match her tormenters' intimidation. "I made myself like them, cockier. I became rebellious," she explained.

A boring mall job in the intervening years had convinced her that *lo mejor era estudiar* (it was best to study), so she took classes to earn her high school degree and, at 23, was mere weeks from getting a vocational diploma in commerce and marketing. Her professors gushed about her performance, and her internship supervisor gave her highest marks for professionalism, praising her adaptability and fast learning.

In this article, I draw from accounts shared with me by eight Moroccan young people living in El Ejido between 2010 and 2017. I met some of these five young women and three young men during a year of fieldwork focusing on inclusion and exclusion at secondary schools (2010-2011). Others I met during return summer visits. Together, their stories comprised threads in a tapestry of life history narratives that highlighted personal ordeals as sources of character-building resilience.

Moroccan young people in El Ejido narrativized more than their individual trajectories, however. In describing the difficulties, they faced, they also described a changing set of contexts and social conditions. It is in this sense that I view their stories as versions of the *Bildungsroman*,² which interweaves biographical time-space with the changing time-space of nation and epoch. As first-generation Moroccan youth come of age and move into new economic, societal, and familial roles in Spain, the immediate world is transformed, too, evincing an emerging, if often uncomfortable, transculturality of which they themselves are primary agents and pioneers. In what follows, I read across and between these narratives to highlight how ordeals arise in concert with defining Self-Other encounters (Moroccan-Spanish, but also child-parent) to drive young people's accounts of self-realization.

Self and Other

The relationship between Self and Other has occupied a space of central concern in the anthropology of Morocco. Foundational contributions from Rabinow,³ Crapanzano,⁴ and Dwyer⁵ have illuminated ethnographic and

2. A novel dealing with one person's formative years or spiritual education.

3. Paul Rabinow, *Reflections on Fieldwork in Morocco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977).

4. Vincent Crapanzano, *Tuhami, Portrait of a Moroccan* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

5. Kevin Dwyer, *Moroccan Dialogues: Anthropology in Question* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).

psychosocial dynamics of encounter between secular modern and religio-mystic or traditional frames of life and thought. Morocco, as a space of historic and cultural encounter between “West” and “East” writ large, has invited scholarly attention to ideological entanglements that persist amidst legacies of Islamization, Arab nationalism, European imperialism, and the political economic operation of the *makhzen*.⁶

But the studies I reference here laid groundwork not merely for examining the impacts of large-scale phenomena on Moroccan society. They also problematized the ethnographic project as an extrapolation of Orientalist or East-West encounters and, in so doing, raised questions about the privileges of narration, objectivity, and truth. The framework of Self and Other provided a way of understanding the porousness between the two and how realities rendered by ethnographers-via-participants were co-constructed and partial. Such work detailed the possibility of the Other as a complex, unresolved, emerging Self in his/her own right, and in this way echoed the decentering fictional and autobiographical accounts of Western writers such as Paul Bowles or Juan Goytisolo.

A growing body of work related to late-20th and early-21st century Moroccan diaspora has carried forward the project of complexifying Self-Other dynamics in an era of mass migration and post-9/11 Islamophobia. Literature on Maghrebi and Muslim diaspora in Europe have made important contributions to understanding how, in avowedly secular progressive Western spaces, the presence of Muslim migrants and their descendants – never fully recognized as the citizens they are or become⁷ – has sparked a reckoning with politico-legal strictures and taken-for-granted notions of belonging or national homogeneity.⁸ Selfhood and agency, these studies show, are not the exclusive province of modernizing Western Selves, but also pertain to the mobile, variously (under)privileged transnational Others who encounter them. Struggles to claim Selfhood by criteria apart from dominant linguistic, religious, and ethnocultural norms are central to accounts of diasporic Maghrebi life.

6. Ernest Gellner, *Muslim Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

7. Laila Amine, *Postcolonial Paris: Fictions of Intimacy in the City of Lights* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2018).

8. Jeanette S. Jouili, *Pious Practice and Secular Constraints: Women in the Islamic Revival in Europe* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015); Jeanette S. Jouili, “Islam and Culture: Dis/Junctures in a Modern Conceptual Terrain,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 61, 1 (2019): 207-37; Joan Wallach Scott, *The Politics of the Veil* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); Paul A. Silverstein, “Immigrant Racialization and the New Savage Slot: Race, Migration, and Immigration in the New Europe,” *Annual Review of Anthropology* 34 (2005): 363-84.

For Spain, scholarly interest in North African migration has dealt prominently with arenas of education, gender, and religious practice.⁹ Along with studies exploring facets of political mobilization and community integration,¹⁰ this work has focused broadly on *convivencia*, or conviviality, as a homegrown idea of interethnic harmony rescued from medieval Andalusian history as evidence of Spanish openness and tolerance.¹¹

At the same time, it is worth pointing out that the exilic narrative tradition so prominent in relation to North Africans in France has not developed in the same way in Spain. Moroccan migrant protagonists have appeared in novels by a handful of Spanish and Catalan writers and tend to show up as luckless victims or, alternatively, one-dimensionally noble actors.¹²

An exception is Rachid Nini's *Diario de un ilegal*,¹³ published first in Arabic then in Spanish translation, detailing the journalist's time as an undocumented laborer in Spain in the late 1990s. Rather than following the triumphant arc of the Bildungsroman, Nini's account evokes the opaque literary figures at the center of what Bakhtin called "novels of ordeal."¹⁴ Tested by extraordinary circumstances, protagonists suffer (and survive) but do not necessarily grow. Nini's story – echoed in reports of migrants stranded on the Mediterranean or victimized by smugglers and cruel labor practices – is one of a fractured, nearly schizophrenic Self. His narrative embrace of the abject immigrant contrasts sharply with narratives such as Karima's, in which struggles against Othering and dehumanization became sites of moral regeneration and self-

9. Inmaculada M^a García-Sánchez, *Language and Muslim Immigrant Childhoods: The Politics of Belonging* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell 2014); Anwar Ouassini, "We Have Come Back Home: The Spanish-Moroccan Community, Collective Memory, and Sacred Spaces in Contemporary Spain," *Religions* 10, 2 (2019): 128; Mikaela Rogozen-Soltar, *Spain Unmoored: Migration, Conversion, and the Politics of Islam* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017).

10. Avi Astor, "Memory, Community, and Opposition to Mosques: The Case of Badalona," *Theory & Society* 41, 4 (2012): 325-49; Gunter Dietz, "Frontier Hybridisation or Culture Clash? Transnational Migrant Communities and Sub-National Identity Politics in Andalusia, Spain," *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 30, 6 (2004): 1087-1112; Brad Erickson, "Utopian Virtues: Muslim Neighbors, Ritual Sociality, and the Politics of Convivència," *American Ethnologist* 38, 1 (2011): 114-31

11. The potent legacy of *convivencia* has inspired ongoing political, diplomatic, and artistic ties between Spain and Morocco as both variously capitalize on the lore of Al-Andalus (AD 711-1492) to construct symbolic kinship and affinity between the two nations (Eric Calderwood, *Colonial Al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2018).

12. see Bronislava Greskovicova, "De la otreidad al mestizaje: Representación de la inmigración marroquí en la narrativa española contemporánea (1998-2008)," (PhD diss. Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2016); Dorothy Odartey-Wellington, "El imaginario de la inmigración en la narrativa española contemporánea," *Actas del XVII Congreso de la Asociación Internacional de Hispanistas*, (2010): https://cvc.cervantes.es/literatura/aih/pdf/17/aih_17_5_060.pdf.

13. Rachid Nini, *Diario de un ilegal*, translated by G. Fernández Parilla and M. Embarek Lopez (Madrid: Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo, 2002).

14. M. M. Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, eds. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist and trans. Vern W. McGee (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986).

reliance. Karima, for instance, noted that since going back to school she had been purposeful in seeking integration. She was proud of her efforts despite the painful memories of bullying. In fact, they reminded her of how far she had come. “If you don’t take that step for yourself,” she asserted, “it doesn’t happen.”

In the discussion below, I join a literary-discursive understanding of Bildungsroman with ethnographic consideration of Self and Other to draw out my participants’ framing of their own life stories through serial ordeals, particularly involving encounters with variously threatening Spanish Others. Their adaptive responses and growing self-efficacy created narrative touchstones that spoke, in turn, to their savvy negotiation of multiple pressures, from the host society to family expectations and community norms.

Formative Ordeals

My participants’ life narratives began in the wake of the trauma of undocumented migration. Concerned about dredging up painful memories or putting my interviewees on-the-spot regarding matters of legal residency, I never asked directly about these details, but youth tended to volunteer them – an indication from early in my research that familial and personal ordeals were framed as fortifying experiences.

Majid and Selim’s fathers had arrived in *pateras*, or small boats, crossing the Mediterranean Sea, as had Malika’s, Amina’s, and Lina’s. Even if their backgrounds were different, their motivations were the same, to find work and provide for their families. As Karima said of her father, “He didn’t see a future for us [in Morocco]. There was no work.”

Periods of parental separation preceded family reunion and relocation to Spain. Lina, aged 21 and an intern at the municipal archives, remembered reuniting with her father after two years apart; she was six at the time and did not want to leave his side. Karima’s father spent eight years working in El Ejido’s greenhouses and construction sites before he was ready to bring his wife and five children to join him. Rachid, a 19-year-old classmate of Karima’s, was four months old when his father left for Spain. Even with a degree in economics, he had not found steady work in Morocco. As Rachid put it, “He did everything”: he kept the books for a restaurant, drove a taxi, and took odd jobs. Ultimately, he decided that emigrating was his best option. He was one of four siblings who ended up making their way to Europe, and Rachid spent the next nine years living with his mother and paternal grandparents.

That Rachid’s father had gotten a university diploma signaled the potential upward mobility of his family. His grandfather, by contrast, would

regale him with stories of crisscrossing the countryside in Guercif with his herd of sheep and goats. It was up to Rachid to fulfill the possibilities engendered by his elders' efforts. His grandparents passed away at the height of Spain's economic crisis, and his parents, believing it unwise to relocate the entire family, arranged for his mother to emigrate alone. While they worked to save up money, Rachid lived with one aunt, and his two younger brothers lived with another.

The tangle of parents' calculations and concerns formed the backdrop to young people's own stories of arrival in El Ejido. The sequencing of parental ordeals also pointed to children's early awareness of the role of the state in families' legal and material fates. Stories of relocation to Spain were stories of remediating prolonged separations through European residency and key accoutrements of success. When I spoke with fifteen-year-old Amina, for instance, she told me that her father had spent years working abroad, first in France and then in Spain:

“It's too hard to get papers in France. You need ten years. Here it's just three. He couldn't be without us for ten years! [...]. So he came here, he got his passport, his job, his money, his house, his car, his residency – everything – and started arranging our papers. In three years, we came up, and I've been here for eight years.”

I first talked with Amina and her fourteen-year-old cousin, Khadija, on the school patio one morning as kids in a physical education class ran laps around the distant basketball court. My presence on campus was a novelty, and students were eager to give interviews, curious about what I would ask but always more willing to chat with me in twos and threes. Interviews turned into small focus groups, and kinship and friendship connections among Moroccan families, in particular, were clarified. As I pressed play on the audio recorder, Amina crowed to a boy waving from the P.E. class, “I'm going to be famous!” Then she explained, “He's like my brother. We've known each other forever.” Amina and Khadija were themselves next-door neighbors and belonged to a handful of extended families whose members had relocated to El Ejido in the late 1990s and early 2000s. Early arrivers helped those who came later, often sharing apartments and securing job leads, just as Amina's family had done for Khadija's.

The Spanish Surround

My interviewees' parents belonged to the groups of Moroccan immigrants who had helped create what became known as the “Almerian miracle.” Ultimately the triumph of small producer innovation in hothouse technologies and an expanding foreign labor force, the produce industry that

grew up along the arid coastal plain in the last decades of the twentieth century created unprecedented wealth for locals. Despite the inhuman conditions in which most undocumented people lived,¹⁵ economic migrants accounted for more than one third of El Ejido's population growth between 1987 and 2010. Moroccans were and remain the largest immigrant group in the area.

Moroccan youth tended to paint El Ejido as a hostile place. Karima was only six in February 2000, when Spanish mobs burned and looted Moroccan homes and businesses. The violence lasted for days and made international headlines, but the *disturbios* lived on even in the imaginations of youth who arrived in El Ejido much later. This was one of the first things that Majid and Selim mentioned when we started meeting in 2010. We would sit on the concrete benches that lined the school courtyard, and the boys would kick sneakered feet at the ground or throw pebbles while detailing their disappointments with El Ejido. Fifteen and sixteen respectively, these best friends spoke noticeably accented Spanish, an indication of their relatively recent arrival. Other places were better, they claimed, like up north in Tarragona, where Selim's uncle lived. "Not here, though," Majid argued. "People are really racist, most of them. They look at you like you're an animal."

To a person, interviewees reported having grown up seeing after-school fights, some alarming in scope. "A whole gang of Spaniards showed up with chains and sticks right outside the [school] gate," Selim recounted once. "But someone called the police, and then they blamed it all on the Moroccans." El Ejido's frontier-like roughness seemed to involve boys, especially, in cycles of violence and frustration, intensified by the piquing certainty that they would be scapegoats for any trouble. (The Spanish youth whom I interviewed echoed these accounts, with some boys expressing fascination with racial violence.)

Laila, a twenty-six-year-old mother of two, recounted how her older brother, who had been a good student in Morocco, dropped out of school in El Ejido following one of so many after-school fights. Pinned to the ground, he had grabbed a piece of broken glass and slashed a Spanish boy's ear. The authorities sent him to a juvenile detention center, and he did months of community service, picking up trash. "That's going to affect you," Laila noted. "He didn't want to study after that. He kept saying, 'I didn't know that kid. What had I ever done to him?' It's just that if one jumps in, then they all jump in."

Rachid, for his part, took up boxing and mixed martial arts to defend against the Spanish teens who beat him up after school. Like Karima, he never

15. S.O.S. Racismo *El Ejido: Racismo y explotación laboral* (Barcelona: Icaria, 2001).

told his parents about how those kids used his slight frame as a punching bag. His parents had enough to worry about in those years. Moreover, Rachid took solace in the discipline and release of training, which kept him focused on what was important – family, religion, and school – well away from the *porros y botellones* (pot-smoking and open-air drinking parties) that were common distractions in El Ejido.

Indeed, spaces of social, institutional, and urban daily life played key roles in young people's narratives of encounter and ordeal. Although depictions of immediate, bodily threats attenuated as interviewees pursued advanced training and work, specters of moral corruption continued to shape lessons about the costs of integration and whom, beyond family, might be trusted to advance dreams of a better future.

Navigating Family Expectations and Institutional Encounters

As prized but complicating contingencies in parental decision-making, youth highlighted their sensitivity to family expectations. Having a better life than the previous generation was an explicit goal. “We work for you,” Majid’s father reminded him as he struggled to pass his classes. Amina’s parents warned, “If you don’t study, you’ll end up in the processing plants, like us.” And Lina’s parents, who spent years tending crops in the greenhouses, chided regularly, “If you don’t study, *then* you’ll see what hard work is!”

With few exceptions, parents were not equipped to provide academic guidance, however. A dominating structure in interviewees’ young lives, school potentially withheld future opportunities based on bewildering hurdles: months of lessons preceded cumulative exams in May; recuperative exams could be taken in September, and the chance to advance to the next grade lay entirely with teachers. Majid and Selim knew that completing ESO (state-mandated secondary school) was a gateway to the work both wanted as mechanics. “But they don’t help you here,” Selim lamented. “They don’t respect you. The teachers ignore us.” Majid added, “And if you don’t know something, they won’t explain it in words you can understand.”

Experiences like these left Moroccan youth feeling resentful, ashamed, and unsure what to do. When Karima was failing out of school, for instance, there was no one who understood or stepped in to help. The academic and legal troubles that Laila’s brother weathered brought embarrassment to his family and permanently estranged him from school. Rachid, for his part, discovered an extra-curricular outlet through boxing but found that, even there, his presence was suspect. Spanish competitors occasionally forfeited matches to avoid him, a tactic that kept him from advancing in the rankings.

There was a gendered dimension to this frustration, insofar as North African men and boys were Othered as sexual and violent predators. With social networks largely delimited by family, neighborhood, and mosque, inroads with Spanish speakers were rarer, and this affected prospects for linguistic fluency, scholastic advancement, and chances at skilled blue or white-collar work.

Girls, meantime, shouldered burdens crucial to family wellbeing, acting as extensions of mothers' caretaking roles. As Amina explained, she learned to cook at age 10. "My mom was coming home at three in the morning from the packing plant, so I had to do the cooking, the cleaning, everything. I didn't know how – I figured it out because I had to fend for myself!"

Parental crises could make these burdens heavier, as Laila discovered. At sixteen, she began looking after her infant sister while their mother battled a prolonged illness. While her father divided time between work and the hospital, Laila became the linchpin that kept the family together. She was tall for her age, so when social workers came to their flat, she told them that she was eighteen and capable of looking after the baby. "They were going to take her away otherwise," she explained. "We didn't have another option."

She was up most nights, sleeping fitfully on the couch with her baby sister lying on her chest – the only way to keep her from crying – then was up early to get her other siblings off to school. Fearing the caseworkers' unannounced visits, she kept the house spotless. Neighbors warned her that the smallest misstep could split up the family, so she stopped attending school, played up her confidence when the social workers visited, and, in the end, managed to pull the whole thing off. She had to repeat the school year after her mother recovered but saw this as a small price to pay.

Families of origin, as loci of Moroccan norms of belonging and loyalty,¹⁶ were reference points in aspirational thinking as well as delimiters of possible action. The management of future aspirations¹⁷ therefore hinged not only on surviving and managing Self-Other encounters in the Spanish surround, but also on proving oneself able to help meet family needs.

Laila was in the midst of juggling work, marriage, and two young children when we spoke in 2017, her adolescent experiences having provided unparalleled training. Her account pointed to the galvanizing immediacy of Self-Other encounters for first-generation youth who faced state scrutiny, peer

16. Rachel Newcomb, "From the 'Unseen' to the Visible: Transformations in Women's Kinship Practices among the Urban Middle Class in Fes, Morocco," *Anthropology of the Middle East* 2, 1 (2007): 37-54.

17. Elsa Davidson, *The Burdens of Aspiration: Schools, Youth, and Success in the Divided Social Worlds of Silicon Valley* (New York: New York University Press, 2011).

antagonism, and parental pressures. Finding themselves at the nexus of ordeals like these, the young people I knew described such difficulties as fostering self-knowledge and an internal strength that their Spanish counterparts lacked. As Amina emphasized, “I figured it out for myself. Spaniards aren’t like that.”

Avoiding Moral Hazards

Weathering Othering encounters meant that young people kept close tabs on the moral and existential hazards of life in El Ejido. If being Moroccan was a liability in school and work, for instance, then in matters of faith, it was an asset – provided one was vigilant, as Majid and Selim argued. The boys took comfort in the teachings of the local imam, who reminded them of the virtuous traits shared by Moroccan believers and warned of the corrupting influence of Spanish ways. They made a point of monitoring others’ pitfalls. “The young people here have no values or manners,” Majid remarked one day. “They go around smoking, doing stupid stuff, being tough.” Both boys decried that Spaniards seemed not to respect their elders and that they put them in nursing homes as they aged.

By contrast, Amina and her friends bemoaned the panoply of perceived and real dangers that made parents overly cautious with daughters. “They don’t let you go out!” she complained. “They’re afraid of what will happen and of what people will say.” Twin threats of community gossip and loss of control over girls’ virtue served to reinforce many parents’ unease about living in El Ejido, while details of certain lives gone awry provided cautionary tales. Amina told me in a knowing tone:

“I have a neighbor who’s a prostitute. She was so out of it, a complete ditz. She used to tell her dad that she was going to town to study, but then she’d get with guys [...]. It’s the worst thing that can happen to a Moroccan man, and she’s destroyed her little sister’s life. They can’t even show their faces!”

The fierce socioeconomic competition and moral indeterminacy of life in El Ejido inspired close surveillance of daughters’ safety as much as it created reliance upon those who were skilled at moving between Spanish and Moroccan spheres. The savvy required to do social and linguistic bridging work, particularly under duress of family vulnerability, meant that young women who were successful at it also developed a strong sense of their own capacities for action, including the ability to fulfill family expectations, avoid being targets of gossip, and meet everyday forms of Othering and disdain with equanimity.

Marshalling Equanimity and Finding Work

As Moroccan youth moved into post-secondary training and work, confronting Othering required judicious response. Schoolyard tactics would not do in environments where professors and supervisors held power over job options. Hard work and an affable indifference to racist slights raised Moroccan young people's esteem in the eyes of Spanish employers; and because locals tended to perceive Moroccans as overly conservative, candidates who bucked expectations were lauded as exceptional.

Malika, whom I have known since she was sixteen, described a job interview for an office post with a construction company. She was pleased to use her accounting degree, and she liked her boss. At the interview, however, he had warned her:

“‘Around here it’s only men, and I don’t know, I wonder – ’ and I was like, ‘Why is he asking me that?’ And I go, ‘I don’t have a problem, don’t you worry.’ And he says, ‘I’ll tell you something else. Sometimes, there are clients who are a little more racist, but I hope the day won’t come when a client comes and says to you, ‘Here come these *moros* to take our jobs –’ [...]. So that took me aback. I was like, I thought for a minute, and I’m like, maybe *you’re* like that, because if you’re asking?’”

“I’m here to work,” she responded, “and that’s all.”

Even as a teen, Malika was a bundle of determined energy, diminutive with bright eyes and hair pulled into a tight, practical bun. Her forthright manner and rapid-fire speech made her an engaging conversationalist, while her generous reflections on the changing circumstances of her life deepened my understanding of what it meant to be a young Moroccan woman in El Ejido.

Since even entry level positions remained out of reach without prior experience, interpersonal skills that enhanced chances for internships and temporary posts were critical. Young people like Malika strove to be adaptable, focused, and quick learners. Their willingness to disregard the indignities of being Othered recalled Kapchan’s discussion of *khatr* in a different Moroccan context.¹⁸ This affective volition, individually felt but intersubjectively shaped, was never mentioned by my participants – our conversations were in Spanish – but young adults’ accounts of meeting insult with composure suggested willful equanimity and the need to work within social and racial constraints to ensure job prospects.

18. Deborah Kapchan, “Reflecting on Moroccan Encounters: Meditations on Home, Genre, and the Performance of Everyday Life,” in *Encountering Morocco: Fieldwork and Cultural Understanding*, eds. David Crawford and Rachel Newcomb (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2013), 165-94.

Laila, for instance, had interned at a health clinic and recounted how patients would sometimes ignore her or refuse to answer intake questions. She had been the first among clinic staff to wear a headscarf, making her a visible presence of Otherness:

“One woman came and said to me, ‘Why is it that my daughter can’t find work, and *you all* are here working in her place?’ It didn’t bother me because I already had that idea in my head, especially with older people who have no education. It’s less with younger people, but it’s all the same to me.”

Laila’s apparent indifference (*me da igual*) echoed the refrain of younger participants when they talked about being on the receiving end of barbs from peers: *yo paso* (I ignore [them]). These local variants of *khatr* emerged as Moroccan youth increasingly sought to position themselves as fully realized, professional Selves untouched by the vulnerabilities of exposed Otherness.

Employers sometimes acted as allies. Laila’s boss offered her a white lab coat to inspire patients’ respect. “My sister and cousins just *loved* that!” she laughed. “They would tease me, ‘At least you got to wear the coat!’ and so yeah, at least I got to wear it.” Laila’s hope, like Malika’s, had been to become a nurse. They talked of wanting to help people, which Davidson has identified as a common aspiration among working-class immigrant youth.¹⁹ Nursing was appealing for combining professional status within traditionally feminine parameters of caretaking. But as those opportunities fell out of reach (grade requirements were stringent), they pursued available alternatives, taking pride where they felt they were making a difference. Laila provided pro bono Spanish-Arabic interpretation at the clinic, and Malika did the same during her internship at a nearby townhall. Her boss at the construction firm appreciated that she could communicate directly with Moroccan contractors, and she had also provided translation for a local real estate company on call.

Young Moroccan women cultivated an entrepreneurial, neoliberal approach to cultural and linguistic integration, based on persistence and nimble navigation of unfavorable, and often unjust, circumstances. They measured their successes in part by supervisors’ explicit praise and by being symbolically incorporated into ever-shifting “work families.” (This, despite the scarcity of long-term employment contracts). For instance, Laila’s favorite job had been at a financial consultancy where the boss trained her closely, called her *hija* (daughter), and gifted clothes and toys to her children.

19. Davidson, *The Burdens of Aspiration*.

Malika, too, enjoyed her position at the construction firm, where her bosses teased her good naturedly, giving her the chance to display her own quick wit:

“One of them goes, ‘Since you’re Muslim, you won’t get [Catholic] Holy Week off, so you’ll have to come in and work without us,’ and I said, ‘Oh, really? Well, in that case you’ll have to do without me for the whole month of Ramadan!’”

Friendly banter, so important to Spanish sociality, helped position Malika as little sister to the brothers who ran the company. She disarmed their concerns about her conservative Moroccan Otherness and incorporated herself quickly into work-family dynamics. They read this as an indication of her larger willingness to belong to Spanish society:

“My boss always says to me, ‘Malika, you’re strange. You’re not a normal Moroccan.’ I say, ‘Oh, no?’ He says, ‘As I see it, the people I’ve seen and the people I know, they’ve gotten married, they think differently [than you],’ he says. ‘You? You’re Spanish now.’”

Expressions of admiration and acceptance from Spanish Others signaled a triumphant integrational/maturational arc in young women’s life narratives. Rachid’s, Selim’s and Majid’s narratives illuminated constraints around boys’ aspirational arcs, by comparison. I alluded to this above in terms of the stereotyping of Moroccan boys and men as violent. Rachid bristled when recalling how some Spanish ladies would clutch their purses when they passed him on a sidewalk. He, like Selim and Majid, found community and purpose among other menfolk at mosque. Their commitment to piety and righteous living offered a counterbalance to racist aggressions and other obstacles to their ambitions.

Rachid, despite earning top grades and a solid recommendation from his post-secondary instructors, ended up completing an unpaid marketing internship at a local clothing store. He folded merchandise and waited on customers, but the on-site supervisor was reluctant to involve him in the more educational, behind-the-scenes operations. A week after receiving his diploma, he was working in the greenhouses alongside his father, determined to save up money until finding a job that made good use of his training.

The edges of El Ejido’s informal economy (day labor and non-contract work) often overlapped with young immigrant lives. Their lack of social clout or professional networks, and the perpetual demand for greater prerequisites of job experience made them beholden to supervisors who had few real incentives to leverage new talent. At the same time, the call to be a good Muslim in an unfriendly environment provided boys, in particular, with moral

ground for building a sense of uncompromised Selfhood. Some looked at their sisters or classmates – many engaged with cultural and linguistic “bridging” work or, alternatively, testing boundaries of individuation and self-expression – and found fault. As Selim said one day, gesturing across the school patio to a cluster of girls in hijabs and tight, stylish jeans, “They shouldn’t dress that way. They’re trying to be Spanish.”

Plotting Aspirational Futures

Given the size of my research sample, I make no claims to a broad generational portrait through the data shared in this article. My assessments, in fact, raise questions anew about the Selves made available through ethnographic inquiry and about the transformational insights made possible by witnessing, or listening in on, stories forged through encounters with Othering Others. It should be noted that in the space available here I have not decentered myself and my epistemologies in ways modeled by Crapanzano or Dwyer but strove mainly to highlight interviewees’ own articulations of being decentered in the midst of life-defining challenges. As a female-identified researcher, I always had greater access to female participants, and the lacunae in young Moroccan men’s diasporic coming-of-age stories invite further research.

This collection of narratives was shaped by the vagaries of fieldwork and maintaining contact with participants over the course of several years. I lost touch with some participants after families relocated or young women went to live with their husbands’ families. I formed the most lasting connections with Malika and Laila but was able to interview others, like Karima, whose story opened this article, in either their teen years or young adulthood. I see such narratives as arising in distinct points in biographical time and reflecting how Moroccan youth simultaneously strove toward and struggled against Spanish assimilation – each one according to their circumstances. Amidst the myriad existential ordeals presented by migration and relocation in childhood or adolescence, the independence and savvy that protected ties to families of origin and potentiated moves beyond structural limitations were those that first-generation youth found themselves called upon and variously equipped to develop.

Bildungsroman-type tales of overcoming obstacles and gaining self-knowledge unfolded in reference to experiencing oneself as continually made strange by ethnonational dislocation and having to navigate overt and implicit racism. As heroes of these stories, my participants’ sense of personal autonomy (and, in some cases, hard-won equanimity) can therefore be seen as forged through processes of complex engagement with and against that imposed strangeness – by choice *and* by force, propelled toward integrative

cultural and linguistic behaviors that those around them could not, did not (or did not have to) acquire in quite the same way.

Importantly, the ordeals that tested narrators' mettle and positioned them as heroes against existential threats were also generative of a new reality understood here through the lenses of cultural and generational difference. My interviewees belonged to a new Moroccan vanguard, equipped with bi-cultural and linguistic knowledge that outstripped those of their parents and the Spanish populace, as well as a galvanizing (if not unshakable) understanding of their own resilience. It was in this sense that their character-building ordeals operated at a larger nexus of Self and Other, where Self-as-narrator plotted aspirational futures against multiplex demands and challenges from Others who were, by turns, stranger and kin.

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لقاءات مع الذات الأخرى ومحنة الطموح لدى شباب المغاربة المهاجرين في إسبانيا

ملخص: يواجه شباب بلدان شمال إفريقيا الذين ينضمون إلى آبائهم في إسبانيا في مرحلة الطفولة أو المراهقة تحديات على عكس الجيل الأكبر سناً. ومن خلال الانتقال عبر المساحات والعمليات المؤسسية، من المدرسة العامة إلى التدريب والعمل ما بعد الثانوي، يمارس الجيل الأول من الشباب قدرات ثقافية ولغوية في مد الجسور بينما يواجهون تحديات مستمرة كممثلين لأقلية تلاحقها الوصمة العرقية. ويركز هذا المقال على روايات قصة الحياة من الشباب المغربي الذين يعيشون في جنوب شرق بلدية إلبيجيدو منذ أواخر تسعينيات القرن الماضي، لتسليط الضوء على كيفية مواجهة الذات الأخرى - وهي إطار راسخ في الإثنوغرافيا المغاربية - وأهداف التنقل الصاعد لتشكيل تجارب المستقبل - من العمر في سياق غير مرحب به. وأطبق في هذه الدراسة فكرة باختين عن البيلدونجسرومان لاستكشاف قصص الجيل الأول من الأشخاص الذين أجريت معهم المقابلات باعتبارها سلسلة من المحن والاستجابات التكيفية وزيادة المعرفة الذاتية والاستقلالية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: طموح، بيلدونجسرومان، هجرة، سرد، المغرب، الذات الأخرى، إسبانيا، الشباب.

Rencontres d'autrui et épreuves d'aspiration chez les jeunes immigrants marocains en Espagne

Résumé: Les jeunes maghrébins qui rejoignent leurs parents en Espagne dans l'enfance ou l'adolescence font face à des défis différents de ceux de la génération plus âgée. En passant par les espaces et les processus institutionnels, de l'école publique à la formation et au travail postsecondaires, les jeunes de la première génération exercent des capacités de transition culturelle et linguistique tout en faisant face à des défis continus en tant que représentants d'une minorité racialement stigmatisée. Cet article se concentre sur les récits de vie de jeunes marocains vivant dans la municipalité sud-est d'El Ejido depuis la fin des années 1990 pour mettre en évidence comment les rencontres entre soi-même - un cadre bien établi dans

l'ethnographie maghrébine – et les objectifs de mobilité ascendante façonnent les expériences de la venue d'âge dans un contexte peu accueillant. J'applique la notion de Bildungsroman de Bakhtin pour explorer les récits des interviewés de première génération comme une série d'épreuves, de réponses adaptatives et de connaissance de soi et d'autonomie croissantes.

Mots-clés: Aspiration, Bildungsroman, immigration, récit, Maroc, autrui, Espagne, jeunesse.