

INTERRUPTED VISIONS:
SEEING AND WRITING THE MEDITERRANEAN OF THE TWENTIETH
AND TWENTY-FIRST CENTURIES

By

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□

“J’ai banni le claire, dénué en toute valeur.
Ouvrant dans l’obscur, j’ai trouvé l’éclair.”

“I have discovered clarity as worthless.
Working in darkness, I have discovered lightning.”

André Breton, *Art Poétique*

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Abstract

Since at least Albert Camus' novel *L'Étranger* (1942), vision has been a major element of literary works on and from the Mediterranean. This dissertation seeks to show how the common correlation between seeing and knowing is undone in the works of writers from around the Mediterranean, including: Anna Maria Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" and *L'Iguana*, Abdelkebir Khatibi's *La Mémoire tatouée: Autobiographie d'un décolonisé* and *Triptyque de Rabat*, Assia Djébar's *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, "La Femme en morceaux," and *La Femme sans sépulture*, and Jean-Claude Izzo's *Total Kbéops*. In short stories, novels, and films from 1953 to 2002, modes of seeing that are marked by *interrupted* vision, in particular, figure the problem of understanding and writing the colonial past and the post-colonial present. Ortese and Djébar employ images of framed vision — through eyeglasses, doorways, and narrative frames — to write what lies just outside of them, and to highlight what is only partially seen. In Khatibi, one finds the blink and the syncope, which attempt to map visually Morocco's liminal position as defined by a dynamic of rupture and continuity between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Finally, Jean-Claude Izzo focuses on the crime genre as a frame, which allows him to engage with the criminal and ethical problems of France's desire for cultural homogenization. These works reveal a persistent desire and effort to "see" past the constraints of the past and the present, including those of the nation state. In so doing, they create new visual configurations and perceptual networks that imagine and reimagine the twentieth-century Mediterranean as a space defined by contradiction, liminality, and interconnected histories.

INTRODUCTION

“A *picture* holds us captive. And we could not get out if it, for it lay in our language and language seemed to repeat itself inexorably.”

-Wittgenstein

Albert Camus' *L'Étranger* (1942) is one of the paradigmatic works of twentieth-century Mediterranean literature. The image of the protagonist, Meursault, standing on Algeria's scorching beaches as he faces off with “the Arab” has long captured readers' imaginations (Camus 51). Blinded by the sun and the water's reflections, Meursault's vision blurs as sweat drips into his eyes. Mirages dance before him. The “Arab” disappears, only to reappear with a knife glinting in his hands—or so Meursault believes as he opens fire. This face-off captures colonial violence between France and North Africa, a relationship facilitated by the Mediterranean Sea, and it underscores the centrality and precariousness of vision in shaping depictions of the twentieth-century Mediterranean while highlighting the elusiveness of what, beyond mere geography, the term means. Definitions of the Mediterranean are as intangible as the mirages that flicker before Meursault's eyes. The sea has been conceived of as a temperament, a geography, an ecology, and a metaphor, as a series of separations and, inversely, as networks of separations. Some scholars maintain that “the Mediterranean” is a European, Orientalist construction. The field of Mediterranean Studies is so rife with contradictions that Lebanese poet and writer, Salah Stétié once asked: “La Méditerranée existe-t-elle?” [“Does the Mediterranean exist?”] (« Questions sur un très vieux rivage » 11).

Instead of grappling with the question of whether or not the Mediterranean “exists,” this study interrogates *how* images and narratives construct the twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean. Scholars have repeatedly invoked visual metaphors and images to advance understandings of the region, which has been compared to a mosaic, a blue triangle, and a watermark.¹ Despite work in the fields of art history and visual studies that challenges the hegemony of vision, for many Mediterranean Studies scholars, sight functions as an analogue to knowledge and confirms empirical observations of the region. The ubiquity of the visual in art and literature about the Mediterranean is equally striking: from 1920s art deco posters depicting France’s azure waves, to Claude McKay’s depiction of the sea in *Banjo: A Story Without a Plot* as “a gorgeous bowl of blue” (60), to modernist paintings of the Mediterranean glimpsed through open windows,² the sea, in its alignment with the visual, enraptures and fascinates.

Despite the importance of visual metaphors and images to constructions of the Mediterranean, much postcolonial Francophone literature that can also be considered “Mediterranean” concentrates on the aural as the site of contestation and subversion of colonial structures. Scholars and writers alike locate the possibilities for narrative change in sound and in the musicality of language,³ in contrast to vision, which continues to be conceived of as hegemonic and indicative of European imperial structures. This dissertation is motivated by the observation that despite the critical and artistic emphasis on the aural and a relative sidelining of vision, there is nevertheless a strong presence of images and references to the visual in texts from and around the postcolonial Mediterranean that are not structured exclusively around the gaze as is commonly assumed. Far from affirming

¹ See Braudel, Stétie, and Elhariry.

² See, for example, Salvador Dali’s “Woman at the Window at Figueres.”

³ See See Rice Djebar, Zimra, and Khatibi, for a few notable examples.

knowledge, these moments disrupt ways of knowing while expanding modes and degrees of seeing. There is thus a need to reexamine the role of the visual in twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean literature and to investigate the common correlation between seeing and knowing, which is undone in the works of authors such as Anna Maria Ortese (Italy), Assia Djebar (Algeria and France), Abdelkebir Khatibi (Morocco and France), and Jean-Claude Izzo (France). In short stories, novels, and films from 1953 to 2002, modes of seeing marked by interrupted vision figure the problem of understanding and writing the colonial past and the postcolonial present. These works reveal a persistent desire to “see” beyond the constraints of the past and the present, including those of the nation state. In so doing, they create new visual configurations and perceptual networks that imagine and reimagine the twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean as a space defined by contradiction, liminality, and interconnected histories.

I. Theoretical Framework: Mediterranean Studies

This dissertation is situated within Mediterranean and Francophone Studies, Visual Culture, and Literary Studies. It draws on Mediterranean Studies, which emerged in the second half of the twentieth century as an interdisciplinary field that attempts to define what, beyond geographical proximity, distinguishes the Mediterranean and its adjoining regions as a fruitful unit of analysis. Mediterranean Studies seeks to transcend national boundaries by examining alternative ways of mapping influences and affinities: linguistic, cultural, historical, and agricultural. It conceives of borders as porous, reframes notions of “frontier,” “center,” and “periphery” in terms of connectivities and displacements, and privileges a vocabulary of multiplicities, entanglements, and multi-directionality. It contributes to this field by tracking the circulation of visual tropes (blinks, glances, glimpses) around the Mediterranean. It does

not conceive of these visual moments as merely metaphorical, but as capturing an actual process of seeing within the Mediterranean. In this conception, the Mediterranean serves as a point of geographical departure from which to imagine interconnections beyond strict national borders. My understanding of the Mediterranean is both geographical and imaginary. I analyze literature produced in and about countries that border the sea and interrogate how those physical geographies inspire artistic alternatives that are shaped by what one might call a “Mediterranean imaginary.” I use the term “imaginary” to describe the structure of the imagination rather than its contents. Similarly to the way a poem gives form to written lines, the “imaginary” thus understood gives shape to the imagination. This imaginary emerges as paramount to understanding how the Mediterranean’s various geographical, cultural, and linguistic borders create and are created at the intersection of narrative and images.

The insistence on multiplicity and transnational networks that characterizes Mediterranean Studies has its origins in the work of Fernand Braudel. Considered the founder of Mediterranean Studies, Braudel published his groundbreaking *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* in 1949. He conceived of the Mediterranean not as a single body of water, but as a complex topography comprising multiple seas, inlets, and islands. Braudel criticized previous scholars for failing to grasp the Mediterranean’s greatness and for focusing instead on its minute particularities. He writes: “Ce qui les intéresse, ce n’est pas la vaste mer, mais tel minuscule carreau de sa mosaïque, non pas sa grande vie mouvementée” [“Their concern is not the vast sea, but some minuscule piece of the mosaic, not the grand movement of Mediterranean life”](X). Braudel captures the sea’s “grand movement” by delineating three temporalities he finds specific to the Mediterranean. The first, geographical time, is defined by an almost static history and slow transformations in the

region (XIII). The second is social history, which describes the long-term transformations of empires and social groups (XIII), and the third encompasses the briefer and at times episodic social and political history of individuals and events that Braudel calls “la courte durée” [“the short term”] (Braudel, “La longue durée” 727). In response to what he considers to be the danger of this third type of history—that it risks giving rise to an isolationist and decontextualized understanding of the past—Braudel proposes a panoramic view defined by the “longue durée,” which examines persisting structures and vast chronologies so as to capture adequately history’s complexity (729). His work has long stood as an authoritative account of Mediterranean history.

If Braudel’s tome is considered a definitive account of Mediterranean history, however, in the 1990s and early 2000s, it garnered much more critical response and engagement, most vocally from Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, whose equally large volume, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (2000), served to nuance and provide a corrective for Braudel’s totalizing history. Horden and Purcell critiqued Braudel for his macrocosmic view, which occluded the important particularities and diversity within the Mediterranean. Attempting to avoid what they considered to be Braudel’s deterministic readings pitting humans and human history against the environment, Horden and Purcell offer a largely environmental history of the region, focusing on the variation and diversity of Mediterranean “microecologies”—changes in agricultural systems and in animal and vegetable lives as well as the impact of natural disasters on the region. They examine a longer history of the Mediterranean by going back, “Before Braudel,” to Antiquity and the Middle Ages (2).⁴

⁴ “Before Braudel” describes the scope and original title of Horden and Purcell’s seminar.

Horden's and Purcell's focus on environmental histories ground one of their principal contentions: that the Mediterranean's conceptual usefulness ends with modernity, especially with the rise of nation states. This historical shift, they argue, disrupts the sea's "horizons of communications" to the point that it is no longer possible to talk about a collective twentieth-century history of the Mediterranean (*The Corrupting Sea* 24; 25). *The Corrupting Sea* offers a diachronic reading of the Mediterranean that establishes the "microecologies" of the region in order to transcend binaries between man and his environment and to trouble "the standard definitions of human geography" (2). It places the environment at the center of its analysis and sidelines studies of the Mediterranean's economic and political history (Harris 4). Horden and Purcell differentiate their aims from Braudel's by underscoring "the history *in* the region" in contrast to the "history *of* it," where "in" designates the region's local particularities and "of" connotes its larger framework (Horden and Purcell 2). *The Corrupting Sea* created a paradigm shift within Mediterranean Studies from examining the seemingly static "longue durée" to studying the historical shifts and particularities at play in the region's environment and geography (Morris 34). Scholars have moved away, in the past fifteen years, from the historically static image of the mosaic that defined Braudel's Mediterranean to more dynamic and interactive models.

Despite their attempt to theorize the Mediterranean as a space of movement and processes, Horden and Purcell have been criticized for their occlusion of political history and socio-economics. David Abulafia's *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (2011) offers a more complex historically based conceptualization of the Mediterranean, which he conceptualizes as the five historical periods he calls "five Mediterraneans" (vii-ix). His work distinguishes itself from both Braudel's and Horden's and Purcell's in its concentration on the sea, as opposed to the hinterlands. In his essay "Mediterraneans,"

Abulafia stresses that the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean Sea are not the same thing (64). He conceives of his work as narrowing the field in so far as he restricts his study to the sea and port cities in order to understand how water links societies, economies, and religions. By focusing exclusively on what happens in and around water, Abulafia's work proposes a comparative model of analysis for studying the Mediterranean in relation to other seas and oceans (64).

While Abulafia confines his study to physical spaces touched by the sea, his work also expands definitions of the Mediterranean in order to interrogate its conceptual usefulness in mapping alternative cartographies. He writes: “[my] argument is also that Mediterraneans are not necessarily seas in the sense that we normally understand them [...] Deserts, like seas, have their islands, or oases and they have established their trade routes, their navigators, and their own limited resources for which nomads can ‘fish’” (65). By emphasizing “Mediterraneans” as opposed to a single Mediterranean, Abulafia performs a dual move: first, he asserts, as many do in the field, that one cannot attempt to impose a single framework on the Mediterranean without being reductive. Secondly, his work suggests that Mediterranean Studies can offer comparative ways of engaging with space that extend to other disciplines and allow for new ways of understandings of networks and interconnections in our increasingly globalizing world (65). Although fruitful and provocative in helping scholars escape purely geographical notions of the Mediterranean, Abulafia's adaptation contains its own set of dangers: namely, engaging with the Mediterranean in such wide-ranging and generalized ways that the term loses any real meaning.

The title of Michael Herzfeld's essay, “Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating,” is a humorous yet apt commentary on the

ubiquitous, often unexamined uses of the term “the Mediterranean.” His pointed critique highlights the ways in which, despite efforts like Abulafia’s, notions of “the Mediterranean” exist in an age where it seems as though other categories of analysis have been thoroughly challenged and deconstructed (46). For Herzfeld, the tenacity and persistence of the term “the Mediterranean” warrants its own analysis (46). Some Mediterranean Studies scholars argue that one of the ways in which the category of the Mediterranean persists is as images that perpetuate cultural stereotypes and clichés based on lingering imperial ideology. W.V. Harris asks, “Is Mediterraneanism [...] in effect a cousin of Orientalism?” (2). Both terms, “Mediterraneanism” and “Orientalism,” refer to homogenizing moves that efface cultural specificity. Coined by Ian Morris, “Mediterraneanism” refers especially to narrative tropes often associated with the Mediterranean, such as the dialectic between honor and shame, and concealment and intimacy, this latter relationship being prevalent in depictions of the Middle East, especially in relation to metaphors of veiling and unveiling (53-4). While these tropes are not exclusively visual, they do conjure images that exoticize the Mediterranean as a place that is continually penetrated by Western gazes.

Rather than shying away from the Mediterranean because the concept threatens to homogenize and reify images of otherness, scholars have increasingly taken up the question of cultural production around the Mediterranean. Karla Mallette, for example, examines linguistic transformation in the medieval Mediterranean. She writes: “the Mediterranean at times functions less as a conductive mechanism and more as a barrier. But at no time has communication across it ceased” (Mallette 19). Her work thus interrogates the importance of linguistic circulation, especially among merchants and pirates whose own journeys required them to navigate diverse seas and languages. In a similar vein, in “Lingua Franca: A Non-Memory,” Jocelyne Dakhlia counters the common belief that colonialism created a linguistic

plurality in North Africa; on the contrary, she argues, imperialism led to the shrinkage of identities which had previously flourished before French rule. Her work thus tracks a series of linguistic encounters, including French, Arabic, and Spanish, in order to depict the Mediterranean as a space of semantic richness. These kinds of studies focus on how the Mediterranean—as a region and as a conceptual construct—operates simultaneously as a space of interconnections and separations.

To study the twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean presents a particular set of difficulties, especially in light of Horden's and Purcell's contention that, due to the solidification of imperialist structures and nation states, the Mediterranean as such vanished. It is worth reiterating, however, that Mediterranean Studies as a field of inquiry emerged in a postcolonial moment when the relationships that have defined the sea, its surrounding nation-states, their geographies, and politics were and continue to be subject to radical revision. This fact suggests that Horden's and Purcell's claims for the "vanishing" of the Mediterranean is itself a symptom of another set of complex historical transformations. Indeed, Iain Chambers' *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (2008) theorizes the modern Mediterranean as a space defined by poetics. His prose is a hybrid between creative writing and theory, which reflects his own meditations on the Mediterranean as marked by "floating semantics, drifting through a hundred interpretations, a thousand stories" in what is a porous Mediterranean modernity (79).

This more recent work suggests not only that the Mediterranean remains a viable category in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries but, indeed, that some of the most pressing issues surrounding the Mediterranean today might revolve around how it has been imagined and how artists use it as a construct for imagining their worlds. Salah Stétié's "Discours sur un très vieux rivage" ["Questions on a Great Divide"] (1996) takes up the

question of the Mediterranean in a series of short paragraph musings that seek to answer the question of whether the contemporary Mediterranean exists. The answer seems to emerge from thought itself, as the essay's final lines affirm: "Oui, je crois qu'elle existe et qu'elle n'est, tout compte fait, que cette interrogation tremblante à son sujet" ["Yes, I think that the Mediterranean exists and it is at the end of it all, only the trembling interrogation about it"] (139). The Mediterranean thus exists, for Stétié, as long as it persists in our consciousness and thought. It is as much an actual geographical location as it is a fragile construction of the imagination. Stétié's essay affirms Herzfeld's contention that whatever the Mediterranean "is"—a question open to debate given its many engagements—its presence continues to "impinge on many forms of consciousness" (Herzfeld 47).

II. The Mediterranean and Visual Studies

Many of these theories share a reliance on images and visual metaphors in order to advance understandings and definitions of the Mediterranean. An implicit correlation in Mediterranean Studies thus exists between visibility and epistemology, where sight legitimates critical engagements with the Mediterranean. Maurice Merleau-Ponty claim that "[w]e never cease living in the world of perception, but we bypass it in critical thought" ("An Unpublished Text" 3), proves especially true in Mediterranean Studies, where sight is often invoked to further analysis of the region. Where Herzfeld argues that the persistence of the category "the Mediterranean" warrants its interrogation, I make a similar claim regarding the ubiquity of the visual: Mediterranean Studies' seeming reliance on images and visibility demands an analysis of their role in shaping conceptions of the twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean.

My work disentangles the correspondence between sight and understanding so as to dwell in perception and in the process of seeing. I examine how narratives constitute, elaborate, even foil sight and how experiences and degrees of seeing shape alternative ways of knowing the Mediterranean. Although the region is often theorized as comprising multiple networks—socio-economic, linguistic, social, equally complex aesthetic and formal networks exist between forms of restricted vision and narratives, on one hand, and the thematization of transparency, on the other. Rather than maintaining static relationships to either clarity or obscurity, these relationships create “shifting labels and taxonomies [that betray] not only unstable identities and categories [but also] the daily uncertainties” of the twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean (Clancy-Smith 1).

“Vision” and “visuality” describe the literal act of seeing and the conditions under which one is able to see. These terms describe different types of disrupted vision: from blinks to glimpses. They also articulate the many ways in which vision is constrained by physical objects such as doors or window ledges that delimit sight. Moving away from purely metaphorical engagements with sight that often further its relationship with epistemology, I examine how degrees of seeing are translated into narrative, a question first inspired by Virginia Woolf’s essay, “The Cinema,” in which she laments watching a movie about the ocean and not feeling the waves wet her feet.⁵ This question, for Woolf, was all the more pressing with the advance of new technologies, such as the ability to render images on the screen with greater clarity.

More than an anecdote about visual perception, Woolf’s essay highlights the process of translation of the senses into narrative form that is also at the heart of this study, as I seek to understand how twentieth and twenty-first century Mediterranean literature textualizes

⁵ See “The Cinema” at www.woolfonline.com

vision and the experiences of seeing. Paying particular attention to vision rendered in narrative clarifies the act of “writing vision,” so to speak, as an act of translation between images and their analogue in language. Whether it is as a visual form on the page or as an image conjured up in the mind, words can assume a picture-like quality, which, in turn, is captured in language. The form and shape that these intersections assume across different genres informs, in turn, how these textual/visual forms inflect narratives, desires, and understandings of the Mediterranean.

Inspired by the work of art historian W.T.J. Mitchell, I also focus on the disjuncture between the “verbal” and the “visual” in order to capture the complex relationship between these two representational modes. The texts explored in the present dissertation show how textual/visual relationships are defined by processes and problems by no means given in advance. While this may hold true for many figures, the hindered forms central to my work are especially compelling because they occur in an instant. As a result, they leave the reader with little to grasp and highlight how “spectatorship [...] may be as deep a problem as various forms of reading (decipherment, decoding, interpretation, etc.) and that visual experience may not be fully explicable on the model of textuality” (Mitchell 91).

Visual forms textualized in Mediterranean literature simultaneously reflect and problematize the socio-historical conditions in which they were produced while attempting to see past those very constraints.⁶ The postcolonial Mediterranean offers an important historical moment for analyzing the relationship between interrupted vision and the

⁶ Here “reflection” describes the interrelationship and mutually constituting relationship between the senses, history, and literature, rather than an uncritical mirroring. See Etienne Balibar and Pierre Macherey’s “On Literature as an ideological form.” I am also not suggesting that authors or text actively or consciously “respond” to given political, social, or historical event. Along the lines of Fredric Jameson’s concept of “imaginary resolutions,” I gesture here to the ways in which a text formally problematizes its historical moment, while also imagining alternatives to it. For more see Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*

production of new national, political, and cultural reconfigurations. I argue that these shifts are registered formally and visually in texts that attempt to write and “see” the postcolonial Mediterranean, signifying, with the term “postcolonial,” the period after decolonization, which, far from engendering a clean rupture with the past, still contains the lingering structures and “continuing effects of colonial habits” (Patke 15).

The study of shorts stories and novels from France, Italy, and North Africa published between 1953-2002 examines the role of interrupted vision in shaping narratives of the twentieth and twenty-first century Mediterranean. It tracks the circulation of visual movements (blinks, glances, glimpses) and vision around the sea, showing how they defy clear-cut national boundaries. Because these visual moments are not construed as primarily metaphorical, but as rooted in the Mediterranean’s actual geography, they are able to serve as a point of visual “departure” for the diverse visions that attempt to map alternatives to the nation. Ortese and Djébar engage with and resist frames—eyeglasses, doorframes, and narrative frames—to write what lies just outside of them and to highlight what is only partially seen. The partially seen, for Ortese, figures Naples’ position as a crossroads between Africa, on one hand, and Northern Italy, on the other. In Khatibi, one finds the blink and the syncope, which attempt to map visually Morocco’s liminal position as defined by a dynamic of rupture and continuity between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. Djébar uses visual and textual frames to subvert official French history and unearth the multiple, partially effaced histories in North Africa. In focusing on a plurality of voices and difference, Djébar foregrounds France’s many transnational and Mediterranean interconnections with ancient Rome, Italy, and Malta. Finally, Jean-Claude Izzo focuses on the crime genre as a frame, which allows him to grapple with the criminal and ethical problems of Marseille in the face of France’s desire for cultural homogenization.

In this dissertation, I build on the work of art historians of modernism who have explored vision's "denigration" in the twentieth-century,⁷ its increasing internalization within the subject, its link to the psychological,⁸ and its increasing abstraction in response to modernization and technological advances.⁹ My work ventures outside of a purely European context and into the Mediterranean to examine not just diminished vision, but an intermittent one. Focusing on diminished and obstructed visual forms during the period of decolonization reframes discussions traditionally held in trauma studies—a field that grapples with the problem of violence on the body and the failure of a "body in pain" to articulate those experiences, especially as they relate to war and torture.¹⁰ These discussions persist in Postcolonial Studies via the lens of melancholia and *nachträglichkeit*.¹¹ Even though the works were written during or about the period of decolonization, these texts emerge not out of an "afterwardness," but out of an interface between constraint and paralysis, on the one hand, and a creative drive to push past those limitations in order to write the story of the contemporary Mediterranean, on the other. Interrupted vision is a formal reply to colonial violence that reveals a more complex response condensed in visual details such as the blink or a glimpse. All the narratives herein examined rely on yet older narratives and intertextual references in order to connect with a mythical Mediterranean past, all the while attempting to articulate and "see" their current sociopolitical position within the contemporary Mediterranean.

⁷ See Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes*

⁸ See Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer*

⁹ See Sara Danius' *The Senses of Modernism*

¹⁰ See Scarry, whose phrase, "the body in pain," I borrow here.

¹¹ "Nachträglichkeit" is Freud's notion of belated understanding, especially in relation to traumas. For postcolonial engagements with this term, see Homi Bhabha's "Race, Time, and the Revision of Modernity" in *The Location of Culture*.

This dual movement—of turning towards the past as well as the future in order to narrate the Mediterranean’s position in contemporary history—reveals the ambivalences and complexities of a region still in the making, just as vision in these narratives is an unfolding process. This two-fold movement also captures the historical shock of colonialism, which continues in the Mediterranean despite its official end, as well as the conditions of possibility these moments make possible, particularly through writing. In describing these relationships, scholars often turn to a vocabulary of “entanglements” and “enmeshments,” as in the case of Sumathi Ramaswamy and Martin Jay in *Empires of Vision*, between Europe and its (ex)colonies in continual encounters of “desiring” and “disavowing” (4). Yet, my study of visual interruption approaches this relationship differently: as that between rupture and continuity, or even rupture as continuity that reveals more completely the many contradictions of the Mediterranean.

□

I bring together authors who themselves lived in and around the Mediterranean, identified themselves as “world citizens,” and were known for their errant intellectual lives. Not all of these authors were exclusively novelists, but all were interested in visual media and in word/image relationships. Anna Maria Ortese lived in Libya before moving back to Italy, in which she continued to move, repeatedly. She wrote poetry, neorealist short stories, and fantasy narratives. Before that, however, she had worked as a journalist and published a series of essays on cinema. Abdelkebir Khatibi was known for his far-reaching intellectual and creative interests as a sociologist, theorist, novelist, art critic, and poet. He was also a comparative and global thinker, interested in travel, foreign languages and cultures, which helped him to formulate Morocco’s relationship to its own past. He studied calligraphy and

was especially interested in questions of legibility, visibility, and history. In addition to co-writing numerous art collections, Khatibi wrote the preface to a photography collection of modern-day Morocco.¹² A cineaste, playwright, poet, and novelist, Assia Djébar produced experimental work dealing with visual art and cinema in order to move beyond generic and formal boundaries. Of my primary authors, Jean-Claude Izzo is the most rooted in a specific geographical location (Marseille and Southern France). Izzo, who co-wrote a photography book and composed poetry of his own before focusing on crime novels,¹³ often incorporates musical and visual elements (as in the case of photography) into his work.

The works here under investigation all registers the impossibility of seeing or knowing the Mediterranean fully. All of them concentrate on forms of interrupted vision set in relation to a similar and seemingly contradictory theme--a specular, transparent optics conveyed through repeated references to glass, especially windows. In contrast to hindered visual forms, windows apparently contain the promise of direct access to both visual experience and understanding. Yet, the authors studied herein reveal that just as the restricted visual/textual forms are resisted, the notion of transparency is illusory. Each chapter examines the role of actual frames (window frames, thresholds, doorframes) that delimit the experience of looking so that even objects that appear easily accessible and attainable (textually or visually) are always framed in ways that determine how they are to be seen and read. The authors of this study undo seemingly a priori relationships between words and images, and foreground the act of reading and interpretation as constructed,¹⁴ just as their narratives create a picture of the twentieth- and twenty-first century Mediterranean.

¹² See *Les Marocains*.

¹³ See Izzo's short story collection, *Vivre fatigue*, his poetry collection, , and his photography book, *Marseille*.

¹⁴ See W.T.J. Mitchell's "The Pictorial Turn."

Readers join the process of meaning making in yet another network between readers, image-texts, and the narratives they tell.

Each chapter comprising this dissertation is organized around a visual trope foregrounding the importance of interrupted vision and explores how vision undoes relationships between seeing and knowing the Mediterranean. Chapter One, “The Mediterranean as Mirror: Anna Maria Ortese’s ‘Un paio di occhiali’ and *L’Iguana*” focuses on the dialectical relationship between visibility and invisibility and far-sightedness and myopia. Inspired by Merleau-Ponty’s *Visible and the Invisible*, it investigates the problem of capturing a holistic view of the Mediterranean and of ever seeing one’s larger relation to others within the region. Ortese’s short story, “Un paio di occhiali” [“A Pair of Glasses”] from the collection *Il mare non bagna Napoli* (1953) disavows the sea and rewrites Edgar Allan Poe’s story by arguably the same name, “The Spectacles,” published one hundred years earlier. My reading of Ortese’s short story argues that the Mediterranean makes its mark through negation and absence. Unable to see Naples’ surroundings, readers are put in a position of near-sightedness, which mirrors the protagonist Eugenia’s own myopia. Naples, as a result, is immediately portrayed as cut off from the world and struggling in its isolation to find its place on the map, just as Eugenia attempts to find her bearings with a new pair of glasses. Eugenia’s quest for a pair of eyeglasses figures Naples’ own historical struggle to situate itself vis-à-vis Northern Italy, on one hand, and the greater Mediterranean, on the other. The short story’s final question, “Where are we?” is Eugenia’s as well as Naples’. Bridging the personal and the socio-historical, Ortese’s “Un paio di occhiali ” foregrounds the contradictions of the postcolonial Mediterranean glimpsed through textual-visual representations.

The question that emerges from Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" is not "does the Mediterranean exist?" but rather: what do the ambiguities of the Mediterranean's textual-visual constructions tell us about our relationship to it? These questions are central to the second Ortese work taken up, her fantastical novel, *L'Iguana* [*The Iguana* (1965)]. While "Un paio di occhiali" highlights the Mediterranean from a Southern Italian (*mezzogiorno*) perspective, *L'Iguana* takes readers to Northern Italy where Milanese entrepreneurs attempt to buy luxury islands in the Mediterranean in order to promote tourism. Setting out to find both an island and a heart-wrenching story that will sell to Milanese readers, the protagonist gets lost in an unknown sea. This novel underscores Ortese's interest in negating the Mediterranean as a purely geographical space, while heightening visual fantasies that establish a sea-like aesthetic characterized by partial visions, glimpses, and the collapse of the distinction between fantasy and reality. It shows Ortese's ethical investment in the Mediterranean as a space of class and gender inequalities staged primarily through the novel's posthuman love story between the protagonist and a hybrid iguana-woman figure.

Chapter Two, "In the Blink of an Eye/in The Shift of the Kaleidoscope: Abdelkebir Khatibi's Mediterranean Morocco," asks: how does Morocco's liminal geographical position between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean complicate notions of "Mediterraneanness?" This chapter continues to complicate definitions of "Mediterranean," arguing that the blink and the kaleidoscope are master tropes in Khatibi's aesthetics which, along with the *bilangue*, reveal his desire to situate Morocco within the Mediterranean. On this reading, his novels conceive of the sea as a textual/visual and geographical space. Although Morocco is often left out of discussions of the Mediterranean because it primarily faces the Atlantic, this chapter capitalizes on its ambiguous status to understand how visual/textual constructions shape a Mediterranean imaginary. In answering this question, this chapter asserts the

importance of the blink and the kaleidoscope as crucial visual analogues to the *bilangue* in Khatibi's *La Mémoire tatouée: Autobiographie d'un décolonisé* [*Tattooed Memory: Autobiography of a Decolonized* (1971)] and *Triptyque de Rabat* [*Rabat Triptych* (1993)], respectively.

While critics have focused primarily on Khatibi's engagement with language, I show the imbrications of visual and linguistic modes of representation in his work. In Khatibi's writings, visual and textual interruptions symbolize Morocco's larger geographical, cultural, and political entanglements between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. This chapter reveals how seemingly dualistic structures like the *bilangue* and the blink are actually structured around a relationship of threes, as symbolized by the triptych. Similarly, the Mediterranean navigates (literally and metaphorically) between dualisms in order to rewrite the complexity of Morocco's postcolonial existence vis-à-vis France and the world more broadly. This rewriting happens formally as well: Khatibi subverts the autobiographical genre to capture collective histories and experiences of postwar Morocco. At the same time, he echoes Baudelarian themes of wandering and the modern city to demonstrate further the transnational networks between France, Morocco, and Spain.

Chapter Three, "Mediterranean Through the Frame: Assia Djébar's *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, 'La Femme en morceaux,' and *La Femme sans sépulture*" builds upon and reframes the preceding chapter's focus on interrupted vision and blackouts. Exploring the centrality of visual and textual frames and frameworks in Djébar's work, it extends this visual analysis by focusing on stories that thematize women's disappearances through a retelling of *The 1001 Nights* undertaken from a feminist perspective. Djébar's intertextual references are re-structured around textual/visual breakdowns, hindrances, and obstructions, including half-closed shutters, window frames, and partially occluded thresholds. Her incorporation of visual tropes and cinematic vocabularies highlights the desire for and

impossibility of circulation—of actual physical bodies and narratives across different temporalities and geographical borders. These works speak to Djébar’s growing interest in “internal” forms of Mediterranean identity within both France’s and Algeria’s borders.

Chapter 4, “Micro Visions, Macro Narratives: Magnifying the Mediterranean Puzzle in Jean-Claude Izzo’s *Total Khéops*,” echoes the crime elements in Djébar’s narrative and draws them out more fully in this Mediterranean Noir novel. While Chapter Three interprets Djébar’s oeuvre through the concept of frame and frameworks, this chapter engages the visual conceits of the magnifying glass and the picture puzzle that define detective fiction and allow for an examination of minute visual detail that belatedly accrues significance. A close reading of the trilogy’s first novel, *Total Khéops* (1995), shows photography’s importance in condensing visual/textual narratives of the Mediterranean that create semantic, political, and historical networks between Marseille and Greece as well as Marseille and North Africa, all the while narrating the history of Southern Italian immigrants struggling to make a living in France. Rather than creating meaning mimetically, photography thematizes the allure of the Mediterranean and entices readers into its alluring and problematic image in much the same way that the male protagonists are drawn to the women who represent different poles of the Mediterranean.

Structured around binaries—two women, two photographs, and two disappearances—Izzo’s novel attempts to surpass the very structures by which it is bounded in the same way that France attempts to restore its national boundaries while forging transnational, multiple Mediterranean networks. In this movement of textual/visual expansion and restriction, *Total Khéops* reveals the ambivalence of Izzo’s Marseille as Mediterranean. Rather than solving the question of what the Mediterranean “is,” this chapter shows that the Mediterranean, as captured in Izzo’s work, is defined by an endless

multiplicity of fragmented images, myths, and histories that never add up to a coherent “whole.”

While this dissertation begins with a narrative of post-war Naples, it ends with a story of the Southern Italian diaspora living in Southern France. Each chapter builds formally and aesthetically on the previous one in networks of contradictions and ambiguities or, to return to Horden's and Purcell's term, “horizons of communications” (24). Like the blinks, glimpses and peeks that recur from page to page, these thematic and formal echoes reverberate in circles of interconnection. Initially, my focus on vision potentially threatens to reify the senses and isolate sight from other perceptual experiences; however, instead, it traces the pathways that a visual/textual analysis creates and opens up. For, “So much of what seems to constitute a domain of the visual is an *effect* of other kinds of forces and relations of power” (Crary 2). Visual tropes explored in this work converse with the “richer and more historically determined notions of “embodiment,” in which an embodied subject is both the location of operations of power and the potential for resistance” (Crary 2-3). From textual bodies to physical bodies, from a single body of literature to the multiple bodies that converge in the Mediterranean, embodiment is also part of this study. If, as Merleau-Ponty suggests, “[t]hings have an internal equivalent in me” (“Eye and the Mind,” 4), it is in “some tracing rendered visible again” that we map and are mapped in our “inspection of the world” (4). In this process, we too become bound up in the desiring and disavowing that define the Mediterranean's contradictions and fuel its imaginary. When focusing on the interrelationships of interrupted vision, we must heed minute visual detail, which registers and responds to (consciously or not) the Mediterranean's vastness through its inverse emphasis on the particular. This microscopic view permits us to glimpse partial, destabilized

understandings of the region's multiplicity and its competing images in twentieth- and twenty-first century literature.

Chapter 1

The Mediterranean as Mirror: Anna Maria Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" and *L'Iguana*

Not all people exist in the same Now. They do so only externally, by virtue of the fact that they may all be seen today. But that does not mean that they are living at the same time with others.

Rather, they carry earlier things with them, things which are intricately involved. One has one's times according to where one stands corporeally, above all in terms of classes. Times older than the present continue to affect older strata; here it is easy to return or dream one's way back to older times. [...] In general, different years resound in the one that has just been recorded and prevails. Moreover, they do not emerge in a hidden way as previously but rather, they contradict the Now in a very peculiar way, awry, from the rear.

-Ernst Bloch, "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to its Dialectics"

The invisible underlies the visible. What is seen contains elements of the unseen, and perceptions encompass imperceptions. Far from binaries or contradictions, invisibility and visibility have a chiasmic relationship: one is engendered through the other (Merleau-Ponty, "Working Notes" 247). The blind spot ("punctum caecum") is fundamental to seeing. Relationships between the visible and the invisible are characterized by encroachment, infringement, and intertwining.¹⁵ Perception is a journey, an "ensemble of the body's routes" in relation to the visible (247).¹⁶

The same vocabulary of "intertwining" and crisscrossed "routes" informs current understandings of the Mediterranean. Meaning the "Middle Sea" and a "sea between the

¹⁵ The notion of "intertwining" is especially important for Merleau-Ponty whose chapter "The Intertwining—the Chiasm" outlines relationships between the visible and the tangible.

¹⁶ See Merleau-Ponty's "The Eye and the Mind."

lands” (Abulafia xxiii, 3), the Mediterranean is often conceived of as a place which, not unlike Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the visible, defies binaries and strict borders—national, cultural, linguistic, and geographical. The sea is a liminal space that engenders forms of mapping defined by circulation, transnational routes, “microecologies,” and “horizons of communications” (Horden and Purcell 2, 24). To speak of the Mediterranean, however, is different from speaking about the Mediterranean Sea. While the “sea” describes the actual body of water, the “Mediterranean” writ large refers to the communities that border it (Abulafia 64).

Twentieth-century Italian writer Anna Maria Ortese unites questions of the visible, the Mediterranean, and the Mediterranean Sea in her writings. Working within and against both notions of the sea and the Mediterranean, Ortese’s narratives extend beyond a purely geographical understanding of the region to wrestle with how different forms of interrupted vision shape alternative understandings of the region. Images and visual metaphors are often invoked to solidify understandings of the region and yet Ortese’s writing undoes the correlation between seeing and knowing by exploring how images disrupt and block a cohesive image of the Mediterranean. While Horden and Purcell assert that the conceptual usefulness of the term “the Mediterranean” ceased to exist with modernization,¹⁷ Ortese’s work reveals a more nuanced understanding that centers on contradictions and competing images that relay the difficulty of engaging with and a persistent desire to “see” the region.

Through a close reading of her 1953 short story, “Un paio di occhiali” [“A Pair of Glasses”] from *Il mare non bagna Napoli* [*The Sea Does Not Reach Naples*] alongside her 1965 novel, *L’Iguana* [*The Iguana*], I will argue that these narratives grapple with the problem of seeing and narrating a coherent image of the twentieth-century Mediterranean. To date,

¹⁷ See *The Corrupting Sea*, page 3.

many scholars have noted Ortese's investment in formal experimentation and in subverting clear-cut generic boundaries, all the while drawing on literary traditions such as Neorealism, the fantastic, and the fable (Wood, "Fantasy and Narrative in Anna Maria Ortese" 354). Thus, just as she refuses a singular conceptual and geographical notion of the Mediterranean, Ortese's work also tests generic borders in order to upset any firm notion of "reality." As Sharon Wood states, "[i]t is this suspension of the 'real' world which characterizes Ortese's writing, as her texts sit on the margins of meaning and refuse to coalesce into a coherent whole" (357). Her work disrupts correlations between seeing, knowing, and narrating.

Despite the scholarship on Ortese's incongruous style and her contributions to Neorealism and the fantastic, her importance as a writer of the visual and of the Mediterranean remains little explored. This chapter, therefore, will link discussions of Ortese's style and genre explicitly to questions of the Mediterranean in her writing. For, by analyzing the role of interrupted vision and the Mediterranean in "Un paio di occhiali" and *L'Iguana*, I will also examine two of Ortese's oeuvres that are stylistically and generically distinct. They create their own formal interruptions of traditional literary genre. "Un paio di occhiali," a rewriting of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Spectacles," explores how myopia engenders alternative ways of mapping post-World War II Naples' larger socio-historical relationship to the Mediterranean. The short story uses a Neorealist style in its seemingly straightforward narrative, its focus on the lower class, and commitment to exploring the socio-economic condition of postwar Naples (Re 12, 13). As with many of Ortese's narratives, however, the short story subverts any unified notion of "the real" or "reality" by narrating the devastation of postwar Naples through the eyes of a young girl whose reveries constitute a large part of the story (Wood 354). In its focus on a child-like perspective, Ortese's story echoes the fairy tale genre: the protagonist, Eugenia, closely resembles the

protagonists in Hans Christian Anderson's "Little Matchstick Girl." Both stories are about young girls who attempt to escape poverty through their fantasies and daydreams.

While "Un paio di occhiali" is situated at the intersections of Neorealism and fables, *L'Iguana* is inspired by the fantastical genre, which draws on northern European gothic and fantastic literature "as literary traditions offering [...] alternative models to the ethos and closed linear narrative structure prescribed by realism" (Billiani 15). Rather than a direct imitation of European Gothic traditions, Italian fantastical literature rewrites traditional tales much like Ortese adopted Poe's "The Spectacles" in "Un paio di occhiali." Moreover, contemporary scholars like Anne Rubat du Merac conceive of Ortese's work as part of the "female fantastic," which seeks to subvert patriarchal and closed narrative forms in favor of a different *sensibilité* that includes the irrational (La Penna 161).¹⁸ *L'Iguana*, like many fantastical narratives, is structured around complex intertextual references including *The Tempest*, *Cinderella*, and *Alice in Wonderland*. *L'Iguana* prioritizes interrupted visual forms, where the word "forms" refers to modes of seeing as well as Ortese's own departure from traditional literary conventions and schools (La Penna 160). Both "Un paio di occhiali," and *L'Iguana*, as I will show, explore how interrupted visual forms create associational networks between different seas: the Mediterranean, Atlantic, and the Caribbean. Ortese's Mediterranean is thus constituted around interrupted vision and the interplay between the visible and the invisible.

¹⁸ See du Merac.

I. “Un paio di occhiali”: At the Interstices of the Visible and the Invisible

Il mare non bagna Napoli's publication caused a scandal (Re 5). Nino Sansone, a Neapolitan writer for the Communist journal, *Rinascita*, criticized Ortese for confirming Northern Italians' stereotypes of the *Mezzogiorno* (the South). Drawing on the primary visual metaphor in “Un paio di occhiali,” Sansone accused the editors of myopia in publishing the collection (Re 5). Since its release, scholars have paid particular attention to “Un paio di occhiali” because it opens the collection and is one of its only fictional stories. Originally published in two installments as “Ottomila lire per gli occhi di Eugenia” [“Eight Thousand Lire for Eugenia's Eye's”] in *Voce*'s March 1949 issue (Re 2), the story first appeared as “Un paio di occhiali” in the journal *Il mondo* (Lannaccone 17). It was later adapted as a television show and aired on Canale Primo in 1972 (Lannaccone 24). In 2001, “Un paio di occhiali” was made into a short sixteen-minute film for the *Biennale*, the Venice international art festival (Dir. Damasco). This publication history speaks to the narrative's formally experimental quality that lends itself well to visual adaptations. In focusing on Ortese's use of eyeglasses as a visual frame to her story, scholars have examined the intersections of fantasy, history, and realism in the story. They have deconstructed binaries between “reality” and “fantasy,”¹⁹ and the relationships between historical and political realities versus imaginative ones.²⁰ Other scholars, such as Lucia Re, have focused exclusively on what she terms a “poetics of nearsightedness” (2). Finally, in all of these critical explorations, scholars usually focus on two questions: “in what 20th century literary school or tendency can we place her? And who is Anna Maria Ortese?” (Wilson 100).

The dynamic between the visible and the invisible moves beyond the autobiographical to explore complex dynamics between sight and meaning making in “Un

¹⁹ See Wood.

²⁰ See Baldi.

paio di occhiali” that includes an exploration of Naples’ relationship to the Mediterranean. To assert the sea’s importance in “Un paio di occhiali” initially seems counterintuitive since the collection (*The Sea Does Not Reach Naples*) negates geographical fact and disavows Naples’ relationship to the sea, which is only mentioned once when Eugenia visits her landlady and looks out at Naples over her landlord’s balcony. For much of the story, the sea is invisible (Re 1).²¹ In the table of contents, however, the preface is abbreviated to “Il ‘Mare’” [“the ‘Sea’”] (np), which paradoxically affirms the Mediterranean as the collection’s central thread and as a singular (“the”) entity. Moreover, this simile defines the sea as a place of bewilderment, pathos, and loss [“come spaesamento” (np)]. As Ortese avows in the preface, “Erano molto veri il dolore e il male di Napoli, uscita in pezzi dalla guerra” [“They were very real, the pain of Naples and the damage to the city, as it came out of the war”] (10). The “sea” appears in quotes since there is slippage and conflation between the title of Ortese’s collection, Naples, and the Mediterranean, which are associated with an overarching sense of despair and darkness. At the same time, however, the verb “bagnare” also means “to bathe” in Italian, thereby intimating that the Mediterranean also contains the promise of metaphorically cleansing Naples and of connecting the city to the greater world. Yet, as readers begin *Il Mare*, the Mediterranean vanishes from view and makes its mark through negation. Unable to see Naples’ surroundings, readers notice the marked absence of the sea, and are put in a position of near-sightedness, which mirrors the protagonist Eugenia’s own myopia. The city is cut off from the world, struggling to find its place on the map, just as Eugenia attempts to find her bearings with a new pair of glasses.

Like the two lenses that make eyeglasses, the narrative is structured around two moments: the first, when Eugenia puts on eyeglasses on in the optometrist’s office and then

²¹ While Re uses the term “invisible,” she does not theorize its perceptual and phenomenological significance.

again when she tries her new pair on in her neighborhood. The eyeglasses contain the promise of transforming Eugenia from a poor, nearly blind girl with an old woman's face into someone who is fully accepted and incorporated into Naples' society (18). As the product of extreme poverty, Eugenia is additionally marginalized because she is not traditionally feminine or beautiful. She is, in fact, most clearly identified by her poverty. If, as Iain Chambers asserts, the worker and migrant are central figures in the contemporary Mediterranean (3), Eugenia symbolizes both.

While Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" explores how eyeglasses frame Eugenia's understanding of Naples, the story draws on an intertextual frame: Edgar Allen Poe's short story "The Spectacles," published nearly a hundred years earlier (Wood 169), which tells the story of a myopic but proud protagonist, Napoleon Bonaparte Simpson, who lives in Paris—a place of European high culture and modernity. He does all he can to immerse himself in the social scene, including refusing to wear glasses because he fears they will detract from his appearance. As his name suggests, he is pompous, concerned only with issues of nobility and class. He ultimately falls in love with his grandmother, Eugenie, proposes to her, and is horrified when he discovers her true identity. Eugenie (whose name is the French equivalent of Eugenia's in Ortese's story) recalls a classical Hellenic beauty. She "rivalled in outline . . . the Greek Psyche" and, she appeared to him at the opera, wearing "an elegant cap of *gaze aérienne*,"²² which put [him] in mind of the *ventum textilem* of Apuleius" (Poe 464). From the mention of the Greek Psyche to the Latin phrase "*ventum textilem*" ["neckerchiefs"] to the later mention of San Carlo, the famous opera house in Naples,²³ Eugenie represents a refined Mediterranean beauty mediated through a European imaginary.

²² This term describes a light or transparent cloth.

²³ Neckerchiefs covered women's bosoms for decorum's sake. For more, see Levine and Levine p. 348.

Poe's story parodies the modern desire to trace "narrative continuity between the ancients and the moderns" (Lambropoulous 12). The Greek Mediterranean is depicted as a place of nostalgia and fantasy for a noble past. Poe's story undermines the fantasy of Mediterranean beauty by revealing Eugenie's wizened appearance, which underscores the deception of initial impressions.

Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" immediately exposes readers to another, far less enticing image of the Mediterranean. Rather than constructing a romanticized, distant dream of the Mediterranean, Ortese explores the brute material conditions of a family actually living in post-World War II Naples, a time that "brought [the city] to the brink of dissolution" (Santore XLIV). Furthermore, as the Roman saying—"Africa begins at Naples"—makes clear (Coburn xvii), Naples was and continues to be denigrated by Northern Italians because of its geographical proximity to Italy's former colonies, particularly Libya, which faces Italy across their shared Mediterranean Sea. Ortese explores the limits of vision within this socio-historical context; she reverses both the cultural and geographic bearings of Poe's text, as well as the gender and class dynamics. While Eugenie is the object of Simpson's gaze in "The Spectacle," in Ortese's story, Eugenia is keen on seeing in her own right. Furthermore, Poe's Eugenie is an old aristocratic woman who was mistaken for a young one; yet, Ortese's Eugenia is a child who, because of severe myopia, resembles an old woman. One neighbor ponders how Eugenia can be so young and so myopic (18), while the tobacconist marvels at the severity of Eugenia's diminished vision: "Alla tua età [...] ci vedevo come un gatto, infilavo gli aghi di notte, mia nonna mi voleva sempre appresso . . . Ma ora sono invecchiato" ["At your age . . . I had eyes as sharp as a cat's. I could thread a needle in the dark, and my grandmother wanted me around [...] But now I'm an old man"] (25). Eugenia's development is perceived as abnormal: she is too young to be almost blind. Living

in Naples' poorest district, she is further ostracized because of her inability to see much of the world around her. "Un paio di occhiali" chronicles economic and perceptual poverty, which is figured most explicitly by Eugenia's need to see and her incapacity to purchase eyeglasses.

The narrative begins when Eugenia's aunt promises to buy her eyeglasses with all of her savings. As Eugenia leaves her impoverished neighborhood for the optometrist's office, her movement becomes symbolic of Naples' desire for social mobility and change because the optometrist's office is in Via Roma [Rome Street], one of the wealthiest streets in Naples. In addition to establishing a socio-economic division within Naples, Rome Street suggests northward mobility as the road that leads to Rome and away from Naples' postwar misery. Just as Poe's "The Spectacles" establishes a historical continuity with a grand Hellenic past, Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" revives a similar adulation of Rome's grandeur. Via Roma echoes the myth of a great Roman past in which Italy ruled the Mediterranean, their "Mare Nostrum" ["our sea"] (Abulafia 604). During World War II, just years before the period in which "Un paio di occhiali" takes place, Mussolini promised to restore the glorious Roman past and Italy's position as "an island that juts into the Mediterranean" (Abulafia 601). The twentieth-century Mediterranean thus *does* exist during Italian fascism as a desire to revive Italy's greatness as the country that controls the sea. Ortese's narrative is thus structured around a national and political history, as well as Eugenia's not too distant past, for her visit to the optometrist's had happened a week prior (14). The allusion Rome's ancient glory transports the narrative back to the moment when Eugenia first experienced the greatness of visual clarity. Her journey enacts a quadruple displacement: geographical, socio-economic, political, and temporal.

Eugenia's visit to the optometrist's is a scene in two senses: it is an instant in the narrative, and a "scene" of memory. As Freud underscores, memory is often visual and performative, especially childhood memories, which exist as "scenes" and "pictures" (Freud 237). As such, memories "are very well preserved and furnished in every detail of sense-perception" (Freud 236). Eugenia's experience of Via Roma, as one might suspect, is structured around strong visual detail, starting when the optometrist first tests her vision by asking her to examine a reading chart. This interaction foregrounds legibility as one of the story's prominent themes: reading the letters of the alphabet foreshadows Eugenia's ability (or lack thereof) to decipher the world around her. The narrative, however, does not emphasize the meaning of the letters, or name them at all. Instead, they become picture-like, some of them "grosse come scatole, altre piccolissime come spilli" ["large like boxes, others as tiny as pins"] (Ortese 16). Tantalizing visual patterns, they add to the optical décor of her surroundings. Eugenia is awed by the "tavoli lucidi" ["shiny tables"] and "un riflesso verde, meraviglioso, che pioveva da una tenda" ["a marvelous green reflection, rippling like a curtain"] (Ortese 16). This first instance of eyeglass wearing reveals how Eugenia's imagination shapes Naples' significance governed as if by images, shapes, and movement (the scroll of the optometrist's letters) that imbue the city with a mythical rather than a social or historical signification.

When Eugenia puts on the eyeglasses, the world comes into focus; this instant enacts the first visual interruption in the story. She ceases to be confused about her surroundings and her gaze turns to the many details outside. Yet, far from giving her an uncomplicated view of the world, "Un paio di occhiali" immediately troubles the possibility of an unobstructed vision when Eugenia looks out the window with the eyeglasses on. Her gaze is doubly enabled by glass— by the eyeglasses' lenses that make up for her deficient vision and

by the windowpane that separates her from the outside world. More than a barrier delimiting her vision, the window functions as a surface onto which Eugenia projects her fantasies. As such, the window is a “transitional or liminal plane between reality and imagination, foreground and background, external and internal worlds” (Jay 245).

Eugenia si era alzata in piedi, con le gambe che le tremavano per l'emozione, e non aveva potuto reprimere un piccolo grido di gioia. Sul marciapiede passavano, nitidissime, appena più piccole del normale, tante persone ben vestite: signore con abiti di seta e visi incipriati, giovanotti coi capelli lunghi e il pullover colorato, vecchietti con la barba bianca e le mani rosa appoggiate sul bastone dal pomo d'argento; e, in mezzo alla strada, certe belle automobili che sembravano giocattoli, con la carrozzeria dipinta in rosso o verdi, coi vetri abbassati, e dietro i vetri tanta gente vestita elegantemente; al di là della strada, sul marciapiede apposto, c'erano negozi bellissimi, con le vetrine come specchi, piene di roba fina, da dare una specie di struggimento . . . C'era un caffè coi tavolini rossi e gialli e delle ragazze sedute fuori, con le gambe una sull'altra e i capelli d'oro. Ridevano e bevevano in bicchieri grandi, colorati. Al disopra del caffè, balconi aperti, perché era già primavera, con tende ricamate che si muovevano, e, dietro le tende, pezzi di pittura azzurra e dorata, e lampadari pesanti d'oro e cristalli, come cesti di frutta artificiale, che scintillavano. Una meraviglia. (16-7)

Eugenia got up, her knees knocking together with emotion, and was unable to repress a small cry of joy. On the sidewalk, she saw so many distinguished people passing by who appeared only slightly smaller than normal. There were young women in silk dresses with make-up on their faces, young men in bright sweaters, greybeards with their rosy fingers entwined about the silver handle of a cane. On the street beyond she could see cars, painted red and green, like so many shiny toys; buses as large as houses with well-dressed passengers sitting behind open windows; and on the opposite side of the street were the most beautiful stores, with windows like mirrors, full of fine clothing, that inspired a type of yearning . . . She could also see an open-air café where golden-haired girls sat with their legs crossed under red and yellow tables, drinking out of bright glasses. Above the café, balcony windows were open and curtains fluttered in the spring breeze, revealing fragments of blue and gold walls and glittering chandeliers, hanging like fruit baskets. It was marvelous.

This passage bustles with pedestrians, buses, open windows, fluttering curtains, and a rippling breeze. Dynamic movement renders the scene delightful to Eugenia (17). As she looks out at Via Roma through her new glasses, she is swept away by all of the “distinguished people,” especially the man in “silk clothes” and a “bright sweater” (17), which are not objects of need but of desire. The many colors (red and green cars, silver

canes, bright reds and yellows) infuse this moment with vibrancy, making it almost tangible; the meticulous detail adds a polished quality so that this scene, approximating the toy-like cars, glistens for the reader. The moment is structured around excess, mirrored formally by the layering of detail upon detail, thereby creating a stylistic opulence. Formally, many of Ortese's sentences are long and marked only by a semi-colon, as if to mimic the way Eugenia's eager gaze attempts to absorb as many images as possible. In addition to enhancing her imagination, this scene establishes the centrality of legibility in "Un paio di occhiali." More than simply correcting Eugenia's eyesight, the eyeglasses contain the promise of helping her read, understand, and interpret Naples and her position within it, just as an economically devastated Naples attempted to make itself legible within postwar Italy.

This moment is a spectacle made possible by spectacles—a wordplay that works, with a slight variation in meaning, in the original Italian where "spettacolo" refers both to a performance and to sight. This definition adds another layer of meaning to the common understanding of spectacle as "something made of glass" and "a mirror" (*OED*). The objects that assume a prime importance in this passage are dominated by optical reflections (the storefront, balcony windows, and glittering chandeliers). The play of light adds to the pleasure Eugenia experiences as she joyfully observes her surroundings. With all of its grandeur and tantalizing reflections, this scene is idealized within Eugenia's memory while inspiring a yearning that propels the narrative forward (11). More than simply capturing Eugenia's increased ability to see with eyeglasses, this instant reveals her growing consciousness of herself as a perceptual and phenomenological being in relation to her surroundings.

Eugenia's experience at the optometrist's is structured around a dual point of view: Eugenia's and readers'. Donning the eyeglasses for the first time, Eugenia believes that the

world's inherent, universal beauty has been revealed. While readers, like Eugenia, are unable to see the Mediterranean, they are able to see the images that constitute her everyday reality, including the water that inundates her house, the cockroaches that enter her aunt's sleeves, and fish bones scattered in the stairway (15). For readers, the scene in Via Roma resembles a scene from a movie. As readers recall, the optometrist's window is covered by "marvelous green reflections, rippling down like a curtain" (14), which furthers this scene's relation to a movie theater. This association is reinforced by the eyeglasses themselves, which gesture towards the popularity of 3-D glasses in the 1950s, their "golden era."²⁴ Although Eugenia's glasses are not 3-D, they add multiple dimensions to vision, as the window delimits and frames Via Roma; the street becomes a pictorial *tableau vivant* of the outside world that springs to life before Eugenia's eyes.²⁵

Eugenia is simultaneously the spectator and the spectacle, beheld by others as if she herself were on display, as she peers out of the shop window.²⁶ Desire, for her, is Via Roma itself where everything seems to glisten like gold, including the storefronts, which confront her with windows resembling mirrors (17). Eugenia sees her own wish to join upper-class life reflected back to her. Her sense of self is shaped by the ideological image of how privileged girls appear: beautiful with their golden hair and perfectly crossed legs (17). Such ornamental style and lavish detail endow the scene, like the optometrist's shop, with the fascination and "marvel" characteristic of commodity fetishism. This grandeur echoes and modernizes Rome's grandeur, which Via Roma gestures to, if only in subtle ways. Eugenia finds herself surrounded by myth, cast in explicitly socio-economic terms. She hopes that

²⁴ While 3-D glasses were patented for public use much earlier, the 1950s marked the period of their enormous success. For more, see Hayes.

²⁵ This is my own reading, but I thereafter discovered Baldi's work on Ortese, which offers a similar reading.

²⁶ For more on the distinction between the seer and the seen, see Lacan's "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze."

clarified vision will help her see and live that mythical dream more clearly and actualize it in her future.

The scene at the optometrist's takes on two competing significations for her and for the reader. For Eugenia, it appears to be a moment of increased sight, imagination, and joy. While the eyeglasses enhance Eugenia's vision, she remains metaphorically blinded to the social and economic barriers between her and the inhabitants of Via Roma and to the fact that lower-class poverty is what makes upper-class decadence possible in the first place. In a moment of joy, Eugenia is a mere spectator, separated from what she observes by a glass window, as if to mark the class divide that remains invisible to her. The figure of the window is a space of her imagination as well as of her alienation. It is a barrier and a conduit to her fantasies. Furthermore, the window keeps out the ambient street noise, so that what Eugenia witnesses is purely visual.

By complicating ways of seeing, Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali" establishes the impossibility of seeing without mediation, and overtly critiques the desire, most often aligned with Neorealism, to represent a single unified reality of what "is."²⁷ The window and glass in the optometrist's office reveal that sight is always already framed in imperceptible ways. The proliferation of visual obstacles, and points of view (seer and seen) capture Naples' own complex relationship to other parts of Italy after World War II. Just as the scene with Eugenia shows the divisions of sight, Naples was rife with cultural, political, and social divisions both within the city's confines and at a national level, as well.

In fact, "Un paio di occhiali," as critic Anna Maria Torriglia underscores, also fits into the genre of 1950s travel narratives—a genre that defined the era and reflected the economic necessity that sent ten million Italians to find jobs in the industrialized cities of

²⁷ In other words, "pure" vision isolated from socio-historical context is unrealizable. See the introduction to Cary's *Suspensions of Perception*.

Milan, Genoa, and Turin at a time when “[traveling] became a dramatic necessity for most immigrants who moved to the foggy cities of the industrial triangle, in particular Turin and Milan, from the southern rocky and dry regions, and who faced miserable and often inhuman living conditions, not to mention a radical cultural uprooting” (Torrighia, 120). During this time, Milan and Naples were seen as two polarized cities: Milan represented economic possibilities, burgeoning capitalism, and modernization, while Naples was perceived as “regressive,” and suffering from the aftereffects of World War II. These economic and political hardships result in what is “a well recorded story. One always leaves Naples for the same reasons: need, exhaustion, nausea, rage, and impotence” (Arpaia 9).

Eugenia’s journey from her lower-class neighborhood to Via Roma figures the massive migration from Southern Italy to the North after the War and the wish to escape Southern Italy’s poverty. Read in this context, Ortese’s story stages a period of increasing social divide, as “the upper-middle class continued as much as they had in the nineteenth century. Industrial society had afforded them more and better opportunities for leisure and display” (Santore 272). “Un paio di occhiali” shows clearly the socioeconomic divisions within Naples by drawing attention to its two different geographies of Via Roma and Eugenia’s impoverished neighborhood—a class difference that involves the “radical cultural uprooting” of which Torrighia speaks.

This “radical uprooting” fittingly enters into Ortese’s “Un paio di occhiali” visually when Eugenia sees American soldiers in the streets while running an errand for her aunt. History explicitly enters into the short story as something Eugenia cannot articulate. She finds herself amidst a parade honoring the American soldiers who helped liberate the South during the War. Unable to comprehend the soldiers’ reason for being in Naples, she is enthralled by the visual splendor of the festivities: “alzando in alto i suoi occhi sporgenti,

sorse quel bagliore caldo, azzurro, ch'era il cielo, e sentì, senza però vederla chiaramente, la gran festa che c'era intorno" ["raising her wide eyes, she felt the warm bath that was the sky and she felt, without seeing properly, the big celebration that surrounded her"] (Ortese 23). This passage is organized around a vertical logic in which Eugenia *looks up*—towards the sky, “the beyond,” and implicitly towards heaven. She perceives the beauty of flowers in window boxes, confetti, and banners, until this moment begins to resemble Via Roma in Eugenia’s imagination. She thus extends the visual detail she experienced in the optometrist’s office, and draws it into her experience of the parade. One scene informs the other in what establishes a visual continuity between the two moments. There are, however, two important differences: first, she is without her glasses among the soldiers, and so she imagines much of what she observes, as the text makes explicit. And secondly, like the soldiers, she is in the street and not removed from the activity by a window. She can feel, therefore, as though she is part of the celebration, which she believes is for her and her newly found “view” of the world. The notion of “the beyond” captures what is incomprehensible for the young Eugenia whose child-like perspective cannot understand the historical reality around her.

At the same time that the narrative “turns upwards,” so to speak, and focuses on the visual beauty of Naples’ sky, it attempts to move *outwards* in order to give readers a fleeting sense of the city’s horizon. Because “Un paio di occhiali” centers on myopia, the narrative is most concerned with how to see into the distance. The story centers increasingly on this concern, particularly when Eugenia goes to visit her landlady, the Marchesa. Standing on her balcony, Eugenia looks out over the city: “E intorno, quasi invisibile nella gran luce, il mondo fatto da Dio, col vento, il sole, e laggiù il mare pulito, grande...” [“All around her, almost invisible in the light, was God’s world, with the wind, the sun, and beneath her the clean sea, so vast . . .”] (30). In contradistinction to the detail in the optometrist’s office, this

moment is a representational void. Here, the sea marks the place of the “unsayable”—that which cannot be articulated and that which Eugenia necessarily fails to recognize. The ellipses are “the marker and the substitute (the ‘tenant lieu,’ or holding place, in Lacanian language) of the unrepresentable totality” (Jameson 163). It is space and time that defy any fixed meaning, slipping through her grasp. From this elevated position and in a moment that verges on the sublime, Eugenia attempts to see past Naples’ isolated confines towards the Mediterranean.

Instead of the detailed colors of Via Roma, Eugenia only sees the Mediterranean’s abstract, ultimately ungraspable beauty and cleanliness that is the antithesis of her life in Naples. As something too vast and distant to grasp—like history and Eugenia’s socioeconomic context—the sea compounds her sense of loss; textually, this moment marks a return to the preface, which establishes the Mediterranean as a place of pain. Standing on the balcony, distanced from her quotidian existence and assuming a different point of view in which she can see things from a bird’s eye view, Eugenia is able to meditate upon Naples’ hardships. This narrative pause and contemplation, for sociologist Franco Cassano, is what defines the Mediterranean: “The sea is, first of all, a meditation, an impersonal voice that transforms, maybe because of a strange Italian assonance between *mare* and *-are*, every verb into an infinitive, a sky redoubled and turned earthly, a wrecked ball, a freed border, a horizon that reminds us of something precisely because it escapes us” (Cassano 11). For Eugenia, it is not only the Mediterranean that eludes her, but also her ability to read Neapolitan life and its connection to Italy more broadly. She is unable, therefore, to engage visual/textual and cultural significations. Just as Cassano’s description of Mediterranean life encompasses visual, linguistic, and representational realms, so too does Ortese’s “Un paio di occhiali.” Eugenia gazes down over the city in a scene that reverses the

moment in which she—amidst American soldiers—looked upwards at the sky. Cassano’s notion of redoubling characterizes Ortese’s structural logic that shifts notions of space and geographies, so that the blueness of the sky is displaced onto the sea’s azure waves. Naples thus functions as a pivot point between different representational modes—between myopia and a desire to see the distant Mediterranean—that map the city as a perceptual and geographical crossroads.

The trajectories that “Un paio di occhiali” enact, however, ultimately end in darkness when Eugenia puts on her glasses in her own district and confronts her immediate social reality in all of its crushing weight in a scene that functions as the counterpart to Via Roma. If the Mediterranean appeared too distant to glimpse fully, this final scene is magnified until it overwhelms:

Le gambe le tremavano, le girava la testa, e non provava più nessuna gioia. . . Improvvisamente i balconi cominciarono a diventare tanti, duemila, centomila; i carretti con la verdura le precipitavano addosso; le voci che riempivano l’aria, i richiami, le frustate, le colpivano la testa come se fosse malata; si volse barcollando verso il cortile, e quella terribile impressione aumentò. Come un imbuto viscido il cortile, con la punta verso il cielo e i muri lebbrosi fitti di miserabili balconi; gli archi dei terranei, neri, coi lumi brillanti a cerchio intorno all’Addolorata; il selciato bianco di acqua saponata, le foglie di cavolo, i pezzi di carta, i rifiuti, e, in mezzo al cortile, quel gruppo di cristiani cenciosi e difforme, coi visi butterati dalla miseria e della rassegnazione, che la guardavano amorosamente. Cominciarono a torcersi, a confondersi, a ingigantire. Le venivano tutti addosso, gridando, nei due cerchietti stregati degli occhiali. . . Eugenia si era piegata in due e, lamentandosi, vomitava [. . .] [Eugenia], pallida come una morta, si sforzava inutilmente di rovesciare, perché non aveva più niente. I suoi occhi sporgenti erano quasi torti dalla sofferenza, e il suo viso di vecchia inondato di lacrime, come istupidito. Si appoggiava a sua madre e tremava. « Mammà, dove stiamo? » (33-4)

Her legs trembled, her head spun, and all her joy was gone . . . There seemed to be a thousand, ten thousand balconies hanging over her, and vegetable carts rushing at her from every side; the shouting voices and the cracking whips that filled the air beat upon her brain as if she were delirious, and when she staggered back into the courtyard, this impression was all the more overwhelming. The courtyard was like a sticky funnel pointed towards the sky, peeling walls and thickly clustered balconies around it. On the ground there was a circle of low arches and at one point a statue of the Madonna surrounded by votive lights. The paving stones were marked with streaks of soapy water and littered with scraps of paper, cabbage leaves, and other

bits of garbage. And in the middle of the scene there stood a little group of sickly, ragged individuals with the pockmarks of poverty and despair on their faces, staring at her with adoring expectation. As she looked at them through the magic glasses, their bodies seemed to twist about and mangled together, then, as they bore down noisily upon her, they suddenly seemed to grow twice as big as their normal size. Eugenia was bent over in half and crying, she vomited [. . .] She was pale as death, and retching spasmodically, with nothing left in her stomach. Her protruding eyes seemed to be contorted by pain and her little face was flooded with tears, as if stupefied. She leaned trembling against her mother. “Mother, where are we?” (trans. Frenaye 426)²⁸

This scene severs Eugenia’s joyful visions of her surroundings, and challenges her initial contention that a correct vision is better than her imperfect one. The glasses simultaneously promise to make Eugenia a more active participant in Naples, while also dashing her belief that life is always as beautiful as it appeared out of the optometrist’s window. In *Via Roma*, Eugenia stood apart from her aunt and optometrist, watching the scene in front of her. In this final scene cited above, however, she is immersed in the world that unfolds around her. Eugenia ultimately sees the socioeconomic conditions of her life. This final courtyard scene is stylistically organized around some of the same principles as the *Via Roma* scene. It, too, is structured around perception—cries, movement, and colors—as well as an overabundance of images, which are neither visually pleasing nor decadent, but nauseating. The “thousand, ten thousand balconies,” “the vegetable carts,” and the “sickly, ragged individuals” loom over Eugenia. Noises—the “shouting voices” and “cracking whips”—shake her small body. Movement is not delightful as it was in *Via Roma*, but destabilizing and characterized by desperation. The last line of this scene—“Mother, where are we?”—is especially telling, since Eugenia did not ask her aunt this question on *Via Roma*, where she was an outsider, but in her own courtyard, which she now sees carries “pockmarks of poverty and despair” (33-4).

This is a moment of defamiliarization in which the courtyard, where Eugenia has lived all of

²⁸ My translations of the Ortese story have differed through much of the chapter, but her translation of this moment is in keeping with my own. I therefore cite her directly above.

her life, becomes foreign to her.²⁹ Unable to situate herself, Eugenia finds herself in the “blind spot” of the narrative or the “dark well” (30), which she could only glean from the distant balcony of the Marchesa’s apartment. She recognizes herself in these pockmarks—something she is only able to do within the context of her neighborhood, surrounded by her own class.

This scene is theatrical: while in Via Roma Eugenia is simultaneously the seer and the seen, in her own courtyard, she becomes the “spectacle” for onlookers. Standing in the middle of the courtyard, she is on display for eager neighbors and readers alike who await signs of her transformation. Their gaze comes crushing down on her, as is evident by her trembling hands, spinning head, face “pale as death” and “protruding eyes contorted by pain” (33). If Via Roma seems too ideal to be “real,” this moment seems equally dramatic as it performs catastrophe. The lavish detail of Via Roma is replaced by “streaks of soapy water,” “scraps of paper,” “cabbage leaves,” and “bits of garbage” (33). Through her physical response, Eugenia transmits her despair to her neighbors and readers turned participants; her swollen eyes and overly exaggerated gestures are responses to the social conditions of her environment.

If Eugenia’s experience of Via Roma crystalizes the socio-economic tensions between Northern and Southern Italy while echoing a past Roman glory, the final courtyard scene has a different orientation as it reverberates with a post-war image of Naples as quasi-third-world. It echoes literature that compares the Italian South to African colonies, which is apparent in accounts of the post World War II devastation: “All of Naples lay spread out beneath us like an antique map, on which the artist had drawn with almost exaggerated care the many gardens, the castles, the towers and the cupolas . . . for the first time I realized how

²⁹ For more on the relationship between defamiliarization and theatricality, see Brecht.

un-European, how oriental it was” (Lewis 44). Naples is depicted as “anti-modern” with “no cars but carts by the hundred, and a few antique coaches such as barouches and phaetons drawn by lean horses” (Lewis 44). In another entry, a World War II soldier writes: “It is astonishing to witness the struggles of this city so shattered, so starved, so deprived of all of those things that justify a city’s existence, to adapt itself to a collapse into the conditions which must resemble life in the Dark Ages. People camp out like Bedouins in deserts of brick” (46). According to this citation, Neapolitans do not live in the same “Now,” to return to the epigraph that opened this chapter; they are remnants of the past and an indication of the porousness between Europe and the so-called “third world” that is internalized *within* Italy. For Antonio Gramsci, the comparison of the Italian South to the colonies returns to the questions of socio-economic inequality and the persistent class divisions between Northern Italy and the *Mezzogiorno* (the South). In this unequal relationship, the South and the Islands have been denigrated to a colonial status to be exploited.³⁰

The Mediterranean, as in “Un paio di occhiali,” is a place “where the Occident and the Orient, the North and the South, are evidently entangled in a cultural and historical net cast over centuries” (Chambers 3). Ortese’s story is not intertwined in one past but in two: between the myth of a great Roman past and the darkness associated with the so-called “Dark Ages.” These two histories join Ortese’s desire to complicate singular narratives, and to trouble questions of reality and “the real.” Furthermore, these scenes are highly visual: Via Roma embodies the light and sharp visual detail associated with a Mediterranean of the sun. The second instant is a far more problematic and “regressive” model, which stymies so-called “modern” European progress. These two moments capture the perceptual binary between visibility and invisibility that began this chapter. While one catalyzes the narrative,

³⁰ See Gramsci “The Southern Question.”

the other closes it. Via Roma initially appears to affirm categories of sight and blindness, light and obscurity. “Un paio di occhiali,” however, is just as much about what happens in the interstices and in Eugenia’s imagination as she herself wavers between clearer sight and severe myopia. The short story enacts the chiasmatic relationship that defines the relationship between the invisible and the visible: the narrative first introduces Eugenia’s myopia, then her enhanced vision in Via Roma; the narrative returns to her myopia, and thereafter recounts the courtyard scene when she sees so clearly she is overwhelmed. Finally, she returns to her myopic state, but with a renewed awareness of her surroundings. Rather than negating the existence of a modern Mediterranean, Ortese’s short story exhibits how prior historical and narrative structures shape contemporary engagements with Southern Italy. Ortese’s Mediterranean is drawn into the past and projected into an uncertain future in a dizzying process that figures Naples’ struggle to find its geopolitical position on the map—a difficulty registered through intermittent vision.

II. *L’Iguana*: Disruptions in the Visual Field

The question of mapping and cartography writ large underlies *L’Iguana*, which was published in 1965, almost ten years after “Un paio di occhiali.” The novel was poorly received because of its strange plot that readers did not know how to interpret. The narrative could easily be characterized as a posthuman and magical realist love story, an ecocritical narrative, a capitalist critique, and a modern fairy tale. While the central visual preoccupation in “Un paio di occhiali” is farsightedness, which represents Naples’ desire to see past its own socioeconomic constraints and be integrated into Italy, *L’Iguana* explores what kinds of vision are possible in the realm of fantasy. The novel thus reframes the visual and textual coordinates of “Un paio di occhiali” and explores the question of what unfolds in unknown

worlds that challenge ways of seeing and knowing.

Just as “Un paio di occhiali” moves increasingly towards imaginative realms via Eugenia’s point of view, *L’Iguana*’s narrative becomes increasingly fantastic. The novel thus explores the theme of travel in both its form and content. In more dramatic ways than “Un paio di occhiali,” *L’Iguana* tests generic limits by including a map, and poetic verses in its narrative. On a larger scale, these aesthetic experimentations gesture to Italy’s desire to explore its own geographical and transnational borders. *L’Iguana* has been called “the book of books” because it draws on a myriad of intertextual references, including Shakespeare, Lewis Carroll, and Tennessee Williams (Frizzi 379). While “Un paio di occhiali” simultaneously adheres to and undermines the framework of Poe’s “The Spectacles,” *L’Iguana* is pastiche-like as it draws on narrative fragments that create broadening and dizzying textual layers (Frizzi 379).

While “Un paio di occhiali” wavers between clarified sight and myopia to figure the difficulty of seeing the Mediterranean, *L’Iguana* moves from Milan, out into the Mediterranean, and beyond to a fantastical island, Ocaña, off the Atlantic coast of Portugal. As the narrative shifts towards Ocaña, the centrality of intermittent vision increases. It serves as a grounding mechanism in the text, and echoes the novel’s presentation of a Mediterranean visual aesthetic in the form of visual resonances.

The novel’s protagonist, Don Carlo Ludovico Aleardo di Grees, is known simply as Daddo. He is a Milanese Count and an architect charged with two missions: first, his mother commands him to find an island, and transform it into a tourist resort for profit. Secondly, his publisher friend, Boro Adelchi asks Daddo to find a “bestseller” story that will strike Milanese readers with its newness. *L’Iguana* is structured around two themes: traveling and exploration, on one hand, and the related quest for fresh and surprising narratives, on the

other. When speaking with Adelchi, Daddo jokes that Adelchi needs to publish a story about a madman who falls in love with an iguana. These prophetic words map out the central narrative thread. When Daddo sets sail, he traverses the Mediterranean and ends up on Ocaña where inhabitants are transformed into young and beautiful royalty at night, balconies float in the air, and people fall in love with animals. Daddo is no exception: he falls in love with a young Iguana, Estrellita, the island's servant, who suffers under abject working and living conditions. In the end, Daddo sacrifices his life trying to save her.

From the beginning, *L'Iguana* draws the reader into the narrative through a direct address: "Come tu sai, Lettore" ["As you know, Reader"] (15). The narrator assumes common experience and knowledge ("as you know") so as to establish a familiar framework. Yet, the world that *L'Iguana* describes is strange. Set against the backdrop of the Cold War, the novel immerses readers into Milanese society, which is ruled by money and ever-expanding capitalist ventures associated with an American and explicitly anti-Russian worldview.

More than affirming the stereotype that Northern Italians are ambitious and wealthy, this initial description sets up a binary between the Northern, more "modern" and European side of Italy, versus the country's Southern, more "irrational" Mediterranean neighbors. In so doing, *L'Iguana* functions as a counterpoint to the divisions that were integral to "Un paio di occhiali" by narrating the Northern perspective. While these North-South divisions are slowly developed through Eugenia's myopic point of view in "Un paio di occhiali," in *L'Iguana* these same socioeconomic and cultural divisions start the narrative. In their desire to buy land, the Milanese search for "quelle espressioni ancora rimaste intatte della « natura », di ciò che essi intendono per natura: un misto di libertà e passionalità, con non poco sensualità e una sfumatura di follia, di cui, causa la rigidità della moderna vita a Milano,

appaiono assetati” [“some manifestation still remaining of ‘nature,’ that is, of what the Milanese understand nature to be: a mix of liberty and passion, with much sensuality and a dash of madness for which, because of the rigidity of modern life in Milan, the Milanese seemed to thirst”] (15). The narrator establishes a stark contrast between “nature” and “culture” that is crystalized in Milan’s relationship to the rest of Italy. As one of the cities closest to the rest of Europe and the country’s industrialized center, Milan represents rationality, urbanity, and modernity. *L’Iguana* begins to define Southern Italy and the Mediterranean through its opposition as a “natural” place, full of passionate emotions, including madness.

At the same time, however, *L’Iguana* foregrounds literature and literary production as central to the Milanese market. Daddo’s friend, Boro Adelchi—whose name parodies the famous publishing house *Adelphi* that published *L’Iguana*—is an ambitious publisher and admirer of French New Wave literature (17). Adelchi’s desire for an extraordinary tale is based around perceived cultural and social divisions within Italy (17). Before Daddo embarks on his adventures, Adelchi asks him: “Daddo, perché non mi procureresti qualcosa di primitario, magari d’anormale?” [“Daddo, why don’t you find me something really first rate, maybe abnormal?”] (17) By using the term “abnormal,” Adelchi makes Milan the cultural and aesthetic standard of comparison. This story, he elaborates, should be one of suffering, which—for the Milanese—was simply a way of expressing one’s emotions as opposed to social and material conditions of oppression (18). Adelchi represents literary trends and a socio-economic desire for new narratives (geographical and literary) that are bound up in the consumer market. These motivations also reveal a need in Milan to renew the inhabitants’ sensual and perceptual engagement with the world, which are paradoxically impoverished by extreme wealth (15).

The search for new narratives and lands is immediately associated with vision. The Mediterranean facilitates both wishes, for it is where rich Milanese noblemen like Daddo purchase islands and convert them into luxury spas for tourists. As one of those noblemen, Daddo views the Mediterranean “come la propria mano [...] benché, praticamente, fosse tutto in vendita” [“like the back of his hand [...] although all of it was for sale”] (20). The region is a commodity to be bought and sold by and for Europe. The sea is controlled by Northern Italy’s desire to have contact with “indigeni” [“natives”], which was “tra le emozioni più ricercate” [“among one of the most sought after emotions”] (15). The verb “ricercare” in Italian connotes both travel (as in “to seek out” and “to find”) and a wish, thereby linking both themes of voyage and desire. In addition to being an untapped economic resource for Europe, the Mediterranean is a place of affect, as it is in “Un paio di occhiali.” Yet, instead of being a place of despair, it provides a cherished escape from the fast-paced pressures of urban life.

What distinguishes Daddo from other nobility is that he questions the Milanese’s exploitative relationship to the Mediterranean. Maintaining that islands like Sardinia would be better if left alone, Daddo compares them to children: “come fossero troppo piccoli per allontanarsi dalla madre loro” [“it was as if they were too small to be distanced from their own mother”] (20-1). This citation reveals an infantilizing relationship between Northern and Southern Italy; the image of islands as children portrays the Mediterranean islands as immature, and dependent on Europe—or at least Northern Italy—for guidance. The simile portrays Milan as violent, uncaring, and without compunction when separating of “natives” from their islands. One does not have to search too far to glean the colonial undertones in *L’Igana*, which draws parallels between the postwar interest in the Mediterranean and imperialism.

In addition to being a commodity, the Mediterranean, for Daddo, is a transitional space through which to access mysterious lands and compelling tales. The young protagonist encapsulates an alternative perspective of the sea. According to Daddo, narratives—like the Mediterranean—should not be intruded upon. Instead, they should be autonomous, unadorned, and speak for themselves. This view is in stark contrast to the ambitious publisher, Adelchi, who dreams of sensationalizing narratives with lavish details that will entice readers to buy his books. Before leaving on his journey, Daddo asks his friend to promise that he will not over-edit any manuscript or story that he brings back. Adelchi lies, promising his friend to obey his requests, all while dreaming of dramatic titles like “Le notti di un pazzo” [“The Night of a Madman”] or “La Strega” [“The Witch”] (19). Adelchi’s passion for literature, unlike Daddo’s, is governed by sales and a desire to appeal to mass audiences. A man devoid of curiosity, Adelchi never reads, but is controlled to the point of delirium by “un’ unica febbre: fare denari” [“a single fever: to make money”] (19). The book market is, like the Mediterranean, shaped by commodity desires that have little to do with the specificity of narrative or the sea. Just as Adelchi does not read the books he sells, the Milanese are captivated by a prescribed image of what they hope, without fully knowing, the Mediterranean to be.

L’Iguana’s central interest resides in what one is able to see outside of the consumer market, and the known world. Traveling thus becomes synonymous with having new visual experiences that will alter one’s conception of reality. As Daddo sails into the Mediterranean in search of new land and new narratives, readers question whether the narrative before their eyes has not been edited and sensationalized. While upper-class Milanese society gives Daddo coordinates for interpreting both the role of narratives and the Mediterranean, he quickly moves into uncharted territory:

L'indomani, 6 maggio, navigando nuovamente lontano dalla costa occidentale della penisola iberica, ch'era in certo senso l'ultimo lembo di Europa, qualcosa cambiò. Il tempo era sempre buono, ma non vi era più quello smagliante azzurro, quel sole, anzi la luce appariva vagamente velata, come se vi fossero nuvolette, che invece non c'erano. E il mare non era più turchese: aveva preso una tinta di argento brunito, come il dorso di un pesce, e al posto delle scaglie vi erano tante piccole onde ... che s'inseguivano. Vi era una pace grande, non più grande, forse, che nel Mediterraneo, perché il mare è dovunque lo stesso, ma che tale sembrava per quei pallidi colori in cui s'era addorrito il sole. (22-3)

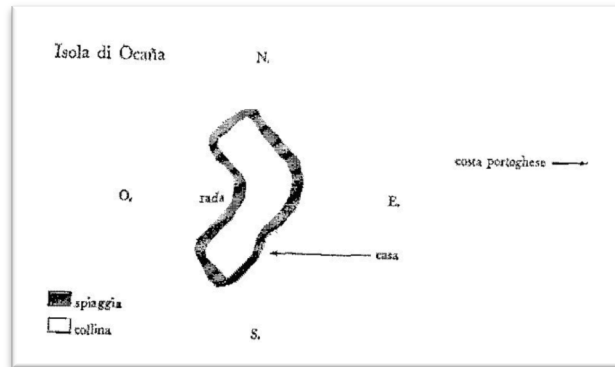
The next morning, May 6th, sailing once again far from the Western coast of the Iberian Peninsula, in a certain sense on the edge of Europe, something changed. The weather was still good, but there was no longer the stunning blue, that sun, even the light appeared vaguely veiled, as if there were small clouds, but in actuality, there were none. And the sea was no longer turquoise: it had taken on a burnished silver hue color, like the back of a fish, and on the back of the scales there were multiple small waves ... that moved in unison. There was an immense sense of peace, not bigger, maybe, than in the Mediterranean, because the sea is the same everywhere, but that was how it seemed because of the pallid colors in which the sun had gone to sleep.

Sailing on the edge of Europe into the Atlantic, Daddo straddles different temporalities and modes of representation. The date, May 6th, is one of the last markers of rational, European linear time in the novel (Frizzi 380). This passage comes the closest to offering a definition of the Mediterranean through its comparison to the Atlantic. In keeping with literary and artistic traditions that depict the Mediterranean in vibrant terms, the narrative describes the sun's brilliance and the sea's stunning blueness that verges on turquoise. Ortese's description creates a visual/textual analog whereby the sea's vibrant appearance results in equally stunning narratives. The Atlantic Ocean, by contrast, is muted and dull; even the sun appears diluted. While the passage is governed by visual contrast, as well as a comparative, analysis between the sea and the ocean, the last lines subsume these differences by reminding readers that the two bodies of water are, in fact, one and the same. The transition between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic is as much a marker of difference as it is of continuity.

The novel transitions from neat distinctions between the Mediterranean Sea and the

Atlantic Ocean through color; shifts in the visual field belie geographical and representational changes within the story that increasingly moves away from official cartography. These changes echo and reinforce the previous divisions between Europe, represented by Milan, and its more “exotic” others crystalized in Sardinia. Daddo ends up on a fictional island, Ocaña, which is purported to be evil and unchristian. For this reason, Daddo’s helmsman speculates that it is not on the map (24). The inhabitants, however, maintain that it is not mapped because of its small size, which is why it is considered nationless. Unclaimed by any country and unable to fly a flag, its inhabitants nevertheless identify as Portuguese (28). By destabilizing distinctions between politics, fantasy, and so-called “reality,” *L’Igna* limns new understandings of place that defy clear-cut national borders and conceptions of otherness. Furthermore, the island’s small size also continues Ortese’s writerly investment in probing minute visual detail, and the interface between visibility and invisibility. Her novel poses the question: if a place is so imperceptibly small, does it exist?

If the Mediterranean is conceived of as a space that transcends national boundaries, Ocaña actualizes that desire paradoxically through its fictional existence between waters, cultures, and matrixes of power. Just as the postcolonial Mediterranean is characterized as a “disquieting space” (Chambers 5), Daddo’s journey into an equally unsettling place reveals a similar fluidity of Mediterranean identity and geography. The undoing of binary-based categories—nature versus culture, Europe and its others, city versus sea—manifests itself visually, especially when Daddo first glimpses Ocaña; a map of which is reproduced several chapters later for readers:



(Figure, page 82)

The island’s identity and significance mutate before Daddo’s eyes until what he knows of the world becomes unhinged from what he sees. The island wavers on the horizon and appears, at first, to be a horn, a broken ring, or a school of crustaceans that appear like small bumps in the water (22-3). The child-like style of the image (above) compounds the sense of a blurred and changing visual field. An associational logic—where one shape recalls another—begins with the introduction of the Mediterranean’s vibrant turquoise and propels the narrative forward.

Similar to “Un paio di occhiali,” the Mediterranean fades from the narrative. And yet, the sea is continually revived through the insistence on two images: the color turquoise that creates episodic resonances throughout the narrative, and repeated circular forms that recall the Mediterranean’s association as the “Encircled Sea” (Abulafia xxiii). Rather than being driven by the content of *L’Iguana*, both the color turquoise and circular shapes bear an associational and formal centrality to the narrative that converge in Estrellita, the Iguana-woman originally from the Caribbean and after whom the novel is named.

Estrellita embodies the difficulty of seeing and seeing clearly, which is first foreshadowed in the description of the island but emerges more prominently with the introduction of her character. Daddo first meets Estrellita when he is given a tour of Ocaña by a man named don Ilario Jimenes of the Marquis of Segovia, Count of Guzman, but who

is simply referred to as the Marquis. Much to Daddo's surprise, he sees a creature he cannot properly identify just as he could not discern that Ocaña is an island. His visual uncertainty is exacerbated when what he took for an old woman is, in fact, "una bestiola verdissima et alta quanto un bambino, dall'apparente aspetto di una lucertola gigante, ma vestita da donna, con una sottanina scura, un corsetto bianco, palesemente lacero et antico" ["a very green beast and tall as a child, who resembled a giant lizard, but who was dressed like a woman with a dark shirt, a white corset that was clearly torn and old"] (29-30). Like Eugenia in "Un paio di occhiali," Estrellita is depicted as grotesque and tragic. Her name, meaning "little star" in Portuguese, is an ironic commentary on her beastliness as the antithesis of traditional feminine beauty. The fact that she still performs the role of a woman makes her all the more unnerving. Yet, it is her bold green color—emphasized in the superlative form of "verdissima" ["greenest"]—that strikes a visual chord with readers and continues the narrative's color association with the Mediterranean. The superlative designating the color green is offset by the diminutive verb endings ["ina"] underscoring Estrellita's small, child-like stature. A petite woman-animal, she embodies the crossing of different categories and typifies the representational boundaries that Daddo himself has crossed.

Similar to "Un paio di occhiali," *L'Iguana* troubles visual clarity and foregrounds the difficulty of a "complete" vision in which the viewer is able grasp an image in its entirety. Estrellita, for example, often appears out of the corner of Daddo's eyes so that he only glimpses her in what become interrupted visual moments that frustrate his wish to define her. And yet, Daddo attempts to impose his own values upon the strange creature. Interpreting Estrellita's clothing as an indication of her desire to be a "true woman," Daddo offers her a silk scarf—a symbol of European civility (31). In keeping with performative gender roles, and reminiscent of the drama that Adelchi so eagerly wanted to find in

narratives, Estrellita begins to cry. More than mere sentimentalism, her tears draw attention to her unusual eyes, which are “impercettibili” [“imperceptible”] and “miti” [“gentle”] (31). The word “gentle” adds to the gendered reading of the Iguana as feminine and passive; it points to her domestication by her masters on the island. The word “imperceptible” causes the most conceptual confusion: how can eyes be imperceptible? Is not their function to see? Once again, Ortese’s narrative—as in “Un paio di occhiali”—draws attention to difference as occurring not only within sight, but at physical level of the eye, as well. While Eugenia is ostracized for her severe myopia uncharacteristic of a small child, the Iguana’s eyes beg larger questions related to how one sees and the subjectivity of sight. The Iguana’s vision becomes even more central when the narrator describes her tears: from her eyes “scese, cioè salì una lacrima, in quanto le palpebre delle iguane si aprono esclusivamente dall’alto” [“a tear descended, rather rose, for Iguana’s eyelids open exclusively from the top”] (31). The phrase “descended, rather rose” highlights that Daddo must undo a human-centered way of conceiving of perception and account for visual difference that exists within the phrase itself as a contradiction and revision. The tear’s falling, then rising movement mirrors the viewers’ conceptual and syntactical reframing of this moment. The commas convey visually the reconceptualization on the page as the Count revises what he thinks is universal and “normal” based on what he sees before him. Readers can almost imagine the tear rolling down the Iguana’s cheek and, in mid-sentence, reversing its pathway upwards.

The separation of sight from empirical forms of knowledge develops into the central tension in *L’Iguana*. In challenging what is preconceived with what is actually witnessed, the narrative forces Daddo, and readers by extension, to dwell in visual moments and to understand them on their own terms before ascribing a critical interpretation. The narrative enacts this split between sight and knowledge by using familiar scenes and frames of

reference, which it ultimately foils. When Estrellita, for example, puts on the scarf that

Daddo gave her:

Con certe mossettine che a qualsiasi spettatore, meno che al tenero conte, sarebbero parse grottesche, per non dire orripilanti, la creatura si aggiustò la sciarpa sul capo, inclinando, mentre ne annodava i capi, qua e là la lunga e paurosa testina, proprio come una donnina davanti allo specchio; e non vedendo, poi, dove potersi rimirare, corse davanti a un immenso paiolo di rame, che lei stessa aveva reso brillante con le sue verdi manine. (32)

With small jerky movements that to any onlooker, unless it was the gentle count, would have appeared grotesque, not to say repugnant, the creature adjusted the scarf on her head, leaning forwards and sideways to knot the ends, exactly as a woman would do before a mirror; and not able to see herself, she then ran to face a huge iron pot that she herself had polished with her own green hands.

At once a parody and a tragedy, this scene highlights Estrellita's continued desire to be seen as beautiful by a European man. While Eugenia sees scintillating fabrics in Via Roma through her eyeglasses, the Iguana wears some such piece on her person. By putting the scarf around her head, she attempts to identify with high culture all the while being condemned by her identity as an iguana. The racial and colonial overtones of the scene are blatant; so are the gender and class dynamics. This moment draws on the iconic image of a woman manicuring herself in front of a mirror as she admires the image reflected back at her, which confirms her idealized image as well as her sense of self in the world.³¹ As much as she tries to resemble a "civilized" woman, the Iguana is defined by difference and slippages. Her gestures are "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha 152), especially due to physical reasons: her hands are clumsy and one is bandaged. She therefore cannot complete the fine motor skills required in adorning herself. Once again, her hands are described as blue/green, which echoes the Mediterranean's color in what is a moment of punctuated visual emphasis and textual detail. While the Count knows the Mediterranean like the back

³¹ See Lacan, "Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience."

of his hands, which suggests facility and his worldly knowledge, the Iguana's cumbersome hands are yet another barrier to realizing the life she desires. Rather than a "natural" moment in human development, the act of looking at oneself in the mirror is underscored as highly artificial and socially constructed, all the more so because of the woman's hybrid identity as neither fully animal nor entirely human.³²

At the same time that Estrellita reinforces the predominance of the color turquoise, the pot in which she sees herself introduces the importance of circular forms in the narrative. Instead of a commode or fine mirror that one might expect in a scene of gentility, the iron pot is a clunky reminder of Estrellita's servile status. While its round form resembles the shape of a mirror, the pot is an object of utility rather than one of adornment and beauty. It cannot clearly reflect her image back to her as a mirror would, and highlights Daddo's difficulty in discerning her place in the household and on the island more broadly. Estrellita is unable to see herself as clearly as she would in a mirror, and so her imperfect image furthers her sense of alienation. With her image framed by the pot's encircled shape, this scene parodies and renders absurd Estrellita's desire to be integrated into island life, much as Eugenia's hopes of joining Neapolitan life fail.

Forms of interrupted vision increasingly define *L'Iguana* and capture Daddo's inability to interpret Estrellita's identity while reinforcing her seemingly inherent status as an "other" rarely acknowledged or seen. The fact that she is only partially glimpsed increases Daddo's interest in her, and he begins to fall in love with her. He begins to look for her, and begins to wonder about who she is and where she lives. Sight thus becomes aligned with knowledge and his growing conviction that he can save her from her miserable working conditions if only they could meet face to face. Time and time again, however, Daddo's

³² See Kaja Silverman's *Threshold of the Visible World*.

vision is blocked.

The Marquis' house, for example, furthers the difficulty of seeing with literal barriers that figure the equally hard process of uncovering the island's mystery and the Iguana-woman's history. The house is dusty, disorderly, and falling into desuetude. It is made up of endless rooms with half-closed doors (34), so that Daddo can only peek into them. Closet doors left ajar leave him on edge, all the more since he suspects that a void lies behind them (54). The house's disorder inspires him to question Estrellita's true identity; she is supposedly a housemaid, and yet she fails to perform her housekeeping chores. Estrellita herself lives in obscurity. The Marquis and his brothers force her to crouch on the floor and beg for scraps to eat. With nothing more than dirty clothes to sleep on, she is relegated to the prison-like basement that is devoid of light in what becomes a clear illusion to the Cinderella story. (55). Marquis and his family attempt to forget Estrellita, and hope that not seeing her will enact her erasure. She represents the house's repressed, "dark continent" (Khanna) in explicitly colonial terms as a reprise of Jane Eyre's madwoman in the attic.

L'Iguana thus thematizes the struggle to see in conditions of darkness that obscure and constrain vision. The text centers on the smallest intermittent images that flash before the Daddo, disappear, and reappear. The same topaz-like color reminiscent of the Mediterranean, for example, resurfaces in the form of small stones that the Daddo discovers hidden in Estrellita's room (55). The stones more firmly establish visual resonances between different objects of the same color: the Mediterranean and Estrellita. With each new referent, the bluish/green color accrues an increasing significance in expanding circles of meaning. The stones acquire an actual value, or so the Daddo believes, as he observes the Iguana assiduously collecting them and burying them in the earth, as if hoarding money. This image is not false, for the stones are the payment that Estrellita receives for her work. Immediately,

the Count fears that the Avaredo brothers have tricked the naive Iguana into thinking that the stones are monetarily valuable. Commodity structures once again enter into the narrative. In gendered and Western-centric ways, the Count assumes that Estrellita is too uneducated to know about the “real” value of money—an ironic contention since money’s power lies in its inherently deceptive and fetishistic character. When Daddo asks her whether she knows they are not money, she replies that of course they are not money, but they are her savings. They are stones (79).

The stones are crucial in maintaining the visual continuity in the narrative through rupture: that is, each reiterated mention of the stones highlights their difference based on the context in which they are evoked. The stones extend the theme of commodities and commodity fetishism that frame understandings of Milan and the Mediterranean in the first half of *L'Iguana* into the fantastical world of Ocaña. This expansion of socio-economic values into imaginative realms highlights how dreams and desires are historically and culturally made. These constructions are most notably challenged through Estrellita’s empirical observation that the stones are *stones* and not money. And yet, they are her savings. She at once exists within and outside of the framework of the commodity structure that is based on disavowal and the logic of “I know well but all the same.”³³ While the stones and money are both elements of mystery in the narrative, the stones do accrue sentimental value and are remnants of a past love affair between Estrellita and the Marquis who gave her the stones as tokens of his love. Since then, she has collected stones for nostalgic and sentimental reasons.

One of the predominant tenets of Mediterranean Studies is that ruptures can also

³³ See Mannoni.

create continuities.³⁴ This same dynamic is enacted in *L'Iguana* with the stones: they are evoked and dropped, only to resurface again. Their round shape constitutes other circles of meaning that, like the color turquoise, garner formal significance, as well as visual, narratological, and historical resonances. Readers discover, for example, that the interspecies romance between the Marquis and the Iguana is a repetition of a romance between the Marquis' mother and a monkey named Perdita, an illusion to *Cinderella*, *Beauty and the Beast*, and Shakespeare's *Winter's Tale* (Frizzi 385). While the monkey began as a servant and was elevated to the status of an island legend, Estrellita's story follows an opposite trajectory: one that began when she was mythologized as a muse ("a star") and that ended with her ruin and perdition (Frizzi 385). Estrellita becomes Perdita, whose name means lost, loss, and perdition, "in addition to the double meaning of *perdere* in Italian [to lose and to lead astray]" (Frizzi 386). The two women's stories overlap in ever-expanding intertextual, semantic, and temporal circles that simultaneously draw *L'Iguana's* narrative into the past while framing future events, similar to "Un paio di occhiali" that was shaped by the grandeur of Rome, on one hand, and Naples' modern ruin, on the other.

There is a final circular image in *L'Iguana*: the well in which Estrellita's body is abruptly discovered with no explanation as to whether her fall was accidental or whether she was pushed. The narrator describes Daddo's reaction to the sight: "Vide una creaturina bellissima, tutta vestita di merletto bianco, con una fascia rosa alla cintura, et due scarpini anche rosa. Essa stava inginocchiata sul fondo, immobile come se dormisse, nello stesso atteggiamento in cui egli la vide la notte nello scantinato" ["Daddo saw a little beautiful creature, all dressed up in a white lace dress, with a pink sash for a belt, and two pink shoes. She was kneeling at the base of the well, immobile as if she was sleeping in the same position

³⁴ See Abulafia, Chambers, and Horden and Purcell.

in which he saw her that night in the cellar”] (156-7). This scene is a negative of the instant in which Estrellita looks at herself in the pot turned mirror. Still dressed in traditionally feminine clothes, the Iguana maintains her performance of gender and refined European culture. The details such as the “white lace” and the “pink sash” add to the scene’s paradoxical and strange nature. The Iguana’s clothes point to refinement as if she were going to an evening event, which is sharply contrasted with the death-like image of her body lying in the dark well.

While the well formally mirrors the shape of the pot, spatially it recalls the dark cellar in which Estrellita is confined. At the beginning of the novel, when she gazed at her image, she found herself distanced from the silver circle that projected her image back to her. In the well, by contrast, she is subsumed *into* its circular shape and into its obscurity. The image of Estrellita in the cellar is superimposed over that of her in the well just as the different cylindrical forms—the pot, the stone, and the well—converge. Instead of perfectly shaped circles superimposed over one another, however, each shape is modified and displaced throughout the narrative. This destabilization is enacted visually through Daddo’s eyes that increasingly deceive him until he is unsure if Estrellita is actually at the bottom of the well. *Is that her body? Or is it a figment of Daddo’s imagination? If it is her, was she pushed or did she fall?*

These questions go unanswered. The Count dies heartbroken and in mourning over the Iguana’s death as if he were the victim of his own narrative, which—in its desire for melodrama—subsumed him. In so far as stars have afterlives, Estrellita never actually dies. She rises again only to continue her slave-like work on Ocaña, which is bought by wealthy owners and converted into a spa. The narrative comes full circle with the thematization of islands for sale and the promotion of tourism. While Daddo’s voyage to Ocaña began as a

desire to escape European capitalism and imperialism, those same structures are displaced, and then reproduced as fantasy in a circular manner that draws the Mediterranean into the Atlantic. The color turquoise and the cylindrical shapes create visual/textual dynamics in the narrative that draw attention to the processes of seeing and narrating. Repeated at intervals, these dynamics (between animal-human, land-sea, realism-fantasy, and text-image) enable encounters that facilitate and are facilitated by the sea.

III. Conclusion

Ortese's Mediterranean is simultaneously defined by and undermined by myth. While the Mediterranean is "a sea *between* lands" (Cassano "Mediterranean Thinking" 370), Ortese's stories unfold between notions of a grand Mediterranean, including as a catalyst for tourists' imaginations, and underlying structures of inequality that bear down upon it. This ambivalence manifests itself in vision and, more specifically, within the relationship of the visible and the invisible. Through a series of relationships defined by fluidity, and the interplay between nearsightedness and farsightedness, Ortese's texts detail varied experiences of sight. As a result, Ortese's work reveals a desire to engage with the plurality of Mediterraneans and to explore how the sea creates different vectors, routes, and exchanges that move beyond purely geographical understandings and inscribe themselves in narrative. Just as Ocaña marks the convergence of many bodies of water, including the Caribbean insofar as that is where Estrellita is originally from, *L'Iguana* moves from prose, to map, to poetry in order to chart its narrative as a journey defined by interruption. As generic limits are disturbed, so too are Italy's national borders within these narratives that belie a desire to see and imagine future potentialities and connectivities. Yet, rather than an exclusively utopian wish to think a plurality beyond the nation, both "Un paio di occhiali" and *L'Iguana*

reveal the impossibility of entirely breaking free from those very structures—national as well as textual/visual. Such a break is conspicuous in *L'Iguana*, which ends abruptly with a series of sparse haiku-like poems. The first, entitled “Presentazione del luogo” [“Presentation of Place”], reads:

Questo è il mare
Questo è il cielo
Grigio e giallo
Pioggia e gelo. (181-2)

This is the sea
This is the sky
Grey and yellow
Rain and cold.

The poem is organized around a series of deceptively simple definitions and falsities. The first line is clearly not the sea, but a poetic line. And yet, the line is paramount in showing how the sea can be constructed textually and poetically. In naming the sea, the poem conjures it up in readers' minds as a poetic construct. Furthermore, while the sea is often conceived of a place of abundance and fluidity, these lines are striking in their restraint as they highlight the sea and the poem as defined by rupture. The poem, like the definition of the Mediterranean, is marked by an accumulation of definitions (or “ands”) as well as by difference, as intimated in these lines through contrast of grey and yellow. Finally, these lines capture how the Mediterranean is constituted through textual and visual understatement: through by subtle, nearly imperceptible visual experiences like myopia or glimpses, or by eyeglasses, turquoise stones, or poems that speak to the region's continuity through and in spite of rupture. “Un paio di occhiali” and *L'Iguana* offer images of the Mediterranean that are shaped by readers and refracted back to them through a series of distorted images. The image in the optometrist's window in Via Roma and the one projected in the Iguana's pot-like mirror move away from purely mimetic understanding of what the Mediterranean “is,”

and instead reveal how it is constructed through a series of interrupted and discrete visual moments that reveal its ambiguities and complexity.

Chapter Two

In the Blink of an Eye/in the Shift of the Kaleidoscope: Abdelkebir Khatibi's Mediterranean Morocco

Après tout, le haïku est proche d'une rêverie—clip, du clin d'œil: juste le temps d'en lire un par jour, peut-être d'en écrire—sous l'abri du silence et du vide: caresse d'être à peine aimé, à peine désiré. On dirait que quelques mots suffiraient pour mettre de l'ordre dans le monde, en saisir au vol l'harmonie mobile.

After all, the haiku is like a dream—a clip, a blink: just the time to read one each day, maybe to write some—under the shelter of silence and emptiness: a caress barely loved, barely desired. One might say that a few words would suffice to put order in the world, to seize in flight a mobile harmony.

-Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Ombres Japonaises; Précédé de Nuits Blanches*

Blinks structure our visual attention and enable us to see. They are mini-blackouts: transient visual suppressions and ruptures. Their paradoxical nature has captured artistic and critical attention alike. In Jean-Paul Sartre's 1944 play *Huis clos (No Exit)*, the blink's promise of rupture and change is refreshing for the characters who are caught in hell with no way out. In the 1950s and 60s, Jacques Derrida evoked the blink to critique Husserl's temporal and perceptual binaries. While Husserl likened time to "a living eye or core" that is governed by a punctual now (Derrida 238), Derrida continues this optical metaphor to introduce difference within the figure of the blink: "As soon as we admit this continuity of the now and the not now, perception and non-perception [...] we admit the other into the identity of the augenblick (the blink of an instant)" (240). The blink is a site of contradiction and ambiguity, thereby complicating notions of self/other, here/there, and past/present. In "The Blink of an Eye," Rosalind Krauss builds upon Derrida's use of the blink to argue for deconstruction's importance to art history and to theorizations of vision. She engages

Duchamp's work, which she argues oscillates "between the transparent and the opaque"—a movement that is "the very precondition for any visual activity at all" (197).

In what follows, I will argue for the blink's central importance as an optical and textual "frontier" in Moroccan writer Abdelkebir Khatibi's *La Mémoire tatouée: Autobiographie d'un décolonisé* [*Tattooed Memory: Autobiography of a Decolonized*]. The blink, as I will show, destabilizes meaning and captures visually Morocco's multiplicity in relation to the Atlantic and the Mediterranean: a concern that Khatibi takes up two decades later in his novel, *Triptyque de Rabat* [*Rabat Triptych*], where a kaleidoscope becomes the primary visual trope that points to Morocco's postcolonial destabilizations. Like the blink, a kaleidoscope is constituted by visual interruption as the pieces within the frame shift; however, the kaleidoscope requires that one *not* blink and instead maintain one's visual attention as the pieces shift to create new images. At the same time, the pieces within a kaleidoscope merge, open, and merge again, like a shutter or an eyelid, thereby mirroring the movement of a blink. Despite their differences, both the blink and the kaleidoscope interrupt and "undo" vision. They draw attention to the ideological and cultural constructions of sight,³⁵ to that which cannot be fully incorporated into vision, and to the untranslatable. As such, the blink resembles, and foreshadows, Khatibi's later notion of the *bilangue*, or bilingualism, which he theorizes in *Amour bilingue* [*Love in Two Languages*]. The *bilangue* is dialogic: it stages a postcolonial writer's complex and contradictory relationship to language. Like a blink's opening and closing, the *bilangue* is structured around dualisms between, for example, the "him" and "her" of the love story, French and Arabic, love and antagonism.

The kaleidoscope continues the *bilangue's* linguistic emphasis on vertigo and dizzying madness. In tracing the relationships between the blink, the *bilangue*, and the kaleidoscope, this chapter establishes the fundamental importance of visibility underlying Khatibi's work. Furthermore,

³⁵ See Metz and Jay for more on the ideological and historical implications of the gaze.

in bringing the visual into an understanding of the *bilangue*, I show the inherently triangulated structures that inform Khatibi's writings. I thus establish his importance as a distinctly Mediterranean writer who is concerned neither exclusively with Morocco nor only with France, but rather with what happens in the interstices between them. In their fluctuations and instability, the blink, the *bilangue*, and the kaleidoscope, I argue, expose the precariousness of textual-visual relations, thereby undoing notions of a hegemonic gaze and a master discourse associated with empire. They allow different points of view and narratives of postcolonial Morocco to emerge. The Mediterranean, in so far as it is often understood as antithetical to clearly articulated national boundaries, functions as a response to neatly demarcated geographical and power relations against which Khatibi positions himself.

Similar to how Ortese engages eyeglasses, myopia, and fantasy to reveal the difficulty of seeing at a distance—dynamics which represent Italy's struggle to position itself on the global map—Khatibi employs the visual figures of the blink, the *bilangue*, and the kaleidoscope to grapple with Morocco's position as both Mediterranean and Atlantic. An important difference, however, between Ortese and Khatibi is that Khatibi's work reveals the interruption within sight itself, whereas Ortese's "Un paio di occhiali," particularly, explores visual rupture that occurs as a result of eyeglasses. Furthermore, while Ortese's stories subtly probe the relationships between sight and legibility, Khatibi more firmly links interrupted vision to language, and narrative possibility.

I. *La Mémoire tatouée: Between Two Waters*

Twentieth-century Moroccan writer poet, philosopher, and sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi was born in El Jadida in 1938. He spent most of his life in Morocco and earned his doctorate in sociology from the Sorbonne. He devoted his career to writing about decolonization, especially in relation to questions of language and literary form. Derrida was his close interlocutor; the two had

an “intertextual friendship” and correspondence (Rice 293). Khatibi’s thinking is closely aligned with deconstruction, which he theorized as a form of decolonization (Khatibi, *La Langue de l’autre* 24). Khatibi was inspired by Freud’s work, and engaged with it to understand interrelationships between psychoanalytic, religious, and temporal frontiers.³⁶ Khatibi’s theorization of the *bilangue* has received substantial critical attention. Yet the blink, which has received less notice, is fundamental in showing postcolonial Morocco’s difficulty in seeing its history and, paradoxically, the necessity of that occluded vision in order to understand anything at all. The dynamics of *Amour bilingue* are prefigured in *La Mémoire tatouée* with the blink. While the former explores schisms in language, the latter foregrounds fragmented visual perception. In order to grasp the importance of this prefiguring, one must first investigate what aspects of the *bilangue* most clearly echo and complement the blink.

The *bilangue* is Khatibi’s theory of translation,³⁷ negotiation, and change between languages within Moroccan and French postcolonial contexts. Instead of “a fixed linguistic duality” (McNeece, “Rescripting Modernity” 91),³⁸ the *bilangue* is staged as a failed love story between a North African man and a French woman in *Amour bilingue*. While the pronouns “him” and “her” designate different voices, they are not characters but androgynous, continually shifting dynamics in thought between “a fading and dispersive center” (Qader 120-1). Their dialogue and interactions symbolize the linguistic and cultural negotiations between France and Morocco. Speaking becomes an ethical and social move towards the other and otherness. The *bilangue*, in Lucy Stone McNeece’s words, is “so risky that Khatibi once described it as ‘suicidal,’ the voyage toward another language and culture provokes a crisis in which everything is thrown into question, everything is at risk. Love is clearly an ontological and epistemological adventure as well as a sentimental one” (92). The *bilangue* is

³⁶ See Khatibi’s “Frontiers: Between Psychoanalysis and Islam.”

³⁷ For discussions of other major theoretical and philosophical terms, see *Penser le Maghreb*.

³⁸ McNeece distinguishes between Khatibi’s notion of the *bilangue* and bilingualism by focusing on the *bilangue* as a relational and reciprocal process that “is quite removed from the narrow, politicized notion of bilingualism currently under debate in the United States and Europe” (91).

fundamentally associated with survival: it shapes how one knows oneself, communicates with others, and informs one's sense of the world.

The *bilangue* signifies a rupture that encompasses experiences of madness, deafness, amnesia, and loss in the face of the untranslatable. It marks a lacuna, which gives way to contradictions between life and death, love and ambivalence, desire and despair (Khatibi, *AB*, 11). These tensions are rooted in lack, in what is sacrificed, effaced, or repressed. As the narrator's "third ear," the *bilangue* is desire itself; the surplus captures the liminal spaces between languages—their unheard, non-verbal aspects—so as to arrive at "un sens inverse, dans la dissociation de tout langage unique" ["an inverse meaning, in the disassociation of any particular language"] (11). These contradictions capture the postcolonial condition of fragmentation and alienation. They reveal that colonization does not just divide lands and peoples, but it also forges divisions in language and thought. The *bilangue* marks psychological separations within the colonial subject. It underscores the inherent otherness within: the colonizer or ex-colonizer cannot be clearly extricated from the self and vice-versa.

The sea is the figure that captures the *bilangue*'s many entanglements between, for example, the "I" and the "you," the "self" and the "other." While the sea is not explicitly mentioned as Mediterranean, it functions—as the Mediterranean often does—as a space of liminality and interconnection:

C'était, de nouveau, l'appel de la mer. Il se déshabilla, jeta ses habits, plongea, nu, du côté accessible de la falaise. Il nageait sous un ciel encore clair, parsemé de nuages légers argentés en leur milieu. Paix totale, aucune vague puissante, ça et là des algues en guirlandes. La côte s'était éloignée, pendant qu'il poursuivait régulièrement sa nage.

A un moment, il fut transporté par les sensations les plus folles—folie de la langue. A la place de l'eau, c'était le mot « eau » qui le poussait à la nage ; à la place de la mer, c'était le mot « mer » qui baignait sa pensée irradiée. Bahr ! Bahr ! (38)

It was, once again, the sea's call. He got undressed, threw his clothes off, and dove, naked, off the accessible coast of the cliff. He swam under the still clear sky, scattered with clouds that were lightly silvered in their center. Total peace, not a single powerful wave, here and

there, algae appeared in garland shapes. The shore became distant as he consistently pursued his stroke.

In an instant, he was transported by the craziest sensations—the madness of language. In the place of water, there was the word “water” that spurred him to swim; in the place of the sea, there was the word “sea” that bathed his glowing thoughts. Bahr! Bahr!

The sea is fundamental to Khatibi’s conceptualization of the *bilangue* which, in this moment, emerges from the sea. The narrator’s movement through water facilitates his mobility through language that emerges, like algae, around him. The sea’s environment—its calm waves and silver-lined clouds—inspires him to meditate upon relationships between signifiers and signified as he swims. Touching water, the narrator touches language and meaning which become experiential and perceptual. Instead of invoking language to recall a feeling, the sensation of water recalls language. In this reversal, language is dizzying and “maddening.” As previously mentioned, the *bilangue* is a question of survival; yet, here, it is also a source of pleasure. The sea and the narrator’s body produce language in what becomes a triangulated relationship that opens onto multiplicity. A second tripartite dynamic exists between French (“eau”), the actual water, and the Arabic word for water (“Bahr”).

This moment in *Amour bilingue* establishes an oceanic imaginary that structures the novel and moves beyond clear national boundaries. It is in this imaginary that the narrator rediscovers language: rather than French or Arabic, the sea is the site of their mediation where they are born out of one another. This linguistic multiplicity was denied during French rule of the Maghreb when French was the only sanctioned and official language.³⁹ The “madness” of which the narrator speaks captures both his elation at having rediscovered language’s multiplicity and the trauma of it having been repressed. In this dynamic, the sea functions to transcend binaries and to open up onto a series of mediations—or triangulated relations—that extend beyond strict national borders and show alternate ways of mapping cultural, linguistic, and other histories. “Mediations” here designates a

³⁹ For more on language, colonialism, and acculturation, see Dakhliya.

dialectical process in which two terms are mutually constituted by and through their interactions, much in the same way that the narrator makes language, and is made by language as he travels in the sea's liminal waters.⁴⁰

While the sea gives *Amour bilingue's* narrator language and linguistic rhythms that are internalized within him, the sea is equally important in its relation to the blink in *La Mémoire tatouée*, which Khatibi wrote twelve years prior in 1971. Like the *bilingue*, the blink initially suggests a binary structure of an open or closed eye. One finds the *bilingue's* structure prefigured in the blink, so that the two figures exist as visual/textual analogues to one another. Yet, in bringing the blink into the discussion of the *bilingue*, one can better understand how Khatibi's writings struggle to see (at times literally) Morocco's historical and geographical position as both Atlantic and Mediterranean. Just as the *bilingue* attempts to recover linguistic losses and the untranslatable, the blink attempts to push metaphorically and literally beyond obstacles of the past— and beyond Morocco's own geography—to visualize itself as part of a more complete history.

La Mémoire tatouée is a formally experimental work that is part parable, autobiography, poetry, and exegesis.⁴¹ Part I centers on the death of the narrator's father and brother, his affective separations from his mother and his aunt, his circumcision, and his first visit to prostitutes. The narrator recounts his schooling in Marrakesh during the battle for Moroccan independence, his experience of enforced monolingualism at school, and the splitting of his identity between French and Islamic traditions. Part II relates the narrator's experience of alienation in Paris during the Algerian War of Independence. Afterwards, he succumbs to exhaustion, falls ill, and checks himself into a sanatorium. Part III concludes with the narrator's homecoming and with a series of

⁴⁰ For more on mediation and dialectics, see Ollman, especially page 13.

⁴¹ For more on the question of genre in *La Mémoire tatouée*, see McNeece, "Decolonizing the Sign : Language in Abdelkebir and Identity Khatibi's *La Mémoire tatouée*."

fragmented poetic images that constitute a dialogue between characters designated only as “A” and “B.”

Instead of offering readers a linear plot, the narrative is experimental, composed through poetic associations. It is, in the narrator’s words, “un miroir dont je bricole les reflets” [“a mirror whose reflections I cobble together”] (16). The narrative unites the textual with the visual so that it “allows language to see double, making it ‘loucher’ in the active sense of the word” (Bensmaïa 107)—where “loucher” means to squint or to see cross-eyed. Here, Bensmaïa uses the word to show how Khatibi’s work is structured by dualities; however, his analysis does not investigate fully the implications of what an aesthetics of squinting might suggest for Khatibi’s larger aesthetic.

La Mémoire tatouée offers such an opportunity. The blink first appears in the passage that gives the work its title, thereby placing it at the forefront of the text. The narrator remembers seeing a Bedouin woman who

ouvre la main ancestrale, j’épouse ma fixation au mythe. Toute calligraphie éloigne la mort de mon désir, et le tatouage a l’exceptionnel privilège de me préserver. Aucun point de chute dans le chaos, seulement la force d’une impulsion dénouée, un graphe prompt comme un clin d’œil. (13-4)

opens her ancestral hand, I embrace my fixation to myth. All calligraphy distances death from my desire, and the tattoo has the exceptional privilege of preserving me. No falling point into chaos, only the force of an unraveled impulse, a graph as swift as a blink.

The woman opens her hand like an eyelid and reveals a henna image to the narrator. This gesture wedds the narrator’s memory of Morocco to visual perception through a series of inscriptions, which establish the blink as the narrative’s central visual trope. The woman is a mythical figure, who connects the narrator to Morocco’s ancient past. It is from her body that the blink, and memories in the form of blinks, emanate. The tattoo, itself an image, is grafted into the woman’s skin just as this moment is etched into the narrator’s memory.

La Mémoire tatouée articulates the blink's function as a corporeal and cognitive act: as both voluntary and involuntary, like memory, which is also described in those terms. The blink's first appearance establishes two layers of meaning: a material one, as represented by the woman's body, and an abstract one, insofar as memories are immaterial, cognitive, and visual. Similar to the *bilangue*, defined as "[une] topographie de son corps" ["a topography of [the narrator's] body"] (*AB* 37), the woman's body, the tattoo, and the narrator's memory create different spaces brought about by the intersection of text (the narrator's story) and image (the tattoo). They conserve Morocco's colonial past and postcolonial future to be deciphered and narrated.

The blink introduces three different temporalities: first, the very rapid movement suggested by the phrase, "the blink of an eye," and second, the unexplored, often ignored potentialities that unfold between the eye's opening and closing. Third, the Bedouin woman suggests a mythical, almost static temporal presence, since she belongs to one of the oldest nomadic communities in North Africa. This passage centers on the liminality and "in-betweenness" of that opening—of the eye or the hand—into which the narrator both distances and projects himself. Just as the blink is vision in movement, these projections symbolize different shifts in meaning: from language to image and back again. The blink both separates and unites images with language, and preservation with decay. As this description announces, the blink is a symbol that prevents the narrator from falling into ruin; yet, its interrupted logic is paradoxically what connects him to eternity and myth, allowing him to feel united with a history greater than his own. Before the narrator's eyes, the tattoo limns the separation and continuity between past and present. It, and the body by extension, is the site onto which experiences—ones which otherwise might fall "into chaos"—are inscribed and affixed.⁴²

While the blink is initially aligned with metaphorical topographies of Moroccan memory and inscriptions of the body, it is increasingly associated with actual geographies in the narrative,

⁴² This reading concurs with McNeece's interpretation. See "Decolonizing the Sign," especially page 28.

especially with the sea and sea-inspired imagery. Just as the blink is vision in movement, its role in *La Mémoire tatouée* is as an ever-shifting lens through which Morocco is mapped. The blink is invoked in relation to Morocco's Atlantic coast, specifically the two coastal towns—El Jadida and Essaouira—where the narrator grew up. The two “parallel cities” (39) reinforce the narrative's two-fold structure and echo the dualities of the blink and the *bilangue*.

Similar to the formal resonances between the blink and the *bilangue*, the sea (“mer”) is sonically linked to its homophone, mother (“mère”), in one of the most commonly cited lines of *La Mémoire tatouée*: “Mer, mère, mémoire, lapsus échappés à cette frileuse nostalgie” [“The sea, mother, memory. Freudian slips escape from this chilly nostalgia”] (22). As with the blink, these lines center on small, typographical nuances between “mer” and “mère,” that—if read quickly—might be missed. The word play, extended into “memory,” draws attention to language's subtlety and to the meanings created by a single omission or addition of a letter. They underscore the inherent visuality of reading: of word as image. Changes in a word's appearance engender changes in meaning similar to the way that blinking causes shifts in seeing, however slight.

Khatibi's slightly awkward phrasing of “the” mother rather than “his” mother encourages readers to recall the second meaning of “la mère” (mother) as “la mer” (sea). A textual revision and reversal of the first sequence (“mer, mère, mémoire”), this moment moves from a geographical significance to a familial and personal one. “La mère” (the mother) recalls not only the impersonal, even Freudian notion of that role, but it intimates the other “mer”—the sea and the narrator's burgeoning oceanic imaginary. *La Mémoire tatouée*'s dedication to “the mother” is therefore also a dedication to “the sea.” While the “sea” most clearly and grammatically alludes to the Mediterranean Sea (the Atlantic is referred to not as a sea but as an ocean), the “mer” is unnamed and the reader cannot be sure which body of water this passage refers to; these lines therefore create a productive ambiguity around Morocco's identity within the Mediterranean.

This moment in *La Mémoire tatouée* hinges on the following contradiction: while the phrase “the mother” depersonalizes and distances the narrator from his mother, the other “mer”—the sea—is increasingly internalized within him as a predestined melody (22). While clearly a characterization of the sea as musical, these lines gesture to the sea’s poetic rhythms and lullaby qualities. The sea is defined not only the body’s pulses, but also by its image as something that is seen, experienced, and written. The sea is a space of linguistic and representational potentialities that are interrupted by the blink, and that establish bodily tempos with opening and closing movements. Taken together, the sea, writing, and the blink enact intersections of the visual, the textual, and the corporeal. As with the *bilangue*, the sea and the body are defined by scansion: by the way eyes and the sea move. Such movements inspire the hand to write on the page in accordance with poetic meter and lyrical cadences.

La Mémoire tatouée increasingly internalizes the blink and the ocean within its narrative as cartographic references that help the narrator ground himself in language, literature, and writing. The memory of the ocean anchors him to the past, even as his memories are divided between his two childhood port cities. This shift is first manifested geographically, as the blink moves from its association with the sea, back onto the shore and to the inner streets of El Jadida—streets defined by “le jeu du clin d’oeil, la femme par ici se couvrait tout le corps et l’on surprenait, sous une apparition fouguese, un seul oeil, un seul bien au-dessus de mon appel” [“the play of the blink, the woman in these parts covered her entire body and one found, under a spirited appearance, a lone eye, a single one well above my call. I was faced with these vague forms. Save me!”] (50). This description rearticulates the blink’s function, specifying its contradictory role in both saving the protagonist and threatening him with ruin—an idea first introduced with the Bedouin tattoo. Here, ruin is specifically characterized by “vague forms” and formlessness; the narrator’s salvation hinges on the analogous conservation of forms. In its detail, the blink initially symbolizes such preservation

as small, contained and localizable actions, which the narrative equates with a word (“un mot”). The blinks in *La Mémoire tatouée* thus preserve memory and literary form, while functioning like miniatures—condensed, enigmatic textual moments meant to challenge, disrupt, and complicate meaning.

Here, the complication stems from the blink’s paradoxical status as a formal solution to the narrator’s fears, and as that which engenders them in the first place. The blink is an edge: the place where meaning hinges between survival and death. In El Jadida’s streets—where “the play of the blink” unfolds— the narrator is confronted with a disembodied eye, which—isolated from the woman’s body and appearing alone (“un seul oeil”)—frightens the narrator with its uncanniness.⁴³ The blink teeters between abstraction and literary potential, on one hand, and the materiality of the body, on the other. Yet, once again, things are not so clear-cut; for the blink is what unites the body’s materiality (its inner, physically felt rhythms) with writing and its environment (the sea and the city, for example). Simultaneously too abstracted and separated from the body, the blink becomes unnerving and threatening in its chaos until the narrator is forced to ask: “Où, dans ce chassé-croisé, la cohérence et la continuité?” [“Where, in this musical dance, is there coherence and continuity?”] (54)

The narrator attempts to find stability through reading and writing. In a middle school in Marrakesh, he studies under a draconian teacher—symbolic of French colonial rule—who teaches French as the “official” language in an atmosphere of enforced monolingualism. Alienated from both languages, the narrator confesses: “J’aurais appris par clin d’œil, ficèlement du corps, à lire dans un mort, et écrire pour les survivants de mon déracinement—ma génération—, rivé à un double langage” [“I would have learned with a blink, a binding of the body, to read into a dead man, and to write for the survivors of my uprooting—my generation—attached to a double language”]

⁴³ In “The Uncanny,” Freud identifies concealment and the loss of limbs (or their separation from the human body) as being one of the most acute experiences of the uncanny. For more, see “The Uncanny.” 218-252.

(66). For the first time in *La Mémoire tatouée*, the blink and the *bilangue* (double language) merge in the same passage. They accentuate loss and fragmentation, which counter-intuitively, give the narrator the coordinates with which to write his history within the context of Morocco's postcolonial situation. The line "to read into a dead man" is most telling of how death inspires the narrator's agency as a writer. The word "death" in French ("mort") is close to "mot," meaning "word." Readers would expect this word, since the passage centers on reading and writing; however, the narrative instead references "mort." Instead of reading himself into language ("un mot"), the narrator reads into a dead man, into the violence of history. Khatibi's use of the word "rivé" connotes linguistic division: the narrator is attached to two languages and is therefore inherently divided between them. The word "rive," in French, also means bank or embankment, thereby suggesting that the two languages provide the narrator with a resting place—a space symbolic, in geographical terms, of the Mediterranean Sea between the French and Moroccan shores.⁴⁴

The shores, the "coordinates" on which the narrator anchors himself, first appear as parentheses on a page. He writes: "Distinctivement, j'ouvre une parenthèse contre une autre, pour me séparer, corps et passé, dans un livre à traduire" ["Distinctively, I open a parenthesis against another, to separate myself, my body and the past, in a book yet to be translated"] (73-4).

Graphically, the parentheses resemble a displaced blink, the top and bottom of an eyelid, so that this trope is reoriented and inscribed onto the page, just as the tattoo is inked onto the woman's body in *La Mémoire tatouée*'s opening pages. The blink is the nexus between the visual and the textual, allowing the narrator to insert himself into its liminal space, while separating himself from his past in order to see and write it. The blink thus imbues the narrator with enough critical and creative distance to write his story, however incompletely.

⁴⁴ These lines are an allusion to Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other, or the Prosthesis of Origin* where he writes: "the sea was there: symbolically an infinite space for all the students of the French school in Algeria, a chasm, an abyss" (44).

The blink, and by extension the parenthesis, symbolize the interplay between visual rupture and continuity that becomes emblematic of Morocco's larger postcolonial relationship with the West and the Mediterranean. The blink and the parentheses symbolize that which first appears marginal, but in actuality is fundamental to gaining a fuller sense of Morocco's past. The parenthesis turned blink foreshadows the *bilangue's* privileging of weaker voices—the handicap, the deaf and mute, and the so-called “insane”—erased by official history. A seemingly dualistic structure, the blink in actuality opens up a space of mediation and difference so that the question becomes: “Se décoloniser de quoi? De l'identité et de la différence folles. Je parle à tous les hommes” [“To decolonize oneself from what? From insane identity and difference. I speak to all men”] (192). The “from what?” alludes to Morocco's complex colonial past as a never fully colonized French protectorate until from 1912 to 1956. To speak of “colonization” and “decolonization” in Morocco requires a more nuanced understanding of colonial rule, just as the blink in *La Mémoire tatouée* hints at the nuances and degrees of seeing. The writing of the self is always the writing of the other, which the narrator underscores: “l'Occident est une partie de moi, que je ne peux nier que dans la mesure où je lutte contre tous les occidents et les orientes qui m'oppriment ou me désenchangent” [“the Occident is a part of me, which I can only deny insofar as I fight against all the Occidents and Orientes that oppress and disenchant me”] (108). The blink shows the entanglements of writing the postcolonial condition—a process marked by loss since the “identity” of which the narrator speaks is inevitably bound to that of the colonizer.

The narrator recognizes the impossibility and undesirability of separating himself from the Occident. And yet, his relationship to the West is contradictory, antagonistic, and characterized by love—a scenario resonant with the *bilangue*. Offering detailed close-ups of minute and flickering images, the blink permits the narrator to probe the marginal, unexplored moments of vision, which are central to giving him glimpses into history. Because it is associated with temporality, the blink

connects the narrative with a distant and mythical past that cannot be mastered fully. And yet, in its precision and detail, the blink paradoxically contains the possibility of—if not mastery—appropriation and agency. Both internal and external to the narrator, blinks are something that the narrator can lay claim to, manipulate, and create.

While the first half of *La Mémoire tatouée* charts the narrator's relationship to the Atlantic Ocean—to Essaouira and El Jadida, especially—the narrative's penultimate section focuses on the Mediterranean. As the initial contrast between Essaouira and El Jadida reinforces the blink's dual structure, this dynamic is once again displaced onto another duality: onto Morocco's position between the Atlantic Ocean, one on hand, and the Mediterranean Sea, on the other. This relationship is staged as a dream-like encounter between the narrator and an Andalusian boy. The narrator recalls: "Je fis un geste, il en fit un autre en renversant la main, fit la moue. Mon ombre, une, deux, trois, et pirouette dans la rue. Je donnai au garçon une cigarette; entre lui et mon enfance, revenait le même dé clic de la vague" ["I made a gesture, he made another, and reversing his hand, he pouted. My shadow, one, two, three, and he pirouettes in the street. I gave the boy a cigarette; between him and my childhood, the same sea song returned: the splash of the waves"] (159). While the Andalusian boy represents the Spanish and Mediterranean side of Morocco, the narrator—positioned in relation to Marrakesh and the West—symbolizes its the Atlantic side. In this dance of "pirouettes," the boys enact a process of mirroring. They connect through a transient identification reminiscent of the *bilangue*, where the light and shadows shape the interaction between lovers (19).

In *La Mémoire tatouée*, the spectral qualities of the scene—the play of shadows and the cigarette's glow—remind the reader of the distance and optical illusions between the two boys who never engage in an actual dialogue. Instead, they are each other's passing, ephemeral other. This moment underscores the importance of mediations—of "third terms" produced through the boys' exchange—in its emphasis on *three* pirouettes. Rather than representing Morocco's binaries, they

engage in a complex silent exchange, enabled through one another. In this interplay, the Mediterranean Sea and Atlantic Ocean are figured through rhythm, which contradictorily serve as conduits and separations between the two boys in what becomes a dance that attempt to articulate Morocco's geopolitical and cultural position.

The blink's emphasis on fine, subtle aesthetics theorizes Morocco's position within the Mediterranean and in relation to Europe as needing equal attention and care. While the *bilangue* captures the untranslatable, the blink in *La Mémoire tatouée* attempts to "see" Morocco's postcolonial position—one defined as much by rupture, convergences, and displacements. As the narrator underscores: "Nous arrivions du Nord, façon de parler, parce que le Nord se déplace, on est toujours le nord d'un nord et d'un sud et bien plus loin, l'essentiel c'est de se déplacer en guerre, pour voir ce qui se passe" ["We arrive from the North, so to speak, because the North moves, we are always North of a North and of a South and much farther away. The essential thing is to displace oneself in war in order to see what is going on"] (72).

In gesturing to Morocco's relationship to Spain and Portugal, on one hand, and to the trade routes to Senegal, on the other, Khatibi's text can be thought of achieving creatively what Amira K. Bennison advocates scholars must do in understanding Morocco's global contexts that transcend isolated studies of French imperialism. "What is true for North Africa," she writes, "is especially true for Morocco, a country whose socio-political evolution cannot be understood without taking its relationship with the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, Africa, and the Arabo-Islamic world into consideration" (Bennison 11). Perceptual or geographical ruptures reveal "[s]hifting labels and taxonomies [that betray] not only unstable identities and categories [but also] the daily uncertainties of legal and cultural pluralism engendered by empire itself" (Clancy-Smith 1). Khatibi's blink brings these layers of complexity to bear upon Morocco's position in *La Mémoire tatouée*. Like the blink itself, Khatibi suggests, Morocco is elusive and contradictory as it straddles numerous geographical,

political, linguistic, and cultural spheres — intricacies which suggest, for Khatibi, what it means to be “Mediterranean.”

II. *Triptyque de Rabat: An Encircled Sea*

Triptyque de Rabat—written twenty years after *La Mémoire tatouée*—attempts to map Morocco’s geographical and historical relationship to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic. Instead of invoking the blink to do so, it relies on the figure of the kaleidoscopic to show how Morocco’s socio-historical and cultural relationship to both bodies of water is shifting, as the novel’s three-fold or triptych-like structure immediately intimates. Unlike *La Mémoire tatouée*, the narrative is neither personal nor meditative in tone. A detective novel narrated in the third person, *Triptyque de Rabat* delves into Rabat’s corrupt inner life: its covert political operations, a mysterious death, drugs, and illicit sexual encounters. The protagonist, Idris, works for the ministry, where he is overwhelmed by daily tasks, which he completes with detachment (11). The narrative centers on a triptych of three stories: the first recounts Rabat’s story, poised between the sky and the earth, as if teetering above the ocean (8-9). The city is figured by a large falcon, which founded the city after circling the Atlantic and Mediterranean. The second narrative centers on Idris’ personal life, especially his relationship with his wife, Khadija, on one hand, and his lover, Nafissa, on the other, who vanished and exists for him as a ghost, an allegory, a fleeting vision that always escapes full comprehension (10). Nafissa’s death remains clouded in mystery and there are speculations that she was driven towards her own ruin after she dabbled in drugs and in Rabat’s nightlife. The third story is about the ministry and a mysterious “clan,” a subset of the ministry, involved in corruption, drug cover-ups, and collusion. Representing the city’s wealthy echelons, the clan—or “The Order”—indulges in decadent pool parties, overflowing champagne glasses, and collusion between the highest orders of the government. “The Order” is complicated because Idris’ bother, Ali, is deeply involved in the organization, while Idris attempts to distance himself from their rogue policies. Both “The Order”

and the ministry constitute the novel's attempt to grapple with Rabat's political world and the role of state power.

While *La Mémoire tatouée* is concerned with the preservation of form, visual attention to detail, and miniature textual moments figured in the blink, *Triptyque de Rabat* stages the dissolution of form and the threat of amnesia, death, and madness that *La Mémoire tatouée*'s narrator fought against. *Triptyque de Rabat* takes up a different aspect of the *bilangue*, revealing it—through Nafissa's character especially—to be an experience of spectral haunting and hallucinations (AB 25). And while *La Mémoire tatouée* operates within dualisms in accordance with the blink, prefiguring the *bilangue*, *Triptyque de Rabat*—as the title intimates—makes visible the “third step” of the mediation between two terms. The novel is organized around a circular logic that figures Morocco's cultural and historical multiplicity between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. If, as Abulafia maintains, the conceptual usefulness of the Mediterranean extends beyond a physical description of the sea in order to theorize different conceptions of space and interconnections based on routes and exchanges (65), then *Triptyque de Rabat* explores the circular pathways between two seas that are fundamental to Morocco's geographical, cultural, and historical identity. The kaleidoscopic movement in *Triptyque de Rabat* is thus all the more central in echoing the Mediterranean's own metaphorical circular shape as an “encircled sea” (Abulafia, *The Great Sea* xxiii).

The Mediterranean: The First Triptych

To speak of a Mediterranean Rabat may seem paradoxical because the city borders the Atlantic Ocean, not the Mediterranean Sea. Yet, even its status as a maritime city is put into question when even the narrator affirms: “Oui, Rabat tourne le dos à l'Océan. On dirait que les habitants ont peur de *se mouiller*” [“Yes, Rabat turns its back on the ocean. One might say that its inhabitants are afraid of *getting wet*”] (23). The novel personifies the port city and immediately reveals its ambivalence towards the waters that border it. As if disavowing the sea's potential to connect it to other areas of

the world, Rabat turns inwards in a willed move of isolation. This voluntary departure from water marks another divergence between Ortese and Khatibi's work. For in Ortese, the inhabitants want to access the sea, which represents the possibility of connecting with the rest of the world. For Khatibi, the sea, however, poses the threat of exposure—an ambivalence that is conveyed through an unusual image: a mythical Falcon that was born out of the sea and founded the city. The narrator asks: “Sa forme est-elle sortie de la mer? on le prétend. Le Faucon magique est-il né de l'écume? on le prétend aussi” [“Did its body come from water? We pretend it did. Was the magic Falcon born from its foam? We maintain that as well”] (63). The series of questions and responses mirror the uncertainty of the Falcon's origins. The magic Falcon establishes a complex and contradictory maritime imaginary that is markedly different from *Amour bilingue's* where the narrator is described as joyously immersed in water. According to legend,

Le Faucon magique vécut en symbiose avec la ville, la protégeant contre les aventuriers de la mer. Mais la nature est cruelle, car la surabondance de la lumière qui enivrait nos aïeux, attira des prédateurs inconnus, venu des cieux lointains [...] C'est lui, notre auguste allégorie, qui grava sa force visuelle sur les hauteurs de la ville. C'est bien lui qui ajusta la forme de Rabat à notre rêverie: forteresses, enceintes, portes sculptées de pierre, cimetières, demeures ou palais de mosaïque et de marbre [...] Il rentra en guerre. Il pourchassa l'Étranger à l'intérieur des océans, et, le traquant, il le poursuivit vers l'Occident. Course aquatique impitoyable, qui fut relayée par nos ancêtres les pirates. Il fit le tour de la Méditerranée, survola l'Atlas, avant de se replier ici, dans la falaise [...] De ses griffes si agiles, il fit asseoir les deux Villes-Sœurs sur un tapis floral, à l'ombre matinal. (64-5)

The magic Falcon lived in symbiosis with the city, protecting it against seafarers. But nature is cruel, for the excessive sunlight that intoxicated our ancestors attracted unknown predators from distant skies [...] It is he, our robust allegory, who engraved his visual force onto the city's heights. It is indeed he who adjusted Rabat's shape to our dreams: fortresses, surrounding walls, sculpted stone doors, cemeteries, houses and palaces made out of mosaics and marble [...] He went to war. He chased foreigners into the depths of the Oceans: and, hounding them, he pushed them towards the Occident. A ruthless aquatic chase, which was taken up by our pirate ancestors. He circled the Mediterranean and flew over the Atlas Mountains, before withdrawing here in the cliffs [...] From his agile claws, he made the two sister cities sit on a floral tapestry, in the morning shade.

Similar to the Bedouin tattoo in *La Mémoire tatouée, Triptyque de Rabat* grounds its story in myth in order to show how history informs the present. While the tattoo is a symbol of timeless

stability in so far as it is grafted onto the woman's body, the Falcon captures the past's errancy in its flight as the bird skims the horizon and disappears at intervals. The Falcon simultaneously protects Rabat from the dangers of the sea (especially from pirates), while forcing the narrative (and the city by extension) to turn outwards, so to speak, towards the Atlantic Ocean and Mediterranean. The bird offers a panoramic view—conveyed formally by this passage's insistence on enumeration (the wars), and on the city's topography (fortresses, surrounding walls, sculptured doors, cemeteries, houses and palaces, mosaics and marble). The passage becomes its own "chase" as it attempts to map the ever-expanding influences on the city which, like the falcon's flight, extend beyond its geographical borders. Narrowly defined national and cultural boundaries are thus complicated and multiplied. Furthermore, this moment highlights the trope of the sun—a dominant Mediterranean figure—depicted here as dangerous, as it exposes Rabat to "unknown predators from distant skies." Rather than creating a binary between sunlight and darkness, however, this scene prioritizes "morning shade," which points to *Triptyque de Rabat's* exploration of how multiple modes of seeing register Morocco's liminal position. The phrase "morning shade" suggests that there is a visual balance between the threat of overexposure ("excessive sunlight") and under-exposure so that the twin cities, Rabat and Salé, can flourish on their "floral tapestry." In addition to underscoring the importance of the visual, the bird's flight reveals a continual desire to circle back to the Mediterranean.

The Falcon's flight echoes the kaleidoscopic movement in *La Mémoire tatouée*, which is depicted in the novel as vertiginous, as well as complicit with colonialism and decay. Yet, in *Triptyque de Rabat*, the kaleidoscope's constantly rotating movement complicates Rabat's geographical position, and symbolizes its cultural, artistic, and socio-political position as both Mediterranean and Atlantic. The narrator describes the city as "[u]ne ville qui tend à s'équilibrer—avec une remarquable autorité—du nord jusqu'au sud du pays, comme si elle s'abritait sous un patio stellaire pivotant entre

la mer, le désert et la montagne” “[a] city that tends to balance itself—with remarkable authority—from the north to the south of the country, as if it were arbitrating itself under a starry patio, pivoting between the ocean, the desert, and the mountains”] (23). Taken together, the ocean, desert and mountains form a geographical triptych, gesturing to Morocco’s environmental variation, which is reflected in the city’s social fabric: “[t]rois communautés, trois espaces dans une ville découpée, dédale de luttes sournoises, quelquefois sans merci. Entre Musulmans, Européens, et Juifs” “[t]hree communities, three spaces in a divided city, a maze of shadowy struggles, at times merciless. Between Muslims, Europeans, and Jews”] (52). This multiplicity is broadened even more in the novel’s final pages, which conceives of identity in explicitly circular terms, thereby reinforcing the novel’s kaleidoscopic logic: “[a]utour de nous et de notre entité, il y plusieurs cercles d’identité : le Maghreb, la Méditerranée, l’Europe, le Moyen-Orient, l’Afrique, l’Islam” “[a]round us and our beings, there are many circles of identity; the Maghreb, the Mediterranean, Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and Islam”] (131). The circles, like the Falcon’s flight, point outwards and construct Morocco as a crossroads and as a focal point from which different cultures and geographies radiate outward. The novel thus establishes vision as continually changing depending on one’s positionality, much like Morocco’s relationship to Atlantic and Mediterranean that changes depending on where one is standing. Rabat’s multiplicity is additionally visible in the city’s architecture, especially the medina:

Là-bas, derrière la porte de la médina, le brouhaha, le va et vient bariolé des passants, giboulée intermittente d’odeurs et de parfums, épices, poissons frits, brochettes de viande hachée ou découpée, olives, citrons confits, crêpes enveloppées par des gestes drapés, et à côté de la mosquée, juste à sa porte, d’éternels aveugles chantant et récitant en chœur, avant l’appel de la prière, branché sur microphone, par un muezzin invisible, assis sur une natte d’osier. (98)

There, behind the gates of the medina, the brouhaha, the coming and going of motley passers-by, the intermittent shower of odors and perfumes, spices, fried fish, skewers of ground or cut meat, olives, lemon preserves, crêpes wrapped in draped gestures, and next to the mosque, just at its door, ever-present blind people sing and recite in chorus, before the call to prayer, transmitted by microphone by an invisible muezzin, seated on wicker mat.

Just as the passage with the Falcon enacts the chase of the bird's flight, this passage formally mirrors the marketplace rush. Enumeration after enumeration, it overflows with visual perceptions. While scent is evoked, it is approached through the images of food. For example, while the "fried fish" or "skewers of ground or cut meat" might prompt readers to imagine how they taste, they encounter them visually first. The "olives, lemons, conserves" create a tableau of color and serve as metonymic figures of the crowd. While the Magic Falcon's flight reveals Rabat to be a place of many geographical convergences, the marketplace shows how that multiplicity and liminality are inscribed in Rabat's urban landscape, as well.

Triptyque de Rabat paints a portrait of the modern Moroccan city as mediated through the narrator's shifting gaze and change in point of view, which recalls the kaleidoscopic movement in addition to the triptych structure that moves from narrative to narrative and image to image. While the narrator is not synonymous with Idris, readers see Rabat predominantly through Idris' eyes, especially his memories of growing up in the city. The image of the city unites past and present under his kaleidoscopic gaze. In this way, Khatibi's Idris strongly echoes Charles Baudelaire's Constantin Guys, whom one can also compare:

à un miroir aussi immense que cette foule; à un kaléidoscope doué de conscience, qui, à chacun de ses mouvements, représente la vie multiple et la grâce mouvante de tous les éléments de la vie. C'est un moi insatiable du non-moi, qui, à chaque instant, le rend et l'exprime en images plus vivantes que la vie elle-même, toujours instable et fugitive.
(Baudelaire 9)

to a mirror as big as this crowd; to a kaleidoscope endowed with consciousness that, which each of his moments, represents the multiple lives and the graceful movements of all the elements of life. It is an ego insatiable for non-egos that, at each moment, expresses itself in images more animated than itself, always unstable and fleeting.

Idris, not unlike Guys, serves as the point of convergence of many images and visions of Rabat—from his relationship to Nafissa to his work in the ministry and, by extension, to "the Order." Similar to the hinges in a triptych, Idris holds these multiple narratives together. In the final lines of *Triptyque de Rabat*, in fact, the narrator likens him to "une tache, une image, dans cette carte"

[“a spot, an image, on the map”] (139). Simultaneously the receiver of images and a projection of one, Idris embodies kaleidoscopic vision. If Khatibi was, indeed, inspired by Baudelaire, Idris can be understood as a revision and re-envisioning of modern man, not in Europe, but from the position of an ex-colony.⁴⁵

Khatibi’s novel rewrites this figure within the context of postcolonial Morocco. He does so through the ongoing presence of Idris’ blackouts or fainting spells, which interrupt the kaleidoscopic movement. He embodies an all-encompassing, shifting vision, a visual lacuna symbolic of his position as a postcolonial subject and of Morocco’s position of rupture in the Mediterranean. Etymologically, “syncope,” the word Khatibi uses in the original which also has an equivalent in English, echoes the musical word “syncopation,” thereby designating something that is offbeat, unpredictable, and a counterpoint rhythm. In linguistics, a syncope is verbal stress. The first time that Idris faints,

Il eut mal aux yeux. La lumière avait noyé passants et conducteurs. Par bouffées saccadées, elle les lança au différents coins de la ville.

De nouveau, il reprit contrôle de sa vue [...] La ville changea de couleur, de rythme. Elle sembla jeter, hors de tout centre, murailles, portes et meurtrières. Les perspectives se déplacèrent et défixée, la ville paraissait vaciller.

Une douleur toucha ses nerfs, elle le secoua et le projeta en l’air. Il s’imagina flotter, se dispersant en brise de verre. Puis il tomba au bord du trottoir. (27-8)

His eyes hurt. The light had drowned the pedestrians and the drivers. In jerky flashes, the sunlight threw itself into different corners of the city.

Once again, Idris regained control of his vision [...] The city changed color, rhythm. It seemed to throw, out of every center, walls, gates, and embrasures. Perspectives were displaced and, uprooted, the city seemed to waver.

A pain hit his nerves, it shook him and projected him into the air. He imagined himself floating and scattering like a breeze of shattered glass. Then he fell on the sidewalk’s edge.

The change in visual perception occurs at the level of agency, where the light gains control over Idris in forceful motions (“threw” and “projected itself”). This shift is made even more explicit in French,

⁴⁵ While it is impossible to establish a direct influence, it is highly probable that Khatibi had read Baudelaire, especially *The Painter of Modern Life* from which this section derives.

where the city and the light are gendered female. The passage creates a power dynamic between the “he” (Idris) and the “she” (the city and the light), in which the city becomes frenetic and the light drowns the protagonist. The aquatic metaphor amidst the urban landscape reminds readers of Rabat’s status as a port city. Idris’ perceptual experience resides in the word “seem,” so that as his visual acuity wavers so does the city. Even though much of the description is abstract, the mention of Idris’ nerves re-grounds the passage in the materiality of his body. Yet, this anchoring is only temporary since his nerves—similar to the light’s thrusting movement—destabilize and “project” him into the air and induce a blackout. He “scatters” like the shards of glass found in a kaleidoscope.

While the blink in *La Mémoire tatouée* engenders small narrative hiccups and moments of rupture, which permit the storyline to move impressionistically from one reminiscence to another, the narrative jumps are much more pronounced in *Triptyque de Rabat*. Idris’ blackout challenges vision in two important ways: first, it allows the narrative to explore the liminality and complexity of sight and to trouble what it means to “see” in the first place. Secondly, the blackout highlights how vision can be separated from empirical fact. Readers understand, for example, that Idris did not actually scatter like glass, but only perceived himself to be doing so. “Uprooting perspectives,” as the previous passage states, results in the uprooting of visual certainty and of the alignment between vision and knowledge. *Triptyque de Rabat* wavers between metaphor and fantasy, on one hand, and science and health, on the other.

On the other “side” of his fainting spell, Idris wakes up in a hospital, firmly within the realm of the medical setting. His room is “propre, désencombrée, sans trace de douleur. Un lieu de transparence où la lumière du jour se détachait sur un espace nu, presque ascétique. Là bas, à travers la fenêtre, un jacaranda encore fleuri” [“clean, unencumbered, without any trace of pain. A place of transparency where the light was set off again a bare, almost acetic place. Over there, through the window, a jacaranda still in bloom”] (28). The theme of transparency, first intimated in the glass

simile before Idris fainted, is fully elaborated here, where transparency suggests the hospital's distant, clinical atmosphere. The image of light is not the same light that the narrator of *La Mémoire tatouée* describes on Morocco's beaches. Instead, it suggests sterility where everything is wiped clean and standardized. In French, the word for "detach" is "détacher," which has the embedded word "tache," meaning stain. The hospital is a place unmarred by stains. It is equally devoid of visual variation: everything appears of the same optical gradation so that this room is undifferentiated from any other. The standardization of vision is in stark opposition to Idris' faulty vision before fainting. It is the negative to that moment, and highlights the scientific and medicalized world, which seeks not only to cure Idris, but also to standardize how viewers see him. Only the purple jacaranda, a symbol of the natural world, cannot be so easily regulated, and disrupts this scene's visual uniformity. It is an image, however, made possible by the same transparency dominating the hospital room, for it is framed—like a picture—by the window and visible through glass, which separates Idris from the world. Here, the glass is intact, symbolizing his restored health and vision, while underscoring the extent to which our sight is always mediated, even when those mediations are concealed by their translucence. This image recalls Chapter One's reading of Eugenia at the optometrist's in Via Roma. Both "Un paio di occhiali" and *Triptique de Rabat* reveal glass to be yet another obstacle or frame to vision, which shapes how one sees and interprets the outside world.

Nafissa and the Port City: The Second Triptych

The Falcon's circular flight captures the city's ambiguous, displaced position in relation to the Mediterranean and the Atlantic respectively. This circling movement is displaced onto the chase that Idris undergoes to find Nafissa in the streets of Rabat. While the Falcon's circling of the city reveals a vision defined by a circling back and a desire to chart the city in its complexity between two seas, Idris' pursuit of Nafissa foregrounds the emergence of a vision of escape, whereby Nafissa—

the person Idris attempts to capture visually—continually evades him. Her elusive presence is directly invoked when, after a fainting spell, Idris utters her name. He elaborates: “Ah! Je la connais sans la connaître. Une lubie, une chimère, un mauvais oeil, une folie, que sais-je? moi, de mes extravagances! [“Oh! I know her without knowing her. A fancy, a chimera, an evil eye, madness, what do I know? Me, about my extravagances!”] (29) Nafissa, the second triptych in the novel, introduces a series of paradoxes figured in this moment that are characteristic of the *bilangue*: she exists at the nexus of delight (fancy), fantasy (chimera), and pathology (madness). She embodies contradiction and the breakdown of seeing and knowing, and knowledge and memory.

Nafissa introduces narrative incongruities and ruptures in the novel. She can be situated clearly neither in Idris’ mind, nor in the text as a whole. A beautiful, upper-class woman who was born into money and, paradoxically, a social aberrant, she was “déjà entamée. Drogue ? Dérèglement sexuel ? Peut-être” [“already infected. Drugs? Sexual deviance? Maybe”] (38). The “maybe”—reiterated after many statements about Nafissa—highlights Idris’ uncertainty about what happened to her, and whether she overdosed or whether she was slowly poisoned by someone, namely her uncle, who wanted to drive her insane. Upon discovering her body, detectives find a pair of sunglasses, undergarments, and “la poudre blanche d’une mystérieuse drogue” [“the white powder of a mysterious drug”] (68). While there is nothing immediately criminal about Nafissa’s death, Idris undertakes his own investigation and goes to the cemetery, where he finds no trace of her. Embodying invisibility, her death constitutes a blackout—an omission and lacuna—in the text as a whole. Relegated to the hypothetical tense, Nafissa hovers as a missing person and as a ghost; she straddles the realms of invisibility (her vanished body) and abstraction (her ghost). “Comment,” Idris asks, “vivre quand tout se défait devant vos yeux ? [...] Son image se brouilla un instant alors que la lumière du jour, en diminuant, adoucissait graduellement sa beauté, la détachant de sa transparence” [“How does one live when everything undoes itself in front of your eyes? [...] Her

image misted over the second that the light of day, gradually softening her beauty, detached itself from her transparence”] (39-40).

While *La Mémoire tatouée* is structured around an increasing internalization of matrixes of perception, especially eyesight, *Triptyque de Rabat* emphasizes visual detachment and separation. Nafissa’s character, in fact, occasions separation and permits the narrative to explore its effects: for example, “Idris ouvrit la porte avec nonchalance. Il ne vit qu’une ombre. De l’ombre se détacha un reflet net, le visage d’une femme” [“Idris opened the door with nonchalance. He only saw a shadow. From the shadow, a reflection clearly stood out, a woman’s image”] (7). The shadow centers on repetition and revision; at first, it appears as a black shadow—a flat surface and projection. However, the passage separates the shadow from its reflection. Finally, Nafissa’s face emerges and hovers—like Rabat itself and like Idris before his blackouts—as a mystery and abstraction.

Nafissa is not only a symbolic and textual blackout in *Triptyque de Rabat*: she becomes aligned with it and with the process of a detached vision. As in fainting where a person’s consciousness fades in and out, Nafissa (or her ghost) fades in and out of Idris’ line of vision. He begins to follow her trace throughout the city, unsure of whether it is truly her, or someone with her likeness. Just as *La Mémoire tatouée* is comprised of visual directives around blinking, *Triptyque de Rabat* explains the art of following someone: “La filature est un art de la souplesse et d’une extrême discrétion [...] Elle s’était éloignée. Elle disparut dans un passage où, à son tour, il entra et sortit de l’autre côté. Rien” [“Trailing someone is an art of suppleness and extreme discretion [...] She had gone away. She disappeared into a passageway where, when in turn, he entered and exited the other side. Nothing”] (35-6). This passage, another echo of Baudelaire’s notion of modernity (“l’homme des foules”), begins with an impersonal instruction and guideline on how successfully to track someone, and it ends with the loss of Nafissa.

Rather than promoting a binary of visibility and invisibility, Idris' pursuit of Nafissa opens up a tripartite visual experience:

Suivait-il effectivement la même femme ? Il crut un moment. Il n'était plus sûr de ses yeux ni de leur acuité [...]

Dans sa précipitation, Idris crut revoir Nafissa, tournant la rue de gauche. Il accéléra le pas. Aussitôt retrouvée, elle n'était plus seule. Une femme, peut-être plus jeune, avec la même silhouette, la même démarche désinvolte accompagnait, silencieuse, en lui donnant le bras. Plus de valise à la main. Tout était à recommencer. Syncope. Idris s'appuya contre le mur. Il faillit chuter. (36-7)

Was he in actuality following the same woman? He thought so for a moment. He was no longer sure of his eyes or of their acuity [...]

In his hastiness, Idris thought he saw Nafissa, turning into the street on the left. He did not speed up. As soon as he found her, she was no longer alone. A woman, maybe younger, with the same silhouette, the same nonchalant walk, accompanied a man, silently, giving him her arm. No suitcase in her hand. Everything had to start over. Syncope. Idris leaned against the wall. He almost fell.

As another failed attempt to find Nafissa, this moment nevertheless highlights three important aspects of vision as advanced in *Triptyque de Rabat*. First, the passage begins by questioning the veracity of sight. The relationship between seeing and knowing breaks down more completely. Instead of confirming his sense of the world, vision feeds Idris' increasing doubts about Nafissa and her existence. Second, this moment centers on a dramatic revision and re-envisioning of the narrator's beliefs. Nafissa's specificity is lost in an abstracted series of women who resemble her. Finally, the third visual thread is revision, describing both the protagonist's desire to see her again and the failure of that revision and re-envisioning. While Idris wants to see her again, he is victim of another blackout which takes control. Yet, it is not a perfect repetition: for he "almost" fell and did not lose complete control like the first time when he ended up in the hospital. This second scene—an imperfect "revision" of the first moment—points to the liminality of the blackout, a temporary

loss of consciousness (and loss of reality), which is then regained—a process not unlike the shifts in visions that a kaleidoscope engenders.⁴⁶

Triptyque de Rabat privileges a fading in and out movement that is characteristic of fainting: the novel's tempo is slower, more trance-like than in *La Mémoire tatouée*. In this dynamic, both Idris and Nafissa exist as “revenants” or ghosts. In French, the word “revenant” is key, for it describes someone who has come again, where “venir” means to come or to arrive. Nafissa is most clearly a “revenant,” since she is dead and has returned to haunt Idris. Structurally, fainting adheres to the same logic in the sense that Idris, too, comes to his senses after a blackout, so that he exists like her “Séparée de tout, ni morte, ni survivante” [“Separated from everything, neither dead, nor living”] (28). As a ghost or “reventant,” he exists at the interstices of myth, modernization, and memory in his recollections of Nafissa.

“The Order” and Shifting Power: The Third Triptych

While Nafissa represents a circular search that figures Morocco's own wavering position between the Mediterranean and the Atlantic, “the Order” internalizes corruption and mutability on a governmental level, especially in the way it merges concealment and deception. If the Ministry represents “un agent de la démocratie musclée et décorative” [“an agency of forced and decorative democracy”] (11), the Order—its more corrupt faction—engages in even more willfully obfuscated operations. For, “derrière la politesse argentée et ses rites, il y a l'ombre du geste sournois, l'invisibilité des coups bas. Et derrière l'ombre, le secret, l'éternel secret de l'ordre” [“[b]ehind silvered-plated politeness and its rituals, there is a shadow of an insidious gesture, the invisibility of low blows. And behind the shadow, the secret, the eternal secret of order”] (20). Here, “order”

⁴⁶ In “Object Relations in an Expanded Field,” Brown notes that for Proust, “the shifting kaleidoscope of darkness” forms part of Marcel Proust's sleeping/waking/dreaming state” (89).

refers to governance in general, but it is symptomatic of the Order's rule, which, like Nafissa, is mysterious. Furthermore, the Order embraces invisibility as its ethic, making any event, person, or thing disappear from the public eye so that its blackouts represent permanent erasures.

The Order governs by a series of optical illusions and abstractions, replacing one object with another in a continual pivoting motion: "C'est ce qu'on disait de l'Affaire et de « la main de l'Etranger »: une série d'objets substitués à d'autres, et de surcroît, maquillés. Un vrai kaléidoscope!" ["It is what some said about the Order (known as "l'Affaire") and of "the Stranger's hand": a series of objects substituted for others and, moreover, dressed up. A true kaleidoscope!"] (98) Directly invoked, the kaleidoscope functions here as an instrument of deception; its ability to shift-shape, and to transmit image after image relays its ability to produce spectral realities, especially in Rabat, the country's seat of government. The "Stranger's hand" represents foreign governments, implicating ex-colonial powers, and reveal that forms of corruption exist internal to Morocco, but are reinforced from the outside, as well.

The scene that is most emblematic of the kaleidoscopic logic is when Idris goes to a party at the magnate's house. There, he sees his brother Ali, who is part of the Order and whom he accuses of selling his soul after Ali confesses to having cheated his way to the top in accordance to the rules of Rabat's political games (58). Infuriated, Idris leaves and, as he does, a trapdoor opens and he disappears, and is transported an invisible stairway (58). It not only connects Idris into a supernatural realm, but transports the text into a fantastical world where he finds himself under "une piscine suspendue, où les nageurs descendaient et remontaient, tout auréolés de bulles colorées" ["a suspended pool, where swimmers descended and ascended, all haloed in colorful bubbles"] (60). Here, the swimmers constitute the kaleidoscope, moving with their colors in a circular movement between the floor and the pool above. What is more, the image induces vertigo,

for what is normally grounded (a pool) appears in the sky—a move that echoes a kaleidoscope’s vertiginous effects.

This moment introduces the triptych structure in the form of three words, “Si tu savais” (“if you knew”) (60), which emanate from a disembodied voice. Deceptively simple, they nevertheless get to the heart of the schism between seeing and knowing in the novel, where Idris is never sure of the veracity of what unfolds before his eyes. This is especially true here since there is no way to narrate coherently what unfolds around him. Idris finally sees a videophone—an instrument that brings sight (a screen) and sound (a speaker) together—suspended in the air, from which the voice emerges. He decides to leave the room. As he does, the same words are repeated: “if you knew” (60). It is at this point that “Idris se retourna de nouveau. À la place du visiophone, il aperçut une peinture aérienne, diaphane, toujours suspendue dans le vide. À travers cette fresque, il reconnut la muraille entourant le jardin de Chellah. Puis tout fut effacé” [“Idris turned around again. In the videophone’s place, he saw an ethereal painting, diaphanous, still suspended in the void. In this fresco, he recognized the wall circling the Chellah garden. Then everything was erased”] (60).

Idris’ turn engenders a narrative one, in which a new image is reproduced: the fresco of the Chellah, one of the oldest areas of Rabat. The wall depicted in the fresco conveys a concentric, pivoting movement reflected in the passage as a whole. It moves from a relationship between image and sound (videophone), to the visual (the fresco), to emptiness when everything is erased. This final move is not a negation or a void designating the lack of an object; instead the object is invisibility itself. The material objects designate the Idris’ immediate perception and experience of the moment in the now, while the empty space points to the infinite of traceless-ness as figured by Nafissa. This moment merges around another triptych: videophone, fresco, invisibility; moving outward, so to speak, and shifting focus, this narrative moment as a whole constitutes yet another

trptych (pool, videophone, fresco). A switch in perspective reveals different crystallizations of images embedded in others, which form combinations of images in a kaleidoscopic manner.

III. Conclusion

This movement and multiplicity enacts the many faces of Rabat's government, as well as Morocco's complex geopolitical and cultural position. In *La Mémoire tatouée*, the blink serves as a metaphor for rupture, which captures the text's desire to break free of restrictive colonial structures and to open up new narratives and histories. The blink engenders an exaggerated visual interruption that conveys the difficulty of narrating the lingering effects of colonialism, and the new ways of understanding Morocco's identity as one defined by temporal and geographical liminality. This "in-betweenness" represents Morocco's position in the Mediterranean—a mediated one between the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea so that the two seas and Morocco form their own triptych. Neither fully one nor the other, both constitute Morocco, much in the same way that the act of blinking signifies a rupture that is vital for sustained visual attention.

Chapter 3

Mediterranean Through the Frame: Assia Djebar's *La Nouba du Mont Chenoua*, "La Femme en morceaux," and *La Femme sans sépulture*

"Our master and teacher is Scheherazade; don't forget, like her, you too are only cramming in five to ten page stories in between events called "life."

-Orhan Palmuk, *The Black Book*

A frame outlines a picture, gives it shape, and makes it stand out. Frames delimit borders, and direct the eye towards an image. Yet, what would happen if a painting consisted of a frame and not a canvas? (Baker 118) In cinema, the question of framing can reveal the ideological constructions of identification associated with voyeurism and fetishism (Doane 22). Feminist filmmakers often draw attention to the camera in order to show how movies construct women as spectacles and objects of male desire.⁴⁷ For, upon seeing the camera, the viewer's suspension of disbelief is severed, and "[he] discovers that the camera is hiding things, and therefore distrusts it and the frame itself which he now understands to be arbitrary. He wonders why the frame is what it is" (Dayan qtd. Silverman, "Suture" 221). Frames are also central in narratives; they give them shape and often ascribe them a genre. Deleuze and Guattari, for example, define the tale as characterized by the question: "What is going to happen?" (Deleuze and Guattari 192) Framing and borders more generally are central to Mediterranean Studies, since the sea is a space defined by pluralities and multiplicity.⁴⁸ Moreover, similar to the way a frame functions as a barrier and complement

⁴⁷ See Mulvey, Silverman, and Doane.

⁴⁸ See Cassano.

to an image, for Iain Chambers, “[t]he Mediterranean [...] has consistently disturbed [the] picture [of modernity]” (13).

Twentieth-century Francophone writer and cineaste Assia Djebar wrote extensively about the Mediterranean in different works that foreground the problem of narrative and genre; she focuses especially on how tales and prose shape ways of narrating history through different textual and visual frames. Born in 1936 in Algeria, Djebar published her first novel, *La Soif* [*Thirst*] in 1957 during the Algerian War of Independence (Rice 18). Her work is inherently interdisciplinary and includes poetry, film, novels, and ekphrastic short stories. This formal experimentation reflects Djebar’s desire to subvert generic boundaries that reinforce official history, and to rewrite colonial history from marginalized positions, especially those of Algerian women. In so doing, she embraces an aesthetics of plurality, diverse points of view, and “le multiple” (O’Riley 28). Djebar achieves this multiplicity through sight, especially in moments when seeing is hindered, interrupted, and delayed. While such instances may seem marginal or inconsequential, they are, in fact, central to her narratives, in which relationships between seeing and knowing break down and open up new potentialities, particularly ways of re-narrating colonial history.

Scholars have often studied the way that Djebar explores issues of gender, North African identity, and language. They have focused on the importance of aural and music in infusing the cadences in Djebar’s poetics that seeks to restore the richness of Algerian identity lost during colonization. This chapter builds upon understandings of Djebar as a writer of pluralities; yet it does so by situating her explicitly within the larger transnational context of the postcolonial Mediterranean. I argue that Djebar restores Algeria’s previously erased histories and marginalized figures by troubling visual and textual borders. While Jocelyne Dakhli contends that French colonialism, which included mandated linguistic

assimilation, resulted in the impoverishment of identities in North Africa through the polarization and occlusion of difference (Dakhli 235), these effaced identities and subjects resurface in Djébar's narratives through different forms of diminished and hindered vision. In this chapter, I will bring together three of Djébar's works that span her career: her film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua* [*The Women of Mount Chenoua* (1978)], her short story "La Femme en morceaux" ["Woman in Pieces"] from *Oran, langue morte* (1997), and her novel, *La Femme sans sépulture* [*The Woman Without A Grave*], which she began in 1980 in Paris, but finished in New York City in 2002. The stories all engage *The 1001 Nights* as their narrative frame and chronicle the disappearance of a female protagonist. As a result, they thematize invisibility and erasure: the women's vanished bodies figure Algeria's silenced and effaced history. While *The Arabian Nights* frame is the master narrative uniting these three works, the repeated references to Scheherazade foreground the importance of the frame and the transgression of borders—textual, linguistic, temporal, and geographical. For *The Arabian Nights* "has no nation; its homeland is everywhere and nowhere" (Mallette 29). This textual frame allows Djébar to use the tales' framework to ground themes of gender and narration, all while creatively challenging the strict geographical and historical borders of the French-Algerian context.

Florence Martin maintains that *La Nouba* and *La Femme sans sépulture* form a diptych (Martin 48); this chapter will argue that Djébar's aesthetic project is in fact more dynamic and multiple. Her stories not only describe French-Algerian colonial relations, but they also capture a wide-reaching geographical plurality that extends to the Mediterranean, including Malta, and outwards to Baghdad. Similar to Khatibi's, Djébar's work keeps these dynamics in tension with the different obstacles that only give a partial vision and rendering of history. And yet, while Khatibi's work does so in formally abstract ways, for example, in conceiving

of the blink as a frame, Djébar invokes physical and literal barriers such as doors, olivewood boxes, and mosaics. In so doing, she also uses literary frames (*The 1001 Nights*) in order to reveal the many obstacles and hindrances women face in narrating their histories. Far from being only constraints, these many frames also serve as the very conditions of possibility for women to write their stories.

I. **Against Transparency: The Obstacles of Sight in *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua***

In 1978, after a ten-year hiatus from writing, Djébar filmed *La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua*, which was controversial from its debut. Because of its experimental style and the privileging of female voices and characters, the movie was pulled from consideration from the *Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage*—an international film festival in Carthage, Tunisia (Martin 45). The film only gained recognition when Djébar showed it to the prominent Italian neorealist director, Carlo Lizzani, and the head of the Venice Film Festival. Praising the film, he nominated it for a Critics prize, which it won in 1979 (45)⁴⁹.

The film's protagonist, Lila, is an aspiring filmmaker whose entire family was killed during the Algerian War of Independence with the exception of her brother who is unaccounted for twenty years later. She returns to her native town, Cherchell, Algeria, to find out more about his disappearance and to film the mujahidats' (women freedom fighters) untold story of resistance. *La Nouba* is semi-autobiographical, and resonates strongly with Djébar's own return to Algeria in search for information about her brother who vanished during the War. Lila is Djébar's fictional "alter-ego" (Donadey 43). Lila's name, meaning "night" in Arabic, is a reference to *The 1001 Nights*, and to the tradition of telling narratives as a form of survival (43). A "modern incarnation of Scheherazade" (Martin 58), Lila

⁴⁹ See Martin, footnote 3.

conducts a series of interviews with local townswomen and tells their disparate stories. The film chronicles her failing marriage to Ali who was crippled during a horse accident and whose handicap symbolizes an overall paralysis between the couple. Lila attempts to narrate Algeria's history to her young daughter, but struggles to find the words to do so. Rather than a straightforward documentary, the film "seems to take a perverse pleasure in thoroughly disappointing any desire on the viewer's part to tie up loose ends or to reach closure" (Bensmaïa and Gage 877). *La Nouba* is instead a poetic, impressionistic work that combines live footage from the Algerian War, poetry, music, and folklore.

While the film is nonlinear, it is not the case, as Reda Bensmaïa asserts, that "[o]verall, the film presents itself as a succession of disparate elements that are joined neither by plot nor by a unifying theme" (877). On the contrary, the film is organized around a logic of trumped, frustrated, and delayed vision, which captures the fragmentation of peoples, cultures, social class, and history. If Bensmaïa was unable to find a unifying theme, that is precisely the point: the film's coherence resides in its incoherence, in its perpetual desire to explore how sight captures the difficulty of seeing, understanding, and narrating the past.

La Nouba is rooted in a sense of place: in Cherchell, a town bordering the Mediterranean, fifty-five minutes west of Algiers. The film reveals its importance as a coastal town with extended shots of waves, underwater caves, animals grazing along the water, and children playing near the sand. The film registers the Mediterranean as fundamental to the story that extends beyond the modern Algerian and French postcolonial context to include the Roman presence in Algeria, as evidenced by the Roman ruins. These multiple dynamics gesture to Cherchell's place in the history of cultural conquest, exchange, and domination within the Mediterranean's deep and ancient history (Braudel XIII). Just as the Mediterranean lingers in Cherchell's ruins, it is manifested formally in the structure of the

“nouba,” an Andalusian musical form that means “your turn” in Algerian and Moroccan dialects (Martin 50-1). *La Nouba* is importantly “a history of *women* who speak in their turn” (Khannous 43), thereby placing gender at the heart of the narrative. Moreover, the film privileges other marginalized voices, such as those of the peasant and rural classes.

The importance of social class in *La Nouba* is foregrounded with the film’s dedication to Belà Bartók. Although he is best known as a musician and composer, Bartók was an ethnomusicologist who studied popular music in Algeria in 1913—a period which Djébar’s film refers to as a “silent Algeria” because it marked a time when peasant voices were unacknowledged (Martin 51). Like Bartók, Djébar’s *La Nouba* has a similar aim in devoting an entire film to the peasant women during the Algerian War (Martin 52). Zoulikha, the second person to whom the film is dedicated and who sacrificed her life to liberate Algeria during the War of Independence, was a peasant suffering from the socio-economic inequalities of French colonialism. The film conveys her poverty in contrast to the European settlers who danced near the Roman statues and bought up the land (Djébar *La Nouba*). While the film is dedicated to Zoulikha, her story only occupies seven minutes (53:00-60:00) of the 115-minute film (Martin 60). Viewers learn that, after being tortured and killed, her body was placed in the town square. On the second night after her death, her body vanished and was never found. Her disappearance becomes a “visible blank” in the film (Martin 60).

Although Zoulikha assumes a marginal position in the film, her ghost-like presence opens up new possibilities for interrogating the limits of sight, especially in relation to erasure and invisibility. Lila’s position as an insider/outsider further complicates her ability to see and to narrate clearly (Martin 47). The film conveys Lila’s complex relationship to Algeria through visual markers, especially by her clothing. Unlike the veiled peasant women,

Lila wears traditionally “Western” garb—pants, an impeccably ironed blue sweater or black dresses, a leather bag, and scarf. More than just a visual indication of her foreignness as a French educated, bilingual, and unveiled woman, her clothing reveals her “modern” lifestyle, which marks her as urbane and privileged within the context of a film about Algerian peasant life. Unable to speak Tamazight, the local Berber dialect, Lila cannot communicate directly with the women she interviews. She further stands apart from Cherchell and from the peasant community because of the technology she brings to the rural town, most notably her camera crew, and the convertible Citroën that she drives around town.

La Nouba thematizes different socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural barriers that prevent ways of accessing history, especially the Mediterranean past. These obstacles are manifested formally in a series of frustrated and interrupted visual frames that foreground the problem of narration. The first of these sequences occurs at the film’s opening: Lila, dressed in white, stands with her back to the viewers against a wall. The scene lacks any contrast so that it is difficult for viewers to distinguish between Lila and the background. Lila says, “Je ne veux pas que vous me voyez. Je ne veux pas que tu me voies” [“I don’t want you to see me. I don’t want you to see me”]. She quickly revises her statement to the personal “you,” which viewers understand to be her husband, Ali. This reiterated statement immediately introduces the problem of the gaze, identification, and filmic suture. While “suture” describes the process of identification in which the viewers are drawn into a film,⁵⁰ *La Nouba* immediately problematizes the politics of looking. As the protagonist and storyteller, Lila refuses to be the object of contemplation and appropriation. She draws attention to the power dynamics embedded in the act of looking, while highlighting her own difficulty seeing: she stares blankly at a wall that prevents her from seeing her husband, Ali,

⁵⁰ See Silverman.

who is confined to a wheelchair in the adjoining room and whose gaze is turned away from Lila. *La Nouba* establishes an aesthetic of fragmented, disparate acts of looking that gesture to the larger gender dynamics and obstacles in the film. Despite being within the same filmic frame, Lila and her husband fail to see one another. The wall that separates them thus furthers the isolation between the couple.

In the *Khlass* (finale), the movie repeats the opening scene but with a difference: Lila is wearing a black dress against the white wall after having confessed: “I’m not looking for anything. I only remember that I’m looking” (*La Nouba*).⁵¹ As she stares at the wall, she is not looking *at anything* but the color white. There is no mention of a “you,” which is replaced by “anything” and “something.” Here, looking becomes a quest in and of itself, with no firm end goal or clear object to observe. This repeated scene reinforces a fragmented looking that is detached from any clear narrative.

While the first scene pairing unfolds during the day, the complementary and successive scenes unfold in blackness. Lila, viewers learn, was jailed during the War—a haunting experience that she cannot discuss with Ali. Her silence around this trauma becomes one of the many metaphorical walls between them. The film flashes back to a scene of Lila wearing a white dress behind white prison bars. Just as there was no contrast in the first frame between her dress and the white walls, in the prison scenes, it is hard to distinguish between her dress and the prison bars, which become blurred in the impressionistic style of a photographic negative. This visual ambiguity conveys her desire to erase those memories just as small pieces of the image appear half eclipsed to the viewers. The darkness, a reminder of Lila’s name, suggests that she can escape neither her past nor her experiences of the War that are integral to her identity.

⁵¹ The film is in Arabic. Citations are from the English subtitles.

Lila's failure to speak of her experiences and to understand fully the villagers' post-war experience is additionally figured as a separation between generations. In a scene that is repeated at the film's beginning and end, a small girl approaches Lila's and Ali's house. Slowly closing one shutter so that her view and the viewer's image of her are halved, the girl gazes in at Ali in his wheelchair and, in the background, at Lila who returns her glance. The window frame and the shutter restrict the girl's gaze and Lila's as they look past Ali at one another. No one speaks and the scene initially communicates stasis, especially since Ali—in the middle of both women—never moves. Forming a tableau of figure and ground, Lila glimpses a younger version of herself in the girl and the girl, in turn, catches sight of a future version of what she will become. This moment captures the generational gap between woman and girl, as well as Lila's desire to envision the past that nonetheless remains distanced from her. At the same time, the house—with its dark interior, the wall separating Ali and Lila, and the small window—communicates a sense of claustrophobia.

As *La Nouba* thematizes isolation, it also reveals Lila's class and social mobility, as she drives around town without incident (Martin 54). Yet, even in a moment that underscores Lila's freedom, the film re-introduces the formal trope of borders, thereby reminding viewers that the image before them is culturally, historically, and politically constructed. In the Citroën, the windshield delimits her gaze of the surrounding countryside so that her view resembles a framed picture. The car window becomes another lens, in addition to the camera lens, which further mediates the extended shots of the countryside. More than a frame, the glass draws attention to the problem of seeing and the promise of transparency, which is yet another barrier. Glass is the physiological surface onto which the eye registers itself (Krauss 182). The transparency of glass thus inspires a meditation on what it means to see at all. For what the viewer, in this case Lila, experiences is “l'oeil et même le

cerveau en train de composer les objets, il voit les images de ceux-ci impressionner la rétine et le cortex selon des lois de (dé)formation qui sont les leurs et qui organisent la paroi de verre” [“the eye and even the brain in the process of forming its objects; it sees the images of these imprinting the retina and the cortex according to the laws of (de)formation that are inherent to each and that organize the screen of glass”] (Lyotard 133). Looking out of her car window, Lila is unconsciously partaking in the act of reflection—not the mimetic process, but rather the unfolding of vision itself. Her physical journey through the countryside is a perceptual one, in which her different visual experiences attempt to shape a narrative of the past. The car’s windshield resembles a screen onto which Algeria’s image is projected at the same time that Lila’s vision is constituted.

Glass and the theme of transparency acquire an increasingly paradoxical significance in *La Nouba* as containing the promise and impossibility of direct access to the visible and to the past. Towards the end of the film, however, Lila confesses: “As an architect, I have always wanted to build houses of glass, transparent houses. Maybe then we wouldn’t look that way at veiled women. Veiled or unveiled, it is all the same. We are constantly being watched” (Djebar, *La Nouba*). To construct a house of glass is to be able to see beyond the temporal, linguistic, class-based, and cultural barriers that societies. The dream of transparency is nevertheless complicated, for as the car window underscores, glass is a medium that calls attention to vision as a process defined by distortion and separations. *La Nouba* slowly reveals the false dichotomy between visibility and invisibility to show that a direct and “pure” vision devoid of obstacles is impossible.

Without undoing this metaphorical dream entirely, however, the film introduces an actual dream that Lila has as she travels in a boat into sea caves where *mujahidats* clandestinely organized their resistance efforts. While Lila’s wish for a glass house is

characterized by light and openness, her dream of the caves is shadowy and dark. Visually, the two dreams complement one another and offer two different solutions to the problems of seeing and narrating the past. Her dream-like state, furthered by the Mediterranean's undulating waves, reveals women dancing in the Dahra grottos and an old woman telling stories to children who are lined up to hear her story. And "so it was, in a silent Algeria," the voiceover interjects, "an old woman whispering in the night and the old stories become the wonders of the children and history is revisited by the fire, in broken words and voices searching for one another" (*La Nouba*). A clear allusion to *The 1001 Nights* and to the power of narrative as a form of historical transmission, this citation unites language with light (i.e. fire), underscoring the interrelationship between seeing, knowing, and narrating. Unlike glass, however, fire—a symbol of narrative inspiration or the "spark" of a new idea—more aptly captures the nuances and degrees of sight, which waver and cast shadows on objects (or thoughts) perceived in darkness. The fire (narrative) contains the promise of illuminating the past (symbolized by darkness), but threatens to flicker out, thereby vanishing into the past, as well.

This moment highlights the paradoxical precariousness and persistence of narratives of decolonization. The Mediterranean functions in a similar way: as that which transports Lila into undersea caves, and into a dream sequence that offers her a way to connect with an alternate, unofficial history as told by women. Formally, this transition links her documentary-style interviews on land to the poetic space of myth that is made possible by the sea. Like glass, water suggests an initial transparency; yet, one cannot see through the sea, or adequately capture it in narrative. There is always something that escapes the author, just as Lila cannot write the past completely. As Chambers underscores, "[in the shifting currents and cultures of the Mediterranean there] is, here, too, an excess that remains as such, present

but beyond representation, that bleeds into the account, that occupies the gaps between words” (19). Dreams, especially, have their limits as forms that are already lost upon waking. The process of re-narrating history is characterized by a loss and then retrieval—a dynamic that figures both Lila’s and Djébar’s continual search to excavate marginalized or erased histories.

In this excavation, the house of glass and the caves offer two models with which to create narratives and to access history. Rather than prioritizing one over the other, *La Noubia* presents them side-by-side to highlight the problem of mediation in narration and to foreground the obstacles to vision and representation. The house of glass initially promises a fantasy of direct visual experience, whereas the cave emerges as a radical alternative reminiscent of Plato’s cave in which history and memory are figured as shadow. *La Noubia* is defined by the struggles of reconstructing Algeria’s past that is layered with cultural, linguistic, and class differences. Its multiple frames manifest a formal refusal to conform to a single, cogent narrative while creating a desire, even imperative, to attempt to do so.

I. Excavations of the Visual in “La Femme en morceau

In her 1997 short story, “La Femme en morceaux,” Djébar returned to the problem of narrating history, which she would later characterize as “[u]ne écriture de creusement, de poussée dans le noir et l’obscur !” [“a writing of digging, pushing into darkness and obscurity!”] (Djébar “Idiomes de l’exil et de l’irréductibilité” np). Her visual metaphors liken the role of the writer to that of an excavator who brings repressed and effaced histories into the open. “La Femme en morceaux” begins, quite literally, in obscurity with the image of an anonymous woman’s mutilated body in a chest at the bottom of the Tigris River. The story unfolds once the chest is pulled from the river’s depths. Djébar’s story is an act of retrieval

that gives the anonymous woman an importance and narrative of her own, which moves her from the periphery into the center. In so doing, “La Femme en morceaux” explores the embroiled relationships between past and present in what becomes the future perfect: a verb tense that allows the story to explore relationships between the seen and the unforeseen, the perceived and the unperceived. These perceptual entanglements show political, gendered, and historical complexities of how the past shapes the potentialities of the future, while the future is, in many ways, one that will have been. This dialectical temporality allows Djébar to explore the transnational links between ancient Baghdad and modern day Algeria. Yet, as with *La Noubia*, Djébar’s tale reveals a cartographic desire to map North Africa’s networks in a triangulated way that encompasses France in the dynamic between Algeria and Baghdad.

Just as Djébar’s writing process is characterized by “digging,” “La Femme en morceaux” forges multiple networks of relations: literary, imagined, and geographical networks that are characteristic of the Mediterranean. While Algeria and France border the sea, however, Baghdad clearly does not. And yet, Djébar’s short story exemplifies a pluralistic understanding of “Mediterraneans” that have been fundamental in “bringing together diverse cultures, which have themselves emerged in very diverse environments” (Abulafia 65). “La Femme en morceaux” thematizes the importance of circulation from within the Mediterranean, outwards, and back again. By concentrating both on a woman’s body and its textualization, the tale highlights the value (of objects, women, and narrative) that accrues as objects traverse and transgress different borders.

“La Femme en morceaux” appears in *Oran, langue morte*, a short story collection about the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, torture regimes and mass violence, especially against women. “La Femme en morceaux” is an embedded narrative about Atyka—a young schoolteacher in modern day Algiers—who teaches a “Tale of Three Apples” from *The 1001*

Nights to her students. The second protagonist in Djébar's story is an anonymous woman from *The 1001 Nights*—described as young and sickly—who is murdered by her husband after he falsely accuses her of infidelity. Only later does he discover that she was innocent. The remainder of the tale is about responsibility and partial vision that slowly renders clear the whole story. Djébar's retelling of *The 1001 Nights* disrupts an already nonlinear narrative and places the woman's murder at the tale's opening so that readers must assemble the narrative piecemeal in order to understand it. As readers do this, they must connect the anonymous woman from *The 1001 Nights* to Atyka, and ancient Baghdad to modern-day Algiers. The two stories progressively merge as Atyka becomes fully immersed in the "Tale of Three Apples" and imagines herself as the anonymous woman. Djébar's narrative thus has a dual lens: the two stories mirror and anticipate one another in a complex temporality as Atyka reads about fictional pasts while unknowingly charting her own death.

Djébar's story begins in the present tense with the unknown woman's body that is found dismembered in a chest. This scene exploits the readers' ignorance: no contextual clues are provided. With the crime already committed (Bloch 255), readers are confronted with a corpse; they must be detective-like in assembling the narrative clues.

Une nuit à Bagdad. Au fond, tout au fond du cours large, légèrement en pente du fleuve, un endroit entre la ville et le palais. Là, au fond de ce fleuve, le Tigre, dort un corps de jeune femme. Un corps coupé en morceaux.

Les morceaux soigneusement enveloppés d'un voile. D'un voile blanc de citadine. Un voile de lin à peine ensanglanté.

Le voile est plié dans un tapis. Un tapis du Kurdistan. Un tapis de soie et de fils d'or. Un tapis précieux." (163)

One night in Baghdad. The end—the very end—of the river's course slopes gently between the city and the palace. Here, at the bottom of this wide river, the Tigris, sleeps a young woman's body. A body cut into pieces.

The pieces are wrapped carefully in a veil, a white veil of a city woman. A linen veil, just barely soiled. Just barely bloodied.

The veil is folded inside a carpet, a carpet from Kurdistan. A carpet of gold and silk thread. A precious carpet.

The carpet, rolled half way, is kept in a coffin, a large coffin made of palm leaves. Freshly cut leaves, cut this very autumn. It is not yet winter.

The coffin made of palm leaves has been sewn carefully with yarn, good red yarn. Sewn tightly.

The coffin itself is preserved in an olivewood trunk, a sealed trunk. A heavy trunk with an ornate lock. Purchased from the best of the city's artisans.

This scene is striking in its organization around visual detail. While vision, as the first act of looking in the scene, conveys superficial beauty, revision of the scene—achieved through fragments that modify the first descriptions—communicates an underlying horror. The first line provides an example of this technique while setting the formal precedent for the passage: “There, at the bottom of the Tigris, a young woman sleeps. A body cut into pieces.” The sentence begins by specifying a geographical location (“at the bottom of the Tigris”). The information that “a young woman’s body sleeps” at the bottom of the riverbed provides an almost magical dimension, asking readers to suspend their sense of reality in order to envisage a situation in which it would be possible to sleep underwater. And yet, the final fragment, “[a] body cut into pieces” forces readers to revise the entire description. Sleeping becomes a euphemism for death; the most blunt and explicit meaning is that a woman’s mutilated body lies at the bottom of the Tigris River. In the original French, sleep (“dort”) and body (“corps”) rhyme, which unites them through sound. Yet, death (“mort”)—which rhymes with this sequence—is omitted. As the central focus of this murder scene, death is inferred but never mentioned; if death is impossible to capture visually and to fix in a single spot, in Djébar’s text it is equally hard to capture linguistically.⁵²

While this first paragraph is, quite literally, a still life—a moment of death and suspension—it gains momentum through vision and revision where what was first seen is semantically suspended until it is seen again differently. It is not that the first image gets erased, but rather that it is complemented, reduplicated, and reworked. This technique of

⁵² For more on the difficulty of seeing death, see Torlasco.

revision is furthered in the second paragraph fragment, which mentions the veil that enshrouds the woman: “The pieces are wrapped carefully in a veil, a white veil of a city woman.” The veil image is repeated twice, once without color and then again to designate its color or, more precisely, its absence thereof. Or again, “A veil slightly stained. Slightly bloodied” (163). The repetition of “slightly” (“à peine”) reinforces restraint and minimalizes the stain, which soon becomes blood. The veil is what holds the woman’s fragmented body. Djébar’s story literalizes Franz Fanon’s understanding of the veil as something that metaphorically “protects, reassures, isolates [...] Without the veil [an Algerian woman] has the impression of her body being cut up into bits, put adrift” (Fanon 59). In “La Femme en morceaux,” however, a woman is actually cut up and put adrift.

Despite the lack of firm evidence that Djébar consciously cites Fanon in her tale, this intertextual resonance creates a textual layering that mirrors the actual overlay of different fabrics. Holding the woman’s body together, the veil enforces the wrapping or layering effect through the trope of *anadiplosis*. More than simple repetition, anadiplosis designates a “reduplication” associated etymologically with a “doubling back” or folding (OED), which captures the way the woman is wrapped with the multiple fabrics holding her body together.

This scene’s optical and perceptual richness is characteristic of the fetish, which, like the woman in pieces, is enigmatic and imbued with mystery. The scintillating appearance of a fetish object echoes the word’s etymology, which describes ornamentation and artifice (Bernheimer 63).⁵³ For example, the rug from Kurdistan that covers the woman’s body is “silk and threaded gold.” The passage insists that it is “[a] precious rug.” Always reading retroactively, readers understand that “precious” is a synonym for uncommon and expensive. This scene creates value both by emphasizing the skilled artifice behind the

⁵³ See Marx.

fabrics and chest, by highlighting their rarity which is due, in part, to their either difficult to find (the geographical distance of Kurdistan) or their newness (the palm tree whose “[l]eaves [were] cut this same autumn. Winter has not yet begun”). The final emphasis on the “heavy trunk with an ornate lock” emphasizes the quality of the chest and its sturdiness. Formally, the opening paragraph ends without any furthering of the plot; like the chest, the paragraph exists initially sealed off from the rest of the story and is something that the readers, placed in the detective’s role, must crack. At the same time, however, readers are lured into the passage by decadence: by the woman in the chest and by Djébar’s use of language, which accentuates and ornaments *The 1001 Nights* tale.

This opening scene stages the problem of aesthetics in representing violence, and reveals how writing becomes complicit in rendering death beautiful, even bloodless. This scene, readers soon discover, is a rewriting of the “Tale of Three Apples” from *The 1001 Nights*. Djébar’s rendition heightens the Orientalism already present in the tale in order to draw attention to and problematize it. The intrigue in the scene becomes a critique of voyeurism in which readers participate as they become wrapped up in the partially occluded image of the woman’s body. The reader’s gaze is distracted and displaced by the fabrics covering the woman so that, in keeping with the crime genre, relationships between seeing and knowing break down. Djébar’s rewriting of the “Tale of Three Apples” blurs distinctions between the tale and the short story. While the former is defined by the question “What is going to happen?”, the short story inspires the question “What happened?” (Deleuze and Guattari 192). “La Femme en morceaux” straddles both questions, and draws readers into a complex temporality that entangles the past and present, and the seen and unseen. The reader assumes the position of a curious voyeur who seeks to unravel the fabrics embalming the woman in order to discover what happened. Such unraveling of fabric

results in an unraveling of meaning and narrative that contain the answers to both what has taken place and what is about to unfold.

This unraveling between seeing and knowing, past and future first occurs at the public level of governance, when the Caliph of Baghdad and his friends Djaffar and Massour go into the town for a stroll and ultimately discover the woman's body. Disguised as townsmen, they move freely among the villagers without attracting attention. They have power over the townsmen because they are able to see the villagers while, inversely, the villagers are ignorant of the men's true identity. When the Caliph and his friends encounter a fisherman, however, this dynamic changes. Bemoaning his misfortune at not having fished anything from the river to feed his family, he is given by the Caliph and his friends 100 dinars to cast his net in again to see what he can retrieve. The fisherman believes he is speaking only to pedestrians (165). He gladly takes their money, unaware of their socio-economic and political power in the town, and casts his net. He retrieves the olivewood chest.

If seeing is equated with knowing and if knowledge is power, then the Caliph and his friends are stripped of power with the introduction of the olivewood box, since they are ignorant of its contents. Readers gain an upper hand since they know what has just been discovered. They are put in a position of anticipation and *déjà-vu* in the most literal sense. When Djaffar and Massour take the chest back to the palace, open it, and see the unknown woman's body, they refer to her body in specifically visual terms as a spectacle to behold; her body is "blanche comme le vierge d'argent" ["as white as virgin silver"] (166). In French, the word silver ("argent") also means money; the body is imbued with the value of a once beautiful, unknown woman who was innocent ("virgin") of the crime.

The process of revision in “Tale of Three Apples” is a process of reconstruction, whereby the characters in the story and the readers want to “see” and know the identity of the young woman. The narrative moves from the public spectacle of her dead body into the private sphere to reveal an undoing of her domestic life. Just as economic inequalities figure largely in *La Nouba* as staging divisions between Algerian peasant women and Lila, “La Femme en morceaux” centers on class in relation to Baghdad city life. From the opening pages, the short story explores social class and the extent to which the bourgeois woman is constrained by social expectations of her as a “proper” wife and mother. The still unnamed woman is introduced through her social status: she was married to a man who, like her father, is an honorable bourgeois (166). With three children, the couple seems to have an ideal life and yet, as the opening scene foreshadows, outward appearances are deceiving. She is overwhelmed by her children and sick; she is despondent and exhibits indifference to her husband. The affective, physical, and psychological barriers between the couple become the narrative’s central focus and problem to resolve.

The cure to the wife’s illness comes in the form of an apple, which she once enjoyed with her husband when they were first married. The wife cathects her hopes onto the apple, an object of nostalgia and desire, which she creates a mental picture of it in her imagination. This image is so vivid that it was “[c]omme si l’envie frustrante se met à l’habiter lui-même; le fruit lui devient obsessionnel” “[a]s if a frustrated desire became internalized in him; for the husband the fruit became an obsession”] (177). While the wife fantasizes about the ability to feel pleasure again, the husband is resolved to cure her. The couple is united by a common, private vision. Yet, there are no apples to be found because they are out of season. The husband goes to the marketplace to find one, to no avail:

Des caravanes venues de loin auraient pu en apporter. Or c’est le moment des transactions des dattes, de leurs qualités diverses, de l’alcool de dattes, ... On trouve

aussi des mangues, des ananas, des fruits étranges venus de Chine ou de plus loin encore ! Pas une seule pomme ! (176)

Caravans from afar should have been able to bring them. For now is the season of dates, of their diverse varieties, of their diverse alcohol... One finds also mangoes, pineapples, strange fruits from China or from even still further away! Not a single apple!

The marketplace scene is a counterpoint to the description of the dead woman in the trunk, which began Djébar's story. Both scenes have rich visual details that form a tableau of colors. While the first scene invokes highly detailed static images to create texture and a sense of semantic wrapping that covers the dead body, this market scene bursts with color and movement, yet ultimately fails to provide an apple, just as the first scene does not create a clear picture of the woman's body. The marketplace scene shows Baghdad's centrality in the global market place. This scene, paired with the initial description of the woman in the trunk, reveals the way the semantic and visual reinforce one another in defining desire, which is augmented through strong visual images and the sensual quality of Djébar's narrative.

Sight is not enough to satiate desire and to repair the problem of alienation in the narrative. After peeping into gardens and threatening to steal an apple, the husband finally procures three apples and brings them to his wife who barely glances at the fruit and averts her eyes when he kisses her (182). More than ingratitude, this moment reveals a failure, as the cliché goes, to see eye-to-eye; it points to the couple's inability to know and understand one another. The plot thereafter gains momentum and suspense precisely in moments where things are not visible, or only partially so. In the most deadly encounter which sets the murder plot in motion, the husband sees a slave walking down the street with a shiny apple in his hand. For fun, the slave, identified in racially problematic terms as "the Black," lies when asked where he got the apple and makes the husband believe that he is his wife's lover.

Surface appearances are deceiving, and this scene is an explicit critique of trusting initial impressions and narratives that seem to confirm those visions. More than undoing the relationship between sight and knowledge, this moment troubles the relationship between truth and sight. Things are not always what they appear. The anonymous woman is victim to the slave who stirs up trouble by playing on the husband's fear of being made a cuckold; she is also victim to her husband, who murders her in a bloody rage. Readers learn this background story piecemeal so that their fragmented understanding of the tale mirrors the woman's dismembered body. The clue to the woman's murder lies in a seemingly trivial detail: her son sneaks out of the yard with one of her precious apples to go for a stroll through town. The slave sees the boy and takes the apple. As in a detective story, the narrative insists on events and details that are discarded as irrelevant but that are crucial to the narrative in hindsight.

The slave's and son's involvement—if initially innocent—shape the woman's murder in crucial ways. These details revise the townspeople's assessment of the crime and put into question who is ultimately responsible for the woman's death: the husband or the slave. The husband's confession makes the townspeople reconsider the case and see it “à nouveau,” or afresh (193). This phrase is fundamental in capturing the movement of the narrative as a whole, which operates “à nouveau” with each new revision and detail. A continual movement of assessment, revision, and reevaluation propels the plot forward until the townspeople decide who is ultimately culpable. Yet, what was the name of the slave? If he is to blame, as the townspeople contend, how can they find him?

Since the slave cannot be found, the Caliph threatens to kill Djaffar as retribution for the woman's death. True to the suspense genre, it is only in the minutes leading up to his death that Djaffar sees his daughter and “[i]l a senti une boule mouvante contre la poitrine

enfantine: quelque jouet qu'elle cache sous le tissu" ["[h]e felt a moving ball under the child's chest: some toy that she hid under the fabric [of her shirt]" (195). What is key, however, is that Djaffar only felt the object moving under his daughter's clothes; he did not actually see the toy. While the narrative is in the third person and appears to be impartial, it is in fact a reflection of Djaffar's inner thoughts and assumptions based on only the object's shape. This assumption quickly dissipates when he asks what is under her clothes and his daughter exclaims that it is not a toy, but an apple (195). The scene first appears to be unrelated to the main events of the narrative. Once the apple is uncovered, however, the scene is fundamental to saving Djaffar's life and to completing the narrative puzzle. The clue was the apple itself, which traveled from Bassora to the wife's house, into the city, and to the palace where the dead woman's body was kept for most of the narrative.

II. Narrative Circulation: *The 1001 Nights in Algeria*

The apple in Djébar's adaptation of a "Tale of Three Apples" stands for the larger role of circulation and movement in the short story. Formally and typographically, Djébar's narrative oscillates between *The 1001 Nights* tale and the embedded story of Atyka: a young schoolteacher in Algiers who reads the tale aloud to her students. While the "Tale of Three Apples" appears in plain font, Atyka's narrative is in italics. This visual demarcation furthers the sense of moving back and forth between each story at a textual level. Much of the narrative, in fact, shows Atyka coming and going from school. Walking is the activity that permits her to prepare her lessons as she becomes increasingly immersed in the "Tale of Three Apples." Atyka dreams of her class and "descend à pied, légère, des hauteurs de sa banlieue proche: sous ses pieds, à l'horizon, la mer immuable" ["descends, walking, lightly from the heights of the nearby suburb: under her feet, on the horizon, was the immutable

sea”] (168). Walking allows Atyka to go physically from her house to school, and to travel imaginatively from the ancient Baghdad of *The 1001 Nights* to present-day Algeria.

While the act of walking enables Atyka’s imagination, the role of the Mediterranean—invoked only once—is more enigmatic. The narrative insists on Algiers as a port city and on the vastness of the bay as a catalyst for creativity as well as a conduit to narrative possibilities. In the passage above, the sea and the act of looking merge, thereby permitting Atyka to imagine that she exists in the place of the woman in pieces: “Sur le chemin du retour, tout en jetant un regard à l’immense baie là-bas, Atyka est heureuse de s’imaginer presque parmi ce couple” [“On the road returning home, all in a simple look towards the immense bay over there, Atyka is happy...happy to imagine herself almost between this couple”] (180). It is in the act of gazing at the Mediterranean that her interior life, as imagined through “A Tale of Three Apples,” comes alive. Just as the sea transports Lila into the caves that spark her dreams and allow her to connect with the past, in “La Femme en morceaux,” the sea facilitates Atyka’s love of literature. The “immense bay” facilitates her imagination and inner life, which, along with the French language, fuels her desire to exist in a space of transit between cultures and creative realms. While scholars have theorized the Mediterranean’s porous geographical and cultural borders,⁵⁴ Djébar’s tale reveals the sea to be a space of creative potentiality that allows one to see the world differently, and to connect to different literary traditions.

Atyka’s imagination is expressly visual. When she immerses herself in the story, she is transported by images of *The 1001 Nights* that continue to haunt her (180). Towards the end of the story the narrator says: “il faudra bien revenir, se dit Atyka, rêveuse, au corps de La Femme en morceaux que le récit surabondant en épisodes de diverses couleurs a si vite

⁵⁴ See Chambers.

écarté” [“We must return, Atyka tells herself, dreaming, to the body of the woman in pieces, which the tale with its overflowing episodes with different colors, distances itself from so quickly”] (207). This citation calls for a return to the story’s beginning, which functions simultaneously as a point of departure and of return. Furthermore, color is the visual analogue to the many dramatic or “colorful” events in the narrative. Yet, the insistence on visual abundance seems, even within the narrative, to overlook the centrality of obscurity (of the woman’s dead body), and partially visible moments (the woman’s son sneaking away). There is, therefore, more visual variation within “La Femme en morceaux” than even the narrative acknowledges. Finally, while the colors are defined by distance, the word in French “écarté” (“distance”) embeds the word “carte,” “map:” while the colors become distant, they map visual connections between Atyka in present days Algiers, ancient Baghdad, and even France, which assumes an important role because, as the text makes explicit, Atyka reads Galland’s translation of *The 1001 Nights* in French.

Atyka metaphorically moves through the spaces of translation and language, which then permit her to enter into different worlds and realms; it is this intellectual and linguistic mobility—or circulation—that causes her death. On the last day that she teaches a “Tale of Three Apples,” five armed men walk into her classroom, announcing that they—as rebel militants—are the moral “control” and are there for Atyka. Just as the woman in pieces from a “Tale of Three Apples” was accused of sexual promiscuity, Atyka is charged with promiscuity not only in teaching a tale with sexual overtones, but by conducting her class in French—something which the rebels consider treasonous. The appearance of Algerian nationalists is part of an increasing “self-reflexivity in Djébar’s work” that creatively illustrates “what historian Benjamin Stora has identified as a repetition from one war [Algerian War of Independence] to another [the Algerian Civil War]” (O’Riley 11). By

comparison, the unnamed woman represents the violence of the Algerian War, and Atyka's death captures the enduring postcolonial conflict born out of the 1950s. In this cycle of violence, the second trauma confirms the first in a model of history that is based on iteration.⁵⁵

Atyka is ultimately shot for her "treachery" in what becomes the spectacle of her death—a spectacle that complements and bookends the opening image of the dismembered woman in the olivewood box. Atyka's death unfolds in front of her students with assassins who are depicted in such a grotesque manner that they resemble caricatures: they are armed and one has a crazy demeanor and looks like a comedian cross-dresser (Djebar 208). The fifth man appears especially carnivalesque and theatrical with his hunchback, high-pitched laugh, and erratic demeanor. In a blending of reality and fantasy, the students are momentarily unsure if the man is a fictional character from a tale (208). While Djebar writes the "Tale of Three Apples" into the context of modern-day Algeria, the tale's fantastical world shapes how Atyka's students interpret who the militants are. Thus, *The 1001 Nights* is so all-consuming that the students fleetingly believe that the militants stepped off the tale's pages and into the classroom.

Atyka's students are jarred back into the reality of their situation when the hunchback commands them to close their eyes (207). Shot in the chest and then decapitated in front of her students, Atyka is robbed not only of her life, but of her vision, as well. The act of looking is displaced onto Atyka's student, Omar, who "du coin le plus reculé de la classe, le seul à rester assis, a vu. Il voit et il a vu le bossu s'approcher du corps basculé d'Atyka, d'une main lui révéler la tête en la soulevant par ses longs cheveux" ["from the furthest corner of the classroom, the only one remaining seated, saw. He sees and he saw the

⁵⁵ See Wegner and Benjamin.

hunchback approaching Atyka's wavering body, one hand picking up her head by her long hair"] (211). As the man does this, he slits her throat. The verb "to see" ("vu") captures the complex temporality of the moment. Oscar saw ("a vu") and still sees ("voit") this scene. Rather than a contradiction, these two verbs reveal a complex temporality in which the past persists into the present. He is haunted by Atyka's murder that continually plays out before his eyes so that the moment, while relegated to the past, is internalized within Omar in what becomes an eternal present.

In the murder mystery genre, the investigator is often confronted with the same complex temporality, for the past "is anything but external to him. What appears in front of the investigator's eyes is not the past as it was, but the past as it will have been in relation to the time of his search" (Torlasco 4). Djébar's "La Femme en morceaux" adheres to this same temporal logic. Atyka begins in the position of the investigators vis-à-vis *The 1001 Nights*, which exists within her as creative inspiration. While reading "Tale of Three Apples," Atyka reads about her own death that is still ahead of her because she identifies with the woman in pieces, but it is also behind her. The principal mystery resides in Atyka's death, which neither readers nor Atyka anticipate fully.

One of the final scenes returns to the figure of the olivewood chest. This time, however, there are two chests: one for the anonymous woman and one for Atyka. All of the same details from the opening scene are present with one important exception: the verbs are in the future instead of the continuous present. After Atyka's murder, "[l]es deux coffres seront placées à l'intérieur d'une caisse de bois d'olivier" ["[t]he two chests will be placed in the interior of an olivewood chest"] where Atyka will rest (214). The future tense, while nodding to the past in its repetition of now familiar images, propels the narrative forward and gestures to how the violence against women will continue into the future. One mutilated

body will replace another. More than a simple merging of the past and present, “La Femme en morceaux” shows that the past lays the conditions of possibility for the future, which becomes the future perfect tense. What goes entirely unnamed in “La Femme en morceaux” is the Algerian War of Independence—the war that created a volatility that would later become manifest during the Algerian Civil War of the 1990s. The short story, however, stays within the realm of aesthetics and visuality as it concludes with Omar, who roams the street of 1990s Algiers:

[Il] parcourt des jours et des jours la ville, depuis chaque aube griffée de rose jusqu'à l'heure du couvre-feu.

La ville blanche? Omar ne supporte plus que le blanc: les sachets de lait d'un litre, dans un plastique bon marché, vendus partout à l'entrée des marches; il ne regarde que les mendiants, chaque soir, accroupies sur le bord des places populeuses et qui allaitent plusieurs bébés à même le trottoir. (214-5)

[He] spent days and days in the city, from the rose-lined daybreak to until the curfew.

The white city? Omar could only tolerate the color white. The small liters of milk, sold in cheap plastic bags everywhere at the entrance of stores. Every evening he sees only beggars squatting alongside the crowded squares nursing numerous babies, right on the street.

In a story that privileges vibrant colors, this penultimate scene paints a bleaker picture that lacks vibrancy and detail of the earlier narrative. Unlike the rare apples, the milk is unexceptional and sold everywhere. White, a convergence of all the colors, assumes the symbolic importance of cultural amnesia and the perpetuation of violence in Djébar's writings. It also stands in for the white page: stories not told and voices unheard.⁵⁶ This last image in “La Femme en morceaux” reveals the starkness of Algiers' socio-economic situation: a city haunted by poverty where cheap plastic bags, milk cartons, and homeless women lie in the streets. In preferring this scene to literature and to Atyka's lessons, Omar chooses images defined not by hope, as exemplified by her lessons, but by perceptual

⁵⁶ For more on the color white, writing, and amnesia, see Djébar's, *Le Blanc de l'Algérie*.

indecipherability, which figures economic devastation, as well as historical and cultural amnesia.

While the last scene of Djébar's story, narrated through Omar's eyes, prioritizes indecipherability and amnesia, it nonetheless continues the short story's formal investment in fragmentation and circulation, as exemplified by the milk cartons and plastic bags wafting in the streets. These objects echo the movement of the apples in the "Tale of Three Apples," that travel—from the husband, to the wife, to her child, and to the slave. The apples, thus, thematize the transmission of narratives across different borders. In engaging with such circulations, Djébar adds textual layers to a narrative that already foregrounds different forms of layering, beginning with the woman wrapped in lavish fabrics in the olivewood chest. If the Mediterranean is often theorized as a crossroads region,⁵⁷ "La Femme en morceaux" reveals different textual and aesthetic mappings between Algeria, France, and Baghdad. The Mediterranean keeps texts in circulation, whether as objects of trade or as textual fragments, which continually undergo adaptation, translation, and re-appropriation.

Atyka's death, therefore, marks a visual and textual interruption that captures the reworking of narrative. Omar takes up where Atyka left off. In so doing, his narrative initially appears to escape the Orientalist and fetishistic undertones of both *The 1001 Nights* and Atyka's engagement with it. Instead, Omar paints a bleaker picture of Algeria, which gestures to the postcolonial condition of the Mediterranean as ravaged by colonial violence. Yet, even in this move away from romanticized narratives, Omar sets out in search of Atyka's voice through which to continue the memory of the anonymous woman in the "Tale of Three Apples." Consequently, the narrative is subsumed back into *The 1001 Nights*, and

⁵⁷ See Bennison.

reveals a cycle of beauty and ornamentation, on the one hand, and violence, on the other. This dynamic marks a return to the logic of the fetish. In an attempt to rewrite the tale from the *Arabian Nights*, Djébar's narrative shows the complexity and difficulty of such a project. In so doing, she unknowingly highlights the problem of writing the Mediterranean and its history as marked by subversion and desire.

III. The Mediterranean as Film and Mosaic in *La Femme sans sépulture*

Despite these difficulties, Djébar continually engages with such rewritings. *La Femme sans sépulture* (2002) is a revision of *La Noubba* and an elaboration of Zoulikha's story; it also builds on "La Femme en morceaux" by furthering Djébar's interest in the intersections of history, performance, and spectacle. Unlike the episodic and sporadic style of *La Noubba*, *La Femme sans sépulture* is structured around a series of monologues, each narrated from the point of view of the multiple female protagonists dedicated to keeping Zoulikha's legacy alive, including Zoulikha's daughters, Mina and Hania, and her fortune-teller friend, Damme Lionne. The novel begins with the voice of a filmmaker, who was once Zoulikha's daughter's neighbor. Although she remains nameless in the novel, she, like Lila in *La Noubba*, is a stranger who lives in France and identifies as French. She was, however, born in Algeria and returns to her native town to film and chronicle Zoulikha's life.

The filmmaker gathers different protagonists' memories of Zoulikha and, at three separate points in the novel, readers hear directly from Zoulikha who speaks from the grave. While "La Femme en morceaux" is structured around a duality between the anonymous woman and Atyka, which allowed Djébar to experiment with different temporalities, *La Femme sans sépulture* represents her latest attempt to write a multiplicity of voices and temporalities within a single novel about disappearance, marginalization, and gender. By

prioritizing women's voices, the novel draws on the tradition of *The 1001 Nights*, but works against female censorship and the power dynamics of the original tale that often affirm unequal gender relations. Djébar attempts to empower women by imbuing them with a strong narrative voice, rather than having them assume the position of passive agents or objects of the male gaze. Rather than telling their stories under the threat of death as Scheherazade did, the women in *La Femme sans sépulture* commemorate Zoulikha's life in what the narrative calls "une large fresque féminine" ["a large female fresco"] (Prélude). The Prélude anticipates the novel's reliance on visual art to convey the many celebrated voices in the novel. Each voice, this citation suggests, will complement the others in what will become a tableau of stories narrated for and by women.

This celebration is the most clearly articulated revision of Djébar's narratives, as the protagonist makes her objective clear in the opening pages: to tell Zoulikha's forgotten heroism during the Algerian War of Independence. Similar to "La Femme en morceaux," the protagonist must retrieve Zoulikha's history from obscurity and make it known to contemporary France. The narrator begins, "L'histoire de Zoulikha: l'inscrire enfin, ou plutôt la réinscrire" ["The history of Zoulikha: to inscribe it finally, or rather to re-inscribe it"] (13). More than a remake or adaptation, both *La Nouba* and "La Femme en morceaux" suggest the extent to which Zoulikha's story haunted Djébar, and was a narrative that she felt compelled to rewrite repeatedly in order to home and excavate the multiple layers of her history, as well as Algeria's. The protagonist alludes to these layers when she mentions the town's multiple names: it was first known as Césarée and then later was called Cherchell (Prélude). This name change reveals the semantic inscriptions within the town, much like the Roman ruins in *La Nouba* that attest to North Africa as a place of multiple, transnational conquests that often define Mediterranean history.

The filmmaker's challenge is to capture this historical complexity and do justice to Zoulikha's story. Yet, despite her past proximity to the women she interviews, the filmmaker knows nothing about Zoulikha's story or her daughters. *La Femme sans sépulture* tries to learn that story through a series of interviews and camera lenses. The novel's formal interest focuses on how to translate a cinematic vocabulary into words in order to capture the ways in which narrative is predicated on images. In other words, the novel incorporates cinematic references directly into the novel, so as to define *La Femme sans sépulture* as inherently interested in bringing visual technologies into prose. For example, the filmmaker, referred to as "the visitor" remembers her film, alluding to *La Noubra*: "la caméra fouille lentement l'espace vide des artères, des places et des statues sans regard. Comme si Zoulikha restée sans sépulture flottait, invisible, perceptible au-dessus de la cité rousse" ["the camera slowly probed the empty spaces of the roads, the places and the statues with no gazes. As if Zoulikha, remaining without a tomb, floated, invisible, but perceptible above the red city"] (Prélude). While feminist film critics show the cultural and political constructions and ideologies behind film by undoing the seamless and "natural" identification between the viewers and the camera,⁵⁸ Djébar introduces the camera into her novel to the same end. She points to the camera as a technology that produces meaning from a particular and always biased vantage point. Furthermore, Djébar employs the term artères ["arteries"] to describe the town's streets, thereby personifying the city as feminine and heightening the relationship between a camera and the female body as one defined by voyeurism, pleasure, and penetration.

A tension exists between the wish to tell Zoulikha's story and the fear that doing so would fulfill viewers' fetishistic desires, which would misrepresent and exploit Zoulikha. Her

⁵⁸ See Silverman and Metz.

daughters reject film and cinema more generally because, for them, filming their mother's life would be tantamount to killing her. Hania, Zoulikha's oldest daughter, most often expresses this concern: "Face aux journalistes [...] j'ai l'impression, en déroulant des mots [...] en parlant de Zoulikha, il me semble que, à mon tour, je la tue !" ["In front of journalists [...] I have the impression [...] when I talk myself about Zoulikha, it seems to me that, in turn, I kill her"] (50). Hania invokes the problem of the camera, and in objectifying the dead for the sake of a distant, impersonal audience. For her, television is especially intrusive, for it allows filmmakers to make "une image projetée n'importe comment" ["an image projected in any which way"] (54). Hania's objects to how images are divorced from their historical and personal context. As a result, they are open to commodification and the whims of an audience who can interpret the images any way they want.

While film threatens to reduce history to a series of pastiches, *La Femme sans sépulture* counterbalances this threat with Dame Lionne (Lla Lbia in Arabic), the town fortuneteller and Zoulikha's close friend, who represents a mythical "mémoire pure" ["pure memory"] (167). She embodies a timeless and unadulterated history, which she interprets according to Spanish Tarot cards. Her visions, unlike the filmmaker, are based on her connection to spirits, the past, and her ability to foresee the future. Yet, it is precisely the future that Dame Lionne refuses to predict. She is firm in her conviction that one should recall only the past and never speculate about the future. While Hania worries about the commercialization of television and the impoverishment of Zoulikha's image, Dame Lionne tells a similar story in relation to fortunetelling. Two bourgeois women come to her, demanding that she tell them their fortune. When she refuses, they try to tempt her with money: "Elles apportaient leur or, elles allaient dénouer leurs mouchoirs pour laisser étinceler les pièces de louis anciennes... Elles voulaient me tenter, me croyant dans le besoin, alors que le seul besoin de

Lui” [“They brought their gold, they were going to untie their handkerchiefs to let their old Louis pieces sparkle...They wanted to tempt me, thinking I was in need, when I only need Him”] (28). In this interaction, the bourgeois women hope to buy visions of their future as if it were just another commodity to purchase. Dame Lionne, as one of the only contacts to Zoulikha and her mythic past, refuses to join the marketplace or to be influenced by material concerns. Instead, she attests to the impossibility of purchasing a sense of history or, in the related case of film, making Zoulikha’s life into a sensationalized motion picture or a television series.

As opposed to *La Nouba*, Zoulikha figures much more prominently in *La Femme sans sépulture*. While many scholars have studied Zoulikha as a ghostly presence symbolizing the spectrality of colonialism,⁵⁹ she also embodies a grounded materiality and another tortured body in the Algerian War of Independence. With half-closed eyes, she is led off a helicopter into a forest, which smells like napalm. Instead of an overly dramatic vision of death, Zoulikha remarks its banality and inevitability (219), thereby deflating the mounting tension leading up to her torture. This moment immediately undermines the potential for pathos and melodrama that defined the death of the anonymous woman in “La Femme en morceaux.” Rejecting a martyr narrative, Zoulikha refuses to satisfy her torturers’ desire to dominate her physically or sexually:

Torture ou volupté, ainsi réduite soudain à rien, un corps—peau jetée en dépouille [...] torture ou volupté, mon corps—peut-être parce que corps de femme et ayant enfanté tant de fois—se met à ouvrir ses plaies, ses issues, à déverser son flux, en somme il s’exhale, s’émiette, se vide sans pour autant s’épuiser! (218)

Torture or sexual pleasure, so easily reduced to nothing, a corpse—skin thrown like a hide [...] Torture or desire, my body—maybe because it was a woman’s body and having given birth many times—began to open its wounds, its openings, to rid itself, in short it exhales, it crumbles, it empties itself without exhausting itself!

⁵⁹ See O’Reily.

In a passage that maps the images of sex and torture, childbirth and love, Zoulikha shows the countless forms of violence and violations against the female body that are anything but spectral. Instead, these acts enact countless aggressions throughout a woman's lifetime. If Zoulikha's images are produced out of her half-closed eyes that reveal a certain blindness, in the final lines, however, she describes herself buried in a ditch, "c'est là, yeux ouverts, dans tout mon corps pourrissant, que je t'attends" ["it is there, eyes open, in my putrefying body, that I wait for you"] (234). Her eyes witness what will come, what has been, and the importance of witnessing what, although unspoken as such, is an appropriate way and form for telling her story and, by extension, Algeria's history.

Yet, just as *La Femme sans sépulture* prioritizes different female voices, it narrates multiple histories of the Mediterranean. Similar to *La Noubia*, the novel describes the roman ruins, thereby showing the city as a space inhabited by multiple communities, including Berbers, Greco-Phoenicians, and later Ottomans ("Cherchell" Encyclopedia Britannica). The town first had Latin, Berber, and then Arabic names; in the nineteenth century, the town officially became Cherchell, which is the French version of its Arabic name. The changes in the town's name reflect its changing colonial history and the shifting Mediterranean forces that occupied it. In the twentieth century, it became a popular tourist spot for Europeans and became known as the "Algerian Riviera" in the 1940s. The protagonist in *La Femme sans sépulture* is especially vocal about referring to the town as Césarée and not Cherchell in order to resist French colonial appropriations of her hometown (Djebar 13).

These histories are captured visually in *La Femme sans sépulture* in the form of a mosaic on display at the town's museum.⁶⁰ The mosaic provides a model for telling history:

⁶⁰ "Les oiseaux de la mosaïque" in French. This mosaic is most likely a reference to the actual mosaic called "Odysseus and the Sirens" held at the Bardo National Museum in Tunis. For more, see Huth.

(Je revois les images). Trois femmes ou, plus exactement, trois femmes-oiseaux, oui! Je crois même que personne n'a jamais ainsi dessiné les femmes, dans aucune des mosaïques si célèbre de la région, ni à Carthage, ni à Timgad, ni à Leptis Magna. Je suis prête à le parier. Des femmes, celles de Césarée! De longues pattes d'oiseaux prêts à s'envoler au-dessus de la mer—c'est une scène marine, elles sur le rivage, contemplant un grand vaisseau au centre de la scène, flottant au dessus des vagues. Leurs faces sont si belles, leurs couleurs nuancées ont traversé les siècles et conservent leur éclat. (116-7)

(I see again the images). Three women, or more precisely three bird-women, yes! I think that no one has been able to draw women like that, in none of the other famous mosaics of the region, neither in Carthage, nor in Timgad, nor in Leptis Magna. I'd be ready to bet on it. Women, those from Césarée! With long bird claws ready to fly away above the sea—it is a marine scene, with the woman on the coast contemplating a big ship in the middle of the scene, floating above the waves. Their faces are so beautiful, their nuanced colors traversed centuries and preserved their brightness.

This citation begins with the parenthetical “I see again,” which establishes this ekphrastic moment as a revision explicitly connected with the narrator’s imagination. The image, entitled “Ulysses and the Sirens,” permits the narrator to map Cherchell’s geography within North Africa, which is important because this vision gestures outward toward the sea and to other cities, such as Carthage, in the Mediterranean. In the image, the women-bird figures are simultaneously re-inscribed within a different mythology, one not centering on men as exemplified in the figure of Ulysses, but on the women of Césarée who, from the point of view of the narrator, come into focus in the mosaic. It captures visually North Africa’s deep history and becomes associated with Césarée’s future with its colors and shapes that, archived in a museum, will continue to maintain its “nuanced colors” that have “traversed centuries and preserved their brightness” (117).

Historical continuity and memory are depicted in artistic and visual terms. The mosaic is the centerpiece of *La Femme sans sépulture*, which is the visual analogy to the novel. In *La Nouba*, the aesthetic ideal was a house of glass and the sea cave’s fire, and “La Femme en morceaux” focused on the apples as textual objects of contemplation and circulation. In

La Femme sans sépulture, however, the mosaic celebrates movement with the figures of the birds, especially with Odysseus, the traveler searching tirelessly for his home. The narrator explains: “Je l’entends, et je me trouve presque dans la situation d’Ulysse, le voyageur qui ne s’est pas bouché les oreilles de cire, sans toutefois risquer de traverser la frontière de la mort pour cela” [“I hear [stories], and I find myself almost in Odysseus, the traveler who did not block his ears with wax, without once and for all risking to traverse the frontiers of death for this”] (236). The narrator identifies herself as Odysseus, thereby rewriting that role as feminine and placing herself in the position of the writer-traveler—displaced not by harsh winds and sirens, but by the webs of history. Through the mosaic’s image, the novel explores Césarée’s larger relationship to the Mediterranean as represented by interconnections between Greek myth, Roman Ruins, especially the Roman circus ruins which are in close proximity to the town’s Italian inspired streets with their Rococo style (186). The town’s architecture, in fact, is mosaic-like in the way it combines different styles associated with diverse periods and cultures of the Mediterranean. This visual hybridity thus speaks to the town’s own cultural and social multiplicity.

The image of the Mediterranean as a mosaic is a well-known trope in Mediterranean Studies. In describing the sea, Ferdinand Braudel reproached scholars for their lack of holistic approach. He critiques scholars who only home in on one aspect of the Mediterranean and fail to see its “history of constant repetition, ever reoccurring cycles” (20). The mosaic figure permits him to demonstrate visually his more global approach to the Mediterranean. It additionally serves as the visual analogy to Braudel’s famous concept of the “longue durée,” which underscores a deep history in which the lingering structures of the past continue to shape the present. Braudel’s mosaic initially suggests multiplicity, which conjures up the Mediterranean’s visual richness. The mosaic in Djébar’s *La Femme sans*

sépulture belies a desire to glorify female solidarity and to resuscitate women's effaced histories. In so doing, Djébar infuses the mosaic with a specifically gendered history and uses it to revive marginalized histories which, like the mosaic's nuanced colors, have traversed the centuries.

IV. Masking and Unmasking: Social Struggles in the Mediterranean

In lyricizing women's histories via the mosaic and in prioritizing figures of harmony, Djébar's novel temporarily occludes the importance of social class and the material realities that shaped women's struggles during the war. *La Femme sans sépulture*, however, also shows Cherchell to be shaped greatly by class dynamics within the Mediterranean, which become manifest in actual moments of masking and substitution that show the necessity of conforming to certain appearances for revolutionary and political ends. Social standing is associated especially with the Maltese presence in the city during the War. They looked down on the Cherchell inhabitants "[c]omme si ces Maltais, ces Européens d'ici, ils la connaissaient, la France. Ils l'appelaient « leur mère », eux qui n'étaient de nulle part" ["[a]s if these Maltese, the Europeans from here, knew France. They called it "their mother," those people who were from nowhere"] (33). Claiming France as their mother allowed the Maltese a feeling of moral and ethnic superiority, which the novel communicates when describing a racist incident between Zoulikha and a Maltese woman who stereotypically called her "Fatima" in the streets, thereby assuming she is a "stereotypical" Moorish woman (23). This scene, one of the first in the novel to show Zoulikha's courage, describes how Zoulikha responded by calling the woman "Marie," thereby consciously overlooking the specificity of her cultural identity as Maltese, and giving her a stereotypically Italian name. More than just indicative of racism, the divisions between the Maltese and the Arab and Berber

communities are above all socio-economic for the Maltese are “[l]es plus riches parmi les Européens, en tout cas” “[t]he richest among the Europeans] (23).

La Femme sans sépulture quickly reveals the social hierarchies present in Cherchell during the War of Independence; yet, unlike in *La Nouba*, it is especially social class that Djébar explores in her revision of Zoulikha’s story—divisions that she explored within the context of “La Femme en morceaux” and ancient Baghdad, but which she brings to the fore in her discussion of contemporary Algeria. Zoulikha’s class position, however, is greatly revised in *La Femme sans sépulture*, for the narrative explains that her father was well off, able to keep his tract of land, and was considered a good man. It is Zoulikha’s dedication to the people of Algeria and to freedom that sets her apart from her father who looked down, for example, on her first marriage because her husband was a commoner.

Social mobility assumes a great importance in *La Femme sans sépulture* as Zoulikha attempts to navigate between the town and the mountains where the resistance fighters prepare their attacks on the French during the War. Her task is to go unnoticed as she moves from the town to the mountains and back again. To accomplish this, Zoulikha dresses as if she were a poor woman:

Déguisée en vieille—elle, alors si belle—, elle enlevait son dentier, elle tirait ses cheveux et les dissimulait sous une coiffe de paysanne, comme on les aime ici, d’une serge d’un noir luisant et orange ; elle ajoutait un vieux pan de drap usé sur sa tête et ses épaules, comme si elle était pauvre. (Elle qui aurait pu vivre dans la ville richement, mais tout leur argent, à elle et à El Hadj, était versé, en grande partie, d’abord à la *medersa*, puis à « l’organisation », puisque le temps de la lutte ouverte avait sonné !) (80-1)

Dressed as an old woman—she who was so beautiful—, she took out her dentures, pulled back her hair and tucked it beneath a peasant headdress, like they like here, made of a black shiny twill and orange; she added an old shirt tail from a used sheet on her head and shoulders, as if she were poor. (She who could have lived lucratively in the city, but poured their money, hers and her husband El Hadj’s, in large part, first into the school, then into “the organization” because the time for open struggle had sounded.

Zoulikha's heroism becomes defined as giving up her class privilege, and joining the so-called "masses" in their fight against colonization. Simultaneously, however, what this passage emphasizes is the importance of choice: Zoulikha was beautiful, but disguised herself to appear unkempt in order to fulfill the preconceived idea of a peasant woman. Class centers on the invisible or rather the visible: she chooses a guise so as to go unnoticed or, in more visual terms, to be erased as Zoulikha herself will later be when, after her death, she will disappear.

The scene of Zoulikha dressing up as a peasant is reversed after her disappearance, when her eldest daughter, Hania, goes to a French lawyer in search of information about her mother and "[a]insi, habillée comme une Européenne, on pouvait me prendre pour une Corse, une juive, bref une femme de chez eux" ["[s]o, dressed like a European, one could take [her] for a Corsican, a Jew, in brief, one of their women"] (58-9). While Zoulikha's disguise shows that one can "put on" a position of social class to resemble the invisible masses, her daughter later demonstrates the reverse need to appear sophisticated and European.

This dynamics of multi-directional veiling and unveiling shows the tenuous nature of perception and the precariousness of what is visible—which is inevitably contingent on the perceiver's position (class and otherwise). The novel therefore provides a creative answer and active re-vision of the multiplicity of Algerian history as a mosaic of women's perspectives and of different visual modes. Each main character, while telling her story, inhabits a particular vantage point so that the novel becomes a form of visual experimentation. The mosaic resembles a multiplicity of gazes—ways of seeing and perceiving one's self in relation to others in the act of narrating the past.

V. Conclusion: Between Frames: Djebbar's Visual and Textual Aesthetics

In all three of Djebbar's works, the narrator takes up and challenges the textual and visual frames of *The 1001 Nights*. In so doing, Djebbar reinserts women into the history of postcolonial Algeria. *La Nouba*'s models of the glass house and the cave reveal Djebbar's interest in seemingly conflicting models of vision and modes of engaging with history. The film, however, undoes those polarities by exploring the complexity of fire and darkness, while troubling the seeming transparency of water and glass. "La Femme en morceaux" allows Djebbar to contemplate the fragment: the pieces that are integral to storytelling and to the detective genre. Similar to *La Nouba*, the story contemplates darkness, as figured in the olivewood chest, versus the near transparency of the white page. In moving from the glass house to the white page, Djebbar further complicates relationships between opacity and translucence, and turns her attention to explicitly textual ways—as gestured to by the page—of writing history. Moreover, her multi-faceted narratives, not unlike *The 1001 Nights*, become objects of circulation, adaptation, and movement within the Mediterranean and the Mediterranean imagination, as exemplified in Atyka's dreaming of the anonymous woman. These complex trajectories and images merge in *La Femme sans sépulture*'s juxtaposition of visual, filmic, and textual modes of representation. In her narratives, Djebbar works in between these frameworks, while paradoxically seeking to undermine them. In each case, her writing—a digging in the dark—straddles the fine line between subversion and complicity in the stories that she is simultaneously trying to escape and create.

Chapter 4

Micro Visions, Macro Narratives: Magnifying the Mediterranean Puzzle in Jean-Claude Izzo's *Total Khéops*

A magnifying glass homes in on the smallest detail. As its traditional ocular shape suggests, it supplements human vision. The lens embodies an act of narrowing in on clues to see the world from vantage points that might help solve a mystery or crime. The magnifying glass epitomizes the figure of the detective. It functions as a frame, an instrument of magnification, allowing the detective to zoom in on smaller portions of larger pictures, portions that might be otherwise imperceptible. While contemporary detective novels and films no longer rely exclusively on classical instruments such as the magnifying glass, this instrument foreshadows the genre's later reliance on science and forensics. The detective genre resembles a picture puzzle, whose pieces often take the form of snapshots to be assembled into a larger whole.⁶¹

French writer and poet Jean-Claude Izzo (1945-2000), considered to be the founder of so-called Mediterranean Noir fiction,⁶² uses the detective genre to explore Marseille's contradictions and the impossibility of clearly articulating—or, in keeping with the detective metaphor of “solving”—the question of the city's larger relationship to different Mediterranean diasporic communities, especially the Italian and North African communities.

⁶¹ See Bloch.

⁶² In my research on the genre, “Mediterranean Noir” was always capitalized including by Izzo himself. For the sake of consistency, I will continue to do so throughout my chapter.

Izzo shares Djébar's preoccupation with the ways in which seeing and knowing become divorced from one another, especially in relation to marginalized voices that have silenced by "official" history. Djébar attempted to highlight simultaneously the difficulty of excavating the past through visual obstacles—like doorframes and partially closed windows—to revive those stories and to re-narrate them from empowered women's perspectives. Izzo's work, on the other hand, uses the detective genre and its structure of magnified images to explore how the disconnect between seeing and knowing results in an impossibility of ever being able to articulate one's position in relation either the present or the past.

Izzo is most famous for *La Trilogie marseillaise* [*The Marseille Trilogy*], which comprises *Total Khéops* (1995), *Chourmo* (1996), and *Solea* (1998). While the trilogy's instant success was comparable to that of Stieg Larson's *The Girl With the Dragon Tattoo* in Europe, like much of Mediterranean Noir, it received far less global attention. In what follows, I map the development of Mediterranean Noir and then analyze first novel in Izzo's trilogy, *Total Khéops*—translated into English as *Total Chaos*—whose plot and development center on magnified moments— including two photographs—that give the detective-protagonist, Fabio Montale, visual clues about the murders he is investigating. Unlike traditional detective novels that are structured by a desire for a narrative resolution, clues in Izzo's novel do not create a clear picture. Instead, they foreground the many obstacles to sight and reveal the competing images that define Marseille and its relationship to the Mediterranean. The novel's magnified images create a vision of the city and the region that is characterized by an endless multiplicity of partial images and histories that never add up to a coherent "whole." As the title suggests, *Total Khéops* reveals Marseille and the Mediterranean to be places of "total chaos," where there is always more going on than meets the eye.

I. Jean-Claude Izzo and the Mediterranean Noir Genre

Total Khéops marked Izzo's first foray into detective fiction and a renewed interest in the Mediterranean Noir genre (Reynolds 1). He was previously known for his poetry, "regional writing," and political activism, including his hunger strike while on military duty in Djibouti with the French colonial army, and for his participation in the events of May '68 (Smyth 112). Izzo was born into a family of Italian immigrants; his father was a dockworker who was nearly deported during World War II when the Germans decided to "cleanse" the city by demolishing part of Le Panier where many immigrant communities lived.

Scholars have focused largely on this personal history as a lens through which to read Fabio Montale, whose parents in the trilogy moved to Marseille from Naples after the War.⁶³ In addition to this autobiographical reading, scholars have focused on Izzo's Marseille as an "imagined community," a place of hybridity, exile, and cultural difference.⁶⁴ Finally, critics have examined his work within the context of the international detective genre, and have shown how his depictions of Marseille follow in the lineage of "Simenon's Paris, Montalbán's Barcelona, Sciascia's Palermo, Chandler's Los Angeles and Ian Rankin's Edinburgh" (Smyth 111).

What is striking about Izzo's writing is its multi-layered intertextuality. Drawing on contemporary politics, popular culture, philosophy, and poetry, Izzo brings together different narrative registers. Frequent references to Miles Davis and John Coltrane give the series a musical undertone. As Edmund J. Smyth contends, there are many literary influences and layers to Izzo's work that trouble perfunctory definitions of the detective genre that may understand the plot to be solely about murder: "Izzo is a much more self-consciously literary

⁶³ See Seward and Symthe.

⁶⁴ See Seward.

and even philosophical writer than other practitioners of the néo-polar [...] there exist many quasi-poetic passages and indeed actual quotations, from Louis Branquier, Saint-John and Baudelaire” (113). Furthermore, Izzo’s writings are highly visual, even cinematic.⁶⁵ Yet, little has been said about the importance of visuality, particularly photography, in Izzo’s work, or how his engagements with visuality reveal the difficulty of narrating coherently the city’s history.

Mediterranean Noir draws on Greco-Roman and Biblical traditions in order to foreground the continuities between the past and present, especially to underscore humans as innately violent. Izzo asserts: “In the beginning is The Book. And that moment in which Cain kills his brother Abel. In the blood of this fratricide, the Mediterranean gives us the first noir novel” (Ferri 13). He continues, “In the beginning, indeed, all the motives for murder already existed. Envy, jealousy. Desire, fear. Money. Power. Hatred. Hatred of others. Hatred of the world. That is the basis of all the Greek tragedies” (Ferri 13). Noir, for Izzo, is therefore a modern genre that emerges out of ancient religious and mythological history. As Izzo positions Mediterranean Noir in relation to the distant past, he also identifies Albert Camus’ *L’Etranger* as a twentieth-century influence (Reynolds 1). The genre is thus defined by two historical perspectives: the ancient and the modern colonial and postcolonial contexts. *L’Etranger* portrays the Mediterranean as a site of increasingly destabilized vision. Both the sea and characters’ perceptions of the region are defined by an excess of light, which paradoxically engenders blindness. This effect is what Camus’ protagonist, Meursault, “un homme du midi” or Mediterranean man, blames for his murder of “the Arab,” the crime at the heart of *L’Etranger*. In Camus’ racially problematic and heavily colonial novel, the

⁶⁵ The trilogy was adapted for a French TV miniseries starring Alain Delon.

beauty and brightness of the external world often prevent people from recognizing the world and the universe's indifference towards humankind (Reynolds 1). This epiphany is the fruit of Meursault's time in prison—away from the sun and bright colors of the Mediterranean—as he awaits his execution. He comprehends the ultimate meaninglessness of human life and the absence of personal, cultural, and historical coherence.

Izzo's work emerges out of this tradition and its emphasis on vibrant images associated with the sun and the Sea's blue waters. Mediterranean Noir, as Izzo's work reveals, relies on visual tropes and colors. For instance, critic Michael Reynolds distinguishes Mediterranean Noir from "traditional noir" in the following terms:

Crime exists. Everywhere. Perhaps what makes it different in the Mediterranean... is that here it is also saturated with color. Traditional noir, both the North American and the Northern European variety, is colored grey. The blacks and browns of the northern metropolises. The muted tweeds of a Sherlock Holmes. The grays of film noir and cities cloaked in heavy, dank fogs. Mediterranean Noir deals in color. The other face of the violent, criminal Mediterranean is the vibrant, sun-drenched Mediterranean. The colors of Mediterranean Noir are bright, almost gaudy: yellows, reds, ochre, and above all blue. Or else white. Light itself. The source of all color. (Reynolds 1)

While the so-called dull colors of Sherlock Holmes are visual analogues to the dark world of crime, Mediterranean Noir—like Camus' *L'Étranger*—is structured around a seeming paradox: the appearance of beautiful bright colors, light, sun, and a blue sea belie a dark underbelly of crime and corruption. In Izzo's work, as in Camus', the appearance of excessive, abundant vision in the Mediterranean and its fiction operates as a form of visual deception: that bright, seeming clarity does not, in fact, stand for narrative, historical, or regional coherence. The traditional images of a "gaudy" Mediterranean "saturated with color" and the source of "light itself" threaten to make a parody of the region as a place of boisterous irrationality, uncontrollable passions, and decadence. Such depictions become a form of what Michael Herzfeld calls "Mediterraneanisms"—a series of clichéd,

manufactured, and homogeneous images of the region that lack cultural and historical specificity. Although *Total Khéops* invokes such images of the region, the narrative has an ambivalent relationship to them.

In part because of his focus on crime in Marseilles, scholars have classified Izzo as a writer of tragedy who reveals humankind as ultimately condemned to repeating acts of violence and aggression. His novels “shed light on the dark corners of our modern cities” and human nature (Reynolds 1). But, rather than affirming the essentialisms of the “Mediterranean” or of solidifying an ahistorical concept of “human nature,” Izzo’s novel—and its dynamic between magnified puzzle pieces and panoramic visions—continually troubles notions of essentialism and stable perspectives on the world. Instead of coherence, *Total Khéops* is structured around a series of potential master-narratives at play in Marseille and the Mediterranean: trans-historical mythical, religious, and ancient narratives, on one hand, and the modern socio-political context of 1990s France, on the other. This contemporary context is characterized by the national desire to “purify” the streets with a zero immigration policy (20). These narratives of nation, region, and human nature ultimately fail to account for the “total chaos” that defines 1990s Marseille.

II. Izzo’s Marseille: The Violence of Two Pasts

On the surface, the novel seems to be a straightforward detective plot. The protagonist, detective Fabio Montale, lives and works in Marseille. He is estranged from his childhood friends, Ugo and Manu, who learned to survive by committing petty crimes and living on the fringes of the law. Montale’s approach to his job also alienates him; his tactics differ from the rogue policies and racism that pervade the Marseille police department. The narrative begins when Ugo returns to Marseille to avenge the murder of Manu, who was

gunned down in the streets. In what is ultimately a set up, Ugo follows a false lead, kills an old mafia leader who had nothing to do with Manu's murder, and ends up dead. Montale investigates both murders and, in so doing, relives his years growing up in Le Panier. Montale's memories center on Lole, the gypsy girl he grew up with and whom he, Manu, and Ugo all loved. The narrative overlays Lole's story with that of another woman: Leila whom Montale cares for as an adult and who is raped and killed outside of Marseille. Montale must solve all three murders.

Total Khéops situates itself in a city that is an embodiment of paradox. On the one hand, Marseille has been an historically important city in France, as well as a site for international culture and trade, as its nomination as the European Capital of Culture suggests (Jordison, *The Guardian*). On the other hand, Izzo's novel dwells on its reputation as France's "murder capital" (Williams *Frontline*).⁶⁶ These conflicting, yet coexisting, images of Marseille are at the heart of Izzo's vision of "total chaos."

The novel's title, *Total Khéops*, is an allusion to a song with the same name by IAM—a Marseille rap group known for its politically charged lyrics and investment in exposing French racism and xenophobia.⁶⁷ More than just havoc, the phrase, "Total Khéops," suggests an entangled situation from which it is hard to extricate oneself. In that sense, the novel's title refers to a place, historical context, and series of actions that are difficult to grasp—much like the Mediterranean itself. The IAM song testifies to the hardships that young Arabs face living in France, specifically: "On survit d'un rythme de rap. /voilà pourquoi ça frappe. / Ils veulent le pouvoir et le pognon, à Paris. /J'ai 22 ans, beaucoup de choses à faire./ Mais jamais de la vie je n'ai trahi mes frères" ["We survive in rap's

⁶⁶ The European Commission nominated Marseille in 2013 as the "European Capital of Culture." For more, see *The Guardian*.

⁶⁷ For more on IAM, see Ragone.

rhythm/that's why it beats. /They want the power and money in Paris/I'm 22 years old, with a lot to do. But I've never in my life betrayed my brothers"] (96). The lyrics, directly invoked in Izzo's narrative, attest to overlapping forms of oppression and conflict. In the novel, the boy who sings and identifies with the song is a North African immigrant. The song attests to his alienation in Marseille, compounded by the city's socio-economic subordination to Paris.

Izzo's critique of Marseille's rising socio-political status within Europe—in the years before its nomination as a “cultural capital”—is even more blatant in the trilogy's second novel, *Chourmo*, which offers an important context for understanding the politics that inform the series as a whole. Montale scoffs, “De quoi sourire! J'appartenais à cette race marseillaise qui se fout de l'image qu'on peut avoir de nous à Paris, ou ailleurs. L'image ne change rien. Pour l'Europe nous ne sommes toujours que la première ville du tiers monde” [“What a joke! I belonged to this race of people in Marseille who don't give a damn what image they have of us in Paris or anywhere else. The image does not change anything. To Europe, we are still just the first city of the third world”] (158). As this moment suggests, Marseille is compared often to Paris, France's northern and stereotypically more sophisticated capital. Similar to the dynamic between Naples and northern Italy described in Chapter One, the schism between Marseille's official image and its lived reality is mapped onto the geographical division between northern France—aligned with Europe and European culture—and Marseille, its southern, Mediterranean, even “subaltern” other that exists as a racialized “other” within France. And Izzo's novels register these divisions within Marseille. *Total Khéops*, and the trilogy more broadly, chronicle an “awareness of the topography of the city itself, constructed through a complex web of references to [...] its cultural representations” (Hewitt 259). The narrative “exude[s] the atmosphere and landscape of the

French Mediterranean, and in particular the multicultural city of Marseille” (Smyth 111).

Izzo’s text shows how Marseille is defined by different diasporic communities—Italian and North African—that constitute ways of understanding Marseille’s larger history of immigration and its status as a Mediterranean crossroads. These histories manifest themselves in terms of two distinct areas of the city: the previously mentioned quarter, Le Panier, and the contemporary concrete housing projects, *la cité*, north of Marseille where North African and African immigrants live and where the police force is afraid to go. Le Panier is the city’s oldest district and was partially destroyed in 1943 when Nazis expelled 2,000 of its inhabitants to internment camps, while limiting the area to 1,500 in the lower half of the district. Le Panier is where the Greeks settled in 600 BCE, after the Phoenicians (“Marseille,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1994). Marseille, then called Massalia, has since been conceived of as a place of trade, as France’s largest port city since before the Punic Wars (264 BCE to 146 BCE), when it was only rivaled by Carthage as a center for trade (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). In addition to the movement of goods in and out of the city, there has been a steady flow of immigration into the city from Italy, Corsica, North Africa, South America, Vietnam, and the Comoro Islands near Madagascar (*Encyclopedia Britannica*). Since even before Marseille’s nomination as the European Capital of Culture in 2013, Le Panier has been increasingly gentrified and renovated for tourists, while many of the district’s monuments have been erased— a process that Izzo’s trilogy chronicles explicitly.

Le Panier is both a symbolic and an actual site of social struggles and diasporic movement into and out of Europe. For outsiders, it was “la honte. Depuis le siècle dernier. Le quartier des marins, des putes. Le chancre de la ville. Le grand lunapar. Et, pour les nazis, qui avaient rêvé de le détruire, *un foyer d’abâtardissement pour le monde occidental*” [“shame. Since the last century. The neighborhood of seamen, prostitutes. The cancer of the city. The great

brothel. And, for the Nazis, who had dreamed of destroying it, *a center of degeneration for the Western world*] (21-2). This passage centers on different forms of historical contamination brought about by immigration and the intermingling of different languages, cultures, and traditions. The metaphors that center on illness and contagion portray the district as something to be excised out of Marseille. The quarter is Marseille's "shame," which the trilogy's characters internalize until, in their own words, they taste it on their breath (22). Izzo's series focuses on the post-World War II Mediterranean immigrants in Marseille, especially those who fled Spain during Franco's régime and Italians who left Naples after Mussolini's rise to power.

While Izzo's *Total Khéops* shows the discrimination and oppression that the post-War Mediterranean diaspora has faced, the novel simultaneously conveys nostalgia for that era. Although "contamination" was the primary metaphor that outsiders used to describe Le Panier and those who lived in it, the district's inhabitants reframe that history and remember the area fondly, particularly how it provided an opportunity for forging class-based, transnational solidarities. The text reflects this focus formally when it details quotidian life in the district. Zooming in on the district, the narrator describes: "Le soir, *nabos* et *babis*, ceux du Nord, se retrouvaient dans la rue. On tirait la chaise devant la porte. On se parlait par la fenêtre. Comme en Italie. La belle vie, quoi?" ["In the evenings, the *nabos* and the people from the north, the *babis*, met up on the streets. They pulled chairs out in front of their doors, talked through windows. Just like in Italy. Just like the good old days"] (21). Izzo's focusing in on life in Le Panier reveals a Mediterranean district of intermingling. "Nabos" refer to the Neapolitan, while the "babis" is slang for Northern Italians. Despite the cultural divides *within* Italy between the North and South, in Marseille, the two communities are brought together through their common identification as Italians. Elsewhere, this cultural

intermingling occurs linguistically when the narrator explains: “À Marseille, ça causait déjà un curieux français, mélange de provençal, d’italien, d’espagnol, d’arabe, avec une pointe d’argot et un zeste de verlan” [“You already heard a strange kind of French spoken in Marseille, a mixture of Provençal, Italian, Spanish, and Arabic, with bits of slang thrown in”] (71-2). Part of Le Panier’s history is comprised of overlapping linguistic layers, including local dialect, Italian, and Greek. These languages not only attest to the many communities living within the city, but they also depict Marseille as a geographical crossroads between Europe and the Mediterranean.

The intermingling of Mediterranean languages is a hallmark of Mediterranean Noir, which foregrounds the Mediterranean’s multiculturalism and transnationalism. The region exists as a space of translation, which “leads us to depart from our language to encounter and get to know another” (Cassano 374). Even the etymology of “translation” means, “to bring to the other side” (Cassano 374). Le Panier is the place in which barriers are traversed in order to find common ground, much as the immigrants to Marseille are brought together by their journey across the Mediterranean. This movement is portrayed visually in *Total Khéops*, which describes Le Panier’s fading charm through invocations of small winding streets, and old paint traces still visible on newly renovated buildings. The description of the Italian Square most explicitly reveals the connection between old and contemporary Marseille. The Square has white tables and parasols “comme en Italie” [“like in Italy”] (27). As the passage focuses on the objects outside the cafés, it also zooms out to map a geographical connection with Italy. The description is organized around a focused detail, and a panoramic transnational simile in which the image of Marseille recalls another part of the Mediterranean. This perspectival shift foregrounds the importance of point of view, so that Marseille’s image is contingent upon where one is positioned in relation to it. Although the

comparison of Marseille to Italy initially seems celebratory, the narrative immediately complicates the romanticized image of a transnational Marseille through yet another visual reference: in the cafés, reproductions replace the once original tableaux on the walls (27-8). The city is characterized by tensions between authenticity and reproduction, where the remnants of Marseille's Italian past—as represented by Montale's own family—are replaced with a stylized image of what tourists associate with Italy. Contemporary Marseille is defined by manufactured clichéd images of the Mediterranean that appeal to what tourists would like to imagine the city is. Izzo's prose does not dwell in these moments, but lists them almost mechanically as if to reveal the ways in which they are generic and uninspiring.

Formally, these images are thus enumerated in passing and offer a kaleidoscopic view of Marseille that alters with each descriptive fragment and introduction of a narrative detail, which recalls the shifting logic that informed Khatibi's *Triptyque de Rabat*. Yet, in Izzo's novel, the distanced perspective offers a panorama of images that are less dizzying than stereotypical and expected. At the same time, however, the novel increasingly narrows as it focuses on particular images of Le Panier that imbue it with more geographical and cultural specificity than the generic white tables and parasols. For example, Montale remembers the food and drink that continue to be integral to his French and Italian identity. As an adult, he drinks the anise liquor, Pastis, an aperitif associated with southern France. Montale reminisces about the Italian meals he had on Saturday nights as a child, with plates of larks, wine, and pastas (42). The meals blend Italian and French culinary traditions so as to highlight Marseille's transnational space. The narrative oscillates between different registers that focus on Le Panier, its daily life, and scenes of its inhabitants speaking to each other from their windows. Each detail is registered by a shift in the narrative's perspective and relative distance from the objects described.

This same visual logic of magnification defines Marseilles' description of "la cité," the housing projects where more recent immigrants—having arrived since the end of the Algerian War—live. It is, in fact, known as a "cité maghrébine" ["the North African projects"] (64).⁶⁸ Far from the Sea, the projects, not unlike Eugenia's neighborhood in post-war Naples, are insular and dark.. Concrete buildings abut Marseille's skyline, which Izzo describes in fragments in *Total Khéops*. In confirming the series' logic of accretion in which one narrative fragment builds upon another like clues, the second novel, *Chourmo*, offers a more complete description:

Ici, rien n'est pire qu'ailleurs. Ni mieux. Du béton dans un paysage convulsé, rocheux et calcaire. Et la ville là, loin de tout. Sauf la misère. Même le linge sec en témoigne. Il semble toujours sans couleur, malgré le soleil et le vent qui agite. Des lessives des chômeurs, voilà tout. On ouvre sa fenêtre et on a toute la mer pour soi. C'est gratuit. Quand on a rien, posséder la mer—cette Méditerranée—c'est beaucoup. Comme un quignon de pain pour celui qui a faim. (55-'6)

Here, it was no worse than elsewhere. Or better. A mass of concrete in the middle of a contorted landscape of rock and chalk. And the city center there, far from everything. Except for misery. Even the dry clothing outside bore witness to it. It seemed always colorless in spite of the sun and the bustling wind. The clothes belonging to the unemployed, there you have it. You open the window and have all the sea to yourself. It is free. When you have nothing, to own the Sea—this Mediterranean—means a lot. Like a crust of bread for someone who is hungry.

While the Mediterranean is often conceived of as a place of vibrant colors, the housing projects strip the sky of its hue. They are characterized by the poverty that leaves their inhabitants with a sense of suffering, of living an unexceptional life, "no worse than anywhere else." In stark contrast to Le Panier, which, despite its poverty, invokes a sense of community and recalls Naples for the Italian immigrants living there, *la cité* is stripped of human presence. Furthermore, the dry clothing itself becomes a witness to this scene, which is otherwise devoid of people who might see it.

⁶⁸ I do not capitalize "la cité" because it is one of many housing projects in Marseille as opposed to Le Panier, which is a unique district.

Izzo's Marseille is structured around economic misery and immigrant hardship at two different historical moments inscribed within two distinct areas of Marseille. Le Panier and *la cité* mirror one another from a geographical and temporal distance, showing different iterations of history and forms of oppression. The paragraph above centers on point of view and offers different perspectives that create close-ups as well as panoramic views of the district. The narrative focus shifts from the horizon to the buildings and then to the detail of the clothing hanging on clotheslines outside. The window serves as an opening both formally and conceptually. Like a magnifying glass, it is a frame that mediates between the view of the Mediterranean and the insularity of the housing project. As such, it reveals the economic devastation and bleakness of the concrete buildings, in stark contrast to the blue sea.

Here, the Mediterranean offers a respite from class struggle and the claustrophobia of life in the projects. The sea nourishes as if it were bread. Here the invocation of bread ("pain") creates a link between Le Panier (literally a "bread basket") and the hunger in *la cité*; the words "pain" and "panier" underscore the problem of sustenance that unites both districts. *Total Khéops* is thus structured around dualisms: between Marseille's ancient mythical and social history as crystalized in Le Panier, and the socio-political environment of 1990s France and questions of North African immigration that converge in descriptions of *la cité*. These two districts encapsulate different histories within Marseille that belie the city's contradictions.

III. Lole: Le Panier and Marseille's Classical Past

As Montale attempts to reconcile Marseille's contradictory images, he turns, paradoxically, to different images: more specifically, to two photographs that capture

Marseille's contradictions between le Panier and *la cité*. The first photograph is of Lole who embodies a Greek lineage that connects Marseille to a classical Hellenic past. She vanishes from the city and thereafter figures nostalgia for a lost and mythical history. Lole recalls Le Panier. She is "la Gitane, Belle, depuis toujours" ["the gypsy. Beautiful, since forever"] (16). Grammatically, both "Gypsy" and "Beautiful" are capitalized and integral to Lole's transient identity. While she defies any strict boundaries, like the Mediterranean itself, she is an ahistorical and mythical character who, like her beauty, has existed "since forever." This conceptualization of the Mediterranean most closely resembles Braudel's understanding of the Sea as containing a nearly static history that unfolds almost imperceptibly and transforms itself in endless circular movements (Braudel XIII). Similarly, Lole disappears only to reappear in the narrative.

Izzo's narrative immediately foregrounds the theme of constrained vision when Ugo returns to Marseille and goes to Lole's house, where he sits down and "caressa l'accoudoir de la main et il s'assit, lentement, en fermant les yeux. C'est seulement après qu'il la regarda enfin. Vingt ans après" ["caressed the armrest with his hand and sat down, slowly, closing his eyes. It is only afterward that he finally looked at her. Twenty years later"] (16). This moment prioritizes a haptic experience over a visual one. Averting his eyes from Lole, Ugo displaces his affection for and attraction to her onto the armchair, which he touches instead of embracing her. Furthermore, Ugo perceives Lole only partially since his half-closed eyes eclipse her full image. This instant questions the equation between seeing and knowing, thereby showing that when even when she is present to Ugo, his eyelids prevent him from seeing and "knowing" Lole fully.

Ugo's constrained vision foregrounds the importance of interrupted vision when Lole's image flashes before him. This moment interrupts a scene that is otherwise

characterized by a prolonged temporality and that is drawn out syntactically by the commas offsetting the word “slowly.” Readers must pause while reading the phrase, thereby mirroring the tempo with which Ugo sits down, closes, and then re-opens his eyes in what becomes an extended blink. The phrase, “it was only after,” delays the moment in which Ugo sees Lole and creates distance between them. The pronoun “là,” which replaces Lole in the sentence, resonates with the homophone “là,” designating “there.” When Ugo finally opens his eyes “là” (Lole) appears “là” (“there”): at the only point in the narrative when Ugo sees Lole fully present to him for the first time in twenty years. This insistence on the place where he sees her captures his desire to see her in the instant, much as a detective looks for clues to grasp. Ultimately, Ugo’s partially closed eyes capture a liminal visuality that gestures to Lole’s own partial presence as neither fully “here” nor “there,” which is enacted literally as Lole enters and leaves the room. The stasis intimated by his half-closed eyes is contrasted with Lole’s movements in and out of the room. The paradox between mobility and immobility captures Marseille’s own relationship to the past, on one hand, and its quickly evolving status as the soon-to-be European Capital of Culture, on the other.⁶⁹

The tensions between Marseille’s past and future are fully developed through a series of photographs that Ugo discovers in Lole’s apartment. The photographs reveal Lole’s otherwise transient presence in the novel; they offer a clue—a material object for readers to grasp and decipher. Like a detective who must assemble different narratives, readers are unsure as to how to interpret Lole’s larger significance, which is only glimpsed in this

⁶⁹ Although *Total Khéops* was written before Marseille’s nomination as the European Capital of Culture, Izzo’s novel foreshadows the city’s rising international status and France’s wish to promote the city through renovation projects and international advertisement campaigns.

moment. The novel constructs her as the paradigm of literary and artistic desire always beyond reach.⁷⁰

Dans un tiroir, il trouva plein de photos. Il ne leur restait plus que ça. Ça l'échouera. Il faillit tout foutre à la poubelle. Mais il y avait ces trois photos. Trois fois la même. À la même heure, même endroit. Manu et lui. Lole et Manu. Lole et lui. C'était au bout de la grande jetée, derrière le port du commerce. Pour y aller, il fallait tromper la vigilance des gardiens. Pour ça, nous étions bons, pensa-t-il. Derrière eux, la ville. En toile au fond, les îles. Vous sortez de l'eau. Essoufflés. Heureux. Vous vous étiez rassasiés de bateaux en partance dans le coucher du soleil. (30-1)

In a drawer, he found a whole bunch of photos. That was all they had left. It made him sick. He almost threw everything in the trashcan. But there were these three photos. The same photo taken three times. Same time, same place. Manu and him. Lole and Manu. Lole and him. It was the end of the big pier, behind the commercial port. To get there, they'd had to slip past the guards. We were good at that, he thought. Behind them, the city. In the background, the islands. You came out of the water. Breathless. Happy. You'd feast your eyes on the boats leaving in the setting sun.

As the narrator underscores, photographs were all they had left, as if the photographs could offer Ugo nothing but a glimpse into his past. And yet, "there were these three photos." While this moment appears to diminish the photographs' importance as "all they had left," they jog Ugo's memory of his childhood.

As such, the photographs function like glimpses and continue the novel's interrogation of interrupted vision that prevents ever seeing "the whole picture" that defines the detective's quest. This aim is complicated because the images are structured around iteration and reproduction. They offer different possibilities for narrating the past, much like the possible conjectures that a detective makes in formulating what might have happened in a crime. Yet, in the case of the three photographs, a source or an "original" is never identified. One of the attributes of a detective is the ability to decipher fine detail; and yet, the photographs, while not exact replicas, are united through their sameness, which the

⁷⁰For more on the inherent transience of desire, see Lacan and Žižek.

passage formally echoes by repeating the word “la même” three times for each image. Each of the three photographs captures a different vantage point, which plays off another, thereby showing the triangulation of possibilities between the three friends. In this light, each photograph could be read as capturing an image of lovers at the beach—or capturing a desire to be read as such. The three images echo a triptych structure, and yet a traditional triptych must be read in a particular order. In Izzo, no one photograph has priority over another and there is no clear way to interpret their relationship. This scene disrupts chronology so that the images become a pastiche of memory, and provide only intermitted images of Lole’s past.

A photograph only gains its full meaning through inscription and captions, “without which all photographic construction must remain bound in coincidence” (Benjamin 215). In the same way, a detective must assemble disparate puzzle pieces of a narrative and give them meaning. His or her job is to create a narrative and make it intelligible to others. In *Total Khéops*, the question of inscription is further complicated because the entire passage is a narrative and therefore already ascribes a certain reading onto the images. The second half of the passage, however, directs readers’ interpretation and shapes their understanding of these scenes. It does so by breaking down the barrier between subject and object and inviting the viewer/reader into the space of the photograph. The slippage from the impersonal “il fallait” (“one had to”) to the “nous” (we) is seamless; it lures Ugo into the photograph, allows him to relive the moment and to imbue it with movement so that he “live[s] not *out of* the instant, but into it” (Benjamin 204). This semantic slippage from the impersonal to the personal sutures Ugo to the photograph and to his past.⁷¹

⁷¹ Here, I draw on cinematic notions of “suture.” For more on this, see chapter 5 of Kaja Silverman’s *The Subject of Semiotics*.

In Barthes' words, "Four image-repertoires intersect here, oppose and distort each other. In front of the lens, I am at the same time: the one I think I am, the one I want others to think I am, the one the photographer thinks I am, and the one he makes use of to exhibit his art" (13). This dynamic is more complicated in Ugo's case as he looks at these photographs knowing that he is about to avenge Manu's death and that he will probably die. He looks at the photographs of himself as he was and, in so far as photographs embalm time and intimate death, as he will have been.

Ugo is not the only one drawn into the photograph. In another shift in point of view, between mention of Marseille and its islands, a "vous" (you plural) is drawn into the scene. The photographs depend on readers' engagement and participation in them. As in a detective narrative whereby viewers become participants, Izzo's narrative increasingly draws viewers into the images and into the past. This movement occurs semantically. While the "vous" most logically designates the three boys, it is nevertheless ambiguous and highlights the shift in identification in the photo as something that both the narrator and Ugo perceive. As a result, the boys are at once a "we" and a "you"—a group distinct from the narrator and a collective of which Ugo is part. This pronoun switch pulls in another "vous" ("you") into the moment: the reader.⁷² Not only does the "you" interpolate the readers into the moment, it furthers their identification with the boys and Lole. The readers enter the photograph as if they could be the ones exiting the water, breathless ("Essoufflés") and happy ("Heureux"). In addition to the grammatical switch between the third person singular ("Manu," "Ugo," and "Lole"), to "we," and then to the "you plural," there is movement from land and city, into water, and a resurfacing from the ocean. The changes in geography and in perspective

⁷² In his English translation, Howard Curtis does away with the ambiguity and glosses the phrase as follows: "The three of you came out of the water" (28). This change does away with the productive complexity of identification in the photograph.

further *Total Khéops*' emphasis on shifts in point of view and positionality. The multiple ways of interpreting these photographs stand for the plurality of Marseille that like the photographs, changes according to who takes the picture versus whose picture is taken.

The photographs showcase images as governed by an interplay between convergences and dispersal. Like clues, the photographs offer glimpses of the past, while reinforcing the partial quality of those images. In the passage's final switch in point of view, Lole, Manu, and Ugo—the objects of the viewers' gaze—become the spectators as they watch boats vanish on the horizon. This final image reinforces loss and underscores Marseille as a point of departure, Lole as fleeting, and the men's friendship as relegated to the past. The photographs operate through a semantic and visual layering that compounds experiences of transiency, fragmentation, and multiplicity within the contemporary Mediterranean as mediated through images. The simultaneous appearance of all three photographs introduces a tension between unity and multiplicity, sameness and difference that speaks to the novels' portrayal of Marseille's triangulated position vis-à-vis Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean. Mediterranean diasporas—originating both from Europe and North Africa—that constitute Marseille.

IV. From Photographs to Jensen's Bas Relief

While the photographs of Lole require the viewer-turned-detective to ascribe them with meaning and to understand their function in the narrative, the images have greater intertextual and aesthetic resonances with Marseille's ancient past. The narrative explicitly compares Lole to the bas-relief of Wilhelm Jensen's novel, *Gradiva* (1907), which Freud made famous with his analysis of the text. In the original novella, the fictional archeologist, Norbert Hanold, becomes fascinated by a bas-relief of a woman he names Gradiva that he

finds at an exhibit in Rome. Once he returns to Germany, he obtains a plaster cast of the relief, and is fascinated by the detail of her foot that appears half off the ground in what he imagines is a captivating walk; her calm gait reminds him more of Pompeii and its rhythms than of Rome. The novella does not actually have a picture of the relief, but describes the bas-relief ekphrastically to explore the intersections of reality and dream-visions. Hanold undertakes a journey to Rome, Naples, and then Pompeii in what ultimately becomes a journey for Gradiva who vanishes from Hanold's view. Ultimately, it turns out that Hanold's childhood friend, Zoe Bertang is the unconscious source of his affection that has been displaced onto Gravidia. This story was made famous by Freud's analysis of it in 1907, and later Salvador Dali painted several depictions of Gradiva. Hanold describes her in the following terms:

So the young woman was fascinating, not at all because of plastic beauty of form, but because she possessed something rare in antique sculpture, a realistic, simple maidenly grace which gave the impression of imparting life to the relief. The left foot advanced, and the right about to follow, touched the ground only lightly with the tips of her toes [...] This movement produced the double impression of exceptional agility and confident composure, and the flight-like poise, combined with a firm step, lent her a particular grace. Where had she walked thus and whither was she going? (Freud 14)

The intertextual reference, which Izzo references explicitly in *Total Khéops*, foregrounds the disjuncture between what is seen and what is known. It shows how visual clues serve to unearth forms of repression, as well as confirm them in so far as the detail of Gradiva's foot and gait fascinated Hanold for reasons he only realized later. The role of this moment is to highlight a displaced visuality, and to show how vision reveals only partial knowing. Through this comparison, Lole is an intermittent vision that cannot be fully captured so that she hovers between materiality and myth. Indeed, after Ugo's visit, he asks her to leave Marseille, which she does, and we do not see her again. She therefor also stands for both Marseille's own partially forgotten, repressed pasts and the detective Montale's

repressed childhood affections for her. The three photographs that picture different configurations of Ugo, Manu, and Lole further echo Hanold's replica of the bas-relief in what becomes and updating of the technology of the visual medium. Izzo's engagement with the photographic medium speaks to a desire to capture Lole's transience visually. Within Marseille, Lole also represents Le Panier, a site of the city's old history as a place of immigration and exile, especially of movements and migrations between Naples and Marseille. Lole therefore recalls the socio-economic struggles of post-War immigrants, as well as the solidarity between different immigrant communities from around the Mediterranean. Gradiva becomes a cultural and aesthetic lens through which to contextualize and situate Lole. Furthermore, while Lole is recalled through Gradiva, both women are captured through visual art; this moment emphasizes the importance of aesthetic form in shaping narratives of the past. In a novel about detection and uncovering clues, Lole captures the fleeting quality of images and the difficulty of perceiving them.

Izzo's intertextual reference to Gradiva closely echoes the original text, and picks up the main motifs. For Lole, as the narrator underscores:

faisait songer à la Gradiva des fresques de Pompéi. Elle marchait en frôlant le sol, sans le toucher. L'aimer, c'était se laisser emporter par ses voyages. Elle transportait. Et, quand on jouissait, on n'avait pas l'impression d'avoir perdu quelque chose mais d'avoir *trouvé*.(240-41).

resembled Gradiva in the Pompeii frescoes. She seemed hardly to touch the ground. Making love to her was like letting yourself be carried away on a journey. She transported you. And, when you came, you did not feel as though you'd lost something, but as if you'd *found* something.

Lole is associated with Gradiva through the motif of traveling. Both women are rendered mythic through their simplicity in constructions made in and facilitated by the Mediterranean. Izzo's narrative goes further, and explicitly sexualizes Lole in a way that Jensen's text does not. As the figure of porous boundaries, Lole's borders are penetrated

just as she seeps into the imagination and bodies of the men who love her. And just as Gradiva, “splendid in walking” (Freud 15), moves among the ashes of Pompeii after the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (Freud 20), Lole lingers in Marseille’s violence and chaos that threaten to smother her.

By comparing Lole to Gradiva, *Total Khéops* also maps Marseille’s connection to Pompeii and to Greece. As Norman underscores, “the cut of [Gradiva’s] features seemed [...] more and more, not Roman or Latin, but Greek, so that her Hellenic ancestry became [...] a certainty” (17). Different temporalities and geographies merge in Lole’s character, which is representative of how Marseille is situated at the interstices of a classical past and the present. Moreover, through this comparison, Lole becomes associated with multiple transnational lineages—primarily Roman and Greek—so that, like Marseille itself, she captures the intersection of multiple histories and geographies. This comparison offers yet another contradictory image of Mediterranean cities as defined by coexisting images of conquest, settlements, and beauty that are never entirely resolved. The juxtaposition between Pompeii’s ruins and Gradiva’s beauty is striking in this respect. Just as Montale is not able to make coherent sense of life in Le Panier and *la cité*, the image of Gradiva and Lole, on one hand, and Pompeii and Marseille, on the other, represent the principal tensions within the Mediterranean as defined by violence and beauty.

Lole is both a metaphorical figure of itineracy and disappearance, as well as a literal one. In Marseille and in Montale’s life, she is difficult to situate in the present because she seems elsewhere. At the same time, she actually vanishes from the novel, thereby thickening the plot and complicating Montale’s already difficult role as detective. Yet, Lole foils the traditional detective plot in so far as her character, like the Mediterranean itself, resists easy interpretation and categorization. She is neither someone whom Montale can literally or

metaphorically pin down and ascribe meaning to. If traditional detective narratives center on epistemology and the attainability of knowledge (Pearson and Singer 7), Lole's ephemeral character highlights the impossibility of ever fully seeing or knowing anything in permanence.

Like the Mediterranean's own "fluctuating compositions," Lole gestures to Marseille's status as a place of comings and goings. As the object of male fantasy, she underscores the Mediterranean as defined by desire: a perennial and always unfulfilled search for something unidentifiable just beyond reach. The intertextual references that overlay Lole's character formally mirror Izzo's own critique of France's desire to cast Marseille in a new image that Parisians and the rest of the world would like to see. In a complex and paradoxical move, the lyricism that describes Lole simultaneously captures a desire to return to an older Marseille, while echoing new efforts to repaint the city, renovate its older buildings, and to restructure its image as beautiful and enticing in France's national imaginary (27). The tensions that exist in images of Marseille thus translate to the narratives about the city.

V. Leila: *La cité* and France's Colonial Past/Postcolonial Present

Along with Lole's story, *Total Khéops* narrates Leila's story. While Lole represents one pole of attraction in *Total Khéops* towards an exotic Hellenic, classical beauty that captures life as remembered in Le Panier, Leila figures a comparable pull but towards a North African Mediterranean. Leila is the daughter of North African immigrants living in *la cité*. And while Lole is associated with visual art, Leila is explicitly aligned with literature and narrative. She is a young North African graduate student in Aix-en-Provence who studied the *1001 Nights* and *Ulysses*, which thematize how narratives are told and circulated. The connection between

Leila and the *1001 Nights* is even inscribed in her name, meaning “night” in Arabic. As Karla Mallette asserts, *One Thousand and One Nights* “has no nation; its homeland is nowhere and everywhere. It is a vast, raucous, transnational celebration of the messy and exhilarating power of narrative” (29). Additionally, the text is often considered one of the first murder mysteries.⁷³ Prior to the beginning of *Total Khéops*, Leila wrote a thesis entitled *Poésie et devoir d’identité* [*Poetry and the Duty of Identity*] (77), which studied the role of poetry in facilitating relationships between the Mediterranean, the East, and the West. She conceives of her work as extending the work of Lebanese writer and poet, Salah Stétié, who struggled to define the Mediterranean. Leila, having left for Aix from Marseille in order to get the results back from her thesis and to see whether she was awarded a Masters degree, is never again seen alive. Raped and killed in the hills of Marseille by neo-Nazis, she foregrounds the city’s future as dominated by violence, which contemporary France refuses to confront because of the international networks of corruption and collusion between the Italian mafia, North African drug lords, and high French governmental officials. While Leila is never photographed, the men who kill her are. In this second, seemingly unremarkable image that Fabio Montale is given by chance, the assassins are captured *together* at a reception for the reactionary party, le *Front National* [National Front], rising neo-Nazis, and mafia.

Leila encapsulates the artistic and critical interrogation of narrative. She meets Montale when her brother gets into trouble with the law. Despite having feelings for Leila, Montale never has a relationship with her for fear of spoiling their friendship, particularly in the light of his past relationship with Lole, which ended badly. Instead, Montale and Leila connect over their shared love of the Marseille poet, Louis Braquier, whose verses interrupt Izzo’s narrative:

⁷³ See Marzolph.

Longtemps je t'ai cherchée
nuit de la nuit perdue. (87)

I searched for you for a long time
night of the lost night.

These lines contain a series of double meanings, especially because they appear in *Total Khéops* when Montale begins searching for Leila. Excerpted from “Eau douce pour navire, L’au-delà de Suez, Liberté des mers” [“Calm Waters to Sail, Beyond the Suez, Freedom of Seas”], the poem is about life at sea. It creatively establishes the Sea as a space of transit and search, much like the motif of Jensen’s *Gradiva*. The word “nights” references Leila, the novel’s other night, and her disappearance.⁷⁴ The “night of nights” alludes to the *1001 Nights* as a “transnational symbol of the power of literary invention” (Mallette 31). It captures the metaphorical loss of nighttime, search for narrative, as well as Leila’s actual vanishing. Just as there are multiple possible meanings for the word “night,” the “you” in the poem is triple and describes Leila, the Sea, and poetry itself. However, there is a fourth possible interpretation: the “you” can be desire itself that is always searched for without ever being realized. The diverse meanings and interpretations of these lines point to the Mediterranean and Leila’s semantic and narrative multiplicity much as the photographs of Lole do.⁷⁵

While Leila’s character seems to contribute to the novel’s romantization and lyrical portrayal of the Mediterranean, this sentimentalist image is interrupted when Montale finds her murdered:

Je n’avais jamais rien vu d’aussi moche. J’en avais pourtant vu. Leila gisait sur un chemin de campagne. La face contre terre. Nue. Elle tenait ses vêtements serrés sous son bras gauche. Dans son dos, trois balles. Dont une lui avait perforé le coeur. Des colonnes de grosses fourmis noires s’activaient autour des impacts et des égratignures qui zébraient son dos. Maintenant, les mouches attaquaient, pour disputer aux fourmis leur part de sang séché. (125)

⁷⁴ See Chapter 3 about the connection between the name Leila (Lila) and the word “night.”

⁷⁵ For more on language and the Mediterranean, see Dakhliia.

I had seen a lot of ugly things in my life, but nothing compared to this. Leila was lying face down and naked in a footpath. Her clothes were bunched together under her left arm and there were three bullets in her back. One of them had perforated her heart. Columns of big black ants were scurrying around the bullet holes and the scratches that streaked her back. Now the flies were attacking her too, fighting the ants for their share of dried blood.

While the initial three photographs in *Total Khéops* evoke a nostalgia and lure readers in, this image of Leila's raped, dead body does just the opposite. Additionally, while Lole's story draws out the metaphorical and formal implications of the detective genre, Leila's murder is the actual crime that requires investigation. Centering on decay, this image repels readers and forces them to avert their eyes just as Leila's eyes are cast down towards the ground. This is a stark contrast to the novel's initial photograph where viewers were enticed to dwell in the instant. Finally, unlike the comparison between Lole and Gradiva, this moment undoes the association between Scheherazade and Leila who, despite her identification with *The 1001 Nights*, could not save her life through narrative.

Too late to prevent her death, Montale witnesses her body first hand, unmediated by visual representation so that he is confronted by death up-close. In keeping with the centripetal logic of the magnifying glass, this passage increasingly focuses on smaller and smaller details. The description begins with a brief panorama of all the ugly things Montale has seen in his life and then focuses on Leila's body in a country lane. The narrative shifts yet again to describe her clothes, then the three bullet holes in her back. With each additional layer, readers get closer and closer until they see the ants crawling over her. This scene is structured around a parallel logic: the country pathway where Leila's corpse is found mirrors the path of ants down her back. One line is the magnification of the other in what establishes a visual and formal resonance. Just as the divisions between Montale and Leila's dead body are narrowed, the borders give way on and around her: blood and sweat pool

over her, as well semen, urine, and feces from her rape. The scene's details provoke discomfort in the viewers, which is reinforced sonically; for example, the French word "moche" ("ugly") is an off rhyme with "mouche" (fly), thereby highlighting the repulsion of the flies running over her dead body. They teeter around the bullet holes, further collapsing distinctions between Leila and the earth, the living and the dead.

The image underlying Izzo's Marseille is one haunted by gratuitous violence that exists in stark contrast to Gradiva's beauty. There were no witnesses to Leila's rape and murder, just as much of the crime in the city goes unseen or ignored in *la cité*. At the same time, this image challenges the limits of sight and what one is actually capable of witnessing without deflecting one's eyes. The word seen ("vu") occurs twice and rhymes with "nu" ("naked") as if to underscore the importance of seeing Leila naked. This nakedness, however, not only captures her raped body, but naked violence with which it was done. As she is far from the Sea, the waters cannot bathe Leila—an act that would wash her dried blood and metaphorically cleanse her after her rape. Reduced to perforated skin and dried blood, Leila is stripped of her beauty and her romanticized image of feminine beauty.

What Montale witnesses, here, confirms what he already knew: that Leila was killed. Here, vision confirms knowledge and solves the question of Leila's whereabouts, while catalyzing the search for her killer(s). This magnified moment thus solves one puzzle, while setting another one in motion. The correlation between seeing and knowing is the basis of the detective genre, which "promotes the idea that things can be known—a crime is committed and the detective, through deduction or action or both, finds out who is responsible" (Day 40).

Despite the initial correlations between seeing and knowing in this scene, relationships between responsibility, knowing, and seeing are unraveled around Leila's body.

Montale's empirical observations evanesce as he looks at her because Leila's murder is not a single act of violence. Instead, as the plot reveals, it stands in for France's more recent colonial past that continues to haunt France's national consciousness. Leila's murder represents the lingering aftereffects of France's own violent regimes and torture during the Algerian War of Independence—something that was not officially acknowledged until 2000. Historian Todd Shepard writes of the same processes in his book, but he focuses on the erasure of violence in the French national imaginary:

French and international media fixated on incidents where guerrillas emasculated or beheaded soldiers or civilians. International and French condemnations of FLN violence reached their height in 1957, after the FLN's massacre of the villagers of M'elouza. The mainstream press presented such "barbarism" as far more despicable than such French army activities such as napalming villages, collective punishment, and torture. The almost complete absence of images of such state-sponsored acts facilitated this wartime focus on nationalist atrocities. (44)

The French-sponsored acts of violence were, however, not acknowledged until Louise Ighilahriz, a former French Front de Libération Nationale (FLN) member who fought against the French during the Algerian War of Independence, published an autobiography chronicling her rape and torture by French military officials in 1957 (Cole 127).⁷⁶ While Ighilahriz's story disturbed French readers, more shocking was the fact that French General Jacques Massu's affirmed that Ighilahriz's story was probably true (127). In October 2000, public intellectuals demanded an official apology from the French State, and two months later historian Raphaëlle Brache published the first doctoral thesis in French on torture regimes during the War (127).

Leila's murder echoes this violence, particularly the rape and torture of North African women at the hands of imperialists. Her death, however, precedes 2000 and captures 1990s France's continued efforts to occlude repressed and internalized forms of violence

⁷⁶ Ighilahriz's autobiography was published in 2001, but she made a public statement in an interview with *le Monde* in 2000. See Cole 127, n. 10.

that nevertheless haunt France. As Leila's dead body collapses borders, her death collapses distinctions between images of violence that exist external to oneself and their internal equivalent within Montale's and readers' imaginations. As Montale explains, "Je vivrais avec cette image horrible de Leila, et cette douleur, tant que ces pourritures seraient en liberté" ["I'd live with that horrible image of Leila, and that pain, as long as those bastards were still at large"] (134). More than just being haunted by the image of Leila's dead body, Montale—and the narrative by extension—contemplates what it means to "live with" ("vivre avec") an image that disturbs his psyche. The image of Leila interrupts and penetrates Montale's thoughts at intervals. One body (Leila's) inspires images within another (Montale's), and another (the text). Merleau-Ponty's theory of vision and painting helps explain this dynamic for "since things and my body are made of the same stuff, vision must somehow come about in them; or yet again, their manifest visibility must be repeated in the body by a secret visibility" (Merleau-Ponty, "The Eye and the Mind," 91).

This interiorization of vision complicates Montale's search for clues, which are traditionally conceived of as external to the detective. Here, Marseille's porous and transnational borders are translated into perceptual and aesthetic crossroads, as "the inside of the outside and the outside of the inside, which the duplicity of feeling [le sentir] makes possible and without which we would never understand the quasi presence and imminent visibility which make up the whole problem of the imaginary" (Merleau-Ponty 91-2). Of central importance here is the collapse between borders and the correspondence between the inside and outside world that structure not just images, but the imaginary. Leila's death becomes part of Montale so that the search for her killer becomes bound up in the detective. This entanglement of self and other speaks to the trilogy's broadening logic that seeks to

complicate categories of “good” and “evil,” “culpable” and “innocent” so as to show the complexity of social and cultural networks within the Mediterranean.

Overlapping visual structures and forms increasingly complicate ways of seeing and knowing “the truth” about the crimes committed in the novel. *Total Khéops* subsequently makes the leap from Leila’s death to the imaginary when the narrative moves from her gruesome murder to painting, which presents yet another visual contradiction. This association is made through the specific location: the place where Leila’s body was found was where Cézanne found inspiration for his painting. Montale muses:

Ce chemin est un de ceux qui conduisent au massif de la Sainte-Victoire, cette montagne qui inspirait Cézanne. Combien de fois avait-il fait cette promenade? Peut-être même s’était-il arrêté ici, posant son chevalet, pour tenter d’en saisir une nouvelle fois toute sa lumière.(128)

The pathway was one of those that led to Sainte-Victoire, the mountain that was such an inspiration to Cézanne. How many times had he come this way? Maybe he’d even stopped here and set up his easel and tried once more to capture its light.

The “here”—a concept central to the three photographs of Lole—unites Leila and Cézanne. The Sainte-Victoire pathway is the geographical point of convergence between two disparate times and diametrically opposed images: the first, a picture of horror, the second a source of painterly imagination.

The paradox between brutality and inspiration is inconceivable to Montale. This moment highlights the act of painting as governed by the imagination and beauty, by “un bleu absolument pur que le vert sombre des pins rendait encore lumineux. Comme les cartes postales” [“an absolutely pure blue, made all the more luminous by the dark green of the pines. Like a picture postcard”] (127). The natural beauty around Montale discomfits him, and strikes him as almost too polished to be anything but a postcard. A gruesome body, a painting, and postcard are as visually different as could be. One repels, the other inspires artistic imagination, and the last idealizes. Yet, geography unites them all. What distinguishes

them is a formal difference, the ways in which they register images as capturing extreme beauty, on one hand, and brute horror on the other. This incompatibility haunts Montale as he searches for clues that would help him renew his faith in humanity—ever brief signs that the world is not as corrupt as it seems. This moment is reminiscent of the conflicting images of Marseille itself. Just as images of the city’s crime and beauty exist side by side, Leila’s body is recalled in the same passage that evokes the sky’s beauty.

This formal mapping overlaps with a temporal one. In *Total Khéops*, these two moments are not, of course, presented chronologically: Montale begins by seeing Leila’s body and reads “backwards,” and her story is superimposed onto Cézanne’s. This movement from present into past mirrors the logic of the detective genre, which must move back in time from the dead body in order to recreate the chain of events. While Leila has been stripped naked in death, Montale hopes metaphorically to re-clothe her through narrative by stitching together clues that will lead him to her killer. In putting the pieces together, the text works from image (Leila’s body) to text so that here, as in the first photographs, the narrative creates a tension between images and their textual inscription.

The search for Leila’s killer becomes a search for clues that assume overlapping forms—that is, a desire to fit the pieces together visually to create a narrative. *Total Khéops* is organized around a series of overlapping, superimposed visual images that coalesce around Leila, just as different criminals merge around her death. These images recall the bullet holes in Leila’s back. One such image occurs as a flashback when Montale first met Leila while helping her brothers who were falsely accused of stealing batteries from a storekeeper who was suspicious of them simply because they were Algerians. Frustrated by this allegation, Leila’s brother, Driss, “ramassa une grosse pierre, et la balança dans la vitrine” [“picked up a big stone and threw it at the window”] (73). Even though this moment seems trivial and

appears to show Driss' frustration, it accrues a visual and formal importance in relation to Leila's murder. The image of breaking glass captures the desire to break down seemingly invisible barriers that nonetheless stand in the way of immigrants succeeding in Marseille. It stands for the racism that is a like glass ceiling over their heads.

Visually, this moment is striking in so far as it highlights the breakability of transparency, which is figured by broken glass shards. This moment gains more significance when Leila appears on the scene with Montale to rescue her brothers. The shopkeeper glares at her, and “[i]l la fusilla du regard” [“he shot her a glance”] (75). The shopkeeper literally shoots her with his look—an act that is increasingly significant when readers learn how she was killed.

If the photographs of Lole, Manu, and Ugo capture narrative disunity and multiplicity generated by the different images, *Total Khéops* initially moves towards narrative resolution as disparate stories converge. They do so around the same reiterated circular shape of the wound that is a constant reminder how Leila was killed. Her “mort [...] était comme une pierre jetée dans l'eau. Des ronds se dessinaient tout autour, où gravitaient des flics, des fascistes” [“death [...] was like a stone cast into water, sending ripples in all directions, and cops, gangsters, and fascists were moving within those ripples”] (241). Like the ripples themselves, this scene echoes one in which Leila's brother threw a rock into the storefront window. Rather than shattering glass, the stone pierces water. Furthermore, instead of Leila being a third party attempting to save her brother from jail for throwing a rock into a storefront window, her death is the stone that once broke glass and rippled waves.

Like a photographic negative in the process of being developed, one scene emerges through and because of the other. Both are formally structured around transparency—glass

and water—and visual breaks: the place in the window that broke or the place in the water that was pierced. They reinforce the importance of not just visual interruptions, but also punctuations whereby the windows and water are pierced by objects that disrupt their surfaces. Moreover, they reveal how *Total Khéops* draws on relations and concepts that are central to photography to understand how they might help in creating meaning, and making sense of the violence in Marseille. Rather than neatly aligning images and their inscriptions, these scenes highlight their interplay—the way they are negotiated with every movement.

The second and final photograph in *Total Khéops* creates narrative ripples, and allows Montale to connect the killings of Ugo and Leila. In keeping with the overall narrative logic, however, the photograph's significance emerges over the course of three distinct scenes in which the image takes on increasing meaning for Montale. The emphasis on three's recalls Khatibi's triptych structure in Chapter 3, and its emphasis on mediation: how binaries are always defined by their interactions and contingent upon an always shifting point of view. In addition to capturing multiplicity, the number three underscores an always-shifting visual perspective.

In *Total Khéops* tertiary visual structures exist alongside a series of pairings that reveal a formal tension and further the novel's insistence on contradictions. The binaries— two women, two deaths, and two photographs— carry significance as variations on repetitions, much like the reproductive process of photography. Within the narrative's visual register, these binaries manifest themselves as negative, or inverted re-occurrences of past moments. For example, the metaphor of Leila's death as a stone in water echoes the composition of the scene with her brother breaking the storefront window. The photographs (of Lole, Manu, and Ugo, on one hand, and of the killers on the other) are structural inverses of one another.

In contradistinction to the first series of photographs, there is only one photograph that bookends *Total Khéops*. Yet, unlike with the first photograph that was only seen once—the moment Ugo took them out of the drawer—the final photograph is evoked three times in the narrative. The photograph was taken at a dinner in support of Marseille’s rising right-wing party. Montale’s friend, Babette, found it while investigating a story on the Mafia’s connection to fascist groups in Marseille. After looking at it, Montale narrates his reaction:

Je ne lâchais pas la photo des yeux. J’étais comme hypnotisé par le regard bleu, électrique, glacial de Welper. J’en avais côtoyé des comme lui à Djibouti. Des spécialistes de la mort froide. Des putains de l’imperialisme. Ses enfants perdus. Lâchés dans le monde, avec cette haine d’avoir été les « cornards de l’Histoire. » (231)

I could not take my eyes off the photo. I was hypnotized by Welper’s ice-cold, electric blue eyes. I’d known guys like him in Djibouti. Cold-blooded killers. The whores of imperialism. Its lost children. Let loose in the world, full of hatred for having been the ‘cuckolds of history.’”

The color of Welper’s blue eyes shocks Montale and draws him into the photograph. The eyes echo the blue of Marseille’s sky and the Mediterranean; in contrast to painting or postcards, Welper’s eyes chill Montale with their eery quality. The encounter, of course, only exists only for Montale because of and via the photograph. Staring at Montale in a face-off that was made possible through a photograph, Welper betrays his secrets because of, or in spite of, his eyes.

Welper’s eyes and the photograph by extension introduce History with a capital “H” into the picture. It is the first time that imperialism, embodied in Welper, is registered as an image—or, more precisely, an image inscribed textually. Photography’s function in *Total Khéops* moves from personal to political, from Marseille to the global. While the first photographs of Lole, Ugo, and Manu speak to their shared experiences as part of the Mediterranean diaspora, this photograph captures a larger colonial past that returns to the city in an altered form. The ripples that Leila’s death provoked are both historical and

geographical. Welper, readers learn, was born in Algeria, and joined the OAS (l'Organisation armée secrète)— a paramilitary organization that fought against Algerian independence. After working to suppress multiple revolutions, Welper moved to Marseille where he joined Front National. Imperial histories, as well as the politics of inequality and corruption, speak through this photograph of Welper. The number three assumes temporal significance the second time Montale looks at the photograph, which readers learn was taken three months ago (173). With each new look at the photograph, new faces appear to Montale as he attempts to trace networks of political and economic affiliations. Photography contains a myriad of possible interpretations and connections. In Montale's third look, his lover tells him that one of the men photographed is her pimp, Raoul Farge.

The first photograph catalyzes nostalgia for Marseille's past through the personal story of Ugo, Manu, and Lole; the second documents Marseille's current socio-political landscape. An image taken for a journal rather than one taken as a personal memento, the second image has a different aim. Although the group and its party were public, the photograph nevertheless reveals what was never acknowledged officially, but what remained was always in full view: the rising neo-fascist groups in Marseille that transcend clear national, generational, and professional lines. The photograph is what permits *Total Khéops* to draw its narrative together. It crystalizes and freezes a seemingly trivial moment that nonetheless is central to Montale's case and his greater knowledge of Marseille's contemporary political and social landscape.

Yet again, *Total Khéops* offers competing images of Marseille. The first photograph and Lole captures the city's past as a place of a place of transit, migration, and change around class tensions and nostalgia. The second image depicts Marseille's more sinister side, where different corrupting figures from all social ranks converge. What unites them is not a

shared struggle, but an addiction to violence and a power that includes even high officials as in the case of Éric Brunel—a prominent lawyer who defends North African immigrants who are set up by his fascist friends to organize arms trafficking networks within the housing projects. That way, both he and his friends profit economically and professionally. He was also the man Manu robbed before Manu died, unaware of his influence in Marseille. He is a prominent member of the neo-Nazi party, and involved in Leila’s murder.

Narratives converge around Brunel as soon as he enters the police station and Montale sees him. This is paradoxically a moment of déjà vu since Montale has already seen him in the photograph, with Welper, but never met him; stepping out of the photograph and out of Montale’s imagination, Brunel meets him face to face. While previously “[c]e nom [lui] dit vaguement quelque chose” [“that name vaguely meant something to him”] (254), it is only when Montale sees him that he realizes who he is. This moment centers on the perfect alignment of text (his name) and image. This alignment, however, contradictorily provokes a crisis—“total chaos” in the narrative as opposed to the unity readers might expect: “La boucle était bouclée et j’étais vraiment dans le merdier. Total Khéops disent les rappers d’IAM. Bordel immense” [“Things were coming full circle, and now I was really in the shit. *Total Khéops*, to quote the rappers of IAM. In other words, total chaos. A complete mess”] (254). This image continues the circular image conjured up with Leila’s death. Yet, instead of suturing the narrative neatly together in a resolution that is satisfactory, things become a “complete mess.”

VI. Conclusion

Relationships between closure and chaos, convergences and dispersion constitute the final contradiction in *Total Khéops*. These dynamics emphasize, once again, the impossibility

of ever having a unified image of Marseille; if this fact resonates as a repetition of a prior theme, it is precisely the point. As opposed to a traditional detective novel that moves towards a resolution, Izzo's work underscores stasis and the impossibility of ever achieving a narrative end.

Thus, in solving Leila's murder, *Total Khéops* opens up onto another far more troubling story: the rise of fascist regimes world-wide. While the novel reveals "the explosive fact of decolonization that now sweeps these comfortable categories away and confronts [Marseille and France] with an immense multitude of others"(Jameson "End of Temporality" 709), it goes further to show how such confrontations with others and otherness is also about colonial history lingers as fragmented images in our global consciousness. *Total Khéops* enacts the circular effect that it describes: it begins with Leila's murder and Marseille's contemporary geopolitical context, and explores how those histories resonate with global atrocities. For Montale, as he underscores in the second novel, *Chourmo*, "toutes les images les plus horribles, que ma tête avait pu enregistrer, défilèrent devant mes yeux. Charniers d' Auschwitz. D'Hiroshima. Du Rwanda. De Bosnie. Un hurlement de mort. Le hurlement de tous les fascismes du monde" ["And all the most horrible images I've ever seen paraded before my eyes. Mass graves. Auschwitz. Hiroshima. Rwanda. Bosnia. A scream of death. The screams of fascisms all over the world"] (270). Izzo's Marseille is not only a multicultural space of different communities and local differences; it is a site upon which the aftermath of French imperialism is inscribed and the formerly colonized are reminders of France's continued violence against its former colonies in the form of interrupted visions. The accumulation of narrative clues that is integral to assembling the detective's puzzle and to solving a crime is never realized in *Total Khéops*. The closure around Leila's murder leaves more questions than answers about the international

networks of crime, and the common monetary interests uniting the French state, the mafia, and drug lords.

Rather than an open and shut case (Pearson and Singer 2), *Total Khéops* enacts a domino effect where one piece of the puzzle leads to yet another clue in ever-expanding circles of corruption and disruptions that create series of interrupted images of Marseille and the Mediterranean. If Montale's job, as a detective, is to focus in on narrative clues in order to make sense of them, the clues resist a complete inscription and incorporation. In trumping the detective's quest for truth, Izzo's narrative problematizes the question of guilt and involvement. As Leila's murder reveals, there are only layers upon layers of interrelated corruption. Rather than fitting them together, the detective must attempt to account for and attempt to make sense of their coexistence. Readers, like Montale, are left with images—of photographs, fleeting images of women—that underscore the impossibility of ever fully seeing and grasping Marseille's history.

Coda:
Through the Rearview Mirror: Glimpses of the Mediterranean and into History

Objects in the mirror are closer than they appear. The rearview mirror permits viewers to see what is behind and before them simultaneously. It magnifies, frames, and brings what could go undetected into focus in the blink of an eye. In crime fiction, a glimpse in the rearview mirror can provide a clue to the larger narrative puzzle.

The question of relationality and point of view is fundamental to the Tunisian writer and director Moshen Melliti's debut film (2007) *Io, l'altro* [*I, the Other*], which grapples with how to confront otherness within the Mediterranean and within the larger context of the post-9/11 world. The film is about Youssef, a young Tunisian immigrant who goes to Sicily and befriends a man, Guiseppe. Both men are working-class fishermen struggling to make a living; this common class context unites them as they set sail into the Mediterranean in search of fish. Yet, the men find the waters almost empty. As their boat travels into deeper waters, Guiseppe hears a radio broadcast announcing the global search for a terrorist named Youssef, responsible for the Madrid bombings of 2004. With this historical detail, viewers become firmly situated within the post-9/11 world as Guiseppe begins to wonder if his friend Youssef is the man authorities are looking for.

As the ship sails further into the Mediterranean and loses contact with the base station, the distinctions between self and other blur as both characters of *Io, l'altro* ask: who is the Other? Is he an extension of myself, or the enemy? Is this real or just a figment of my imagination? These questions are all the more poignant because the two men's names—

Youssef and Guiseppe—are the North African and Italian equivalent of the name Joseph in English. Furthermore, the names are stereotypical in so far as every Italian man might be a Guiseppe, just as every North African man could be a Youssef. Through these names, *Io, l'altro* underscores the indistinguishability of any particularities that could identify the “real” Youssef responsible for the bombings. The two men proliferate into many different men, so that the dualism and mirroring open up onto an entangled multiplicity where self becomes other and friends transform into enemies in a troubling dynamic.

Io, l'altro speaks to the visual dynamics that are at the heart of this dissertation. Similar to Djebbar's *La Nouba* that engages different architectures to foreground the impossibility of an unmediated seeing, Melliti's film works with the ship's structure—portholes, bows, sails—to capture the men's increasing psychological distrust of one another in what is characteristic of the Mediterranean Noir genre. Historian Pierre Nora says that French-Algerian relations will always be defined by violence because of the still lingering aftereffects of the Algerian War of Independence on either side of the Mediterranean (Nora 317). *Io, l'altro* appears to be a response to Nora's theory of history, which grapples with how colonial structures still inform our global relations and conceptions of otherness, especially in a post-9/11 world that attempts to reduce complex categories of identity into binaries.

Mediterranean Studies counters such reductive understandings by challenging strict national boundaries. The complex flow of immigrants and migrants into Europe, the ever-changing linguistic evolutions across national boundaries, or the still enduring presences of places like the Spanish protectorates Ceuta and Melilla within Morocco's own borders all resist a simple or singular interpretation. Instead, these entanglements point to persisting transnational affinities and interrelationships within and around the Mediterranean in spite of and as a result of colonialism's end.

The geographical and national reorganization of borders within the postcolonial Mediterranean offers a rich opportunity to examine how literature creatively engages with such socio-political and geographical reconfigurations. This dissertation has begun to trace how interrupted visual networks in literature register the abrupt shifts brought about by colonial conflicts such as the Algerian War of Independence around the Mediterranean Basin. Each chapter has analyzed how visual interruption defines the Mediterranean as grounded in a physical geography, which in turn inspires transnational and imaginative cartographies that extend beyond the texts and the nations in which they were produced. Thus, the visual tropes register the Mediterranean's geography while attempting to engage creatively with the social, political, and historical changes brought about by decolonization. As a result, the visual tropes—especially the blink and the frame—are characterized by continuity and rupture, or continuity as rupture. The ambiguities in the vision refract the historical and artistic changes occurring in the region. Yet, rather than understanding the desire “to write” the Mediterranean as an impulse defined exclusively by trauma or haunting, visual interruption, as textualized in narrative, reveals the sometimes nearly imperceptible potentialities and conditions of possibility in each blink, each frame.

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