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Hôtel La Fêlure: A work of fictocriticism

Abstract:

“Hôtel La Fêlure” is a work of fictocriticism in the form of a short story. In the piece’s auto-critical introduction, the author explains that, after a visit to Marrakech, Morocco, in early 2023, he conducted preliminary research on Moroccan male sexuality in advance of a return visit. Along the way, he viewed *The Blue Caftan*, a Morocco-set film directed by Maryam Touzani, and read *L’amour Fait Loi* [Love Lays Down the Law], a Morocco-based essay collection edited by Pierre Pascual. Rather than write a scholarly essay on the film, his first inclination, he created “Hôtel La Fêlure”. In the short story, Benjamin and a cast of Moroccan characters, who lodge in the eponymous hotel, watch and analyse *The Blue Caftan* through the lens of a fictional lecture on Moroccan male sexuality. Over the course of their conversation, the characters occasionally ventriloquize lines from *L’amour Fait Loi*.

Biographical note:

Based in New York City, Eric Daffron is a professor of Literature at Ramapo College of New Jersey. Formerly a scholar of early British Gothic literature, among other topics, he has recently made a creativecritical turn. His recent work has appeared in *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies*, *European Journal of Life Writing*, *L’Esprit Literary Review*, *The AutoEthnographer* and *Impost: A Journal of Creative and Critical Work*.

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Auto-critical introduction

Although I had dreamt of travelling to Morocco for two decades, I did not land on Moroccan soil until January of 2023. After only six days in Marrakech and its environs, I fell in love with Morocco, both its people and its culture. Despite this budding love affair, I left the country with more questions than answers. For example, ambling through Marrakech's main square one late afternoon, I spied duos of young men walking arm in arm.[1] Their public display of affection struck me as utopic. Yet I wondered whether my Western perspective skewed the reality on the ground. After all, Article 489 of Morocco's penal code punishes individuals who engage in sexual activity with same-sex partners.

Back in New York, anticipating a return visit later in May, my curiosity spurred some research, more preliminary than exhaustive. As I researched Moroccan male sexuality, two cultural texts captivated my attention. One was *The Blue Caftan*, an exquisite film directed by Maryam Touzani (2022).[2] Set in Salé, the film explores the lives of a tailor, his terminally ill spouse and his handsome, young apprentice, who attracts the amorous attention of his mentor.

The other text was *L'amour Fait Loi* [Love Lays Down the Law],[3] a collection of fearless essays written by members of Morocco's LGBTQI+ community. Edited by Pierre Pascual (2020b) in the wake of a series of forced outings, the collection called for a more tolerant, inclusive Morocco, a country where all individuals can live and love freely.[4] In fact, one of the editor's moving comments inspired my piece's title. One day, while they were walking towards a hotel, a Moroccan friend shared with Pascual (2020c) his favourite French word, *fêlure* [crack]. Riffing on the word, Pascual dreamt of a hotel named La Fêlure, a place of communal living and mutual care. What if such a hotel actually exists, I asked myself, even if only in his imagination and, by extension, my own?

Putting that question in the back of my mind, I contemplated writing a scholarly article on *The Blue Caftan* in light of my research findings. Yet, over the years, I have become increasingly dissatisfied with the traditional academic essay, despite publishing a number of them myself. A literary scholar, I was trained to study a topic for months, if not years, before writing a scholarly essay on the matter. Although I respect my disciplinary training, it has nonetheless stifled me. Often I am reluctant to share insights that have emerged early in my research and to do so in non-traditional formats. Seeking an alternative, I changed course and wrote a piece of fictocriticism.

This is not the first time that I have written in a mode only to discover its name after the fact.[5] One day, happening upon "fictocriticism", I recognised something of "Hôtel La Fêlure", a draft of which I had just completed. From researching the term, I learned the mode's characteristics and stakes, ones that helped me to clarify my project as it unfolded. Scholars have defined fictocriticism as an experimental, hybrid mode, one that obscures the disciplinary boundaries between fiction and criticism (Brewster, 1996; Gibbs, 2005; Muecke & King, 1991; Nettelbeck, 1998). The mode often hosts multiple voices that enter into dialogue and debate, a

feature that these critics have noted. Rather than reaching a definitive conclusion, they have contended, fictocriticism embraces interruptions and other discontinuities. Some scholars have additionally described fictocriticism as a performative writing practice (Gibbs, 2005; Nettelbeck, 1998), one “in which the interpretative process is the subject as well as the tool of critique” (Nettelbeck, 1998, p. 13). Rather than an original genius, a fictocritical writer such as Roland Barthes recycles and repurposes others’ words (Nettelbeck, 1998; see also Gibbs, 2005). In fact, the mode trades the singular expert for a writing subject who assumes plural, provisional identities (Nettelbeck, 1998).

Just such a work of fictocriticism, “Hôtel La Fêlure” was written across the spring of 2023. Given that timeline, my piece obviously does not advance the astute claims, monumental evidence and polished erudition that one would expect of a conventional scholarly essay published after years of research and revision. Such an enterprise, although worthy, is not the purpose of “Hôtel La Fêlure”. This piece – a short story, if you will – stages a critical conversation among Benjamin (my first name) and a cast of imaginary Moroccan characters. Lodging in the story’s eponymous hotel, they give voice to ideas that derive from my research. I augment those ideas with memories and observations from my trips to Marrakech. Occasionally, my characters ventriloquise inspirational lines from *The Blue Caftan* and especially from *L’amour Fait Loi*. Their voices thus emerge from the interstices between those texts, cracks not unlike the literal and metaphorical ones that Benjamin discovers in Hôtel La Fêlure and its residents.[6] It should go without saying, however, that none of my characters stands in for the authors whom they cite. Even Benjamin floats opinions that I would not claim as my own except perhaps as some alter ego.

Hôtel La Fêlure: a work of fictocriticism

À l’hôtel La Fêlure nous pourrions vivre ensemble en paix, prenant soin les uns des autres, ne cherchant pas à être plus fort que nous le sommes, acceptant de n’être que des humains et non pas ces demi-dieux surpuissants qui veulent régir le monde et tous ses habitants.[7]

– P. Pascual (2020c, p. 91)

I walk briskly behind the porter as we make our way through Jemaa el-Fna, the central square of Marrakech’s medina. Weaving in and out of the crowd, we steer clear of a snake charmer and his menagerie of menacing cobras. The porter races ahead, making a quick right onto Rue Riad Zitoun el Kdim. I know the street’s name from my last visit to the medina, a place whose busy souks far exceed its signposts. Soon the porter swerves left down an alleyway. Struggling to keep pace, I almost stumble as a skinny cat scurries between my feet. No sooner do I reach the porter’s side than he stops before a grey door and rings the bell. Admiring the door’s simple geometric design, I read the posted placard: Hôtel La Fêlure. Surely a misnomer. It is a four-bedroom riad, after all.

As I ponder the incongruity between the name and the thing it designates, a woman appears at the door.

“Hello,” I say feebly, still jetlagged, as the porter leaves my side.

“*S-salamu 3alaykum*,”[8] she replies, shaking my hand. “I’m Fatima,” she continues, backing into the entryway, “and you must be Benjamin.” As I enter the riad, I gaze upwards, astounded by the vast expanse from the first floor to the glass roof. “I’m meeting another guest at a property nearby,” my host informs me, “so I hope you don’t mind if I leave. I made you some mint tea just before you arrived.” Walking towards the door, she says, “*Bslama*.”[9]

As I explore the riad, I’m drawn to one of the upstairs bedrooms, its French doors fronting the balcony, which overlooks the floor below. Surveying the bedroom and its adjacent sitting area, I notice cracks in the plaster here and there. “Old-World charm,” I say quietly to myself and then make my way downstairs.

Weary from travel, I find a cosy spot on the canapé and pour some tea. As the warm, sweet liquid glides down my throat, the doorbell rings. Walking to the door, I muster some French, “*J’arrive*.”[10]

When I open the door, a youthful man in blue jeans and a black t-shirt greets me with a smile. “Hi. I’m Adam,” he informs me, pronouncing his name in the local dialect.

“Hello,” I respond. “Do you work for Fatima?”

“No, I’ve come to stay.” Only then do I notice his suitcase.

Flabbergasted, I muse inwardly, “I thought I rented the whole place to myself.” I hesitantly let the stranger enter but absentmindedly leave the door cracked.

When I wave a hand towards one of the downstairs bedrooms, Adam looks upwards with a grin, “I prefer the upstairs.”

I follow my uninvited guest as he briskly climbs the stairs and enters the bedroom opposite mine. Unpacking, he first removes some clothes and a book by Abdellah Taïa. Then he carefully pulls from his backpack a stuffed bear and gently holds it.

“What happened?” I ask, pointing to its broken arm.

Handing me the toy, Adam replies, “*Lequel de nous n’est pas une poupée cassée, recollée?*”[11]

Baffled, I ponder Adam’s comment. Soon I hear a faint sound below. Realising that I earlier left the door open, I rush downstairs with Adam in tow.

When I reach the first floor, a young, dashing handsome man is setting the dining room table. Cheerfully, he greets me, “*Bonjour!*”[12] Although I am perturbed by another invasion of my privacy, I cannot help but admire his elegant, grey djellaba.

Then a twentysomething woman smartly dressed in a pantsuit leans from the kitchenette. “Is anyone else hungry? We brought dinner.” When Adam nods in assent, she requests, “Help me warm things up.”

“*Wakha,*”[13] Adam replies, joining her.

Soon I learn that he knows Idris and Rachida, the newest arrivals, but how he made their acquaintance and why they all came to the riad I still cannot discern. Annoyed by the afternoon’s unexpected turn of events, I hanker for a drink. Suddenly I spy a bottle of Domaine de Sahari Réserve on a side table. “One of my guests must have brought it,” I silently speculate. I uncork the bottle of red wine and pour a glass.

After a half hour, the threesome brings to the table a chicken tagine with prunes, side dishes of zaalouk and taktouka, a basket of khobz and some nectarines. My earlier irritation gradually subsiding, I am grateful for the food and the dinner companions. While we enjoy the delicious dishes, they converse.

“Did anyone else go to the lecture at La Librairie du Monde last night?” Rachida asks.

“No,” Idris responds. “I studied for my graduate seminar. What was it about?”

“Leila, the speaker, reviewed three scholars’ work on North African and Middle Eastern male sexuality.”[14]

“Leila’s topic reminds me of Halim,” I pipe in, feebly attempting to enter the conversation.

“Who’s Halim? Are we expecting him?” Adam asks.

“I certainly hope not,” I quickly retort. “We’ve run out of bedrooms, after all.” Embarrassed by my flare up, I take a deep breath. “Halim is the tailor in *The Blue Caftan*, a film set in Salé. Though happily married, he falls in love with another man.”[15]

Leaping to the big-screen television mounted nearby, Adam exclaims, “Let’s watch it! I bet it’s on International Flicks.”

We throw pillows from the canapé to the floor while Idris locates the remote, selecting the English subtitles for my benefit.

A few minutes into the film, we reach the scene in which, having just arrived to work, Youssef changes shirts. As the apprentice bares his torso, Halim admires the beautiful, young man. Halim's gaze is suddenly disrupted when Mina, his spouse, enters the room.

Interrupting the film with the remote, Adam exclaims, "That was titillating!"

"Yes, it was," I underscore. "From the beginning of the film, it's clear that Halim is a closeted homosexual."

"I'm not so sure," Idris cautions, "that Halim would think of himself as gay, much less closeted. Your Western expression seems out of place in this film. Salé's medina and Halim's trade bespeak an old world for which *closeted homosexual* doesn't quite seem the right term."

"Perhaps Leila's lecture can illuminate this matter?" Rachida proposes.

Attentively, Adam, Idris and I lean towards Rachida. "If I remember Leila correctly," she begins studiously, "one scholar argued that, for a few decades now, we've been at the crossroads of two models of Moroccan male sexuality.[16] The first model, a local one, places different, public manifestations of masculinity on a complex continuum. These positions range from a strong, independent masculinity (*rajul*) to a lesser, feminised form of manhood characterised by economic and other forms of dependence (*zamel*)."

When Adam winces at the last word, I wonder whether an old wound has reopened.

"By marrying a woman," Rachida explains, "the *zamel* can eventually attain full masculinity, a status that, for the *rajul*, is never in jeopardy. In fact, after marriage, some men continue having sex with other men."

"That sounds like Halim," I divulge, but catch myself before spoiling the plot. "The other model?" I ask politely, aware that I cut in.

Patiently, Rachida continues, "That model, a Western one, assumes that a person is either heterosexual or homosexual. Unlike the other model, which is predicated on practices, this one is based on identities. Increasingly, more affluent Moroccans subscribe to this model, but it's essentially a foreign import."

When Rachida finishes, Adam asks impetuously, "So which model applies to this film?"

"I can't possibly know yet," Rachida retorts. "The film just started."

Reaching for the remote control, I resume the film. Soon we witness a scene in the local hammam, in which a man invites Halim to his private stall, and, much later, we see another hammam scene, during which the viewer can infer, from the action below the door, that Halim and another man engage in anal intercourse.

Lunging for the remote, Adam remarks with bated breath, “That was steamy.”

“Yes, literally,” I chuckle.

Boldly, Rachida declares, “These scenes epitomise the first model.”

“Really?” Idris responds.

Darting her eyes at Idris, Rachida begins, “According to one scholar, the two models coexist in Morocco but in different sites. For example, the hammam, which the scholar associated with the first model, is a place that men sometimes frequent to seek other men for sex. That scholar also – ”[17]

Before Rachida can continue, the doorbell rings. I saunter to the door. Opening it into the dimly lit alley, I spy someone in baggy haram pants.

“Hi!” the twentysomething exclaims, rushing into the riad before I can utter a word.

“Rayan!” Rachida cries, jumping to her feet. “I’m so glad you finally arrived. I was beginning to get worried.”

“So was I,” Adam concurs.

“Sorry I’m late,” Rayan apologises. “I just left work at Maison de l’Art Contemporain.”

Sheepishly, I turn to the new arrival. “I’m afraid we’ve run out of bedrooms.”

“Don’t worry,” Rayan reassures me, pointing towards the canapé. “I can sleep there.”

Addressing Idris and Rachida, I ask, “Do you mind if Rayan sleeps downstairs?”

“Of course not,” Rachida replies. Then she adds warmly, “Everyone is welcome in Hôtel La Fêlure.”

“Then it’s all settled,” Rayan says gleefully.

“I don’t know about the rest of you,” I confess, “but I’m tired from travelling all day. Would you mind if we finish the film tomorrow?”

“No problem,” Adam says. “*Layla sa3ida.*”[18]

“*Layla sa3ida,*” my new friends echo.

The next morning, waking in need of an espresso, I step downstairs. Adam joins me.

“Good morning,” Idris cheerfully greets me.

“Did you sleep well?” Rachida asks.

“Fine,” I return. “Where is Rayan?”

“They’ve stepped out to Jemaa el-Fna to grab an avocado juice,” Idris responds.

While Idris and Adam prepare breakfast, Rachida and I set the table. Once Rayan returns, the guys bring the food.

“Would anyone mind if we watch the film over breakfast?” I ask.

“Sure,” Adam replies. “Let me get Rayan up to speed.” While I fetch the remote, Adam gives our companion a quick plot summary.

As we sip black coffee or mint tea and munch on honey-laden msemen, we’re silently glued to the monitor. Eventually, we reach the tortured scene in which, at home in bed, Mina asks Youssef to forgive her for falsely accusing him earlier in the film. As he breaks down in tears, Halim comforts him.

Touched, Rayan stops the film to ask, “Why does Youssef cry?”

“I’m not sure,” Adam replies, equally moved. “But did anyone notice that Halim embraces Youssef from behind?”

“Of course,” Idris quickly affirms. “Earlier Youssef assumes the same posture in the shop when *he* expresses *his* love for Halim. There Halim rejects Youssef’s affection. Reasserting his power, the tailor orders his apprentice to gather thread from the floor. Here, however, Halim consoles Youssef.”

“You may have overlooked another difference between those two scenes,” Rachida asserts. “It’s true that both scenes begin with one man holding the other from behind. But in the second scene, Halim turns Youssef around so that they face each other. I can’t help but think that those contrasts are key to understanding Halim’s relationships with men.”

“Are you suggesting,” I probe, “that those contrasts have something to do with the two models?”

Puzzled, Rayan asks, “The two models?”

“I’ll explain later,” Adam mumbles, impatient with this debate.

Turning towards me, Rachida responds in a teacherly tone, “I think we can safely say that, over the course of the two scenes, Halim moves towards greater acceptance of his love for Youssef. Beyond that,” she admits reluctantly, “I’m not sure what those contrasts mean.”

“Perhaps you’ll figure them out if we continue the film,” Idris challenges. With those words, I realise that a friendly competition has arisen between our two intellectual powerhouses.

“Please pass the remote,” Idris requests. After Rayan hands it over, Idris says, “*Shukran.*”[19]

A few minutes later, we watch the joyful domestic scene in which Mina dances to music emanating from outside the window. She soon invites Halim and Youssef to join her.

Suddenly, Rayan pauses the film and jumps to their feet. “It’s all in the shoulders.”[20]

Following suit, Adam joins Rayan, both gyrating across the floor to imagined music.

Turning away from their frolicking, Idris asks seriously, “Did you notice that, by the end of the scene, Mina moves to the side? From that vantage point, she approvingly watches the two men dance together.”

“Obviously,” Rachida rejoins. “One of the things I admire about Mina,” she continues gently, “is her gradual openness to the budding romance between Halim and Youssef.”

“Over the course of the film,” I add, “the three characters cultivate a relationship of mutual care and respect. In fact, the film gestures towards a future world in which everyone loves freely.”

While the others reflect on my utopian vision, I resume the film. Soon we witness Halim and Mina in their bedroom, deep in conversation.

“I tried to suppress it,” Halim confesses to Mina.

No sooner do those words leave Halim’s mouth than Rachida grabs the remote and announces, “This scene is a clear instance of the second model.”

“How so?” Adam inquires.

Still perplexed, Rayan demands, “What *is* this second model?”

Disregarding the question, Rachida elaborates, “According to Leila, confession is the centrepiece of the Western sexual regime, which compels individuals to discover and reveal their inner truths, in particular their sexual identities.”[21]

“But,” Idris counters sceptically, “Halim never says he’s gay. He just says *it*.”

“Obviously,” Adam asserts, “*it* is homosexuality.” Contributing at last to a debate from which he has largely been absent, Adam smiles contently.

Nodding, Rachida concurs, “Essentially, Halim comes out to Mina.”

“Coming out,” Adam states with newfound confidence, “can be an important moment in accepting ourselves and asking for acceptance from others.”

“But when it’s forced by others,” Rachida adds sombrely, “coming out can expose members of Morocco’s queer community to ridicule, imprisonment and even violence.[22] For that reason, some scholars have doubted the efficacy of political organisations, however well intentioned, that impose a Western-style identity politics on Moroccan men.”[23]

“But when it’s not compelled,” Adam insists, “[*T*]e coming out peut être très beau.”[24]

“[*T*]out coming out commence d’abord par un coming in,”[25] Rayan declares, making their own inroads into the conversation.

“Coming in?” the rest of us ask in rapid succession.

“Before you expect others to accept you for who you are,” Rayan explains, “you must accept yourself.[26] To be queer is, for many of us, to be rejected. Sometimes we even reject ourselves and others like us.”[27] Rayan pauses to gather their thoughts, their impassioned words having opened a window, however obscure, into their troubled life before Hôtel La Fêlure. “So, you see,” Rayan continues, “we’re broken. [*Mais*] [*n*]ous revendiquons notre fragilité, nous sommes ... bercé.e.s par la poésie, la nuance, la dualité.[28] With the patient care of friends and lovers, we will survive.”

Adam’s stuffed bear suddenly coming to mind, I ruminates anew on my roommate’s earlier enigmatic comment.

Interrupting my train of thought, Idris hits “play” on the remote. Soon we hear Mina insist that Halim and Youssef go to the hammam. Moments later the two men lie side-by-side nearly naked on the hammam floor while a man scrubs Halim. As Halim and Youssef touch fingers, the other men go about their business.

Abruptly pausing the film, Idris queries Rachida, “Last night you argued that the hammam is indicative of the first model. But is the hammam – or any other Moroccan site, for that matter – limited to just one model?”

“Yes, I believe so,” Rachida responds.[29]

“Then here’s a place where the theory doesn’t work,” Idris contends.

“Why not?” Rachida asks as if unconvinced.

“Because this last scene moves beyond the first model,” Idris declares.

Turning towards Idris, we give him the floor.

“This scene,” Idris begins, “is just one in a series taking place in the hammam, a local site that *sometimes* conforms to the first model. Yet there are important differences between the earlier scenes and this one. In the former, Halim comes alone and occasionally engages in sex without Mina’s knowledge. In the latter, however, he comes with Youssef at Mina’s insistence. In fact, intentionally or not, she facilitates their romance.”

“Don’t forget that they touch,” Adam quickly reminds Idris.

“Yes,” Idris affirms, nodding.

“Are you implying,” I inquire, “that this last scene invokes the second model?”

Before Idris can respond, Rachida objects, “The men in the hammam overlook Youssef and Halim’s public display of affection. You might even say that the fellow bathers tolerate without explicitly condoning it. Their attitude flies in the face of the second model, which demands full confession.”[30]

“Well,” I start hesitantly, “the scene does seem a *bit* different from the others.”

“I’m not sure anymore,” Idris admits dispiritedly. “In any case, the two-model theory seems overly tidy.”

“In fact,” I assert, “the theory falls prey to a binary, the hallmark of Western rational thought.”

“Your point is well taken,” Rachida concedes, easing the tension in the room. “Leila mentioned a scholar who resisted homogenising and dichotomising Western and local cultures, including the social classes that comprise the latter. Contending that Moroccan male sexuality varies from one concrete situation to the next, that scholar has encouraged us to attend to the complexities of each and every instance. Only then will we discern the diverse ways in which Moroccan men construct and adapt their identities via interpersonal exchanges, social sites and cultural representations of diverse origins.”[31]

“Much the same can be said for our LGBTQI+ community,” Idris observes, finding rare concurrence with Rachida. “Our community gets its cue from Stonewall.[32] Yet, at the same time, it isn’t a carbon copy of the West but bears witness to Moroccan culture, which is far from unified.[33] Take *zamel*, for instance.”

“That word is hard for me to hear,” Adam recoils.[34]

After casting a look of empathy towards Adam, Idris moves forward. “Generally speaking, *zamel* refers to a man who has sex with another man. And so does *loubia*, for that matter.”[35]

“*Ana loubia*,”[36] Rayan informs us.

“In some contexts,” Idris continues, “those words bear derogatory associations. Yet, like *queer* in the Anglo world, those words are now being reclaimed by a new generation of Moroccans.[37] We’ve even given our own spin to *faggot*: it’s *fagouta* in Darija.”[38]

I cringe inwardly, reticent to expose my own wounds even as my friends openly share theirs.

“Thus,” Idris concludes, “we need to abandon the tired binary between West and East. *Je suis au-delà de tout ça*.”[39]

Moved by Idris’s passion, I remark, “Decades ago Abdelkebir Khatibi invited us to engage in an ‘other-thought,’ a strategy that subjects Western and local cultures to a ‘double critique’ while recognising the inherent multiplicity and heterogeneity of both.[40] You seem to be searching for just such a different way of thinking.”

Idris nods in agreement.

Eager to reach the end of the film, I press the remote’s green button. Soon we view the poignant scene in which the ailing Mina invites Halim to touch her chest, the site of a mastectomy. As he traces her scar with his index finger, I spy a fissure in the wall behind Adam. Musing silently, I wonder whether a crack can provide an opening, an opportunity for embracing and sharing our wounds while transforming them into acts of grace.

Scenes later, after burying Mina, Halim and Youssef sit silently in a café. Around them, the all-male clientele converses, plays cards and drinks tea.

As the credits roll, I observe, “The ending is fitting. Youssef and Halim sit in the same café where, in an earlier scene, Mina and Halim sit. Substituting for Mina, Youssef lives with Halim happily ever after.”

“Not so quick,” Idris demurs. “You’ve been watching too many Hollywood films. I don’t buy your point that Youssef replaces Mina even if the film’s plot leads us towards that conclusion. Such an interpretation makes the two persons and, by extension, the two relationships, exchangeable. But the relationships mean very different things on Moroccan soil.”

“I’ll concede your point,” I respond. “Perhaps the paired scenes epitomise Halim’s two life choices?”

“Now you’re resorting to a binary,” Idris quickly retorts. “The two relationships aren’t an either-or option. Like some Moroccan men, Halim has sex with other men while married.”

“At the very least,” I say with frustration, “the two scenes are symmetrical.”

“But they really aren’t symmetrical,” Adam jumps in. “When Halim takes Mina to the café, she’s the only woman in the house. She even cheers for the wrong team during a televised game. Unlike Mina, who is out of place, Youssef belongs to this world.”

Having listened attentively on the sidelines, Rachida suggests, in a conciliatory tone, “What if we put the first café scene aside for a moment and build on Adam’s point? Leila reminded us that the café resembles the men’s hammam. Fixtures in Moroccan society, these homosocial spaces often cater to men seeking other men for sex. Thus, this scene, like the hammam scenes, seems indicative of the first model.”[41]

“I don’t know anything about these models,” Rayan admits, “but Halim and Youssef don’t go to the café in search of sex. They’re already a couple.”

“Could we say, then,” Rachida proposes, “that, like the hammam, the café serves as cover for the two men, providing them an opportunity to appear in public as a couple?”

“Your point makes sense from the perspective of the other men in the café,” Idris begins, meeting Rachida half way, “but not from our perspective as viewers. Although the other men in the café seem oblivious to Halim and Youssef, the camera draws our attention to the latter, who, unlike the other customers, sit in silence.” Slowing down to collect his thoughts, Idris then waxes philosophical. “In other words, the camera marks the couple’s difference, even if it doesn’t signal what that difference could be or might become.”

Suddenly, Rayan jumps to their feet, weary from the prolonged deliberation. “I need to stretch my legs.” Walking to the sound system, they ask, “Anyone up for dancing?”

Eagerly, Adam rises, soon followed by Rachida and Idris.

“Hey, let’s do the farandole!” Rayan exclaims, reaching for Adam’s hand.[42]

“*Yallah!*”[43] Adam shouts enthusiastically, kicking a few pillows out of the way.

Taking Idris’s hand, Rachida adds, “*Main dans la main.*”[44]

“Join us, Benjamin,” Idris invites me.

Awkwardly, I reply, “I don’t know how to dance. Plus, I thought the farandole was French.”

Holding my hand tenderly, Rayan explains, “Here we do it Moroccan style.”

“[*Oui*],” Idris agrees, “[*c’est un message de paix et d’amour.*”][45]

“I carry only one weapon,” Rachida informs us, moving briskly around the room: “*le bien vivre-ensemble.*”[46]

“Don’t be afraid to love,”[47] Adam encourages me.

At last, I relent and join my new friends. Joyfully, we dance the farandole. Peace and love we sing in every tongue we know until divisions of gender, culture and language recede. Glimpsing what lies *au-delà de tout ça*, we momentarily forget the troubled world outside Hôtel La Fêlure.

Notes

[1] I recorded this incident in a short lyric essay (Daffron, 2024).

[2] Throughout this piece, I cite from the version available for streaming on Amazon Prime.

[3] Throughout this piece, all translations from the French are my own.

[4] Throughout this piece, I cite from the book’s Kindle edition.

[5] A few years ago, I learned the word “autotheory”, after having already written or co-written works in that mode.

[6] I thank one of my anonymous reviewers for suggesting the connection between my piece’s intertextuality and one of its major themes, and for suggesting that a crack offers an opening – an insight that I assigned to Benjamin through his narration.

[7] “In Hotel La Fêlure we could live together in peace, taking care of one another, not seeking to be stronger than we are, accepting that we’re only humans and not those ultra-powerful demigods who want to govern the world and all its inhabitants.”

[8] “Peace be upon you” (Peace Corps Morocco, 2016, p. 5). In addition to English, the characters occasionally speak in Moroccan Arabic (Darija) and French to intimate Morocco’s multilingual landscape.

[9] “Good-bye” (Peace Corps Morocco, 2016, p. 6).

[10] “I’m coming.”

[11] “Who of us isn’t a broken doll, glued back together?” Pascual (2020c) asked this question after learning his friend’s favourite French word (p. 91).

[12] “Hello.”

[13] “Okay” (Peace Corps Morocco, 2016, p. 130).

[14] Although Leila’s lecture is fictional, it nonetheless resembles the kind of lectures that individuals from these Moroccan characters’ backgrounds might hear. Take, for example, *The Queer Is Yet to Come/Le Queer Est à Venir*, a remarkable podcast devoted primarily to North

African sexualities and genders. This podcast, which I listened to while composing this piece, sometimes features topics comparable to that of Leila’s lecture. In the episode “From Morocco to Lebanon: Studying Queerness and Masculinities – with Oumaïma Dermoumi” (2021, April 20), the Moroccan-born, French-educated activist addressed in English, French and Darija their study of masculinities. The episode commented on the irony that so much scholarship on Moroccan sexuality has been written by non-Moroccans.

[15] See Touzani (2022). All subsequent references to this film, including the English subtitles, come from this source.

[16] This paragraph and Rachida’s next two paragraphs attribute to Leila’s lecture a broad synthesis of arguments from Rebutini (2011; 2013a; 2013b). Concentrating on Marrakech, Rebutini derived these models, in part, from Massad (2007); see especially pp. 37–47, 160–90. Focusing on Casablanca, Gouyon (2018), the third scholar in Leila’s lecture (see below), challenged Rebutini and Massad and, incidentally, contributed an essay to *L’amour Fait Loi* [Love Lays Down the Law], edited by Pascual (2020b). My characters find these scholars’ insights applicable to the Salé-set film despite geographic differences.

[17] Rebutini (2011) made the point about the models’ coexistence in different Moroccan sites, linking the hammam to the first model. Gouyon (2018) also elucidated this de facto function of the hammam (p. 33).

[18] “Good night” (Peace Corps Morocco, 2016, p. 6).

[19] “Thank you” (Peace Corps Morocco, 2016, p. 19).

[20] Mina delivers this line in this scene.

[21] For this Foucauldian point, see Rebutini (2013a; 2013b). Gouyon (2018) has argued that some young Moroccan men have constructed homosexual identities without necessarily making recourse to a Western sexual epistemology that demands a revelation; see, for example, pp. 15–17, 126–27. See note 30 for an alternative.

[22] The impetus for *L’amour Fait Loi* was a series of forced outings, an example of Rachida’s point. For an explanation, see Pascual (2020a).

[23] See Gouyon (2018), especially pp. 95–114, and Rebutini (2013a). See also Massad (2007, pp. 37–47, 160–90), especially pp. 181–90.

[24] “Coming out can be very beautiful.” The French portion of Adam’s sentence comes from Alloul (2020), who quoted Mala before the latter recounted a forced outing (p. 59).

[25] “All coming out begins first with a coming in.” H. (2020c) wrote this line (p. 23), likely drawing on Diouri-Ammor & Achbar (2020); see note 26.

[26] For the point that “coming in” entails self-acceptance, see Diouri-Ammor & Achbar (2020).

[27] Many of the contributions to *L’amour Fait Loi* made this point; see, for example, H. (2020b).

[28] “[But] we claim our fragility, we are ... cradled by poetry, nuance, duality.” This sentence, minus my interpolation, came from Mychkine (2020b, p. 12).

[29] Rebutini (2011) argued that the two models coexist in different sites (see note 17). Elsewhere, however, Rebutini (2013b) implied a more complex single-site layering, the kind that comes closer to the one that Idris soon entertains and that Gouyon (2018) advanced (see note 31).

[30] On the banality of male sexual practices in Marrakech’s public places, an attitude associated with the first model, see Rebutini (2011; 2013a). Although Gouyon (2018) did not subscribe to the two-model theory, see a comparable discussion of the “tacit”, an approach that characterised the lives of some young, gay men in Casablanca (pp. 127–33).

[31] See Gouyon (2018), especially pp. 15–17, 24–32, 59–61, 115–19, 167–71, 218–21.

[32] See Alloul (2020).

[33] Gouyon (2018) made a comparable point; see, for example, pp. 115, 118, 169–71.

[34] Mychkine (2020a) recounted adolescent memories of being insulted by individuals who called him *zamel* and *loubia*.

[35] Leila’s scholars provided more refined definitions for these words than the one Idris offers. For an explanation of *zamel*, see Rebutini (2013b). For explanations of both Darija words, see Gouyon (2018, pp. 27–30) and Pascual (2020b, p. 111).

[36] “I am homosexual.” For the translation of *ana*, see Peace Corps Morocco (2016, p. 7). For *loubia*, see Gouyon (2018, p. 15). Rayan’s declaration is the title of Gouyon’s book.

[37] For discussions of the recuperation of one or both of these words, see Gouyon (2018, pp. 28–30) and Pascual (2020b, p. 111). In “From Morocco to Lebanon: Studying Queerness and Masculinities – with Oumäïma Dermoumi” (2021, April 20), the guest suggested that, like “queer”, such words should be reclaimed by members of Morocco’s LGBT community.

[38] Nidaazzi (2020), who used this word as a pseudonym, explained its derivation.

[39] “I am beyond all that.” H. (2020b) wrote this line, aspiring to move past any number of identities built on a binary (p. 79).

[40] See Khatibi (1983/2019, Chapter 1).

[41] Rebutini (2011) addressed the café as a traditional homosocial site in Marrakech, one indicative of the first model.

[42] H. (2020a; 2020c) called the modern queer movement a farandole.

[43] “Let’s go” (Peace Corps Morocco, 2016, p. 136).

[44] “Hand in hand.” Inspiring the queer community to combat homophobia, Tahir (2020) wrote this line (p. 21).

[45] “[Yes, it’s] a message of peace and love.” Speaking of the farandole, H. (2020c) wrote this phrase, minus my interpolation (p. 23).

[46] “Living together harmoniously.” Making a point similar to Rachida’s, H. (2020a) addressed this line to the homophobe in Morocco and elsewhere (p. 8).

[47] Mina says these words to Halim moments after he touches her mastectomy scar.

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