

## «JE SUIS UN COWBOY DU FAR WEST»: A STUDY OF TEXTUAL MÉTISSAGE IN DJANET LACHMET'S AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL NOVEL LE COW-BOY (1983)

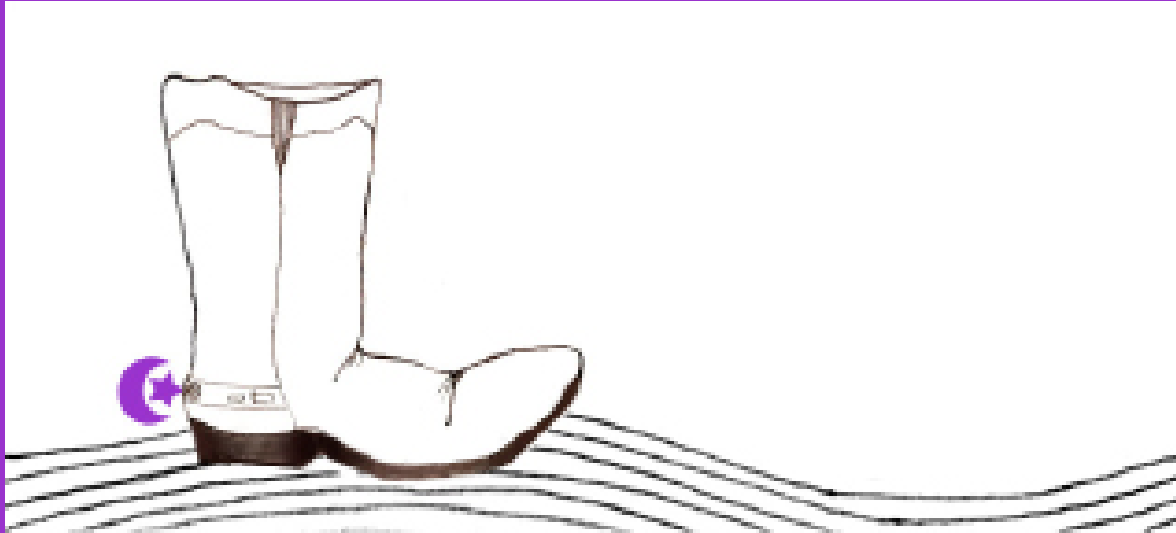
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**Abstract** || This paper explores the idea of *métissage* – a kind of intertextuality – as it has been theorized by Françoise Lionnet (1989) through a close reading of *Le Cow-boy* (1983), an autobiographical novel by Djanet Lachmet about the Algerian Revolution (1954–1962). Lionnet (1989) describes *métissage* as a textual weaving of traditions in order to reintroduce oral Creole customs and to re-evaluate received Western concepts. The term carefully links issues of race, politics, reading and writing. Described as a «life-story», Lachmet’s *Le Cow-boy* is the story of Lallia, a young girl growing up during the Algerian liberation struggle of the 1950s and sixties. Providing both a critique of *métissage* and study of its possible manifestation in the novel, I ask whether life-writing is – in this case – a kind of stratagem that opens up ambiguous spaces of possibility where a subject of violent history and an agent of discourse might engage with one another; where new modes of interaction between the personal and the political might be meaningfully explored.

**Keywords** || Comparative Literature | Life-writing | Algerian Literature in French | Intertextuality | Algerian Revolution | Popular Culture.

## 0. Introduction

In this paper I want to explore the idea of *métissage* – a kind of intertextuality – as it's been theorized by Françoise Lionnet (1989) through a close reading of *Le Cow-boy* (1983), an autobiographical novel by Djanet Lachmet about the Algerian Revolution (1954 – 1962). Lionnet describes *métissage* as a textual weaving of traditions in order to reintroduce oral Creole customs and to re-evaluate received Western concepts. The term implies the process of creolization (from the French word «métis», referring to persons of racially-mixed blood). It is etymologically linked to «tissage», the French for «weaving», and provides a metaphor for the construction of narratives. Besides being a concept, *métissage* is also a praxis and a site of purposeful ambiguity: «*Métissage* is [...] the site of undecidability and indeterminacy, where solidarity becomes the fundamental principle of political action against hegemonic languages» (Lionnet, 1989: 6). The term thus carefully links issues of race, politics, reading and writing. Described by literary critics Mohammed Tabti and Christiane Achour as autobiographical or as a life-story, Djanet Lachmet's only novel was published in France by Pierre Belfond in 1983 (see Tabti, 2001, Achour and Ali-Benali, 1991). Not much is known about the author—the reverse side of her book states only that she was born in Algeria and lives in Paris. She is described by Michel Laronde as part of the «Mouvance beure», originating in Paris (698). After a bit of research, I also discovered that she is an actor who starred in independent films like *L'Autre France* (1975), directed by Algerian film director Ali Ghalem. The novel was translated into English by Judith Still and published under the title *Lallia* in 1987. While the translation brought the book to a wider readership, Still has been criticized for her translation; especially her decision to convert the narrative's present tense into a series of confusing past tenses. For this reason, the translations I provided here are my own. *Le Cow-boy* is told in a mixture of first and third-person voices and describes the anguishes and difficulties of an Algerian girl confronted with racism, class tensions and the cruelties of war. The title of the novel implies the overarching plot – a Romeo and Juliet theme – in which an Algerian Muslim girl loves a French boy, nicknamed the «Cowboy». Their young love does not end with their double suicide, however, but is doomed by the madness of the war around them, the loyalties mandated by their families and the multiple factions of the armed nationalist movement. Written in French prose, Lachmet's novel reels from childhood memories to love letters to wild hallucinations to ancestral tales. The youthful voice of the protagonist describes her tumultuous childhood in exuberant run-on sentences in the present tense, rupturing the narrative with flashbacks and abrupt scene changes. It is clear from the beginning of the story that Lallia has a tenuous relationship with her parents and sister—especially with

her aloof mother. This unhappy family situation supplies the tenor of the novel and inspires Lallia to seek friendship and love outside the home. Since Lallia's liaison with René operates as the leitmotif of the novel, I have decided to focus my analysis on the figure of the Cowboy and their doomed friendship in the context of the Algerian War of Independence.

## 1. Revolution: The novel's violent context

The Algerian National Liberation Front (FLN) declared war against France on November 1, 1954 but the independence struggle did not reach its climax for two more years. Raging on for eight years the Algerian Revolution took the form of a kind of guerrilla warfare in the rough wilderness of the countryside. At its most effective between 1956 and 1957, the National Liberation Army (ALN) reached its peak membership with approximately 60,000 men. Smuggling arms and supplies across the borders with Morocco and Tunisia, the Army made successful attacks on French forces until the construction of barriers and increased border control along the Morice Line in 1957 and 1958. In a departure from its rural campaign, the FLN's Battle of Algiers unfolded in the capital city in 1957<sup>1</sup>. While the French were ultimately successful in their urban campaign against the FLN, the Battle of Algiers marked a grave moral crisis for France and exposed its widespread use of torture against suspects. Exposés like Henri Alleg's *La Question* (1958) on his experience of torture at the hands of the French appeared in the *métropole* and were quickly censored by the government.

General de Gaulle's return to power in 1958 marked the beginning of the end of the Algerian Revolution. While the war continued for four more years, France's new leader began to take steps to negotiate with the FLN. Around this time, the Provisional Government of the Algerian Republic (GPRA) was formed by the FLN with Ferhat Abbas at its helm and the following year the ALN general staff was organized around Colonel Boumediene. These two entities were meant to work in tandem, complimenting one another; however, this relationship shifted dramatically with the country's independence in 1962. The negotiations with France solidified the FLN's hegemony as the «rightful leader» of Algeria and it continued to construct its heroic story to reinforce this impression. Disguised as the sole party of the populist struggle, the FLN disseminated its version of events through the nationalist newspaper, *El Moudjahid*. The notion that the Revolution would transform the Algerian people and make them «one» was propagated by supporters of the FLN, including Frantz Fanon who declared that oppressed people everywhere must unite and shake off the colonial yoke in the same manner as the Algerians

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## NOTES

1 | The designation «Battle of Algiers» refers to the approximate period between January and September 1957. It is widely contested by historians since a heightened level of urban violence preceded and followed this specific interval of time. Hence the designation is considered arbitrary. Examples of high profile terrorist attacks that preceded the Battle of Algiers include the widespread guerrilla attacks following the execution of Ahmed Zabane and Abdelkader Ferradj in June 1956 at Barberousse, the explosion at rue de Thèbes in the Casbah in August 1956 and the bombings at the Milk Bar, the Cafétéria as well as a failed attempt at the Air France terminus in September 1956. These three bomb attacks were undertaken by *fidayate* Zohra Drif, Samia Lakhdari and Djamila Bouhired.

(Fanon, 1959).

After years of negotiation and a number of dramatic events in Algeria and France—including a military coup in Algiers in 1958, the massacre of peaceful Algerian demonstrators in Paris in 1961, and amidst the terrorist activities of the  *pied noir*  militia, Secret Army Organization (OAS)—the Evian accords were signed on May 19, 1962, effectively marking the end of a long and bitter war of independence. Following a referendum on July 1, 1962 the accords ratifying Algeria’s sovereignty were adopted by voters and France recognized the country’s autonomy on July 3, 1962. On the same day, the GPRA arrived in Algiers with its new leader, Ben Youssef Ben Khedda, who had recently replaced Ferhat Abbas, to a massive out-pouring of support and celebration in the streets of the capital.

In regards to the massive number of European settlers, the GPRA stated that «the safety of those French people and of their possessions must be respected; their participation in the nation’s political life must be ensured on every level» (Stora, 2001: 125). Nonetheless, the majority of French settlers fled the country and went to France after independence. For many of them—who had lived in Algeria for generations—this was the first time they had set foot in France.

In the summer of 1962 the struggle for power among different factions of the FLN and the ALN continued. Aggressive actions by the ALN inspired leaders of the nationalist movement to join forces to combat what was considered a military  *coup d’état* ; but the GPRA was eventually dissolved. This did not bring an immediate end to the fighting, however, and opposition movements continued in Kabylia and Algiers. With the bloody clash between Yacef Saadi’s commandos and guerrilla fighters on August 29th, the Algerian people marched in the streets calling out, «Seven years is enough!». On August 30, the ALN political bureau gave bureau troops permission to descend on Algiers, where violent skirmishes left more than a thousand people dead. Following this, executions and «purges» occurred including the massacre of several thousand  *harkis*  and the disappearance of over a thousand European settlers in the Oranie<sup>2</sup>. In September an agreement was finally reached which made Algiers a demilitarized zone and it was placed under the purview of the political bureau. Despite this agreement, Colonel Boumediene ordered the army to enter and occupy the capital. Following this, Ahmed Ben Bella was installed as the head of government. As sociologist Abdelkader Djeghloul notes: «This Algeria hardly resembles the one the first combatants of November 1954 dreamed of, who, for the most part, are absent from the country’s leadership» (Djeghloul, 1990: 777; my translation).

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## NOTES

2 |  *Harkis*  were Pro-French Algerian Muslims who fought on the side of France during the Revolution. The term « *harkis* » is derived from the Arabic word « *harka* » which means «movement».

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As I stated at the beginning of my paper, I intend to ask whether self- or life-writing is –in this case– a kind of stratagem that opens up ambiguous spaces of possibility where a subject of violent history and an agent of discourse might engage with one another; where new modes of interaction between the personal and the political might be meaningfully explored. In this respect, an outline of the major events of the war is helpful. I especially want to highlight the political confusion of the Algerian war and the extreme polarization that occurred as the violence increased; and the strife among different factions of the liberation struggle and within the FLN itself, essentially erased or mythologized in the official history that was developed by the Algerian regime (although this is slowing unravelling). It is useful to draw attention to these facts in order to situate the critique which subtends the novel examined in the following sections of my paper.

## 2. Le Cow-boy

In the first pages of *Le Cow-boy*, Lachmet describes the initial encounter between Lallia, a middle-class Muslim Algerian girl, and René, the son of French settlers. At the annual pageant the school children wear costumes for a play at the town hall. Lallia, the smallest girl in her class, is a daisy. Admiring her costume in a mirror before the performance she notices a blonde head in the reflection. As she turns to catch the person watching her, she spots the brim of a hat disappearing behind a column. A boy is smiling at her: «Je jette un coup d’œil dans le miroir pour vérifier ma tenue, quelque chose est peut-être de travers» [I glance in the mirror to check my outfit, something may be wrong] (Lachmet, 1987: 30). He wears a cowboy hat with a badge in the shape of a bull’s horns and has a toy revolver in his belt. She asks if he is chasing robbers: «Non, je suis un cowboy du Far West» [No, I’m a cowboy from the Wild West] (*ibid*). Borrowed from American popular culture, the cowboy is a widely-recognized romantic symbol of the colonial settler. In the US context, the cowboy and the Wild West are icons in an intricate mythology constructed around the experience of westward expansion at the turn of the nineteenth century. As popular culture scholar John Cawelti points out, this was the era of the modern adult western novel, exemplified by the stories of Owen Wister, Emerson Hough, Harold Bell Wright, and Zane Grey. It was the zenith of the Wild West Show and the Rough Riders, when Theodore Roosevelt exploited the myth of the cowboy and the Wild West for political purposes. American history witnessed the debut of Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis, and the first western genre films. In his essay, «The Significance of the Frontier in American History», Turner argues that the rise of urbanization resulted in these cowboy mythologies. They became increasingly important in the imagination of American culture since



they established an important link between the past and the present. The western, in this view, is fundamentally a nostalgic genre seeking to preserve conservative values increasingly eroded by changes related to industrialization and the rise of the city (Cawelti, 2004: 84-85). Lachmet's decision to weave the American cowboy with its iconographic significance into the plot of her novel presents us with a rich example of *métissage*, a kind of cultural and literary braiding. Appropriating the figure of the cowboy and the construct of the Wild West—removing them from their familiar context of American popular culture—Lachmet sets out to expose the absurdities of the colonial enterprise and allude to its eventual demise, considering that the cowboy is always a supremely nostalgic figure.

Switching abruptly to the third-person voice, the narrator jumps ahead one year and describes her next encounter with René. Shortly after her family moves to a new neighbourhood, Lallia notices a couple of children next door and makes friends with the boy, Yves. Yves convinces her to play a game with him and his classmate, René. The game is «I spy»; Lallia and Yves select something and René must guess what it is. They choose a daisy: «Pourquoi tu as choisi la pâquerette? Tu ne pouvais pas trouver quelque chose de mieux? dit René» [Why did you choose a daisy? You couldn't find something better? said René] (Lachmet, 1987: 37). Lallia explains: «L'année dernière, à la fête de l'école à la mairie, j'ai joué une pâquerette. C'est pour ça» [Last year, at the school pageant, I played a daisy. That's why] (*ibid*). René recognizes her right away: «Oui, je me souviens. C'était toi, la pâquerette? Eh bien, tu n'as pas changé» [Yes, I remember. That was you, the daisy? Well, you haven't changed] (*ibid*). The two become fast friends: «Lallia aime beaucoup jouer avec le cowboy, elle le retrouve tous les jours, ils passent des heures ensemble. Quand ils se fâchent, c'est Yves qui arrange les choses» [Lallia loves playing with the Cowboy, she meets him every day, they spend hours together. When they get angry at one another, Yves settles their fights] (*ibid*). But the friendship between the three children dissolves when Yves falls in love with Lallia and René decides he won't play with girls anymore then leaves the country with his family for summer vacation. Lallia begins to write secretly to René:

Je suis triste parce que je ne te vois pas, tu es encore reparti. Yves m'embête toujours quand tu n'es pas là. Il m'a même dit que tu as une fiancée là-bas dans tes voyages. Moi, c'est toi que je veux embrasser.  
– La pâquerette.

I am sad because I don't see you, you're still gone. Yves always bothers me when you're not there. He tells me you have a girlfriend during your travels. It's only you that I want to kiss. –The Daisy. (1987: 40)

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Pâquerette,

J'ai été content de ta lettre. Yves ne t'embêtera plus, je lui ai donné une bonne correction. Je n'ai pas de fiancée dans mes voyages, d'abord je ne m'intéresse pas aux filles. –Le Cowboy

Daisy,

I liked your letter. Yves won't bother you anymore, I taught him a lesson. I don't have a girlfriend when I travel, anyway I'm not interested in girls. –The Cowboy. (Lachmet, 1987: 41)

This affection between the Cowboy and Lallia intensifies as the relationship between Lallia and her parents grows increasingly strained—providing a counterpoint.

In chapter five, the narrator reverts back to the first-person voice, marking the end of the summer holidays and the return of the Cowboy. One day he is waiting for her after school to give her a gift. Walking with her friend Rida, Lallia follows Yves and René who wander in the direction of the tennis courts at the top of a hill. While Rida and Yves watch a young couple playing tennis, René gives Lallia his gift: «René ouvre son cartable et me tend un paquet enveloppé et fermé par une étiquette de cahier sur laquelle il a écrit "Pâquerette"» [René opens his satchel and hands me a package wrapped and sealed with a notebook label on which he had written «Daisy»] (1987: 62). Opening the package, she finds a circular box painted with a picture of a cowboy holding a daisy between his teeth; and inside the painted box are two red hearts wrapped in cotton wool. One heart has «you» written on it, the other «me». At the bottom of the box is a piece of paper folded up many times. Unfolding the paper, she uncovers a small drawing of a daisy: «Je ne sais pas quoi dire, mon coeur est si heureux. Lui, on dirait qu'il a fait ça comme ça, pour jouer. Il regrette peut-être, il n'a pas l'air content. Je cours rejoindre Rida, laissant mon trésor là, ouvert, sous l'arbre» [I don't know what to say, my heart is filled with happiness. As for him, you would think he did it for a joke. Perhaps he regrets it, he doesn't look too happy. I run off to join Rida, leaving my treasure there, open, under the tree] (1987: 63). René doesn't look too happy and runs off to fight Yves. Lallia tells her friend Rida about the gift and asks her what she should do. Rida replies that she must give the Cowboy a kiss. After a bit of convincing, she joins René by the oak tree:



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Je reste adossée à l'arbre sans oser le moindre mouvement. René me regarde et s'approche de moi. Puis il entoure le tronc de ses bras, je suis prisonnière. Son visage est si près que je retiens mon souffle. Lui respire encore très fort, à cause de la bataille. Il me serre contre le chêne et m'embrasse.

I lean against the tree, not daring to stir. René looks at me and approaches me. Then he clasps the trunk with both his arms, I am a prisoner. His face is so close that I hold my breath. He is still breathing very hard, because of the battle. He squeezes me against the oak and kisses me. (1987: 64-65)

The illicit kiss marks a turning point in the novel after which the narrator's relationship with her family completely devolves. She begins to deceive them, spending more time with René, Yves, and the children she meets in the marketplace: «Demain, je pars avec le cowboy à la ferme de ses parents. J'ai dit aux miens que j'allais en pique-nique avec l'école et Rida m'a aidée à mentir» [Tomorrow, I'm leaving with the Cowboy to go to his parents' farm. I told my parents that I'm going on a school picnic and Rida helped me deceive them] (1987: 65).

We have established that René is our cowboy of twentieth-century popular culture since Lachmet has essentially integrated the western—with all its inferences of mobility, competitiveness, and rugged individualism—into her text and onto the landscape of colonial Algeria. The western dramatizes and affirms masculine values by making the struggles of the heroic male protagonist on the frontier a narrative focus. While the cowboy symbolizes American values of individual male competition, aggression, and separation from community and family; the woman in the cowboy-western represents the values of the mythic past that centre on family, home and community (Cawelti, 2004: 87). In the context of colonial Algeria, on the cusp of war, this American mythology finds itself destabilized by the self-conscious love of two children—a cowboy and his daisy—performing Wild West gender roles. Lachmet thus asks us implicitly to approach the text as a possible site of resistance—where notions of authenticity are challenged. A discussion of intertextuality—an integral part of *métissage* as I read it—is apropos here.

### 3. Intertextuality and Dialogism: Theorizing resistance/ Theorizing *métissage*

Distinguished by the praxis of writing with other authors, it is my understanding that intertextuality employs «a kind of language which, because of its embodiment of otherness, is against, beyond and resistant to (mono) logic. Such language is socially disruptive,

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revolutionary even» (Allen, 2000: 45). Ultimately a dialogic process, it weaves together texts, cultural references, and languages and has the effect of fragmenting the original work and, hence, of defeating presumptions of authenticity or purity. While one might argue that the practice of intertextuality has gone on for centuries in many cultural settings, the word was introduced by the Bulgarian theorist Julia Kristeva and explained to a French audience in her seminal work, *Séméiôtickè: recherches pour une sémanalyse* (1969), translated as *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (1980). The theory took the work of Russian Mikhail Bakhtin as its inspiration since Bakhtin was interested in crafting an innovative approach to notions of the text perpetuated by early-twentieth-century Russian Formalists. In his engagement with and critique of these writers, he viewed the text as a social construct that provides a site for the dialogic encounter between a text and its reader. As a result, he maintained that textual meaning is malleable while context is vital in our understanding of society, literature and language (see Bakhtin and Medvedev, 1985).

Drawing on Bakhtin's theories of the text as a form of social interaction, Kristeva asserts in *Séméiôtickè* that the writer is foremost a reader of other texts and, hence, the act of writing continually amalgamates traces of other texts into the new cultural product—resulting in the likelihood that all texts are merely citations (1969: 146). Thais Morgan clarifies that

Kristeva's most valuable contribution to the debate on intertextuality is the idea that an intertextual citation is never innocent or direct, but always transformed, distorted, displaced, condensed, or edited in some way in order to suit the speaking subject's value system (Morgan, 1989: 260).

European theorists who have since expanded on Bakhtin's and Kristeva's notions of intertextuality include, most notably, Roland Barthes and Gérard Genette. Like Kristeva, Barthes was interested in undermining notions of stable meaning (and, hence, the foundations of structuralism). Exploring conventional understandings of the text in his essay, «Theory of the Text» (1973), he outlines their limitations and then establishes a new textual practice marked by *signifiante* or continuous semantic interplay. This new approach is self-reflexive and intensely «critical of any metalanguage» (Barthes, 1981: 35). Another facet of his vision was the indistinguishable activity of the writer and the critic, the author and the reader. The productivity between author, text and reader illustrates the innately social nature of the textual enterprise, its dialogism. Genette introduced the concept of the Greek palimpsest—a manuscript page, scroll or book that has been written on, scraped off and written on again to produce textual strata. Elaborating on this ancient method of writing, he describes the contemporary textual process as a similar kind of

revisionary process whereby each new text is inscribed upon another, leaving traces of the previous text faintly visible beneath its surface (Genette, 1982: 451). In this way, the palimpsest is also polyphonic, in Bakhtin's sense of the word, as it consists of many voices besides that of its most recent author.

Another theorist who developed notions of intertextuality is the Moroccan writer and literary critic, Abdelkébir Khatibi. Like his contemporary Homi Bhabha, Khatibi is interested in the cultural specificity of the intertext which, in his view, has been mostly overlooked (see Dobie, 2003). Influenced by Jacques Derrida's philosophy of *différence*, Khatibi sees the text as an encounter between specific cultural and linguistic influences which, at their point of meeting, mingle with one another and metamorphose. This transformative encounter creates the possibility of a *pensée-autre*, or the possibility of «thinking otherwise», where static binaries are dissolved and dialogue becomes possible. In *Maghreb pluriel* (1983) he explains the concept of *pensée-autre* as a kind of plural thought that originates at sites of cultural diversity like the Maghreb. This plurality is viewed by Khatibi as a source of vitality and so to deny it is destructive to the society in his view. According to Khatibi, another integral element of *pensée-autre* is its marginal nature—as a liminal space where the self and the other interact and transform one another. Hence, the intertext is always unfinished and in the process of becoming. By extolling the virtues of open and unfixed thought, Khatibi criticizes notions of static social and textual binaries—much like Bakhtin and Kristeva did in their respective critiques of formalism and structuralism—while the unfinished quality of *pensée-autre* also allows for diversity since identity is not formulated on mythic ideas of the past: «If we accept the possibility of an identity that is no longer fixed to the past, we may achieve a more just conceptualization of identity that is in the process of becoming; that is to say that identity is a heritage traces, words, traditions, transforming over time which is given to us to live out, with one another» (Khatibi, 1990: 149; my translation). Calling for an acceptance of the other within, Khatibi claims that we might finally move towards a more truthful approach to the idea of identity. This acceptance would be based on an understanding of our innate heterogeneity and would require a rejection of identity constructs that rely on comparisons of self versus other or East versus West. Residing in the gap between cultures and languages, he argues that the Maghrebi author must constantly destabilize meaning and deconstruct unitary ideas through the social text.

Building on the above approaches to intertextuality, and introducing Edouard Glissant's (1981; 1989) contribution to debates about hybrid identities and texts, Françoise Lionnet describes *métissage* as a feminist praxis that cannot be assimilated into a fully articulated

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theoretical system. According to her, *métissage* is a kind of bricolage, in the sense elaborated by Claude Lévi-Strauss. However, it surpasses this understanding, bringing together disparate fields like «biology and history, anthropology and philosophy, linguistics and literature» (Lionnet, 1989: 8). For Lionnet, *métissage* is also a reading practice that allows us to underscore the interreferential nature of a set of texts, which is crucial for the comprehensive understanding of postcolonial cultures. She cites Teresa de Lauretis, who states that identity is a strategy so it follows that *métissage* must be «the fertile ground of our heterogeneous and heteronomous identities as postcolonial subjects» (Lauretis, 1986: 9). While there is a reactionary potential in a separatist search for a unitary and naturalized identity, a feminist politics of solidarity can protect us from this danger. To explain, Lionnet says that «solidarity» calls for a particular form of resistance with intrinsic political ambiguities:

These ambiguities allow gendered subjects to negotiate a space within the world's dominant cultures in which the «secretive and multiple manifestations of Diversity», in Edouard Glissant's words, will not be anticipated, accommodated, and eventually neutralized (Lionnet, 1989: 462-463).

A politics of solidarity thus implies the acceptance of *métissage* as the only racial ground on which liberation struggles can be fought (Lionnet, 1989: 8-9). Lionnet argues that when there is a constant and balanced form of interaction, reciprocal relations tend to prevent the ossification of culture and encourage systematic change and exchange. When language responds to such mutations she believes it reinforces a kind of creative instability in which no 'pure' or unitary origin can be posited.

#### 4. Romeo and Juliet: The intertext

After a long absence, René writes a love letter to Lallia, expressing his hopes to return to Algeria from France. Lallia has nearly forgotten about the Cowboy who disappeared before she had so many troubles at school. Leaning against a low wall after school one day, Lallia looks up and sees René go by on his bicycle:

Il me fait un grand signe de la main et continue son chemin. Il n'est même pas venu me voir, je me demande pourquoi il m'a écrit une lettre alors. Il passe en faisant un signe, comme s'il n'était jamais parti, comme s'il m'avait vue la veille. C'est un menteur, lui aussi, il me déteste et moi aussi

[He waves to me and continues on his way. He hasn't come to see me, I wonder why he bothered to write me a letter. He passes by with a wave, like he never left, like he had seen me the day before. He's a liar too, he hates me and I hate him] (Lachmet, 1987: 116).

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Suddenly, René swerves his bike around and returns to where Lallia is standing: «René saute et laisse son vélo tomber. Les roues continuent à tourner toutes seules. Il ouvre les bras et me prend contre lui. On reste longtemps comme ça à écouter nos coeurs et à sentir nos corps chauds» [René jumps off and lets his bicycle fall. The wheels continue to turn on their own. He opens his arms and holds me close. We stay like that for a long time, listening to our hearts beat and feeling our warm bodies] (*ibid*). The two children bike to the water tower together. Lallia rides on the Cowboy's handlebars. As they ride through the town, Lallia sees the new legions of French troops. René explains that the troops are here to fight the *fellagha* (1987: 117). Curious, Lallia asks who the *fellagha* are. René describes the *fellagha* as «des bandits qui pillent dans les campagnes, et même dans les maisons en ville, maintenant» [the bandits that plunder the countryside, and even the houses in the town now] (*ibid*). This is news to Lallia. That evening, she innocently asks her father to explain who the *fellagha* are (*ibid*). Lallia's father informs her that they are Arabs but they are not bandits. Lallia still does not understand why they are called *fellagha*. Her father clarifies: «Ce sont les Français qui les appellent ainsi, parce qu'ils sont contre eux. Ils veulent la liberté» [It's the French that call them that, because they are against them. They want freedom] (1987: 118). She continues to press her father: «Mais, c'est un mot arabe, *fellagha*? Ça veut dire ceux qui assomment?» [But isn't it an Arabic word, *fellagha*? That means those who block?] (*ibid*). In response, her father forbids her to ask anymore questions and orders to stay at home when she is not at school (*ibid*). She is surprised by his anger: «Je crois quelque chose de grave se passe. Mais quoi?» [I think something serious has happened. But what?] (*ibid*). After school one day, Rachid, a boy in René's and Yves's class, walks her home. He tells her that the other boys want to beat her up because she hangs out with French boys too much:

Tu ne sors qu'avec les Français, ils disent que tu es amoureuse de René, le fils du juge. Son père ne nous aime pas, et il a même condamné à la prison le père d'un copain. Nous, on s'est vengé sur René, on l'a battu à la sortie de l'école. Il était avec sa bande, lui aussi. On les a massacrés, c'est nous qui avons gagné  
[You go out with the French boys, they said that you are in love with René, the judge's son. His father doesn't like us, and he even sent the father of a friend to prison. We took revenge on René, we beat him up outside the school gates. He was with his gang. We massacred them, it was us who won] (1987: 138).

Rachid asks which side Lallia is on: «Si tu es avec nous, tu es avec nous» [If you are not with us, you're against us] (*ibid*). Lallia promises that she is with them.

Ordered and intimidated to stay away from René, Lallia dreams incessantly of the Cowboy; reading his letters and building up a

fantasy of forbidden love. The Romeo and Juliet intertext thus operates in tandem with references to the Wild West which we might read as the setting of their romance. In this case, the Wild West may simply be construed as a child's view of the Algerian milieu in the throes of a violent war—where French soldiers are the 'cowboys' and the fellagha are the «Indians». This reading is reinforced by a passage in the novel in which Lallia comes upon Rachid, who is on his way to visit the mother of a classmate who was killed:

Ils avaient joué aux militaires et aux fellagha. Comme il était arabe, c'est lui qui avait joué le fellagha. On dit qu'ils ont fait exprès de le noyer. Quand on l'a retiré de l'eau il portait la trace des pierres que les autres lui avaient jetées avant de se sauver

[They were playing at 'soldiers and *fellagha*'. Since he was an Arab, he played the fellagha. People say that they drowned him on purpose. When they pulled him from the water his body bore traces of the stones that the others had thrown before escaping] (1987: 160).

The children are killing each other while playing at cowboys and Indians in a make-believe Wild West with brutal consequences. The plotline of forbidden love—albeit an awkward love between children—thus provides another foreign intertext to consider. By reconfiguring a well-known Shakespearean tragedy Lachmet transforms its meaning; subtracting key characters and embellishing others of lesser consequence or adding characters not at all present in the original text. For example, it is clear that Lallia is our Juliet while René is Romeo. However, we might read the feuding Capulet and Montague families in a more general sense—as represented by the warring parties of the Algerian Revolution. The deletion of familiar characters thus provides the opportunity for the construction of others; it is in this twofold process that we might locate the author's intertextual critique.

Lallia sees the Cowboy once more towards the end of the novel on the day she finds the butcher murdered in the market square. Leaving the house early one morning to get milk, she discovers she has made a mistake about the time. All the stores are still closed. Retracing her steps to return home, she sees a body in the middle of the church square:

L'homme étendu était mort, le crâne ouvert juste au-dessus du front. Du sang mêlé à une substance blanche que je me refuse à nommer. Le corps qui gisait était celui du boucher que je connaissais bien

[The man lying there was dead, his skull open just above the forehead. Blood mixed with a white substance that I refuse to name. The body was that of the butcher who I know well] (1987: 163).

Standing frozen to the spot, Lallia contemplates the body. While the town awakens and gathers around her to look, she imagines she is all alone and invisible: «J'avais l'impression d'être au fond d'un



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puits. Personne ne s'était rendu compte de ma présence. J'étais transformée en statue invisible, une heure, peut-être plus» [I feel like I'm at the bottom of a well. No one sees me. I am transformed into an invisible statue, one hour, maybe more] (*ibid*). Suddenly, someone takes her arm. It's the Cowboy: «Il m'attira loin de la foule et me demanda pourquoi je ne répondais pas à ses signes. Je ne répondais pas non plus aux questions qu'il me posait. Je pensais à ce spectacle» [He pulled me away from the crowd and asked why I wasn't responding to his gestures. I don't reply to the questions he is asking me. I am thinking of this spectacle] (*ibid*). As quickly as he appears beside her, he disappears, running off down the street with Rachid and another boy in close pursuit.

Returning home, Lallia goes to bed and comes down with a temperature. She is overcome with nightmares. One afternoon, feverish, she walks to the Cowboy's farm. His family has left and all the roses are dead: «René n'est plus là. Il ne sera plus jamais là» [René is gone. He will never come back] (1987: 164). She walks to the old disused factory where they used to meet. She calls his name at the top of her voice and the empty building answers her with echoes. Walking along the railway tracks on the way home, she hopes she will have an accident. At home again, she sprays herself with the hose and lays down on the terrasse: «J'ai une envie folle de crier. Je ne veux pas penser au cowboy, c'est un ennemi, c'est le fils des autres» [I have a wild desire to cry. I do not want to think about the Cowboy, he is an enemy, he is the son of others] (1987: 165). She begins to lose her mind: «Je suis devenue folle. Je crois que les oiseaux me parlent et je leur réponds. Couchée sur le ventre, le menton dans les mains, je leur raconte des histoires. Ils traversent le ciel avec des cris aigus et je ne me sens plus toute seule» [I'm mad. I believe that birds talk to me and I answer. Lying on my stomach, chin in my hands, I tell them stories. They cross the sky with sharp cries and I no longer feel alone] (*ibid*). Going downstairs, she smells coffee and sees her parents calmly sitting in the courtyard eating cakes dipped in the best honey. Their bourgeois routine continues while outside the tenuous safety of the home, the world is chaos and death.

The novel whirls from one tragedy to the next as it winds to a feverish close. Lallia flees to the Algiers Casbah to live with a *moudjahida* and militate in a cell of *moudjahidine*, avoiding an arranged marriage. While she is away her father dies of an undisclosed illness and her mother buries him before she can come home. When the Revolution ends all the men in their village are dead and the women must figure out a way to proceed in this new world. Lallia, however, is unable to move on and eventually goes mad and is institutionalized.

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## 5. Conclusion

The novel's *mélange* of symbolic and literary allusions to create something «other» indicates a textual strategy akin to that in other postcolonial works like Tayeb Salhi's *Season of Migration to the North* (1969). Similar to Lachmet's piece, this 'minor' novel makes constant reference, both in terms of content and of structure, to Western literary works—*Othello*, *King Lear*, *Heart of Darkness*—and deliberately confronts these texts from within (Makdisi, 1992). As Barbara Harlow explains, it «has many of the elements of the Arabic literary technique of *mu'arada*, which literally means opposition or contradiction, and which involves at least two writers, the first of whom writes a poem that the second will undo by writing along the same lines but reversing the meaning» (Harlow, 1985: 75-79). *Season of Migration*, then, «is and is not a novel; it is and is not a *hakawati* oral tale; it is like *Heart of Darkness* as much as it is unlike it; it draws its formal inspirations from Europe as much as it seeks to distort and undermine them; it remains, finally, an unstable synthesis of European and Arabic forms and traditions» (Makdisi, 1992: 814-15). Along these lines, *Le Cow-boy* might be read as a kind of *métissage* that weaves together assorted literary and cultural tropes in order to reverse the meaning of the major work. The result is a hybrid assemblage that defies a smooth reading; thus remaining unstable and unresolved. Describing these textual subversions as cultural and linguistic «intervals», Lionnet elaborates on this strategy:

We [postcolonial women writers] have to articulate new visions of ourselves, new concepts that allow us to think otherwise, to bypass the ancient symmetries and dichotomies that have governed the ground and the very condition of possibility of thought, of “clarity,” in all of Western philosophy (Lionnet, 1989: 6).

Determining Shakespearean tragedy and the American western as her palimpsest, Lachmet confounds literary and cultural foundations with references to romanticism and the macho cowboy, which are problematized in turn by the outspoken and precocious presence of her young heroine. While there is no happy ending for Lallia, the novel manages to unravel to some extent the unproblematicized narrative of celebration and unification that the FLN government promulgated at the war's conclusion. As a form of life-writing, *Le Cow-boy* bears witness to the realities of a violent anti-colonial struggle—as seen through the eyes of a child. As Christiane Achour-Chaulet writes, madness born of struggle provides a certain clarity; it is «a madness with a surcharge of lucidity» (1989: 88, my translation).

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