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Surrogacy: Temporary Familial Bonds and the Bondage of Origins in Fouad Laroui's *Une année chez les Français*

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Surrogacy: Temporary Familial Bonds and the Bondage of Origins in Fouad Laroui's *Une année chez les Français*

This article examines Fouad Laroui's 2010 novel, *Une année chez les Français*, and charts the protagonist's development to argue that it offers a new model for Moroccan coming-of-age in a postcolonial context. While *Une année* is a Bildungsroman, it breaks away from patterns seen in the genre before it to illustrate the possibilities of creating 'Third Spaces' (Bhabha 1990). The protagonist, Mehdi, arrives at his moment of 'apprentissage' thanks to his pseudo-adoption by a French family and French boarding school, where he experiences what I have termed a *pull-push* sensation. I outline the sources and effects of the *pull-push* Mehdi perceives and then turn to argue that these experiences allow him to destabilise the relationship between the concepts of *family* and *familiarity*. It is through his newly found understanding that what is familiar is not always family and what is family does not always feel familiar that Mehdi is able to articulate the third space he desires for himself and come of age. While this article focuses on the experiences of a single, fictional character, *Une année chez les Français* introduces readers with a framework for imagining the identity-formation of a multiplicity of individuals who have grown up at the intersection of postcolonial North Africa and continental France.

KEYWORDS: *Une année chez les Français*, Bildungsroman, coming-of-age, third space, pull-push, boarding school, apprentissage

The roman d'apprentissage or Bildungsroman is a classic genre prevalent in many languages, cultural settings, and periods. The term was initially coined to refer to a predominantly Western sub-genre of novels in which the protagonist 'comes of age' or discovers the solution to 'the conflict between the ideal of *self-determination* and the equally imperious demands of *socialization*' (Moretti, 1987 15). When the protagonist finds him or herself able to reconcile these two seemingly contradictory poles, he or she has transitioned from childhood naïveté to adulthood and, therefore, to a higher plane of understanding of the world. The Bildungsroman reflects the Enlightenment thought from which it came — it requires 'harmony of aesthetic, moral, rational, and scientific education' (Martini 1991, 5). However, since its birth and classification at the end of the 18th century, the Bildungsroman has also appeared in many

other formats, including the postcolonial context.

Fouad Laroui's first novel, *Une année chez les Français*, fits the blueprint of a Bildungsroman: Mehdi (the protagonist) searches for the aforementioned 'self-determination' in the face of the 'demands of *socialization*' and his coming-of-age is marked by his arrival at a compromise. The novel is informed by its author's Moroccan origins, French education, and immigration experience from North Africa to Europe. Thus, it contains many of Laroui's biographical details despite featuring a fictional protagonist. Young Mehdi leaves his rural Atlas hometown in 1969 (after the European protectorates had been abolished in Morocco and during the reign of Hassan II) for Casablanca to begin his education at Lycée Lyautey, a school named after the French Army General famous for his contributions to the establishment of a global French empire, Hubert Lyautey.¹ Though the country's independence and constitutional monarchy had been fully established at that point, the people of Morocco were still adjusting to the end of French colonial presence.

Mehdi, like many others, finds himself pulled in one direction by the remnants of French imperialism and in the other by his small-town origins in Béni-Mallal. His solution, ultimately, is to cultivate what Homi K. Bhabha has called a 'Third Space' for himself, in which he (Mehdi) limits the influence of the expectations of others on his self-creation. However, before finding his Third Space, Mehdi moves through a series of failed experiments. Initially, he experiences culture shock, panics, and attempts to assimilate into his surroundings completely. He tries to more closely resemble his new school environment and his surrogate family (made up of his classmate Denis Berger and Denis's parents) by allowing Franco Moretti's 'socialization' to become his primary goal. In so doing, he rejects his biological kin, pushes them aside and implicitly denies his rural, Atlas origins. His trajectory is thus a model for the experimentation

that must occur for young people to discover their own ‘self-determination’ rather than the path that others would chose for them. Despite the tumultuous transition from childhood to adolescence, Mehdi manages to tune out everyone else’s expectations of him and ultimately settles upon an identity rooted in cultural ambi- or polyvalence. His arrival at this new space represents his Bildung, his moment of apprentissage, or his coming-of-age.

Une année escapes both the classic Western model² and the postcolonial nationalist model. Mehdi’s search to define himself requires him to undo much of the European imperial logic that coincided with Enlightenment thinking and helped produce Western Bildungsroman. Additionally, while Mehdi’s coming-of-age parallels the struggles of his newly independent nation and while he struggles to come to terms with concepts such as race and class, his education takes place in an elite French school and his conclusions are far more ambivalent than they are nationalistic. Mehdi’s most notable trial is developing an understanding of the difference between what feels *familiar* to him, and what is *family*. Ultimately, his coming-of-age will occur as he disentangles these two concepts from one another and cultivates a *familiar family* space.

In what follows, I argue that members of Mehdi’s new environment, inclusive of both his surrogate family and boarding school, develop an ambivalent *pull-push* gesture toward him in which they simultaneously draw him in and keep him at arm’s length. This *pull-push* characterises the combination of, on the one hand, the bonds Mehdi develops with Denis, the Bergers, and the school at large, and on the other, the racism that serves as his bondage in this new community. I conceive of this gesture as a *pull-push*, as opposed to a *push-pull*, because as we will see in the examples that follow, Mehdi’s new family and school draw him nearer to them in hopes that he will integrate himself into their community *before* they reject him and push him away. Regardless of his initial strides toward integration, Mehdi learns that he will always be

bound by his hometown, his biological family, his origins, and the genetic make-up that makes him look different from his European classmates.

Subsequently, I analyse the process by which Mehdi slowly destabilises the relationship between *family* and *familiar*. I examine the scene in which Mehdi's suspicions that these two terms are not mutually inclusive are confirmed. As his illusions come crashing down, he realises he will never be a part of the Berger family and comes-of-age. He accidentally arrives at his Third Space, which symbolises his transgressive decision to come fully into himself. As Mehdi comes to see the subtle racism around him, his growing understanding of how racism works and how it affects him marks the site of his coming-of-age which, ultimately, requires him to develop his own definition of kinship.

The Bergers' *Pull-Push* of Mehdi

Through Mehdi's experience in the Berger household, the reader has access to more information than Mehdi and, also, picks up on the oddity of certain elements of his relationship with them, to which he is completely oblivious. Thus, the reader knows that the Bergers' view of Mehdi is very different from his understanding of how he fits in with them. Laroui's descriptions of Mehdi's time with them are peppered with details that suggest that they have grown to love Mehdi *like* a son but that they do not reciprocate his view that he now is fully part of the family.

When Mehdi initially arrives, Mme Berger behaves very strangely toward him, and Mehdi's impression of her is that she is mean. In one example, she asks Denis to make Mehdi change his blue pyjamas (which he has borrowed from the Bergers) and Mehdi does not understand why (182-83). The mysterious behaviour continues the following day at breakfast, when Denis mentions Pascal, a person with whom Mehdi is not familiar (184), and Saturday night Mehdi pretends to be asleep while Mme Berger hovers over him, caresses his hair, and

begins to cry (185). Mehdi decides that she is not mean but remains confounded by her seemingly contradictory actions. His confusion dissipates shortly thereafter when he finds a photo of Denis and a boy who looks exactly like him. On the back of the photo, he reads the words ‘*Denis et Pascal, vacances d’hiver*’ (189) (Denis and Pascal, winter vacation).³ Pascal is wearing the blue pyjamas in the photo and Mehdi realises that, at some point, Denis had a brother, Pascal.

With the implied revelation that Denis has (or more likely, had) a twin brother, Mehdi’s presence in the home is complicated. (It remains unclear whether or not Mehdi understands that the Berger family has likely experienced a major loss.) Pascal’s presence in the story illuminates the Bergers’ motivation for including Mehdi in their family dynamic; they are using him to fill a void that is likely still very fresh in their lives. Are the Bergers invested in Mehdi, specifically, or are they invested in recreating a previous familial structure in which they are a family of four? Their view of him contrasts sharply from his understanding of their role in his life and can be read as a case study of Derrida’s aporia of absolute hospitality, wherein absolute hospitality is impossible because, in order to be hospitable, the host must continually assert his/her ownership of that which he is offering the guest (Derrida and Dufourmantelle 2000).

In Mehdi’s case, the aporia of absolute hospitality results from the Bergers’ simultaneous *pulling* of Mehdi closer to them and *pushing* him away. I call this ambivalent, emotional action their *pull-push* of him. The family continually alludes to Mehdi’s inclusion through their generosity with him (pulling), which mirrors his growing friendship with their son. However, this message of acceptance is undermined each time one of the Bergers reminds Mehdi that he does not entirely fit in with them (pushing). In his famous chapter, ‘Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse,’ from *The Location of Culture*, postcolonial scholar Homi

K. Bhabha describes the sensation of near-belonging as ‘not quite/not white’ (2004, 131).

Bhabha’s theory posits that as non-whites inch closer to the coloniser, they are simultaneously embraced and rejected by the coloniser’s community, which pull-pushes outsiders. The duplicity of the pull-push occurs as individuals, such as Mehdi, conform more closely with a new environment and, thus, they are pulled closer and set apart within their communities by the coloniser as models of the possibilities of inclusion. However, these individuals remain outsiders who are ‘almost the same but not quite’ (Bhabha 2004, 127) accepted or integrated.

Mehdi’s relationship of being *like family* to the Bergers signals his near acceptance within a French family and, more broadly, to being considered French or white. However, the fact remains that he is not French, or white, and he must confront the fact that he is ‘not quite’ family and ‘not quite’ one of them. He fails to meet the requirements of full inclusion, or of an informal adoption, into the family. While he senses that this might be the case, initially he is unable to understand the cause of the non-acceptance he feels. In what follows, we will examine the manner in which the Bergers pull-push⁴ Mehdi, the larger forces that drive their attitude towards him and the implications for him as he discerns his place in this environment.

Mehdi is more consciously aware of the moments in which the Bergers draw him nearer. He takes note of these instances and feels the euphoria of belonging. The first moment he feels like family to them occurs near the end of his first weekend in their home:

Mme Berger sourit à Mehdi (il écarquille les yeux de stupefaction), lui caresse les cheveux comme la veille au soir quand elle croyait qu’il dormait. [...] Puis, se baissant, elle lui lace les souliers. *Elle – lui – lace – les – souliers.* (188)

Mme Berger smiles at Mehdi (his eyes widen with stupefaction), she caresses his hair like the night before when she thought he was sleeping. [...] Then, bending over, she ties his shoes. *She – ties – his – shoes.*

Mehdi would call the Bergers his family and, thus, he inscribes even the most banal of activities with meaning. He notices that Mme is just as likely to help him with his shoelaces as she is her biological son and he projects as a sign of acceptance onto his tied shoelaces. Mehdi experiences this moment as Mme Berger pulling him closer to her and to the rest of the family.

The instances in which Mehdi feels pulled closer to the Bergers only grow in frequency from here. He transitions to spending his weekends with them without an official invitation or conversation. Everyone moves on autopilot as if Mehdi had been coming home with Denis on Saturday mornings all along. In subsequent weekends together, Mehdi discovers that he has been given a set of drawers with socks, underwear and a small packet of lavender to keep everything smelling fresh (191). These drawers symbolise Mehdi's presence in the home even when he is away at school and the expectation that he will return each following weekend to make use of his things and occupy his space in their lives. For Mehdi, the drawers imply his permanence in their lives and their acceptance of him as family.

In other instances, the ambivalent pull-push of a particular action is more clearly visible to Mehdi. For example, in one scene Mme Berger jokes with her husband, Denis, and Mehdi that to earn their *bise*⁵ they must say something flattering about Mozart. Denis is the first to earn his kiss (212), and after M. Berger receives his, he asks about Mehdi's (213). When Mehdi does finally receive a kiss, it is on his cheek rather than on his nose — the spot where Mme kisses both Denis and M. Berger (216). While the degree of intimacy of a kiss on the nose versus the cheek could be debated, most relevant is simply that while Mehdi was pulled closer to the family by the sheer presence of small kiss, he was also pushed away from them by its slight difference from the others. As he lays in bed that night trying to fall asleep, he meditates on the small difference and the overall shape of his nose as it compares to Denis's. His thoughts lead him to

wonder whether the kiss he received on his cheek is somehow due to a racial difference and to the shape of his nose. Regardless, the full weight of Mme Berger's choice to kiss his cheek is inaccessible to him.

Similarly, the Bergers often refer to Mehdi as 'notre Mehdi' in a way that highlights the pull-push occurring in the family dynamic. M. Berger refers to Mehdi in this way in the scene with the *bise* above. He asks, '— Et notre petit Mehdi ? Sa bise ?' (213) (And our little Mehdi? Where's his kiss?). Here, the possessive adjective 'notre' or 'our' is a pull-push in and of itself: it feels like a term of endearment while simultaneously indicating ownership in a slightly condescending manner. M. Berger is laying claim to Mehdi while revealing his membership in the family; his use of 'notre' indicates that he feels a level of intimacy towards him.

In a contrasting passage, Mme Berger conflates Mehdi with her distorted views on race and nationality. She attempts to educate the boys about immigration and how it does or does not work: 'Et Mehdi, (elle tapota la tête du petit garçon), *notre*⁶ Mehdi, il sera toujours marocain' (228) (And Mehdi, she tapped the boy's head, *our* Mehdi, he will always be Moroccan). Like M. Berger before her, Mme claims Mehdi as part of the family with the possessive adjective and intends for it to be an affectionate way of referring to him. However, her message is that Mehdi (unlike other immigrants in France) will always be Moroccan and can never be fully French (or European more generally) no matter where he lives or for how long. Scholars such as Alec G. Hargreaves have shown that this view of North Africans or Muslims as un-assimilable or un-integrateable is a predominant one and is often due to religious difference (1995, 157).

According to Mme, Mehdi will never shed his Moroccan-ness, whether due to religion or not, because it is ingrained and essential to his person. With her use of 'notre' she pulls Mehdi closer

to the family by gesturing at belonging and, subsequently, she essentialises him due to his race and nationality, thereby pushing him away.

Mme Berger is not the only family member who is guilty of boiling Mehdi down to this one facet of his person. When he first arrived in their home, M. Berger did something similar when making a feeble attempt at small talk with the boy: ‘Nous vivons depuis plusieurs années au Maroc, mais beaucoup de choses sont encore nouvelles ou étranges pour nous. Des choses qui doivent te sembler assez banales, non ?’ (180) (We’ve been living in Morocco for several years now but many things remain new and strange to us. Things that must be relatively banal for you, right?). Mehdi admits internally that absolutely nothing about this scene feels banal to him. When he asked the question, M. Berger did not know yet that Mehdi is Moroccan, but he jumps to that conclusion because of Mehdi’s physical name and appearance. Additionally, M. Berger generalises Moroccan culture and lumps the experiences of an environment such as Casablanca in with those of Béni-Mallal, and concludes that all aspects of Moroccan culture must feel familiar to Mehdi. M. Berger imagines a unified, national culture rather than seeing the multiplicity of cultures that make up his surroundings in Morocco. In this way, the family fetishises Mehdi, his Moroccaness, and the access they believe he has to all things Moroccan, inscribing him in a form of new orientalism (Spivak 1993, 134).

M. and Mme Berger also make assumptions about Mehdi’s religious practices. Though they have chosen to include him in their family time, they remind him that he is different from them because of his religion. Interestingly, religion never comes up in conversation and no one ever explicitly asks Mehdi whether he is a Muslim or his family practices this faith. Instead, his difference from the Bergers is made clear to him when Denis and his parents chose to consume sparkling wine and pork in front of him. On multiple occasions, in what feels like an

afterthought, it occurs to Mme Berger that Mehdi cannot have either of those things. Usually the realisation takes place as M. Berger is serving him (211) and her forceful reaction side-lines Mehdi, who does not understand either what the wine and pork are or why he cannot consume them. The Bergers do not take Mehdi into account when they plan their meals and they do not ask him or present him with options when they are serving him. Instead, they prohibit him from consuming pork and alcohol based on their understanding of his faith. They remain oblivious to the effects of their enforcement of his difference, and they go on eating and drinking in front of him. Later, when Mehdi is tired of feeling ostracised, he samples both the pork and the wine and, when his reaction is disgust, he takes it as a sign that he does not belong after all (224).

Perhaps the most striking example of how the Bergers keep Mehdi at arm's length despite his presence in their family occurs in a scene where Denis reveals to his family that Mehdi is first in his class for his grades in French. The conversation arises when Mehdi is trying to earn his bise and he does so by reciting the first stanza of Verlaine's 'Art poétique'⁷ at Christmas time.

Mme Berger reacts:

— La question que je me pose est : comment un enfant de dix, onze ans est-il capable de réciter du Verlaine ? Ce n'est pas au programme de la sixième, je suppose, ou alors les temps ont vraiment changé.

Denis continua :

— Même en classe, il sort des trucs bizarres. (Sans transition.) Il est le premier en français...

Mme Berger, toujours pas revenue de son étonnement parnassien, interrompit Denis.

— Comment ça ? Tu veux dire qu'il est le premier *des Marocains* ?

— Non, c'est lui qui a les meilleures notes. De tous.

Elle fronça les sourcils.

— Mais alors, vous ne faites pas beaucoup d'efforts, toi, et la fille des Kirchhoff, et le fils Fetter et les autres, Loviconi et la petite Bernadette...

— Non, maman, on fait tout ce qu'on peut, il est plus fort que nous.

Elle secoua la tête et fit la grimace pendant que M. Berger la regardait, l'air faussement scandalisé.

— Mais enfin, Ginette, pourquoi un petit Marocain ne pourrait-il pas être le premier de la classe ? Tu n'es quand même pas raciste ?

— Ah, je t'en prie ! On ne dit pas des mots pareils, même pour plaisanter. Tu oublies mon oncle mort en déportation... [...] Et d'abord, ne m'appelle pas Ginette quand il y a des étrangers.

M. Berger jeta un coup d'œil sur Mehdi, qui était en voie de disparition.

— Lui ? Mais c'est un enfant !

— Peut-être, mais on n'est pas en famille. Tu ne m'appelles pas Ginette !

M. Berger haussa les sourcils de façon exagérée.

— Très bien, *Geneviève*. (Il avait appuyé sur le prénom.) Mais tout cela ne m'explique pas ce qui te choque...

Elle lui coupa la parole.

— C'est une question de *langue maternelle* ! (214-15)

“What I want to know is, how is a child who is ten, eleven years old capable of reciting Verlaine? It's not part of the sixth-year curriculum, I'm guessing, or else times have really changed.”

Denis continued, “Even in class, he produces these weird things. (Without transition.) He's the first in our class in French...”

Mme Berger, still coming out of her poetic shock, interrupted Denis, “What do you mean? You mean that he's first among *the Moroccans*?”

“No, he has the best grades. Of all of us.”

Her eyebrows dropped into a frown. “Well then, you all must not be trying very hard, you, the Kirchoff's daughter, the Fetter's son and the others, Loviconi and little Bernadette...”

“No, mom, we do our best, and he is better than us.”

She shook her head and grimaced while M. Berger watched at her, with a scandalised look.

“Well anyway, Ginette, why couldn't a little Moroccan be first in his class? You're not a racist, are you?”

“Oh, give me a break! Don't say that, even as a joke. You forget my uncle who died during deportation... [...] And besides don't call me Ginette when we are among strangers.”

M. Berger glanced over at Mehdi, who was trying to disappear.

“Him? But he's a child!”

“That may be, but we are not among family. So you don't call me Ginette!”

M. Berger raised his eyebrows, exaggeratedly. “Very well, *Genevieve*. (He stressed her first name.) But all of that still doesn't explain to me why you're so shocked...”

She cut him off. “It's a question of *mother tongue*!”

This passage is incredibly rich thanks to the many racist assumptions and layers of argument it neatly portrays in a few lines. In what follows the excerpt above, Mme Berger begins drilling/quizzing Mehdi's vocabulary in Arabic and it becomes clear that Mehdi is much more comfortable speaking French than Arabic. (In fact, it is possible that Mehdi speaks Tamazight at

home with his family rather than Arabic, a fact that Mme overlooks when she makes assumptions that the experiences of Moroccans are homogeneous.)

Mme Berger has constructed a mechanism through which children simply inherit the language of their parents,⁸ and she thus assumes that, because of Mehdi's Moroccan origins, he will never achieve a level of French that rivals her own son's. Mme's perception of language acquisition is precisely the thought process that Rey Chow questions in *Not Like a Native Speaker: On Linguaging as a Postcolonial Experience*: 'Does having a language mean coming into possession of it like a bequest from bona fide ancestors and/or being able to control the language's future by handing it down to the proper heirs?' (2014, 20). While the work of many scholars and theorists has concluded that there is no such thing as Mme's *langue maternelle* (Deleuze and Guattari 1980, 7), it seems as though Mme would answer Chow's question in the affirmative; she views language as a trait that is inherited and encoded in one's genes.

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Jacques Derrida describes his ability to 'pass' as a native French-speaker when he is writing (1998, 46).⁹ However, he is unable to do so orally, which displeases him, and he feels shame in this displeasure. In the scene above with Mme, Mehdi stands in contrast to what Derrida describes because he does not perceive his French skills as at all imperfect. Instead, it is Mme who questions his ability to reach the same level of proficiency in Frenchness as her son. Whether she realises it or not, Mme imagines access to Frenchness that is beyond linguistic ability. As Chow describes, the coloniser (here, Mme) induces in the colonised 'an unfulfillable yearning for linguistic purity' (2014, 23) that, in Mehdi's case, did not exist previously and will provoke a deeply-imbedded feeling of outsidersness or inability to measure up. Mme seeks (though it seems she will not succeed) to imbed in Mehdi the insecurity that Derrida describes, even though it did not exist previously.

Mme Berger, who was previously displaying affection towards Mehdi, pushes him away and reminds him that he is *Other*¹⁰ in both the family and in French society more broadly, and she interrupts an otherwise pleasant Christmas holiday. She reprimands her husband for referring to her by her nickname, Ginette, because she does not believe it is appropriate for him to do so in front of strangers. In doing so, she betrays that Mehdi's French language skills, his success in school and, by extension, Mehdi are a threat to her. She would like to regulate the distance at which Mehdi finds himself from both the family and French society more broadly. Frantz Fanon has argued that the colonised are whitened or Europeanised through their mastery of the colonial language (1967, 112), but as Mme shows, when Mehdi has whitened himself to the point of discomfort, the coloniser can simply remind him of his lack of linguistic heritage and undo his mastery.

Oddly, up to that point in the novel, she did not have any hard evidence that Mehdi even spoke Arabic. A closer examination of the students she lists (who must not be trying hard enough in school) reveals that many of those children are likely not from *français de souche*¹¹ families: Kirchoff is a Germanic name; Fetter is likely a German Jewish name; and Loviconi is most likely Italian. In fact, of the many students Mehdi has encountered at school, Denis is the only one whose name is thoroughly French. Thus, whether these children are definitively French, or grew up in French-speaking households, is unknown. Mme reduces their ability to succeed in French class to their whiteness, rather than their Frenchness.

When M. Berger accuses Mme of making a racist assumption about Mehdi and his ability to access the level of French necessary to be first in his class, she deflects the accusation. When she reminds him that her uncle was deported, she pivots away from the accusation with a shallow mention of another racist action of which she disapproved. Her deflection technique allows her

to circumvent the accusation without addressing it or examining her own logic about language access. No one in her surroundings questions her further or notes her mobilisation of her deceased uncle to cement her colonizing language.

Mme betrays her lack of understanding or knowledge about Mehdi in other scenes as well. For example, she makes Mehdi feel uncomfortable by insisting that he tell her what his father does for a living. However, Mehdi does not have a father figure and he feels uncomfortable with her assumption that he does (206-07). The more time Mehdi spends with the Berger family, the more he faces such awkward conversations about his biological family, food, customs, religion, and language. Mehdi's discomfort culminates when Mme Berger fetishises his familial/socio-economic/social situation with an invented narrative about who Mehdi is and where he comes from. When she, Mehdi, and Denis are looking through a book containing images of Van Gogh's artwork, Mehdi stares at Van Gogh's rendition of a pair of shoes that remind him of his father (Mme Berger still does not realise he is absent in Mehdi's life). When he tells Mme Berger that he is thinking of his father, she assumes that he (Mehdi's father) must have worn an equally worn-down pair and that, because Mehdi is Moroccan, his family is necessarily poor, and his father could not afford new shoes. Mehdi feels ashamed of her implication of his father's (and therefore his) poor origins.

Sensing his shame, she goes on to say, '*Je t'assure, j'admire ton père, de si humble extraction, d'avoir réussi à mettre son fils au lycée français. Au moins, toi, tu n'auras jamais à porter des godillots aussi pourris*' (233) (I assure you, I admire your father, who from such a humble background managed to get his son in a French school. At least you will never have to wear such beat-up footwear). In these two sentences, Mme fails Mehdi and pushes him away despite the compliment she perceives that she has paid Mehdi's father, which, in her mind,

should draw him closer to her. First, she displays the degree to which she makes assumptions about Mehdi based on generalisations. She makes a leap by assuming that the pair of shoes cause Mehdi to think of his father because he, in his (presumed) poverty, wore a pair just like them that was falling apart. (Mehdi does not tell her that he was actually recalling how his father welcomed a beggar with beat-up shoes into their home for the night when that beggar had nowhere else to sleep.)

Implicit in that logical leap and in the rest of her thought is the idea that Mehdi's origins are indicative of his poverty, that his family is aware of their poverty, and that they have sent Mehdi to the lycée to change their lot in life. Mme thinks that Mehdi's arrival to the school in Casablanca is due to his father's work to get him there so he could 'better' his situation. The truth is that Mehdi's father is (most likely) dead and had nothing to do with the decision that he go to the lycée. In fact, no one in Mehdi's family desires him to be different or to become more like the French through his education. There is no indication that anyone in Mehdi's family thinks of him or herself as lacking anything or that anyone has aspirations for Mehdi. Instead, Mehdi's mother decision to send him to school in Casablanca is shown as devoid of much meaning. Mme's train of thought displays the gendered manner in which she assumes agency and decision-making must occur in the home of his biological family. Having no evidence to the contrary, Mme believes that a father-figure must be responsible for Mehdi's success and acceptance to the French school.

Mme uses the narrative she created for Mehdi and his biological family as an educational opportunity for her son: 'C'est ce qu'on appelle *l'ascension sociale*. Répète, Denis' (233) (That is what we call *social ascension*. Repeat, Denis). She appropriates the experience she invented for Mehdi in order to turn it into a productive moment of instruction about society, class, and

social mobility. Her lesson is intended to benefit Denis's grasp of the noble actions she bestows upon Mehdi's father. Neither Denis nor Mehdi has any idea what she is talking about, which becomes evident when Denis asks her if the term has something to do with skiing. The boys' have not yet been indoctrinated into the traditional Western notions of *progress*¹² required in order for Mme's point to be clear to them. Her intentions, however, are not lost on the reader.

Mme wants Denis and Mehdi to understand that Mehdi's father helped their family *progress* by sending him to a French school but, because the boys are lost as to what her argument is, the constructed nature of her views on social ascension and progress more generally comes into focus. In this short passage, Laroui's text reveals that a notion of *progress* is not innate and the objective trajectory it implies is in fact a subjective ideal held in place by social contract. While Mme's comments were meant to be flattering and complimentary of Mehdi's father, she completely missed the mark, failed to connect with him, and fetishised Mehdi's presence in the French school by turning it into the product of his father's admirable hard work. Through this dialogue, she unintentionally highlighted her own racist assumption that a French education for Mehdi would necessarily better his life.

The rest of the conversation does not go well for Mehdi or for Mme. Although it does not lead him to sever ties with the Bergers, this encounter opens Mehdi up to the possibility of detachment from them. As Mehdi attempts to correct her false assumptions about his train of thought, her tone is condescending, and she 'educates' him instead of trying to relate to what he is feeling internally. He comes away from the conversation feeling as though Mme has insulted his father (235), which causes him to recall and inventory other negative experiences he has had with Mme before falling asleep that night (236). Their home and their family dynamic has grown *familiar* to Mehdi, but he subconsciously concludes that they are, decidedly, not his *family*.

In many ways, what Mehdi experiences emotionally as he attempts to integrate himself into the Berger family is paralleled by his time in school. As Laura Reeck points out in her book, *Writerly Identities in Beur Fiction and Beyond*, the classroom is often cited as an important site for the education and integration of children (2011, 28). This is especially the case for Mehdi since the lycée is a boarding school, where he spends almost all of his time, and because the role of the boarding school can be read as that of Mehdi's extended family in Casablanca. Put differently, the Bergers' and his perception of his integration in their home allow Mehdi to feel better integrated at school.

At school, he feels comfortable with his academic work (194) but faces awkward conversations and social interactions. In his early days, he employs the same mimicry-to-fit-in strategy while he is on the school premises:

— Je parie que t'es un *nouveau*. T'es un nouveau, hein ? Tu entres en sixième ? Eh bien, bonjour ! Je suis Sidi¹³ Mohammed Khalid M'Chiche El Alami. Je suis un ancien. J'entre en cinquième.

Il n'avait pas dit « je m'appelle Sidi... » mais « je suis Sidi... ». Étrange.

— Et toi ?

Mehdi fit un effort pour parler, malgré la boule dans son estomac.

— Je *suis* Mehdi Khatib. (75)

— I wager that you're a new one. You're a new one, huh? You're going in to the sixth grade? Well then, hello! I *am* Sidi Mohammed Khalid M'Chiche El Alami. I am an old one. I'm going into the fifth.

He hadn't said "My name is Sidi..." but rather "I am Sidi...". Strange.¹

— And you?

Mehdi made an effort to respond, despite the knot in his stomach.

— I *am* Mehdi Khatib.

Mehdi does not understand why this student, M'Chiche, has used a different structure to introduce himself the one that he is used to. He observes the change, but does not question it.

Laroui hints at the extent to which Mehdi is lost in this Casablanca school by subtly highlighting

¹ It is typical to introduce oneself in French using a form of the verb "to call oneself" rather than "to be." Here, Mehdi is confused by M'Chiche's substitution of verbs.

Mehdi's lack of understanding of another Moroccan student. Despite being of the same national origins as Mehdi, this student remains mysterious. Because he uses 'Sidi' to introduce himself, the reader assumes that M'Chiche comes from a radically different socio-economic background from Mehdi's. (The difference in social class is also, presumably, why M'Chiche substitutes his verb choice. The title requires him to use a form of the verb 'to be' to designate his rank.) Mehdi, perplexed but determined to fit in, mimics M'Chiche's sentence structure when he gives his name and unintentionally uses it incorrectly. His attempt to 'harmonise' with the school environment becomes a site at which he 'camouflages,' albeit poorly.

In a second example Mehdi asks his theatre teacher who the Moors were (the antagonists of the play they are reading). Soon, the class is laughing when Denis makes a joke about the fact that *Maroc* should be called *Mauroc* or, in English, Morocco is really 'Moor'-occo. Naturally, Mehdi does not find the joke funny, and he becomes distracted by the idea that he is a Moor and of a different race than his classmates. Because the protagonists of the play battle the Moors, Mehdi fears that if he is one, he might be on the wrong side of the battle or of history. His insecurity on the subject leads him to feel like an imposter in the classroom and he imagines a set of punishments if someone were to discover his Moorish-ness. Though Mehdi is succeeding academically, the texts selected for his coursework and education make him feel like an outsider at a school where the majority of his classmates are of European ancestry.

As Mehdi moves between school during the week and the Bergers on weekends, he feels more and more distant from his surroundings. What felt very familiar and comfortable to him a few weeks earlier starts to slip away as he realises that he will never be fully accepted. The theatre club both affirms him for his oratory and acting skills (197) and holds him at arm's length. This club represents his larger family at school, and the teacher's receptiveness to Mehdi

echoes the pull-push he feels in the Berger home. Therefore, Mehdi feels alone in class and begins referring to himself internally as ‘Mehdi le Maure’ (196) or, ‘Mehdi the Moor.’ He takes this internalisation of his Moorishness with him on his weekend visits with the Bergers and the reader realises that despite his efforts to integrate himself into his new environment, his comfort level at school and in the home of this French family is dissolving. His continued discomfort as he uses the same strategies for attaining membership in this extended family of classmates foreshadows the rest of Mehdi’s coming-of-age process by alluding to the breaking-point Mehdi will eventually hit.

Easter weekend, Mokhtar, the man who drove Mehdi to school months before, comes to take him back to Béni-Mallal for a family wedding. Before he departs, he tries (and fails) to moderate between his two worlds and slips back into his pattern of feeling paralyzed and mute when faced with an awkward situation. Mokhtar and M. Berger arrive at the same time and Mehdi, confused, chooses not to indulge them in their social niceties: ‘Eh bien, tu ne nous présentes pas ? Mehdi ignorait tout de cette opération sans doute très délicate. Comment présente-t-on les gens les uns aux autres ? Et, de toute façon, à quoi cela servait-il ?’ (238-39) “‘So, Mehdi, you’re not going to introduce us?’ Mehdi didn’t know exactly how to conduct this delicate operation. And, besides, what was it good for?’ Faced with two men who represent two pieces of his identity, he is unable to reconcile what they represent.

In the weekend that follows, Mehdi has one last chance to see whether his family could feel familiar to him. Initially, things go well, and the setting is comfortable and more-or-less *familiar*: he is happy to be home; his mother greets him enthusiastically (at which point he notices that she smells differently from Mme Berger); he is excited to see his younger siblings; and he becomes conscious of how much he had missed the taste of Moroccan tea (242).

However, he is mocked for his clothing,¹⁴ and his own trepidation as he asks himself ‘Était-il devenu un étranger ?’ (242) (Had he become a stranger here?). As the wedding weekend unfolds around him, he compares and contrasts his Béni-Mallal home with his new Casablanca home. He watches the women around him dance, tries to imagine the French women he has met dancing in a similar fashion and concludes that these two environments are two entirely different worlds (244). The wedding devolves into drama and feuding between the groom’s side and the bride’s side and Mehdi watches from a distance as his *family* begins to feel less and less *familiar* to him.

Mehdi’s dissimilarity from his environment is not lost on his family members, who think of him as odd and different. His cousin even refers to him as ‘le petit Françaoui’ or ‘Frog boy,’ because in his Moroccan environment, Mehdi is seen as Frenchified. He leaves the wedding and his Moroccan home utterly confused about the events that transpired as well as his role in them. He becomes aware that he can no longer return to Béni-Mallal without feeling out of place. He experiences what Winston James, in his study of migration and the Caribbean, states about the predicament of finding oneself between home and exile. James argues that ‘the importance and value of home is never more appreciated than when one is in exile’ but that ‘strictly speaking, it is never possible to return’ (1993, 248).

Mehdi’s experience of exile is very different from the one James describes, in part because he does not dream of home or value home when he is away at school and, although, his time in Casablanca is isolating, he never felt fully at home in Béni-Mallal. Regardless, when Mehdi attempts to return home for a brief period, James’s theory about the impossibility of finding oneself at home post-departure holds true. Mehdi cannot go back to Béni-Mallal and feel fulfilled. The following weekend, when Mehdi returns to the Bergers, he cannot reconcile Béni-

Mallal with Casablanca or his biological family with his surrogate family. His months in school have led him to a crossroads: what is *familiar* is not *family* and what is *family* is not *familiar*.

Familiar vs. Family: The Culminating *Apprentissage* and a Compromise

Mehdi's state of limbo, in which he subconsciously attempts to understand the destabilisation of the correlation between *family* and *familiar*, does not last long. His illusions about becoming a part of the Berger family and the larger Lycée Lyautey extended family come crashing down as the school year wraps up and his teacher club teacher announces the cast of the school's end of year play:

Elle se mit à écrire au tableau les prénoms des enfants et ceux des petits bonhommes plats qui vivaient dans les dessins.

Linus – Denis

Lucy – Marie-Pierre

Charlie Brown – Mehdi

Elle continue d'écrire mais Mehdi ne voit plus rien. Ou plutôt, il ne voit plus qu'une seule chose. Une erreur. Il se lève, s'approche du tableau et pointe le doigt sur son prénom. Il coasse, la gorge étranglée :

— C'est moi qui joue le *tagoniste* ?

Sabine se retourne et tapote la tête de Mehdi en souriant.

— Mais non, c'est Denis qui va jouer Linus. Le *tagoniste*, comme tu dis.

Mehdi ne comprend pas. Linus, c'est le premier rôle, le plus important. Or, il est, lui, Mehdi, le meilleur acteur. Elle l'a dit elle-même. C'est donc lui qui doit jouer Linus.

C'est logique. Sabine continue :

— Et toi, tu joues Charlie Brown.

Mehdi sent son estomac se nouer. *C'est un petit garçon mal dans sa peau, touchant par sa maladresse, malchanceux...* Son visage se décompose.

— Pourquoi ?

Sabine fronce le sourcil.

— Pourquoi quoi ?

— Pourquoi c'est pas moi qui joue Linus ?

La jeune femme sourit.

— Mais enfin, voyons, mon petit Mehdi... Linus est blond. Regarde !

Elle prend sur la table un exemplaire des *Peanuts* et lui montre le dessin. Le dessin est en noir et blanc. Pas la moindre couleur ! Comment peut-elle voir des couleurs là où il n'y en a pas ? Mehdi pointe un index tremblant sur la feuille de papier, l'ongle râpe le visage de Linus.

— C'est pas vrai ! Il est pas blond ! Il est... il est *rien*.

Sabine hausse les épaules.

— Mais si, gros bêta, il est blond. Et puis, regarde : c'est un ange, Linus ! Les anges sont blonds, c'est bien connu. Toutes les toiles de la Renaissance le prouvent. (258-59)

She started writing the kid's names next to the names of those flat little guys who live in the drawings on the board.

Linus – Denis

Lucy – Marie-Pierre

Charlie Brown – Mehdi

She kept writing but Mehdi could no longer see anything. Or rather, he could only see one thing. A mistake. He stands up, walks up to the board and points his finger at his name. He croaks, with a knot in his throat: "Am I the *tagonist*?"

Sabine turns and taps Mehdi on the head, smiling. "Well no, Denis will be Linus. The *tagonist*, as you like to call him."

Mehdi doesn't understand. Linus is the main character, the most important. And he, Mehdi, is the best actor. She said it herself. So, therefore, he should be portraying Linus. It's only logical. Sabine continues: "And you, you will be Charlie Brown."

Mehdi feels a knot in his stomach. *He's a young boy, ill at ease with himself, who is awkward and unlucky...* His face falls. "Why?"

Sabine's brow frowns. "Why what?"

"Why am I not the one playing Linus?"

The young woman smiles. "Well, let's see, my little Mehdi...Linus is blonde! Look!"

She picks up a copy of *Peanuts* and shows him the drawing. The drawing is in black and white. Not the slightest color! How can she see colors where there clearly are none? Mehdi points a trembling finger at the sheet of paper, his name scrapes Linus's face. "That's not true! He's not blonde! He's...he's *nothing*."

Sabine shrugs. "Well, yes, silly, he's blonde. And besides, look: Linus is an angel. Angels are always blonde; it's a well-known fact. All of the artwork from the Renaissance proves it."

In this difficult moment, Mehdi comes-of-age, his naïveté about his environment disappears suddenly, and he realises that his European, white, counterparts will never fully look past his Moroccanness. This scene is a pivotal moment for him that stands in sharp contrast to his experiences up to this point: all year he has been told that he is the best actor in the theatre club and he has received praise from Sabine for his oral recitation skills. Sabine's rationalisation of not casting him as the main character in the play boils down to his physical appearance or, in this case, his Arabness. Going into the casting process, Mehdi had assumed that roles would be distributed on the basis of merit and he is crestfallen when he learns the opposite. His helplessness as he is cast in a secondary role solidifies the extent to which he recognises his

bondage as such. His French school is not a meritocracy that is colour-blind and his rural, Atlas origins, his brown skin, and his Arab/Berber phenotype are what prevent him from receiving the lead role in the play.

The relevance of Denis's blonde hair and his *français de souche* origins comes into focus for the reader as Mehdi ironically watches Denis, his best friend and surrogate brother, take what he believes is rightfully his. When Mehdi challenges his teacher's logic in casting Denis because he is blonde, she betrays her Eurocentric association of angels with whiteness and, therefore, of purity and sweetness with a particular race. Mehdi does not see race when he looks at the comic strip and notes that the drawings are in black and white, but that does not prevent his European teacher from seeing them in colour. As he replays Sabine's description of Charlie Brown, he shudders in recognition: her description matches his experiences, and he, too, is awkward in his new environment and ill at ease with himself. Laroui emphasises the profound impact of this turn of events on Mehdi by switching into a present tense recounting of the dialogue—the reader sees everything unfold in real time.

Throughout the text, but especially in this scene, the other characters introduce Mehdi to his Otherness and reveal that they see colour where he does not. As Sabine finishes her explanation with, 'Denis est comme Linus, c'est un petit ange blond' (259) (Denis is like Linus, a little blonde angel) it hits Mehdi all at once that Denis, because of his physical appearance, will have access to things that he, Mehdi, will not. Therefore, Lycée Lyautey cannot serve as an extended family, despite their *familiarity* to him, and the Bergers, regardless of his bond with them, could never be his *family*.

As he realises that his origins are a source of bondage for him no matter the strength of his newly found bonds, he turns to flight from the scene in order to cope with this newly

discovered crisis; he runs out of the classroom and seeks solitude outside. The strategies he previously tried to make sense of the Casablanca/Béni-Mallal crossroads no longer suffice. He has tried remaining invisible, rejecting his family and origins, and immersing himself fully to find acceptance from the Bergers and from his school, but none of those coping mechanisms are adequate for handling this set of circumstances. When Denis comes looking for him, he responds to the level of rejection he feels by rejecting Denis, ‘Va-t’en ! Imbécile ! (Ça lui a échappé. Il a insulté son ami !) Je ne veux plus jouer au théâtre ! Plus jamais ! Jamais !’ (260) (Go away! Idiot! [That word slipped out. He insulted his friend!] I don’t want to act in the theater! Never again! Never!) He tears the script of out Denis’s hand, shreds it, and goes on to insult Mme Berger, at which point Denis turns and walks away.

Mehdi severs the emotional bond he has cultivated with the Bergers to remove the possibility of the bondage it imposed on him. He subconsciously reaches the conclusion that he does not want to be subjected to the pull-push that this school and this family inflict on him as they simultaneously try to assimilate him into their folds and keep him at arm’s length.

Immediately after Denis walks away, Mehdi feels a new pain, true solitude:

Et soudain, une sensation atroce s’empare de lui. Il se voit *seul* mais, pour la première fois, ce n’est plus un vague adjectif, un état transitoire (une pause, du repos...), voire un bénédiction (seul sur la terrasse quand tout le monde s’agite, en bas...); cette fois-ci, tout a disparu, tous les adjectifs, tous les mots, tous les états, il n’y a plus d’avant ni d’après, le temps est aboli, il n’y a plus que ça : *seul*. (261)

And suddenly, an awful sensation grabs ahold of him. He sees himself *alone* but, for the first time, it’s not a vague adjective, or a transitory moment (a pause, rest...), even a blessing (on that terrace while everyone below him is stirring...); this time, everything has disappeared, all of the adjectives, all of the words, all of the states of being, there is nothing before and nothing after, time is frozen, there is nothing but that: *alone*.

From this space of self-imposed solitude, young Mehdi has to decide how he will position himself in school and with the Bergers moving forward. His strategy of integrating himself fully

and seeking surrogate membership failed him, but what will he do next? Can he maintain the bonds he has created without the accompanying bondage of being held on the periphery and made to feel Other?

In a video interview with his publisher, Laroui describes Mehdi's journey as one of finding the appropriate 'distance' between himself and not only the new French world that he discovered at school but also the Berger family (Edjulliard 2010). Laroui elaborated his personal experience with the impossibility of assimilating to French culture as an outsider when asked in an interview why he chose to live in the Netherlands instead of France: 'C'est un pays [Pays-Bas] qui a le pouvoir d'assimiler les étrangers mais aussi de vous renvoyer votre différence. Alors, autant être vraiment un étranger, plutôt que d'avoir un statut ambigu où finalement on ne sait plus qui on est' (Rousseau 2016) (It is a country [the Netherlands] that has the power to assimilate immigrants but also to remind you of your difference. So, you remain a true stranger rather than having an ambiguous status and, in the end, not really knowing who you are). For Laroui, the Netherlands represent the appropriate 'distance' between oneself and one's new world.

Azouz Begag's protagonist, Azouz, in *Le Gone du Chaâba* faces a similar conflict as he struggles to decide to what degree he will integrate with mainstream French society. When this novel was initially published, the contentious nature of the debate surrounding integration led to political conversations about whether or not it was an appropriate choice for school reading lists. Laura Reeck's theory is that 'it is likely that *Le Gone du Chaâba* was at once not French enough and too French, that is to say threatening in its linguistic and cultural proximity' (2011, 30). Mme Berger and the lycée, like larger French society in Reeck's theory, would like to control the assimilation process of immigrants or children from different environments, such as Mehdi. Like

Azouz before him, Mehdi's coming-of-age process helps him to see that and to take hold of the moderation that must occur between both internal and external competing poles.

Initially, Mehdi has no idea as to how he will reach a compromise now that he is at this new crossroads, but his unease reflects his new level of awareness regarding his disenfranchisement. He goes about the remainder of the school week feeling depressed and avoiding the events that transpired in the theatre club. When he catches Denis's eyes, he redirects his gaze, breaks eye contact, and eliminates the possibility of a confrontation. As the weekend approaches, he fears the moment he will have to face the Bergers: 'Mehdi n'avait aucune envie de se retrouver avec Denis et ses¹⁵ parents, dans leur maison' (264) (Mehdi had no desire of finding himself with Denis and *his* parents, in *their* home). He once imagined that he would have access to those parents and to that home, and now he realises he will never feel ownership of them. Laroui stresses the third-person possessive adjectives in Mehdi's thought process to highlight Mehdi's realisation that he does not belong and no longer wants to. In a way, Mehdi has come full-circle: he is re-experiencing the dread of not knowing what will transpire when the school week ends, just as he did before the Toussaint long weekend. His feelings of non-belonging reach a peak as he shuts down socially and ignores anyone who attempts to engage him in conversation for fear that they will discover that he is an imposter (264).

Mehdi's crisis is resolved in a *deus ex machina* moment when, as if by some miracle (in Mehdi's mind), a man he does not recognise comes to the school on that Saturday morning to take Mehdi to spend the weekend « en famille » (264), or, 'among family.' Here, the guillemets surrounding the words in the text have a double effect; Mehdi is likely quoting the man's words internally and simultaneously questioning them. First, if this man used the words « en famille » to refer to Mehdi, then they reveal something about his definition of *family*: one that is not based

on *familiarity* but rather on biological ties. For Mehdi, the guillemets could also signal the sometimes-constructed notion of who constitutes *family*.

The reader learns that this man is in fact a biological cousin of Mehdi's, but what is at stake is whether or not Mehdi classifies as him as *family* despite never having seen him before. Miloud (a school staff member) welcomes the man and treats him with respect, exchanging pleasantries with him in Arabic. Mehdi leaves with the man (Tayeb) and is greatly relieved that he will not have to face the Bergers; the school administration will simply explain to them that he left with his *family* this weekend. Initially, Mehdi is unsure what to think about this newfound *family* of his, but his previous predicament was uncomfortable enough that he does not hesitate in taking the opportunity to continue avoiding it.

Mehdi's new weekend home represents an intermediary, third space between Béni-Mallal and the Berger home. The décor is a combination of traditional Moroccan furniture and markers of the French colonial past. The conversation in the home takes place in equal parts Moroccan Darija and French and they eat a Moroccan lamb tagine for dinner. His experience there contrasts sharply from the time he has spent elsewhere, because Mehdi is able to find a balance between Moroccanness and Frenchness in this environment. Additionally, Tayeb bridges the (would be) gap between Mehdi and his other relatives with exaggerated translations that allow Mehdi to fit in and even to gain favour in this new household (268). Mehdi's aunt and uncle treat him like a respected guest by moving into the living room so that he can sleep in their master bedroom.

This new Casablanca *family*, that is at once biologically related to him and *familiar* to him, represents the internal compromise that Mehdi has reached. Mehdi's comfort in this compromise crystallises the next day when he saves the day at a soccer match. He realises that the teams have an unequal number of players on the field and his cousin credits him with the

victory of his favourite team. At the end of the weekend, Tayeb asks him if would like to come back and Mehdi's reaction neatly distils how differently he feels here:

Il (Tayeb) lui dit qu'il passerait le prendre le samedi suivant. Désormais, il allait passer tous ses week-ends en famille, ajouta-t-il.

— Du moins, si tu veux ?

Mehdi hocha la tête en souriant. Oui, il le voulait. Il voulait revenir dans ce monde où on lui offrait des lits grands comme des paquebots (c'était autre chose que le petit bateau où on lui avait fait boire du Viadox et manger des cochonneries !) ; ce monde où on l'acceptait tout naturellement ; où l'on ne se moquait pas des souliers de son père ; où il pouvait changer le cours des choses de façon miraculeuse [...].

Ce monde où l'ange, c'était lui. (273)

He (Tayeb) tells him that he'll be by next Saturday to pick him up. From now on, he would spend all of his weekends with his family, he added.

“That is, if you want to?”

Mehdi nodded his head smiling. Yes, he wanted to. He wanted to come back to this world where people offer him beds as big as ships (which was completely different from the little boat where they had made him drink Viadox and eat garbage!); this world where he was accepted as he was; where people didn't make fun of his dad's shoes; where he was capable of miraculously changing a course of events [...].

This world where the angel was him.

The reference to angels at the end of the passage drives home the Mehdi's sense of relief and his awareness that he experienced an injustice in school and would likely continue to experience similar injustices if he chose to continue remoulding himself to integrate into the world represented by Casablanca and the Bergers.

Mehdi's *moment d'apprentissage* is marked by a compromise whereby *family* and *familiarity* do not have to be distinct or mutually exclusive. The novel's argument seems to be that young Mehdi and, by extensions, other individuals living in these in-between spaces, cannot force their connections or transform their situation of bond/age on their own. Mehdi can choose to spend time in an environment that is comfortable to him but that also does not malign him or distinguish him on the basis of his physical appearance, Moroccanness, or rural origins in Béni-

Mallal, but he discovered this space not thanks to his willpower, but rather because he allowed himself to be open to exploring a new environment without expectations.

As Franco Moretti posits in *The Way of the World*, stories or novels are often classified as belonging to the Bildungsroman genre when they illustrate the manner in which youth comes to an end. However, the genre also seems to preclude that the end of youth ‘has meaning only *in so far as* it leads to a stable and ‘final’ identity’ (1987, 8).¹⁶ Thanks to the end of his youthful ignorance, Mehdi develops a space of in-betweenness or a third space (Bhabha 1990) that is at once external to the binaries he resists and crafted with them in mind.

In *Les Damnés de la terre*, Frantz Fanon describes the compartmentalisation of the colonial world that was destabilised at the end of the colonial era but also reinforced through neo-colonial projects (1978, 7). Mehdi may no longer be a colonial subject in the literal sense, but he remains Othered in European society. His coming-of-age is marked by his understanding of that fact and the end of his naïve view that he can integrate into his surroundings. However, his arrival at this conclusion also leads to a genesis: the emergence of Mehdi’s *self*.

La distribution des prix

When the school year is over, the extended school family embraces Mehdi for his scholastic achievements. At the end of year award’s ceremony, Mehdi is recognised for being first in his class (277), and the director congratulates him with a ‘Félicitations, mon fils !’ (283) (Congratulations, my son!). With these three words, the director claims Mehdi as part of the family and asserts his ownership over the boy’s accomplishments. When the ceremony is over, one by one, Mehdi’s teachers congratulate his mother and suggest he pursue an education in a variety of topics: geography, mathematics, French, etc. (284). He has proven to his school that

his classroom abilities are superior to those of his classmates, and through his successes, convinced the lycée staff that his worthy of being a member of their community.

The school imagines itself a progressive environment and it take credit for the boys who have attended over the course of the past year:

« Hommage aux enseignants et au proviseur du plus grand lycée d'un empire spirituel : l'empire de la francophonie. » [...]

— On ne peut mieux caractériser ce qui nous lie. Nous sommes fiers de vos enfants, de *nos* enfants. Notre lycée est le symbole éclatant de l'amitié entre les peuples, de la richesse du dialogue et de la diversité. Tous ont fait de leur mieux (quelques toux discrètes parcoururent l'assistance.) Mais il faut distinguer particulièrement ceux qui se sont illustrés par leurs efforts, leur talent, leurs résultats. C'est ce qu'on appelle « l'élitisme républicain ». Ce n'est pas un oxymore ! (280)

I'd like to pay homage to our teachers and to the Headmaster of the best school that symbolizes this an important spiritual empire: the francophone empire. [...] There is no better way to characterize what unites us. We are proud of your children, of *our* children. Our school is a break out symbol of friendship between peoples, of the importance of dialogue, and of diversity. Everyone did their best (a few discrete coughs erupted in the audience). However, it is necessary to distinguish those who stood out for their efforts, their talent, their results. That is what we call "republican elitism." It is not an oxymoron!

The speech's ironic claims about diversity and friendship between peoples highlight the wedge that now exists between Mehdi and the school. The possessive adjective *nos* reappears, mirroring M. and Mme's use of *notre* and underscoring the condescending ownership that the school administration would like to have of Mehdi in light of his achievements.

However, the school and the Bergers are too late: Mehdi no longer wants to integrate himself fully into his surroundings. When he first catches a glimpse of his mother, who has travelled to Casablanca to be a part of the ceremony, he is delighted to see her (277), and he feels comforted by her presence. He is proud of how beautiful she is in her traditional Moroccan dress (284) and no longer wants to distance himself from the origins she represents.

Now that Mehdi has seen the racism with which Lycée Lyautey and the Bergers' view him, he cannot un-see it, and the impossibility of allowing himself to strive for integration or

assimilation crystallises (285). Mehdi stands between his two mother-figures, with the option of serving as a bridge between them, but Mehdi opts for silence. His silence is no longer the dumbfounded muteness that would seize him previously, but rather a silence that is motivated by an awareness of how he has changed and of his will to take control of his existence between these two worlds (here, represented by two women). The last few sentences of the book leave the reader with not only the finality of Mehdi's change, but also the possibilities brought on by the beginning as he moves forward with his third space in hand: 'Mehdi comprend confusément qu'il vient de vivre l'année décisive de sa vie. Une année chez les Français' (287) (Mehdi understood confusedly that he had just lived the most important year of his life. A year with French people).

¹ For more information on General Lyautey, see Singer and Langdon's *Cultured Force: Makers and Defenders of the French Colonial Empire*.

² Examples of what I mean by the classic Western model include Goethe's *Wilhelm Meisters Lehrjahre*, Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield*, and Gustav Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale*.

³ Unless otherwise indicated, translations are my own.

⁴ Unlike many Bildungsroman protagonists before him, Mehdi is not pulled between the two opposing poles of school and home. Instead, his status as a boarding-school student creates a different intermediary position that is the result of being pulled toward and pushed away from the same pole: European Casablanca.

⁵ Bise: small kiss, usually on some skin other than the lips.

⁶ My emphasis.

⁷ 19th century poem considered a classic, known for its 'decadent' style and moralizing themes.

⁸ Laura Reek shows how the same assumption is made of Azouz Begag's protagonist in *Le Gone du Chaâba* (38).

⁹ As a Franco-Algerian Jew, Derrida explains that he could never rid his French of linguistic markers that betray these facets of his identity.

¹⁰ Here, I mean 'Other' in the Lacanian sense.

¹¹ A controversial expression used to designate French citizens whose families have been in France long enough not to identify with other national origins or who do not see themselves as the products of immigration.

¹² By this notion of progress, I mean the one neatly defined by Robert Nisbit in his five crucial premises: 1. value of the past; 2. nobility of Western civilisation; 3. worth of economic/technological growth; 4. faith in reason and scientific/scholarly knowledge obtained through reason; 5. intrinsic importance and worth of life on Earth (1980, 4).

¹³ Masculine title of respect. In Morocco, sometimes ‘Sidi’ is a title given to members of the Alawi dynasty. In this case, ‘Sidi’ is mostly likely used to designate this students as a wealthy Moroccan.

¹⁴ A common trope for children who are educated under the French system in the colonial world; see, for instance, Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir*.

¹⁵ Laroui’s emphasis.

¹⁶ Moretti’s emphasis.

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