

Souffles: Fifty Years Later

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“We revolt simply because, for many reasons, we can no longer breathe.”

Frantz Fanon

In the early hours of January 27, 1972, Moroccan security services swept through a residential neighborhood in Rabat, part of a nationwide dragnet that rounded up students, teachers, unionists, and intellectuals. Topping the regime’s most wanted list were two writers, Abdelatif Laâbi and Abraham Serfaty, the editors of the journal *Souffles*, and founders of the Marxist-Leninist group Ila al-Amam (Forward). In 1966, a group of avant-garde Moroccan poets, led by Laâbi, had launched the quarterly *Souffles* (literally, breaths; figuratively, spirits) as a literary journal. The early issues of *Souffles* published experimental poetry, essays on Moroccan literature and art, but the publication gradually turned into a venue for anti-colonial thought and Third World solidarity. In 1968, the publication became more politically militant, expanded its readership, and launched an Arabic version (*Anfas*) in 1971. Between 1966 and 1973, *Souffles/Anfas* published a stunning array of texts – tracts, open letters, interviews, abstract art, essays on Brazilian cinema novo, the Palestinian struggle, Russian futurism and the Black Power movement, speeches by anti-colonial leaders like Amical Cabral, poetry by Syrian bard Adonis, and the proceedings of Pan-African festivals and anti-colonial conferences.

That early January morning, Laâbi would be arrested in Rabat, tortured, and sentenced to ten years in prison; after serving eight years, he was expelled to France in 1980. Serfaty would go on the run, living in halfway houses for two years, until he was arrested in 1974, tortured and imprisoned for 17 years, before being expelled to France. After the editors’ arrest, the publication slowly petered out; the final issue was released in April 1973. The Moroccan regime’s harsh response to this literary journal, was a testament to *Souffles/Anfas*’ growing influence among

students and workers in the Maghreb, and in forging ties with liberation movements across Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East. *Souffles* is the first truly post-colonial and Tricontinental publication, emerging during the post-independence years, engaging with and connecting all the formerly colonized regions of Asia, the Middle East, Africa, and the Americas. (The Havana-based magazine *The Tricontinental* was launched in August 1967 a year after *Souffles*, and soon after the publication *Lotus: Afro-Asian Writings* was founded in Beirut.)

The journal *Souffles* was born in 1966 at a moment of great political duress, as the young King Hassan, abandoning his father’s proximity to the Non-Aligned movement, was shifting the Moroccan regime to the right, quashing leftist movements, and ousting African liberation movements from the kingdom. *Souffles* would become a flagship publication of the Moroccan Left.¹ *Souffles*’ trenchant critiques of Morocco’s political-economic order rattled the makhzen—the Moroccan state—especially when it began publishing in Arabic. King Hassan II was famously contemptuous of intellectuals and writers, favoring technocrats and traditional scholars (El Guabli, 2023). Following the student protests of March 23, 1965 that left hundreds dead, the monarch had glowered on live television, “There is no greater danger to a country than a so-called intellectual; it would have been better if you had all been illiterate.” The crackdown of 1972 would usher in an era of attempted coups and brute repression, which included the shutting down of sociology and philosophy departments, and a stalling of literacy campaigns (Madoui, 2015). This benighted era, known as the “Years of Lead,” (Hachad, 2019) would only begin to lift with the death of Hassan II in 1999. Only then (in 2000) was Serfaty, then wheelchair bound, allowed to return to Morocco, and did people begin to publicly speak of *Souffles-Anfas*, and the “linguistic guerillas” behind it (Tenkoul, 1982).² The uprisings of 2011 would of course stir further interest in the history of the North African left, and in 2013, Kenza Sefrioui published her excellent book *La revue Souffles 1966-1973. Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc*, which brought the story of this journal to a Francophone audience.

Half a century after Hassan II wished (and wrought) calamity on Moroccan intellectuals, it is exhilarating to see the country has a vibrant cultural and intellectual scene, with Moroccan

¹ Lamalif would also emerge as a flagship publication of the Moroccan left, though without the Third Worldist and Tricontinental approach of *Souffles*. Lamalif would remain in print until 1988. See Brahim El Guabli and Ali Alalou, *Lamalif: A Critical Anthology of Societal Debates in Morocco during the “Years of Lead (1966–1988)”* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2022), pp. 3-16.

² It was Moroccan students in Europe who first began broaching the topic of *Souffles* in the 1980s.

writers, artists, social scientists – excelling domestically and around the world. Yet the challenges that the *Souffles* collective identified in 1966 remain - from the French diplomatic and corporate domination of the Moroccan publishing environment to the weak intellectual infrastructure to state repression; and the isolation, privation and vulnerability of Moroccan scholars persists. The current challenges of a global economic downturn, an authoritarian surge, a looming competition between the US, Russia and China that will play out in Africa, and renewed meddling by Middle Eastern (Gulf) states in the Maghreb make for a context not unlike that faced by Laâbi and his comrades. Yet not since *Souffles* has there been a forum to gather Moroccan scholars to reflect on these matters, to connect intellectuals in the kingdom with their siblings abroad, and to link the decolonial struggles in the Maghreb to the Global South more broadly.

We are delighted to announce that fifty years after its shameful silencing, *Souffles* is rising again from the ashes. With the blessing of Mr. Laâbi we are launching *Souffles* (in Arabic: *Anfas al-Alam: the website Souffle-Monde*) as a platform for decolonial research, to promote young Moroccan and Maghrebi scholars, to create mentoring relationships, to build a culture of epistemic justice that recognizes the achievements of local scholars, and to translate work that would go unnoticed due to the asymmetrical access to publishing circuits and global markets. *Souffles* aspires to rehabilitate the work of pioneering Maghrebi intellectuals. The *Souffles* collective understands that knowledge production is a tool for emancipation and social change. How knowledge is produced and disseminated shapes the way our societies are perceived, represented, and engaged with materially and immaterially.

In the pages below, we review the history and work of *Souffles* arguing that its project remains immensely relevant. In its seven years, *Souffles-Anfas* covered a range of issues and debates. Below we focus on four questions that *Souffles* addressed, and which remain pressing: 1/ the question of language: that is Morocco’s need to remake and mobilize language – any language – for the task of critique of Western hegemony and monolithic understandings of the Arab-Islamic tradition; 2/the kingdom’s relationship to Africa, and pan-Africanist thought; 3/Morocco’s relationship to the Tricontinental movement and the Third World Left, especially the Latin American left; and 4/ Morocco’s relationship to Israel and the Palestinian question. In resonance with the first issue of *Souffles* published in March 1966 which addressed the question of culture and national identity, the first issue of *Souffles* focuses on the question of identity, pluralism, and ethno-racial diversity in contemporary Morocco.

“Linguistic Drama”

Souffles started small, but with a bang. Laâbi published the first issue of *Souffles* in the spring of 1966, a decade after Morocco gained independence from France, a year after the bloody student protests of March 1965, and a few months after the assassination in France of Mehdi Ben Barka, socialist politician, and icon of the international left. The journal was run out of Laâbi’s apartment in Rabat, prepared by volunteers, most prominently Jocelyne Laâbi, printed in Tangier, and sold in select Moroccan cities for 1.5 dirhams. In the inaugural issue-manifesto, Laâbi wrote, “Something is afoot in Africa and the rest of the Third World. Exoticism and folklore are falling by the wayside. No one can predict where this will lead. But the day will come when the real spokespersons of these collectivities really make their voices heard.” The founders of *Souffles* – Laâbi, Mustafa Nissabouri, Mohammad Khaïr-Eddine, Mohammed Melihi, Mohammed Fatha – wanted the Maghreb to be part of this revolutionary wave. The first issue pleaded for an end to the cultural stagnation of the colonial era – the “sclerosis of form and content, [the] unashamed imitation” and for more representative voices (Laâbi, 1966, p.6).³ To that end, in early 1967, the *Souffles* group, launched a publishing house, Atlantes, to counter the decades-old monopoly of French publishers in North Africa and provide an outlet for Maghrebi writers to express their “true voice.”

Frantz Fanon towers over the *Souffles-Anfas* project. Most of the writers at *Souffles* had spent time in Paris, reading and sometimes writing for *Présence Africaine*, the Pan-African quarterly founded in France in 1947. They saw the Martinican thinkers Aimé Césaire and Frantz Fanon as “elder brothers.” Inspired by the Fanon’s theory of national culture and liberation, Laâbi would, in his opening essay, use the phrase “cultural decolonization” – several critics argue that he coined the phrase (Fanon, 1952). The poet would ponder how the struggle for a national culture in Morocco could create opportunities for emancipation – and vice versa (Laâbi 1996). He broached the question of language and identity: what language should Maghrebi writers of his generation, who grew up speaking Arabic or Amazigh at home, but writing French in school – write in? A decade earlier Albert Memmi – the Tunisian essayist – another “elder brother” to the *Souffles* group had termed this condition the “linguistic duality” of the colonized child. Memmi

³ For English translation, please see “Prologue” by Teresa Villa-Ignacio in Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, eds., *Souffles-Anfas A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Stanford University Press; 1st edition (November 25, 2015).

had famously predicted that the end of colonialism would spell the end of Maghrebi literature in French – as North African writers would now opt for Arabic. Laâbi disagreed sharply, saying that the post-colonial writer should decolonize the colonizer’s language – subvert it, change it, employing “linguistic terrorism” when necessary to make it their own. He was particularly fond of Kateb Yacine, the Amazigh novelist and an avowed atheist, who had chosen to write in French saying the language was “our war booty.” *Souffles*’s linguistic ambivalence is betrayed by its self-description as the “Arabic Cultural Journal of the Maghreb” despite it being written and published in French from the outset.

From the start, *Souffles* sought to upend the French literary establishment with its promotion of “ethnographic” writers, “vainglorious false talents” who wrote exotica, recycling tired clichés for the benefit of the colonizer. Contributors also reflected on how the French Nobel Laureate Albert Camus’s *The Plague*, then required reading for all Moroccan baccalaureate students, erased Algerian characters, and examined how French colonial administrators had instrumentalized Ibn Khaldun’s *Al-Muqaddimah*, years before post-colonial scholars in American academia began publishing on these very questions (Laâbi, 1967). Laâbi and friends also turned their guns on the Arabic literary establishment, and the nationalist movement that had repudiated Maghrebi writers who wrote in French, or criticized Maghrebi society in French. The early issues of *Souffles* offer homage to Moroccan and Algerian novelists Driss Chraïbi and Kateb Yacine, as pioneers who had critiqued their societies in French and been lambasted – if not banished – for it. Chraïbi’s 1954 novel *Le Passé Simple (The Simple Past)*, for example, had offered a scathing exploration of oppression within Moroccan society – through the family, patriarchy, racism, and the religious establishment. Nationalists had excoriated Chraïbi for catering to French Orientalist stereotypes. Laâbi made it clear the journal would embrace banished writers like Chraïbi and Yacine, describing them as examples of elders who had successfully “decolonized” history (borrowing an expression from Mohamed Sahli’s book *Decoloniser l’histoire: Introduction a l’histoire du Maghreb (1965)*).

Inspired by Fanon’s calls to transcend colonial binaries, Laâbi and his comrades maintained that *Souffles* would be a place for “double-critique” – an assessment of Western hegemony and neo-colonialism, but also an internal critique of Arab-Islamic dominance. They were fully aware that Moroccan denunciations of “stifling ancestral traditions” could be weaponized by Western adversaries (Laâbi, 1969-70). They thus broke with the earlier generation and their binaries of

colonizer/colonized and French versus Arabic, noting that the endless quarrel over language choice had impeded the development of a national culture. They called on Moroccan writers to write in any language – French or Arabic or any other, just to make the language their own. If in the 1930s, the Moroccan anti-colonial movement chose Arabic as the language of nationalism and solidarity with the Arab East, by the mid-1960s, the *Souffles* collective was arguing that both French and Arabic could be used for decolonization. In 1971, however, Laâbi would issue a famous *mea culpa* acknowledging that *Souffles* had not reached a wider public because of Morocco’s illiteracy levels and his group’s decision to publish in French. Shortly thereafter he announced the launching of *Anfas*, the Arabic language journal – as the Moroccan intelligentsia turned again towards Arabic (Laâbi, 1971).

Morocco’s linguistic drama continues and is still linked to the country’s location between Europe, Africa, and the Arab world. The 2011 Constitution’s recognition of Amazigh as an official language, and Morocco’s return to the African Union in 2017 has pushed the debate about Darija (Moroccan vernacular Arabic) or Fus’ha (Modern Standard Arabic), French or English in new directions. Morocco’s “linguistic drama” was linked to the debate over the nature of the post-colonial state, which deepened the rift over Arabic and French, pushing Tamazight to the margins, until the emergence of a powerful Amazigh Cultural Movement brought the language into public discourse, as an essential component of Moroccan identity (Slyomovics, 2016). This inaugural issue of *Souffles* includes provocative essays by two young scholars that explicitly address the question of language and political identity. Ali Mouryf, a researcher at the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture (IRCAM), looks at the question of Amazigh identity through the prism of history education and curriculum design for secondary schools. Yousra Hamdaoui, a scholar of the Sahel, examines the role of pan-African publishing houses and the circulation of Moroccan literature in Francophone and Arabophone Africa.

Worth noting that for all its cosmopolitanism, *Souffles* never offered much on Amazigh culture and politics – aside from the poetry of the Tafrouate-born Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine. Perhaps the Berber Dahir of 1930, the French colonialists’ attempt to rule Arabs and Berbers through different legal systems, which sparked the Moroccan nationalist movement, was still too fresh a memory in Morocco. This oversight was also a result of the Marxist-Leninist vision, which favored national unity and class struggle over particular identities. Likewise, *Souffles* seldom showcased women’s voices. In twenty-two issues, the journal published women three times:

Lebanese-American writer Etel Adnan’s poem, “Jebu” critic Jeanne-Paule Fabre’s essay on Moroccan women’s writing, and Italian art historian Toni Maraini’s piece on Moroccan painters. Unlike, its contemporary *LAMALIF*, which published prominent Maghrebi feminist thinkers, *Souffles* published no Moroccan women writers’ (Babana-Hampton, 2008). *Souffles* is aware of this history and will be an inclusive platform where gender and ethno-racial diversity are encouraged. This issue includes a piece by sociologist Yassine Yassni on racism towards black women in Morocco. Sociologist and gender scholar Zakia Salime offers a moving tribute to her grandmother Lala Khnata, tracing her life story from 1950s Tafilalt to the medina of Fez, analyzing the deep feminine solidarities that were spurred by the displacement of women from the periphery to the imperial city of Fes.

Maroc Africain

Souffles alongside the Uganda-based *Transition Magazine* (1961-1977) was one of the first pan-African, anti-colonial publications to appear on the continent. The *Souffles* writers came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s. As historian Paraska Tolan Szkilnik writes in her book *Maghrib Noir* (2023), this was a time when Rabat was, a “center of anti-imperial thought” hosting a range of Luso-African liberation movements, welcoming leaders like theoretician-revolutionary Amilcar Cabrale and MPLA leader Mario de Andrade, a time when Nelson Mandela and Frantz Fanon were attending training camps in Oujda (Tolan-Szkilnik, 2023). From 1966 to 1969, every *Souffles* cover was emblazoned with a black sun, a symbol of a rising Africa, or perhaps an African torch illuminating other parts of the world.

The question of whether Arab nationalism or pan-Africanism was a more suitable framework for addressing the Maghreb’s cultural subjugation was a theme in the early years. *Souffles* writers often viewed the Maghrebian’s “alienation” in light of the Negro’s “double alienation,” and with an eye on the situation in “Black Africa” and the French-speaking Caribbean. On the language question, Laâbi would compare the Maghreb to the rest of the continent, noting how language crises in “Black Africa” were not as “acutely polemical” as in North Africa. The multiplicity of languages in sub-Saharan Africa, and the lack of a unified written language, meant states outside Northern Africa could adopt a European language (French or English or Portuguese) as a lingua franca with little resistance. In North Africa, where Arabic had held sway as an

authoritative written language for centuries, the choice of a European language was bound to be more conflictual. But, Laâbi argued, Arabic could be transformed and re-purposed as well.⁴

In dialogue with writers in Francophone and Lusophone Africa, France, and the Caribbean, *Souffles* would also emerge as a platform for debates around race and Negritude. The Negritude movement was born in Paris in the 1930s, inspired by the Harlem Renaissance and the surrealism movement. The school’s founders, *les trois pères*, as they were known, were poets Aimé Césaire, Léopold Senghor, and Léon-Gontran Damas, who met as students in Paris and started the journal *L’Etudiant Noir* in 1934. It was the Martinican poet Césaire who would coin the term “Negritude” in his poem *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal* (Notebook of a Return to My Native Land) (1939), seeing the concept as an affirmation of black pride and history, and a counter to the Western universalism that spoke of *liberté* and *égalité* but deprecated black people. The Senegalese poet Leopold Senghor would go further, defining Negritude as “the ensemble of values of black civilization,” and “a concept of the world which is dramatically opposed to the traditional philosophy of Europe.” He would argue that Negritude was shaped by cultural unity, as seen in the “vital force” of far-flung African religions, the (musical) rhythms (or what he called the “Negro-style”), and the geometrical aesthetics of African masks seen across African countries. Senghor’s thinking would inspire some of the more popular and problematic conceptions of Negritude - the “mystic warmth of African life,” the African’s purported closeness to nature and connection to ancestors, in contrast to the materialism and soullessness of Western civilization (Okune, 2011; Markowitz, 1969, p. 123). Senghor’s leftist critics, starting with Fanon, would find this language essentialist, totalizing, and echoing of colonial stereotypes.

Fanon granted that by affirming a black past, Negritude could help the colonized African develop a positive sense of self. He thought Aimé Césaire’s writings had helped spark a political awakening among West Indians (Fanon, 1991, p. 89). But while an important first step towards emancipation, Negritude was insufficient and had drawbacks. Fanon argued that in privileging “race” and ignoring class conflict, Negritude enabled bourgeois rule and by extension neo-colonialism. Negritude, in his eyes, flattened black identity and experience. “For there is not one Negro - there are many black men,” he would write, adding that the disalienation of a black doctor

⁴ On this score, Laâbi would write that Fanon, with his Francophone focus, had remained unaware of all the experimental writing taking place in Arabic in Algeria and Morocco in the 1950s.

in Guadeloupe was different from that of a construction worker in Abidjan, Cote D’Ivoire (Fanon, 1991, p. 115). Knowledge of black history was inspiring but talk of a “mythical past” was unproductive. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon observes that extolling the greatness of Songhai civilization would do little to help the exploited Songhan. The Negritude poets, Fanon concluded, were peddling a “mummified culture, of curiosities, and exotic things.” The tensions between Fanon’s anti-colonial vision and Senghor’s version of Negritude are understandable.

Both Aimé Césaire and Fanon were major reference points for the Souffles collective. Mohammed Khair-Eddine’s explosive 1964 poem “Nausée Noire (Black Nausea)” about a brutal monarch, was clearly influenced by Césaire’s classic poem *Cahier de Retour*. But in the debate about Negritude, the journal backed Fanon’s class-based critique, publishing a number of essays by Marxist pan-Africanists. The most well know was the Haitian poet René Depestre’s address at the Cultural Congress of Havana in January 1968 titled “The Winding Course of Negritude,” republished in Souffles in 1969 (Depestre, 1969, pg. 42-46). Depestre had also studied in Paris and been part of the *Présence Africaine* network. He had returned to Haiti only to be imprisoned by the Duvalier regime, and then fled to Cuba. In the Havana address, Depestre would salute African American thinkers like W.E.B Du Bois, and Langston Hughes who had laid the groundwork for the Negritude movement. Depestre would then lament how Negritude was born in the Caribbean with the Haitian revolution but had now become the ideology of the tyrannical Duvalier regime. It had become the weapon of the black bourgeoisie used to obfuscate class relations, separating race from class. Negritude may have been a suitable “affective rebuttal” to white racism, but it also led black thinkers to “epidermize” their condition.⁵

The Senegalese poet-president Senghor would come under heavy criticism at Souffles-Anfas, not only for his reified division of Africa into a “Berber-Arab” zone (with its “Bedouin virtues”) and a “Negro-African world,” with differing civilizational logics, but also for his proximity to the Moroccan regime. Shortly after Senghor assumed office in Senegal, King Hassan came to power in Morocco (in 1961). As the young monarch sought to bring Morocco into America and France’s orbit, Senghor would prove an ally and kindred spirit. Scholars have written about the influence of Negritude on Amazigh politicians in Morocco, but less so on the monarchy’s

⁵ Depestre would also slam Senghor for saying “emotion is black like reason is Greek.” He would criticize the white scholars who thought blacks had “more soul” – locking blacks into “blackness” and whites into “whiteness.”

affinity for Negritude and its spiritual essentialism (El Guabli, 2022; Peyron, 2022, p.247). If Senghor, a Catholic, liked to speak of Senegal as a seamless symbiosis of Negritude and Islam (specifically what French colonialists called “Islam noir”), Hassan II would soon begin speaking of Morocco as a mix of Moorish Islam and African civilization, the kingdom as a tree with roots deep in Africa and branches in Europe. Soon a curious coalition would form at *Souffles* of Haitian, Senegalese, and Moroccan writers opposed to Negritude-inspired authoritarianism, dismayed by the French-backed autocrats who spoke of Sufism and spiritual values while hunting down leftists.

The debate around Negritude – not unlike the ongoing debate around Afropessimism and blackness today – touches upon American imperialism, the African American struggle, as well as Africa’s relationship to the Arab world. In April 1966, the late art critic Abdullah Stouki – often described as the dean of Moroccan journalists - would pen a scathing review in *Souffles* of the Dakar International Festival for Negro Arts. He berated the Senegalese organizers for catering to European fetishism with “primitive arts.” Stouki would lament the absence of progressive voices like Paul Robeson and the anti-apartheid activist Miriam Makeba, noting that Senghor was increasingly repressive, and was holding a festival under the patronage of General de Gaulle and John F. Kennedy, the latter was “exacting one of the most atrocious genocides in history [in Vietnam] while continuing to deny American Negroes the most basic rights.” The African American jazz poet Ted Joans who had been living between Morocco and Timbuktu would make a similar point in a letter to his friend the surrealist poet André Breton, saying he planned to boycott the Dakar festival in his “own sweet way,” by “crossing the Sahara” to Oran, Algeria (qtd. in Tolan-Szkilnik, 2020).

The rivalry between the leftist continental pan-African camp and the Negritude-inspired pro-American camp, played out – and still plays out - at cultural festivals. *Souffles* published a dossier on the Pan-African Cultural festival held in Algiers in July 1969, conceived as a response to Senghor’s festival in Dakar. Five thousand performers, intellectuals, and freedom fighters from across Africa and the Americas gathered in the Algerian capital. The 3000-word Pan-African Cultural Manifesto produced by the delegates, reprinted in *Souffles*, offered a sharp riposte to Senghor’s idea of a bifurcated Africa. In a 40-minute taped message, Ahmed Sekou Touré of Guinea, a rival of Senghor, repudiated the Senegalese president’s ideology: “Negritude is thus a false concept, an irrational weapon encouraging the irrationality based in racial discrimination,

arbitrarily exercised upon the people of Algeria, Asia and upon men of color in America and Europe.” In a response read by the distinguished Senegalese diplomat Mohtar M’Bow, who would later become the general director of UNESCO and a close friend of King Hassan II, Senghor argued that Negritude was necessary to bridge between Arabism and the “Negro-African world” (Lindfors, 1970). These tensions would erupt again eight years later, when Nigeria decided to host the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (FESTAC 77) as a follow-up to the Dakar festival. From the outset, Senghor demanded that North African states only have observer status at the festival; his minister of culture said Senegal would boycott the event if it was not limited to Black countries only. General Obasanjo of Nigeria, however, wanted the North African states to participate as full members, and as *The New York Times* would report, Nigerian officials accused the Senegalese of exhibiting “racial bigotry in the most nauseating sense” (Darnton, 1976).

Souffles was at the center of this debate over the definition of Africa. The PANAF of 1969 would prove incredibly generative for the journal’s writers who attended the jamboree, mingling with revolutionary groups like the ANC, FRELIMO, SWAPO, MPLA, meeting figures like Stokely Carmichael, Kathleen Cleaver, Archie Schepp, and Nina Simone. The journal would go on to publish a double issue about the festival featuring speeches by leaders from the Guinean and Portuguese colonies, a section in honor of the Black Panthers, with a translation of the Black Panther Party’s 10-point program. In an essay on the Panthers, Serfaty would highlight Amiri Baraka’s book *Blues People* (1963) and the importance of music to the African American struggle. The following issue of March-April 1970 would include poetry by Haki Madhubuti (Don Lee), founder of the Chicago based Third World Press; his poem on black counterculture “A Message All Black People Can Dig” would be translated as “Un message que tous les noirs pourrons pieger” (Villa-Ignacio, 2017).

Souffles journal was a pioneer in contesting colonial geographies and categories, debating whether “race” was defined by class or culture – and whether it was worth repurposing this colonial concept, as Senghor was trying to do. Shortly after the 1967 War, Laâbi would publish a cryptic poem titled “Race,” that mentions Fanon by name, and recounts in visceral terms the universal violence that this colonial concept (with its hierarchies) had inflicted on humanity. The piece would spark an animated discussion among the Souffles writers not least on how to translate the term “race” into Arabic. This debate continues today, as do disputes between Afro-pessimists

(Negritude’s ostensible heirs) and their Marxist critics, who claim Afropessimism “flattens” blackness and de-materializes race (Okoth, 2020). Festivals also remain a major venue for deploying soft power and conceptions of national identity: consider Morocco’s state-sponsored Sufi festivals, Algeria’s attempt to shore up its revolutionary credentials with the 2019 PanAf festival, or the Senegalese leader Macky Sall’s use of the Dakar Biennale to burnish his image (El Guabli, 2018; Boum, 2013).

Several pieces in this issue of *Souffles* revisit this period of Afro-Arab/Afro-Amazigh internationalism. Aomar Boum looks at a little-known side of African American internationalism, tracing the history of the African American Bahai community that formed in Morocco in the 1950s. Hisham Aïdi’s essay on the history of Gnawa music looks at how this marginalized culture, singularly valorized and celebrated by French colonialists, has ironically become Morocco’s most well-known music, a symbol of the monarchy’s Sahelian roots and Negritude. Brahim El Guabli, in turn, scrutinizes the writings of Moroccan nationalist and Istiqlal leader Allal El Fassi, during his exile in Gabon in the 1930s, showing how while the *Souffles* writers were speaking of pan-African solidarity, Moroccan state-builders were disseminating their own racialist ideas of Africa.

The Tricontinental

Souffles took a militant political turn, in 1968, establishing ties with the Castro regime, Chinese Maoists, Egyptian Communists and the American Black Panthers. This political shift was a reaction, *inter alia*, to the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and the May ’68 student uprisings in France (Stafford, 2018). But it was also due to the arrival of Abraham Serfaty at the journal’s helm. Born to a Jewish family in Tangier in 1926, Serfaty was first arrested by the Vichy authorities at the age of eighteen for his activism in the Moroccan Communist Youth (Slyomovics, 2016). He studied engineering at the Ecole des Mines in Paris, and then returned to Morocco to join the anti-colonial movement, which led the French authorities to exile him to France for six years. Upon independence, he returned to Morocco, assuming positions at the Ministry of Economy and as head of research at the Office Chérifien des Phosphates (OCP), the state-owned mining company. By the late 1960s, this high-ranking civil servant with Communist leanings was increasingly involved in miners’ strikes and labor protests, leading to his dismissal from his position at the OCP in 1968.

That same year Serfaty joined *Souffles*, having met Laâbi at a political meeting about Palestine. Judging the Moroccan Communist party as top-heavy and sclerotic, they launched the Marxist-Leninist group *Ila al-Amam*. Under Serfaty’s leadership, *Souffles* began publishing more essays on policy and political economy – educational policy in Morocco, the international banking system, regime-type and class politics, Latin American revolutions – and much less poetry. “Literature was no longer sufficient,” Laâbi would write. Nissabouri and Khair-Eddine’s poems would slowly vanish from *Souffles*’ pages; thereafter any verse showcased in *Souffles* would have an explicit political tone (like one poem titled “The Call of the Orient”, published soon after Gamel Abdel Nasser’s death in 1970 (El Amrani, 2008). As the journal adopted a Marxist position, politically and methodologically, and became the mouthpiece of the Moroccan underground radical left, *Souffles*’ more literary and artistic members would leave, dismayed by the publication’s militant turn. Painter Mohammed Melihi would depart *Souffles* and launch *Intégral*, a magazine devoted to the arts. Poet Mostafa Nissabouri, sociologist Abdelkebir Khatibi and novelist Tahar Benjelloun would follow suit.

The Third World movement had high hopes for the Tricontinental Solidarity Conference set to take place in Havana in January 1966. The gathering aimed to bring together leaders of revolutionary movements from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, for the first time since the 1955 Bandung Conference. The architect of this Tricontinental congress was the exiled Moroccan opposition leader and mathematician Mehdi Ben Barka. (Per Moroccan leftist lore, Ben Barka had not only coined the term “Tricontinentalism,” but envisioned Morocco as an epicenter of the movement for its location between three continents – Asia, Africa, and Europe.) Ben Barka had run afoul of his former pupil King Hassan a few years earlier, when he rejected the new Moroccan constitution of 1962, saying the goal of the Moroccan people was “to battle this totally feudal regime.” Ben Barka’s high-profile alignment with leftist movements – he had befriended the likes of Amical Cabral, Malcolm X, and Che Guevara – made him anathema to the young monarch who was battling leftist militancy at home, and trying to ingratiate himself with the West. When Ben Barka visited Havana in 1965, Castro informed him that the Moroccan king was pressing the Cuban leader to remove him as head of the Tricontinental, otherwise Morocco would stop buying sugar from the island (Lentin, 1966, p.44). A few months before the conference in October 29, 1965, Ben Barka disappeared in Paris. His fate remains a highly political question in Morocco: every year brings a new documentary or investigative report about what happened to this hero of

the Moroccan nationalist movement. Not even the Equity and Reconciliation Commission, put in place in 2004, was able to shed new light on his enigmatic abduction in broad daylight in Paris. The mainstream view remains that he was abducted by French security, with the assistance of Israeli agents, and then delivered to the Moroccan security services.

The first Tricontinental Conference took place in the Cuban capital in January 1966 drawing 500 delegates from dozens of countries. The conference would issue a resolution denouncing the crime committed against Ben Barka, accenting the “direct responsibility” of General Oufkir, minister of interior and the king’s right hand. Castro would salute the fallen “comrade Ben Barka” as a visionary. The conference would lead to the founding of the Organization of Solidarity with the Peoples of Asia, Africa, and Latin America (OSPAAL). OSPAAL would honor Ben Barka by publishing his speech as President of the Preparatory Committee in the inaugural issue of the Tricontinental magazine in 1967 (Ben Barka, 1967). The conference also inspired Cuban military support for the anti-colonial movements in Namibia and Angola. Che Guevara, then in the hills of Bolivia, sent a letter to the conference calling for “two, three, many Vietnams,” as a way to combat imperialism. Since Morocco did not have a representative at the Tricontinental, the Angolan poet and leader of the MPLA Mario de Andrade filed a report of the conference published in *Souffles*.

The Cuban revolution in 1959 had riveted the Moroccan left, especially in northern Morocco and the Spanish Sahara, both areas still ruled by Madrid. Fidel Castro also had a keen interest in Spanish-ruled northern Morocco, which had risen up since the 1890s against Spanish imperialism. The Rif had been part of the Cuban nationalist imagination for almost a century. In 1893, the Cuban poet and nationalist José Martí, had famously written in support of the Berber uprising against Spanish rule in northern Morocco: “Seamos moros! Let us be Moors...we who will probably die by the hand of Spain” (Martí, 1938, p. 201). Likewise Abdelkrim’s historic defeat of the Spanish at the Battle of Anoual in 1921 had inspired Castro and his associates. In November 1956, when Fidel and his fighters set up camp in the Sierra Maestra mountain range and launched a guerrilla war against Batista’s army, they were taking a page from Abdelkrim’s playbook (Ramonet, 2006). Upon assuming power in June 1959, Guevara, now Cuba’s ambassador-at-large, flew to Cairo and met with Abdelkrim twice at the Moroccan embassy to discuss guerilla warfare (“Guevara face,” 2009; Er, 2017). Radio Havana began broadcasting anti-Franco propaganda directly to northern Morocco and Spain, as Cuba extended its support to the FLN in Algeria and

other African liberation movements. When Cuban troops joined forces with Algerian forces fighting Morocco in the border war of October 1963, relations between Rabat and Havana deteriorated further.

Souffles had forged ties with various Latin American liberation movements, carrying translations of works published in the radical Havana-based bimonthly *Casa de la Americas*, which in turn translated works by North African writers and carried advertisements for *Souffles*. It’s not clear why Serfaty was so keenly interested in Latin America - perhaps because his father, part of an early Moroccan Jewish migration to South America, had resided in Brazil for seventeen years. But under Serfaty’s tutelage, *Souffles* ran essays by Latin American writers like Mexican thinker Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez. *Souffles* would even arrange a speaking tour of Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier in Morocco in February 1969. The journal published analyses of the Cuban and Bolivian revolutions and asked whether the Cuban theory of *foco* (guerilla violence) was applicable to Morocco. *Souffles* promoted debates about Tricontinentalism and anti-colonialism across languages and regions. The publication also had ties to Syrian poet Adonis’ magazine *Mawaqif* in Beirut, thus connecting Latin America and the Middle East. *Souffles* publicized Egyptian sociologist Anouar Abdelmalik’s calls for a “Tricontinental sociology,” and Moroccan critic Abdelkebir Khatibi’s idea of “other thinking” (*pensée autre*). Inspired by Fanon’s call to leave Europe behind, and to find something different (“trouver autre chose,”) Khatibi was laying the groundwork for what is nowadays called decolonial thought. In his *Local Histories/Global Designs* (2012), the Argentine decolonial scholar Walter Mignolo describes Khatibi’s “other thinking” as a specific North African response to intellectual imperialism, and an attempt to find an alternative to the capitalist world system (Khatibi, 1971).⁶

The coup d’états and civil unrest of early 1970s Morocco would set the stage for the Green March of 1975, making the “Saharan question” paramount in the kingdom’s politics. In August 1972, Sahraoui student activists in Ila al-Amam published an essay in *Anfas* (*Souffles*’ Arabic edition), stating that, inspired by Castro and Che Guevara’s strategy in the Sierra Maestra, they hoped to turn the former Spanish Sahara into a launching pad for a revolution that would liberate the entire Moroccan people from “the regressive comprador regime” (Al-Sayyid, 2018). The

⁶ Khatibi had co-edited a volume with Albert Memmi on Maghrebian literature published by Presence Africaine. See Albert Memmi, ed., *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d’expression française* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1964).

conflict with the Polisario movement would split the Moroccan left, as Laâbi and Serfaty’s group of Ila al-Amam supported self-determination for the Sahara, while their ally 23 March movement, the other wing of the Marxist-Leninist movement named after the bloody uprising of March 23, 1965, advocated for Moroccan rule (al-Shāwī, 1992). It was their stance on the Sahara that ultimately sealed Laâbi and Serfaty’s fate. In October 1972, an issue of *Souffles* was published, with a report about the regime’s crackdown on the student movement and the banning of the national student organization (UNEM) and Ben Barka’s UNFP. In April 1973, the final issue was published. Serfaty was caught, the journal was shuttered, and the “years of lead” set in. When Moroccan Foreign Minister Mohamed Benhima met with Henry Kissinger in New York in October 1973, he assured his American counterpart, “We are against all liberation movements” (Office of the Historian, 1973).

In 1980, Morocco and Cuba had broken off diplomatic relations, due to Havana’s support for the Polisario. In the early 2000s, as leftist governments swept to power in Latin America and Hugo Chavez stepped up support for the Polisario, Moroccan diplomacy turned its attention again towards the South Atlantic. In 2004, King Mohammed VI did a whistlestop tour of South America, signing economic agreements, visiting century-old Moroccan Jewish communities and cultivating alliances to counter Cuban and Venezuelan support in the Sahara. (Hugo Chavez had begun building Bolivarian schools in refugee camps in Tindouf). Shortly after Fidel Castro’s death, Morocco and Cuba rebuilt ties, culminating in full bilateral relations in 2018. Morocco’s overture towards Latin America (and Africa) is happening at a time when both the former Spanish Sahara and the Rif region are politically restive, but it has created more space for dialogue and academic exchange. In the last decade, Moroccan researchers have been studying Latin America’s experience with democratization, transitional justice, and the rise of indigenous movements (Jebrouni, 2020). In this issue, Najwa Belkziz looks at the role of Moroccan mothers of the “disappeared” in the truth and reconciliation process in Morocco launched in 2004, and how it parallels the movements of the mothers of the *desaparecidos* in Argentina. Mohammed Oubenal, a researcher at the Royal Institute for Amazigh Culture, looks at the role of music and protest in the Rif region, noting the influence of Latin American music and indigenous activism.

Plus ça change...

In late 1969, Serfaty published Issue 15 of *Souffles* devoted entirely to the question of Palestine. The issue included a poem by Laâbi titled, “We Are All Palestinian Refugees.” The *Souffles* collective was solidly pro-Palestinian from the start. In his critique of Negritude, Haitian poet René Depestre had observed that Negritude had morphed into an unacceptable “Black Zionism,” separating black from people from the tricontinental, Third World struggle. After 1967, the Palestinian cause became central for *Souffles*, as did Arab politics and the Arabic language. Serfaty was particularly vocal on the Palestinian question, saying that the 1967 War had exposed the “retrograde nature” of Arab regimes, “signaled the death of Nasser and opened the way to revolutionary ideas.” He feared that the Palestinian-Israeli conflict could spell the end of Moroccan Jewry’s millennial presence in the kingdom altogether. He would pen a moving piece in *Souffles* distancing Moroccan Jewry from Zionism. “Je ne suis pas en exil,” he would write, “I am not in exile.” Morocco’s most famous Jewish dissident would accuse Hassan II of allying with the Zionist movement, and the Moroccan bourgeoisie of facilitating the out-migration of their Jewish compatriots. He would also reprimand the conservative, Arab nationalist Istiqlal party for its anti-Semitic language and for conflating Judaism and Zionism (Serfaty and Elbaz, 2001). Serfaty would also praise the largely Moroccan Israeli Black Panther movement when it rose up against Ashkenazi dominance in Israel in 1971. In exile he would continue to write about how his identity as an Arab Jew was nullified by both Jewish and Arab nationalists, arguing that the Muslim-Jewish convivencia of Islamic Spain could make “New Andalusias” possible.

Serfaty’s writings resonate deeply today, though not in ways he would have predicted. Fifty years after *Souffles* was silenced, the Moroccan-Israeli alliance is out in the open, with diplomatic ties established in December 2020, in exchange for the Trump administration recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Saharan provinces. Flights from Israel alight in various Moroccan cities, with Moroccan Israeli returnees welcomed to great media fanfare. The convivencia that Serfaty dreamed of has today become the catchword of the normalization process in Morocco and the Abraham Accords. We are honored to include in this inaugural issue of *Souffles* a previously unpublished letter written by Abraham Serfaty in 1990 to an American colleague in New York.

Fifty years after *Souffles* turned towards the Arab East, Morocco is at a turning point again. As the reveries of the “Arab Spring” fade, it is a moment reminiscent of the late 1960s, with a counter-revolutionary authoritarianism, a new Cold War looming and the Maghreb again having to navigate between East and West. A substantial segment of the Moroccan intelligentsia today is

moving away from Arabism – dispirited by decades of war, the collapse of the pan-Arab project, and now fearing the predation and domination (“Engulfment”) of the Gulf monarchies (El Guabli, 2021). Young people are looking for an alternative across the Mediterranean, across the Atlantic and across the Sahara. *Souffles* will try to facilitate new conversations about language, identity and modernization, cultivating a civil dialogue that brings in traditionalists and dissidents. As with the original *Souffles*, there will be a productive tension between literary scholars and social scientists, between cultural studies and political economy, between champions of specific languages and policies. Like the original *Souffles*, we will include scholars who deploy different methodologies, including Marxist class analysis, though *Souffles* will not have the unified Marxist-Leninist stance of the later (post-’68) *Souffles*.

Our hope is to create a decolonial platform from whence contributors from the Maghreb can engage with the rest of Africa and the Global South – and vice versa. As Laâbi wrote in the first issue in 1966, “*Souffles* is not sponsored by any niche nor any minaret and does not recognize any frontiers. Our Maghrebi, African, European, and other writer friends are fraternally invited to participate in our modest enterprise.” All are invited.

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