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# Poem as Space for Artistic Contestation: Finding Multiple Voices of Female Writers through Artistic Vocabularies

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Poem as Space for Artistic Contestation: Finding Multiple Voices of Female Writers through

Artistic Vocabularies

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## Abstract

This project is a creative piece that consists of ten poems and a critical analysis of artistic vocabularies utilized by women writers: Aicha Bassry, Furugh Farrukhzad, and Fatima Mernissi. I argue that their speaking together, especially through multiple voices, is a political act that can be privileged above normative discussions of art currently. This comes from the common worlds they build in their poetic and scholarly work, which despite differences in voice and vocabulary, centralize women. I define artistic vocabulary in this project as the transformation that takes place when image is translated into word. I explore this idea of multiple voices through a series of erasure poems based on five from Aicha Bassry. I consider the artistic medium of the poem as a site of contestation of voice, authenticity, and authority— a place to test the third spaces of these writers.

## Acknowledgments

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I began this project wanting to explore the historical and current art landscape in Morocco. How women artists and writers engage and critique their worlds through their work. Perhaps most importantly to me, and most ambitious, how do these women construct a grammar and language for understanding their lived experiences that might gesture towards a kin of transnational feminism. However, in preparing the literature review, many of my assumptions were challenged which led me to shift my project to a creative one instead.

This decision in part came from reading Pieprzak's *Imagined Museums: Art and Modernity in Postcolonial Morocco*. Pieprzak argues that public discourse, national memory, and art mutually construct each other. Further, all three are informed by the particular histories and anxieties of French colonialism and post-independent Morocco. Much of her writing focuses on the national museum as a site of not only art, but as one of verbal communication through that art (92). This means that attached to artistic production is the production of discourse.

Most valuable to me was her chapter *Imaginary Museums and Their Real Phantom Pain*. Her central argument in this chapter is that around questions of what is truly modern, traditional, ancestral, cultural, there stands the artist, who attempts to relocate status quo discourse in favor of new narratives. She writes poignantly that by doing so, "they attempt to create a space for Moroccan art that would increase their own agency in controlling, developing, protecting, and disseminating modern Moroccan culture, (93)."

The spaces artists occupy certainly come with their own difficulties, namely in the struggle with definition. Specifically, what it means to produce authentically, especially when Morocco has been controlled, developed, protected, and disseminating by those who often have more power than the artist. This certainly resulted in conflicts of identity as artists attempted to

relocate discourse and through that relocation articulated their own positionality. For example, the artist Tallal, a Moroccan expressionist painter, writes that he not a Moroccan painter, but rather Moroccan *and* a painter (Pieprzak 197).

While this might seem like a declaration of freedom, Tallal purposefully changed his aesthetic from what he believed to be distinctly Moroccan in an attempt to enter a sort of international universalism. Pieprzak summarized his frustration, believing that, “national identity and artistic vocabulary should not be conflated,” (Pieprzak 197). However, in relocating his relationship to nation, Tallal unwittingly argued to be an artist, one must be internationally minded rather than locally. Further those who have created the contemporary Morocco and in many ways have not left. I mean, namely the vestiges of colonialism as they exist today, such as tourism culture, and more current, the democratic transition to the King Mohammad the Fifth.

It is within these spaces that artists can create aesthetics that, like how art in museums connote certain discourses, produce new relationships to image. While I call this a foundation to visual grammar, Pieprzak might refer to this as artistic vocabulary, the signs and symbols used by artists. My own understanding of artistic vocabulary comes from work that seems to be in conversation with Pieprzak. For example, cultural anthropologist Amy Malek points to the kind of artistic third space akin to the site of the artist as one of relocation of the dominant discourse.

In *Memoir as Iranian Exile*, Malek discusses how cultural production makes possible new codes, inscriptions, and identities that exist outside of hegemonic powers (Malek 357) . This kind of cultural production is one that calls for the privileging of the self as the basis and starting point for all politics. Malek argues that the position of the artist between dominant and subversive, normative and imaginative is the means through which creative documentation is

possible. That to displace a narrative one must be displaced, exiled in some way, or in Malek's own word, be "deterritorialized," (355).

The Trinidadian-Canadian poet Nourbese Philip continues the thought of creative documentation in her essay *Reckonings of Excavation*. She explores the predicament of post-colonial writers writing in colonial languages, in her case English and French, and examines how these writers make sense of their position. Nourbese argues that verbal and non-verbal techniques such as comparison, simile, metaphor, fable, and myth, are tools writers use to create and establish new relationships between image, what she refers to as the creative DNA, and word (Phillip 122). She observes:

"The power and threat of the artist, poet, and writer lies within this ability to create new images, images that speak to the essential being of the people among whom the artist creates. If allowed free expression, these images succeed in altering the way a society perceives itself and, eventually, its collective consciousness... the autonomous image maker serves the function of continually enriching the language by enlarging the store of images and in particular, metaphorical image. If we accept that living language continually encapsulates, reflects and refines the entire experiential life and worldview... of the society at large, and if we accept that this poet...and storyteller express this process in their work, then we must accept that this process becomes one way in which a society continually accepts, integrates, and transcends its experiences," (Phillip 44-45)

Nourbese certainly agrees with Malek's insistence on the artistic power of subversion and Pieprzak's idea of relocation. She also notably calls on the store of metaphoric image, another way of describing a visual and artistic repository, or vocabulary. The artist is both the image maker, but she is also made by image. This is to say that while the artist exists within such a transformative space, she is both a producer and product of the everyday.

However, this is not say that all artists are on equal footing. Traditional forms of Moroccan art were often made inferior by male artists who believed this sort of rhetorical

distancing could be the entry point into Western recognition. While Pieprzak has certainly documented this, it is also an argument made in *Art, Self-Censorship, and Public Discourse: Contemporary Moroccan Artists at the Crossroads*. Cynthia Becker argues that while contemporary artists are newly able to be political, the restraint and censorship they face unwittingly allows their art to exist normatively in public discourse. While male artists attempted to reject European training, or to decolonize art, they made the art of women popular, such as ceramics and textiles, but not the women artists themselves. Becker asks: “What does it mean for a male artist to emphasize the female decorative form? Is this liberating for women or does it burden them as carriers of tradition?” (Becker 157).

Moroccan women artists must face a particular predicament, a sort of double bind. In one corner, they face exclusion from international recognition due to their Moroccan-ness and also face appropriation from Moroccan male artists. With this dilemma in mind, I finally shifted into this new project after finishing Pieprzak’s last chapter, in which she writes, “How are local memories erased or replaced by global images that do not correspond to a local reality?” (Pieprzak 130).

While my intention was to understand how the work of Moroccan women artists came to be, I did not want to erase certain memories and privilege my own global image of what I wanted their work to do. Which is to say, I did not want to supercharge art with my own limited understanding of Moroccan history and politics. That perhaps I was asking not necessarily too much of Moroccan women artists, but was asking for the wrong thing. Just as women carry the burden of culture and tradition, I did not want to further burden women artists with the

untangling of their own marginalization. Instead I wanted this project to be one of finding rather than placing.

Instead this is my project. Using the work of Moroccan poet Aicha Bassry, I created a form based on the erasure, in which I take Bassry's poems and erase certain words. I then took the work of Furugh Farrukhzad, a Persian feminist poet, and the work of Fatima Mernissi, a Moroccan sociologist and catalogued their vocabulary into a sort of word bank. From there, I wrote ten poems, five using Farrukhzad's vocabulary, and five using Mernissi's. For this project, I wanted to consider the artistic medium of the poem as a site for contestation, making its incorporation as a tool of methodology and analysis necessary. I think of the poem as a contact zone, a place to question authenticity and authority. Generally, as a sort of third space akin to Malek. To return the last quote by Pieprzak, if there was to be any kind of erasing or replacing, I wanted to be done with local and everyday voices.

I was first unsure of what my data would look like in a creative piece, especially given my use of both a poet and a critical scholar. However, both writers had the same intention of making women central to voice and subject, despite having few moments of overlap among these three writers in language. While certainly within an essay both poet and scholar can exist, by reducing their work to words and considering those effects, I believe it is possible to raise both works to the same critical space, a kind of level playing field. Or more so, a sort of return, as both writers are inspired the very basis of lived experience

I read *Beyond the Veil* by Fatima Mernissi. Mernissi has written a number of books, and given the time constraint, I could not read all. I say this since I did not get the chance to read more of her work, so that I could see the evolution and scope of her scholarship. This is

especially important given that Mernissi has also written memoirs like *Scheherazade Goes West* and *Dreams of Trespass*, which privilege the first person voice like Bassry and Farrukhzad.

My method for extracting words for both writers was the same. I extracted words from three chapters in *Beyond the Veil: the Muslim Concept of Active Female Sexuality, Regulation of Female Sexuality in the Muslim Social Order*, and *the Meaning of Spatial Boundaries*.

I extracted words from eight poems featured in a biographical sketch of Farrukhzad in the anthology *Middle Eastern Women Speak* edited by Elizabeth Warnock Fernea. I picked them because the author collected these poems across three collections of Farrukhzad, collections that represent major shifts in her style.

Aisha Bassry was born in 1969 and throughout her life studied literature. She has written numerous collections of poetry, which have been translated into Turkish, Italian, and Spanish. Many of her poems use the imagery of nature, and question the ways of the body. All her poems, even if there are physical landmarks point to a sort of dreamscape. Many of her poems are written without excess, with short lines and minimal punctuation, as if to capture a single image. Her poems also contain short epigraphs as a way of basing or offering a foundation to a poem. Poets like Finnish poet Edith Södergran and Japanese poet Inoue. Most notably to me, she refers to the Persian poet Furugh Farrukhzad.

While Furugh Farrukhzad is not Moroccan, she is referenced in the epigraph of one of Bassry's poems. Farrukhzad was born in [brief history]. Her poetry exists within a literary tradition that shares important qualities with the work of Moroccan women poets. There is the prioritization of self. The building of metaphor through imagery of nature, though this imagery is utilized in different ways. The referencing of God, heaven, and love to signify desire.

Farrukhzad's poetry is generally longer than Bassry's but still prioritizes focus and precision in its simplicity and lack of excess. Both works are especially concerned, or rather, are inspired by interiority, the base root desire of the speaker. Often this expresses itself as confession and command, addressed one might think to either God or a lover, but most certainly someone beloved and elevated in the eye of the speaker above all else.

For example, in the Bassry's poem *On the Edge of Autumn* the speaker asks the Beloved to gather her up, in the hope their dreams might be united. In *With the Scent of the Rain*, she offers herself again and again with unflinching purpose (I give you my heart/I give you my eyes/I give you my womb). In the poem *Sin*, Farrukhzad writes, "I whispered in his ear the tale of love/I want you, O life of mine/I you, O love giving embrace/"— for both speakers, to give is to want.

Both also share a frustration at the limitations of the physical body. Bassry writes in *The Beach Departs*, "And I, alone/secretly elude death/but not the body/" and Farrukhzad calls in *My Heart is Heavy* the sky a skin to signify a larger barrier the speaker is attempting to break free of, cementing this idea with the line "no... will escort me to the celebration of sparrows," In the poem *World of Shadows* she asks directly, "Is a body a prison or a field of freedom?"

Farrukhzad's vocabulary is one I only encounter through translation. Many of her words are one or two syllables long, and gravitate towards more general and unspecific objects and ideas (she uses more abstract nouns) However, she uses poetic devices to elevate these everyday objects into image, specifically through the interaction of the senses.

In the poem *Sin*, the speaker is both admitting and memorializing a moment with her Beloved, and in the first stanza, using words like warm, fiery, hot, and avenging, to build her

Beloved into an image of desire just as urgent as the union itself. Farrukhzad's poetic vocabulary also contains place markers despite being unspecific of place. For example, words like seclusion, solitude, darkness and more concrete, road, path, prison, field, and bed are frequent in her poems. All connote a place but the reader is not given more details as to what kind or where. Bassry's work is the same in this regard.

Lastly, Farrukhzad's vocabulary is religious, which is best illustrated in poems such as *Divine Rebellion*, in which she begins each stanza with , "If I were God/—" She uses words such as sin, God, furnace (to call on hell), angel, heaven, divinity, summoning, and more. Like Farrukhzad, Mernissi's vocabulary is noun heavy. Many of her words are three or four syllabled, scientific and precise. For example, she uses anomaly, theoretical, configuration, instrument, receptacle, apparatus, instinct, flesh, transgression, and more. While Farrukhzad's love vocabulary is one that is physical and inspired by passion, Mernissi is more concerned with sex as a question of gender boundaries and duties. She uses words like progeny, procreation, copulation, and surprisingly pleasure as well. Her vocabulary is especially more complex and lacks the kind of dream world Farrukhzad and Bassry use.

This kind of scholarly orientation to work simply comes from Mernissi's focus on Islamic feminism and gender discourse. In *Beyond the Veil* she explores Christian and Muslim traditions of feminine sexuality, even using psychoanalysis from Freud. She investigates how male-female dynamics are changing in major debates of tradition and modernity in Morocco and the Muslim world at large. She is most interested in seeing contradictions and developments in these dynamics.

Writing these poems was certainly difficult. There is an instinctive need to make a narrative, piece together a story and configure what the speaker is desiring, and thereby what desire in its whole is. Many times after writing out a line or considering the placement of a word, I wondered what the whole of the poem was gesturing towards. I wondered, who is this speaker? There is the voice of Farrukhzad, of Bassry, of Mernissi, and me as well, all emoting together. When time, place, and language all become a sieve through which the speaker is made and identified.

I am thinking again about the lack of geographic markers in the work of Bassry and Farrukhzad, especially in comparison to the scientific Mernissi, who has whole chapters dedicated to letters and data she collected in a summer in the 1970s. The speakers in both poems are without territory or specific land markers. This is even noted in a biographical sketch on Farrukhzad. Michael Hillmann points to this as well, writing, "... it is interesting that the poems as a whole lack a specifically represented Islamic environment or palpably Iranian settings..." (Middle Eastern Women Speak Anthology, page 297).

I believe that the speaker's desire is one that makes her an exile, of place and time. To return to Malek's term, this desire deterritorializes the speaker, making their experience one that could occur anywhere at anytime. Which is to say, that speaker and her Beloved occupy a world created by the speaker's desire, and each time and every time the speaker desires, the world is created anew. Certainly this must mean that all three women's work can exist simultaneously. This is to say that Bassry's desire occurs at the same time as Farrukhzad's desire at the same time as Mernissi's gender discourse.

I am especially thinking here about the issue of encountering this work in translation.

Bassry writes in classical Arabic and French. Mernissi wrote in French. Farrukhzad wrote in Persian and later in her life attempted writing in other languages such as English and Italian. I wondered what shadowed and double meanings could exist, perhaps, if these poems were translated back to their original languages. For me, this work became more complex to me because of voice, since there were voices, plural instead. This kind of poly-vocular work might offer a new way of working through the politics of artists who struggle to define themselves singularly. I come to this conclusion especially after not wanting to come to singular conclusions about the politics of Moroccan women artists.

As far as politics go, I'd like to lean on Mernissi's own idea of politics from the chapter *Modern Situation: Moroccan Data*. She writes, "By political, I do not mean democratic infrastructure... I have in mind rather the relations we establish with the people closest to us, with whom we share the greatest interests and weave the most intense and most intimate human relation possible... (Mernissi 96)" I believe all voices are possible to exist in the same transformative space that Pieprzak, Malek, and Phillip call on. Having a genealogy of women wanting makes the speaker stronger. Which means that women speaking and dreaming and desiring with one another is an intimate act, and therefore political.

Bassry and [Farrukhzad]—  
featuring the following poems:

The Winter Wasn't Late  
With the Scent of the Rain  
On the Edges of Autumn  
With Urgency  
Let's Believe in the Beginning of Autumn

## The Winter Wasn't Late

Nature has taken its toll on my body  
Relentlessly, dauntlessly,  
It is I who slipped away from my autumn  
And slept on green grass.  
For one passionate moment  
I believed that winter was late in coming.

## The [            ] Wasn't Late

[            ] has taken its toll on my body  
Relentlessly, [            ]  
It is I who slipped away from [            ]  
And slept on [            ]  
For one [            ]  
I believed that [            ] was late in [            ]

## The Border Wasn't Late

The imaginary line between silent and needful has taken its toll on my body  
Relentlessly, birthed and daughtered by it,  
It is I who slipped away from its vine and dark clinging  
And slept on— dreamt and craved the sun until my being yellowed in every light.  
For one bewildering moment  
I believed that border was late in its claiming.

### With the Scent of the Rain

Were I to leave this body  
Just remove it...  
Decomposing matter does not concern me.  
I give you my heart;  
The dead do not love.  
I give you my eyes;  
The dead do not cry.  
I give you my womb;  
The dead do not procreate...  
Just leave my lungs:  
For I love the scent of the earth  
When the first showers arrive.

### With the Scent of the [       ]

Were I to leave this [       ]  
Just remove [       ]...  
[       ] [       ] does not [       ] me  
I give you my [       ];  
The dead do not [       ].  
I give you my [       ];  
The dead do not [       ].  
I give you my [       ]'  
The dead do not [       ]...  
Just leave my [       ].  
For I love the scent of the [       ]  
When the first showers [       ].

### With the Scent of the Field

Were to leave this field  
Just remove whatever makes the shape of doubt,  
Whatever makes an enclosure of love, O love, giving does not fade me  
I give you my wandering;  
The dead do not repute how soil is a threshold for the soul;  
I give you my refuge;  
The dead do not gleam crystal, but still cling dew and silent in the dark earth.  
I give you my eyes...  
Just leave my breathing, memory of sparrow, bearing yellow in flight.  
For I love the scent of an endless garden  
When the first showers flower red and murmur, like me.

## On the Edges of Autumn

My body is like algae  
Exhausted by the night's diving.  
Gather me up in your blueness  
That I might float on the surface of your sleep –  
A purple dream.  
Perhaps,  
Perhaps a plant shall bloom  
On the edges of autumn.

## On the Edges of [     ]

My body is like [     ]  
Exhausted by the [     ] [     ].  
[     ] me up in your [     ]  
That I might [     ] on the surface of your [     ]–  
A [     ] [     ].  
Perhaps,  
Perhaps a [     ] shall [     ]  
On the edges of [     ].

## On the Edges of Night

My body is like color clinging to night's refuge  
Exhausted by the fading, how the dark softens the summoning of heaven's light.  
Imagine me up in your idea of God, or at least the place you feel open as the sea.  
That I might complete myself, make myself whole on the surface of your shelter—  
A mirage, full of singing.  
Perhaps,  
Perhaps a sound of yellow and green, near divine, shall remain  
On the edges of night.

With Urgency

No one has desired me  
— with urgency— as death has  
I have lived many lives in my metaphors.  
That is how I extended life  
And forged a small eternity for myself

With Urgency

No one has [ ] me  
—with urgency— as [ ] has  
I have [ ] many in my [ ]  
That is how I [ ] [ ]  
And [ ] a [ ] eternity for myself

With Urgency

No one has divined me  
—with urgency— as a soul has  
I have sought many, some soiled and aromatic, some being and body and shape of dream—  
in my blood  
That is how I stretch open, how I color beating star  
And pour eager a heaven's worth of eternity for myself

## Let's Believe in the Beginning of Autumn

In the forties,  
That is, in middle age,  
No roses in the garden charm us.  
In the forties,  
Birds abandon their nests,  
And the numbers grow rusty in our memory.  
In the forties,  
The moon shifts its shadow's gaze away from the window,  
So that your dying flame is not reflected in its eyes.  
Even the sun  
Has not read your horoscope as it used to every morning –  
The sun does not have the mirror's courage  
To reveal to you the beginning of autumn.

## Let's Believe in the Beginning of [            ]

In the [            ],  
That is, [            ],  
No [    ] in the [            ] [    ] us.  
In the [            ],  
[            ] abandon their [            ]  
And the [            ] grow [            ] in our memory.  
In the [            ],  
The [            ] shifts its shadow's [            ] away from the [            ],  
So that your dying [    ] is not [    ] in its eyes.  
Even the [    ]  
Has not read your [            ] as it used to every morning –  
The sun does not have the [            ]'s courage  
To reveal to you the beginning of [            ].

## Let's Believe in the Beginning of Pleasure

In the pleasure,  
That is, in solitude,  
No sin in the beating blood embraces us.  
In the pleasure,  
Smoke abandons its cold and heavy,  
and O life, mine grows needful and wanting in our memory.  
In the pleasure,  
The heart shifts its shadow's origin say from the golden  
So that your dying color os not fevered in any eye

Even the grave  
Has not read your craving as it is dreamt every morning  
The sun does not have the dark's courage  
to reveal to you the beginning of pleasure.

Bassry and [Mernissi]  
featuring the following poems:

The Winter Wasn't Late  
With the Scent of the Rain  
On the Edges of Autumn  
With Urgency  
Let's Believe in the Beginning of Autumn

## The Winter Wasn't Late

Nature has taken its toll on my body  
Relentlessly, dauntlessly,  
It is I who slipped away from my autumn  
And slept on green grass.  
For one passionate moment  
I believed that winter was late in coming.

## The [ ] Wasn't Late

[ ] has taken its toll on my body  
Relentlessly, [ ]  
It is I who slipped away from [ ]  
And slept on [ ]  
For one [ ]  
I believed that [ ] was late in [ ]

## The Reasoning Wasn't Late

Ritual has taken its toll on my body.  
Relentlessly made ornamental by what first made me.  
It is I who, bejeweled in all my desiring, moved away from praise and pure  
as the only instrument to incite the good of the world  
And slept, as if this all had the taste of instinct.  
For one fleeting moment,  
I believed that duty was late in its reasoning.

With the Scent of the Rain

Were I to leave this body  
Just remove it...  
Decomposing matter does not concern me.  
I give you my heart;  
The dead do not love.  
I give you my eyes;  
The dead do not cry.  
I give you my womb;  
The dead do not procreate...  
Just leave my lungs:  
For I love the scent of the earth  
When the first showers arrive.

With the Scent of the [       ]

Were I to leave this [       ]  
Just remove [       ]...  
[       ] [       ] does not [       ] me  
I give you my [       ];  
The dead do not [       ].  
I give you my [       ];  
The dead do not [       ].  
I give you my [       ]'  
The dead do not [       ]...  
Just leave my [       ].  
For I love the scent of the [       ]  
When the first showers [       ].

With the Scent of the

Were I to leave this reality  
Just remove the question,  
Whatever is the difference between intimate and imitation, it does not fulfill me.  
I give you my nature;  
The dead do not care for that which is adorned with love.  
I give you my reversal;  
The dead do not care for that which is inalienable.  
I give you my presence.  
The dead do not pardon and yield.  
Just leave my conflict.  
For I love the scent of a trespass territory,

When the first showers grow and invade.

## On the Edges of Autumn

My body is like algae  
Exhausted by the night's diving.  
Gather me up in your blueness  
That I might float on the surface of your sleep –  
A purple dream.  
Perhaps,  
Perhaps a plant shall bloom  
On the edges of autumn.

## On the Edges of [     ]

My body is like [     ]  
Exhausted by the [     ] [     ].  
[     ] me up in your [     ]  
That I might [     ] on the surface of your [     ]–  
A [     ] [     ].  
Perhaps,  
Perhaps a [     ] shall [     ]  
On the edges of [     ].

## On the Edges of a Mistake

My body is like a depository, or at least its anatomic realization  
Exhausted by all my synonyms: anomaly, delight, intimate device  
O Believer, believe me, up in your heaven  
I might be an impulsive science but on the surface, you are the same.  
An outline like me, a transgression like me.  
Perhaps,  
Perhaps the mistake of it all shall arise  
On the edges of your domain.

## With Urgency

No one has desired me  
— with urgency— as death has  
I have lived many lives in my metaphors.  
That is how I extended life  
And forged a small eternity for myself

With Urgency

No one has [     ] me  
—with urgency— as [     ] has  
I have [     ] many in my [     ]  
That is how I [     ] [     ]  
And [     ] a [     ] eternity for myself

With Urgency

No one has epitomized me  
— with urgency— as the flesh has.  
I have tried my way out of words, so many, all immobile, atrophic symbol,  
—and in my own creation, my vision is imprecise  
That is how I configure my body and being into my own design  
And promise an altering eternity for myself.

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