The Role of Moroccan Street Art in Decolonial Discourse and Binary Deconstruction

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The Role of Moroccan Street Art in Decolonial Discourse and Binary Deconstruction

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Abstract

As a country historically subjected to French colonialism and currently the site of a burgeoning street art scene, Morocco is a locus for street art that contributes to the decolonial project and deconstruction of remaining colonial structures left by the French. Drawing from Edward Said’s concept of orientalism, the idea of gaze, and bell hooks’s counter concept of oppositional gaze, this paper seeks to understand how Moroccan street artists use their art to challenge the binary opposition between tradition and modernity constructed during the French Protectorate. I will discuss the theme of temporality, because of street art’s ephemeral nature and the concept of time and history that is addressed throughout several artists’ work, specifically in the dialogue between tradition and modernity. I will continue on to discuss how artists represent Moroccan culture through their art, challenging western depictions of Morocco, and creating a reputation of street art in Morocco. Exploring connections between artists through the Jidar Street Art Festival and social media, this work will seek to understand the ways in which personal connections, collaborations between artists, and a deeper connection to the spaces that street art occupies all uplift Moroccan culture, change orientalist perspectives, and spark conversations that contribute to decolonization.
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Finally, I want to thank all of the friends I have made during my time in Morocco, both in and out of the SIT program. I am so thankful for the opportunity to learn from you and love you. I hope that we will be able to see each other again and I look forward to hearing about all of your future adventures.
Introduction

It is impossible to spend more than a few hours in Rabat without noticing the incredible murals that populate the city. As an artist studying social justice, my immediate reaction was to wonder if any of the art was politically motivated. The more time I traveled around Morocco and the more that I learned about human rights here, the more curious I got about Moroccan street art being used as means of political protest as I had seen it being used in the U.S. However, the more that I learned about the red lines here the more I understood how the street art scene in Morocco operates differently from those in other countries, and decided to focus instead on Moroccan street art’s relationship to colonialism.

The primary question that my research seeks to answer is *To what extent does Moroccan street art subvert colonial infrastructure through a deconstruction of the orientalist binaries of tradition and modernity?* However, in order to fully answer this question, I must also reflect on the following questions:

- How does the identity of Morocco as a former French protectorate contextualize the public space and influence the meaning of street art occupying public spaces in Morocco?
- How do representations of Morocco differ between Moroccan and international artists? How do international artists portray Morocco in different ways and what influence does colonial gaze have on this?
- What role does Jidar and social media play in creating a platform for Moroccan artists and connecting artists from different countries?

I will begin this paper by describing the necessary background information for understanding Rabat as a city that was formerly controlled by the French and the influences that has left on the city, in addition to other ways that the French influenced art in Morocco. I will
then provide background information on the Moroccan government’s relationship to street art, beginning with the Arab Spring and rise in street art as a political tool in other countries. My contextualization of the government’s relationship to street art will continue with a discussion of the Jidar Street Art Festival and the festival’s positive and negative impacts on Rabat. After this I will establish my theoretical framework, focusing on Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism, in addition to other postcolonial scholars’ reflections on the pursuit of decolonization. I will then outline my methodology, including my research design, assumptions, limitations, and positionality. After establishing the basis for my research, I will present my findings, beginning with orientalist street art produced by the French artist “Invader,” and moving into the work of Moroccan street artists who seek to address the relationship between modernity and tradition in their work. I will discuss the relationship between modernity and tradition that Lyautey constructed as a part of the French colonial project and how Moroccan street artists are deconstructing the binaries that the French manufactured. I will argue that Jidar and social media both create platforms for Moroccan artists to express their identities and form connections with international artists, contributing to the dismantling of colonial binaries.

Themes

My research will center around three main themes that all initially present conflict and binary opposition which I will discuss and deconstruct throughout my research.

I. Temporality - Inherent to art that is accessible by the public and existing in spaces controlled by the government is the aspect of temporality. While most of the street art in my research is authorized by the government, this aspect of temporality and street art is more secondary in my research, but still important to acknowledge while discussing the
nature of street art. My main discussion of temporality will revolve around history and the way that both history and time are portrayed throughout artists’ work. Additionally, both street art’s relationship to time has been significantly changed by social media, allowing it a much longer lifespan than it might have had in the past. I will discuss the role that temporality and social media play in street art more extensively later on in my research.

II. Modernity - The second opposition in my research is modernity vs tradition. In my literature review I will address how modernity and tradition were constructed as oppositional binaries during the French Protectorate. I will deconstruct this binary throughout my research, with the help of Edward Said and the artists I look at in my study.

III. The third theme that I will discuss in my research is coloniality because of Morocco’s historical relationship with colonialism, the lasting impacts of this, and the assemblages and complexities resulting from this relationship. I will apply this theme specifically to the role that both Moroccan and international artists play in influencing public space and the potential discourse that can come from sharing and creating art together.
Literature Review

Relevant Background of French Colonialism in Morocco

While I interviewed artists from different parts of Morocco, my background research will focus on Rabat as a site for understanding the lasting effects of French colonialism and the current site of large scale street art through Jidar. Because Rabat is the site for so much of the street art in Morocco and will be the site for my research, it is important to first understand the capital’s history before understanding how current attempts to change Rabat through street art are functioning.

In 1905 the French invaded Morocco, establishing a protectorate (Brooms). During this time, “France claimed it had to intervene to save Moroccans from their supposed barbarism and to ensure the safety of its nationals” (Bennis), coming to “explore the ‘new,’ but also the ‘old;’ the ‘primitive,’ the ‘simple’ and the ‘natural’” (Sourgo). The French used these Orientalist perceptions to justify their colonization of Morocco, subjugating Moroccans and creating French infrastructure. Louis Herbert-Gonzalve Lyautey, the first French Protectorate Resident General affected the country significantly during this time, and specifically Rabat by redesigning the landscape to create a “dual city,” with part focusing on maintaining Moroccan heritage and the other reconstructing French infrastructure. He accomplished this vision by making efforts to preserve the architecture of the medina and preventing any types of modern technology from changing the medina’s image, such as removing a telegraph wire that changed the “traditional architecture” (Wright) of the medina’s entrance. While insulating the image of the medina, Lyautey built a new train station, bank, and other governmental buildings in a modern style with an attempt to incorporate North African architecture in a way that European tourists would see the modernity as French but perceive the architecture as Moroccan. In doing so, he aligned the
French influence on Rabat with modernity and the Moroccan culture with traditionalism. Thus, Lyautey attempted to preserve a one dimensional image of Moroccans seen through a western lens - creating a Moroccan subject for the viewing of European tourists. The invasion of the French and segregation of French and Moroccan people inherently created a power imbalance and construction of at least two publics - one with the power of gaze and one forced to be gazed upon.

Beyond Lyautey’s dual city project, education was a large part of the French colonial project that is relevant to understanding the colonial influences on the public sphere and art in Morocco. During the French Protectorate the French created vocational schools to restructure and reinforce the traditional craft economy, creating separate French and Moroccan economies. In order to get people to enroll in their vocational schools, the French hosted workshops for unschooled children, teaching them how to draw and paint with the assumption that they would later enroll in the vocational schools. This constituted the basis for colonial pedagogical practices during French occupation, setting up a system that loosely claimed to benefit Moroccans while instilling French artistic practices in machinery developed to “promote modernization and incremental development without social disruption” (Kozakowski). This caused more people to get involved with the arts, albeit through French forms.

**Brief History of Art Education in Morocco**

Despite French efforts to assimilate Moroccans through education, actions were taken after Morocco gained independence to counteract these efforts. One site of decolonial reconstruction is the Casablanca Art School (CAS), originally established in 1919 by the French with an Ecole des Beaux-Arts model, it was reinvented in 1962 by Ferid Balkhia who reworked the curriculum to include more local artisanal skills in a modern context. Balkhia did this by
hiring professors whose practices included traditional art. Mohamed Mehli, a renowned Moroccan street artist became a visual arts professor at the school, in addition to anthropologists, historians, and artists that taught courses on Arab, Amazirgh, and Islamic heritage. Balkhia’s motto was “tradition is the future,” reflecting the work he put into restructuring the CAS and French colonial constructions of tradition in opposition to modernity.

The movement at the Casablanca Art School is relevant to the discussion of modern day street art because Balkhia and the artists he hired inspired a shift away from the colonial pedagogical practices of the French by integrating Moroccan art and making art more accessible through the creation of a public, outdoor exhibition. In 1969, Balkhia and other CAS professors hosted an outdoor exhibition called *Présence Plastique* (pictured above) (Trigg), which was revolutionary for its time as it was the first exhibition held outdoors, seeking to make art more accessible to the public as “The idea was to make art an everyday part of Moroccan life” (Montazami). With art museums being a major mode through which colonialism is exercised in art, *Présence Plastique* created an avenue sidestepping inaccessible, elitist museum practices by creating a gallery that is not only physically accessible to all Moroccan citizens, but also culturally accessible by representing Moroccan artists and more local artistic practices.
The Moroccan Government’s Relationship to Street Art

Additional relevant context to the discussion of public space and street art in Rabat is the Moroccan government’s response to the political unrest caused by the Arab Spring. Street art became an important tool for expressing and inspiring political unrest in Egypt, Syria, and Libya. After seeing the role that street art played in mobilizing the revolutions in other countries and noticing an increase in the creation of political street art in Morocco during the February 20th movement (Aluzri), King Mohammed VI created more legal avenues for creative expression in Morocco. The largest scale example of this effort is the creation of the Jidar Street Art Festival. Created in 2015, the festival invites nine artists from around the world to participate in a ten day festival decorating walls in Rabat with murals and a collective wall. The 2023 Jidar Festival featured artists from Argentina, Mexico, Morocco, the Netherlands, and Spain. The Jidar website states that the objective of the festival is “to make Rabat a field of expression for artists from around the world but also the laboratory of specifically Moroccan urban art,” (Jidar).

While different in many ways from the changes made to Rabat by Lyautey, the government’s increased efforts to promote public art echo Lyautey’s plans for a “dual city,” in that both claim to pay tribute to Moroccan culture while some argue that it disproportionally seeks to gain international recognition. PhD candidate Farouk El Maarouf presents a criticism of the festival, stating “The JSAF can legitimately be criticized for its underlying support of Rabat’s gentrification, whereby ordinary dwellers of the Moroccan capital cannot afford to pay escalating rent prices or enjoy adequate living standards in a city whose current cultural and artistic lifestyle is more exclusive than inclusive when it comes to lower-class citizens” (El Maarouf 5). Farouk’s point illustrates the hypocrisy in the Moroccan government’s justification for Jidar as a way to make art accessible to everyone when the festival increases tourism, raising the price of living,
making Rabat less accessible to its citizens. This statement is supported by King Mohammed VI’s “city of lights” program, which is working to “transform Rabat into a global capital, rivaling cities around the world” (Wang 2018) through new projects that arguably contribute to the gentrification of Rabat. Furthermore, the King’s aspiration to obtain a title held by Paris is suggestive of a colonial legacy left behind by Lyautey’s dual city project, idolizing French influence.

Despite the valid criticisms of Jidar and the festival’s real impact on Moroccans, the festival effectively creates a large, internationally recognized platform for Moroccan street artists to showcase their work to Morocco and the world in their own style. Regardless of the lasting colonial influences on the government’s goals for Rabat, the platform that Jidar creates for artists allows for collaboration and connection between Moroccan and international street artists, thus creating a space where artists can engage in decolonial discourse by collaborating and sharing art.

Theoretical Framework

Before I discuss decoloniality and the process of decolonization through art in a research setting, I want to first briefly discuss the use of decolonization in academic rhetoric through “Decolonizing Transgender,” a roundtable discussion between scholars and activists that references “Decolonization is Not Metaphor” by Eve Tuck and K. Wayne. Both of these sources articulate the necessity of returning to the original definition of decolonization, criticizing the use of decolonization as a metaphor or as a buzzword in academic discourse. The basis of the definition that they argue we must come back to is the return of sovereignty back to a group of formerly colonized people, of which can take many forms.
I do not seek to contribute to a rhetoric that simplifies and diminishes the ongoing process of decoloniality by bolstering the label of “postcolonial” to try and negate the reality of still present colonial hierarchies. As articulated by Tom Boellstorff, “decolonization involves not just replacing the figure of the colonizer with the figure of the indigenous but recognizing messy entanglements of colonizer and colonized in emergent assemblages of embodiment, culture, and politics” (Boellstorff). I agree with his rejection of decolonization being a simple replacement, and wish to highlight his emphasis on the complex multiplicities that emerge from the process of decolonization, especially involving culture and politics. My research explores the ways that Moroccan artists create assemblages in the wake of colonialism, participating in a dialogue between Moroccan culture, Amazigh culture, and the remnants of French colonialism. I speak about decoloniality in my research because it is important and relevant to the topic of street art in Morocco, however any inadvertent simplification of decoloniality is due to my research parameters, with the disclosure that my work only scratches the surface in capturing the complexity of creative practices used in a postcolonial context.

In order to contextualize the pervasiveness of French colonialism I will be employing Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Said defines the concept as the essentialist supposition of western superiority over the East. Said designates the West as Europe and North America and the East as Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East, a distinction that critics of his work have critiqued as essentializing the very groups he is advocating for (Moxon). While Said’s essentialization of many cultures does limit his work, I believe that his theories offer a framework, that when applied to specific international relations, can offer a helpful lens for understanding the ways in which the constructs of east and west, and the othering they cause, contribute to colonialism at large and the repercussive harm that they inflict on
individuals. I evoke Said’s theories primarily to contextualize a few of the interactions I discuss between international artists and Morocco. I turn to Ijeoma Nnodim Opara, a doctor discussing colonization of the decolonization movement within the healthcare field, to frame my approach to discussing decolonization. She states “It is a colonial construct that everything has to be rigidly defined and have only one definition. The fluidity of decoloniality allows for a multi-faceted approach to decolonization so that various aspects of the colonial mountain could be attacked simultaneously and synchronously, increasing the likelihood of it being successfully leveled” (Opara). This statement rejecting rigidity and highlighting fluidity in the pursuit of decolonization is what my paper and perspective on art revolve around. Art does not have the single handed power to dismantle deeply entangled histories of colonialism, it is however a mode through which artists can confront colonialism. Street art especially, holds a unique power to spark public discourse, giving it a critical role in the deconstruction of colonialism.

One more important concept, often present in colonial relationships, is the ability to gaze, defined through postcolonial theory as the “unequally constituted right to scrutiny, to represent what is gazed at, and to intervene and alter the subject of the gaze” (Ram 1). Gaze can be thought about in relation to power, as who has the authority to gaze and who is gazed upon. The power of gaze also contributes to the construction of the other because it defines one subject as having the ability and authority to perform an action onto another second subject that does not possess that power. Manthia Diawara articulates the power that the spectator holds: “Every narration places the spectator in a position of agency; and race, class, and sexual relations influence the way in which this subjecthood is filled by the spectator” (Baker). While gaze implies a power dynamic between a subject and a spectator, bell hooks coined the term “oppositional gaze” (hooks) as a form of resistance. She speaks about oppositional gaze as the resistance to the repression of a
black person’s ability to look - reclaiming the agency and power that comes with being a spectator. I will be referencing both gaze and oppositional gaze in my discussion of street art, taking into account both the identity of the artist and the subject matter of their work to understand the power relations of gaze in the context of street art in Morocco.

Methodology

Research Design

I started off my research by meeting with two people on their PhDs on different aspects of street art in Morocco, named Mariem Himmi and Farouk El Maarouf. I also spoke with Amine Hamma, the project manager at the Hiba Foundation in Rabat. All three of these people are well informed about the history of the street art movement in Rabat and helped me shape my research questions going into interviews with artists. After speaking with Mariem, Farouk, and Amine, I gathered contact information from the artists that they know. I contacted twelve street and graffiti artists via Instagram Direct Message, as that is the main platform they use. I gave the artists the option to meet in person or call for those located in Rabat and I offered the options of calling or answering questions over email to the artists located outside of Rabat. Of the twelve artists I contacted, seven of them responded, agreeing to my request, and three of them answered my questions. Most of them opted to answer questions over Instagram DM or email because of their schedules and one artist opted for an in person interview. In addition to contacting artists, I also observed street art in the Rabat medina created by the street artist “Invader” and utilized an app developed for Jidar that locates and documents murals completed for the Jidar Street Art Festival around the city of Rabat.
Assumptions

My initial assumptions when I was beginning my research was that there would be an abundance of political street art because of the sheer amount of street art that exists in Rabat due to Jidar and the culture of creativity resulting from it. My limited interactions with street art have been with murals in the Mission District of San Francisco, seeing photos of Banksy’s work, and some more commercial street art in Los Angeles. Several of the Mission District murals and Banksy’s work all contained political messaging, causing me to view street art as inherently political. Before starting my research I had not thoroughly considered the ways in which the limits to freedom of speech impacted the parameters of street art in Morocco, assuming that there would be comparable amounts of political street art here.

Limitations

My biggest limitation was the limited time frame for my research. I anticipated my lack of Arabic or French skills to be more of a barrier but because all of the artists I contacted spoke English, language was not a barrier for me. However, because my conversations and electronic correspondence was only with artists who could speak English my research neglected non-English speaking street artists. Additionally, using Instagram as my main means of contacting artists limited my research to street artists with a presence on social media. This limited my interviews to artists who have relatively large followings and the access to resources and connections to create large public works. While I was still able to observe smaller scale graffiti, all of my analysis is based on my own background knowledge and assumptions rather than the artist's own explanations, allowing for the possibility of misinterpretation. I tried to offset this limitation by speaking with two PhD students who are also studying street art in Morocco.
through different lenses to see if I could gain more perspective from people who knew more about Moroccan street art than I ever would be able to learn in my month of research.

Positionality

While critiquing colonial influence, gaze, and the impacts of orientalism on Morocco, it is impossible not to acknowledge the irony of my identity as a white American student researching street art as a way to subvert colonial powers. While I was writing my paper, I was conscious of my own bias and positionality and attempted to offset this by letting the artists’ work and quotes speak for themselves. Regardless of these efforts and the postcolonial theorists I discuss, the nature of study abroad, the parameters of this research, and my own positionality inherently impact my research, and the ability for me to connect with the art I explore in the process. With this in mind, I have used this research period as an opportunity to understand how my relationship to power as a white foreigner influences the spaces I occupy, the conversations I have, and the research I conduct. I hope that this paper reflects the understanding that I have gained with the acknowledgement of the limitations caused by my positionality.

Findings and Analysis

Orientalist Constructions of Street Art in Morocco

One of my first encounters with street art in Rabat was a blue ghost coming out of a genie lamp on one of the walls of the medina. Upon further research I found that this was not the only piece of its kind, created by an artist who goes by the name “Invader.” A 54 year old French street artist with over 700 thousand followers on
Instagram, Invader uses the main character from the 1978 video game Space Invader with additions based on the city he is creating in. Since 1996, Invader has created work in 83 cities, describing each visit to a new city as an “invasion.” In an interview he recounted his time in Morocco, saying “One month after my quick invasion of Marrakech, I went back to Morocco to invade its capital city, Rabat!“ (Christie’s Daily 2016) Calling his unauthorized pieces a “quick invasion” in a country that was formerly colonized by his country demonstrates a complete lack of awareness of the relationship between his positionality and the spaces he is possessing through his work. Invader’s work can be further problematized with the context of Lyautey’s dual city project to segregate Moroccans in the medina, now the site of Invader’s “invasion.” In another interview he declared that “It is very exciting to work in the streets because you kind of own the city!” (The Talks). Again, Invader reveals an air of entitlement in the sense that he believes he can achieve ownership over a city, echoing the perspective of the French colonists that came to Morocco in the 1900s.

Beyond his flippant attitude towards his possession of public space, the symbols that Invader chose to add to his signature Invader: the genie lamp, flying carpet, and belly dancer are all blatant representations of orientalism. These symbols evoke ideations of magic, exoticism, and are evocative of Disney’s Aladdin, a film that portrayed many orientalist stereotypes including the same ones used by Invader, all contributing to an overall production of Morocco as strange, mystic, and in need of civilizing. They demonstrate that Invader’s work operates off of constructs of his colonial gaze, not any real knowledge of Morocco.

The lack of cultural accuracy and Invader’s own description of his time in Rabat as an “invasion” demonstrate that his work in the Rabat medina was not created for Moroccans - it was created for himself and the tourists that come to Rabat, seeking to see the exotic stereotypes they
were promised in western representations of Morocco. While Invader’s work combines the relatively modern aesthetics of a video game with orientalist constructions of Moroccan culture, rather than demonstrate a relationship between modernity and tradition, Invader perpetuates the colonial gaze. Invader’s work is a minor example of the colonial remnants of French occupation and a lasting orientalist view of Morocco.

During my conversation with a Moroccan graffiti artist called Basec Ayoub on the relationship between international street artists and Moroccan street artists he told me that “they [international street artists] don’t expect to see good or great artists or writers.” When I questioned him on this further he told me that “they see it [Morocco] as a third world country.” I found this odd, especially given that Rabat hosts an internationally renowned street art festival, not to mention several internationally recognized street artists.

In order to reconcile these reported perceptions of Moroccan street art and Invaders’ entitlement with Morocco’s reputation for incredible street art, I turn to Said’s theory of Orientalism and the lasting effects of colonialism from the French Protectorate. The latter obviously being a product of the former, Said stated in Orientalism “When one uses categories like Orient and Western as both the starting and ending points of analysis, research, public policy… the result is usually to polarize the distinction - the Oriental becomes more Oriental and the Westerner more western - and limits the human encounter between different cultures, traditions, and societies” (Said 46). This idea that orientalism limits human connection across cultures is a product of a group of people being constructed as the “other” by another group. When the differences between groups of people are highlighted, distorted, and weaponized it limits interactions between individuals within the different groups, thus furthering the binary constructions of the Orient and the Westerner. The individual perceptions of Moroccan street art
by international artists are products of this colonial framework, ideologically constructed by orientalism and put into action by the French with their physical segregation of Moroccan and French people. This ideological and physical segregation of everything French and Moroccan in Rabat also resulted in the alignment of modernity with French infrastructure and tradition with Moroccan culture, as discussed in my literature review.

With street art originating from the west as a modern art form, the lack of international expectations for Moroccan street art could be attributed to the residual orientalist associations of modernity with the west, as partially demonstrated by the culturally inaccurate symbols employed by Invader.

Regardless of any lasting associations of modernity with France, street art as a modern art form means that it has only ever existed in Morocco after Moroccan independence, giving Moroccan street art its own identity. Obviously, the remains of French colonial machinery still exist, but as a novel art form, street art is not tasked with creating a Moroccan street art identity separate from a French predecessor.

Deconstructing the Binary Constructions of Modernity and Tradition in Morocco

Inaccurate perceptions of Morocco and its street art scene in combination with the illusory dichotomy between tradition and modernity built during the French Protectorate are what I seek to deconstruct through my interviews with artists and interpretations of Moroccan street art.

One artist whose work incorporates modernity and tradition is Abid Wane in his “Berbism 2.0” series for the 2017 Sbagha Bagha street art festival in Casablanca (Amin). The futuristic aesthetics of the glitch technique and neon colors create a hyper modern image. The
blurred colors on the left side of the figure's face replicate movement, implying passage of time; movement into the future (Lobo). These hypermodern visuals paired with a traditional Amazigh tattoo and accessories of the blue figure establish a relationship between the modern and the traditional, painting the two as overlapping. The tattoo pictured on the chin of the blue figure is a part of Amazigh culture that “told the stories of tribes, tied women to their land, and conveyed familial ties” (McCabe), however French occupation and the rise of Islam stigmatized these tattoos, causing fewer Amazigh women to get them. Wane’s incorporation of a tradition defamed by colonialism demonstrates a reclamation of Amazigh culture and rejection of colonial influence.

Contrasting Lyautey’s dual city project that designated modernity as French and tradition as Moroccan, Abid Wane is rejecting this orientalist view that paints the Moroccan subject as one dimensional and old. He also reclaims the word “berberism,” a Roman label for the indigenous people of Morocco, meaning barbaric (Sahara Desert Tour). Rather than calling his series “Amazigh” or some variation of the Tuareg term meaning “free people,” he employs the derogatory label forced upon the Amazigh by the colonizers (adding the 2.0). Labeling the series as barbaric while portraying a beautiful woman commanding grace and power in a large scale, public piece of art contrasts and challenges the original meaning of the term. The subject’s gaze, unwavering and somewhat bored, almost challenging the viewer to look at her, is evocative of the oppositional gaze. While the subject in the mural will always be on display, she returns the
viewer’s gaze - an unchanging spectator who commands power through her size, vibrancy, and attention grabbing stare. She takes up public space, catching and holding the eye of passersby, many of whom may be tourists with no knowledge of the fact that they walk on Amazigh land. In this way, the subject reclaims the space, fusing tradition with modernity, the past with the present and future. Given the context of the title and the historical oppression of Amazigh people, using the term “berbism” with the theme of time, Wane acknowledges the colonial rhetoric forced on the Amazigh people and counters it with a creative celebration of Amazigh culture and futuristic touch to demonstrate a relationship between tradition and the future.

Another artist that addresses tradition and modernity, and the first artist that I interviewed is Soufiane Zorgane (@zorg_arts on Instagram), a Moroccan street artist based in Rabat. Zorgane has been creating street art since 2009 and uses aspects of Moroccan culture, especially Arabic calligraphy, to incorporate his identity in his work. His views on tradition and modernity run in the same vein as the relationship that Abid Wane depicted in his “Berbism 2.0” series. When asked about this relationship he told me,

“The blend of traditional and modern elements in my artwork represents a harmonious coexistence of the past and the present. It acknowledges the significance of cultural heritage while embracing the creative possibilities offered by contemporary influences. This approach allows me to create art that is both rooted in tradition and relevant to the modern world, fostering a sense of continuity and preserving the essence of my culture in a contemporary context.”

Zorgane’s emphasis on the coexistence between the past and present, fostering continuity, and preserving culture are superficially similar to Lyautey’s claims to preserve Moroccan culture. However, Zorgane’s ideas are entirely different from French colonialism because rather than seeing the past and present as binaries in opposition to each other, he seeks to engage them in the
same conversation. Addressing tradition specifically, Zorgane said that “it's important to recognize that traditions and cultures are not stagnant. They evolve and adapt over time to meet the needs and preferences of each generation” (Zorg). Beyond blending modernity and tradition, Zorgane’s outlook on tradition as constantly changing reflects the same insistence on the necessity of fluidity in the decolonization movement that I mention in my theoretical framework. Zorgane’s rejection of rigidity in definitions of modernity and tradition is emblematic of the larger rejection of binary labels that is vital in the pursuit of decolonization. The restructuring of this relationship signifies a cultural shift away from hard and fast binaries as a whole, creating more space for conversations to be had on the topic of other categories.

In this mural by Zorgane, completed in 2021 in Casablanca, he depicts a woman with Amazigh tattoos, a butterfly resting on her hand and rings of Arabic calligraphy behind her long hair that appears to be moved by the wind. The nature of such a large-scale installation causes the viewer’s eye to travel up from the left corner of the mural, following the subject’s hair, to take in her grace, and the power that seems to emanate from the rings of Arabic calligraphy surrounding her head. The vastness and contrast in colors of the subject’s hair draw the viewer’s attention to it and her lack of hijab, a potential commentary on the subject’s detachment from Islam, which was brought to Morocco by the Arabs and rejected by many Amazigh (Chtatou). Additionally, the movement visible in the subject’s hair and the
temporal nature of butterflies make the mural feel dynamic and full of life, contrasting one dimensional depictions of Moroccan people by western artists. This mural offers several interpretations, but above all conveys a sense of serenity while illustrating Amazigh and Moroccan culture, demonstrating Zorgane’s dedication to dynamic tradition in his art.

An artist whose work broaches the political, Samir Toumi portrays Moroccan culture and historical events with a warm color palette and artistic eye. In this mural captioned the “The Green March in New Colors,” Samir Toumi paints the Green March of 1975, when Moroccans, organized by King Hassan II asserted their claim to the Western Sahara which was formerly controlled by the Spanish (Elbouchikhi). Depicting the Moroccan flag, the photos of King Hassan II that protesters carried, and the crowds that were involved in the Green March, Toumi omits the green that symbolized Islam during the march. While this mural could be interpreted in several different ways, the negation of Islamic representations and the caption acknowledging this omission with “new colors,” suggests some sort of commentary on Islam. Toumi plays with the past and present inversely to the way that Abid Wane does - rather than depicting the future while refusing to omit a label of the past, Toumi portrays the past with an omission of the Islamic components of the event. Toumi alludes to the discourse existing between the Amazigh and the Moroccan government, particularly regarding Islam. Islam was a function of assimilation during
the Arab invasion of the 7th century (Kesbi), causing some “Amazigh political activists to say that rejection of Islam is necessary to liberate our people and that Amazigh and Muslim identities are irreconcilable” (Kahina). While this is not necessarily Toumi’s stance on the issue, his critical approach to the portrayal of history creates space for conversations around the Amazigh’s relationship to Islam. When asked about the relationship between politics and his art, Toumi answered that “What is important to me is to shed light on topics that bother me and try to cure myself of their harm to me through art,” further telling me that he does “not differentiate between what is political and what is cultural, social, or anything else.” This lack of separation between the political and cultural in Toumi’s view demonstrates the two domains’ interrelatedness, particularly in the artists’ work. Through the “Green March in New Colors,” he seamlessly incorporates both Amazigh politics with Moroccan culture while portraying a social movement. While Samir did not elaborate on the topics that bother him (and due to the format of my interview I was unable to follow up), his work speaks for itself in its celebration of Moroccan culture and potentially emblematic critique of the restrictive role that Islam can play. While distinctively different from Abid Wane and Soufiane Zorgane’s work, Samir Toumi’s nuanced portrayal of the Green March also contributes to a dialogue between the past and the present, communicating a sense of dynamism, and opening up space for commentary on colonial influences on Morocco.

**Jidar and Social Media**

As the starting point of my research, Jidar plays a pivotal role in the street art scene in Morocco as a platform for Moroccan artists, space for interactions between international artists, and representations of Moroccan culture in the capital. One international artist whose work stood out to me was Vincent Abadie Hafez (known as Zepha), a French artist who participated in the
2015 Jidar festival, creating a mural that depicts Arabic calligraphy, French writing, and Tifinagh script (the script used to write Tamazight, the Amazigh language), representing the three languages spoken in Morocco (Elkhatibi). This mural demonstrates the dialogue that exists between the three languages in Morocco, the French representing a recent colonial relationship to the others, and the Arabic having a more distant historically colonial relationship to Tifinagh. The circles that he paints them in are reminiscent of the circles of a tree, suggesting themes of time and history. Additionally, Zepha’s intricate calligraphy forces the viewer to take a closer look in order to recognize the overlapping symbols as Arabic, French, and Tifanagh, drawing the viewer in, giving them time to reflect on the meaning of his work.

Zepha’s work draws an important contrast from Invader’s pieces, as two easily noticed artists in Rabat and the only two French artists in my study. Zepha’s art clearly demonstrates his style without sacrificing any thought or detail toward acknowledging the space that he is creating his art in. Whereas Invader prioritizes his style without any attention to the culture of the space his work is occupying. Another contributing factor to this distinction is the fact that Zepha’s work was authorized as a part of Jidar and Invader’s work was unauthorized, requiring the entitlement necessary to illegally put up culturally insensitive pieces. Applying the concept of gaze, Zepha’s bias is arguably lacking from the mural, portraying an interpretable depiction of the relationship between languages in Morocco. It is clearly created for the people living in
Morocco who can recognize the Arabic letters, Tifinagh script, and/or French letters, not for tourists with no ability to recognize these alphabets, contrasting Invader’s work that caters to the western tourist’s eye, seeking out oriental symbols to confirm their stereotypes of the east.

Mehdi Annassi (known as Machima), a Casablanca based (Jidar) multidisciplinary artist participated in his second Jidar in 2023 to revisit a mural he worked on in 2016 with Mexican street artist Stnk. In 2016 their collaborative mural depicted a young boy with a monkey. In 2023 he revisited the same concept to paint the boy grown up with a different companion, this time pigeons. Describing his experience creating the mural, he said that “I came here to see what has changed and I found pigeons that were not here before” (Jidar-Rabat Street Art Festival).

Machima’s dedication to the space that his art shares displays a real relationship between his art and the space that it exists in - he did not come and plaster his own visions for the space onto the wall without taking into account the surrounding area. He noted that he tries to “create conversations with people to know what’s happening in the area” (Jidar-Rabat Street Art Festival) before beginning his work to better inform his art and create something for the people of the space he is creating in. While not specific to Moroccan culture, Machima’s creative process is strikingly anti-colonial in that he seeks to understand the space, the people, and the surroundings of the area that he is creating before altering the space. Furthermore he incorporates aspects of the surroundings with the
pigeons he noticed to capture the essence of the area he is creating in. Lastly, the long term attention to detail in portraying the formerly little boy as grown up shows how Machima did not forget about his creation, instead nurturing the boy into a teenager by revisiting the mural and dedicating time into figuring out how he should represent the older version of the boy. All of these details function in opposition to colonial machinery that seeks to use and discard both people and cultures while employing modes of production that prioritize efficiency over accuracy.

Beyond the incredible work produced in the festival, Jidar also creates the space for conversations and connections between international artists. An international artist speaking in a video produced by the festival for 2023 Jidar said that “I think it’s good with this festival, you meet Moroccan artists from here, you learn about the culture here” (Jidar 2023). This sentiment in addition to the resulting collaborations of artists from around the world in Jidar demonstrate Jidar’s power to unite and establish relationships between international artists, leading to a deeper understanding of different cultures.

An interesting component of all of the work I observed throughout my research is the integral role of social media in allowing artists to share their work. While historically street art has been limited to the physical space that it exists in, street art now has the potential to possess any space and connect with a much wider audience through social media. When I asked Ayoub about his perspective on the role of social media in street art today he answered that “Social media impacted it very well,” allowing him to meet other artists both Moroccan and international, causing “Instagram [to] make the world smaller.” Social media has also helped promote Moroccan artists to the world, giving the world a view into the street art in Morocco that it might not see otherwise. This holds power as it cuts down on the space between artists of
different nationalities, allowing for more personal connections between different artists and cultures, chipping away at the binaries of orient and westerner constructed by the west.

**Conclusion**

French colonialism in Morocco has left a lasting imprint on Morocco in many ways, specifically through Lyautey’s dual city project in Rabat and French vocational schools. Moroccan street artists have reworked the remnants of these colonial assemblages through a restructuring of the Casablanca Art School and an increased emphasis on street art, beginning in 1969 with an public open air exhibition hosted by the Casablanca Art School and continued through Jidar and the growing street art movement in Morocco. Artists have addressed themes of tradition and modernity through representations of Moroccan culture in their art, with social media and Jidar both providing platforms for international dialogue and the promotion of Moroccan culture through art. Ultimately street art contributed to the formation of new connections that allow for open discourse on ways that colonialism has constructed current international relations, the roles that individuals play in these systems of power, and how art can be an effective mode through which to have these conversations.
Further Research and Future Implications

While I learned a lot from the artists I spoke with, given my limited time frame, I was unable to interview every artist that I hoped to speak with. If I were to pursue this research further I would begin with diversifying my sample population to speak with a wider variety of artists, particularly more female, and/or queer artists about how different facets of their identities impact their work. Because of my limited time and lack of experience in the field, I thought that looking at Moroccan street art as a whole would be the most valuable use of this opportunity, however, given more time I would seek to understand the intricacies of the community and the relationship between different artists of different backgrounds more. I think another way to expand on my research would be to interview artists participating in the 2024 Jidar, and do a deeper analysis of Jidar’s relationship to Moroccan culture and international perception of street art. Additionally, I would be interested in pursuing this research in different contexts, potentially through a comparison to street art in Los Angeles or different cities and countries.

With coloniality being such a large and oppressive force in so many countries, seeing the power that street art has had in Morocco as a mode of liberation and expression contributes to an anticolonial dialogue that presents art as a liberatory practice. I hope that my research contributes to this conversation, adds to the spotlight that deserves to be shown on Moroccan street artists, and inspires other creatives in their pursuit of decoloniality.
Appendix A: Interview Questions for Street Artists

1. How do you feel that gaining success has impacted your art and creative process? Do you feel that gaining success has given you more or less freedom in being able to create what you want?

2. What are your opinions on Jidar’s impact on street art/graffiti in Rabat and Morocco generally?

3. Have you noticed any changes in the graffiti scene in Morocco over the last few years?

4. Do you incorporate aspects of your identity (race/gender/nationality/class/etc) into your art? If so, how do you do this?

5. How has social media impacted your art and graffiti generally?

6. Would you say your art is political? If so, how do you navigate the red lines?

7. What do you want your audience to feel when viewing your art? Is there a message you hope to convey with your art?

8. How does the public aspect of your art affect its meaning and impact?

9. Is there anything else you would like to share about your art that I should include in my project?

10. If I quote your answers in my research, how would you like for me to refer to you? - I can use your Instagram handle, full name, or keep it anonymous.
Appendix B: Interview Questions for Graffiti Artists

1. What motivates you to create graffiti? Who do you create for?

2. Have you noticed any changes in the graffiti scene in Morocco over the last few years?

3. Do you incorporate aspects of your identity (race/gender/nationality/class/etc) into your art? If so, how do you do this?

4. How has social media impacted your art and graffiti generally?

5. Would you say your art is political? If so, how do you navigate the red lines?

6. What do you want your audience to feel when viewing your art? Is there a message you hope to convey with your art?

7. How does the public aspect of your art affect its meaning and impact?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your art that I should include in my project?

9. If I quote your answers in my research, how would you like for me to refer to you? - I can use your Instagram handle, full name, or keep it anonymous.
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Figure 5.
