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Jungle and Desert in Postcolonial Texts: Intertextual Ecosystems

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This article examines postcolonial representations of the jungle and the desert, focusing on two novels in particular: Étienne Goyémidé's Le silence de la forêt *(1984) and Tahar Djaout's* L'invention du désert *(1987). Postcolonial literary representations of these "extreme" landscapes are layered with allusions and almost always engage in an intertextual conversation with the colonial genres that influenced readers' conception of these spaces. The specificity of jungle and desert serves in contemporary postcolonial literature as a foil to homogenizing forces of both the past and the present, as seen in the stylistic techniques authors employ to depict these spaces. These stylistic techniques often work in two seemingly opposing directions: they "naturalize" landscapes that are often portrayed as inhuman and contrast them to the "unnatural" structures of colonial and postcolonial society, while at the same time embodying and claiming the distortion or disorientation inherent in those landscapes. These complex, multifaceted, geographically rooted descriptions, which incorporate and react to a variety of historical and cultural factors, take what I call an ecosystem approach, rather than continuing to rely on a false nature/culture division.*

Keywords: Africa, Maghreb, forest, jungle, desert, ecocriticism, landscape, identity, intertextuality, adventure, travelogue, Djaout, Goyémidé, Kipling, ecosystem

The jungle and the desert are richly layered imaginative terrains, in part due to their role in literature as unconquerable lands at the outer extremes of understanding. This is true in a variety of literary traditions, including the African tradition, though postcolonial literary representations of these "extreme" landscapes also frequently engage in an intertextual conversation with the colonial genres that deeply influenced readers' conception of these spaces. Such intertextuality is often viewed as an attempt to reinstate some of the historical, cultural, and geographical specificity of the region elided or erased in colonial texts by first adopting and then upending certain generic conventions. While this is certainly the case in the texts I examine here, at the same time, both the desert and the jungle serve symbolically as sites for confronting and examining very contemporary forces, such as global capitalism and the grab for

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resources, the neocolonial structures that maintain inequality in independent nations, post-independence nationalist movements, and the rise of extremism in places such as Algeria, to name a few. In other words, the specificity of jungle and desert serves in contemporary postcolonial literature as a foil to homogenizing forces of *both* the past and the present, as seen in the stylistic techniques authors employ to depict these spaces. These stylistic techniques often work in two seemingly opposing directions: they "naturalize" landscapes that are often portrayed as inhuman, and contrast them to the "unnatural" structures of colonial and postcolonial society, while at the same time embodying and claiming the distortion or disorientation inherent in those landscapes. These complex, multifaceted, geographically rooted descriptions, which incorporate and react to a variety of historical and cultural factors, take what I call an ecosystem approach, rather than continuing to rely on a false nature/culture division.

In this article, I examine Etienne Goyémidé's *Le silence de la forêt* (1984) and Tahar Djaout's *L'Invention du désert* (1987),[1] studying in particular how those texts engage intertextually with colonial genres and how they move beyond those tropes to assert a topographically informed and specific identity, and posit a kind of "social ecosystem" based on the interconnection of landscape, culture, and history. This article attempts to identify the ways in which these two particular novels both claim and push back against various collective identities, and relate both to the colonial West and to postcolonial national and global trends. In another study on postcolonial intertextuality, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad*,[2] Byron Caminero-Santangelo notes that while the standard model of reading intertextuality in postcolonial literature has centered on the binary of the "empire writing back," postcolonial African authors in fact engage in multidirectional, multifaceted intertextual conversations that speak to nation as well as empire.[3] The authors of the texts studied here move between modes of identifying, using the jungle and the desert to suggest new (or very old, but abandoned) "possibilities for flexible networks" and affinities yet also to assert a "hard sense of uniqueness" (Caminero-Santangelo, 2) based on these landscapes' particularity. I choose to focus on these two "extreme" landscapes precisely because of that particularity: they stand out as extreme and exceptional spaces in literature from Africa, Europe, and elsewhere, and so the authors' choice to portray them as integral to (or symbolic of) the contemporary social ecosystem constitutes a noteworthy shift in perspective.

1 Étienne Goyémidé, *Le silence de la forêt* (Paris: Hatier, 1984). Tahar Djaout, *L'invention du désert* (Paris: Seuil, 1987).

2 Byron Caminero-Santangelo, *African Fiction and Joseph Conrad* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005); quotes here are from the introduction.

3 The author notes that "for reasons both good and bad, the study of postcolonial hybridity remains tied to a typology which defines postcolonial cultures in terms of their oppositional relationship with the West" (1), and warns that simply defining postcoloniality by its "attempts to undermine assumptions of the West obscures an incredible spectrum of political concerns" (1–2), including collective identity formation trends associated with nationalism. Caminero-Santangelo points out that recent postcolonial theory "rejects the notion of autonomous, static collective identities associated with both colonial ideology and certain nativist forms of anti-colonial nationalism" (1) and suggests that the cultural and intertextual connections between Western and African (or, more generally, "postcolonial") texts and societies is "much more complex than has been implied by the focus on parodic revision" (2).

The Symbolic Lexicon of Desert and Jungle

The forest in African literature has long been a place of magic, lawlessness, mystery, and fear. From the Evil Forest in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to the bush in Amos Tutuola's *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts*, to the magical land in Asenath Odaga's children's story, *The Diamond Ring*,[4] forests represent otherworldliness, an antithesis of society and civilization. Likewise, as Robert Harrison points out in his book, *Forests: the Shadow of Civilization*, in Roman times, "the forests were in fact commonly referred to as the *locus neminis*, or the 'place of no one'," and the *res publica* and the *res nullius* were arranged and understood such that "a sylvan fringe gave the civic space its natural boundaries."[5] However, during the period of Europe's "age of empire," descriptions of extreme landscapes such as the jungle and the desert took on another layer of significance: these spaces embodied the outer extremes of colonial expansion, and also more generally, extreme difference. Through the proliferation of adventure novels and travel writing in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe, "desert" and "jungle" came to be synonymous with their symbolic lexicon—the constellation of images, words, and associations that came to not only represent these spaces in the Western imagination, but also to stand in for them to the point where those terms had less to do with a set of geographical or topological elements than with a set of psychological and emotional reactions, often predicated on ambivalence toward the colonial project. Thus, the symbolic lexicon of the jungle included the image of luxuriant growth, of course, but "jungle" also signified entanglement, disorientation, overwhelm, sexuality, and lack of restraint. Conversely, the desert's symbolic lexicon is one of harshness, emptiness, annihilation, and sterility. If "jungle" called to mind teeming life and the beginning of time (like Marlow's observation of going "up that river" to the "earliest beginnings of time" in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*), "desert" called to mind decadence (as in Said's analysis of the "Orient") and death—the end of time. Because this substitution was (and, perhaps, is) so complete in the collective imagination of a broad readership,[6] contemporary authors must in some way grapple with this entrenched symbolic lexicon in their own imaginings of these landscapes, in order to re-form these landscapes in the minds of contemporary readers, in a way that takes into account both the landscape's literary legacies and the authors' own vision of it.

This symbolic lexicon operated (and still operates) in a wide range of discourse, from travel advertisements to policy papers, though adventure literature and travelogues are the genres in which it has taken on its fullest amplitude and which, as we will see following, have done quite a bit to shape readers' perception of these spaces. These are genres with which Goyémidé and Djaout engage, responding to their legacy and also incorporating them into the ecosystem of the space. Both authors were city dwellers themselves, but the journeys in both novels weave these "extreme" landscapes

4 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Heinemann, 1958); Amos Tutuola, *My Life in the Bush of Ghosts* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954); Asenath Odaga, *The Diamond Ring* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1967).

5 Robert Pogue Harrison, *Forests: the Shadow of Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 49.

6 Not just Western readers, but readers all over who were brought up on the stories of Rudyard Kipling and the like; see Ngugi, Adichie, Achebe, and many others.

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into the fabric of national identity, upending some of the basic elements of their symbolic lexicon. In many ways, Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*[7] encapsulates the symbolism of the tropical forest in European adventure literature, both in itself and, perhaps more so, in the ways it has come to be used and understood—in essence, itself forming a part of the symbolic lexicon of the literary landscape that signifies colonial otherness. For example, Etienne Goyémidé uses Kipling's *Jungle Book* in his own novel to stand in metonymically for the symbolic lexicon of jungle adventure novels: simply by evoking "Kipling's book," the author assumes the reader will call to mind the entire constellation. In addition, by engaging intertextually with Kipling's stock characters and applying them to his own society, Goyémidé suggests the fiction inherent in both the term *jungle* and in the "jungle" of neocolonial Centrafrican society.

Goyémidé's Jungle/Forest Book

The Centrafrican author Etienne Goyémidé's 1984 novel *Le silence de la forêt* is in many ways a traditional "jungle book" at first glance. The narrator-protagonist, Gonaba, a civil servant in the Centrafrican Ministry of Education, enters the equitorial forest and lives with the inhabitants, referred to in the text as "Babingas" (pygmies), whereupon he discovers a more "authentic" way of living. However, Goyémidé's distinction between "jungle" and "forest" is a means of engaging in a conversation with the genre while creating a distinction among a fiction, phantasm, and farce on the one hand—represented by the idea of "jungle"—and on the other hand, the forest as ontological reality, a repository of humanity, and an element integral to any possible redemption of contemporary Centrafrican society. An extended meditation on Kipling's *Jungle Book* causes Gonaba to come to the realization that this fictional trope, "jungle," applies less to the landscape commonly associated with it than with modern, Westernized, urban society. Rather than the equitorial forest being out of proportion, it is in fact the imported society that does not fit the scale of contemporary Africa; this society swallows up and "digests" the customs and values once central to Centrafrican life.

The term *jungle*[8] is used in the novel only figuratively, not as a topological descriptor. The first time it appears is in the phrase *la loi de la jungle*, "the law of the jungle." Gonaba has already made references to the forest, setting up various "jungle" concepts, such as how it swallows up (15) and digests (61) civilization, but the first time the word *jungle* is used, Gonaba is surrounded by the forest, feeling insignificant and stripped of agency:

> [À l'aube] la grande forêt qui n'a jamais cessé de vivre reprend son essor. J'éprouve un sentiment de crainte au milieu de cette immense forêt, qui apparemment ne vous témoigne aucune hostilité, mais qui, d'un autre côté, ne se montre pas tendre avec ses habitants. C'est *la loi de la jungle* (65, emphasis mine).[9]

7 W. H. Hudson, *Green Mansions* (London: Duckworth, 1904); Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Lost World* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1912); Rudyard Kipling, *The Jungle Book* (London: Macmillan, 1894).
8 Etymologically, the word *jungle* came into French via English, first appearing in 1796. See Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales, www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/jungle.
9 "[At dawn] the great forest that has never ceased living gets going again. I'm aware of a feeling of fear in the middle of this immense forest which apparently harbors no hostility toward you, but which, on the other hand, does not demonstrate tenderness toward its inhabitants. It's the *law of the jungle*."

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When the forest goes beyond an ontological reality and starts taking on a personality, it becomes jungle. Or, more precisely, "jungle"—or the phrase, "law of the jungle"—signifies a shift from a perceptual to a conceptual relationship with the space. Immediately after this passage, there is a section break, and the narration leaps into a discussion of "Kipling's book." The book is so synonymous with the idea of the jungle that the title is not even mentioned. The jump (via the intertextual bridge of the phrase "law of the jungle") from the main narrative to a meditation on one of the most famous "jungle books" of all times reinforces the fictionality of the "jungle" by maintaining a figurative discourse.

The narrator performs an interesting negotiation between jungle and forest, fiction and reality, artifice and authenticity over the next few pages. In his initial musings on Kipling's *Jungle Book*, he outlines the various main characters and their defining characteristics; he then compares himself to "un Mowgli," "the little man with naked tender skin" (65) and begins to think he is out of place among the dangerous creatures of the "jungle." He reasons, "Là-bas ["in his own society"], je suis chez moi, le maître de ce qui m'entoure. Mais ici, ici c'est *la forêt*..." (66, emphasis mine).[10] Gonaba realizes that Manga the Pygmy (his alter-ego, who is exploring "civilization" in the village on the edge of the forest and whom Gonaba sends to the capital city of Bangui in order to continue his investigations), is about to

> [...] pénétrer ma jungle 'civilisée.' Sa position là-bas ne diffère guère de la mienne ici. Ma communauté 'civilisée,' avec ses lois et pratiques tortueuses, inextricables, louches et inhumaines à bien d'égards, est une véritable jungle (71).[11]

Adjectives that normally describe the flora and the feeling of the jungle now apply to the laws and practices of modern society. What is particularly interesting is the use of the word *véritable*, which seems to imply that the society that employs such "torturous practices" is the actual fiction, so to speak, and also the site where what is most ruthless and fearsome in human nature is acted out.

This reflection causes Gonaba to re-evaluate and in effect reverse his interpretation of Kipling's characters, this time explicitly applying the interpretation to his society, calling it "une jungle qui renferme ['a jungle that contains']" these figures. The fictional type-characters populate Gonaba's world, not the forest. And now, Gonaba revises his own personal affiliation with Kipling's characters.

Gonaba asserts that his own "civilized" jungle is more cruel than Kipling's, because although everyone starts out as a Mowgli, they then "more or less deliberately" choose to become "bulimic and voracious" tigers, "stupid but powerful" Hatis, "hypnotic and destructive" boas, or "thieving" Banderlogs. Whereas "in Kipling's jungle, in this immense equitorial forest," one is born as a beast, those in the city choose to become one, and therein lies all the difference, for "he who dreams of becoming a tiger, and succeeds in becoming one, is even crueler than a tiger by birth."

10 "There, I'm at home, the master of my surroundings. But here, here this is the *forest*...."
11 "is going to penetrate my 'civilized' jungle. His position there is no different from mine here. My 'civilized' community, whose laws and practices are torturous, inextricable, dubious, and inhuman in a whole variety of ways, is a veritable jungle" (71).

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Gonaba then gives what he feels is an illustrative example, citing the transition to independence: "The first sub-prefects who took the place of the Whites often behaved much more sadistically than those whose places they took." He concludes that while "the law of the jungle rages everywhere," it is much better to see it applied "by foreign elements than by one's own brothers."[12] In this important passage, the narrator-protagonist's viewpoint undergoes a radical transformation, enacted through the notion of fiction or artifice as it applies both to jungle/forest and to the realities and fictions of postcolonial African society. What begins as fear of the forest's unfamiliarity and dangers (which brings to light the concept of "jungle" as the imaginative embodiment or projection of such fears) becomes a meditation on "jungle fictions."

Goyémidé's use of Kipling's characters in the context of the CAR in the 1960s[13] is illuminating on many levels. Here, the protagonist is contrasting forest and jungle, village and city, and "natural" and "imported" society all at once, through the lens of "imported" fictional characters, in order to posit that the "official" post-independence CAR is a kind of netherworld. In fact, in many ways, the capital of Centrafrican "civilization," Bangui, was at that time a continental backwater, and at the end of the novel, Gonaba is heading unawares into arguably the most flagrant example of neocolonial farce in all of Africa, which took place in CAR. Jean-Bedel Bokassa, who seized power in a coup months after the novel's incipit, proclaimed himself emperor in 1976, modeling his lavish coronation ceremony exactly on Napoleon's, with the political, material, and financial support of the French government. This display took farce to a new level: an African dictator-emperor got new clothes, based on his French associates' studies of fictional representations (Sacha Guitry's 1955 film, Jean-Louis David's painting in the Louvre); François Giscard d'Estaing, the French president's cousin, describes the coronation as a "masquerade," explaining that in order to "préserver l'influence française et la paix en Afrique francophone," France agreed to pay for the coronation up to "l'équivalent de ce qu'aurait coûté une division blindée." As far as the actual ceremony was concerned, Giscard d'Estaing said it did not cause a great stir; "Après tout, cela n'avait pas grande importance que Bokassa se mette

12 "Dans la jungle de Kipling, dans cette immense forêt équatoriale à la lisière de laquelle je suis étendu, on naît tigre, loup, panthère, boa, singe ou éléphant. On ne le devient pas. Et c'est là que réside toute la différence. Cette différence est importante, car celui qui rêve de devenir un tigre, et qui réussit à le devenir, est encore plus cruel qu'un tigre de naissance. On en a vu des exemples à grande échelle. Les premiers sous-préfets et autres cadres de l'administration du territoire, qui ont succédé aux Blancs, se sont bien souvent comportés de façon beaucoup plus sadique et plus intolérable que ceux dont ils ont pris la place. [...] La loi de la jungle sévit partout. Et il est encore mieux de se la voir appliquer par des éléments étrangers que par ses propres frères" (73).
"In Kipling's jungle, in this immense equatorial forest on the edge of which I am stretched, one is born tiger, wolf, panther, boa, monkey, or elephant. One does not become it. And therein lies all the difference. This difference is very important, for whoever dreams of becoming a tiger and succeeds in becoming one is even crueler than a tiger-by-birth. We have seen examples on a grand scale. The first subprefects and other administrative officials who took over from the Whites often behaved much more cruelly, much more sadistically, and much more intolerably than those whose places they took. [...] The law of the jungle rages everywhere. And it is much better to see it applied to oneself by foreign elements than by one's own brothers."

13 The novel opens with the date, "Lundi 7 mai 1965." The Central African Republic became an independent state on 13 August 1960; Jean-Bedel Bokassa grabbed power in a coup on New Year's Eve, 1965.

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quelques plumes sur la tête."[14] In other words, to borrow Gonaba's interpretation of Kipling's characters, the ruthless Bokassa made himself into a tiger—in sumptuous clothing. Similarly, the conclusion Gonaba seems to draw from his reflections on Kipling's book is that the society in which he's been living—a replica (or farce) of the cruel hierarchies of colonialism—is fictional, ruthless, and artificial.

By contrast, the narrator's experience with the people who live in the forest is a meditation on the idea of "nature" and "natural," and the idea of a social ecosystem. In another intertextual conversation, this time with both Rousseauian philosophy and the Négritude movement, as well as the corpus of African pastoral fiction, Goyémidé contrasts the artificiality of "les délices empoisonnées de la société importée" (73) with the locally specific, rooted society of the forest people,[15] as well as with his own childhood. Gonaba's journey into the forest causes him to remember "les vertus qui m'ont été inculqués à la circoncision" (74),[16] and to contrast the "living, airy, and human" manioc glue which he finds on the back of an old family photo with the "cold, avaricious, indifferent" (39) mastic,[17] which ruins and disintegrates, drawing an implicit but nonetheless obvious analogy between an upbringing and worldview that "fit" the circumstances and an unnatural, imported, situationally inappropriate and ultimately harmful mode of being. As he progresses, he encounters a settlement in the forest, where instead of a hierarchical, authority- and status-based system, he finds a network of mutual support and benefit. Goyémidé appears to be suggesting that the Babinga society Gonaba encounters is a more "natural" model for the contemporary Central African Republic than the neocolonial fiction of Kipling's characters run wild in the postcolonial capital, one that incorporates social and environmental elements, and is able to incorporate modernity (in the form of Gonaba) as well.

Goyémidé's choice of portraying the Babingas certainly has elements of the African pastoral genre of romanticizing a static, precolonial culture, but he uses this trope for certain strategic purposes. First of all, he integrates long-marginalized forest peoples into Central Africans' idea of a citizen, ostensibly arguing that discrimination and exclusion of the forest peoples diminishes *all* Central Africans. This novel is an attempt to "naturalize" the forest and its peoples in the eyes of other Africans—to make the landscape and the people familiar, usual, understood, and thus, also "innate" to the fabric of wider African society. Second, he is offering a home-grown alternative

14 Geraldine Faes and Stephen Smith, *Bokassa 1er: un Empereur Français* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 2000), 20. This book is my source for the description of Bokassa's coronation. "[...] in order to preserve French influence and peace in francophone Africa [...], Paris agreed to pay—including covering a few 'extravagances' and misappropriations of funds—the equivalent of what a supplementary armed division through NATO would have cost. 'And as far as the ritual is concerned, no one really stood in the way of this operation. People complained, because they had to pay, but they let it happen. After all, it was of little importance that Bokassa put a few feathers on his head.' "

15 See, for example, French ethnologist Serge Bahuchet, upon whose work I rely heavily for this article, particularly *Les Pygmées Aka et la Forêt Centrafricaine: ethnologie écologique* (Paris: SELAF, 1985). In addition to Bahuchet's works, see Daniel Bakongo, *An Inquiry about Mongumba Aka Pygmies' Social Integration in Central African Society: An Ethnology Case Study* (Bangui: University of Bangui, 1997), as well as the work of Maurice Amaye and Noel Ballif for anthropological studies concerning the Aka, one group of "pygmies" living in approximately the same region of the equitorial rainforest as that in the novel.

16 "the virtues that were inculcated in me at the time of the circumcision ceremony" (74).

17 "vivantes, aérées et humaines," "froid, indifférent, rongeur, boulimique, avare et exsangue."

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to the artificial striving, decadence, and corruption of postcolonial African societies that seek to mimic and maintain colonial institutions for the benefit of the very few to the detriment of many. Goyémidé blends village-born, French-educated Gonaba with forest-dwelling people indigenous to the setting of the novel—and with the forest itself—into a mutually influencing sociocultural ecosystem.

In the "ecosystem" view of the novel, the forest itself can be seen, both ecologically and socially, as representing a whole body or organism, a sort of "whole system [which] is more than the sum of its parts because it is providing characteristic emergent properties,"[18] which then stands as a metaphor for what is possible in society at large. Two moments in the novel encapsulate the forest's role in Gonaba's trajectory of emergent awareness. On the very second page of the novel, Gonaba muses, "C'est à croire que l'immense forêt, qui vous regarde imperturbablement, veut vous tuer à petit feu, avant de vous digérer" (4)![19] The forest digests; it incorporates; and it does so threateningly. The very first time the forest is mentioned, it is described as imperturbable—yet antagonistically, with malicious intent, directed at a specific object that is necessarily outside of it: the forest *wants* to kill *you* before digesting *you*. This description comes at a moment when a hung-over Gonaba is intent on salvaging the dignity and proper appearance his position demands. Later, though, when he has decided to leave appearances behind and go into the forest to "experience other realities," his description of the forest is modified in small but important ways:

> Je me sens comme écrasé par la puissance et la majesté de cette forêt equatoriale imperturbable. J'ai l'impression d'être dans l'estomac d'un monstre antédiluvien, qui va d'un moment à l'autre commencer son travail de digestion. Les parfums des fleurs, les odeurs des fruits pourris, les miasmes des vases s'emmêlent et se confondent en une *réalité sans nom* (61, emphasis added).[20]

Here we have digestion again, but without a sense of antagonism; sensory descriptions again, even of unpleasant smells, but this time on equal footing with the smell of flowers and without a sense of disgust or revulsion. All of these experiences are confounded in a "reality without name," which is the reality of lived experience independent of titles or markers. Description doesn't exactly fail; it's just superfluous in the presence of such crushing, powerful reality. It is a totally sensory experience, one in which subject and object, protagonist and antagonist, have no place, but all elements are included. Yet again, the forest is imperturbable, though this time it is not intentionally threatening: the digestion just happens, without a specific object in mind. Thus, the novel seems to suggest, the forest (both literally and as a metaphor for an ideal society) is unperturbed by the fluctuations of social and political fads; or rather, it

18 Sven E Jørgensen and Felix Müller, "Ecosystems as Complex Systems," *Handbook of Ecosystem Theories and Management*, eds. Müller and Jørgensen. (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2000), 5.

19 "It's as if the immense forest, which looks at you imperturbably, wants to kill you little by little, before digesting you!"

20 "I feel as if crushed by the power and the majesty of this imperturbable equatorial forest. I have the impression of being in the stomach of an antediluvian monster, that will at any moment begin its work of digestion. The perfumes of the flowers, the odors of the rotten fruit, the miasmas of the sludge pools mix together and become confounded in a *reality without name*."

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just goes on doing its digestive work, incorporating new elements into its own system, rather than changing at the whim of those elements. This sense of balance and slow change are at the core of the novel's imagination of what is "natural." Gonaba perceives the forest as malevolent when it is unfamiliar to him; once Gonaba is in the forest, he perceives it as equally impactful, but more neutral—an ever-evolving yet stable system.[21]

Like Jørgensen and Müller's definitions of ecosystems as "self-organising systems" which exhibit the properties of "openness," "self-referentiality and co-operation," "historicity and irreversibility," and "emergence,"[22] Goyémidé's postcolonial African definition of *nature* and *natural* is not static; it implies a kind of evolutionary rate of change, as opposed to a catastrophic one, incorporating new elements into the system while maintaining a certain coherence. Balance is key to this definition of *natural*; it means adapting new elements to a fairly stable sense of self, rather than adapting one's sense of self to new elements, or at least making modifications to one's individual or collective sense of self by choice, rather than having them violently and disruptively imposed.[23] Nature also has room for the human in it: in both the novel and in actual equitorial forest societies, forest-dwellers are as much an element of the forest as the animals they hunt or the plants they use, and although they see themselves as the masters of the other forest elements and evaluate forest elements and environments based on how useful those are to them, they identify with the forest as well, locating the spirits of their ancestors in the trees. They also attempt to incorporate outside interventions into their own culture (which is an uphill battle, given the imbalance of force and resources), building camps just outside forestry complexes and gaining

21 Stable is very different than static, as I hope I am making clear. As an example, in her book *Cutting the Vines of the Past: Environmental Histories of the Central African Rain Forest* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 2002), Tamara Giles-Vernick discusses in depth how one group of forest people, the Mpiemu, have incorporated outside factors and events (including but not limited to French colonialism and its economic offshoots) not only into their ways of obtaining livelihood, but also their environmental outlook and their methods of recounting memory and history. She notes that the "Mpiemu reinterpreted and transformed colonial discourses of dearth and loss" in the framework of their own history-telling, or *doli*. Unlike Goyémidé's version of a "pygmy" settlement, "different gender, generational, and regional groups lauded new forms of wealth and authority" coming from colonial intervention and postcolonial state reorganization; they also "lamented elders' depleted authority, and mourned [...] the disappearance of some sites like old villages and *panjo* [communal eating structure], even as they used new sites and objects to recall their pasts" (118). In other words, the Mpiemus' vision of their place in the world and their relations with others is far from static—it adjusts to interventions sometimes with nostalgia and sometimes with enthusiasm—but it remains stable in the sense that these changes get incorporated into *doli*, or the Mpiemu method of recalling or reciting individual and collective history and identity.

22 F. Muller and Søren Nors Nielsen, "Ecosystems as Subjects of Self-Organising Processes": II.2.1 *Handbook of Ecosystem Theories and Management*, eds. Jørgensen and Müller (Boca Raton, FL: CRC Press, 2000). These terms taken from pages 179–83 are the authors' elaborations and explanations of a definition of "self-organizing systems," which include ecosystems.

23 For example, Elisabeth Copet-Rougier discusses the fluidity of clan identity in the precolonial period in the Sangha region, saying that certain clans would opt to identify with stronger groups rather than their original group, while maintaining their particular clan identity within the wider grouping. See Elisabeth Copet-Rougier, "Political-Economic History of the Upper Sangha," *Resource Use in the Trinational Sangha River Region of Equatorial Africa: Histories, Knowledge Forms and Institutions*, eds. Eves, H., Hardin, R., & Rupp, S. (New Haven, CT: Yale School of Forestry and Environmental Studies, 1998), 59–61.

wealth by providing meat to the workers.[24] This incorporation can be viewed as more organic than aggressive, the forest doing its "work of digestion" rather than the malevolent jungle that "wants to digest you."

The use of the term *ecosystem* is not unproblematic—biogeographer Philip Stott questions the validity of the very concept,[25] and literary scholar Dana Phillips warns against using "fuzzy concepts fashioned out of borrowed terms," arguing that "ecocritics" often use "words like 'ecosystem,' 'organism,' and 'wilderness' [...] metaphorically, with no acknowledgment of their metaphorical status"[26] and without taking into account the very real differences between literary and scientific thinking—but it serves symbolically here to represent balance, interconnectedness, evolution or emergence, and some degree of geographic specificity. The forest ecosystem must be thought of to include the people who live there; in fact, society (as envisioned by Rousseau and as depicted in *Le silence de la forêt*) is itself a kind of ecosystem, requiring overall equilibrium that accommodates inevitable change and cooperation between members to maintain its overall health and viability. Structures imposed violently from the outside can be seen as invasive species (indeed, the Lindjomo Mpiemu refer to a certain plant that's overtaken abandoned coffee plantations by the names of the successive French-supported dictators of the country![27]), and the best kind of change is that which happens "naturally," that is, from a place of real understanding and familiarity, and gradually enough for the system to adapt itself and incorporate the changes in a viable way.

In a way, this is the kind of change Goyémidé's novel is suggesting, not only in its content, but in its very structure. It reverses the African literary tradition of depicting the forest as otherworldly by portraying its inhabitants as more "human" than their urban counterparts; it also mimics the European version of a "jungle book" and engages intertextually with a titan of that genre in order to look afresh at the legacy of that culture in contemporary Africa. Like Mowgli in Kipling's *Jungle Book*, Gonaba chooses to return to "civilization" at the end of the novel; however, in Goyémidé's version, the reader is left believing that Gonaba will deploy the knowledge he has gained in the forest in order to actively change and improve his society. John McBratney reads the ending of the *Jungle Book* as a vindication of British imperialism: Mowgli "has discovered his caste as a ranger and forest-guard working for the British Raj," and the forest creatures acknowledge a "new respect for human leadership" in the form of Mowgli, which McBratney interprets as emblematic of the "higher law" of British rule, as opposed to the "cruelty and injustice" of the villagers.[28] Both Mowgli and Gonaba maintain connections to the forest, but unlike Mowgli, who intentionally founds his family under the auspices of the Raj, Gonaba emerges from the forest with

24 See Bahuchet, Giles-Vernick, and Ballif.

25 In his confrontational monograph, *Tropical Rain Forest: A Political Ecology of Hegemonic Myth Making* (London: IEA Environment Unit, 1999), Stott performs a sociolinguistic deconstruction of the term *tropical rain forest*, similar to that of the term *jungle* in this study.

26 Dana Phillips, "Ecocriticism, Literary Theory, and the Truth of Ecology," *New Literary History* 30.3 (1999): 577–602 at 579.

27 See Giles-Vernick 137–39 for an interesting analysis of this phenomenon, particularly as it relates to gender differences.

28 John McBratney, "Imperial Subjects, Imperial Space in Kipling's *Jungle Book*," *Victorian Studies* 35:3 (Spring 1992), 277–293. Quotes from pages 288 and 287, respectively.

a critical view of the dominant socio-political structure and is prepared to integrate the two from within the heart of his "modernized" world, as symbolized by his bringing his forest-born children with him to Bangui.

Like Goyémidé's use of the adventure novel genre, Algerian writer and activist Tahar Djaout similarly employs a colonial genre in order to ironize the knowledge and authority that genre purports to transmit. As we will see in the reading of *L'invention du désert* that follows, however, although both Goyémidé and Djaout seem to be advocating for a kind of flexible social plurality via their depictions of landscape, Djaout is reinforcing certain elements of the desert's symbolic lexicon—disorientation, crumbling, and immeasurability—and incorporating those elements into his conception of the contemporary North African ecosystem.

Intertextuality and Erasure in the Desert

In the 1987 novel *L'invention du désert*, Tahar Djaout creates a narrative that resembles a travelogue, sending his narrator-protagonist on an odyssey from Paris through the Algerian Sahara, and then across the Arabian peninsula. However, he adopts the genre in order both to refute the depiction of an ahistorical desert often presented in such texts and also to reclaim the Sahara desert's specificity as both an element and an analogy of North African identity. Such a goal might seem in fact to reinforce a static, monolithic interpretation of the desert (and, indeed, of the concept of identity itself), but the author depicts a Sahara that is immune to arbitrary boundaries and designations, constantly shifting, and impossible to gauge or quantify using standard measurement. Djaout does this precisely to refute any claims of a monolithic North African identity, whether from the past (such as French colonial influences), the present (post-independence nationalist movements), or the looming, imminent future of radical Islamist terrorism in Algeria. The travelogue form allows Djaout to critique the authoritative, categorical knowledge often inherent in the genre, and by extension, to critique these other forms of categorization or pigeonholing.

Knowing the Unknowability of the Sahara

Unlike the narrator's portrayal of vacationers' visions of the Sahara, Djaout's desert is not a consumer good and cannot be reduced to a tourist cliché. The narrator insists that he himself has "le plus grand respect pour le désert, pour ses humeurs non programmables, pour ses caresses écorchantes" (42)[29] and asserts that arrogantly underestimating its scale can be dangerous, as in the case of a German tourist driven mad by the seemingly endless monotony (42), professing,

> Voici comment le désert se venge parfois à ceux qui refusent d'en reconnaître la loi rigoureuse pour n'y voir que l'ultime paradis de la vacance éternelle, un lieu de villégiature où l'on peut tout à son aise musarder, bronzer, et photographier l'inédit. Oui, le désert se venge parfois. D'avoir été trop *aplani*. D'avoir été *réduit*—alors que dans son

29 "the greatest respect for the desert, for its unprogrammable humors, for its scathing caresses."

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> ventre se fomente la calcination définitive du monde—à un chevauchement *inoffensif* de dunes, à des soleils se couchant dans une profusion *docile* d'ocre et d'or (42-3, emphasis mine).[30]

In other words, one needs to comprehend the incomprehensibility of the desert in order to survive there and to adjust oneself to its scale in order to reap the benefits. Otherwise, the confrontation between one's preconceived ideas and the lived reality can be devastating. Djaout's narrator's reflections on tourism in the Sahara critique a relationship to the desert that attempts to reduce and flatten its enormity to fit a postcard idea of it.

By contrast, the narrator describes a Sahara that escapes all confines, be they the dimensions of a postcard, standard systems of measurement, or preconceived ideas. Traveling in the desert, he loses track: driving through the "distension des dunes, on se sent réduire la distance entre vivre et mourir, entre la plénitude et l'anéantissement, entre la compacité et le vide" (28),[31] and one can "arrive à franchir, les yeux fermés, un bon millier de kilomètres" (44)[32] while driving through this immeasurable landscape. Distances are distorted, both spatial and temporal: the desert exists in "un temps informe, dévorateur où la voiture s'engloutit."[33] In fact, time and space are not simply distorted in the desert, but cancelled out: "la distance et le temps s'anéantissent. Il n'y a aucun centre ici, aucune temporalité" (28).[34] While this canceling of time might at first echo an Orientalist reading of the timeless desert, or at least the symbolic lexicon of the desert as found in many desert travelogues,[35] Djaout is suggesting something beyond awed bewilderment. In fact, he is both positing disorientation as inherent to the North African experience, and, as we will see following, creating the means by which histories can coexist in the narrative. Such a wrinkling of time, or lack of temporal center, does not allow any one person, event, or viewpoint to hold primacy; instead, the distance between the narrator and his predecessors seems "anéanti" as well. This suggests a dynamic, unbroken, and personally meaningful experience of history in the region, but an experience characterized by dislocation.

30 "This is how the desert sometimes takes revenge on those who refuse to recognize its rigorous law so as to only see it as the ultimate paradise of the eternal vacation, a resort where one can loaf around, sunbathe, and photograph the unexpected totally at leisure. Yes, the desert takes revenge sometimes. For having been too *flattened*. For having been *reduced*—while in its belly foments the ultimate calcination of the world—to an *inoffensive* overlapping row of dunes, to suns setting in a docile profusion of ochre and gold."

31 "Distention of the dunes, one feels the distance shrink between living and dying, between plenitude and annihilation, between compactness and the void" (28).

32 "manage to get through a good thousand kilometers, eyes closed" (44).

33 "a devouring, unformed time where the car sinks in and gets swallowed up."

34 "Distance and time are annihilated/annihilate themselves/annihilate each other. There is no center here, no temporality" (28).

35 Including one of the most famous and enduring travelogues, that of Moroccan medieval scholar-traveler Ibn Battuta. See Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa 1325–1354*, trans. and ed. H. A. R. Gibb (London: Broadway House, 1929), particularly the section on Ibn Battuta's traversal of the Sahara desert en route to the kingdom of Mali, 317-–41. Excerpts of Gibb's translation of Ibn Battuta's text are available online via Fordham University's Medieval Sourcebook project: http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/source/1354-ibnbattuta.asp.

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Travelogue as Personal Journey, Co-Temporality of History

In another nod to the symbolic lexicon of travelogues and adventure novels, the narrator describes his quest in terms of action: "Je traque la tribu délitée, je remembre la dynastie pulvérisée. Je nage dans les biefs des chroniques, remonte des torrents apocryphes, j'enjambe des temps sans milliaires et des déserts effrayants. Je dois me construire à tout prix une rénommée de pisteur" (40).[36] In this Loti-esque passage, the narrator engages the vocabulary of adventure in order to posit that the real quest is to track the shards of history, both personal and collective, in order to piece together a shattered and scattered self-identity. Djaout thus establishes a genealogy in the desert that informs the narrator's current understanding of himself. Such a genealogy refutes the notion of a timeless, static, long-dead version of desert history presented in so many travelogues, as well as in other modes of thinking that attempt to homogenize the history of the region. The genealogy that Djaout's narrator establishes draws on heterogeneous lineages, both personal and collective.

The narrator of *L'invention du désert* does not travel alone. With him are his various avatars, whose traces he carries with him and picks up along the way: his "ancestor," a great-grandfather whose pilgrimage to Mecca was the subject of his mother's stories when he was a child; his own childhood self, who traveled widely in his imagination, fueled by the stories of his ancestor; and Ibn Toumert, the fanatical twelfth-century berber *mahdi* who founded the Almohad dynasty,[37] about whom the narrator is writing a history. These three other protagonists make appearances in the narrative present, in addition to the narrator occasionally confusing himself with the figures of the past, suggesting a continuous lineage, both historical and personal, in and of the desert. Like Goyémidé's forest, which "incorporates" all elements into a society that is both rooted and dynamic, Djaout's desert incorporates his narrator's individual and collective past, as well as his present experience as an intellectual in Europe.

The narrator lives in the "ville froid" of Paris, and the novel opens there, with him trying to write the history of the Almoravids and experiencing nightmares. The travelogue narrative recounts his circuitous journey back to his birth village, via two deserts, where he encounters chimeras of his various avatars along the way. He carries Ibn Toumert with him: the Almoravid history "cliquette à l'intérieur de [s]on crâne" because his head is "semblable à ces outres où les Indiens transportent, au gré de leurs migrations, les os de leurs ancêtres" (26).[38] This is a metaphor for his own experience of diaspora: he carries the figurative bones of his ancestors (including his own childhood self) in his mind as he travels, and he collects more "bones" of memory throughout the journey, which he transforms into writing. The desert is the necessary element for this process: rather than going to the desert "pour m'évader ou pour chercher des sensations inédites,"[39] he goes to get back in touch with himself and with

36 "I follow the trail of the crumbled tribe, I remember the pulverized dynasty. I swim in the bays of chronicles, I go back up apocryphal waterfalls, I leap over times without mile-markers and frightening deserts. I must at all costs build myself a name as a renowned tracker."

37 In fact, in *The Ornament of the World* (2003), scholar of Andalusia Maria Rosa Menocal calls the Almohads "an even more fanatical" group than the Almoravids who were already there (43).

38 "rattles inside [his] skull"; "like those skin pouches wherein the Indians, in the course of their migrations, transport the bones of their ancestors."

39 "to get away or to seek out novel sensations."

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familiar sensations, "car le désert m'habite et m'illumine depuis des temps indéterminés" (27).[40] In other words, although his village is in the mountains, the desert is a fundamental element of his imagination and self-conception. The fact that it's been a part of him since "indeterminate times" echoes the folding and wrinkling of temporal perception in the desert itself, and again, allows the imaginative "bones" of his avatars to appear in the present, and (just as in the "ecosystem" of Goyémidé's suggested society) for past and present to mutually exert influence.

Thus, while in the Arabian desert, the narrator remembers the stories his mother told him of his ancestor's journey to Mecca and his own childhood experience of hearing these stories and the imaginative travel they inspired. Signaling a continuous, living history in the desert, narrator, child, and ancestor are confused and fused into one multiple persona: the child, hearing the stories, "ne savait pas très bien si c'était de lui qu'il s'agissait ou de l'ancêtre, si c'était lui qui vivait les événements ou s'il les regardait simplement se dérouler devant lui" (68),[41] just as the narrator himself appears unsure who is the subject and who is the object of his story, switching among first-, second-, and third-person pronouns and weaving flashbacks seamlessly into the narrative present. The desert is the medium for this odd combination of disjuncture and syncretism: preceding this particular flashback, the narrator "regarde longuement le sable sans fin— jusqu'a [se] calciner la cornée. Et, tout à coup, le désert cesse d'être en face et autour, il gagne les membres et la tête" (64)[42]—it inhabits and illuminates him, as do the bones of memory of his childhood self and his great-grandfather, creating a multiple, cotemporal whole.

At the end of the novel, the narrator with his collection of memories returns to his village of origin, trying to find that "quelque chose d'irremplaçable" (15)[43] he feared losing in the nightmare that opens the novel. Having arrived via the desert with his avatars and the shards of his history he collected along the way rattling in his head, he does not need to "sob" like another immigrant he remembers seeing as a child, for two seemingly opposing reasons. On the one hand, the folds of time and space in the desert demonstrate an inherent if counterintuitive connection and erase the notion of a break or rupture, even in diaspora. On the other hand, the desert's distortions show that the conflicts, confusions, and competing influences of the North African experience are in a sense a factor of unification via that shared experience of disorientation.

The Shifting Sands of Identity in North Africa

Djaout's text suggests that just as one cannot rely on markers and measurements to navigate in the desert, one cannot reliably navigate by the shifting markers and categories of affiliation and identifying in the region. In Djaout's depiction, true intimacy and familiarity with the desert don't make it easier to really comprehend it. On the contrary, familiarity means accepting its unpredictability: it is "dur au balisage.

40 "for the desert inhabits and illuminates me since indeterminate times."
41 "didn't really know for sure if it was about him or the ancestor, if it was he who experienced the events or if he simply watched them unfold before him."
42 "look[s] for a long time at the endless sand—to the point of charring [his] cornea. And, all of a sudden, the desert ceases to be in front and around, it enters the limbs and the head."
43 "something irreplaceable."

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Il ondule sous les mensurations, glisse comme une couleuvre entre les mains qui veulent juger." The narrator notes that if you try to place a marker, the next day you will see that "le sable a accompli son travail d'aplanisseur" (33).[44] He cannot navigate in any reliable way by the "succession de dunes à peine réelles qui sous l'effet d'un vent inopiné peuvent s'enjamber ou s'avaler" (30).[45] The desert sand undulates, slides, flattens, and distends whenever someone tries to measure or mark it, but rather than being surprised or frustrated by this, the narrator accepts and even relates to it. This seems to suggest that the desert here represents the very kind of "contingent and heterogeneous construction of culture and identity" to which Byron Caminero-Santangelo was referring in the introduction to his book,[46] as opposed to singular and limiting nationalist ideologies, be they "Western" or "nativist," with their need for exact markers, boundaries, categories, and systems of measurement. In this way, Djaout uses the Sahara as a metaphor for a version of North African "identity" consisting of shifting layers and ruptures.

The concept of "identity" itself is particularly complex in North Africa, and, one could argue, the dominant theme of literature from the region from the 1950s until today. Various identifying categories—language, ethnicity, geography, religion—coexist and compete, often within one person, and the valence of each category shifts with time. This competition can be confusing and destabilizing: in the first line of *L'invention du désert*, the narrator refers to himself in the third person, both describing and enacting this kind of fragmentation: "Il se voit multiple, se bagarre."[47] As the narrator-protagonist journeys through the desert with his avatars, the Sahara reveals itself as a metaphor for the multiplicity and slippage inherent in the concept of "identity" in the region. The Sahara unites or equalizes through the common experience of destabilization. Like Djaout's portrayal of the Sahara itself, "identity" in North Africa is portrayed here as impossible to pin down: any attempts to pigeonhole inevitably crumble or break down. The colonial rupture, and the postcolonial tragedy in Algeria in particular, created a profound rift in any kind of comfortable sense of identity, and Djaout's desert, with its distortion of time, space, and distance, is a literary embodiment of that profound existential disorientation, at the same time very rooted in a particular history, notably in his description of a key location for North African history.

Tehouda, or the Palimpsest of History

The novel's central episode is the narrator's visit to a place called Tehouda, at the gateway to the Sahara in Algeria, the town of Biskra. In this passage, the traveling narrator stumbles upon the remnants of an integral piece of his own history. This encounter, written in a kind of mirror opposite of Pratt's language of discovery,[48]

44 "Hard to mark. It wavers under measurements, slides like a serpent between the hands that want to judge." "The sand has accomplished its task of flattening" (33).

45 "succession of barely real dunes which, under the effect of an unexpected wind, can overlap or swallow one another."

46 Ibid., 9.

47 Djaout, 9. "He sees himself [as] multiple [multiply], fights with himself/battles himself."

48 Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992). Pratt identifies three techniques used by European explorer-writers that reinforced a sense of "discovery" in their writing: 1) the landscape is aestheticized in the description; 2) Many descriptors, derived either

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permits the narrator to reflect on the sorts of "flexible networks"[49] that have existed in the region and the ways in which those networks have been written out of linear or official history—what Djaout refers to as History with a capital H. The underlying implication of the passage is that in fact it is the sand that creates and preserves h-history, which, like the sand itself, is flexible. In other words, though Tehouda has been excluded from the writing of History, and though the desert has essentially reincorporated its vestiges into the sand, not only can traces of a multiethnic, religiously plural society still be found in the crumbs, but this very crumbling has become an integral element of North African identity. Thus, the Sahara is not only an archive for histories that have been (and are still being) elided; it also enacts a key facet of the experience of being from the region: a kind of breakdown of singularity or singular meaning, in tandem with a *longue-durée*, geological-time perspective.[50]

Tehouda (or Tahoudit, which means "Jewish" in the Berber language of Tamazight) was the capital of a Berber kingdom led first by Dihya, or Al-Kahina, a Berber queen thought by some to have been Jewish, and then of Koceila, the Berber king who defeated the invading Arab Muslim conqueror, Oqba ibn Nafi, in an important battle in 683.[51] Despite the site's seminal importance in the *longue-durée* history of the region, it has been abandoned in disrepair. All that is left is a "simple étendue *désolée* avec des *squelettes* d'anciennes demeures [,] cité *fondue* dans la *poussière*. Cité de terre *friable* dans le repli du désert. Monticule couleur *d'anonymat* comme la nature alentour" (31, emphases mine).[52] The language of crumbling and degradation, itself expressed in fragments of sentences, at first seems to corroborate an Orientalist understanding of the desert, yet Djaout is suggesting that the decadence is due not to the inevitable forward march of linear History, but rather to an intentional choice by those who have written the area's History as it commonly reads today. Here, rather

from nouns or from materials, add a level of density to the description, but scientific vocabulary is absent; 3) A relation of mastery is predicated between the seer and the seen, 202–15).

49 Caminero-Santangelo, 2.

50 See Wai Chee Dimock's book, *Through Other Continents: American Literature across Deep Time* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009 [2006]). Dimock defines "deep time" as "a set of longitudinal frames, at once projective and recessional, with input going both ways, and binding continents and millennia into many loops of relations" (3), as opposed to the view of time as "a measuring tape, with fixed segments, fixed unit lengths, each assignable to a number" (2). She equates the latter with the ideology of the nation-state, which conceives of time and space in proportional relationship to its own spatiotemporal boundaries and asserts the "glaring inadequacy of a nation-based model in world politics" and a "parallel inadequacy in literary studies" (2). In this context, she calls on Braudel's model of *longue durée* to resist what she perceives as New Historicism's insistence on "context" in a very narrow sense.

51 Koceilah/Kusayla/Aksel (d. 690): Imazigh (Berber) leader who led the resistance against Muslim Arab invasion; Okba/Uqba (622–683): an Arab general who led the Muslim conquest into North Africa; Kusayla's troops defeated Uqba at Tehouda in 683. Al-Kahina: title, meaning "the priestess" or "the soothsayer," given by the Arabs to Dihya, a Berber queen commonly believed to be Jewish, though there is some dispute over that claim. Al-Kahina succeeded Kusayla and also led the army in resisting Muslim conquest. See J. Abun-Nasr, ed., *A History of the Maghrib in the Islamic Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 27–30 (Koceila/Kusayla and Okba/'Uqba), 31–32 (al-Kahina). See also the articles pertaining to each in the *Encyclopédie Berbère* (Edisud, 1984): Koceila in v. 28–29, Kahena in v. 27, and Oqba in v. 35, all available in full text online at http://encyclopedieberbere.revues.org.

52 "simple *desolate* expanse with *skeletons* of old dwellings [,] city *melted* into the dust. City of *crumbly* earth in the folds of the desert. Little mound, *anonymity*-colored like the surrounding nature" (emphasis mine).

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than History arresting the narrator's attention by imposing a monument or a marker, his attention is drawn by quite the opposite phenomenon: Tehouda has been erased.

> Aucune plaque commémorative. Il n'existe même pas de panneau routier indicateur. Pour ceux qui inventorient les localités, Tehouda n'est pas un lieu d'histoire, elle n'est même pas un lieu tout court. Tehouda n'existe pas. Pourtant, c'est là que l'histoire du Maghreb s'est jouée. Irréversiblement. Ici fut ouvert la première entaille qui allait désagréger la Berbérie (le Maghreb—la Nuit du Nom—devint notre désignation) (31-2).[53]

There is nothing here today that confirms the existence of a place called "Tehouda." Now, it is a relic of disintegration, the place where that disintegration began. Words, whether on signs and plaques, or in history books, are what grant a place its status as "real" in the realm of History. European colonial administration operated by the post-Enlightenment drive to name, label, and categorize, and indeed, the French administrators were probably "those who keep an inventory of localities," but the erasure of Tehouda reaches back to an earlier homogenizing force: the Arabo-Muslim conquest of the region. Indeed, this new system also changed the name of the region, thereby changing the *orientation* of the region as well: *al-maghrib* means the setting of the sun, and *gharb* means west. The different name also erases the ethnic identity of the region as well, orienting it more in terms of its inclusion in an Arab geography and therefore identity. At Tehouda, the narrator and his avatars are in contact with Al-Kahina, Koceila, and even Oqba; these figures do not proceed in a linear progression, but rather all meet up within the folds of desert time in order to assert a dynamic, uninterrupted, specific history in the region. However, they also disappear together under the crumbling weight of homogenizing forces such as Muslim conquest, French colonization, post-independence Arab nationalism, and (by implication) contemporary religious fundamentalism, as we will see.

According to Djaout, not all deserts are created equal. In *L'Invention du désert*, Djaout contrasts the "désert de ton pays avec ses oasis bruissantes" (105) with the Arabian desert, which "le temps a dénudé d'une nudité inscrite là comme un signe irréfutable de soumission" (81).[54] If the Sahara is varied, multifaceted, and familiar, the Arabian desert is a place where "c'est la stagnation qui règle tout, qui appose son souffle pétrifiant" (105), with nothing but "étendues de sable à perte de vue que Dieu a créées pour faire sentir à l'homme sa nullité" (61).[55] The incessant trope of crushing stagnation, coupled with references to God, the Text, and prophesy, suggest that the narrator is drawing a connection between the desert and a certain interpretation or attitude toward religion. Djaout is of course critiquing the rise of fundamentalism in

53 "No commemorative plaque. There is not even a highway sign. For those who keep an inventory of localities, Tehouda is not a place of history; it's not even a place, period. Tehouda does not exist. Nevertheless, it is here that the history of the Maghreb was played out. Irreversibly. Here was cut open the first gash that would dismember Barbary [the Berber land/kingdom] (the Maghreb—the Night of the Name—became our designation)."

54 "desert of your country with its rustling oases" (105); "time has stripped down to a nudity inscribed there like an irrefutable sign of submission" (81).

55 "it's stagnation that rules everything, that puts down its stultifying breath" (105); "expanses of sand as far as the eye can see which God created to make man feel his nothingness" (61).

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Algeria post-independence, and not just in this portrayal of the Arabian desert: the narrator's choosing to research Ibn Toumert is a veiled means of indicating the presence of this fanatic absolutism in North Africa, as well as a commentary on history resurfacing in the present. Djaout's depiction of the Sahara in all its complexity certainly does not fit within a rigid schema of unitary understanding, either of religion or of national identity. For these depictions of the desert push back against not only the religious extremism of the day, but more generally, post-independence projects of national identity formation that re- (and mis-)interpreted history so as to support a homogenous picture of North African nations as exclusively Arab and Muslim. Such a depiction of the Sahara, particularly in contrast to the Arabian desert, is a way of resisting any homogenizing movement while also acknowledging the trauma and rupture inherent in the North African experience.[56] Djaout's travelogue questions that genre's claims to knowledge and authority concerning the Sahara—and by extension, claims to authoritative knowledge in general—while offering a different kind of desert knowledge, based on both intimacy and fragmentation, in which the desert contains, incorporates, and combines all elements into one disorienting whole.

Conclusion

As seen in these readings of *Le silence de la forêt* and *L'invention du désert*, reading the jungle and the desert in postcolonial novels offers particularly valuable insight into contemporary imaginings of African societies. Because these two spaces are so symbolically and imaginatively charged, it seems impossible to write—or read—about them outside of their symbolic lexicon, or outside of an intertextual conversation; but those allusions, conversations, and imaginative possibilities provide a much richer and more nuanced portrayal because they incorporate various perspectives, rather than simply refuting outmoded ones. Such intertextual approaches are themselves a refutation of the kinds of homogenizing perspectives often inherent in the desert's or the jungle's symbolic lexicon: not only are they pushing back against a limited or uprooted representation of the spaces, but they are incorporating the *entire* history of the region into their depiction. Like many contemporary authors, both Goyémidé and Djaout employ a literary genre in order to engage in an intertextual conversation with their antecedents, whether those be twentieth-century West African novels that draw on a long-standing oral tradition, nineteenth-century European adventure writing, or the travelogue of the great thirteenth-century Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta. Rather than simply either continuing or refuting the traditions of the genre, however, these novels use intertextuality as a means of both suggesting and enacting a historical and cultural continuity, asserting a synthetic, locally specific, geographically rooted approach to structuring both society and identity, in the face of historical and contemporary forces that seek to erase or elide this specificity.

This is where such readings meet tangentially with ecocritical approaches. Although neither the novels nor my readings of them explicitly deal with

56 It is worth noting at this point that Djaout himself was an activist as well as a writer, of Berber descent, and because of his vocal support of secularism and critiques of militant Islamism, he was assassinated by the Armed Islamic Group (Groupe Islamique Armée, al-Jamā'a al-Islamīya al-Musallaha) in 1993.

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"environmental" issues, both novels foreground landscape in order to emphasize the relationship between culture and environment, and to integrate local topographical understanding into wider questions of postcolonial identity. Both are evoking a new type of ecosystem, one in which culture, memory, and history are as integral as plants, animals, and minerals. *Le Silence de la forêt* is implicitly suggesting an "ecosystem" view of both the African equatorial rainforest and postcolonial African society: although the coarse and cynical preadventure Gonaba views the forest as very far from "civilization," way out at the end of the road, the implication at the end of the novel is that the forest and its inhabitants are an integral part of Centrafrican identity—the perception has shifted from their being literally marginal to being included in a widened view of the whole. In *L'invention du désert*, the spatial disorientation of the desert, its ability to resist measurements and markers, as well as its geological time frame, point to a way of thinking about the region that both spans beyond any particular historical period and also questions the act of periodization itself. In content and form, both novels call for balance, familiarity with and respect for the natural environment, and a view of human history that is inseparable from the particular topography in question.

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