‘Abdellatif Laâbi, ‘la chair vive du poème’ : Reading ‘Race’ through Fanon

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For Abdellatif Laâbi, poetry itself is an act of revolt. At least at the time of his work with *Souffles*, the revolutionary Moroccan avant-garde journal which ran from 1966 to 1972, Laâbi conceives poetic writing as an incisive affirmation of resistance against political dogmatism and cultural atavism, as the expression of an ongoing struggle against oppression and stagnation in post-independence Morocco. As he insists in a speech at a conference on Arab poetry held in Beirut in 1970, ‘the poetic act is a totalising one’, which denounces and destroys the stultifying politics and culture of both colonialism and neo-colonialism, and which inscribes nothing less than a new reality with both its imagery and its form.[i] Indeed, he insists, revolution and poetry depend on one another: the innovative inspiration offered by poetry is the breath of life, but without a commitment to revolution, poetry would represent only stagnation and death. Yet Laâbi’s vision of poetry as revolution is expressed not only through his vilification of contemporary cultural ideology in Morocco and in his commitment to the explosion and splintering of verse forms. At the same time, he articulates a singular conception of the poem as the record of flesh and blood, not so much a representation of physical suffering caused by oppression but a more direct expression, through the breath, of the wound, of the sickness of the body deprived of freedom of expression. Furthermore, the poet seeks not so much to portray physical experience, rather, the body itself dictates the poem: ‘the body becomes a sort of epicentre, a crater which communicates to all faculties, including the one executing the poem, its repeated jolts, which spread their volcanic flows across the blank page’.[ii] Laâbi’s own poetry during the *Souffles* period, as it is represented in particular in the volume *Le Règne de barbarie*, published a little later in 1976, achieves its disturbing power through this attempt to release the body from the political and cultural

constraints imposed upon it, here figured precisely through corporeal injury, and through the invention of a language not just representing the body, but directly emitting from it as it responds to and rages against its attackers.

This article seeks to theorise Laâbi's capturing of bodily expression first of all through the lens of his engagement with the work of Frantz Fanon, whose influence Laâbi references in several of his essays in *Souffles* as well as in the poetry itself. Fanon's denunciation of the historical and epidermal racial schemata in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) demands, I suggest, a vision of cultural expression that would precisely allow the body to invent its own language in order to refute the alienation created by the white man's mirage. Laâbi's citations from Fanon calling for the reinvention of national culture in the wake of decolonisation are accompanied by imagery also reminiscent of Fanon's writing, of bodily disintegration and of a reintegration accomplished by giving expression to the body's sensations, movements, and secretions. This corporeal imagery can also be found in the work of Laâbi's contemporaries, including for example Mohamed Khaïr-Eddine, or Jean Sénac in Algeria, yet in Laâbi's case the language is still more guttural, infused with bodily sounds as well as with references to bodily experience.[iii] The second part of my discussion will offer a reading of one of Laâbi's most visceral and indeed Fanonian poems, 'Race', now printed in *Le Règne de barbarie*. While 'Race' at one point explicitly names Fanon, it also comprehensively traces in terms reminiscent of Fanon's thought the corporeal destruction effected by the neo-colonial order, and unashamedly records the contribution of bodily experience to the coming into being of the poem. Laâbi's poetry calls for revolution by adopting the language and capturing the texture of corporeal suffering, and by giving expression to the oppressed body throwing off its constraints. His poetics therefore in many ways achieves what Fanon envisioned in his essay on the reinvention of national culture in Algeria, and what remained an aspiration in *Peau noire,* though Fanon never quite found this

embodied poetics in action or through sustained reading.[iv] Laâbi's poetics of the body in revolt can be construed as a compelling performance and extension of Fanon's aesthetics.

As a psychiatrist, philosopher**,** and political thinker, Fanon always situated the body at the centre of human perception and experience. Heavily influenced by Merleau-Ponty, whose lectures he attended as a graduate student in Lyon, Fanon conceived the body not only as the foundation of human perception, but also as the origin of expression: language springs from the movement of the body, from breath or gesture. The destructiveness of the 'white mask' forced upon the black man in *Peau noire, masques blancs* is therefore the result of its severing of body and representation. The epidermal racial schema imposes on the black man's body an image that he cannot recognise, and the resulting alienation provokes a series of physical violations, as Fanon writes in the startling chapter 'The Lived Experience of the Black Man', 'an amputation, an excision, a haemorrhage that spattered my whole body with black blood'.[v] The child's interpellation of the black man with the brutal cry, "Dirty nigger!" or simply, "Look, a negro!", inflicts a wound that resists healing while displaying itself in the form of scabs of black blood encrusted on the skin.[vi] Carrie Noland's analysis of Fanon in *Agency and Embodiment* aptly pinpoints the effect of this interruption to the subject's apprehension of his body, as she describes the destruction of the relation between the body and the world it inhabits and perceives: 'it is precisely an ability to feel the body poised or moving through space (a body *schema*) that the black subject lacks. To exist solely as a legible surface without depth, as a black skin without cutaneous sensation, is the *"malédiction corporelle"* – the embodied curse – of the *racialized* body'.[vii] The narrating persona of Fanon's *Peau noire* for this reason seeks an expression of resistance by affirming the power of his body, still tentatively in the text, but through imagery such as that of the reclaiming of breath: 'my chest has the power to expand without limit'.[viii] The quotations from poets such as Aimé Césaire, moreover, are those that articulate the cry of suffering

black bodies. Fanon's search for this embodied cultural expression admittedly remains for the most part frustrated: he laments the negritude poets' use of stereotype, and the persona at the end of the chapter breaks down in tears. As Noland also suggests, however, the tears may nevertheless signify the return to the 'involuntary, autonomous body' closer to an integrated expression of bodily experience.

In *Les Damnés de la terre* (1961), as well as in Fanon's psychiatric and political writings, it is clear that colonialism in Algeria too has a destructive effect on the body, demonstrated by the manifold physical symptoms displayed by Fanon's patients. The dream of anticolonial liberation is figured in turn by the unconstrained movement of the body: 'I dream I am jumping, swimming, running, and climbing. I dream I burst out laughing, I am leaping across a river and chased by a pack of cars that never catches up with me'.[ix] Revealingly, moreover, Césaire is again quoted in *Les Damnés* for his poetry of resistance, this time conceived by Fanon to be articulated more convincingly by the Rebelle of *Et les chiens se taisaient* (1946) through the act of killing the slave master. The Rebelle's assumption of his act at the same time announces the implication of the physical body in the expression of revolt: 'I with my revolt and my poor clenched fists and my bushy head'.[x] The Rebelle's affirmation of resistance takes place both through the gesture of the murder and through his assertion of his embodied subject position in language. It is perhaps no coincidence here that Fanon most appreciates Césaire's theatrical work, where oral performance and the physical presence of the actor on stage constitute a poetic form most explicitly embedded in bodily expression. This again anticipates Laâbi's aesthetics, since he too conceives of theatre as a bodily performance, accomplished in his three plays published together, later on, in *Rimbaud et Shéhérazade*.[xi]

Laâbi's engagement with Fanon's thinking is extensive. In his essays printed in the early issues of *Souffles*, Laâbi clearly draws on and develops several of Fanon's arguments in

Les Damnés de la terre while transferring them to the new context of 1960s Morocco and the Maghreb. In his 'Prologue' to the first issue, Laâbi condemns the complicity of contemporary cultural and intellectual work with the sclerotic national culture sanctioned by the post-independence regime. Just as Fanon vilified the atavism of bourgeois intellectual culture during the Algerian War of Independence in 'Sur la culture nationale', here too Laâbi denounces the stultifying acquiescence of contemporary culture.[xii] In the second issue, Laâbi goes on to insist on the importance of the creation of a new national culture in the wake of decolonisation, one more closely allied to the lived experience of the people, in a vocabulary that also quite clearly echoes that of Fanon in his insistence on a culture that articulates the lived reality of the masses. Most explicitly, perhaps, in issue four, dedicated wholly to the question of national culture, Laâbi laments the failure of Moroccan society to fulfil Fanon's vision for the decolonised nation, as 'Fanon's insights have had no afterword', since, 'whether real, partial, or skin-deep, decolonization has produced a still-born new man reeling from political takeovers and his new responsibilities'.[xiii] If Fanon insisted that decolonisation was nothing less than the 'creation of new men', Laâbi here remarks acerbically that these new men were never born.[xiv] Throughout, Laâbi like Fanon affirms that political and cultural struggle must come hand in hand, and that the recovery of national culture is a holistic process involving thought, flesh, perception, and language. Fanon's vocabulary of the creation of a 'peau neuve' in the conclusion to *Les Damnés de la terre* figures again in Laâbi's essay in issue six, published in 1968. Later, issue fifteen's title 'pour la révolution palestinienne' clearly echoes Fanon's formulation 'pour la révolution africaine' in the volume of that name.[xv]

Yet if Laâbi's references to Fanon in his *Souffles* articles stress the importance of cultural revolution as a source of innovation, as well as the necessity of constructing that cultural revolution in dialogue with the people's lived experience, the embodied poetics

sketched by Fanon and referenced above is also given expression here. Laâbi notably theorises poetry as oral expression, and indeed his own poems are written to be performed out loud.[xvi] And this oral quality already brings the body into play in the poetry's coming to life. Oral expression starts, as the journal's title suggests, with the breath, associated at the same time with inspiration and with life, as well as with pre-linguistic and embodied utterance. The breath is at the same time at once the body's sigh of lament or relief, and a most primal marker of its vitality. As Kenza Sefrioui also suggests, the Arabic version of *Souffles, Anfâs,* also evokes '*nafs*, the soul, the essence, the vital principle, even the person, the individual', so that breath here is etymologically connected with life and subjectivity.[xvii] Poetry is also compared, in the 'Prologue' to *Souffles 1*, to a cry, again an unmediated and visceral expression. In Laâbi's words, 'poetry is all that is left to man to reclaim his dignity, to avoid sinking into the multitude, so that his outcry forever carries the imprint and attestation of his inspiration [souffle]'.[xviii] The cry, then, is the vocalisation of breath, and for Laâbi the new poetry of national culture should give expression to this life force of the people in defiance of their oppression. While Fanon too stressed the organic link between poetry and the life of the people, and indeed, argued in *Peau noire* that revolt becomes essential at the very moment when it becomes 'impossible for him to breathe', Laâbi here conceptualises more fully the fusion between subversive literary creation and the life of the body.[xix] Fanon's citations from the negritude poets similarly foreground the breath and the cry, since, although he was critical of Senghor's apparent essentialism, Fanon notes how for him the rhythm of poetry mimics the breath, speeding up and slowing down with the subject's actions and emotions. Laâbi's conceptualisation of poetry as 'souffle' and 'cri' both crystallises and develops Fanon's intimations of a form of expression triggered by the expansion of the chest, referred to earlier, and the seizing of bodily agency.

This conception of poetry as breath and cry, trace and marker of the suffering but resistant body, is explored in several essays in the early years of *Souffles* as well as in Laâbi's poems themselves. Alongside Laâbi himself, many of his colleagues and critical commentators at the same time expand on that initial and primal breath or utterance to dramatise the ability of the poem to follow through the breath and to give voice to other forms of bodily expression. Later, the critic Marc Gontard observes in his discussion of Laâbi's 'terror in writing' that 'at the origins of speech, there is the breath and the constraints of articulation. All speech (in the oral sense) exists first of all as a physiological act', and this physiological gesture is translated in Laâbi's work at once as the sigh of exhalation and as all the marks, movements, and traces of the injured body displaying its pain.[xx] Laâbi's colleague and friend at *Souffles*, Mostafa Nissaboury, moreover, in a letter which follows Laâbi's 'Prologue' in the first issue, argues that, 'poetry is only poetry if it is synonymous with flesh, blood, sweat, and dribble', as if the poet's utterance must contain these physiological traces, signs of the body under duress.[xxi] In addition, in issue three, Ahmed Bouanani's discussion of popular Moroccan poetry emphasises the influence of the oral tradition, that of itinerant singers, for example, and representatives of tribal communities, and insists again on the participation of the body and of the material world in the declamation of the poem, as the speaker also performs through movement and addresses the physical environment.[xxii] In the speech at the Beirut conference, printed in *Le Règne de barbarie* and cited above, Laâbi himself again stresses that, in the struggle against oppression, 'there remains our voices', but also 'there also remain each person's body, the tone of his cry'.[xxiii] In defiance of these references to the downtrodden body, moreover, Laâbi at the same time insists that his poetry also celebrates life, corporeal agency and enjoyment: 'laughter, orgasm, heresy'.

It is no doubt significant that in the same essay, Laâbi again references Fanon, alongside poets such as Aimé Césaire and René Depestre, also in turn theorised by Fanon as

inventors of an embodied poetics of resistance. Yet if Laâbi in his own poetry succeeds, as we shall see, in capturing something of the body's expression as Fanon sought to imagine it, in his critical thought it is Kateb Yacine whom he reads as one of the most viscerally explosive writers of North African decolonisation. Fanon's analysis of Algerian national culture notably betrays a lack of familiarity with the highly experimental work being done by Algerian writers at the time of decolonisation, and he famously cites the poem 'Aube Africaine' by Guinean poet Keïta Fodéba as an apt example of writing embedded in combat, rather than any local Algerian writers. Fanon's lack of reference to writers such as Kateb shows that his theory of national culture is more a product of his imagination than the result of a thorough engagement with contemporary Algerian cultural production. Alongside his own poetry, however, Laâbi's whole-hearted immersion in North African culture during and in the wake of decolonisation enables him to translate and develop parts of Fanon's vision of cultural resistance in his readings of major subversive figures such as Kateb. While Fanon valorised Fodéba's precise and direct depiction of colonial injustice because he perceived that this form served closely to reflect the reality of individual suffering, Laâbi is able to appreciate too that Kateb's far more challenging, elliptical, and experimental style nevertheless captures organic experience. Kateb's rejection of aesthetic convention in his highly allusive *Le Polygone étoilé*, for example, is itself a visceral expression of resistance. Once again, Laâbi conceives Kateb's style as not so much a form of representation but as a much more embodied significatory explosion: 'the irruption of total, raw lived experience, the ORGANIC expression of a non-divided existence'.[xxiv] The writing itself is 'a way to react physically', achieved not perhaps, as Fanon saw in Fodéba's poem, through the use of direct realism, but through the explosive disruption of chronology, the use of flashback and allusion, testifying to traumatic experience and to a restless commitment to questioning.

Despite this appreciation of Kateb's volcanic style, however, Laâbi tentatively hints at the end of the essay that this style can nevertheless come across as a little 'calculated'. If Kateb's writing is highly challenging in its disrupted form and its call for both political and aesthetic revolution, Laâbi's poetry perhaps captures a still harsher, more embodied, more guttural sound than Kateb does in either his novels or his poetry, and in this way perhaps comes closer to a fusion between verbal and corporeal language. As I mentioned earlier, Laâbi's poems are created in order to be read out loud; their disrupted rhythms are best conveyed by the speaker's breath and their stuttering sounds best materialised in the textures of the voice. Moreover, the poems are not merely oral forms, they are forms that demand that the speaker declaims, shouts, and cries, as critics such as Xavier Grall and Kenza Sefrioui have observed.[xxv] Again, if Fanon angrily asserted in his 'Lettre à un Français', printed in *Pour la révolution africaine*, 'I want my voice to be harsh, I don't want it to be beautiful, I don't want it to be pure', Laâbi's poetic voice too is harsh and scratchy, allowing pain and humiliation to resonate through the uneven sound patterns.[xxvi] And indeed, the early volume *Le Règne de barbarie* foregrounds this vocal texture most palpably, as its title also indicates. While 'barbarie' refers on one level to the oppressive authoritarianism of Hassan II's regime as well as to the lingering effects of the colonial system, on another level it designates a foreign form of speech deemed uncivilised to the untrained or colonial ear. As Laura Lonsdale has argued in her analysis of multilingualism and modernity in Spanish and American writing, barbarism can be deployed in modern literature as a form of subversive disruption, presenting, in Brett Nielson's terms '"an iterative disturbance (*baba*)", which prevents sameness from getting too comfortable'.[xxvii] Dramatising this process, Laâbi's volume deliberately invents and performs what might have been conceived as barbaric speech, bringing the stammering and muttering of the oppressed into a poetry that captures the body's expression of suffering, as well, intermittently, of its joys. Lines and even words

are severed in the middle, for example, as if to mimic the body's struggle to organise its experience into standardised form.

As Max Nelson argues, moreover, this infiltration of poetic language with 'unfamiliar growls and scrapes' is a crucial aspect of Laâbi's critical, ethical vision: 'it's a sign of decency, humility, and civility to be able to unmake one's language, to recognize one's own spoken or written tongue as no less of a guttural, hissed-out, scraped together thing than any other.'[xxviii] Laâbi's use of verbal texture is no mere wordplay, then, but a consecration of forms of speech that the colonial regime would have denigrated and mocked. At the same time, it is also an affirmation of humanity in the face of a regime of dehumanisation, it records the experiences of bodies that the regime sought to control, to silence, or even eradicate. Even more, Laâbi's inscription of the body into his poetic language can be construed as the starting point for a recognition of and acceptance of other human bodies. Penelope Ingram has read Fanon's 'resignification of the visual grammar of the body' in *Peau noire, masques blancs* as a rejection of transcendental, representative language in favour of material language.[xxix] This rejection in turn challenges the tendency to assimilate divergent bodies into a preconceived framework, and as a consequence must give space to the multiple ways in which different bodies produce their own significations. Laâbi's endeavour to capture corporeal expression, a language that in Ingram's terms can be construed as significatory rather than representational, is also an attestation of human singularity and vulnerability among other human bodies.

Laâbi's lengthy and incendiary poem 'Race' in *Le Règne de barbarie* can be seen to dramatise both his engagement with and development of Fanon, and this embodied language of resistance and ethical critique. The poem was first published in the Collection Atlantes, a series run by *Souffles*, in 1967, and its significance is also strengthened by the context of the Arab Defeat against the Israelis after the six day war in June of that year. The title itself is

rich in signification and offers a way into the poetic reflection undertaken in the main body of the poem. Abdelkebir Khatibi may have pointed out in a discussion of 'Race' in a review printed in *Souffles* that Laâbi's concept of race was so broad, indeed so universal, that it no longer meant anything (though he nevertheless praises the poem's re-appropriation of body and memory).[xxx] Yet while Khatibi was unsure about Laâbi's use of the term 'race', its implied universalism is precisely the poet's objective: he seeks both to denounce the violence of racist thinking, and to offer a vision of human corporeality and experience that would far exceed the sorts of boundaries that racial categorisation seeks to impose. From this point of view, Laâbi's concept of 'race' can be understood once again to be indebted to Fanon, who also denounces the destructive association between racial stereotyping and bodily violence, but whose conclusion to *Peau noire* envisions a universalist celebration of human self-creation that supersedes any concept of racial identity. Laâbi's concept is also ethically oriented in ways that chime with Ingram's discussion referenced above in its embrace of multiple human bodies creating their own meanings instead of being stifled by the schemas grafted upon them by colonial discourses. Moreover, Mohammed Belmaïzi has offered an illuminating reading of the significance of the Arabic subtexts of Laâbi's writing, and has shown that 'race' is, first, translated into Arabic as 'sulala', connoting at the same time 'masse (d'argile)' ['a mass (of clay)'], and which suggests to me a material form for modelling and remodelling.[xxxi] Secondly, the phoneme 'R', according to Belmaïzi, is suggestive of 'la plongée' ['diving'] or 'l'immersion' ['immersion'], and by extrapolation to 'la boue' ['mud'], again suggesting a mining of the concept of race and rebuilding out of raw materials. Finally, Belmaïzi shows that the term 'race' contains the phoneme for 'tête' in Moroccan Arabic, a theme picked up through the poem with references to considered intelligence as opposed to thoughtless ideology, conceived nevertheless as inseparable from physiology.

Laâbi's poem is littered with damaged bodies, presented as jumbled body parts, the detritus of oppressive thinking. The opening lines stress the isolation of destroyed bodies, material presences usually excluded from literature, art, and intellectual thought, scattered carelessly as if they were passive objects:

nos corps Ramassis de traumatismes De greffes suppurantes
désorganisés
notre marche téléguidée Rebuts de galaxies et de tertres
Nous ne sommes pas les humains auréolés du Livre, de l'Art et de l'Esprit

our bodies Mishmash of traumas Of festering transplants
disorganised
our remote-controlled journey Scraps of knolls and galaxies
We are not the haloed humans of the Book, of Art and Spirit.[xxxii]

Laâbi's figuring here of chaotically strewn, traumatised bodies serves precisely to inscribe in poetic form the textures that literary language usually fails to represent. At the same time, the fractured form of the passage mimics the way in which violence destroys solidarity at the same time as it eradicates the victim's sense of bodily completion and integrity. Moreover, Laâbi uses sound to suggest a guttural form of expression, as alliteration and assonance foreground vocal texture even as the images resist composing themselves into an ordered and aestheticized portrait. The repetition of the 's' sound as well as the phonetic echoing between terms in the phrase 'ramassis de traumatismes' conveys trauma through a 'barbaric' vocal stuttering. Imagery and form in extracts such as

this perform an expressiveness that disrupts the representational security sanctioned by ‘les humains auréolés’ [‘haloed humans’].

Passages such as this, capturing corporeal destruction with both image and sound, give way at the same time to visions of uprising, to evocations of resistance as well as efforts to construct a form of unity out of the scattered oppressed bodies whose traces the poem also records. Throughout much of the poem, these aspirations are figured in tension with ongoing and insistent references to corporeal violence, as if the poetics of embodied resistance must always bear the mark of the body’s suffering. The short broken lines of this passage on the second page of the poem again evoke a form of stuttering, a fractured language of cries and defiance:

je crie
ma race monte
    et d’une chair condamnée
un ghetto de nattaires
un avortement
    ma race
racé ma race

I shout
my race is on the rise
    and of a condemned flesh
a ghetto of straw mats
an abortion
    my race

risen my race.[xxxiii]

While the severing of lines mimics the violation of oppressed bodies here, at the same time the imagery of uprising is figured by the typography of the poem in the shape of a column and in the building of momentum between references to 'ma race'. This uprising recalls the end of Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* with its appeal to the rising of the dove ('monte, Colombe / monte / monte / monte' ['rise, Dove / rise / rise / rise']), which also builds a vision of human solidarity out of a material bonding this time with the earth.[xxxiv] In addition, the uprising again at times draws closely on the body's potential power, 'le ressort d'un muscle qui bat / la chair vive' ['the resilience of the muscle that throbs / living flesh'], recalling Fanon's invocations of muscular energy in his call for anticolonial activism in *Les Damnés de la terre*.[xxxv] The extract above finishes, moreover, with the word play of 'racé ma race', the repetition in the sound again drawing attention to the voice, whilst the 'racé' connotes ironically the idea of racial purity. While curt, staccato lines such as these function as a sort of call, however, passages more like prose with inserted blank spaces betray a more confused dwelling in the history of violence and the search for 'le langage oui le langage' ['language yes language'] which might do justice to that history.[xxxvi] The faster rhythm of these prose-like passages also inscribes the speaker's pauses of breath through the insertion of blank spaces between images.

Resistance seems to emerge through the poem precisely through such an appeal to language. Evoking his own craft, the poet addresses 'ma race' directly and insists, 'j'ai clamé tes yeux pervers / j'ai retracé tes cycles à rebours' ['I declared your eyes perverse / I retraced your cycles backwards'], referring to the perception of racial hierarchy by literally invoking the eyes, and noting his own project to give voice to the disfigurement caused by racial discourse and to retrace its history.[xxxvii] Again, this attempt more directly to express the body

oppressed by the discourse of race welds imagery and form, as once again, sound, rhythm and oral performance conspire to bring a new form of expression. The poet invokes, 'tambour / tambourin/ je vérifie mon corps' ['drum/ tambourine/ I validate my body'], as if the drum and tambourine capture the rhythm of both poem and body and serve to give it a truer existence.[xxxviii] In a particularly climactic passage, moreover, the poet calls to Atlantis, antagonist to Athens, as a figure of resistance whose name Laâbi also used for the short-lived publishing house he set up, and which published his first editions of the poem and *L'Oeil et la nuit* (1969). But once again, in the poem he seeks to rescue the figure of Atlantis from abstract myth and to associate it rather with a language that again can give voice to the oppressed:

Atlantide
que je te démythologise
te resurge éruptif
du fin fond de la condamnation païenne
te remerge en race parlante
en race déplaceuse
tu ne tatoueras les achipels de svastikas
tu ne tueras point
voix des morts.

Atlantis
let me demythologise you
vulcanise you
from the depths of pagan condemnation

may you resurface as an eloquent race

a cosmopolitan race

you shall not tattoo the achipelagos with swastikas

you shall not kill

the voices of the dead.[xxxix]

Here the image of volcanic eruption, highly reminiscent of Césaire, connotes an unmediated and visceral explosion, as if the poem enacts this uncontrolled resurgence rather than reinscribing resistance in mythologised form. This resurgence will give birth, moreover, to a 'race parlante', a humanity able to express itself in its own terms, diverse and connected ('déplaceuse'), and attentive to lost voices rather than committed to 'tattooing' or grafting representations on bodies in the manner of National Socialism (referenced through the swastika). Here again, the rhythm of brusque resurgence is captured by the placing of key phrases, such as 'te résurge éruptif', on a separate line to the right of the page, emerging to disrupt the flow of the previous lines.

Laâbi's search for a visceral language of resistance more specifically, however, also demands an overhaul of this dangerous concept of 'race'. Scattered throughout the poem are occasional references to Arab culture, as if Laâbi is seeking particularly to rescue Arab peoples from destructive racial stereotyping, though at the same time these references are figured as starting-points for dynamic self-definition rather than as essentialising markers. The poetic voice wonders, for example, 'étais-je totem / menhir saharien / ou cette corporelle éclaircie de la foudre' ['was I a totem/ a saharan standing stone / or this corporeal burst of lightening'], and here the image of a monument fixed in territory is rejected in favour of the paradoxical image of the body as a flash of lightening, connoting explosion, energy, and movement.[xl] Laâbi also references, for example, the son of Aïssaoua,

a mystical brotherhood originating from Meknes, here called to 'épaulez/ mon ciel chaviré' ['help hold up/ my falling sky'], as well as Aïcha Qandicha, an at once mythological and popular female figure with hooves thought to seduce men in order to kill them. In both cases, the figures are drawn in to conspire in the poet's activity of resistance, to join his movement ('ruez ruez' ['rush rush'] or substantiate his voice ('j'aboie' ['I howl']. Drawing on but also re-energising Arab culture, then, Laâbi for the most part seeks to connect it with a universal human fraternity, again portrayed as physically dynamic, human bodies in action against abstract discourses of oppression: 'ma fraternité se meut décharge scandante de toutes frontières Déracinant le mal du corps inaudible' ['my brotherhood moves chanting for the dismissal of all borders Uprooting evil from the inaudible body'].[xli] While Salah Stétié beautifully evokes the poet's own body, 'a poetry of a man in motion, walking, loving, suffering, gesticulating, ranting, laughing, attacking, loving once more', this extract also recognises the poet's place among other human beings moving and expressing themselves freely.[xlii] In another passage the poet's blood, moreover, is not racialized but 'cosmogonic', a form of cosmic matter and not determined by any oppressive categorisation.[xliii]

This vision of the body's belonging in the wider material universe reveals another dimension in its resignification. Again, the recognition and expression of corporeal materiality occurs in tandem with an increased awareness of the body's situation in the physical world, echoing and indeed anticipating once again Aimé Césaire and his invocations of the poet's immersion in the elements (most famously, before Laâbi, in *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, but most consistently in his 1985 volume, *Moi, laminaire…*). Laâbi's speaker invokes an 'ailleurs', beyond the demarcated territory of oppression, but addressing the material elements of the cosmos: 'ailleurs / articulée au-delà d'un geste météorite qui strangule le cercle' [elsewhere / articulated beyond a meteor gesture that strangles the

circle'].[xliv] This is not so much an imagined universe that transcends the poet's own environment, however, as an embrace of cosmic materiality that infuses also the poet's body as he writes:

v'la que je remonte les racines
de la cognée où je saigne
ailleurs
giclée de naphte sur l'écrit
corps
comme un séisme localisé
mains de sourciers auxquelles poussent des lance-flammes.

here I am re-climbing the roots
of the fight where I bleed
elsewhere
a burst of naptha on the writing
body
like a contained earthquake
hands of water diviners become flame-throwers.[xlv]

As in Césaire's poetry, the earthquake is figured here as a seism in the body, an emission of energy directed at the same time, once again, to resistance in the form of the flame thrower. Later in the poem, moreover, Laâbi again picks up on Césaire's imagery of uprising at the end of the *Cahier*, as the poem's movement towards crescendo is mimicked by the rising up of the elements: 'monte la montagne verte et tourbillonne / monte monte la marée sans arche

de futur' ['the green and whirling mountain rises / the tide rises rises without the future's ark'].[xlvi] The movement here is also succeeded by a jolt in consciousness ('va ma raison' [go consciousness of mine'][xlvii], which triggers in turn the hand that writes ('va / ma main équateur / ancre d'équinoxes' ['go / equator hand of mine / anchor of equinoxes'].[xlviii] Here again the line breaks also echo the disruptive movement and translate it into a series of jolts in the speaker's breath.

Towards the end of the poem, this fusion of poem, body, and material world is encapsulated by repeated cries responding to the memory of oppression, invoking suffering bodies and geological activity as well as condemning the stifling of expressions of resistance. At the poem's climax, the song of Umm Kalthum, whose voice is representative of Arab peoples, leads in the end into these nonverbal cries, as if to enact the correspondence between verbal poetry and both corporeal language and the physical world. The poet exhorts, for example, 'cri de Continent le tam-tam nous couvre des voix' ['cry of the Continent as the gong covers us with voices'][xlix], as if the land too joins in this rhythmical expostulation. He also conjures a 'cri coulée mienne incandescente' ['cry incandescent flow of mine'],[l] as if the cry too flows from him like lava, though it also floods the planet in such a way as to figure its containment: 'cri je noierai cette planète d'une poésie asphyxiante' ['cry I will drown this planet with an asphyxiating poem'].[li] The closing lines of the poem bring together in startling proximity the earth, the body, the cry, and the breath, as if by breathing into both body and land the poem offers them resuscitation, and affirms life above all. The section is dense with resonant imagery and worth quoting at length:

Terre Terre

l'écheveau phallique de mes racines

la grappe vénéneuse

syntaxe de ma lymphe

racines mutantes d’hommes

je déflore ce corps inouï qui remerge

lui inculque une respiration

le meus

à l’image d’une création juste et violente

nommément

g e n è s e

par le cri

biologie sidérale

corps mien

qui va vivre

se répandre

se défendre

inaltérable

en sa première geste

Earth Earth

the phallic tangle of my roots

the poisonous agglomeration

syntax of my lymph

the mutant roots of men

I deflower this unusual body that re-emerges
instill breath into it
animate it
with the image of a righteous and violent creation
namely
g e n e s i s
by the cry
sidereal biology
body of mine
that will live
spread
and defend itself
unchangeable
in its first gesture[lii]

Here, then, the Earth is profoundly entangled with the poet's biology, and seems to contribute to the reinvigoration of the body. The creation of the Earth (genesis) is also associated now with the creation of the body, but also with poetic creation and with the uttering of the cry. The insertion of spaces within the very term 'g e n è s e' is suggestive of a recreation born out of destruction, as the poem too indexes life even as it tracks violence and brutality. The concluding image, moreover, of the body defending itself is aptly reflected in the creation of the poem itself, an act of expression produced by the body, recording its suffering and seeking to articulate its sounds, textures, and movements. The 'première geste' resonates again with the breath, with the inaugural gesture that summons life. 'Race' in this way summons a reintegration of language, body, and world in such a way as to stand up precisely

to the corporeal alienation and disintegration theorised by Fanon and to affirm corporeal agency through gesture, breath, and speech. If, as Carrie Noland argued, Fanon's persona began to discover a reintegrated form of expression when he broke down in tears at the end of 'The Lived Experience of the Black Man', Laâbi pursues this expressiveness much more fully in this aesthetics of corporeal and cosmic materiality.

Yet if 'Race', like Fanon's work, rejects racial discourse and addresses multiple experiences of human suffering, and if the poem gives voice to the body of the poet precisely as one body among many vulnerable bodies, it at the same time hints at its own fragility. Indeed, in the very lines where he refers to Fanon, the poet confesses, 'je gis /

paléolithique imberbe / tu le savais Fanon / dos à dos / chacun pour soi' ['I lie / a hairless Neanderthal / Fanon you knew it well / back to back / everyone for themselves'].[liii] Despite the references to wider histories of suffering, the poet is aware of the risk of falling into solipsism – a risk also acutely felt by Césaire, noted in the *Cahier* and dramatized by tragic figures such as the Rebelle in *Et les chiens se taisaient* and Christophe in *La Tragédie du roi Christophe*.[liv] As Valerie Orlando has noted, moreover, despite the urgency of the demand issued by *Souffles* to bring cultural renewal, its readership was ultimately limited and it never achieved the impact on the wider population that its authors envisioned.[lv] Laâbi himself confesses too that he and his colleagues were more interested in the quality of their work than in their addressees, and no doubt his poetry never quite spoke to or represented the people in the way that he hoped.[lvi] The poem's visceral cry is here less an affirmation of victory than an uncertain, even desperate call, the trace of an experience of suffering that might not be heard more broadly and might be drowned out by the cacophony of oppressive discourses. 'Race' in the end reveals the vulnerability of the poetic voice despite its attempts to voice resistance in the name of suffering humanity. Laâbi may, as Maurice Chavardes insists, have imagined that, 'the poet is not only the voice but the very flesh of the oppressed',

but he never comfortably adopts the role of speaking for other people or leading their revolt through his writing.[lvii] The poet's body as it is inscribed in the poem may be one of many suffering bodies, but its self-expression is at the same time contingent and may fail to achieve the communication the poet also evidently desires.

Conceived in the light of his later incarceration between 1972 and 1980, largely due to the subversive activities of *Souffles*, however, Laâbi's embodied poetics acquires a new significance not only as a statement of revolt but also as one of survival. Laâbi notes that writing remained crucial to him during his imprisonment, and the representation of his experiences in prison and after his release, for example in *Le Chemin des ordalies*, is in itself an 'an elixir of resurrection'.[lviii] Giving expression to corporeal suffering as far back as *Le Règne de barbarie* is a means not only, then, to denounce an oppressive regime but also to insist simply, and profoundly, on bodily resilience and presence. When authoritarianism goes so far as to constrain and torment the body to the extent sanctioned by the prison system, the creation of an embodied poetics is also a highly personal inscription of corporeal suffering and protest. At the time of writing 'Race', Laâbi had not yet experienced the brutality that was to follow, but the force of that earlier poetics, though never recaptured in his later writings, is clearly highly resonant as a singular, personal expression of violation manifested through bodily functions and gestures. It is perhaps revealing that Fanon too wanted to speak in the name of all oppressed peoples, and yet his hardest hitting chapter, 'The Lived Experience of the Black Man', is his most highly personal. Laâbi too seems to want to achieve the wider relevance that Fanon sought in the humanist affirmations that fill the conclusions to both *Peau noire, masques blancs* and *Les Damnés de la terre*, and yet his poetry evokes what would turn out to be a very particular aesthetic, one that would speak in the end not so much to the suffering masses as to his own subsequent experiences of infringement and violation as well as of resistance. Laâbi's embodied poetics is undoubtedly

a call to arms to a vulnerable humanity but it is also very palpably the poet's singular search for a language able to translate in all its tonalities a personal cry of suffering and release.

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[i] The speech is printed in Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Règne de barbarie, suivi de poèmes oraux* (Gap: Inéditions Barbare, 1976) p. 145.
[ii] Ibid., p. 147.
[iii] See for example Jean Sénac, *Avant-corps, précédé de Poèmes iliaques et suivi de Diwân du Noûn* (Paris: Gallimard, 1968); Mohamed Khaïr-Eddine, *Corps négatif, suivi de Histoire d'un Bon Dieu* (Paris: Seuil, 1968).
[iv] Frantz Fanon, 'Sur la culture nationale', *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris : Seuil, 1991).
[v] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Seuil, 1995) p. 91 ; *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008) p. 85.
[vi] Ibid., p. 88; p. 82.
[vii] Carrie Noland, *Agency and Embodiment: Performing Gestures/Producing Culture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2009) p. 201.
[viii] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 91 ; p. 108.
[ix] Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre* (Paris: Seuil, 1991) p. 82; *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004) p. 15.
[x] Ibid., p. 119 ; p. 48.
[xi] Abdellatif Laâbi *Rimbaud et Shéhérazade* (Paris: Editions de la Différence, 2000).
[xii] Abdellatif Laâbi, 'Prologue', *Souffles I* (1966): 3-6.
[xiii] Abdellatif Laâbi, 'Réalités et dilemmes de la culture nationale', *Souffles 4* (1966) : 4-12 (p. 4) ; trans. Olivia Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2016) p. 61.
[xiv] Frantz Fanon, *Les Damnés de la terre*, p. 67 ; p. 40.
[xv] Abdellatif Laâbi, 'Réalités et dilemmes de la culture nationale', *Souffles 6* (1967) : 29-35 (p. 32).
[xvi] Laâbi himself made this point at a workshop in Oxford, 'Conversations with Abdellatif Laâbi', Maison française d'Oxford, 20th February 2018.
[xvii] See Kenza Sefrioui, *La Revue* Souffles *1966-72: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc* (Casablanca: Editions du Sirocco, 2013) p. 36.
[xviii] Abdellatif Laâbi, 'Prologue', *Souffles I* (1966): 3-6 (p. 6); trans. Olivia Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics*, p. 21.
[xix] Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs*, p. 183 ; p. 176.
[xx] Marc Gontard, *La Violence du texte : études sur la littérature marocaine de langue française* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1981) p. 29.
[xxi] Mostafa Nissaboury, letter to Abdellatif Laâbi, *Souffles 1* (1966) p. 8.
[xxii] Ahmed Bouanani, 'Introduction à la poésie populaire marocaine', *Souffles 3* (1966): 3-9.
[xxiii] Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Règne de barbarie, suivi de poèmes oraux* (Paris: Ineditions Barbare, 1976) p. 143.
[xxiv] Abdellatif Laâbi, 'A propos du *Polygone étoilé* de Kateb Yacine', *Souffles* 4 (1966) : 44-46 (p. 45).
[xxv] Grall writes, 'au fond, l'oeuvre de Laâbi, si modern soit-elle dans sa forme, relève de l'oralité. Elle trouve toute sa puissance d'être dite, d'être hurlée, dans les derbs sauvages du Maroc. See 'Conference de presse, brièvement' in Ghislain Ripault (ed.), *Pour Abdellatif Laâbi* (Paris: Nouvelles Editions Rupture, 1982) p. 12. Also, Sefrioui writes, 'il s'agit d'une

poésie à dire, à déclamer, à chanter voire à crier', in « Les Singes électroniques » (Souffles, n° 16-17 – 4e trimestre 1969 – janvier-février 1970): Un cri de révolte humaniste', *Expressions Maghrébines* 15.2 (2016): 105-121 (p. 117).

[xxvi] Frantz Fanon, 'Lettre à un Français', *Pour la révolution africaine: écrits politiques* (Paris: Editions de la Découverte, 2006), pp. 55-58 (p. 57) ; 'Letter to a Frenchman', *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967) pp. 57-60 (p. 59).

[xxvii] Laura Lonsdale, *Multilingualism and Modernity: Barbarisms in Spanish and American Literature* (London: Palgrave, 2018) p. 22. Lonsdale cites Brett Nielson, 'Barbarism/Modernity: Notes on Barbarism', *Textual Practice* 13.1 (1999): 79-95.

[xxviii] Max Nelson, 'Great Waves of Vigilance', *The Paris Review* (30th October, 2015), https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2015/10/30/great-waves-of-vigilance/.

[xxix] Penelope Ingram, *The Signifying Body: Toward an Ethics of Sexual and Racial Difference* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2008) p. 108.

[xxx] Abdelkebir Khatibi, 'Abdellatif Laâbi 'Race', E. M. Nissaboury 'plus haute mémoire', *Souffles* 13-14 (1969) p. 35.

[xxxi] Mohammed Belmaïzi, 'Introduction à la poétique d'Abdellatif Laâbi', *Expressions maghrébines* 15.2 (2016): 27-44.

[xxxii] Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Règne de barbarie* / *The Rule of Barbarism*, trans. André Naffis-Sahély (Brooklyn: Island Position, 2012) p. 84, p. 85.

[xxxiii] Ibid., p. 86, p. 87.

[xxxiv] Aimé Césaire, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, trans. Mireille Rosello (Newcastle: Bloodaxe Books, 1995) p. 134, p. 135.

[xxxv] Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Règne de barbarie*; *The Rule of Barbarism*, p. 86, p. 87.

[xxxvi] Ibid., p. 88, p. 89.

[xxxvii] Ibid., p. 98, p. 99.

[xxxviii] Ibid., p. 100, p. 101.

[xxxix] Ibid., p. 114, p. 115. I have changed 'you shall not tattoo the archipelagos of swastikas' in the published translation to 'you shall not tattoo the archipelagos with swastikas'.

[xl] Ibid., p. 94, p. 95.

[xli] Ibid., p. 114, p. 115.

[xlii] Salah Stétié in 'Conférence de presse, brièvement', in Ghislain Ripault (ed.), *Pour Abdellatif Laâbi*, p. 13.

[xliii] Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Règne de barbarie*; *The Rule of Barbarism*, p. 96, p. 97.

[xliv] Ibid., p. 102, p. 103.

[xlv] Ibid., p. 102, p. 103.

[xlvi] Ibid., p. 118, p. 119.

[xlvii] Ibid., p. 118, p. 119.

[xlviii] Ibid., p. 118, p. 119.

[xlix] Ibid., p. 122, p. 123.

[l] Ibid., p. 122, p. 123.

[li] Ibid., p. 122, p. 123.

[lii] Ibid., p. 128, p. 129.

[liii] Ibid., p. 110, p. 111.

[liv] For more on solipsism in these plays, see my *Decolonising the Intellectual: Politics, Culture, and Humanism at the End of the French Empire* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014).

[lv] She argues, 'their ideology had little or no audience because their discourse was contained within university campuses'. See Valerie Orlando, *Francophone Voices of the "New*

Morocco" in Film and Print: (Re)presenting a Society in Transition (New York: Palgrave, 2009) p. 53.

[lvi] See 'Entretien: Abdellatif Laâbi', in Kenza Sefrioui, *La Revue* Souffles *1966-1973: Espoirs de révolution culturelle au Maroc*, p. 284.

[lvii] Maurice Chavardes in 'Conférence de presse, brièvement', in Ghislain Ripault (ed.), *Pour Abdellatif Laâbi*, p. 11.

[lviii] Abdellatif Laâbi, *La Brûlure des interrogations: entretiens réalisés par Jacques Alessandra* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1985) p. 33. See also Abdellatif Laâbi, *Le Chemin des ordalies* (Paris: Denoël, 1983).