Chapter 11

Multilingual Academics in a Global World and the Burden of Responsibility

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I was born and raised in Morocco, a rich contact zone crisscrossed for centuries by Arab, Berber, African, and European travelers through linguistic and cultural lines. I grew up speaking Arabic and French, which, at first, resulted in an intense moment of displacement not only at the levels of phonology, lexis, syntax, and graphology, but also in terms of values and worldviews. However, I must admit that—as the French language gradually made its way into my intellectual consciousness, like a pharmakon—things began to take a different dimension. When I was eight, the fables of La Fontaine already occupied a good part of my memory and a few years later, the works of Victor Hugo, Emile Zola, Honoré de Balzac, Molière, Racine, Camus, and Sartre firmly expanded the French linguistic and cultural territory in my imagination and made the Arabic literary tradition, the Koran, and the sayings of Prophet Muhammad look sadly outdated in an emerging modern Morocco. Little by little, I started to drift away from the folk wisdom of my mother and grandparents, which seemed more and more remote and archaic, and soon found myself moving away from the narrow alleys, the squares, and the marketplaces in my hometown Fes to imaginary places in Paris.

In college I developed a keen sense of awareness of the difficult historical circumstances that made me part of a universal colonial project
that gave itself the authority to name and “civilize” its colonial subjects in Africa, Asia, and South America. Most of the colonial literary works that I studied in college, like E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim*, or Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* portrayed the colonial subjects of Europe as foxy, untrustworthy children or lazy, unreliable savages showing a gruesome drive for cannibalism. I felt I was not alone, for there were other people from various parts of the world who were dragged into this messy and shameful colonial enterprise that deprived them of their land and dignity and distorted their histories.

With this already hybrid, non-Western identity, I came to seek out American English and fell in love with the language of Thoreau, Emerson, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Flannery O’Connor, Eugene O’Neil, and other American writers, several of whom I had studied in Morocco. In addition to the thirst for more knowledge that I had brought with me from the old country and to a handful of books in Arabic, French, and English that I had packed in my suitcase, I had especially treasured in my heart Walt Whitman’s concept of identification with fellow humans from all walks of life. I was particularly captivated by the poet’s fascination with himself as a member of the human carnival, a theme I saw working as a unifying thread throughout *Leaves of Grass*. I still have vivid memories of the first time I was rocketed in a matter of a few hours from Casablanca airport to JFK in 1990. When I saw the crowds in New York, the opening lines in Whitman’s poem “Song of Myself” rushed into my mind:

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\text{I celebrate myself;} \\
\text{And what I assume you shall assume;} \\
\text{For every atom belonging to me, as good belongs to you.}
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I decided then that every sound of the English language that belonged to all Americans also belonged to me, since Whitman’s poetry had already given me an extraordinary sense of openness of form and theme. Whitman’s poetry was as large as life and therefore it created for me a large intellectual space that, as a freshly established immigrant, I inhabited with hope for tolerance and acceptance. Today much as Whitman imagined a cosmic unity with me and for me, a fusion of poet and subject, a multilingual voice to celebrate, he must stand aside and be at once a part of me and apart from me. When he is apart from me, I put the accent on difference and detach myself from America to nurse this persistent guilt toward my family that I had to