

May 2009

## Book Review: We Share Walls: Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco

Damla Isik

Follow this and additional works at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws>



Part of the [Women's Studies Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Isik, Damla (2009). Book Review: We Share Walls: Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco. *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 10(4), 338-341.

Available at: <https://vc.bridgew.edu/jiws/vol10/iss4/29>

This item is available as part of Virtual Commons, the open-access institutional repository of Bridgewater State University, Bridgewater, Massachusetts.

This journal and its contents may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Authors share joint copyright with the JIWS. ©2022 Journal of International Women's Studies.

***We Share Walls: Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco.*** 2008. Katherine E. Hoffman. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing. 261 pages. Photographs, references and index included. \$34.95 (Paperback).

Reviewed by: Damla Isik<sup>1</sup>

Published under the Blackwell Series in Discourse and Culture, *We Share Walls* is a result of three-and-a-half-years of dissertation research, filled with rich and elaborate ethnographic detail about language practice and ideology within the context of the mountains and plains of southwestern Morocco. Author Katherine E. Hoffman integrates several rhizomes of argument that come together in the focal point of the book which is, as quoted in the back-cover of the book, to document Moroccan Berbers' everyday strategies to "accommodate themselves to an Arabic-speaking society while retaining their own distinctive identity."

Towards the beginning of the text, Hoffman clearly highlights her major concern as understanding the ways in which "expressive culture mediated constructions of place, personhood, and community among a marginalized yet fetishized indigenous group of Berber language speakers in the late twentieth century" (4). The book focuses squarely on the gendered nature of both practices and discourses of rural Ishelhin of Southwestern Morocco, those Ishelhin who migrate to urban centers for work, and the Arab and French populations who live in these urban spaces. The Ishelhin are the Imazighen or Berbers, native speakers of the Tashelhit language belonging to the Ashelhi ethnolinguistic group, which Hoffman's ethnography centers on. She makes the core argument that both material and discursive practices shape Berber places and languages and, in doing so, aims to demystify the taken-for-granted association between indigenous Berber language speakers, authenticity, and rurality.

Gendered nature of language acquisition, protection, and change is what unites this multi-sited ethnography that is full of "wanderings" (32) and "unevenness" (41) as Hoffman notes and her focus on gender is the unequivocal strength of her ethnography. In Chapter 3, titled "Gender of Authenticity," the author chronicles the feminization of Tashelhit as illiterate women overburdened with agricultural and daily household labor become cultural and political emblems of the preservation of Tashelhit language and Berber identity. In discussing a conversation she witnessed during a taxi ride, Hoffman skillfully shows how, from the perspective of the men who emigrate to the urban centers of Casablanca for seasonal labor, the oral nature of Tashelhit, and the maintenance of rural communities as separate from and more authentic than the urban centers, fell squarely on the shoulders of women who are left behind to tend not only the land, but also the language and customs of the indigenous Berbers. Urban residence, from the perspective of these men, exacerbated latent individualism, while rurality came to represent an abandoned moral universe of the Ishelhin as a single unitary group.

Women, then, become crucial in reproducing the countryside, Tashelhit language, and Ashelhi identity. Indeed, as Hoffman argues, for those families who resided in towns and plains, when the mother spoke Arabic and no Tashelhit, even if the father spoke Tashelhit, children did not learn to speak Tashelhit. Hence, Tashelhit language is

---

<sup>1</sup> Damla Isik is Assistant Professor of Anthropology at Western Connecticut State University.

feminized as both men and women take it for granted that it is the mother who is responsible for ensuring that her children learn to speak Tashelhit.

In Chapters 4 through 7, the author still carefully highlights the gendered nature of language learning and preservation by focusing on two topographical regions: the Eastern Anti-Atlas Mountains and the Sous Valley plains. Chapters 4 and 5 center on the Anti-Atlas Mountains and examine the gendered meanings of *tamazirt* (homeland), which point to the impossibility of generalizing rurality and urbanity as categorical wholes to be understood as antithetical to each other. As these chapters show, *tamazirt* cannot be comprehended as a physical location, but rather as “produced through distinct processes [where] gendered and ethnic subjectivities are constituted less in terms of place (or even places) than in terms of movement between places and means of engagement with them through social networks” (88). After giving the reader the material and demographic constitution of the *tamazirt*, the author identifies *tamazirt* as the wholesome and moral place of *asl* (roots) in contrast to the city. Sociability becomes key to the understanding of *tamazirt* where hard agricultural labor and “fullness” define what it means to be human; the more occupied and “full” the places are, the more “human” are its residents. Yet, the fullness of the *tamazirt* is also under constant threat as younger girls dream of getting married and moving to Casablanca and as young men constantly move to the city to find jobs. The responsibility of perpetuating a *tamazirt*, as Hoffman once again notes, falls on the shoulders of women who are left behind. *Tamazirt*, then, is defined by the very act of emigration itself and the presences of the city. Chapter 5 documents how women’s and men’s songs and everyday talk indexed rurality differently. Women’s *tizrrain* (sung verses) in weddings and women’s everyday conversations centered on hard labor and relocation after marriage without the presence of a nostalgic overtone for the *tamazirt*. For the women, there was no “the *tamazirt*,” but “a *tamazirt*” that was a concrete place of hardship and toil. For men and male singers, however, “the *tamazirt*” became a place of discursive analysis: a nostalgic moral universe. Hence, the city and the country were not mutually exclusive and Ashelhi homeland is continually “generated demographically, materially, and symbolically in relation to the city, as people move between and dwell in both spaces” (143).

Chapters 6 and 7 relocate the reader in the Sous Valley, defining it as geographically and metaphorically an in-between space where Arabic and Arab aesthetics held special cache. As Hoffmann documents, the inhabitants of the Sous Valley called themselves Ishelhin as Tashelhin remain the shared vernacular of the home, gardens and public village spaces. However, plains Ishelhin sang and danced at special circumstances such as weddings and circumcisions in Arabic. Although private discourse was in Tashelhin, the public discourse remained Arabic. Arguing against the overarching argument that Ishelhin is being turned into Arabs in these spaces, the author instead points to the need to document hidden transcripts, rehearsals, and improvisations rather than formal performances to understand language change as messy and unclassifiable. As she concludes, “In the Ashelhi case, the fact that young women chose to use Tashelhit with each other, in speaking, singing, and listening to commercial Tashelhit music, suggests that Tashelhit was alive and well – but in its place. Arabic, too, was restricted to particular domains, but that did not mean that it was poised to replace Tashelhit wholesale (190).

Finally, Chapter 8 moves on to shift focus once again, this time to center on broadcast representations of Tashelhit in Tashelhit radio. Through detailed transcriptions of radio advertisements and interviews, the author argues how radio listeners looked to radio for a higher standard that could be attained by the average speaker of Tashelhit. The everyday speech, then, was seen as a “bastardized parole of a yet-to-be-defined collective langue” as the production and circulation of poetry, proverbs and other variants of Tashelhit preserved and expanded the lexical and genre repertoires of Tashelhit speakers. Additionally, the radio encouraged tolerance for linguistic and cultural pluralism.

The strengths of Hoffman’s text are obvious: her documentation of the feminization of Tashelhit, as one of the key concerns of the text, is described effectively. Her research also points to the fact that rurality, urbanity, ethnicity, and language-use are context-specific constructions. Even the generalization of a “Berber” identity is mute since, as her research clearly documents, what it means to be a Berber in the mountains and the plains of Southwestern Morocco is clearly different. Additionally, through her analysis, she does not shy away from asking tough questions of anthropologists in general and works on language preservation and change in particular. Just as gender underscores her narrative, so does her concern over ethics when it comes to anthropological research. As she tactfully notes toward the end of her text: “The methodological and human rights dilemma I am proposing is how activists and anthropologists alike can ethically encourage the same language practices and ideologies that, while helping perpetuate an endangered language, also gender space, restrict women’s movements, and confine women to lives of hard labor” (232). Although she does not discuss in detail how these anxieties affected her own research questions and strategies, the fact that she poses these hard questions point to her concern.

Hoffman’s text immediately brings to mind another classic text on Berber culture, gender, and language use: Abu-Lughod’s (1986) *Veiled Sentiments*, which is widely used in classes focused on Gender Studies, Middle Eastern Studies, and Cultural Anthropology. In fact, she gets a well-deserved rave review from Abu-Lughod in the back-cover. Indeed, Hoffman’s analysis complements Abu-Lughod’s and is rich with ethnographic detail. Yet, I would have welcomed Hoffman to analyze more extensively the historical, political, and economic background and context that affects her ethnographic subjects and their choices. Although this context is interspersed throughout her narrative, Hoffman does not offer a detailed analysis. Hoffman presupposes that the audience has knowledge about the colonial history and modern context of the Bedouins she is discussing. The context looms in the background, but is not sufficiently discussed. This constitutes a weakness of the text if it is being considered for class adoption; although the text would be an excellent choice for graduate level courses and more theme- or place-focused upper-division courses on linguistic and cultural anthropology, it would be difficult to use this text in a more lower-division, introductory course without additional material for contextualization. Perhaps this could have been resolved by jettisoning Chapter 8. It is a fascinating chapter on its own, but this analysis of the role of Tashelhit Radio seems somewhat out of place toward the end of the book and its presence leaves the reader asking for more historical and economic details, details which would have made this text more accessible. Additionally, for reference purposes, it would have been of tremendous help and would have solved some accessibility issues to include a

short definition of terms that the author uses repetitively throughout the text. In short, Hoffman's text, which is filled with rich ethnographic details, is a rewarding and challenging read for those interested in feminization of language use in North African cultures.

**Reference:**

Abu-Lughod, Lila 1986 *Veiled Sentiments: Honor and Poetry in a Bedouin Society*.  
Berkeley: University of California Press.