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THE PROBLE OF COMMUNITY IN FRANCOPHONE MAGHREBIAN LITERATURE

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Maghrebian francophone literature evokes the possibility of a representative subjectivity by scrutinizing strategic ideological communities and by critiquing socio-ethnic categorizations upon which social life appears to be ordered. The voice of the narrative is constructed through its conscious differentiation and assimilation of other subject positions. Nevertheless, one must conscientiously question narrative's ability to achieve the kind of reflection prerequisite to imagining a literature of the people. Post-colonial writing has come to terms with the temptations of such theoretical proposals, even though the questions of community, representation and public responsibility remain critically unresolved.

Some Maghrebian francophone literature has demonstrated a kind of theoretical affiliation with a European tradition of philosophy and criticism which has condemned the absolutism of the knowing subject. This modernity is considered to have superceded the strategically necessary subjective community essential to successful resistance against colonial rule. A citation from a presentation given by Beida Chikhi in 1991 at the Université Mohamed V in Rabat, encapsulates the position that in Maghrebian literature and culture, the ideal of an oppositional community has given way to the location of revolutionary exploration within the individual subject itself:

"In opposition to reductive and recuperative ideologies, the modernity of Maghrebian texts consists in taking a position of "auto-reflection" and "auto-comprehension" opening onto the debut of a new "I" which speaks in its own name and no longer in the name of the community for which it could only be the spokesman, as was the case in the realist works of the revolution".

The ease with which the subjective and the personal assimilate hermetically here suggests the possibility of an absolute determination and seizure of meaning in a subject rendered transcendent of its *nationalist* historical context. Chikhi's comments suggest that contemporary writing in post-independence countries strikes out a resounding affirmation of difference which articulates the potential for universality from its own subjective position. The danger lies in equating the philosophically engendered subject of the narrative with the socially-situated subjectivity of post-colonial experience. Can narrative tending toward universality achieve the kind of representative transcendence that allows for more than a particular insight into the cultures of colonialism and post-colonialism?

In opposition to a post-colonial literature which depicts the subject's introspective journey into self awareness, the literature of radical difference deploys a plurivocalic

and multi-cultural subjective experimentation which bases its own universalizing tendencies on the principles of openness and multiplicity. In the Maghreb, the works of Abdelkebir Khatibi epitomize this trans-lingual, trans-cultural genre. He argues in *Maghreb Pluriel* that the idea of an authentic and ontological plurality of being particular to the Maghreb is founded on a historical, linguistic and cultural heterogeneity which distinguishes North Africa from both Western and Oriental civilizations. Through the subjective rise to consciousness of this difference, the pluralized subject purports to integrate historical and psychological aspects of culture and to address the concerns of a heterogeneous community in reconstruction. This accumulation of diverse experiences into a unique subjective perception draws reference to a historical identity which, as numerous literary examples demonstrate, needs to prove its contemporary relevance.

Sharing this vantage point, Abdallah Memmes describes the act of writing "Meaning and Interculturality" as one in which multiplicity is a presupposition to Maghrebian subjectivity:

"Whether on the scriptural or on the thematic level, the procedure is the same: the approach at hand is one of a collection of subversive practices, to combat the systems of uniformizing order and to substitute the hegemonic and coercive unity they impose, in order to realize from the starting point of heterogeneity a liberating unity." (Memmes, 101).

According to Memmes, several writers from the Maghreb have used this approach to subvert and reinvent the autobiographical genre, so that the "I" slips into the collective deictic "we" and a representation of the community's life and development is realized. What's more, this strategy of reinvention purports to achieve pluralism from within subjectivity; the enunciation of plural existence by the "I" immediately and immanently dispels otherness from the harmony of a shared cultural experience. Memmes' formulaic conception of the Maghrebian narrative would equate autobiographical writing in the Maghreb with writing the story of a community's rise to collective expression. The writing of community becomes therefore a writing of pluralized modernity, inclusive of difference and capable of expression in the singular voice of the people.

Despite Memmes' wishful pluralizing of the unified subject, inner limitations, ideological biases and mythological foundations present persistent obstacles to ultimate self-knowledge in subjectivity when it is forced to confront, through its very openness, a recalcitrant social reality vocalized from within the heterogeneity of the people. While the representative transcendence of a particular subjective perspective seems possible in the writing of Mouloud Feraoun or Mohamed Dib, radical disruptions on the levels of family, community, and ideology disorient the subject perspective in its attempt to make sense of its social world. I believe that it is through the exploration of this disorientation of community that the subject questions the foundations on which society and the subject are mutually constructed. And this explora-

tion through the contradictory formations of communicative subjectivity permanently discredits the absolute status of the representative popular narrative. But as it denaturalizes the collective, popular object of the writing of communities, it forces a reckoning between oppositional forces, communities of disunity, and contradictory ideals of belonging. This collection of tensions necessitates a rethinking of the foundations upon which narrativity in Maghrebian fiction rests. Subjectivity can not be conceived as lying outside of the social realm; nor can it truly maintain political integrity by remaining open to extreme heterogeneity. In the final analysis, subjectivity is characterized by an ambivalent perspective on community, articulated imperfectly throughout its obstacle-ridden trajectory through incommensurable strands of identity.

By treating six literary texts written by six different authors from the Maghreb, this analysis creates a community linked by its common interrogation on the possibility of community. In creating this space of analytical difference, I will demonstrate how the texts collectively argue the construction of community and how the formation of subjectivity is challenged by its approach to that otherness which, in various guises, emerges from its conceptions of popular unity.

The stable construction of a narrative community is disputed in one of the earliest, "revolutionary", texts. In Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma*, the errant narrative reveals the personal histories of four protagonists whose family backgrounds are characterized by the enigma of uncertain paternity and violence. The novel is simultaneously the representation of a pervasive symbolic and political stagnation which preempts identity reconstruction according to any prior conceptions of community and genealogy. This stagnation comes in spite of the urgently required popular solidarity against the colonial occupation. In the poetic reconstruction of a meeting between an unnamed peasant and Lakhdar, a student militant in flight, the novel offers an example of the multi-layered schism which divides the Algerian people: "I called to him, but he didn't come. He made a sign. /He signed to me that he was at war./ At war with his stomach. Everybody knows ... /Everybody knows that a peasant has no mind./ A peasant is only a stomach. A catapult." (Kateb Yacine 54). Lakhdar is incapable of communicating with his interlocutor linguistically, which is not in itself remarkable in the multilingual Maghreb. But in an ironic reflection of both the peasant's body language and the received message, Lakhdar parodies their mutual unease, both with each other and with the world in which they live: "Me, I was at war. I entertained the peasant. /I wanted him to forget his hunger. I played the fool. I played/ the fool before my father the peasant" (54). The experience of conflict with the world is the only point of commonality, even if Lakhdar recognizes the outward signification of age and generational continuity. Radically different perspectives on "war", the incommensurability of individual experiences of "war" and the absence of a common idiom with which to construct a composite simulacrum of the object in question defy

any genuine notion of paternity and invite a closer view of the barriers which impede the transmission of cultural meaning on identity in *Nedjma*.

Lakhdar's inability to communicate with his "father" suggests that generational, geographical, linguistic and class barriers prevent a concerted popular movement against the foreign oppressors. Another of the protagonists, Rachid, is susceptible to psychic and hallucinatory mental peregrinations, which reveal to him both the enigmas of his own identity and the profound fracture in the affiliations of his tribal ancestry. In one of the most poignant critiques of attempts to re-establish cultural continuity through the mythical historic links of tribal genealogy, he has a vision in which the critical schisms of distinct communities are revealed:

"And the old legendary Keblout appeared to Rachid in a dream ... He, the ancestor with the face of a ferocious beast, with somber and crafty eyes, passed his superb gaze over his tribe, with his cane in hand; with this gaze, he ironically recounted the history of each one ... he alone had lived their existence to its full extent." (134)

The history of tribal disloyalty and irrevocable fragmentation is revealed to Rachid, but the evocation here of a legendary tribal figure serves not to remind him of his forgotten tribal identity; rather, it demonstrates on a psychological level that the contemporary absence of community has origins which precede the current conflict. The emphasis on a "lived history" reinforces the relation between experience and belonging. This relationship is further strengthened by the camaraderie which unites the four protagonists. Individually, they experience a personal exile whose debut stems from the disruption of their paternal origins: "Who among us has not seen his origins blur like a stream in the sand, who hasn't closed his ears to the subterranean gallop of the ancestors, who hasn't run and frolicked on the tomb of his father" (97). Collectively, with the story of each one comprising part of a cyclical and interwoven unity, they bear witness to a generalized environment of alienation in a nation racked by the factionalism of a colonial war.

Kateb Yacine's *Nedjma* weaves personal, mythological and historical identities together in order to highlight collective and communicative fragmentation on several levels. This composite form of representation loosens the narrative integrity of subjectivity but seeks to reconstruct an entity, the female figure of *Nedjma*, around which narrative instances are generated. *Nedjma*'s own enigmatic origins offer the possibility of a necessarily partial reflective plenitude for the alienated protagonists.

Tahar Ben Jelloun's *Moha le fou*, *Moha le sage*, similarly constructs a subversive figure which serves as the wandering witness to the fragmentation of cultural continuity. *Moha* also vocalizes the collective concerns of a people victimized by post-independence transitions of power. While tracing the forgotten origins of a collective consciousness, *Moha* receives and transmits the personal histories of marginalized elements of contemporary society:

"Neither Aïcha, the little maid, wrenched from her village, nor Dada, the black slave woman bought in Sudan at the beginning of the century, had the right to speak in the house of the patriarch. Mute, excluded, both of them. Nevertheless, they spoke. Aïcha spoke at night in the wood, and Dada in the evening on the roof of the house. Their words will reach the ears of Moha. It is again he who relates them." (Ben Jelloun 39)

Moha le fou, *Moha le sage* argues blatantly that even if they are deemed socially acceptable, permissible in Islam, or politically necessary, the abuse of children forced into servile labor, the virtual enslavement of women, and the torture of political dissidents are symptoms of a single social disorder. It is only by collecting these stories, and by transmitting them through the ambivalent optic of the madman/wiseman that a concerted resistance is possible.

Ben Jelloun's interpretation is dependent however, on the retrieval from a mythic past of a unified popular ideal, in which language is the hybridized vehicle of expression of the body. The contemporary dislocation of social unity can only be corrected by remembering the future possibility of a harmony whose promise is already present in the world, on a corporal, natural and social level:

"I sing of a people which is absent for the moment behind the wall. A people which will one day push the wall forward. I say a people and not a dream or an image, a living people, which knows patience and furor, an unpredictable people. It descends on the streets with its naked kids and its trees suspended in the sky" (Ben Jelloun 49).

The primary element of popular renewal is "absent" but "present", tangible yet incomplete in its potential. It speaks in a singular voice which has not yet been integrated behind the concrete action that only a figure like Moha can usher into linguistic form.

In the Manichean imaginary of Ben Jelloun's fictive world, post-independence Morocco effectively silences popular opposition in the name of a degenerative social order whose tenets are no longer an orthodox Islam, national pride and humanism. Rather, they have given way to the vice, greed and injustice which are inevitable in a society which forgets to recognize value in its weakest members: the poor, women, and especially children. Ultimately, however, it is not so much that human behavior fails in the face of absolute ideals which remain resolute to enslave humanity in its fallibility. At issue is whether a reason which fails to recognize the ethical, corporal and mystical composition of human society can ever be anything but abusive. The "people" in Ben Jelloun's writing presupposes this preexistent integrity which society has distorted beyond recognition and which can only be regained through the re-emergent plural conscience.

As it attempts to narrate the composite experience of victimization in post-independence Morocco, *Moha le fou*, *Moha le sage* frequently degenerates into the caricature. While Ben Jelloun strives to create a revolutionary prototype, Moha is

easier read as an essentialized Jeremiah crying in the wilderness of a post-colonial world that has lost its ideals. It is in critiquing the absolutism of such myth, even in its popular and folkloric simulacra, that Mohamed Khair-Eddine's *Agadir* narrates a similar condemnation of the generalized disintegration of Moroccan society. *Agadir* stages the collision of popular, historical and mythic identity in order to confront the impossibility of ever rebuilding a society constructed on received notions, but it is at the same time a deconstruction of its own subjective position on society. In a society founded on precariously crafted mythologies of identity, colossal catastrophe not only destroys but it also unearths the inner workings of mythologies. In the text, subjectivity itself is revealed to be the most important of those mythologies according to which the experience of belonging is purveyed.

The narrator is a minor functionary sent to the cataclysmic scene of a city ravaged by earthquake in order to reestablish official order. As he receives the survivors' documentation of their ruined possessions and property, he notes that their "descriptions are without analogy, but all interconnected by an intrinsic line, shall we say by a similar motif" of *reparable* loss (Khair-Eddine 19). The claims which pass through his hands range from the loss of shops, homes and family members, to the banal job application totally unrelated to the catastrophe. The narrator dismissively critiques the survivors for not simply abandoning their former lives, for they act as if their city were "the cradle of civilization and the matrix on which its history will form" (15). It is evident that the narrator's pessimism was already predetermined by the particular culture of the Moroccan civil service, and he quickly reveals what the actual mission is: "I must admit that I'm not looking for truth. I received orders to that effect. What counts is to arrive at conclusions which will hold" (49).

But it is from this conscious abdication of total restitution that the narrator's own immediate identity and local position (*demeure*) begin to reveal their innate disorder. The text dissolves first-person narrative by disregarding the distinction between direct and indirect discourse, but it also explodes its own generic continuity, by interweaving the novelistic, the poetic and the theatrical. The supreme subject position, which narrates his own inner psyche as he chops through the claims of the dispossessed, gives way to a double allegory in which the "I" imperfectly operates as one among many diverging positions in a theatrical *dramatis personae*. The cast of voices represent historically and socially typical subject positions, including "the judge" (*le caïd*), "the messenger" (*le chaouche*), the "king" (*le roi*), "the peasants" (*les paysans*) and "the student" (*l'étudiant*). Contradiction and deception typify the exchanges, and dominant themes include steadily disempowered fixations like justice, memory, popular unity and the monarchy which, having been unearthed from the unconscious sub-layer of social construction, are forced to articulate the legitimacy of their particular positions.

The "I" reemerges in several points in the text, but just as it loses itself in the polyphony of social and historical personifications of larger social segments, the no-

tions of belonging and existence on which its distinct self is attached are increasingly constricted: "Was I born? I was born, therefore, I live, so it's me that was born ... No, I didn't see myself being born" (86). The search for the origins of civil society gives way to the narrative fixation on the origins of the particular persona which the "I" has become. Memory is tested as an adequate process for the verification of existence and as a viable ideology for the constitution of social belonging. The common ideal of a rural, tribal heritage and an original wisdom, which can be reintegrated through the activation of a continuous, intergenerational memory, becomes nothing short of nightmarish, as the "I" is haunted by his buried father through the marshes and slime of his ancestral homeland.

It is nevertheless in the penultimate section of *Agadir* that the threatened narrative subject emphatically plots out the architectural design of the new city, in which its citizens will "DEFINITELY CONTRADICT THE POSTULATE WHICH AIMS TO DEGRADE US AND ACCORDING TO WHICH GOD IS GOD THE BOSS AND US WHAT ARE WE EXCEPT THE VERTEBRATES OF A REPUGNANT AND DECONSTRUCTIBLE RACE..." (124). The narrator suggests that both the social and the psychological ruins which litter the subjective landscape can only be overcome by radically reorienting thought on humanity. Human existence is unmistakably animal, and the human animal is quite definitely amoral: "GOD WOULD BE THE MONUMENTAL ZERO OF MY EYE WHERE EVERYTHING COLLAPSES" (126); any effort short of a reconsideration of human collectivity according to this ultimate recognition will simply rebuild society on the same faulty foundations.

Building a rationally ordered community in *Agadir* seems to lie outside the realm of human possibility. Inevitably human community is constructed, but the text suggests that the impediment to a more *natural* existence stems from a characteristic linguistic egocentrism: "And then each one speaks especially about his own life. Each one regrets his past life" (126). While the individual claims lodged against an indifferent social order remain disjointed, the cooperative potential of consciousness is also denied the possibility of transcending the limitations of its present existence.

The narrator in *Agadir* has no prior faith in either human community or in the stable rationalism of the individual subject. In this respect, he is quite different from the protagonist and autobiographical "I" in Driss Chraïbi's *Le Passé Simple*. Written in Morocco just prior to its independence, the text depicts a similar breakdown of cultural continuity, this time located squarely in the domestic sphere. On behalf of his weaker family members, the narrator, Driss Ferdi, the western-educated second son of a traditional Moroccan patriarch, launches a counterattack against the tyrannical authority of his stoic, bourgeois father. While Driss perceives himself as the subversive liberator of the oppressed, the genuine breakdown is in the construction of the self as a representative of others. Whereas Driss anticipates a degree of solidarity from his mother and brothers, their skepticism merely aggravates his already impa-

tient pathos and his disgust at their inertia. He challenges his mother verbally to speak her defiance against the patriarch and overcome her wretched status:

“... Do you prefer to remain a wreck? Because, if so, tell me and instead of treating you like some sort of imbecile, I'll treat you like a wreck ... Did you never think that I wasn't proud of you? You could have been a mother, and you're only a wreck. Or do you think that, from the moment you threw me outside with three or four hundred grammes of placenta, I would continue to spend my life blessing you? No way! So? So?” (Chraïbi 153).

Driss eventually abandons the struggle to emancipate his mother. According to his perception, his mother has passed the point in which she can communicate her feelings. Because she has been reduced to her reproductive capacity, the only gesture available to her now is involuntary procreation. In fact virtually the only family member with whom Driss communicates his collectively-conceived struggle is his father, his declared opponent. The text opens up the dual possibility, first that Driss is the only one whose education provides the terms and understanding for concerted action against tyranny, and second that Driss has ultimately mistaken the collective will for a highly personal one. Active and passive resistance may simply be unrecognizable and incommunicable. But the text also jeopardizes its own privileged narrative position by denying the Western educated, humanist-oriented subject the ultimate liberty to coopt incommensurably divergent life experiences.

The inadequacy of the interpretive function of subjectivity is also at issue in Abdellatif Laâbi's *Le Chemin des Ordalies*. When the narrative subject reemerges from prolonged detention, he only partially recognizes the society which inspired his embittered revolutionary idealism. While the text seems to want to maintain an ideal of collectivity, pertinent to particular shared experiences, there is an increasingly evident mistrust of ideological platforms whose defense slips into its primary *raison d'être*:

“What was I and what have I become? What have we done? How much of it was error and how much blindness? What must be let go in order to safeguard something, the most precious of our selves, of our dreams, the most precious of this “for what, for whom” have the sacrifices been accorded, the blood been spilled?” (Laâbi 188).

While Laâbi's narrator recognizes the flaw of ideological forces to unify the inner lives of individuals, it is loss of personal control over the actions required to support doctrine that inspires the most profound regret. It is the return to an awareness of the complexities of the social world which places the subject as a redemptive figure into question. While in detention, his world is constricted in both time and space, and the solidarity that prisoners of conscience feel is easily mistaken for a generalized spirit of solidarity which would link them directly with political and social forces in the outside world. At the same time, the text refuses to idealize and totalize the self-effacing capacities of martyrs for a particular cause. The suffering of the individual

torture victim may be a consequence of pervasive oppression, and it certainly has wider social implications. But Laâbi refuses to repeat the violation by collapsing one man's particular trajectory into a collectivity "whose vultures attack their victim before he has even breathed his last breath" and "who won't pass up the opportunity to deform your words, to keep what suits it, and what it wants to keep, hold them back or drop them after taking them out of context, from their logical development" (197).

Whereas Laâbi ambivalently questions whether an individual case of resistance and suffering truly represents anything greater than personal tragedy, he nevertheless resurrects the ideal of community. Despite his pessimism concerning the utility of his own sacrifice, the narrator nevertheless repeats in a fairy-tale text-within-the-text an allegory of the inner self which attains a sublime state through selfless love. The model for an idealized social body of resistance is implicitly restored. A second recognition of community counteracts the skepticism with which fraternity is conceived according to ideological lines. Even as the narrator argues that one must "dig and dig this hard rock of [social] reality ... to place ourselves into question...to spring up on the other side of the tunnel or the Cavern of our Ideas" (191), community in *Le Chemin des Ordalies* is preserved directly along affective lines: family and close friends, but also a kind of love which characterizes the affective solidarity of resistance writers.

The experience of incarceration indelibly imprints a strategic conception of community on the narrator. This conception allows the inevitable contradictions of pessimism and faith in social ideals to co-exist. Shared experience invites a close affiliation between the narrator and others who have similarly suffered, even as the text expresses a loss of faith in "brotherhood". The unity achieved through shared experience translates itself into an indistinct usage of the pronominal designations "I" and "you" in several texts. The "I" in Abdelhak Serhane's *Les enfants des rues étroites* closely follows the experiences of another, presumably very like him. The "I" attempts to recall and interpret what the other sees, what his position is vis-à-vis other people and what the other person must certainly feel. While they are both spectators at a public story-telling (*halqa*), the "I" narrates his interlocutor's experience, communicates that experience to him and proposes a simultaneous, yet distinct similitude in the representation of their existence:

"You went back to your place in order to listen to the rest of the story. I still couldn't see the expression on your face. Drowned in the overexcited crowd, I could distinguish the worn collar on your jacket. This detail opened wide before my eyes two great parentheses where the itinerary of our two lives were traced in parallel in an ink of misery." (Serhane 37)

The text demonstrates a consciousness of its own narrative production. But it does not incite its own closure according to this model of affective and dual subjectivity. Rather, its several loosely connected stories exhibit radical variations in the collective

conception of subjectivity. The public storyteller promises that the power of his words, are "capable of healing your pain and precipitating you into the absence of people without history ..." (Serhane 37). The particular language arena of the *halqa* speaks of a transcendence toward a community fixed outside historical time. But when the narrator's gaze is attracted to a veiled woman being seduced by men on either side of her, the sexual and the discursive compete for attention in a contrived doubling of the spectacle: "While the two men resolved their differend with punches, the storyteller gathered his belongings and grabbed the woman by the arm and they both disappeared down an obscure alley" (Serhane 56). The woman's presence in the *halqa* is remarkable not only because it disrupts Moroccan gender decorum. She also objectifies the participant observer position so key to *halqa's* communicative approach to narration. Finally, her presence subverts the narration by usurping its audience, leaving the storyteller with no other option than to interrupt the scene of social and discursive interaction.

Communicative exchange is key to subjective transcendence of social realities. Another scene constructs a public forum in a train compartment heading West on the Marrakech-Oujda line where "ten people, stacked up like sardines in a can, occupied eight places" (113), debate political and social issues, share advice and criticism concerning the behavior of their fellow travelers. As various positions articulating poignant feelings on topics ranging from the price of bread to the causes of juvenile delinquency, the text asserts that "Something new was being born. Discourse (*la parole*). People were talking, saying what they thought of the concerns of the day. What was happening? Had they conquered fear?" (121).

In a world where power is derived from deceit and misrepresentation, silence and balking signify an abdication of social responsibility. Serhane depicts a social world in which truth is paid for in cash. The individual must satisfy the demands of an all-encompassing and monstrous administration. The language appropriate to discuss feelings of disgust and impatience must be stifled, and he who can adapt his language to meet the demands of the appropriate social situation will succeed in furthering his particular objectives. In this generalized environment of egocentrism, the contrived communication forum, experimental in form and closed in scope, does seem to give rise to a less encumbered communicative community of heterogeneous subjective positions.

But community discourse is ephemeral in Serhane's text. Permanent communities inevitably produce individuals who feel alienated from them. Exploring the position of the subject in the social world necessarily confronts the dynamics of the particular groups which share its historical and social reality. In the interest of conceptualizing a principle of radical difference, reference must be made to the effects on the subject exacted by these other popular formations. Heterogeneity as a principle in thought requires an openness to the expression of multiple opinions, but some will inevitably argue for the formation of exclusive communities, and others will seek to undermine

the premise of social unity. If it is naive to assume that absolute unity ever exists in a society, it is equally invalid to claim that the pressure of multiplicity leaves no marks on particular groups. The principle of heterogeneity risks becoming an absolutist discourse, especially in its tendency to conceive of marginality as a site of primary and permanent subversion. The words of Abdellatif Laâbi show how writing in the Maghreb has in some respects passed through the period in which ideological presuppositions overrule more tempered approaches to the heterogeneity within society:

"We're past the time of the lightening-bolt discourse which can set the plains on fire, past the slap-dash analyses whose conclusions are already programmed in their premises." (Laâbi 194)

Communities may achieve their autonomy through the articulation of their experience, but discourse is rarely able to adapt painlessly to social and historical transitions. Ideologies which manipulate communities unfailingly alienate their others, and they indirectly contribute to their own demise and to the eventual generation of more socially apt discourse.

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