



IV.  
A WASTED BREATH INSIDE  
A BALLOON

Popular Sufi healing,  
postcolonial bodies, and  
sonic pluralism

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AUDIO

*A wasted breath inside a balloon*  
by Gilles Aubry and Ramia Beladel  
2019, 39'03", stereo audio  
<https://arbor.bfh.ch/18259/2/wb.mp3>

It's Thursday morning. Getting prepared for my performance, my lila, well dressed in my pink takchita, my make-up on, my offerings ready: white balloons and white threads attached to white small stones. A white chair in a green yard near to the graveyard, the spirit is present. I'm in the presence of absence, not steady, but ready, ready to blow the balloons, ready to put some pieces out of myself, ready to put my breath outside my body into the balloons' bodies, ready to do the sacrifice.

– Ramia Beladel, Moulay Idriss, 2014

Ramia Beladel's words above refer to her 2014 performance *Waiting for Godot to bless me* in Moulay Idriss.<sup>1</sup> In the video documenting the performance, one can see her sitting on a chair in an open area, repeating the same sequence of actions several times: she takes a white balloon from a basket, blows it, seals it with a thread attached to a stone, digs a hole in the ground in front of her, buries the stone, raises her hands to her heart, and returns to the chair. After several minutes, she starts sobbing, her face and body visibly affected by a sad feeling, progressively growing into loud cries, preventing her from blowing more balloons. Eventually her cries attenuate and she recollects herself, sitting still for a while before leaving the camera frame. Ramia Beladel describes her performance as a "personal healing ritual,"<sup>2</sup> inspired by her experience with popular Sufism in northern Morocco. The same performance was repeated twice in 2015, and once more in August 2017, during the celebration of a local muslim saint (*mousseem*) in the town of Moulay Bouchta al

<sup>1</sup> The performance is part of Ramia Beladel's artistic project *Waiting for Godot to bless me* (2014-ongoing), documented on her artist website: <https://ramiabeladel.wixsite.com/beladel/post/waiting-for-godot-to-bless-me-2014-ongoing>

<sup>2</sup> Ramia Beladel's statements stem from interviews I conducted with her between August 2017 and March 2019, as well as from her artist website.



Khamar. I joined Ramia Beladel for ten days on this occasion, attending and documenting the ceremonies with her. On the fourth day, she performed a new version of *Waiting for Godot to bless me*, which was video-documented and published later on her website.<sup>3</sup> Our joint research led to the creation of a sound piece entitled *A wasted breath inside a balloon* (Aubry and Beladel 2019). The piece was composed for the most part on location using my mobile sound studio, and finalized later during work sessions in Marrakesh.<sup>4</sup> The piece features a monologue by Ramia Beladel, field recordings, and music from the moussem, as well as sound experiments with balloons.

In this chapter, I continue my examination of sound and aurality in Morocco through a reflection on Ramia Beladel's performative art practice. I consider new dimensions of sonic experience relative to embodiment, healing practices, gender, and performative art. Moussem celebrations in Morocco are associated with spirit possession and saintly healing (*baraka*) in Sufi brotherhoods. Healing practices take several forms, including prayers at the saint's mausoleum, purification rituals, exorcisms, and trance rituals. These practices have fascinated several generations of western anthropologists (see Doutté 1908; Westermarck 1926; Gellner 1969; Crapanzano 1973; Dieste 2013). I rely on these accounts in order to situate Ramia Beladel's artistic engagement with Sufism, along with scholarly writing on new feminist movements in North Africa (Salime 2014; Jay 2018). Attending the moussem in Moulay Bouchta gave me a sense of how the spiritual world of popular Sufism relates to everyday life. I also learned from

<sup>3</sup> The video can be accessed via the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AU4GUmeoxno&t=101s>

<sup>4</sup> The sound piece can be accessed via the following link: <https://arbor.bfh.ch/18259/2/wb.mp3>  
A basic version was created during my stay in Moulay Bouchta in August 2017 and further elaborated over the course of successive working sessions with Ramia Beladel in Marrakesh between November 2017 and September 2018. The piece premiered at the *Sonohr Festival* in Bern in February 2019, and was presented in March 2019 in Moulay Bouchta during the *Sakhra Encounters*.











Preparation for Ramia Beladel's performance *Waiting for Godot to bless me*, Moulay Bouchta, 2017.

Ramia Beladel's own research on healing rituals and from her interactions with women healers. Our exchanges highlighted the centrality of the body in such practices, pointing to the complex history of postcolonial embodiment. According to historian Ellen J. Amster (2013), postcolonial embodiment in North Africa can be traced back to the encounter between local healing practices and colonial biomedicine at the end of the nineteenth century. The body appears as a field whose domination has been contested for more than a century by competing ideological projects, namely political Sufism, colonialism, and Islamic nationalism. These effects can still be viscerally felt today through the hybridity and fragmentedness of postcolonial bodies. People respond in part to these effects through "medical pluralism," combining traditional healing and biomedicine.

Amster's account made me realize that embodiment is a crucial aspect for apprehending sound and aurality in Morocco. Because body and soul form a continuous whole (*tawhid*) in the Islamic cosmological model (Dieste 2013), it makes little sense to consider sound as an autonomous phenomenon. What's more, the Arabic word for "sound," *sawt*, also means "voice." Sound in Morocco is therefore always a *sound body*. Like the body described by Amster (2013), postcolonial aurality appears as a fragmented field that can best be apprehended in terms of *pluralism*. In practice, sonic pluralism is mostly implicit and intuitive; it can, however, be consciously enacted in situations where conflicting epistemologies are perceived as limiting or oppressive. Sound can heal, as we will see, if one believes that malevolent spirits can possess bodies and be expelled by the sound of a rifle. Listening can heal too, when mobilized as



part of trance rituals or performative art practice. Sonic pluralism is involved in individual or collective tactics of “epistemic disobedience” (Mignolo 2011), guided by aspirations of personal emancipation. Sound, bodies, and selves are continuously remade in the process, queered, and re-entangled at the border of knowledge, materiality, and coloniality. The notion of sonic pluralism initially emerged from my case study in this chapter. It gradually gained significance for my entire project in Morocco, eventually providing the general conceptual framework and title for the present book.

### POPULAR SUFISM AND MUSLIM SAINTS

My research took place in Moulay Bouchta al Khamar, a small town situated 60 kilometers north of Fès in the Pre-Rif region of Morocco. I joined Ramia Beladel in August 2017 for the annual celebration or *mousslem* of the town's founder and protector, Saint Moulay Bouchta (fourteenth century), also known as “father of the rain” (Odinot 1932). The cult of Muslim saints is widespread in Morocco and can be traced back to the emergence of Sufi brotherhoods in the twelfth century (Doutté 1908; Westermarck 1926; Gellner 1969). Once a year, people congregate from all over the country and abroad for several days of festivities and ceremonies, invoking the saint's *baraka* against diseases, infertility, or psychic troubles. Adepts of popular Sufi practices in Morocco believe that diseases can be caused by spirits (*jnoun*) who come to inhabit human bodies under certain circumstances. Daily interferences between humans and spirits are accepted by a large part of the Moroccan population as a very condition of existence (Crapanzano 1973). This belief bridges all social categories, spanning class, level of education, age, and geographical origin (Rhani 2009). Spirit names are associated with particular colors, scents, and choreographies. The effects of possession are broadly divided into two groups: a “hostile” type, where the spirit aggresses the person it inhabits, and a “benevolent” type, through which the person benefits from the spirit's power, accepting its presence, even desiring it. While hostile possession needs to be cured through an “exorcism ritual,” usually performed by an Islamic cleric (*fqih*), certain spirits require a ritual of “adorcism” in order to remain benevolent—usually a trance ritual (*lila*) followed by a special meal (*hlou*). Such practices are an important part



Ramia Beladel's performance  
*Waiting for Godot to bless me*,  
Moulay Bouchta, 2017.

of the business of religious brotherhoods, *gnawa*, *hamadsha*, and *issawa* in particular, mediated by the healing power of Muslim saints and their descendants (*chorfa*).

### RAMIA BELADEL'S PERFORMANCE *WAITING FOR GODOT TO BLESS ME*

Born 1987 in Marrakesh, Ramia Beladel graduated from the National Institute of Fine Arts (INBA) in Tetouan in 2013. She uses a variety of media (drawing, objects, photography, video) and formats (installations and performances), and her work has been presented in Morocco and internationally. In her performance *Waiting for Godot to bless me*, Ramia Beladel borrows elements from popular Sufism, which she started exploring in 2014 as part of an art residency in Sidi Ali. Guided by a woman healer, she attended a *lila* (trance ritual) for the first time on this occasion, where participants celebrated their possessing spirit (*mlouk*). She didn't fully get involved in the ritual, however, as she had felt hindered by her Islamic religious education. Although widespread in Morocco, popular healing practices are indeed condemned by the official Islamic doctrine, considered as “outside of proper Islamic piety” (Witulski 2019). Ramia Beladel engaged with popular Sufism in her own way, aware that it would take time to familiarize herself with the knowledge and practices associated with it. As a result, she created a performance defined as her “own ritual,” based on the core principles of the traditional *lila*: offering, trance, and sacrifice. She wrote a set of instructions for it, and later

invited other artists to make their own version of the performance:

Dress in fine clothing.

Find yourself centered and silent.

Sit in a white chair under an open sky.

Offering: white balloons and white threads attached to white small stones.

Sacrifice: inflate the balloons one by one.

By inflating the balloons you are giving a part of yourself (your breath) to another body (the balloons). Seed the inflated balloons in the ground, so they will be autonomous bodies. Now your breath, a part of you, exists inside another body.

Trance: inflate the balloons one by one until you can't do it anymore, until you lose control of your body, and you can't ask it anymore to inflate.<sup>5</sup>

The artist Abdeljalil Saouli and I were the only audience members at Ramia Beladel's performance in Moulay Bouchta. It lasted 22 minutes and took place under a tree outside of the village, next to a local saint's grave. Ramia Beladel was wearing a purple traditional dress (*takchita*). She blew into approximately ten balloons until she started crying, eventually ending the performance. While in the beginning I was attentive to the poetic quality of the scene, particularly with the white balloons softly moving in the wind, I found myself surprised and touched, as Ramia Beladel started crying. Later on, she commented that this time her trance had been "jovial," in comparison to the sadness of the initial version of the performance in 2014. With each blow into a balloon, she explained, she was able to "exteriorize all the

<sup>5</sup> Instructions reproduced from Ramia Beladel's website: <https://ramiabeladel.wixsite.com/beladel/post/waiting-for-godot-to-bless-me-2014-ongoing>.



Ramia Beladel's performance  
*Waiting for Godot to bless me*,  
Moulay Bouchta, 2017.

feelings previously accumulated" through a process of emotional cleansing culminating in cathartic cries. This healing process arguably relies on a symbolism of *purification*, a notion that equally involves body and mind in the scholarly Arabo-Islamic tradition (Dieste 2013). I do not want to reduce Ramia Beladel's performance to this tradition, however, as her work undoubtedly exists as an autonomous artwork, with its own poetics and references. What I am interested in is the relationship between sound, affect, and embodiment in the performance. In order to better understand this relationship, it is necessary to consider discourses on embodiment in Morocco, a notion that historically refers to competing epistemologies.

#### EMBODIMENT IN MOROCCO AND THE FRAGMENTED POSTCOLONIAL BODY

In her book *Medicine and the Saints*, Ellen J. Amster (2013) describes the human body in precolonial Morocco as a "meeting-place of divinity and materiality." Islam articulates a "human body radiant of meaning," she notes, "a body as a signifier, a wellspring of meaning and the foundation of human subjectivity." Dieste (2013) offers a similar description, highlighting the ontological specificities of such a model of embodiment:

"[One] of the main features of the scholarly Arabo-Muslim notion of a person is the idea of "tawhid" or unity between matter and spirituality, i.e. the idea that body and soul form a continuous whole. This continuity can be seen at work in the significant notions

of purity and pollution. Bodily purity is not mere material hygiene, it is a requisite for the salvation of the soul. For this reason, the rituals of purification are not restricted to simple washing of the body, but include a cleansing of the spirit. The spirit turns into the body and vice versa. Thus it is that the Cartesian division between nature and culture, or the conception that separates body and spirit, does not match the holistic conception of the tawhid. The body is defined as a microcosmos which represents society and the universe.”

The Islamic cosmological model was able to accommodate two distinct ways of knowing: Sufi spiritual knowledge based on saintly healing, and “Galenic” medicine developed by early Arab physicians such as Ibn Sina (980-1037) and Al Antaki (1543-1599) (Amster 2013). The concept of divine embodiment was constitutive of the precolonial Sufi political model in Morocco. Sovereignty was invested in the geopolitical moral body of the community of believers (*umma*), and authority was negotiated through a human body known as contiguous with the land, Islamic history in Morocco, and temporal politics. Sufi spiritual healing connected layers of reality otherwise fragmented in temporal life–politics, geography, history, the soul, and God—restoring the individual's integration into a divine cosmological and moral order.

The Sufi Islamic “body-subject” came to clash heavily with Western medicine as part of the colonial encounter in nineteenth century Morocco, and later during the French occupation of the country (1912-1956). Western medicine in the early nineteenth century redefined the human body as a “finite, biologically-contrived entity, knowable and cultivable through the scientific method,” and thus conceptually separated it from the individual and sovereign *subject* of the Enlightenment (Amster 2013). The biological body provided the template for the invention by colonial medicine of “native bodies” as pathological objects of scientific knowledge. Via the naturalization of a racist ideology elaborated in the name of progress and civilization, native bodies were turned into sites of inscription of colonial power and control. For French colonizers, saintly healing and magic practices were clear signs of “a primitive mind trapped in the literal, visual, and sensory body, a Muslim *mentalité* incapable of abstract or conceptual thought.” Instead of banning traditional healing practices entirely, colonial medicine instead chose to enact the necessary transformation of native subjects directly through their



Ramia Beladel's performance  
*Waiting for Godot to bless me*,  
Moulay Bouchta, 2017.

bodies. Colonial “biopower” was thus forcefully channeled into bodies, hidden in symbolic languages of corporeality and woven into traditional healing practice. From there, Amster (2013) traces the emergence of the post-independence Moroccan state as an Islamic monarchy:

The Sufi political model of popular sovereignty declined in Morocco between 1900 and 1930, progressively replaced by a new nationalist narrative elaborated by the Moroccan Sultan Abd al-Hafiz. Using a combination of Islamic modernist thought (*salafiyya*) from the Muslim Orient and of French positivism, the sultan re-casted himself as the popular representation of the collective Moroccan self, inscribed on living bodies in public Islamic rituals, sexual relations, birth, and death. The historical alliance of sultan-science-nationalism-salafiyya accounts for Morocco's emergence from colonialism in 1956 as an Islamic monarchy rather than a secular Arab-socialist state like neighboring Algeria, Tunisia, or Egypt. In the King, Morocco retains an Islamic sovereignty re-embodied. In the Moroccan postcolonial state, a positive technocracy nationalized and Islamicized.

According to Amster, the contemporary Moroccan body is “an archive, a repository of a lost form of political authority.” This *fragmented* body expresses different and layered ways of knowing from Sufi and positive epistemologies, and the competing models of sovereignty they evoke. The postcolonial body is therefore an historical artifact of the Moroccan experience with French colonialism and an emblem of the Islamic



postcolonial condition. Postcolonial bodies escape modern scientific understanding, Amster argues, and suffer from “double exclusion:”

They are intermediate realities that Bruno Latour calls “hybrids” (Latour 1991), realities that are the unthinkable, the unconscious of a modernity that offers a promise, a guarantee, that man can exact truth from nature and have sovereignty over himself as a citizen-subject. The Moroccan body is *f-l-baynat*, in the between, at the interstice between tradition and modernity, Occident and Orient, nature and culture. It is marked as un-modern, while at the same time contaminated by modernity and colonialism. It suffers from a double exclusion: an exclusion from full political rights, and from the present of modern temporality.

Postcolonial bodies remind the white Western subject of their own hybridity, especially in the dark ecological age of toxic nature-culture contaminations. As the modern fantasy of a strict nature-culture divide appears more and more untenable in the face of global warming and planetary extinction, the body is certainly the primary site to re-examine modern Western subjectivity. For postcolonial subjects, however, the priority lays perhaps not so much in a renewed engagement with “non-human” or “more-than-human” alterity. Their struggle is much more about the recovery of a “fully human” status, withheld from them as a result of the double exclusion described by Amster. It is therefore a highly political project of individual and collective emancipation in which Sufi ways of being and concepts of sovereign embodiment play a central role. Despite its co-optation a century ago by nationalist leaders and colonizers alike, the Muslim body remains “a site of Islamic Sufi knowing, of self-determination, and a potential base of resistance to the modern Moroccan state.”

#### EPISTEMOLOGICAL PLURALISM IN RAMIA BELADEL'S PRACTICE

Amster's account of embodiment in Morocco is useful for situating Ramia Beladel's engagement with Sufism within her art practice. Her engagement became an opportunity to reflect and experiment with the cultural-epistemological “fragmentedness” of her own postcolonial “body-self,” as part

of a process of personal reconfiguration. Her observations on Sufi knowledge mirror Amster's (2013) notion of “medical pluralism:”

Popular Sufism is far from the elitist practices of Sufi masters, whose spiritual accomplishment is based on erudite knowledge. Popular spiritual practices are not based on academic knowledge, but on everyday practice. People have a sensitivity for what's going on in their inner selves, often leading to the need to connect with this “other,” who is not really defined. [...] They are people who find themselves in situations that appear inexplicable: they feel sick, or mad. Many of them went first through a psychological treatment that ultimately didn't help. They later found their inner peace through traditional healing practices.

Several epistemologies are evoked in these lines—erudite Sufism, popular healing, and biomedicine—that permeate people's lives in different ways. If people of all classes in Morocco engage with popular Sufi practices, it is often for different reasons. Amongst these reasons, Amster (2013) mentions the costliness of biomedicine, alternate conceptions of illness and the body, and a “dissent from the state.” Quality medical treatments are indeed costly in Morocco, and financial support from the state is scarce or non-existent, especially in the case of psychological diseases that require lengthy treatments. This is often a source of frustration for people and perceived as a lack of social justice. Turning to traditional healing is a way for people to manifest their dissatisfaction with state politics. Medical pluralism, or the mixing of traditional healing with biomedicine, is therefore more widespread among lower classes.

For Ramia Beladel, the terms of her engagement with popular Sufi practices are different. As an educated young woman who grew up in a relatively privileged family in Marrakesh, her interest in Sufism emerged perhaps more from personal curiosity than sheer necessity. However, this does not diminish the significance of her experience with Sufism, quite on the contrary. By consciously choosing to engage with popular healing practices, she reworks the borders of conflicting epistemologies within herself and in her social field. For Mignolo (2011), “border epistemology” provides a method for decolonial thinking, which is importantly practiced “not just through the mind, but with the whole body.” Through her self-invented aesthetic



method of border thinking, Ramia Beladel attempted to regain agency in “self-governance” (Luxon 2008). While this experience informed both her performance and our joint sound piece, the two works render the ontological workings of epistemological pluralism differently. In the performance, this process is internalized and rendered straightforwardly through affective transformation. In the sound piece, different registers of being and knowing are addressed both discursively and through the sound mix.

### A WASTED BREATH INSIDE A BALLOON

As part of our conversations, Ramia Beladel often expressed her discomfort with her position as a woman and as an artist in Moroccan society. This feeling poetically surfaces in her monologue in our sound piece *A wasted breath inside a balloon*:

I do exist in my mind.  
I do exist in your mind.  
I do exist, I do exist.  
A wasted breath, inside a balloon.  
I'm a wasted breath inside a balloon.  
I'm a worker who didn't find a work yet.  
I'm a homeless who didn't find a home yet.  
I'm a swimmer who didn't find a sea yet.  
I'm a traveler who didn't find a destination yet.  
I'm the yet.  
I'm the yet that we use at the end of a sentence  
when a work is undone.  
I'm the yet.  
I'm completely incomplete.  
I'm a dishonored commitment, a missed appointment.  
I'm an infinite movement.  
Movement? I'm a mimicry of movement.  
Who? Who?  
Me, me, me.  
The kids, the family, the conditions, the time,  
the wife, the mother, the dad, the country,



Ramia Beladel's performance  
*Waiting for Godot to bless me*,  
Moulay Bouchta, 2017.

the sex, the second sex, the third sex,  
the society, the traditions, the pretexts.

The pretexts.

I'm the prefix that we use in a word  
because we are so lazy to invent a new one.

I'm the other ramblings of myself.

I'm a there that is not yet the here.

I'm Godot, who waits for himself to come.

As the monologue suggests, Ramia Beladel's discomfort has to do with a sensation of incompleteness, combined perhaps with feelings of shame and anger. If incompleteness may relate to expectations expressed by society, it possibly also points to a rupture at a deeper level of being. This rupture has to do with an existential “in-betweenness,” as Ramia Beladel explains:

Like me, many people have to deal with this in-between situation in their lives. There has been a break in the past, followed by trouble and confrontation. Things took shape and became more and more fixed. Now we have the in-between situation. That is, you keep a door open, and in our times, there are many doors closing. Hence the problematic of borders, refugees, visas, etc. Sometimes you take one step back in order to better move forward. You circle around the center in order to understand it. There are many openings and closings, the negotiation is constant in the formation of an identity.

From this break in the past, namely colonialism, modern Moroccan subjectivity has emerged in the “in-between,” that is in the interstice between tradition and modernity, Occident and Orient, nature and culture (Amster 2013). Marked by



fragmentation, hybridity, and double exclusion, postcolonial subjects need to constantly negotiate their position in society, as Ramia Beladel puts it. They struggle with an unpredictable system of structural inequalities, a world of social and technocratic “doors” that can quickly turn into walls. For Ramia Beladel, this negotiation is further complicated by her particular position as a woman artist, starting with her own family:

In every society and for a long time, artists have never been considered as normal people. Stereotypes endure about artists, about their inspiration, their effervescence, the mad artist, Van Gogh's story, and all that. I am considered to be different by my own family, I'm a little freak for them. They say: she's away with her mind, she thinks of a new artwork, she's not with us. Even if they don't tell me directly, I can also feel the expectations of my parents towards me as a daughter. By choosing to be an artist, it is as if I have escaped these expectations. So far, they haven't been able to introduce me as an artist. They say I'm an interior designer, a decorator, or if they say an artist, they seem to be doubting it.

Beyond her family, being a woman artist places Ramia Beladel generally at odds with socially attributed gender roles. This position is further complicated when female performers appear publicly. Taboos regarding the female body are well alive, especially regarding nudity. Female performers are quickly compared by conservative audiences to the “festive bodies” of cabaret dancer-singers (*shikhat*), known for their highly sexualized dances and shamelessness (Kapchan 1994). Such normative female representations are strongly contested, however, and Morocco has a long history of feminist movements, struggles, and reclamations, which I briefly review in relation to Ramia Beladel's position.

#### WOMEN'S LEGAL STATUS IN MOROCCO AND BODY POLITICS

The status of women in Morocco is legally defined in the Family Code (*Moudawana*), promulgated for the first time in 1958 after independence and followed by successive revisions. According to Jay (2018), the family

ideal in the first version of the Moudawana depended on symbols of national unity. Women's rights and status were directly connected through the figure of the mother. The situation changed in the 1970s and 1980s with the emergence of Islamic feminist movements that rejected both the patriarchal Moroccan model based on “misogynistic readings of religious texts” and a Western feminism that “dismissed Muslim cultures.” Following King Mohammed VI's enthronement, a revised version of the Family Code was promulgated in 2004, ensuring new rights to custody and divorce for women, and restricting polygamy (Jay 2018). These reforms have hardly been implemented, however, and led to resistance from a society that remains “deeply patriarchal” (Biagi and Frosini 2014). Cases of sexual harassment and forced virginity tests are frequently reported in the media. Extramarital sexual relationships are still a punishable crime in Morocco, and hundreds of unmarried couples are arrested each year for this reason, creating heated controversies. While early forms of feminist mobilization in North Africa tended to marginalize the body and sexuality in order to prioritize reforming state laws, new forms of activism have emerged in the region that focus on the female body as a site of contestation (Salime 2014). By relying on “sexualized scripts” rather than “moralizing” ones, these actions extended the repertoire of protest to “personal revolutions,” or “micro-rebellions,” proliferating in the fluidity and interwoven pathways of cyberspace. Unlike older feminist forms of action, these micro revolutions are more in concert with “neoliberal subjectivities and entrepreneurial forms of self-promotion, self-reliance, and self-governance.”

#### BODY POLITICS IN RAMIA BELADEL'S PRACTICE

Ramia Beladel's performance *Waiting for Godot to bless me* is the result of her engagement with popular Sufism; it also expresses a need for individual emancipation, which is a central claim of the new generation of plural feminisms in North Africa. Her body is central to this quest and her art practice. More than simply spiritual cleansing, her performance mirrors a process of self-formation. If traditional healing practices offer possibilities for personal experimentation, Ramia Beladel did not simply follow the instructions of the healers she encountered. She became her *own* healer as



part of her art practice, according to the principle of “self-reliance” evoked by Salime (2014). Her practical engagement with popular Sufism made the borders of her own subjectivity more apparent, as she comments:

Certain ways of knowing, religious or mathematical ones, prevent us from enjoying other experiences. My Islamic religious education restricts myself from believing in popular healing practices. Since I was a child I was told that it is “haram” (forbidden by Islam), and superstition. I am now thirty-two and I started four years ago. I need to take my time in order to move toward a change, slowly but surely. In the beginning, I was hindered by skepticism when attending trance rituals. After a discussion with a healer, I decided not to judge anymore and I stopped asking questions, aware that I wasn’t wise enough to understand. During the moussem, I try not to be this rational mind, but to exteriorize everything I have experienced before, what is buried within myself. It’s like therapy, a descent into hell, psychoanalysis.

The conflicting borders between rational scientific knowledge, modern orthodox (*salafiya*) Islam, medical therapy, and popular Sufi healing were not simply *identified* by Ramia Beladel. She repeatedly explored and questioned these borders through her whole self, body, and heart. The difficulty of this process is rendered in the following excerpt of *A wasted breath inside a balloon*, symbolically compared to self-rewriting on a blank sheet:

A blind site, a white paper.  
Lots of three dots, lots of exclamations, and questions as well.  
Hard to put a point after a sentence, harder to put one sentence in one meaning.  
Different elements, different connotations, different spirits,  
different vibes, different body languages, different songs,  
lyrics, tunes, all that seems not enough to reach  
the exaltation.

## AISHA, A SPIRITUAL HEALER IN MOULAY BOUCHTA

As a site where the spiritual world of popular Sufism meets with everyday life, the moussem in Moulay Bouchta was a perfect ground for Ramia Beladel’s experiments in self-formation. It was also an occasion for me to join her in her research, and together we followed some of the moussem’s events and ceremonies. We spent most of our time in front of the saint’s mausoleum in the village center. The small square was always crowded, with villagers and pilgrims alike, along with sellers, healers, musicians, dancers, descendants of the saint (*chorfa*), and state representatives. The ceremonies included Sufi music and dance performances, the public ritual sacrifice of a cow, as well as a choreographed healing ritual based on rifle firing and the smell of gunpowder (*bokharia*). Most of these situations were audio documented and excerpts can be heard in our sound piece, retracing more or less the chronology of their succession.

Ramia Beladel was especially interested in meeting older women who presented themselves as spiritual healers. She got to know a woman in her sixties, Aisha, who claimed to be possessed by the female spirit Aisha Oumima, also declaring herself a “free woman.” We met several times with Aisha, recording a couple of praise songs with her. Frequently designated as “possessed healers” (*mlaikiya*), “psychics” (*chouaffa*), or even as “witches” (*sahhara*), women like Aisha often find their vocation as healers in the power of the spirit that inhabits them (Rhani 2009). In some cases, this brings them financial autonomy, as well as a certain freedom of action and movement. They are, however, often criticized by members of their communities and families, accused of sorcery, sometimes forced to cease their activities, or are summoned to exert outside of their own community. In our sound piece, one can hear Aisha complaining about such accusations, translated into French by Ramia Beladel. Later in the piece, Aisha speaks of a woman whom she is guiding through spiritual healing, to which Ramia Beladel adds her own comments:

This woman is possessed by the spirit of Malika. There’s another spirit too, who creates a block. She turned 40 years old and she’s still not married. It’s the spirit who blocks her, keeping away her suitors. And the woman is waiting like that, unable to get

married. A woman who turns 40, that's it, she can't hope for anything anymore.

Overall, Ramia Beladel shows a lot of respect and admiration for women like Aisha, who guided her through her initiation to popular Sufism. "I understand Aisha when she says that she is a free woman," Ramia Beladel declares and adds: "when you possess such a spiritual talent, you feel empowered, and this power gives you freedom." Aisha also appears in Ramia Beladel's monologue in the sound piece:

Day after day, I keep talking to Aisha, who is guiding the women through the healing ritual. Free, independent, powerful, she helps them to get rid of their inner demons. The need to create my own performance becomes stronger and stronger, I have demons, lots of them, I need to wash them away. Splashing water from a bucket, I wash myself in Bir Alchifa, the sacred well, surrounded by the underwear left by women before me, breaking from the past into a new present.

#### TRANCE, PERFORMATIVITY, AND INTRA-ACTION

On the day of her performance in Moulay Bouchta, Ramia Beladel was fully prepared, empowered by her experience in the moussem and her interactions with Aisha. Prior to the performance, she went through a henna tattoo ritual and purified herself in the sacred well of the saint's house (*zawiya*). Her monologue describes her state of mind just before the performance:

I can be well dressed,  
I can invent my own ritual,  
I can go into a trance,  
I believe in what I'm doing,  
I believe in art,  
I believe in my body,  
and I'm aware of the spirit that I belong to,  
I can do my own lila.











Ramia Beladel's assertive tone in this part sharply contrasts with the opening of her monologue in the piece. The part marks a transition from a state of incompleteness to her self-affirmation as a woman artist, empowered through spirituality. If this section of the monologue precedes Ramia Beladel's trance ritual in the sound piece, it is, however, already part of it, anticipating the ritual's transformative effect. She continues with a description of the ritual:

It's Thursday morning, I'm preparing for my lila, my offerings are ready: white balloons and white threads attached to white small stones; a white chair under a tree near the saint's grave. Ready to blow the balloons, ready to disperse pieces of myself. The spirit is present. I'm digging in order to seed the balloons. Shivering body, goosebumps, I am the ramblings of my breath. My trance is coming. My body, my closed mind, I start crying, unable to stop myself, I'm losing control, I'm away from myself. One balloon after another, my trance is jovial, tears of joy, tears for the new things I've gone through during this journey, tears for the women who are willing to do anything in order to be blessed and to be free, even using gunshots as therapy. I'm no more a blind site, a white paper, I'm at the same stage of belief together with the women who were in trance, while I was staring at them suspiciously. I believe in my art and they believe in their ritual. I'm in a perpetual state of change, changing weather, changing thoughts, perspectives, interpretations, all that seems not enough to reach the exuberance of these "inner practices."

Written a few days after the moussem for our sound piece, Ramia Beladel's monologue offers an interesting counterpoint to her performance piece. The text describes the trance as a succession of physical and emotional transformations. Breath by breath, balloon after balloon, Ramia Beladel disperses "pieces of herself," until she reaches a state of being "away from herself," to finally better recollect herself. The monologue is clearly a "performative speech act," through which the subject "comes into being" as a new "I" (Butler 1990). In comparison, the process is less transparent in the performance-ritual. Hidden in the opacity of embodiment, the ontological work of trance is only perceptible from the outside through Ramia Beladel's



cries and other visible manifestations of affect. If both the performance and the sound piece have a performative character, the transformation is perhaps more effective in the former case, while it is rather symbolic in the latter. In the performance, the body is the site where subjective postcolonial fragmentation can be reworked, through a form of intra-border dwelling:

The trance creates something like a boiling inside of me, I put things into question, certain principles. It's not fake, it's not theater, it happens in my guts. With this kind of ritual, you become able to open yourself to your own self, not through reflection, but through other means. It's like taking a picture without a camera.

Ramia Beladel's last sentence is of course intriguing. The apparent paradox that surfaces in the expression "taking a picture [of oneself] without a camera" sounds like an invitation to break with conceptual dichotomies such as subject vs object, thought vs matter, or representation vs reality. This expression evokes the possibility to be on both sides of the (absent) camera at the same time, that is simultaneously subject *and* object. In such a case, the body is that special ontological camera that allows for an "entanglement of matter and meaning," as in the "intra-active" model of posthumanist performativity proposed by Karen Barad (2007). "Matter and meaning are not separate elements," she writes, "mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance." As a result, Barad argues, there is "no unambiguous way to differentiate between the object and agencies of observation." Through her performative ritual, Ramia Beladel arguably entered into the ambiguous territory of intra-action, becoming her "new self," as she observed herself.

## THE SOUND BODY

Before examining more closely the sonic dimension of Ramia Beladel's performative practice, it is important to introduce Debora Kapchan's notion of "sound body" (Kapchan 2015). This notion is particularly relevant to my research because Kapchan expanded it through her year-long engagement with Sufism in Morocco as a scholar in sound and performance studies (Kapchan 2016). She highlights the significance of sound and listening in

Sufi spiritual practice. Liturgy is composed of prayer recitation as well as a *dhiber* (remembrance) ceremony, in which the names of God are repeated aloud over and over quite rapidly and with much fervor. The word *samaa* names both the genre of Sufi praise song in Morocco as well as the act of deep listening to that praise. Samaa listening and praise frequently lead to ecstatic states of worship, facilitating a "journey through several states." Sufi spiritual practice provides Kapchan with a model for elaborating her concept of the "sound body that is permeable and responsive to the rhythms of its environment, able to be reoriented easily when in proximity with, or touched by, other melodies, rituals, ecologies, institutions." She contrasts the sound body with the "juridical body of the Enlightenment" and its dualisms. The sound body emerges in performative "listening acts," she adds, whose affective dimension transforms not only ideas, but also the actual chemistry of our bodies.

In the light of the complex political history of postcolonial embodiment traced by Amster, Kapchan's notion of the "sound body" may appear limited because it remains too universal. It doesn't fully account for differences in position between "fully human," privileged bodies, and stigmatized, fragmented, postcolonial bodies. Instead of conceiving the possibility for a dialogue and negotiation between the individual and the social body *as part of* the sound body, Kapchan seems to reduce the sound body to a material, resonant body that ultimately appears trans-historical, and therefore potentially depoliticized. What I find productive in the concept of the sound body is the possibility it offers to re-examine sound itself from the perspective of embodiment. "Existentially speaking it is hard to think sound apart from the body," Kapchan (2017) writes. In its modern scientific definition, sound indeed strangely resembles the "biological body" devised by medical science as a finite object, "knowable and cultivable through the scientific method" (Amster 2013).

## POSTCOLONIAL AURALITY AND SONIC PLURALISM

During my research in Morocco, I often found it difficult to have conversations on sound "itself," as if this notion was irrelevant or foreign to most people I encountered. Discussing voices and bodies felt like a better place to start



Bokharia healing ritual in front of the saint's mausoleum in Moulay Bouchta, 2017. A female patient stands in the center of a circle of horsemen equipped with rifles. The men perform a dance ending with the firing of rifles, causing the blocking spirit to leave the patient's body.



when examining histories of sound and listening. Apart from music, the body is therefore the place to start examining histories of sound and listening. Like the postcolonial body described by Amster, I argue that aurality in Morocco can best be apprehended in terms of *epistemological pluralism*. The term *sonic pluralism* refers to an amalgamation of different epistemologies manifested in sounding and listening practices. In Morocco, these epistemologies can be traced back to Islamo-Arabic scholarship, Berber cosmology, Sufism, modern science, and possibly other sources—all entangled through the colonial matrix of power. Pluralism equally pertains to the status of sound *itself*, as a fragmented field through which postcolonial realities are constructed. As a result, sound is continuously becoming *out of itself*; sound is always a “sound body” because it does not make sense independently from listening subjects. Sound *in itself*, as an autonomous phenomenon that can be observed from the outside, turns out to be a product of modern Western subjectivity. It only makes sense as a particular case in the history of listening, despite its persistence in contemporary sound discourse.

#### SOUND IN RAMIA BELADEL'S PERFORMANCE

Sound, listening, and breathing play important roles in Ramia Beladel's performance; her practice is inspired in part by Sufi sound concepts, she explains:

In spiritual Sufi practice, breath and listening are closely interconnected via the notion of “samaa,” that is listening with an “awakened heart.” It is this principle that can lead to a union with the divine, with the spiritual, and with oneself. Breath leads to samaa, and samaa leads to the divine.

In the performance, trance is enacted through breathing into balloons. According to Dieste (2013), “breath” is a complex notion in the Moroccan Arabo-Islamic tradition. It refers both to *ruh* (divine breath, soul) and *nafs* (animal soul), the latter referring more specifically to human emotions and passions as uncontrolled expressions. Both terms also mean “breathing





Bokharia healing ritual in front of the saint's mausoleum in Moulay Bouchta, 2017.



and air, a means of vital and bodily strength which maintains life," and some afflictions are interpreted as an obstruction of breathing. If breathing and listening are central to Ramia Beladel's practice, she never directly referred to sound itself as an autonomous phenomenon, rather always in combination with listening and embodiment.

To some extent, Ramia Beladel's *Waiting for Godot to bless me* can be considered as a realization of Kapchan's (2015) "sound body." The performance comes close to a "listening act," in which a new subject emerges through deep, trance-like listening. Our joint sound piece *A wasted breath inside a balloon*, on the contrary, points to the complex sociality of the moussem in Moulay Bouchta, as well as to Ramia Beladel's position within it. Besides her spoken script and field recordings, the piece contains an additional layer made of balloon sounds. Derived from Ramia Beladel's use of balloons in her performance, this abstract soundscape is an attempt to represent the fluctuations of her inner affective self. The script draws on various oral and literary registers, including live translation, descriptions, diary, and monologue. Throughout this script, Ramia Beladel's position is changing. If in the beginning she immerses herself in the moussem and manages to bond with some of the women healers, she later clearly distances herself: "I believe in my art and they believe in their ritual," she says in the last part of the monologue. Ramia Beladel and Aisha, the woman healer, differ in their convictions; they also differ in class and education, which inevitably positions them apart from one another in the social field of privilege and agency. Despite these differences, they found ways of connecting on the level of spirituality, empathy, and mutual care.

Through her engagement with popular Sufism, Ramia Beladel certainly realized that gender normativity tends to be reproduced in healing practices. In the previous example of the unmarried 40-year-old woman, Aisha interpreted the situation as a result of the negative influence of a blocking spirit. The woman required a curative treatment, Aisha declared, and therefore sanctioned her for deviating from the social norm. Ramia Beladel herself was "diagnosed" by a *faqih* (Islamic cleric) in 2014, who declared that she was possessed by "Malika," a spirit mentioned by Crapanzano (1973) in his list of Moroccan *jinn* and *jinniya*:

Lalla Malika is very beautiful and dresses, as they say, with a lot of chic. She demands the same elegance of all her followers.

She is a flirt and quite promiscuous, and she especially enjoys relationships with married men. I have been told she speaks only French and that she lives in clothes cabinets. Lalla Malika is always gay, and she does not attack her followers. She likes to laugh and tickle them, and she is responsible when a group of women suddenly begin giggling. She prefers the color pink and requires her followers to wear eau de cologne and burn sandal.

If the transgressive character of the spirit Malika is striking in this description, one should not forget that such an ambiguous female figure is by no way accepted in Moroccan society; it is rather presented as a pathology that needs to be controlled and cured. The association of the spirit Malika with French language highlights the exteriority of this figure for Moroccan society, while at the same time acknowledging her participation amongst the pantheon of Moroccan spirits. If Ramia Beladel made a reference to Malika in her performance by wearing a pink dress (the color of the *jinniya*), she did not engage with her spirit in the traditional way of popular Sufism, preferring instead her own ritual.

To sum up, Ramia Beladel integrated elements from popular Sufism into her own art practice, while clearly situating herself within a distinct social field. From her contested position as a woman artist, she found inspiration in the daily struggle of women healers, while affirming at the same time her own values. These values come close to the new generation of "plural feminism" in North Africa, defined by Salime (2014) as "dignity, individual freedoms, religious choice, the right to subversion, and self-expression." Even if Ramia Beladel repeatedly declared that she doesn't see herself as a feminist, her performance presents similarities with the self-assertive tone of feminist "microrebellions" described by Salime. For Ramia Beladel, microrebellion does not necessarily entail provocation or direct confrontation, however, but mostly irony and indifference, as she puts it:

When I'm back in Marrakesh from the moussem, as I walk through the medina, I stare at supposedly "normal" people with irony. When people react with skepticism to my experience in popular Sufism, I don't argue with them. Even my family criticizes me sometimes

for going to the moussem, as it is "against the religion." I don't even answer, I smile, I say "yes yes." There's a saying: "hesitation is loud and self-confidence is calm." If I wasn't certain of what I'm doing, I would surely enter into a conflict with my family.

## BODY POLITICS OF SUFU-ORIENTED CONTEMPORARY ART IN MOROCCO

The sound piece *A wasted breath inside a balloon* mirrors the complexity of Ramia Beladel's position as a woman artist within conflicting epistemological and social fields. The piece becomes a stage where these tensions can be acted out and possibly resolved, at least temporarily. Out of the performative "speech act" mediated by the script, Ramia Beladel emerges as a new self. This transformation is only possible through her intellectual and bodily engagement with popular Sufism. The "sound body" in our joint piece does not correspond with Kapchan's (2015) "unmarked" body, "free of the dichotomies of modern subjectivity," and supposedly made of pure "vibrant materiality." It is much more a "plural sound body," that is a *fully* postcolonial body, continuously re-entangled in the materiality of knowledge and coloniality, glorious and vulnerable in its struggle for sovereignty. In comparison with the sound piece, Ramia Beladel's performance *Waiting for Godot to bless me* perhaps comes closer to Kapchan's definition of the sound body. The performance nevertheless exceeds this definition, precisely because it exists as part of the highly coded field of global contemporary art. As such, it is not *any body*, which is visually presented in a trance-like state in the video, but a body that can be identified by an international audience as a young North African woman artist, dressed in an elegant modern-traditional dress. Whereas the spiritual bodily practice at the center of Ramia Beladel's performance is personal and intimate, the artwork itself is clearly designed for the "world stage" (Goodman 2005). Through its presentation as a video on the artist's website along with English texts, Ramia Beladel made the work accessible for circulation in the global virtual space of cultural goods. This orientation was productive in her case, leading to new residencies and public presentations in Morocco, as well as in Europe and South America.



I end this chapter with a comment on the political dimension of Sufism in Moroccan contemporary art. Following Amster (2013), I evoked the persistence of Sufi epistemology in Morocco through practices such as “medical pluralism.” Sufi thought is well alive today in Morocco and represents a contested site of power, claimed at the same time by the monarchy, political parties, and working-class communities of believers. This is important when considering contemporary artworks that refer to Sufi thought. Art historian Cynthia Becker (2009) notes that Sufism was embraced first as “Moroccan national heritage” in the early 1960s by the modernist artists of the Casablanca School in an attempt to break with the academism and colonialism of European art. Painters such as Farid Belkahia and Mohamed Melehi found inspiration in Sufi symbolism and calligraphic scripts to create their own abstract visual language. As part of a new generation of artists who emerged with the coming to power of King Mohammed VI in 1999, Younès Rahmoun in his work relies on Sufi meditation and repetition. For Rahmoun, Sufism is a personal transcendental expression that serves as a bridge between the human and the divine. Yet, Becker contends, Rahmoun's art clearly corresponds with the image of Sufism propagated by the monarchy for its own benefit—one of universality and understanding across cultures. In a context characterized by uneven political rights and persistent limitations in freedom of expression, Becker sees Rahmoun's apparent alignment with the state's official discourse on Sufism as a form of “self-censorship.” A similar comment could be made about Ramia Beladel's work, herself a former student of Rahmoun at the art institute in Tetouan. If Beladel's and Rahmoun's work appear apolitical to Western art criticism, then it is perhaps because these works are *differently* political, or micro-political. Sufi practice in Moroccan contemporary art is political precisely because it is centered on the postcolonial body. Like in instances of “medical pluralism,” and similarly in recent forms of feminist activism, engaging one's own body (in traditional healing or in artistic actions) has increasingly become a way for people to reclaim a “legitimate voice,” often denied in institutional settings (Salime 2014). In the present context of disillusionment with the state as a channel for social justice, the body is a site from which opposition to structural violence and institutionalized state corruption can be manifested. Especially, the perceived failure of the Arab Spring revolution in 2011 made it necessary for artists in North Africa to find new modes of extra-institutional criticism. For some of them, engaging with Sufism through their own body—and not

simply on the level of cultural representation—can be seen as an attempt to relocate the political within the body. Like feminist acts of microrebellions, these practices invoke new forms of resistance; this potentially includes experimenting with the borders of censorship—a notoriously unclear territory in Morocco. By engaging with the ontological work of Sufi practice, these artists find a means of subjective transformation from which they can potentially reclaim a legitimate voice. The question ultimately remains whether these energies are sufficient “to fuel an increase in the body's powers” (Marks 2015) and in creative thought.