

A History of the Western Sahara Conflict

A History of the Western Sahara Conflict:

The Paper Desert

By

Michael Baers

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EPIGRAPH

“The world we know is not this ultimately simple configuration where events are reduced to accentuate their essential traits, their final meaning, or their initial and final value. On the contrary, it is a profusion of entangled events. If it appears as a ‘marvelous motley, profound and totally meaningful,’ this is because it began and continues its secret existence through a ‘host of errors and phantasms.’”

Michel Foucault

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PREFACE

This book, the result of roughly seven years of intermittent work, began as an exercise—a way of setting out for myself in roughly chronological order the history of the Western Sahara and the Western Saharan conflict as an aid to what I considered my “real” research, investigating a collection of photographs that arose as a consequence of the war in Western Sahara. But what began as an exercise soon grew into something large and unmanageable. Although the reason why these personal photographs belonging to soldiers of the Royal Moroccan Army were preserved by the Saharawis rather than discarded is one I have returned to again and again, this book addresses this only obliquely. Its subject is, more properly, the conflict itself; the divergent experiences of modernity that fueled it, the underlying antagonisms that fed into it, the history of colonization and migration that undergirds it, and the reasons why it remains unresolved today.

In pursuing an expansive take on the conflict and its genesis I was inspired in my composition strategy by a form of archaic history-writing, the medieval chronograph, one of four ways of visualizing and translating time—alongside chronometry, chronometry, and chronosophy—listed by Krzysztof Pomian in his book, *L'Ordre du temps*.¹ These four systems for representing time derive from a kind of historical thinking, writes Paul Ricouer, “that overflows that of the knowable ... within whose limits historians’ history confines itself.” As thinkable, he continues, they ignore the distinction between certain well-established oppositions—between myth and reason, philosophy and theology, speculation and symbolic imagination.² Thus, while chronology addresses a kind of time treated by clocks and calendars, “with the reservation that its intervals—such as eras—have a signification that is as much qualitative as quantitative,” chronography, with its liberal mixing of micro and macro elements, of myth and reality, goes beyond the calendar. “The noted episodes are defined by their relations to other episodes,” Ricouer writes, “a succession of unique, good or bad, joyful or sorrowful events” that are amorphous rather than

¹ Krzysztof Pomian, *L'Ordre du temps* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1984).

² Paul Ricouer, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 155.

cyclic or linear. “It is what relates the presented chronicle to the narrator’s position, before narrative detaches the told tale from its author.”³

If the reader senses a tension in the book before you, it stems from the difference between these two temporal representation systems—the strictly ordered linearity of the one with which I began and the amorphous and allegorical nature of the system I aspired to employ. For while I had hoped to come to a greater understanding of how the conflict developed by setting down one event after the other, it soon became apparent that the notative nature of chronology was inadequate to this task. My project had soon branched out into myriad chronological eddies and torrents, as difficult to navigate as they were to canalize into a legible sequence of discreet, sequential events or orders of knowledge, given that they traversed both the history of that amalgam of Bedouin clans originating on the Arabian peninsula who made their way westward across North Africa during the Middle Ages and gradually intermarried with indigenous Amizagh tribes to create a new hybrid culture, but also the vagaries of North African historiography, with its complex systems of citation, strategies of legitimation, and temporal architecture unfamiliar to the Western reader. Chronology does not interpret, and finds itself at sea where history passes into myth, and myth is what a good deal of writing about the Sahara by both North Africans and Europeans alike consists of. Chronography, by contrast, is inherently relational and iterative, seeing in historical episodes the echoes of other, earlier episodes, and their successive re-emergence in the future—history as a form of repetition compulsion carried out on a mass scale, where myth and fact are both legitimate forms of historical explanation. A contemporary North African historian like Abdallah Laroui affirms this, as I note in what follows, when he writes that the political unrest that Ibn Khaldun lived through and wrote about informs contemporary Maghribi writers, who have been unable to free themselves “from a sense of impending doom.”⁴ Following this line of thinking, the “rationally pursued mutilation” of European colonization, experienced both by Moroccans and Saharawis, might be felt as the most recent in an interlinking chain of past defeats, subjections, and indignities, experienced in present-time as viscerally as a slap in the face. “There is not occupation of territory, on the one hand, and independence of persons on the other,” writes Kelly Oliver.

³ Ibid., 156

⁴ Abdallah Laroui, *The History of the Maghrib: An Interpretative Essay*, trans. Ralph Manheim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), 218–219.

“It is the country as a whole, its history, its daily pulsation, that are contested, disfigured, in the hope of a final destruction.”⁵

During my protracted struggle with North African historiography a question that began to form was this: did historical antipathies between Bedouin nomads and agrarian Amizagh play some part in the Western Sahara conflict? (As Martin Buber says, the tradition of the campfire faces that of the pyramid.) Was it their differing experience of European colonization, a former empire’s wounded pride under the yoke of Western domination encountering the coming-to-national-consciousness of a fiercely independent nomadic people forced into sedentarization by colonialism and cycles of drought? Did these two cultures, linked by shared religion but separated by much else, represent opposing, incommensurable societal modalities or did colonialization distort each to such an extent that they were bound to come into conflict? And what of the nature of monarchical power in Morocco, or of monarchical power yoked to revanchist doctrine, the latter two usually being identified as more direct causes of the conflict. In Morocco, it can be dangerous to raise objections to the country’s annexation of the Western Sahara. It is also unwise to discuss it. The very few conversations I was able to have with Moroccans over the years about the Western Sahara conflict were stymied either by my conversants’ taking Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara as an article of faith, or being extremely reluctant to broach the issue, perhaps out of worry over how far the *makhzen*’s reach extends. The despot is the paranoid Deleuze and Guattari say, and his paranoia spreads out from the apex of the royal palace to pervade society.⁶

However, to allude to an archaic aspect within Morocco’s power structure is not to say it is premodern. “To exercise sovereignty is to exercise control over mortality and to define life as the deployment and

⁵ Kelly Oliver, *The Colonization of Psychic Space: A Psychoanalytic Social Theory of Oppression* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 49.

⁶ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem & Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 193.

Deleuze and Guattari’s subsequent description of the barbarian despotic machine possesses uncanny echoes with Moroccan society of the 1960s and 1970s, where the king, while drawing his legitimacy from his role as “commander of the faithful,” also managed a complex, interlocking web of personal business interests, rivalries, and alliances: “... the megamachine of the State, a functional pyramid ... has the despot at its apex, an immobile motor, with the bureaucratic apparatus as its lateral surface and its transmission gear, and the villagers at its base, serving as its working parts” (194).

manifestation of power,”⁷ writes Achille Mbembe, following Michel Foucault’s notion of biopower, and indeed much of King Hassan II’s career was devoted to exercising this sovereign function in the service of state control. Far from being barbaric, the positioning of the Other as “a mortal threat or absolute danger whose biophysical elimination would strengthen my potential to life and security,” Mbembe reminds the reader, “is one of the many imaginaries of sovereignty characteristic of both early and late modernity itself.”⁸

And then there is the causative role of the Western world powers, who saw in the Western Sahara conflict another dangerous instance of Soviet encroachment and an opportunity for proxy warfare. One could argue that Morocco’s sense of national injury, expressed as aspirational revanchism, was instrumentalized first by Hassan and then by these larger, more powerful historical actors, with the resulting increase in tension placed under an unbearable pressure by the instruments of world governance normally charged with resolving conflict, in this case the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, and then allowed to boil over.

In the end, all of these forces were at play. In giving an account of the conflict, it is a question of setting them in some adequate relation to one another.

At the conclusion of writing, I cannot lay claim to uncovering new facts about the conflict, apart from drawing on a tranche of American State Department telegrams declassified in 2006 and subsequently uploaded to *wikileaks.com*. In any case, the granular details of the conflict have already been presented by many writers, chief among them Tony Hodges, whose work, *Western Sahara: The Roots of a Desert War*, is encyclopedic in scope. Similarly, the history of the Saharawi people has been addressed in exhaustive detail by the Orientalist H.T. Norris, who in several books and many scholarly articles provides a comprehensive overview of what is known about the Western Saharans—their origins, their history—and what is likely unknowable. What I might tentatively claim as a novel contribution to the field is the combinatorial logic of my undertaking, which integrates different areas of research concerning different time periods—from medieval North African history to the postcolonial present—comparing and contrasting the written record, selectively assembling historical data and drawing on different modes of historical emplotment, including the occasional venture into historical fiction and prose poetry, to create a kind of synoptic fissure.

⁷ Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” trans. Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture*, Volume 15, Number 1 (Winter 2003): 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 18.

Finally, what distinguishes this work from earlier chroniclers of the conflict is its sense of proleptic catastrophe, a consequence of writing it long after the war ground to a halt and metastasized into something far worse—a protracted conflict, a frozen conflict, a case of conflict irresolution, and, for much of the world, an invisible conflict. This intimation of things fated to turn out badly is not shared by even the most astute of the authors who published while the conflict in Western Sahara was still a hot war. Their sympathy for the Saharawis precluded elegy. But from my vantage in the third decade of the twenty-first century, maintaining a sense of hopeful optimism for their fate is very difficult. An interview subject once told me he viewed the Western Sahara conflict as a crossroad where all the world's conflicts intersect. I believe he is correct, although there is a dimension to this insight he perhaps did not intend. If the Western Sahara is a crossroad where many of the Third World liberation struggles of the 1960s and 1970s met and intersected, it is also, more darkly, a lonely backroad where the hallucinatory paranoia guiding American foreign policy in this period imagined all the forces inimical to its postwar order, arrayed elsewhere in Africa, would congregate if given half the chance. It was a delusion Morocco gladly encouraged, to the detriment of the right to self-determination for formerly colonized peoples enshrined in UN General Assembly resolution 1514 of 1960. This right, as in many other instances, was corrupted by the great powers in the service of attaining short-term strategic advantage. As foreign policy, its perversity lies in the way it suppresses the unforeseeable by fomenting the bad. Like that form of night terror where the sleeper awakens to the feeling of being immobilized by a malignant force crouched upon one's chest, a form of parasomnia known to modern medicine as "sleep paralysis," this realpolitik realism is a waking nightmare. I imagine that the Saharawis inhabiting their desert refugee camps or the towns of occupied Western Sahara have intimate knowledge of this condition, having lived for nearly half a century with the consequences of the waking paralysis afflicting the political will of the international community, who lurch from one short-sighted exigency to the next, content to allow everyday people to suffer the consequences. This may be colonialism's most lasting, deleterious legacy.

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Many people contributed to the writing of this book over the years, either through discussion, material support, or both. On top of this list would be Yasmine Eid-Sabbagh, who first introduced me to the Western Sahara conflict through her work with the “Informal Collective.” Close after are Fatima Mahfoud, Patrizio Esposito, and Jean Lamore, who shared their inestimably valuable time and knowledge with me over the years and contributed directly and indirectly to how this book developed. Iz Öztat read my manuscript at an early stage, providing much in the way of useful, sensible advice and continuous encouragement thereafter. It was a CDA grant in artistic research provided by Moiz Zilberman that first set me on the course of writing this book, and for this he deserves much thanks. I would also like to extend my warmest appreciation to the Leibniz-Zentrum Moderner Orient in Berlin and its director, Dr. Ulrike Freitag, for providing much-needed material support to complete this manuscript. Two individuals there also deserve special thanks for encouraging my research over the years—Vice Director Sonja Hegasy and Norman “Saadi” Nikro. The former enthusiastically supported my work, sharing her extensive knowledge of Moroccan society and reading select chapters of this book where her expertise was invaluable. Saadi Nikro was a companion and interlocutor on many fruitful walks and discussion over the years. I am especially appreciative of his insightful criticism of my manuscript and for raising many pertinent questions. Nina Tabassomi has been an astute reader of chapters from this work: I also wish to thank her for many years of vigorous conversation, particularly concerning the legacy of colonialism and the Eurocentric bias one must, in all cases, be aware of and work to supplant. Theocharis Grigoriadis of Freie Universität Berlin has been an extraordinarily helpful and resourceful friend, offering much in the way of encouragement and advice. I thank him as well for sharing his extensive knowledge of a multitude of subjects, including medieval Russian chronographs, and for being extremely helpful in directing me towards difficult-to-access research materials. Nora Ströbel provided help with researching image rights, and Jacob Mundy generously allowed me to reproduce maps from his 2010 book, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution*, co-authored with Stephen Zunes. Finally I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks to the academics and activists who shared

their knowledge and experience during this work's composition, especially Susan Slyomovics, Emilio Spadola, Werner Ruff, Erik Hagen, and Jan Strömdahl. Finally, I would like to thank the Saharawis activists who shared their experiences with me over the years, in the SADR refugee camps and in Berlin, especially Najat Hamdi and Ghalia Djimi. Their courage and commitment makes the world a better place.

A NOTE ON ORTHOGRAPHY

Transliterations of Arabic into the Latin alphabet are notoriously inconsistent. While I have employed a uniform orthography in this text, where direct quotations occur I have retained the spelling used by the author in question.

SECTION ONE

THE NECESSITY OF FACES

CHAPTER ONE

I was in Paris when the e-mail arrived informing me I had received a grant for my project on Western Sahara. I was happy, ecstatic even. But elation quickly gave way to the sobering realization that I was now obligated to complete this project, upon which I had been working fitfully for a good portion of the previous year without, I was forced to admit, making significant headway. The subject of my research was the work of an “Informal Collective,” who in meetings called “encounters,” address the conflict in Western Sahara by sharing a selection of personal photographs, collected in an exquisite handbound book entitled *Necessità dei Volti* (The Necessity of Faces), belonging to Moroccan soldiers captured or killed by the SPLA (Saharawi People’s Liberation Army) or seized during raids on Moroccan military positions during the fifteen years (roughly 1976 to 1991) the conflict was a hot war. Outside these meetings, the photographs are never shown—the “where” in how an image is encountered being, in the estimation of the group, as important as the “what” of its contents. Having attended only two such meetings, and seen the photographs themselves on only a handful of other occasions, throughout the initial phase of my research I never quite lost the sense of a veil obscuring my understanding of the nature and import of the group’s work. Possessing few prior models for understanding the encounter model, I could not easily classify how it worked—a scant epistemological orientation compounded by my paucity of first-hand experience. In addition, as they were neither recorded nor photographed, what went on in encounters remained unclear, perplexing, hard to define. I remained almost entirely dependent on the group’s recollections to fill in the blanks.

This is what they told me: the group show their book so as to talk about the larger tragedy of the Western Sahara conflict, concerned not only with what happened to the Saharawi but also the Moroccan soldiers—many of them conscripts from Morocco’s working class—and their families as well, since they often remained ignorant of the fate that had befallen their relatives who had seemingly vanished into the desert. Seated in a circle at the chosen meeting site, which might be a private home, theater, gallery space, construction site, or derelict building, a group member would commence the meeting by presenting an account of the conflict; how Morocco and Mauritania colluded with a fragmented Spanish government,

in disarray after Franco's death, to annex and partition Western Sahara, while the Polisario Front, the Saharawi's political representatives, had been holding concurrent negotiations with the colonial administration, and had anticipated gaining control of the territory following a precipitous Spanish withdrawal. In the first months of the Moroccan/Mauritanian incursion, early in 1976, seventy percent of the indigenous population fled to hastily arranged refugee camps deep in the Saharan hamada of southwest Algeria where affiliated tribes had long resided. Here they remained throughout the fifteen years of war that followed, sweltering in refugee camps where daytime temperature routinely break 100 degrees Fahrenheit, or joining a growing Saharawi diaspora abroad. And here they remained, sweltering still, after a UN-brokered ceasefire halted fighting in 1991 and the two sides began negotiating the conditions for a referendum to decide the territory's final status—independent state or Moroccan province. It was an agreement doomed from the beginning to failure, despite the optimism of the deal's international brokers, who held fast to the naïve hope of a politically realistic compromise emerging in the fullness of time.¹ Cleaving to incompatible interpretations of the agreement, Moroccans envisaged voter participation on the principle of *jus sanguinis* (citizenship based on blood relations); the Polisario insisted voters be selected according to *jus soli* ("right of the soil," restricting the voter rolls to Saharawi who could prove residence within Spanish Sahara territory as of Spain's 1974 census). Throughout the ensuing quarter century of uneasy peace, the Collective would tell their audience, Morocco cemented its hold on the territory, encouraging a wave of Moroccan emigration that diluted the Saharawi's demographic majority and turned them into second-class citizens in their own country, at the same time extending and reinforcing the system of sand and earth berms—surrounded by mine fields and bristling with electronic sensors and Moroccan army outposts—that had played such an outsized part in bringing the war to a stalemate. (These eventually penned in the country all the way from the Moroccan border in the north, down its eastern frontier, swerving again westward parallel to Mauritania, all the way to the Atlantic coast.) In the meantime, the exiled Saharawi elected to forsake violence, placing their fate in the hands of the so-called bodies of international governance. Only after something of this whole history had been imparted was the book, resting on a chair or nearby table, passed around. Or rather, the invitation to look at the images it contains became more explicit, and another kind of conversation was allowed to unfold.

¹ Erik Jensen, *Western Sahara: Anatomy of a Stalemate* (Boulder and London: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2005), 13.

Many things puzzled me about encounters. In itself, the choice to hold private meetings as a means of promoting knowledge about a political situation in dire need of greater publicity was bewildering, for how to justify their intimate scale against the enormity of the largely invisible historical tragedy unfolding far away, in the westernmost regions of the Sahara. An additional difficulty lay in the group's determination to leave the definition of what constituted an "encounter" open-ended, unconcerned as they were by the question of where their project sat in relation to normative disciplinary boundaries. It was, in fact, this elisional quality and the group's willful evasion of discursive categories, that first piqued my interest. It was a project informed by artistic practice but was not art; it concerned scholarship and scholarly thought but was in no way academic research. There was a political objective, to be sure, but one that seemed bent on undermining the normal cause-effect relationship that usually dictates activist strategy. My object of study seemed perpetually in danger of disappearing before my eyes, and I found myself confronted by the same predicament as the American novelist Donald Barthelme, who, in an essay titled "Not Knowing," categorized the writer as "one who, embarking on a task, does not know what to do."² I didn't quite know what to do, and I didn't precisely know what I was doing *it* about. In this state of radical uncertainty, all I possessed, as a kind of synecdochic placeholder, was a single photograph documenting the venue of past encounter, a dingy room with mottled plaster wall, with the book lying atop a marble-top table reminiscent of the sort one finds in Paris cafés, surrounded by a number of cane back chairs.

² Donald Barthelme, "Not Knowing," *The Georgia Review*, Vol. 39, No. 3 (Fall 1985): 509.

CHAPTER TWO

The topic's obscurity was an ancillary difficulty. Few were familiar with where Western Sahara was let alone its history, a fact complicating my task when, as happened from time to time, someone inquired about what I was working on at the moment. After mentioning my research and being met with a look of incomprehension one too many times, I devised a strategy. I invited my conversation partner to imagine a map of the African continent's northwest quadrant, asking them to picture its countries: there, I would say, between Morocco in the far northwest and Mauritania south on the Atlantic coast, lies Western Sahara, like a comma in reverse, straddling the Sahara Desert and the Atlantic Ocean. Depending on the level of interest displayed, I would go on to explain the war, its indecisive outcome, and the facts of Morocco's occupation (indicated on actual maps by a broken line, denoting in the nomenclature of modern cartography a contested border).

Knowing little of the history of the conflict or the larger geopolitical forces that had shaped it (or even that much older history of migration, conquest and intermingling, and European adventurism), the story of Western Sahara must have appeared to my listeners as an obscure and minor anecdote in the history of twentieth century decolonization; unworthy, perhaps, of the inordinate amount of time I'd devoted to it. Often enough, after having concluded my narrative, I glimpsed this thought in the expression that would fall across their faces—a confused, pitying expression of the sort one reserves for the delusional or conspiratorially minded. Then they would change the topic.

Despite my conversation partners' skepticism, I had not made up the war in Western Sahara. It was indeed real: one in a number of internecine struggles around the world where the peculiarities of politics make sustaining perpetual war preferable to negotiating lasting peace. It was a war some authors claimed was fought over natural resources, while others considered it little more than a highly elaborate and protracted public relations campaign initiated by Morocco's King Hassan II to deflect attention from his incompetence and corruption. In any case, it has remained unresolved and possibly unresolvable: a signature case of conflict irresolution—a phenomenon examined year in and year out at conferences where nothing is resolved, whose participants, after hours or days of earnest discussion, depart no closer to bridging the vast conceptual gap between intellectual understanding and facts on the ground.

Cases of conflict irresolution are endemic in the contemporary world, and while they can commonly be attributed to economic and ideological factors, such conflicts also produce psychic consequences. In cases of forced displacement, exile, and occupation it is necessary to distinguish between retrospective trauma and situational trauma. When interminable conflict makes exile a permanent condition, as in the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis, or Saharawis and Moroccans, homologies develop between political realities, socio-cultural formations, and psychic experiences, dominated by the uncertain relationship between past trauma, present circumstance, and uncertain future possibility. This theoretical link between conflict irresolution as a category of political pathology and subjective experience becomes apparent in the definition of irresolution put forward by Jacques Derrida, who describes an “impossible logic ... the speculative structure between the solution (non-binding, unleashing, absolute untightening: absolution itself) and the non-solution (absolute tightening, paralyzing banding, etc.)”.¹ Irresolution’s psychic and cultural effects are located in the paralysis produced by this “speculative structure.”

A different situation exists in Morocco. There the experience of war and the memory of Moroccan casualties and POWs has been systematically suppressed, leading to the sort of irresolution which occurs when historical traumas remain unacknowledged. Here Avery Gordon’s concept of haunting as the shadow of what has been banished from the social but continues to exert an influence from its margins illuminates these two varieties of irresolution.² Haunting thus constitutes one mode in which the

¹ Jacques Derrida, *The Postcard*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 401.

² Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008). Gordon writes: “What kind of case is a case of a ghost? It is a case of haunting, a story about what happens when we admit the ghost—that special instance of the merging of the visible and the invisible, the dead and the living, the past and the present—into the making of worldly relations and into the making of our accounts of the world. It is a case of the difference it makes to start with the marginal, with what we normally exclude or banish, or, more commonly, with what we never even notice” (Gordon, 24, 25). Or as Judith Butler put it in an equally memorable formulation: “The frame [meaning the conceptual frames that structure medial representation, although the actual framing of a photograph or motion image remains a powerful metaphor for this more theoretical process] does not simply exhibit reality, but actively participates in a strategy of containment, selectively producing and enforcing what will count as reality. ... Although framing cannot always contain what it seeks to make visible or readable, it remains structured by the aim of instrumentalizing certain versions of reality, This means that the frame is always throwing something away, always keeping something out, always de-