We Share Walls

Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco

Katherine E. Hoffman
Additional praise for *We Share Walls*

“A beautiful and deeply researched ethnography that elucidates how performance genres like talk, song, and poetry create a sense of place and a particularly Berber (and gendered) response to modernity.”
Deborah Kapchan, The Tisch School of the Arts at New York University

“At last we have an account of Berber Morocco that probes space, culture, and people in a highly sensitive and eloquent style. Hoffman brings to the forefront a long marginalized language and an almost forgotten community. This is indeed ethnography at its best. Readers will be inspired by the breadth and depth of Hoffman’s treatment.”
Enam Al-Wer, University of Essex

“With compassion and intellectual acuity, Hoffman’s study of the Berber-speaking Ishelhin of Southern Morocco evokes a society where the spoken word has molded a deep attachment to place. Her observations glow with the intensity of lived experience, distilled from a total immersion in the land, language, and people of this remote region. Using speech, poetry, and song as keys to understanding social process, *We Share Walls* represents a major contribution to contemporary Moroccan Studies and to the wider field of ethnolinguistics.”
Susan Gilson Miller, Harvard University

“An excellent in-depth study of the gender and language dynamics in Berber communities. A highly readable and timely addition to the emerging and promising scholarship on language, gender, and women in Morocco.”
Fatima Sadiqi, Harvard University
Linguistic anthropology evolved in the 20th century in an environment that tended to reify language and culture. A recognition of the dynamics of discourse as a sociocultural process has since emerged as researchers have used new methods and theories to examine the reproduction and transformation of people, institutions, and communities through linguistic practices. This transformation of linguistic anthropology itself heralds a new era for publishing as well. **Blackwell Studies in Discourse and Culture** aims to represent and foster this new approach to discourse and culture by producing books that focus on the dynamics that can be obscured by such broad and diffuse terms as “language.” This series is committed to the ethnographic approach to language and discourse: ethnographic works deeply informed by theory, as well as more theoretical works that are deeply grounded in ethnography. The books are aimed at scholars in the sociology and anthropology of language, anthropological linguistics, sociolinguistics and socioculturally informed psycholinguistics. It is our hope that all books in the series will be widely adopted for a variety of courses.

**Series Editor**

**James M. Wilce** (PhD University of California, Los Angeles) is Professor of Anthropology at Northern Arizona University, where he is currently Director of Asian Studies. He serves on the editorial board of *American Anthropologist* and the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology*. He has published a number of articles and is the author of *Eloquence in Trouble: The Poetics and Politics of Complaint in Rural Bangladesh* (1998) and *Language and Emotion* (forthcoming) and the editor of *Social and Cultural Lives of Immune Systems* (2003).

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We Share Walls

Language, Land, and Gender in Berber Morocco

Katherine E. Hoffman
To my mother, with love

And in memory of
Fatima Hamid
and
Lalla Kiltum, “Tagullizt”

*ad tnt iʃh m ṭbbi*
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Blackwell Studies in Discourse and Culture was launched in 2005, committed to publish new titles with an ethnographic approach to language and discourse, and ethnographic works deeply informed by theory. *We Share Walls* by Katherine Hoffman is just such a work, illuminating precisely the issues outlined in the call.

The series books foreground the dynamics of discourse by illuminating issues such as:

- the global and local dynamics of the production, reception, circulation, and contextualization of discourse;
- the discursive production of social collectivities;
- the dynamic relation of speech acts to agents, social roles, and identities;
- the emergent relation of ideologies to linguistic structure and the social lives of linguistic forms; and
- the dialectic relations of local speech events to larger social formations and centers of power.

As Hoffman explains in the first chapter, her title derives from one of the performance forms that helps to constitute Ashelhi social life – a particular *tazrart* or “sung poem” about “sharing boundaries” and “being one.” The original poem is particularly apt as a source for the title, for it expresses the effort – part of which is expended in the very performance of such expressive forms – that “being one” entails. The agents Hoffman describes, including the poet in this case, are often Ishelhin women – singing, socializing their children, defying stereotypes by living their Tashelhit-speaking lives even in the Sous plains, and actively consuming media (radio in particular) while producing intelligent commentary thereupon.

Katherine Hoffman is an ethnographer’s ethnographer. Spending three and a half years in the field (unusual for a dissertation project) has yielded
a remarkable richness, with many layers to every experience, many methods to support every claim, many sites to illustrate each tendency, and three relevant field languages – Tashelhit, Arabic, and French – on which she draws to lend each translation its nuance. We find here both self-deprecating self-reflexivity and documentation of the reflexivity of Tashelhit actors busily engaged in producing goods for circulation. Included in these are, of course, goods such as Modern Standard Tashelhit, or MST. Though the actors here, producing their neologisms, are mostly elite urban radio personalities far removed from those with whom Hoffman spent most of her time in the mountains and on the plains, we should not think that the latter groups labored only to produce subsistence goods. Hoffman demonstrates again and again that ordinary women and men are the crucial producers and circulators of the genres in which Tashelhit has its life.

Each time we follow Hoffman, we meet with surprise – whether we accompany her on the discursive pathways that trace Ashelhi identity and the purity of the Tashelhit language to the mountain homeland or tamazirt, or we squeeze with her into a crowded taxi whose passengers – including the author – debate gendered visions of responsibility for various threats to Tashelhit; or we land in the midst of parties in the mountains or wedding songfests in the plains; or we listen in as urban Ashelhi radio personalities surprise some listeners with the latest MST coinage. The surprises result from the very things that make this book a fine exemplar of the series – Hoffman’s constant attention to the dynamics of social, cultural, and linguistic processes. Thus, for example, the tamazirt is built, and gendered – and Tashelhit preserved – through performance, which Hoffman envisions as combining “manual labor practices alongside discursive practices” (compare Irvine 1989 on Wolof griots). The surprises in Hoffman’s account of the informal party in Chapter Three are several – it is a mixed-sex gathering of unmarried adolescents in which, as Hoffman puts it, “rural and (returned) urban youths fashion each other” by exchanging the symbolic goods associated with mountain and city life. In this and many other ways Hoffman enriches us. Given the manifold forms of active engagement Ishelhin have with Tashelhit ways of speaking, We Share Walls is a unique contribution on many fronts, telling complex stories about culture and metaculture, gender, performance, language shift and maintenance.

Thus, it gives me great pleasure to introduce this exquisite ethnography, and with it, Blackwell Studies in Discourse and Culture.

Jim Wilce
Series Editor
This book was made possible by the women and men of Ida ou Zeddout, Arazan, Tazzemourt, Tiout, Touraght, Indouzal, and Taroudant, many of whom are given pseudonyms in this work. I sincerely hope that my affection and respect for them come through in these pages, and that readers will come to care about these people who have been sometimes exoticized and other times disregarded, but rarely taken at their word.

Without the people who helped me to learn to speak and understand Tashelhit, and then to transcribe, transliterate and translate it, this book never would have been written. Thanks go to Ahmed Boukous and Mohamed Najmi for their initial lessons in Tashelhit. Latifa Asseffar had an enviable attention to detail, taste for hard work, and calm disposition that made the years of transcribing together a joy. The mutual intellectual and emotional growth our friendship fostered has enriched my life immeasurably; I am thankful as well to her mother Zayna and sister Samira for their hospitality. My neighbors in Taroudant not only taught me Tashelhit but became my surrogate family: gentle Fatima Mhammad (“Little Fatima”) and outgoing Fatima Hamid (“Big Fatima”) took me into their lives as a beloved equal with their sons Omar, Mustafa, Mohamed and Kemal; they taught me to bargain in the markets, stand up for myself, preserve lemons, make couscous, and be patient. Mina Alahyane from Ida ou Zeddout brought me to her mountains, endured my persistent questions about life there, shared festive times, and steadfastly bore witness to my character when it was under fire. She enthusiastically took on the role of the critical insider-outsider on whom many of us anthropologists depend. I am deeply touched by her dedication to this research and her abiding friendship.

For support, encouragement, suggestions for improvement, and corrections of errors I am grateful to innumerable friends and colleagues, and ask forgiveness from those I fail to mention here. In Morocco, I am thankful for the warm collegiality and assistance of Ahmed Aassid, Lhaj Hmed Ahamayti and his wife Fadila, Fatima Agnaou, Omar Amarir, Ahmed