Addressing Extremism Through Literature: An Online Cross-Cultural Conversation on Mahi Binebine's *Horses of God*

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Abstract

In the Fall of 2017, first year liberal arts students at Community College and second year Masters' Students in literature at a university in Morocco collaborated in an online and live conversation focusing on the novel *Horses of God* (*Les Etoiles de Sidi Moumen*) written by Mahi Binabine. The novel describes the lives of four childhood friends growing up in a slum near Casablanca, navigating poverty and purposelessness and being drawn to religious fundamentalism. Students in the two colleges engaged in an online discussion on Facebook and live Google Hangouts exchange in which they shared questions about the novel. Moroccan students provided cultural context for the novel and American students discovered important connections to their own lives. Their contrasting life experiences generated unexpected common ground: an acknowledgement of difference and a shared ethical awareness of ways literature can interrogate political extremism.

Key words: literature, extremism, learning community, online collaboration, dialogue, students' reflections.

Introduction

In the Fall of 2017 students from two very different college communities came together for a virtual online exchange: a first-year liberal arts cluster at a New York City community college and a second-year Master's Program in English Literature and the History of Ideas at a university in northern Morocco. The two cluster courses that served as a basis for our exchange were English Composition and French and Francophone Literature in Translation. Our project, informed by the Collaborative Online International Learning (COIL) model developed at the State University of New York (SUNY) and currently gaining momentum at LaGuardia Community College, focused on the novel *Horses of God* written by the Moroccan author, Mahi Binebine. The novel, whose original French title was, *Les Etoiles de Sidi Moumen*, was published by Flammarion in 2010. Students read the 2013 English translation for a French Literature in Translation course. As majors in English Literature and the History of Ideas, the Moroccan students also read the novel in English translation. The film, *Horses of God*, by the French-Moroccan director Nabil Ayouch was released in 2012 under the title, *Les Chevaux de Dieu*. The writer and the director worked closely on the project and have launched

cultural and artistic centers for youth in various slums and underprivileged communities as an alternative to the forces of religious extremism. The novel traces the lives of four childhood friends growing up in the Sidi Moumen slum, near Casablanca, navigating poverty, violence and religious fundamentalism. The community college students and the second year MA Moroccan students read and discussed the novel in their individual classes, and watched the film. The American and Moroccan students then engaged in a live online conversation and wrote follow-up reflections about their conversation. In preparation for their collaboration, they created introductory videos about themselves and their lives which they shared on a private Facebook page created by the MA students.

When we suggested to our Moroccan colleague that his students might collaborate with us on *Horses of God*, we foresaw the potential for rich conversations on issues relevant to all of us (insecurity and threat of violence worldwide) but also the risk (and, perhaps, the thrill) of tackling sensitive and controversial subjects. We hypothesized that literature, and this text in particular, could provide an alternative way of analyzing extremism, one that would facilitate an understanding of its causes from an inside point of view. In response to the claim in the Call for Papers by *Ikhtilaf* that, "the dominant intellectual discourses of our time seem incapable of enlightening people on how to deal with the extremely complex realities of the world," we wanted to find out if a dialogue across cultures about a single provocative text might offer new insights into the ways students negotiate an understanding of difference.

Our collaborative project draws on two pedagogical initiatives: learning communities and online mediated virtual exchanges. Learning communities involve an intentional restructuring of students' time, credit, and learning experiences in order to build community and foster explicit connections across disciplines. Clearly, an international conversation between American and Moroccan university students has the potential to build community and foster interdisciplinary connections. In addition, learning community leaders have long observed that, "Well-designed learning communities can "break down barriers based on race, class and national origin" and promote "genuine exchange and collaboration across differences" (Lardner 8). We approached our project with this goal in mind, and the American college in this collaboration is a long-standing leader in the learning community movement in the U.S. As a teaching method, COIL emphasizes the interactive aspect of mutual learning that is so central to both learning communities and global citizenship. A large part of COIL's mission is to "encourage and support the

development and implementation of collaborative online international courses as a format for experiential cross-cultural learning. Participating students are sensitized to the larger world by deepening their understanding of themselves, their culture, how they are perceived by 'others' and how they perceive 'others'. These globally networked courses intensify disciplinary learning in fields where engaging other cultural perspectives is key" (*Guide for Collaborative Online International Learning Course Development*, SUNY COIL Center, 1). COIL facilitates active learning, providing students with opportunities to "become active agents in constructing and construing a global culture, rather than merely consuming it" (*COIL Faculty Guide*, LaGuardia Community College, 1).

Current academic leaders studying international learning believe that, "successful educational internationalization may promote the exciting prospect of a genuinely reciprocal and multi-vocal global conversation" (Hansen and Peck 21). In addition, the Association of American Colleges and Universities is a strong supporter of initiatives that develop global citizenship. In 2011, its leadership proposed that colleges and universities "create settings that foster students' understanding of the intersection between their lives and global issues and their sense of responsibility as local and global citizens" (AAC&U, 2011a). Finally, Martha Nussbaum, a leading contemporary philosopher, identifies some of the capabilities she deems essential to global citizenship, including "examination of one's own traditions" and "exercising a 'narrative imagination' that allows one to see the world through the eyes of others" (289). We believed that a first step in a global conversation would be for students to experience an openness to another culture and to individual others, through a literary text and in conversation with citizens of another culture (or cultures). We hoped that this shared reading of *Horses of God* and cross-cultural conversation would lead to an enhanced understanding of difference.

As professors of language and literature, we were especially interested in the role of literature as a transformative agent. Would a cross-cultural dialogue about a text that dealt with poverty, violence and terrorism invite students to think deeply about extremism? How would students from such different countries as Morocco and the United States respond to the issues raised in this novel? Would this conversation enable them to discover common ground? What concerns would they have about perceived differences in their respective cultures? A key question for us was how might our international online classroom become a space where community and understanding would be encouraged, supported, nourished? We were intrigued by the potential of

an extended online conversation across cultures as an alternative to more traditional models of exchange such as a junior year abroad, an experience that is costly and difficult to arrange at a public university. Would this model of exchange offer an opportunity for in-depth discussion of difficult issues, issues that students might initially *see* very differently based on cultural differences and even lack of information about another culture. Finally, we wondered if there were other such initiatives in higher education, and we discovered, as an example, that in 2015, the 10th International Urdu Conference was devoted to literature, art and culture as "the first line of defense against extremism." Crafting our pedagogical work to enable greater awareness and cross-cultural conversation, echoing the spirit of *la littérature engagée*, we advocated for the use of literature as a force against extremism. We hope to show here that our students engaged in a "multi-vocal" conversation and demonstrated a beginning awareness of global citizenship.

Structure of the Project:

The community college professors met with the Moroccan professor and his students via Google Hangouts on November 27, 2017. The purpose of this initial conversation was to plan the exchange in detail and to identify relevant themes and questions for the online session. During that conversation we agreed to have both sets of students record videos that illustrated some aspect of their lives, sharing neighborhoods, school plans and dreams. This was accomplished easily because the MA students invited all of the community college students and their professors to join their closed Facebook site where students could share videos and exchange questions about their cultures.

We then set up a group meeting of the two classes on December 5, 2017 via a 90 minute online session. This took place during a regular team-taught class for the community college students and a late afternoon hour for the MA students. During this meeting students discussed the context and events of the novel and exchanged questions about their reactions to controversial moments in the text. The three professors guided students during this cross-cultural dialogue, noting how students approached the conversation, what delicate questions were confronted, what changes in perspective arose for them, and what valuable insights and common ethical ground emerged. What follows is a synthesis of the actual conversation and post-COIL reflections submitted by both sets of students.

Approaches to Dialogue and a Note on Our Pedagogy

We were aware of the difficulties of asking students to engage with a novel that depicted terrorism, and the added challenge of inviting students to discuss this topic with students who were from the culture and country represented in the novel. Employing several strategies to create what we believed would be a safer space for dialogue, we invited to review the questions they wanted to ask in class prior to the online session. This gave them the opportunity to consider how to conduct the exchange honestly but respectfully. Students were also encouraged to think about the nature of their concerns and to consider why certain events in the novel involving women's roles and the rape of a young boy, for example, might be difficult to discuss with their Moroccan peers. Both groups recognized that these specific topics were those where cultural differences would be strongest. Considering how to frame questions about these topics was an important learning experience.

Although we collected student reflections as a way of reconstructing the learning experience and gaining insight into the specific value of online learning, we did not believe that a quantitative analysis of responses would capture the specificity of what students learned and how they learned. We did think, upon reflection after the exchange, that a pre/post survey might provide useful information about how the experience altered their perceptions of others, even their attitudes towards the text under discussion. However, some of these changes were acknowledged by students in their reflections.

Because we knew that American students were not well informed about Islam, one of the professors dedicated a class to providing background on the socio-cultural roots of radical Islam.[1]American students responded positively to this presentation and discussion, noting that the very definition of Islam, its purposes, values and goals, had never been explained to them before. Later, in American students' reflections on the events of the novel, they emphasized just how helpful the lecture and discussion had been in elucidating the distinction between Islam and radical Islam.

When we began our live online conversation, a striking feature of American and Moroccan students' responses was their sensitivity and openness to each others' identities and worlds. Most of the American students had just completed high school. The Moroccan students were in their second year of

[1] The lecture aimed to explain the difference between Islam and Islamism and used these references: G. Makris, *Islam in the Middle East. A Living Tradition;* Francois Burgat, *The Islamic Movements in North Africa;* and John Entelis, *Political Islam in the Maghreb.*

graduate school. Despite the age difference, the young American students brought something unique in this exchange. Youssra, a Moroccan student acknowledged their engagement directly: "I liked the fact that your students asked a lot of questions which were very deep and challenging. They helped us widen our discussion and get further in conversation with them." The same student adds: "I believe that our dialogue offered deep insights into some of the contentious issues that nobody seems to heed warnings about, such as rape." At the same time, there was an awareness on the part of Moroccan students of radically different approaches to specific topics such as the roles of women in Moroccan and American culture.

At the outset, American students were very up-front about a concern they had previously discussed in class: they wanted Moroccan students to understand that they wished to be respectful of another culture even though there were difficult topics they were curious about. Stephanie, an American student, expressed her apprehension: "I really didn't know where to start off and I was afraid the questions I wanted to ask would be interpreted in the wrong way." Benji, her classmate, agrees: "Yes I definitely was cautious about the questions I was asking my Moroccan peers. I didn't want to offend anyone about their view of the novel or, most importantly, their culture, by asking something that may question their beliefs. When making my video at LaGuardia, I made sure to speak about tragic events that were significant to us, such as 9/11, to give them a connection to how we have gone through tragic events too."

Moroccan students expressed a similar desire to engage in respectful dialogue. Several Moroccan students exhibited a high level of openness and critical thinking in their responses. Ferdaous, for example, liked the opportunity of being challenged by American students. "They perceived the Moroccan culture as a new platform of discussion and they were open about taboo subjects such as homosexuality and bombing." The cultural differences and the spirit of discovery, inquisitiveness and pride were recognized by Moroccan students: "The conversation gave an insight into how these young students are open to learn more about Moroccan culture, and it is such a great accomplishment that Moroccan books are able to echo higher in the literary sky of American culture. I was impressed that we Moroccans are very dedicated and devoted to our culture. As far as our international peers are concerned, I was surprised by the number of ideas they were willing to discuss." Moroccan students were eager to praise their American peers, and from the beginning of this conversation, faculty, both American and Moroccan,

noted that their students were highly attentive, attuned if you will, to the generosity and openness of students from very different backgrounds.

Thus, in spite of the American students' initial fears of offending their peers, they were encouraged by the support they received and were successful in engaging in a burgeoning dialogue. One of the rewarding aspects of the collaboration was the Facebook interaction that preceded the online session and continued afterwards. One student commented, "Overall the most interesting part of the project was the private Facebook page shared by the Moroccan students so our class and international peers could share and interact with each other on a more personal level. I enjoyed including videos and pictures of New York, telling them it's a wonderful place to live in apart all the commotion that occurs here. I enjoyed their video as well; everything they included in their videos was completely different from what I had expected." Faculty made note of this type of response and considered how the Facebook exchange added an important personal dimension that may have made both sides more receptive as they turned to the more difficult dialogue about the novel.

Engaging with Difficult Topics: Religion, the Role of Women, Homosexuality

One of the American students, Abir, began the conversation by identifying a specific concern that American students had about discussing religious difference: "One interesting thing I noticed is that although the topic of radical Islam was important, it seemed a little hard to discuss because almost all, if not all, of the students were Muslim. I can completely understand the hesitation to discuss it in such a free manner as we would do in our [American] group discussions, but I made sure to establish that we understood and could differentiate radical Islam from common Muslim beliefs."Abir was eager to let Moroccan students know that the American class had been introduced to this difference in a previous class lecture and discussion.

Abir went even deeper in comparing the promises of religions in different cultures: "It really hit me when one of the students explained the idea of paradise and how it is advertised for those who are without hope. There is a form of paradise in almost every religion and without this reward of paradise who would follow it? It made me compare the Muslim religion to Hinduism in which we are offered paradise as well, and I started to think about how religion is sold to communities and people; it even made me remember how Christianity was taught to slaves and used to inject the idea that there was a heaven waiting for them." Mourad, from Morocco, articulated a recognition

that Americans are more exposed to religious difference: "The idea of religion mentioned during the debate reflected a key aspect of difference. . . I can safely say that the majority of the readership, at least as far as my classmates are concerned, is of the same faith. Our friends in the U.S. showed us how a different system of religious belief shapes and indeed alters the perception of the work at hand." To the faculty, and to students of both communities, these complementary observations demonstrated a high degree of honesty and openness, as well as an ability to reach for a broader understanding of ways religions shape thinking. A kind of meta-discourse was emerging in this exchange, one that we thought would be valuable for future discussion and even writing assignments.

American students also raised questions about women's roles and homosexuality, and they sensed hesitation on the part of the Moroccan group. "The question I asked about women and their role in society caused the room to go quiet," Destiny observed, "since a woman's role is much like in the book." Brenda corroborates Destiny's perception: "One of my classmates asked a sensitive question about the different treatment that women receive compared to men. The women [in the book] are more judged and they are expected to do better compared to men. For example, Nabil (the son), and many other people, judged Tamu (his mother) because she is a prostitute (sinful) but if the guys Yachine and Nabil have sexual intercourse they do not get called out. I noticed that the Moroccan students were just looking around seemed uncomfortable and nobody wanted to answer. It took a while until someone said, 'it is because homosexuality occurs behind closed doors while prostitution does not. That is that why prostitution is judged more.'" American student reactions may also reflect a lack of understanding about differences in communication styles. In a follow-up discussion in the American classroom, faculty asked students to consider what a moment of silence might mean--that it does not always mean "discomfort," but perhaps a need for reflection because the question is complex and deserves a thoughtful response. Students agreed that assumptions made about silence might be incorrect. Faculty asked themselves if a discussion of how to (or not to) read the responses of others would have benefited from conversation--in advance of the live session.

Following the brief exchange about prostitution and homosexuality, an American student, Valeria, summoned the courage to ask the Moroccan students about a violent scene in the novel: "Why do you think the author included the gang rape of one of the boys?" One of the Moroccan students offered an explanation: "We believe the author included the scene in order to

call attention to the consequences of sexual oppression." Jihane expressed her surprise at the American students' reaction to this difficult scene, and her understanding of why. "They were surprised at the homosexual scenes in the novel. I think that they assumed that such acts do not happen in Muslim communities, just because the Islamic faith prohibits homosexual acts in general, and also because it is not really heard of widely." Faculty were impressed with the framing of the initial question because asking about an author's choice brought forth a very forthright response, an awareness of a writer's desire to show the consequences of a kind of oppression. To us, this was one of the stronger moments of the exchange, including Jihane's follow-up observations regarding common assumptions Americans may have about Islam.

At various points in the conversation, American students assumed that the text reflected the reality of women's roles in Morocco today. Stephanie, for example, conflates the two worlds: "Their culture in my opinion involves a lot of violence and restrictions for women; but in my culture, we are equal to men." She continues: "I wanted to ask why in the book women were viewed as home-makers and only they were blamed for the temptation of men. I wanted to know their personal experience without making them feel uncomfortable." Mariam, a Moroccan student offered a contrasting view and revealed a degree of awareness that American students were making unwarranted assumptions: "This collaboration made me discover that our international peers do not know about our culture as much as we know about their culture." American faculty felt that their students might have benefited from a more in-depth advance discussion of women's identities in both America and Morocco. For an eighteen-year-old American female student to announce that "we are equal to men" is a statement that would probably not have gone unchallenged in our own classroom; conversely, Mariam's statement that their international peers "do not know about our culture as much as we know about theirs," while probably true, made us curious and begged for more explication. We noted this for future online conversations.

As much as the American students tried to be careful and cautious so as not to insult their Moroccan peers, their assumptions surfaced. But Moroccan students made their own assumptions as well, as evidenced by this reflection by Rania: "As a part and parcel of a culture and religion that are frequently attacked and regarded to be synonymous with violence and hatred, I learnt to be open-minded, patient and kind to set the best example of a peaceful and loving Muslim female." To an American audience, Rania's comments felt slightly defensive, but the professors also saw this as an opportunity for a

follow-up in-depth discussion of what constitutes global awareness in relation to gender roles.

In spite of delicate questions about women, sexuality, religion and violence, overall, what characterized the dialogue among students was openness, inquisitiveness, the courage to address difficult questions, and pride in one's culture. There was also evidence of stereotyping and some defensiveness—bridges still to cross. However, a first step is recognizing how assumptions interfere with understanding. Students were not immediately able to overcome stereotypes and assumptions about each other's culture, but their awareness of this problem was surfaced by the exchange. The tensions led the professors to reflect on effective pedagogies for addressing these assumptions. On the one hand, faculty believed it was important to anticipate and develop advance conversations about key areas of possible conflict, misunderstanding, and even stereotyping. On the other, it seemed pedagogically valuable to allow these moments of difference to arise through the students' comment, rather than over-preparing. We reasoned that a good online exchange can always be enriched by follow-up discussion in individual classrooms. A future goal Moroccan and American faculty agreed upon was to have the exchange extend over an entire semester, so that the most complex issues, and contrasting beliefs, could be revisited.

My Culture in the Eye of the Other: What Have I Learned?

Commonalities

During the Facebook conversation that preceded the Google Hangout session, three of the Moroccan students created a short video in which they explained to the American students that while they were not from Casablanca, they were familiar with the slum, Sidi Moumen, that is the setting for the novel. They indicated that they came from poverty and could relate to the young men in the novel. American students shared this connection, noting that "it's the same over here," referencing areas in the greater New York City area where poverty and violence are common.

In this way, the novel helped students from both cultures think more deeply about identity and the social conditions that may contribute to violence. In response to a discussion of Sidi Moumen where the novel is set, the American student, Quan, commented that, "there are poor sections of New York City where young people may be drawn to drugs and gangs." His classmate, Kelly, echoed this emphasis on commonalities across cultures: "the conversation made me realize how society is so judgmental about others because of their race, religion, or even on how people look. The thing that was illuminating to

me while talking to them was that they are humans just like us and they should not be judged."

Mariam, a Moroccan student, noted the novel author's incisiveness in pinpointing the roots of violence: "I think that Binebine succeeded in showing the roots of evil and the social reality of terrorism through the portrayal of a group of young men as victims of the social conditions in which they were raised. Even though the group of young men that were portrayed in this novel are Moroccans, I think that the way the story is told shows that every human being, if raised in the same set of circumstances and lived the same experiences, can threaten the peace of the society. In addition to that, those young men are not the ones to be blamed, since their choice to bomb themselves and die was not a choice in the first place." The key question for us was, did the literary text, serve the goal of exploring, exposing and challenging extremism? Faculty were impressed by the desire, on the part of both Moroccan and American students, to point to commonalities in social conditions that are conducive to violence, and to share their awareness that Binebine was effective in humanizing the young men who were inducted into terrorism.

Connections between worlds were expanded as American students indicated that they recognized similarities between the impoverished community, Sidi Moumen, and areas of New York City that are also places without hope and that foster gangs, drug use and crime. Students from both countries voiced their awareness of their relatively privileged life conditions. Crystal noted: "I was raised fortunately in a place where I had everything I needed and enough to get things I wanted; hearing about the struggles that are very real in life open my eyes to how fortunate I really am." Mourad, from Morocco, commented, "I liked the fact that we shared some similar perspectives on how poverty affects the individual, their sense of identity and the behavior resulting thereof. The insights of our friends were interesting in the sense that they showed that though the cultural setting and backgrounds are different, the main ideas the author wanted to communicate to his readership were indeed delivered successfully. Valeria observed: "My major take-away from this collaboration that might help me in any aspect of my education and life experience was that a book can have a powerful impact on one's life." One American student, in advance of the collaboration, volunteered that she couldn't stop reading the novel and that this had never happened to her before.

A majority of students took pride in their common rejection of violence. Jihane, from Morocco, noted that the collaboration was helpful in

illuminating cultural difference but also a shared abhorrence of violence: "This session offered a concrete example for both sets of students, not only to compare the literary text, *Horses of God,* with the movie but also to discuss both with real people from each culture. What was illuminating about this online session was the recognition that we belong to different cultures, religions and beliefs, but we still reject any kind of violence that can be seen in any society." Valeria, from New York, expressed her frustration at the terrorist act: "The act didn't change the world; it only took innocent lives." She even had a message for suicide-bombers to be: "These mission leaders you admire are using you because you feel you lack purpose. Prove them wrong. Choose to live."

The importance of education was debated by both sides. An American student commented, "One thing that the Moroccan students said was how these kids from *Horses of God* were taken advantage because they didn't receive any education growing up. That is true because since they didn't have any knowledge they had to follow whatever they heard was good." During the online session, a Moroccan student also emphasized the lack of intellectual or ethical education and the way this lack of knowledge leads to violence. The relationship between education and a decision not to follow a violent path was corroborated by the American students' observation that the only novel's character that decided not to blow up himself is the one who had some schooling in his life. Another American student commented, "it shows just how important education is and just how much it impacts our lives. This is something that one from any race can relate to."

Students from both countries agreed that this experience should be continued. Stephanie observed, "I honestly do recommend this project to be passed onto the next class, I really think they would enjoy it just because it gets them out of their comfort zone." They showed appreciation of uniqueness of this exchange and expressed desire for continued and deeper dialogue. The desire to pursue this collaboration is evidenced by Jihane's email accompanying her reflection: "I sincerely think that this international project has huge potential and that, if continued, it will greatly benefit English and English literature students worldwide. The very concept of choosing a literary work, reading it together, and discussing it with students from other places and backgrounds is a wonderful opportunity to open up to other ideas and insights. But also, and most importantly, it has the ability of enabling students to contribute to an enriching and inspiring debate on world issues that touch us all." Jawad, from Morocco, concluded: "The most interesting thing to me during this little adventure is to know that no matter what one's

culture or nationality are, when it comes to the fundamental issues of the human condition they cannot help but agree with you, or at least see your point. It is probably the ease with which I will approach other international collaborations because now I know that it is a door through which one can explore different perspectives and share ideas with those who are not necessarily affiliated with my own culture." Both sets of students enthusiastically endorsed the project as one that encouraged cross-cultural conversation and confidence that this kind of dialogue affects their learning and belief in the possibilities of global citizenship. In addition to the salient commonalities discovered by students, they diverged on several major issues. These differences were as instructive as the commonalities.

Differences

While students agreed on the centrality of education in deterring terrorist threats, some demonstrated an important awareness that lack of education may not be the only cause. Brenda, commented: "The Moroccan students said, 'education is the key in stopping terrorism.' I feel this is true in some ways; however, there are still people that were educated and they still became terrorists. For example, 9/11 with the twin towers, all the terrorists were educated people." This student's reaction is perhaps a result of a class discussion, prior to the online conversation, about 9/11 attacks perpetrated by educated middle class young men.

Not surprisingly, Moroccan students had a more politically connected, personal understanding of the novel. One student put it in the larger political context of the Muslim world, beyond the limited space of the Arab world. Mohamed observed, "Given the fact that it deals with the subject matter of the recent conflicts between Muslims and non-Muslims in today's world, means that the novel emboldens the readers to open an interesting debate." Eager to point out that Muslims are unfairly singled out as terrorists, Mourad states that, "terrorist attacks have killed more Muslims than non-Muslims," emphasizing that the novel "tries to show the misuse of Islam." If the comments of this Moroccan student leaves the impression that he is on the defensive, his passion suggests that he was eager to dissect misunderstandings about the Muslim world.

Jawad, effectively summarized the differences between the Moroccan students' understanding of the book and that of the Americans, revealing an astute awareness of the ways our cultures shape us: "The main idea illuminated by the collaboration was the perceptible difference between the two counterparts. It showed me what issues are imperative to them according

to their culture and social conditions in comparison to ours. They were able to read notions of stereotypical depictions of women and double standards between the lines of *Horses of God*, while we attempted to dissect concepts like religious dogma, sexual suppression, and class hierarchy, issues that are pressing in our culture." Mourad offers another insight into the complexities of their inside understanding versus Americans' external one: "Another interesting point is the alienation our friends seemed to have experienced from the narrative of the book. The life experience of the characters was not as identifiable for them as it was for us as Moroccans. However, this particular idea presented us with a challenge; I personally found it difficult to articulate the point that though we may partially relate to some of the events or experiences of the characters, we still are placed (intentionally or not) outside the sphere of a world that is fictitious. Some of us saw the slums and the kind of life people could lead around them; some of us even had friends from such an environment and, for me, this is what explains our ability to make projections while we were reading the work of Binebine. Still, it was by no means a world we could pretend is ours. This is something that I think is a major point of difference in our experience of *Horses of God*as local readership, as opposed to an international one."

We noticed nuanced differences in the intellectual level of understanding in the two groups of students, and we believe that some of these differences may be associated with the different levels of education as well as the Americans' lack of prior exposure to the Moroccan culture. Moroccan students made a sophisticated effort to understand and explain these differences in sociological terms while American students emphasized their perceptions of difference and also of connection. Moroccan students found common ground in the entire group's rejection of violence. American students strove to understand religious parallels as well, as when Abir connects the promise of paradise in Islam, Hinduism and Christianity. Both groups recognized the relationship between poverty, hopelessness, and violence but they also noted that not all terrorism is committed by the poor or disenfranchised. Finally, they were united in their desire for future conversations.

So What? Valuable Takeaways for Students

If the community college and MA students' learning was enriched by reflecting on the key themes and issues that the novel, *Horses of God,* explores, what did each group learn about the other? What commonalities emerged? What

cross-cultural connections were made? What was the specific value for them of the online exchange?

One striking example of cross-cultural connection was that the dialogue allowed an American student to voice his feelings about prejudice against Muslims and African Americans, as both groups are often blamed for being violent. Benji commented, "This reading made me think about myself and my race because African American men are all perceived as violent when that is not the case. There are very well educated and successful African American people out there who are not violent. These stereotypes should not be based on other people's actions because it's not fair to the ones who try to break the stereotypes but also come close to succeeding but come short because of society." Students were united in their recognition of the problem of stereotyping and a conversation that began with the text broadened to reveal their knowledge of difficulties based on poverty, lack of education and de facto segregation of certain communities.

Several students commented enthusiastically on the uniqueness and value of having a cross-cultural conversation. Andy noted, "people often have to work or collaborate with people they're not familiar with." His classmate, Destiny, was also enthusiastic about the connection: "I now know students miles away that I can connect with through literature." The Moroccan student, Ferdaous, appreciated American students' "ability to communicate about serious issues without any prejudice."Her classmate, Jihane, adds: "I also appreciated the fact that they seemed to be a harmonious and open-minded group." Crystal, an American student, observed, "This collaboration made me realize that there is more to the world. That as a people we need to realize there is a need to be more aware of difficulties others face." Jihane, from Morocco, noted the specific value of cross-cultural conversation: "I realized that diametrically opposed backgrounds, instead of being a hindrance to such a process, are a source of inspiration, reflection and insight and contribute greatly to shape our personality, open-mindedness, and respect for other people." Finally, Abir comments, "The major takeaway from this project is that it broadened my horizons. These Moroccan students are halfway around the world and they share some of the same great ideas and have amazing ones of their own; it was an honor to meet them and I felt I grew as a person in terms of experience and character from being able to have a discussion with them; it was a quite rewarding experience."

Faculty Responses and a Note on Online versus Traditional Classroom Dialogues

Was the COIL collaboration an effective format for enhancing students' understanding of their own, and of each other's, cultures? Did a common ethical ground emerge? Alternately, in some instances, is a recognition of and respect for difference a better, or more appropriate, response? Is it important that students be faced with a culturally dissonant experience, something that, as one student suggests, forces them outside their comfort zone, for genuine learning, specifically, global learning, to take place? What were the specific benefits of conducting this conversation in an online format? We asked ourselves how this online collaboration helped students to respect difference and to think critically about ethical issues that the literary text foregrounded. Here, we share our responses to student dialogue and reflections.

During the conversation, we noticed several things about differences in ways students responded to each other in the online format. American students were especially intrigued to find out how Moroccan students would speak about events in the novel. Moroccan students were thrilled that a Moroccan novel was the subject of study for an American literature class. But it became clear in initial class conversations in the U.S. that students were apprehensive about discussing the material, fearful of offending their Moroccan peers. As a result, they were more careful in composing their questions, and, we believe, more attentive in listening to answers. Some of their comments also suggested they were making an effort to interpret non-verbal cues, body language, and even silence, for example. While there was little room, or time, for ice-breaking conversation, the Facebook page was an extremely valuable addition to the conversation. Both groups of students enjoyed sharing their communities and, more specifically, it gave some of the Moroccan students an opportunity to provide American students with a better understanding of the novel's context. One group Moroccan males explained that they connected with the young men in the novel, because they too came from poverty, but the choices the characters made were very far from their experience. What we as faculty took away from this is that there may be distinct pedagogical advantages to the online (and live skype) exchange: attention, focus, respectful listening, and initiative to share and teach another community about your own.

We agreed that the most productive aspects of the experience were related to student enthusiasm for an inter-cultural dialogue and their generous commitment to an open exchange. They eagerly sought connections, commonalities and, they asked, and answered, difficult questions. Not everything discussed was resolved, or resolvable, and it was not possible to

avoid some stereotyping. But it was important that students were often able to recognize stereotyping when it occurred. They also observed differences in the level, and kind, of cultural knowledge each group brought to the conversation. There was a genuine consensus that students wanted to continue this kind of conversation, that they saw the value of a cross-cultural dialogue about a literary text and its potential role in fighting extremism. The fact that we chose a text set in the outskirts of Casablanca that examined poverty and purposelessness and traced young men's induction into terrorism gave the Moroccan students a difficult task. Yet they rose to the challenge of thinking critically about the novel. Amal summarizes the author's effective delineation of the causes of terrorism: "I think that Mahi Benebine was successful in spotting the main causes of terrorism." But she also understands the author's emphasis on the ethical complexity of the situation for the young men: "What is significant about the novel is that terrorists are also considered victims of their own violent acts. From the beginning of the novel, their lives were a product of many social imbalances. Benebine tries to convey the message that as long as there is injustice, poverty and illiteracy in society and as long as the growing gap between rich and poor is deliberately ignored, there will always be suicide bombers who will kill themselves and others to go to "'paradise.'" Jawad concurs with Amal in speaking of the vulnerability of these young men: "With all the inner and outer turmoil these kids have incurred, and all the suppressed emotional and sexual drives that make no sense to their troubled psyches, they had to find something higher and purer by means of which they could perhaps give meaning and purpose to their lives." However, the Moroccan students also noted the ethical failures of these young men: "They did not manage to develop a correct sense of morality in this lawless quasi post-apocalyptic wasteland of Sidi Moumen. And that is exactly when they are introduced to the religious fanatics who want to purge the world of sin. The vulnerability of "The Stars of Sidi Moumen" is exploited as they [the terrorist leaders] give them a sense of legitimacy by making them feel that they belong to an Islamic nation, "an imagined order… Thus, whatever they did was morally correct according to their newly held beliefs, and even had divine reward at the end however atrocious and inhumane it is." We found these reflections rich and nuanced in students' recognition of the young men's vulnerability and implicit quest for purpose. In identifying the fact that Binebine depicts not only the atrocities of terrorism but also engages our sympathy for the young men, they illustrated the way literature can help students identify the complex ethical dimensions of a

problem. We agreed that this dimension should be a key area for follow-up in future online conversations.

In reviewing student responses, we learned that assumptions persist despite the best intentions. For example, American students sometimes seemed to view Muslim students as a monolithic singular identity. There was evidence in their responses that looking at a classroom in which all the women are veiled had this effect. If we want to enhance awareness, we need to get students to see that assuming any group shares a single ideology is a form of stereotyping, one that was noted by Moroccan students who were quick to defend themselves when they thought American students were judging them. We agreed it would be productive to find time to talk about these assumptions and their dangers in a second or third conversation. Overall we discovered that the COIL collaboration offered us an important opportunity to examine our pedagogy together, to reflect on topics that needed more advance clarification and support, and to observe and appreciate the generosity and courage that students manifested in their engagement with their peers. Participating in this kind of online community differs from a live collaboration in subtle ways. We noticed that students were more respectful of their peers, possibly because they did not have the luxury of knowing them better. There was a heightened awareness of areas of difference, given the subject matter of the novel *and* the reality of interacting with individuals from very different cultural communities. Finally, it was clear to us from this collaboration, that we three professors look forward to developing our next COIL project, using literature in ways that will engage students in a more extended dialogue. We hope that this kind of exchange will facilitate an interrogation of assumptions and an expansion of boundaries and a deeper understanding of difference. As one student commented, "I realized that diametrically opposed backgrounds, instead of being a hindrance to understanding, are a source of inspiration, reflection and insight and contribute greatly to shape our personality, open-mindedness, and respect for other people."

Students emerged from this dialogue with an enhanced understanding of others who differ from them in significant ways, and with a critically humanistic awareness of the sources of violence and terrorism. Their responses illuminated the complex ways that conversations about literature and culture may function as a powerful force against prejudice and extremism.

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