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### **Middle Eastern Cosmopolitanism after the Grief: On the Benefits of Generous Uses**

This Mediterranean Seminar essay represents half of an article co-authored by Idriss Jebari together with Olga Verlató. Below is an introduction to the article, giving its overall argument. That is followed by Idriss's Moroccan case study.

In 2008, Middle East historian Will Hanley published an all-encompassing and incisive critique of the concept of cosmopolitanism in the field of Middle East Studies. He sounded the alarm over a term beset by considerable difficulties and limited value along three lines: "Elitism in formulation and content," the "privileging of formal labels over content," and "grieving nostalgia" (2008: 1346). A decade later, in his monograph *Identifying with Nationality* (2017), Hanley proposed "vulgar cosmopolitanism" as an alternative to the dominant use of cosmopolitanism in the field, drawing on a legal and social history of Alexandria in the early twentieth century. With "vulgar cosmopolitanism" Hanley addressed the class components of his critique by integrating the "low, unrefined, plain, common, *ordinary*" including figures such as "the illiterate laborer" both local and foreign, or the multilingual "maid from upper Egypt" (2008: 1352; 2017: 161). Instead of upgrading the term and freeing its usage, cosmopolitanism remains a delicate term to use, especially for new entrants in Middle Eastern studies.

How can we write today about modern Middle Eastern pasts without adopting the cosmopolitan label or sidestepping entirely feelings of nostalgia, among historians or subjects themselves? Rather than hold scholarly debates on the use of cosmopolitanism in MENA history, we find it most often scorned for referring to imperialism by another name. For fear of seeing their work dismissed from the outset for framing it within cosmopolitanism, MENA (Middle East & North Africa) historians now prefer to adopt alternative frames that serve a similar purpose: postcolonialism, transnationalism, and now the global frame have served this replacement purpose to describe a series of entanglements and shared socio-cultural belonging in the region, while these scholarly conversations are seen as less prone to nostalgia and labelism (a questionable assertion). Other historical studies have discussed one of its key features, such as multilingualism or migration, all while avoiding the term itself thus contributing to a disjunction between object, label and content of inquiry.

In the meantime, MENA historians have participated in the spectacular growth of Mediterranean studies with historical studies that inform cosmopolitanism in all but name. They produce histories set in port cities, of inter-faith cohabitation, the migration of populations, adopting subaltern historical perspectives, all while sidestepping the concept of cosmopolitanism, treated as an 'elephant in the room.' How can we reverse this trend, address the contradiction, and draw other lessons from Hanley's critical piece, fifteen years on?

This article speaks from the perspective of a new generation of historians in MENA studies who have been increasingly seeking to place their region of interest within entangled Mediterranean conversations, in which cosmopolitanism offers fruitful frameworks of study. We take cosmopolitanism as defined by political theorist Ulrich Beck as an "empirical-analytical category, a normative and political category, and as an experimental, methodological foundation of sociology aiming at transcending the latter's national and disciplinary assumptions" (Beck 2000; Estevão Bosco 2021, 82). In this article, we start the work of recovering MENA cosmopolitanism by addressing the other two pillars of Hanley's critique – labels and nostalgia – by arguing that we can add conceptual complexity to their use, and demonstrate that

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cosmopolitanism still offers a fruitful entry point into depicting diversity in multilingual, multinational, and multi-faith contexts in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Cosmopolitanism, we maintain, still provides a useful category to capture how *some* subjects in the Mediterranean relate(d) to their plural environments and to their pasts. We thus propose to recover a generous use of cosmopolitanism along two lines: as a category of practice, and as a yearning for social diversity. After outlining these two categories in dialogue with the critiques to cosmopolitanism moved by Hanley in 2008, we discuss two examples that illustrate and reintegrate this concept in the field. Olga Verlato brings focus to late nineteenth and early twentieth-century instances in which local and foreign residents in Egypt adopted the trope of cosmopolitanism to achieve a series of parochial or even “nationalist” objectives. In particular, she examines the case of the 1890 Cairo-based Italian publication *Il Cosmopolita*, a polyglot newspaper that featured six languages—Italian, French, English, Arabic, Greek, and Ottoman-Turkish—and a series of petitions presented by Alexandrian representatives of the Egyptian General Assembly to the Ministry of Education in the late 1910s. Idriss Jebari’s research into Northern Morocco’s port city of Larache today illustrates how ordinary people express longing for a period of the city’s past under Spanish colonialism because of the diversity, social publicness, and opportunities for wider belonging that they have since lost since the country’s independence. In both cases, cosmopolitanism is a natural conceptual path to take, while acknowledging the need to contextualize and frame it appropriately within its imperial and post-colonial contexts. In the case of *Il Cosmopolita*’s content (universalism) and form (multilingualism), a rhetoric of cosmopolitan and polyglot inclusiveness was in fact mobilized to affirm Italian cultural and social aspirations locally *vis-à-vis* both British authorities and Egyptian elites. Similarly, nostalgia for a certain image of the Spanish past can easily be dismissed as an idealism, misinformation, and selective remembrance particularly by those who did not experience that period. These risks require us to display care before re-embracing cosmopolitanism. Nonetheless, we gain more than we lose by embracing a ‘generous use’ of cosmopolitanism in MENA history, as each paper demonstrates. This disjuncture between cosmopolitanism’s explanatory potential and its stunted use suggests we should give this concept another chance.

These two sets of case studies aim to restore cosmopolitanism from the critiques laid out by Hanley’s important article. By seeking to push the field away from the subjectivity of Mediterranean cosmopolitans toward the tools of positivist history – the archive and social class –we risk erasing those historical subjects who self-identify (and self-identified) as plural citizens of a place for a wide range of reasons, rather than finding creative ways to integrate them. Our aim is to arrive closer to ‘multiple cosmopolitanisms’ that go beyond the ‘bourgeois western secular version’ in its Manichean opposition with the ‘illiterate laborer who knows the exchange rates between the four kinds of currency he holds in his pockets’ and highlights several other categories and figures in between (Hanley 2008 1360). Hence our objective is to offer more complete historical portrayals by recovering a “generous” cosmopolitanism which speaks to a yearning for diversity, a multiplicity of social perspectives, read in their historical settings, and which attests to a lived experience as well as a reflection on this past.

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## **Larache's Nostalgic Cosmopolitans:**

### **Spain, the Good Old Days and Disillusionment in Present-Day Morocco**

With the advent of smart phones and unlimited data plans, many of the inhabitants of the port city of Larache in Northern Morocco have discovered themselves to be nostalgic for the past. Social media groups devoted to Larache's past, especially in the era of Spanish colonialism (1912-56), have multiplied, and they have become dynamic spaces where ordinary people post, share and comment, but also remember, reconnect, and express strong political opinions in Arabic and Spanish. In those groups, people are connected by what they call "the good old days" which consists in nostalgia for "the era of the Spanish" (*'ahd al-spanioul*) and which contrasts with the city's fate in the present. They associate the Spanish period with dynamism, beautiful architecture and inter-faith cohabitation of Muslim Moroccans, Jews and Europeans. They show pictures of young Moroccan women in elegant outfits on the Atlantic seafront and invite their followers to long for a return to that "golden age" (*waqt dhahabi*). The present, by contrast, is depicted as a fall from grace as evidenced by acts of uncivility, urban squalor, and a loss of community. These themes illustrate how Larache's inhabitants mobilize a cosmopolitan imagination through nostalgic longing to reconstruct an image of the city during the colonial period and share strategies of change for the future.

Nostalgia represents a common theme in the modern history of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism, but also one of its chief difficulties. In his 2008 article on cosmopolitanism in *Middle Eastern Studies*, Will Hanley identified nostalgia as one of the three issues plaguing the concept's use in the field (along with elitism and labelism), resulting in a term that "fail(s) to provide a satisfying account of diversity, and the critique of nationalism that they entail is

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reflexive rather than creative” (1358).<sup>1</sup> In the case of Egypt, about which most histories of Middle Eastern (or Arab) cosmopolitanism tend to be produced,<sup>2</sup> Hanley demonstrates ways in which this uncritical iteration leads to a “picture book” approach to the past, whereby cosmopolitanism refers instead to a middle-class lifestyle while sacrificing historical rigor in the research process, all while masking the reality of others who better illustrate the two defining features of cosmopolitanism: polyglossia and migration.<sup>3</sup>

The case of colonial nostalgia adds further challenges to the history of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism, especially as it intersects with the history of nationalism and decolonization in the MENA region. While imperial nostalgia in Europe can more easily be connected to feelings of historical decline, or when it is expressed by European settlers who have had to leave (such as the  *pied noirs* in French Algeria), nostalgia from the formerly colonized is more difficult to explain. One approach is to read it as a form of post-colonial identity complex in a Fanonian sense, whereby a certain intellectual and social elite has been acculturated and has assimilated the former metropole’s values.<sup>4</sup> Another view, drawing on a study of colonial nostalgia in Zanzibar, explains these sentiments as “a critique of the present” and “powerful testimony to the experience of economic and social dislocation” against market logics and dislocation of the community.<sup>5</sup> In both these cases, former colonial subjects’ nostalgia for colonialism originates in a misperception of history. In both cases, the subjects’ recollection of the colonial past leaves out the legal inequality, economic exploitation, and physical oppression that were the cornerstones of

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<sup>1</sup> Will Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism in Middle East Studies,” *History Compass* 6/5 (2008), 1358.

<sup>2</sup> See for example the documentary by Sherif Fathi Salem, “That Alexandria” (2015). Menna Taher, “New documentary ‘That Alexandria’ revives Mediterranean gem’s glorious past.” *AhramOnline* (31 January 2015). Direct link: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/32/121814/Arts--Culture/Film/New-documentary-that-Alexandria-revives-Mediterran.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism” (2008), 1352, 1353.

<sup>4</sup> Lorcin, “The Nostalgias for Empire” *History and Theory* 57.2 (2018), 269-70, See Lorcin’s discussion of Algeria and French President Jacques Chirac’s visit in 1995, p. 274.

<sup>5</sup> William Bissell, “Engaging Colonial Nostalgia,” *Cultural Anthropology* 20.2 (2005), 215, 238-9.

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European colonial rule in Algeria or Tanzania. From the outset, the ahistoricity of colonial nostalgia confirms Hanley's 2008 critique of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism.

Why then pay attention to these two features of Larache's inhabitants' relationship to the past? First, I argue that it sheds new light on social attitudes toward the past, at the intersection of digital tools and collective memory. Larache, as I discuss below in section 1, represents a marginalized periphery in the country's socio-economic development model *and* in the nationalist historiography. Larache's inhabitants have processed their city's infrastructural ills through a narrative of historical decline that makes them look toward other periods, such as that of Spanish colonialism, to make sense of the present and to insert their city into another area of belonging. Second, Larache's nostalgic inhabitants have displayed an active relationship with the past by leveraging the digital sphere, which challenges the view that nostalgia for cosmopolitanism has a destructive impact on historical writing in the region. I make the case drawing on interviews with several members of the *nadi al-muwathafin* or the Club of (retired) Civil Servants conducted in March 2022, and the regular observation since the 2020 pandemic of several amateur historical initiatives that emerged from the same problem-space and thirst for the past: Facebook groups devoted to the history of Larache and YouTube channels seeking to interview individuals from the city and leave a trace of this collective memory.<sup>6</sup> Finally, in addition to spurring an interest in more professional history, colonial nostalgia has been a driving factor for a series of civil society initiatives restoring historical monuments of the city, especially its Jewish and colonial buildings (which I do not explore fully in this paper, but that is important to connect with these developments).

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<sup>6</sup> These Facebook groups include: *dhakirat madinat al-'ara'ich* [Memory of the city of Larache]; 'arshif al-'ara'ich [Archives of Larache]; and Fotografias documentos anécdotas historias de Larache y Alcasarquivir. I focus in this paper on the YouTube channel *barnamaj nafida bi-'oyoun muhajira* (programme window with immigrant eyes) from a Larache-born amateur historian residing in the Netherlands.

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I argue that the case of Larache's nostalgia toward the Spanish colonial past offers an argument in favor of a Mediterranean framework for the historical recovery of the city, both in the historiography and in an imagination located at the intersection of several immigrant communities, both the former settlers and the Moroccans who live abroad and stay connected through social media. In this paper, I interrogate how to bring Larache back from a historical non-space by adopting a generous use of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism. I reflect and address some of the critiques formulated by Hanley in 2008, while ultimately arguing that we cannot fully appreciate how these actors long for community, social diversity and management of the city without this conceptual mooring. In summary, this paper can shed light on local practices of history-making around the modern Mediterranean, all while offering a conceptual contribution to the value of framework of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism that continues to animate the field.

### **Larache: A Location Outside of History**

Today, Larache resembles a margin or a "dead-zone", both in the country's historiography and its socio-economic development model. I argue that this double status has created the conditions for feelings of nostalgia for the "good old days" of Spanish colonialism to fester, as a refuge from post-colonial disillusionment. In this section, I argue that present-day malaise among the population reinforces their idealization of this recent period in the city's history, prior to interrogating the examination of this period under the theme of nationalism and cosmopolitanism.

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Larache is a mid-sized city on the Atlantic coast and the North of the country.<sup>7</sup> It has been neglected by socio-economic development plans since independence, like other mid-sized cities in Northern Morocco.<sup>8</sup> Larache is characterized by high youth unemployment, and high rates of emigration to bigger cities such as Tetuan or Tangier and to Spain.<sup>9</sup> Some fishing industries and tomato canning factories coexist with the larger sources of economic income: tourism in the summer, and illicit trade such as narcotraffic. The city's challenges conform to the image of the region of Northern Morocco as catalogued in a special issue of *La Dépêche du Nord*: "Larache, a city forgotten for so long," from the national authorities, especially toward its "historical patrimony, roads and infrastructures, urban transport, role of the communal administration, demands of civil society."<sup>10</sup> These issues are illustrative of the historical neglect faced by Northern Morocco, alleviated in the case of Tangier in the past two decades.<sup>11</sup> Historians explain this marginalization of a whole region due to colonial legacies. Morocco was divided into a Spanish part, in the North and Sahara regions, while the interior and central areas were controlled by France. This part contained the capital of Rabat, the economic and industrial hub of Casablanca, and the symbolic centers of Fez, Meknes and Marrakesh.<sup>12</sup> The postcolonial

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<sup>7</sup> While Larache is not physically on the Mediterranean, it belongs to its hinterland of Northern Morocco. It is a port city that shares attributes with paradigmatic cities of the Mediterranean as defined by Henk Driessen in "Mediterranean Port Cities: Cosmopolitanism Reconsidered" *History and Anthropology* 16.1 (2005): 129-41.

<sup>8</sup> Ihab Bghiel Yahyaoui, "Les inégalités de développement régionales dans les pays en voie de développement : cas de la région tangeroise au Maroc : analyse des causes historiques, géographiques, politiques, socioculturelles et économiques : perspectives de développement." Doctoral Thesis, Paris III (2000). Direct link: <https://www.theses.fr/2000PA030032>.

<sup>9</sup> Marko Juntunen, "Jeunes hommes des classes populaires à Larache: Affirmer sa virilité et se construire un avenir dans une communauté frontalière marocaine." In *Les "Jeunes" dans le Sud de la Méditerranée* 42 (2015), translated by Isabelle Rivoal. Direct link: <https://journals.openedition.org/ateliers/9996>.

<sup>10</sup> Front page of *La Dépêche du Nord* (25 February 2023).

<sup>11</sup> Abdelmajid Hannoum, *Living Tangier: Migration, Race, and Illegality in a Moroccan City* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019).

<sup>12</sup> When France granted independence to the Moroccan Sultan and Nationalists in 1956, Spain withdrew from the Northern region thus allowing its reintegration under a single political authority.

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state's development program has privileged areas in the center rather than its peripheries, which include the North, which also suffered from adequate political representation.

Larache also appears marginalized in the history of the nation, compared to the hubs of nationalist mobilization in Fez, Rabat and Casablanca.<sup>13</sup> Recent historical studies have highlighted the activism of the Istiqlal party in the northern region, especially its local mobilization efforts and its press.<sup>14</sup> However, Northern Morocco has suffered from a form of symbolic erasure from the nationalist horizon after independence, being treated as a *bilad al-siba* (land of chaos, opposed to *bilad al-makhzen*, the land of the government/order), especially after the mountainous Rif region rose up against Hassan II in 1958 – which are also part of the North.<sup>15</sup> While its marginal status came with socioeconomic disadvantages, it fostered a creative counter-culture and transnational influences. Tangier became the well-known site for the beatnik generation and famous writers such as Paul Bowles to find inspiration for a 'raw' Morocco.<sup>16</sup> Beyond the myth of Tangier, other writers found inspiration in the North and allow us to access its social and cultural history. The writer Mohamed Choukri spent his formative years as a teacher in Larache from independence in 1956 to the early sixties, before returning to Tangier.

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<sup>13</sup> Larache appears in the wider historiography of the kingdom of Morocco as the nearby site of the "Battle of the Three Kings" or "Wad al-Makhazin"/"Al Cacer Quibir" in 1578 when the forces of the Moroccan sultan Mansour al-Dahbi beat the Portuguese army of King Sebastian and pushed back their expansion into the country; see Idriss Shahboun, *al-'ara'ish fi tarikh al-maghrib qabla 'ahd al-himaya: jawanib min al-hayat al-siyasia wa al-'iqtisadiya wa al-'umraniya* (2014); and Abdelmalek Nassiri, "Qira'a fi kitab: 'akhbar ahmad al-mansur sultani al-maghrib ta'lif antuniu di saldania" in *amr.ma* (19/03/2014). Direct link: <http://www.amrh.ma/?p=2664>

<sup>14</sup> Abd al-Samad al-Mansouri, *al-Haraka al-Wataniyya bi madinat al-'ara'ich 1930-1956* (Markaz Khutuwa, 2023); Abdelaziz Tribak, *Presse et Politique au Nord du Maroc de 1912 à 1956* (Kalimate, 2017); David Stenner, "Centering the periphery: northern Morocco as a hub of transnational anti-colonial activism, 1930–43," *Journal of Global History* 11 (2016), 430-450.

<sup>15</sup> N.A., "Rural and tribal uprisings in post-colonial Morocco, 1957–60: an overview and a reappraisal," *The Journal of North African Studies* 4:2 (1999), 84-102. Ernest Gellner, "Patterns of Rural Rebellion in Morocco: Tribes as Minorities," *European Journal of Sociology* 3.2 (1962), 297-311.

<sup>16</sup> Hisham Aidi, "Paul Bowles et le 'mythe de Tanger'" *Orient XXI* (13 February 2021). Direct link: <https://orientxxi.info/lu-vu-entendu/paul-bowles-et-le-mythe-de-tanger,4486>; Brian Edwards, *Morocco Bound: Disorienting America's Maghreb, from Casablanca to the Marrakech Express* (Duke University Press, 2005); Latifa Babas, "History: When American intellectuals chose Tangier as an exile," *Yabiladi* (22.12.2017). Direct link: <https://en.yabiladi.com/articles/details/60415/history-when-american-intellectuals-chose.html>.



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More surprisingly, French novelist Jean Genet spent his later years in Larache, and was buried there – a surprising fact considering Larache’s social conservatism and the fact that Genet’s novels evoke eroticism and same-sex relationships. Finally, in the absence of the modernizing state, pre-modern traditions have thrived, including *zawiyas* (brotherhoods) and local saints. The patron saint of Larache is Lalla Mennana (buried in 1715), who was a daughter of the al-Mesbahi tribe who gained prominence during the 16<sup>th</sup> century against Portuguese military incursions. Lalla Menana’s life is shrouded in mystery and accounts of mystical powers. Nowadays, the population visit her shrine to make their demands hoping for supernatural resolution, combining pagan beliefs with Islamic claims of her Sharifian heritage.<sup>17</sup>

In the absence of a strong national presence, Larache has leaned on its Spanish character as a source of identity and national distinctiveness. This is firstly noticeable through people’s integration of Spanish words in their everyday vocabulary as they code-switch with Arabic: common loanwords include “al-banio” (baño/bathroom), “blasa” (plaza/place), “diskou” (disco/song), “bukadiyo” (bocadillo/sandwich) and many others.<sup>18</sup> Second, Spain has historically constituted the privileged migration route for Larache workers who, due to proximity, maintain ties with their families at home and visit annually, usually during the summer months.<sup>19</sup>

Third, traces of the Spanish presence are still visible across the city today and they structure the population’s daily lives. The landmarks of the city have their origin in the colonial era and remain salient monuments in Larache’s topography. Some remain functional, such as the

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<sup>17</sup> Rachid El Hour, “Moroccan female saints in written and oral traditions: Lallā Mennāna, patron saint of Larache,” *The Journal of North African Studies* (2020).

<sup>18</sup> Lotfi Sayahi, ‘*Aquí todo el mundo hablaba español*’: history of the Spanish language in Tangier,” *Journal of North African Studies* 9, 1 (2004), 36-48; Lotfi Sayahi, “Phonological adaptations of Spanish loanwords in Northern Moroccan Arabic,” *U. Penn Working Papers in Linguistics* 11 (2005), 253-63.

<sup>19</sup> Mohamed Berriane, Mohamed Aderghal, and Lahoucine Amzil, “Migratory Flows and Migrants’ Profiles: Moroccan Emigration Towards Spain,” in *African Migrations Research Innovative Methods and Methodologies* Edited by Mohamed Berriane and Hein de Haas (Africa World Press, 2012), 71-92.

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*Balcon Atlantico* seafront corniche where revelers and families meet daily for strolls by the ocean, or the *Plaza Central*, renamed recently *sahat al-tahrir*, but still referred by its old name with its tall palm trees and sometimes functional fountain, and the *Plaza Central Market*, where fruit, vegetable, meat and fish sellers occupy individual stone alcoves rather than being set up on the floor or on trolleys. Others exist in the background, such as the *Nuestra Senora de Pilar Church*, with its typical white and blue colors, on Avenue Muhammad V, the Jewish Cemetery, tucked deep in the old medina, or the *Commandancia*, formerly the seat of the colonial administration and now housing *al-ma'had al-musiqi*, the music school. A third category of buildings are abandoned and appear as ruins, such as the fortified castle overlooking the old port. Finally, a range of shops and other businesses have kept their Spanish name, indicating their long genealogy and how they have been passed down to new owners since: *Cinema Avenida*, *Hotel España*, *Churros Central*, *Café Lixus*, *Bazaar Yebari*. These monuments illustrate the centrality of the Spanish colonial architecture in Larache, as the administrative center for the sub-region with important economic, maritime, cultural and medical offices drawing a regular stream of visitors into the city and contributing to its dynamism.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Even if Larache receives only two mentions in Eric Calderwood's seminal and path-defining book *Colonial Al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Harvard UP, 2018), 138, 181. For historical studies that draw on the Spanish colonial archive and illustrate Larache's importance in the protectorate: Francisco Javier Martínez Antonio, "Tangerian Ghosts and Riffian Realities: The Limits of Colonial Public Health in Spanish Morocco (1906–1921)" in *Occupational Health and Public Health: Lessons from the Past, Challenges for the Future*, ed. By M.C. Nelson (National Institute for Working Life Sweden, 2006), 180-250; Helena de Felipe Rodríguez, *El protectorado español en Marruecos: Gestión colonial e identidades* (Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2002); N.A., "Spanish colonial ethnography in the rural and tribal northern zone of Morocco, 1912–56: an overview and an appraisal," *Journal of North African Studies* 4.2 (1999), 110-130; I. González González, "The political instrumentalisation of an educational model in a colonial context: Spanish-Arab schools in Spanish Morocco (1912–1956)," *The Journal of North African Studies* 20:2 (2015), 265-283; Stacy E. Holden, "Famine's fortune: the pre-colonial mechanisation of Moroccan flour production," *Journal of North African Studies* 15.1 (2010), 71-84; Jean-François Troin, "Montagnes et villes dans le Nord-Ouest du Maroc," in *Revue de l'Occident musulman et de la Méditerranée* 41-42 (1986), 209-215; Troin "Structures et rayonnements commerciaux des petites villes marocaines : l'exemple d'Asilah, Larache, El Ksar" *Revue tunisienne de sciences sociales*, n° 15 (1968), 243-262; Sebastian Balfour, *Deadly embrace: Morocco and the road to the Spanish civil war* (Oxford University Press, 2002).

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Today, these landmarks continue to structure daily life; inhabitants in Larache refer to them with their Spanish names, out of habit or to hold on to a certain past, anchoring this past in their lives along with the complex entanglements with Spain that have grown since Moroccan independence. As I claim in this paper, these monuments give a grounding to nostalgia, rather than being entirely constructed (implied, here, artificial) and merely a projection of discontent with the present. These monuments resemble ruins and eyesores on the urban landscape.

### **Searching for Larache by Unpacking the Nostalgia for the Spanish**

The glorification of Larache's "good old days" under the Spanish represents a staple discourse that punctuates conversations, from family homes to café terraces. Along with its ubiquity, it also lacks conceptual clarity, content or boundaries. It resembles a blanket discourse that can easily end conversations rather than act as an entry point into what constituted the history of these "better days."

To better grasp the relationship between nostalgia and the Spanish protectorate, in March 2021, I conducted a series of informal conversations at *al-nadi al-muwathafin*, the club of retired civil servants located on the first floor of *Edificio Central*, a Spanish-style building on the main square. Most, if not all of this club's members are older male figures who had careers in education, law, or the administration. This is a primary space of socialization for them and they start trickling down in the afternoon through the evening.

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*Members of the Nadi al-muwathafin (picture shared by Akmim)*

As is common in the region, these men usually hold conservative views on religion and social norms. Furthermore, due to their socio-professional attributes as former teachers, these figures enjoy authority within the social fabric and community in Larache. Their pronouncements and narratives about the past hold weight, which speaks to patriarchal gender norms (though in the private sphere, these norms tend to be matriarchal or at least, better negotiated).

I sought out their recollection of “the good old days” in Larache’s history due to their location at the intersection of the Spanish colonial past, as we sat in a Spanish style building, and the postcolonial state, as they were the first generation of civil servants for the state. I had this opportunity thanks to family connections. One prominent member of the association is Larbi Jebari (the man in the white jellabah on the picture above), a former teacher of Spanish and Spanish literature, who was immediately sympathetic to the project. The setting and value of these recollections needs to be qualified further. While these accounts tend to have authoritative value in the Larache community, I believe that they should be complemented by more diverse accounts, most notably by women of the same generation and by youth today. As a starting point, I was satisfied that their accounts could help me capture and record what is otherwise a loose feeling in society. Finally, my difference in age from that of these retired civil servants

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played favorably in our exchanges. The conversation constituted a mode of inter-generational story-telling that my conversation partners were glad to share. These interviews were loosely structured in the round table of the office, with participants joining in casually, or dropping off to take a phone call, to pray, to order some tea from the café downstairs, or to return home. These casual conversations were complemented by two other conversations with my relatives el Hashmi Jbari, who owns and runs Bazar Yebari, and Ahmed Jebari, a more distant relative by association, who lived in Larache as a teenager and left for several decades, and recently returned after his retirement. Prior to these conversations, I had met and spoken with them a few times over the years, but seldom on the topic of Larache.

These conversations began with a simple question: how do you remember the era of the Spanish? Were things truly better in Larache back then? Answers to these questions followed the usual, well-rehearsed tracks, seeped in nostalgia and added little historical information to the history of the city. My interlocutors began with sweeping statements about how the streets were clean compared to being trash-filled today (*nadhafa*), how people dressed up elegantly in the evening (*anaqa*), the work ethics of various shops (*ma'qoul*), and how they attributed this reversal to the how the Spanish were replaced by Moroccans of rural origins (*'robiya*), and led to the loss of what they label “civilization” (*hadara*). The accounts I collected on the day resembled each other and appeared rehearsed and resonated with each other.

Overall, it became clear that my respondents had scant recollections of the Spanish colonial period itself, but rather than they had grown up in its immediate aftermath and maintained its memory through the recollections of older people around them. I came seeking to learn about Larache under Spanish colonialism, from 1912 to 1956, but my respondents remembered its immediate aftermath, in the early years of independence. I then quizzed the

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retired civil servant how he could have known the Spanish if he arrived nearly fifteen years after independence. My interlocutors then clarified that, for them, the era of the Spanish extended beyond 1956 until 1973 when the government passed a law for the “Moroccanisation” of the economy which made it compulsory for all enterprises to have Moroccans as their majority stake-holders. The 1973 law led to an exodus of the Europeans who had remained in Larache after independence, and to these people, the start of Larache’s decline. Hence, the history of Spanish Morocco became a history of Larache in its wake, marked by traces of their passage through plural languages and diverse communities cohabitating.

These conversations were clearer when it came to periods that followed Moroccan independence, rather than the era of the Spanish protectorate itself. I share some responses from Muhammad Akmim (second from the right, picture above), a retired teacher who I would learn was a moderator for a Facebook group on Larache and a well-known figure in the city; these responses were given to Abd al-Ali al-Mahdani on *barnamaj nafida bi- ‘oyoun muhajira* (a window with immigrant eyes) program on the 29<sup>th</sup> of October 2020.<sup>21</sup> Akmim recalled his childhood in the 1960s as a plural space in the “al-Nabas” neighborhood:

A popular neighborhood [hay chaabi] in which you could find some members of the Spanish community in Larache and some Moroccan Jews living side by side with us, back at that time, the beautiful days [*al-zaman al-jamil*], in all honesty, we coexisted together [*ta ‘ayush*], we played games together such as football in the street... many games that today’s youth do not know such *tayba, watil, salbo, salto numero uno*, sword battles, we would go to the Lixus to make those swords. That is in the period from 1964 onwards. I remember because that is when King Hassan II came to open the new mosque, masjid al-qsar... Hay al-Nabas represents red-clay lands where the Spanish were growing cucumbers, which is what they called it in Spanish. The neighborhood is located now

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<sup>21</sup> “Wa yabqa al-’athar: masar al-’ustadh muhammad akmim” in Youtube: *barnamaj nafida bi- ‘oyoun muhajira* (29 October 2021). Direct link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qgNQIni9-xg>.

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from al-Jamaa al-Jadida to the Gurna and al-Suq al-Markazi... until the Lejero, which comes from a Spanish man who fixed clocks *relejero*, Arabized in every day talk.

The second running theme in these interviews was the difference between old and new Larache. For Akmim, the “good old days” was related to its smaller size and the fact that people cared for the city, prior to the wave of migration.<sup>22</sup> He drew a direct link between economic activity and civic collective norms:

The city had numerous factories, more than forty: fish, wood, peppers, olives... people were working, the sea shared its riches with the city’s inhabitants, markets were every week on Wednesday in the Plaza... people came from the countryside, they had a dedicated space for them... there were many commercial stores at that time. With 10 Dirhams, I came with my father down to the market and we could fill his basket. But fruits were expensive... but life was beautiful, truly, we played games that the current generation doesn’t know today! On the days of Aid al-Adha, he helped those who couldn’t buy a sheep. We accompanied young women when they had to walk somewhere at night. We donated sugar to those who needed... it was a beautiful time.

Finally, Akmim spoke extensively about the role of education, schools and learning. These were all common themes in the recollection of Larache nostalgia, both as point of encounter between the Spanish and the local inhabitants, and as the source of Larache’s continued advantages after

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<sup>22</sup> When asked about the difference between old and new Larache: “the old Larache was a small city, there were only 15 or 20 thousand inhabitants. There were factories, people were working. Heart on heart. Neighbors and cohabitation and coexistence between the three faiths, Muslims, Jews and Christians. There was safety. You could leave to the bus station, it was open 24 hours, it was the second one in the whole country after Tetuan... no one would bother to you. Women left to work and no one would bother them. We would receive health coverage and medicine for free at the hospital. Operations for free. Unlike today: the city has grown in size, they encouraged migration to the city [hijra] and they gave them to build shantytowns [*al-bararek*]. This phenomenon began to decrease, but the city grew and is riddled with problems. We hope to see people who care about their country and about their city. Like the Spanish say ‘*todo por la patria*’ ... we don’t want to see an official here coming from somewhere else saying ‘this is not my city, this is your city’ ... this is our city, we can work it with sincerity, dedication, and honest intentions.”

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independence; and it constitutes the era where these figures were children and living an idealized past:

The school of Moulay Abdesslam was a model, people wanted to study, the teachers wanted to teach back then, not like today. The teacher was like a father or a big brother. If he hit you and you went to your father to complain, he would tell you ‘what are you doing in this life if not to study?’ Families and schools understood each other, back then teachers had a high esteem unlike today... they were like prophets. With the development of technology and computers, students do not focus anymore. Back then, we only had a blackboard, chalk, and two textbooks.



Moulay Abdesslam primary  
section 1963-1964<sup>23</sup>

None of these respondents were blind or bothered by how they idealized Larache’s past because they were making claims about their lived experiences. Nostalgia and idealization were addressed by Spanish writer Sergio Barce Gallardo, who has been instrumental in collecting and sharing Larache’s cosmopolitan memory on his personal blog.<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Picture by Muhammad Alwath (11 July 2022): <https://larachearchives.blogspot.com/2022/07/1962-1964.html>.

<sup>24</sup> Direct link: <https://sergiobarce.blog/>



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I was born in 1961... and all my childhood was in Larache. I lived there until 1973, and it was the most naïve and also the most happy time, because childhood is innocent and only in it do dreams exist. This means that I did not know the protectorate personally, because I grew up under independent Morocco. But I know how daily life was in Larache during those years due to the memories of my grandparents, of my parents and other family members, and also from many friends who lived during this period due to their age. Also, of course, thanks to the vestiges that remain naturally in the city like footprints of a recent past. Perhaps I engage in mythification and idealization, because my emotional and sentimental ties with Larache and with those who star in this text, which is nothing more than the summarized chronicle of their lives. It is inevitable that I will do so; however, I don't know how to tell it any other way. An essay written could be considered as a story or a story that hides an essay. Be that as it may, I have not wanted to make a compilation of fragments from other books but to create from my novels and the novels and narrations from other authors. I intend to take the reader to the place of events, to the time, to gently place them on the ground so that they can experience it as if they were part of the story.<sup>25</sup>

Nostalgia appeared to guide these individuals' recollection of Larache's past, which offers well-known shortcomings, but in this case, it offers a strong tool against historical oblivion.

Considering that Larache occupies a marginalized place in the nationalist narrative, its habitants of a certain socio-educational standing feel disconnected from their identity, as they are excluded from the political system. Hence, there are benefits in reclaiming their historical narrative even if it is manifestly plagued by inaccuracies and a selective view of the Spanish colonial system.

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<sup>25</sup> Sergio Barce Gallardo, "La vida cotidiana durante el Protectorado en la ciudad de Larache," in *El Protectorado español en Marruecos: la historia trascendida*, Volumen I, ed. By Manuel Aragón Reyes, Manuel Gahete Jurado, Fatiha Benlabbah (Iberdrola, 2013), 149-150.

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### **Spaces of Encounters: Mediterranean Cosmopolitanism in Larache**

The basis of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism lies in the inter-faith nature of social life made possible by different national communities coexisting peacefully. This theme came across in a more defining manner in the subsequent account of two other men from that generation who had more sustained contacts with Europeans in Larache from their youth to this day. Lhachmi Jbari, another relative, began working in his father's bazaar in his youth, a store located on one of the city's arteries next to the church and central administrative offices. While the shop began by selling a variety of household items, it evolved in the past decades into a tourist-oriented shop selling crafts and fabric. I visited the quiet shop on the advice of the retired civil servants, and soon after sharing my interest in the Spanish period. Lhachmi Jbari's face beamed with a smile and related several stories he recalled that illustrate the inter-faith cohabitation between Spanish and Moroccans. Every year in the run-up to Christmas, they organized the "fiesta de los Reyes Magos" by decorating the store and disguising the staff as Wise Men to entertain the Spanish kids coming in to choose a gift. Jbari retold the story with glee, while also noting that it was natural and not against religion but proof of interfaith proximity. This ceremony was retold by Spanish writer Sergio Barce on his blog:

One of the most fond memories of my childhood in Larache is Twelfth Night. When that date approached, the Yebari Bazaar transformed into a world full of toys, fantasy and the place where the three Wise Men, with their pages, waited for us to bring them our letters. The toys, of course, we had previously chosen in the same bazaar. Then, the cavalcade arrived, with the arrival of Their Majesties on camels, a cavalcade that toured the streets of Larache, and, at dawn, the Three Kings in person, with their inseparable pages, already very tipsy at that hour after eating in each house. The corresponding invitation to champagne, liquor or whatever was needed, they woke us up to give us the gifts. The truth is that everything was full of magic, and it made us children dream. Here are some

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photographs from those days. The Yebari Bazaar full of light, color and fabulous gifts... it was in the late sixties and early seventies.<sup>26</sup>

Contact between different communities is a significant feature of the historical narrative of cosmopolitan Alexandria, particularly in the realm of business transactions that facilitate cultural exchanges such as the one highlighted in Larache's case. However, did Lhachmi Jbari's willingness to dress up as a Wise Man and his positive recollection stem from a cosmopolitan philosophical stance or individual fun? Here I draw from Robert Mabro's account of Alexandria's cosmopolitan identity. In 1927, his point of reference, the cosmopolitans were "about 50,000 persons... the society which claimed an Alexandrian culture – not Egyptian, not Greek, not even pure Italian or English – but something *sui generis*."<sup>27</sup> Alexandrian cosmopolitan society was characterized by "something to do with the sea" and especially entertainment for the privileged, and fragmentation and boundaries for those who had to work: "The area of social intercourse was business. Everybody dealt with everybody in commerce, finance, shipping, industry and the services. The areas that were taboo were religion and politics."<sup>28</sup> In this sense, Larache was cosmopolitan in the way Alexandria was, for certain people and at certain moments.

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<sup>26</sup> "Larache – Los Reyes Magos en El Bazar Yebari" *SergioBarceblog* (20 August 2020). Direct link: <https://sergiobarce.blog/2020/08/11/larache-los-reyes-magos-en-el-bazar-yebari/>

<sup>27</sup> Robert Mabro, "Alexandria 1860-1960 : the cosmopolitan identity," *Cahiers Amicale Alexandrie Hier et Aujourd'hui* 59 (2010), 15.

<sup>28</sup> Mabro, "Alexandria 1860-1960" (2010), 16.



*Picture of Lhachmi's father  
surrounded by notables and a colonial  
administrator*

Lhachmi Jbari shared this picture of his father and other notables in the city, alongside colonial administrators to illustrate the entente that existed between them during the protectorate, and which translated into the father's support for the Reyes Magos ceremony at the store. This undated image can be read alongside efforts to promote a culture of *convivencia* by conservative Spanish Catholic political leaders, as related by historian of Spain Geoffrey Jensen, which ended up facilitating the recruitment of soldiers and notables on the side of Franco during the Spanish Civil War.<sup>29</sup> Bringing historical rigor to Larache's cosmopolitan past may not necessarily lead to the image of a cosmopolitan golden age but more likely toward histories of nationalism, fascism and encounters that remain within the realm of trade.

Another account brings up more nuance in the nostalgic accounts of cosmopolitan Larache, all while recognizing the intercultural and intercommunal encounters between Moroccans and Europeans. Ahmed Jebari, another relative, met me at the Café Lixus one dreary

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<sup>29</sup> Geoffrey Jensen "The Peculiarities of 'Spanish Morocco': Imperial Ideology and Economic Development," *Mediterranean Historical Review* 20.1 (2005), 81-102; María Rosa de Madariaga, "Confrontation in the Spanish zone (1945–56): Franco, the nationalists, and the post-war politics of decolonisation" *The Journal of North African Studies* 19:4 (2014), 490-500; Abel Albet-Mas, "Three Gods, Two Shores, One Space: Religious Justifications for Tolerance and Confrontation between Spain and Colonial Morocco during the Franco Era," *Geopolitics* 11.4 (2006), 580-600; Ali Al Tuma, "Moros y Cristianos: Religious Aspects of the Participation of Moroccan Soldiers in the Spanish Civil War (1936–1939)" in *Muslims in Interwar Europe* (2016), 151-177.

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morning in March 2022. The decoration inside attests to the owner's unhealthy obsession with Omar Sharif, while partaking in Larache nostalgia with pictures of the central square:



*Inside Café Lixus overlooking the medina's main gate. My picture.*

Ahmed Jebari recently retired and relocated to Larache from America, where he lived since the 1980s. After a childhood in Tetuan, he moved to Larache where he spent his teenage years. There, with his older brother and some high school friends, they formed the amateur musical group “The Flies,” known for playing imitations of western rock and funk music. He took great pleasure in remembering how the group came together and improvised lyrics by drawing inspiration from any vinyl records they could procure. Some had talent and went on to have small musical careers, but most were there to have fun, adding it was their energy which made them become minor celebrities in the city. The band began to have local success among the other youth of the city, particularly concerts at the beach, and later even toured the region.

The group's catalyst came when a French music teacher in the local high school began teaching them and even joined the band: “He played saxophone and flute and helped the band in learning about improvisations, jazz and gave the band a different image.” The group expanded

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their repertoire and musical skill, and even began to give performances to audiences of Europeans. Ahmed Jebari recalls fondly how “The Flies” played on the front terrace of the Casino de Larache on the central square of the city, traditionally a place for the European elite to come gamble and drink: “One of the managers of the casino, a Spanish guy, played a role in giving us the chance to play there. It was not an easy thing for Moroccans to even enter the place, but some did!” The Casino has since been replaced by a middle rise of residential apartments, a bank and a café which obstruct the view to the sea – the building has since been replaced by a large residential bloc, further cutting Larache’s square from the ocean. Meanwhile, “The Flies” represent an ignored part of the city’s history, except by those who were part of the band and remember it with a cheeky smile.



*In the center, the Casino de  
Larache*

This group’s history sheds another light on the city’s past, the relationship between Moroccans and Europeans during the late sixties and early seventies. It also allows us to qualify the different experiences and regimes of morality in the present and how they shape the experience of Larache’s Spanish past. Earlier, I evoked how members of the *nadi al-muwathafin* put forward a “respectable” image of civility and respect. Meanwhile, “The Flies” opens the door

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to draw links with counter-culture in Morocco. It is useful to draw similarities with “Nass El Ghiwan,” the poster-boys of Moroccan counter-culture who were active in Casablanca and enjoyed national reach.<sup>30</sup> In Ahmed Jebari’s account, “The Flies” did not have a political or a subversive aim. Instead they were a product of the city’s openness and contacts with a foreign community valuing artistic expression.



*Abderrahman Ayyoub Omar Farouk Jebari,  
Nicolas Yankovich, Ahmed Jebari,  
Mohamed Akhrif, Larbi Gharbiya*

It is likely that these gatherings in the 1970s saw students consume drugs, lead sexually open lives, and hold subversive political discourses – in what was a radical decade of student protests in the country at the university of Rabat, often met by regime repression targeting student ringleaders.<sup>31</sup> This was explored in a 2000 movie *Ali, Rabiaa et les autres* in which musician-turned-actor Younes Megri recalls his radical youth after being released from prison, decades later. The movie characters’ look, their youthful insouciance, and their artistic tastes are reminiscent of the Larache band.

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<sup>30</sup> Omar Sayyed, *Klam al Ghiwane*, (Casablanca: Union of Moroccan Writers, 2002); Omar Sayyed, *Klam al Ghiwane*, (Casablanca: Union of Moroccan Writers, 2002).

<sup>31</sup> Susan Miller, *A History of Modern Morocco* (Cambridge University Press, 2013), 168-9, 188-9.

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The story of “The Flies” brings into focus how European counterparts acted as facilitators or mediators for the Moroccans to access the world of cosmopolitan cultural expression. The casino manager let them perform on the terrace and the music teacher gave them access to a new repertoire. These two figures may point to the existence of inter-communal encounters. They also represent gatekeepers to activities and worlds from which the Moroccan inhabitants of Larache were usually excluded. “The Flies” appeared to be more subversive than representative of social dynamics in the city. For this reason, the group did not come across in the testimonies of retired civil servants (or for that matter, stories of my childhood), or social media sources. The amateur band lasted a few years after which its members took off in separate directions, though they have reconnected and intend to produce a book to safeguard their memory.



*Picture of the former band members in 2018, Ahmed Jebari is first on the left.<sup>32</sup>*

Colonial nostalgia offers an insightful entry point into a neglected chapter of the city’s history and start to overcome its place outside of history. In the past, Larache was a dynamic society where inter-communal encounters took place in shared spaces such as the bazar or at

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<sup>32</sup> Post shared by Abderrahim Zaimi on Facebook (09 August 2018). Direct link: [www.facebook.com/abderrahim.zaimi/posts/2156781194564126](https://www.facebook.com/abderrahim.zaimi/posts/2156781194564126)



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amateur musical concerts. These conversations have also introduced nuance to the mythical image of Larache as an urban paradise of civilization and inter-communal cohabitation. These encounters were structured by unequal power relations and reveal more complex temporalities, where national difference played an important role. European individuals were a decisive factor in the production of what is remembered fondly in Larache's past. Furthermore, when the government passed the 1973 Moroccanization law, nearly two decades after independence, Europeans began migrating out of Larache. Finally, the accounts do not provide sufficient basis to take on nostalgia as a *sufficient* path toward the historicization of Larache's history and identity, because nostalgia tends to overplay the bourgeois version of the past (clean, civic, beautiful) at the expense of another reality, of counter-culture and youth expression.

### **Social Media Groups: A path to redress the historical narrative?**

Cafés are surely the most common businesses found in the city of Larache, followed closely by bakeries and hairdressers. They constitute a daily staple and the main space for men to socialize on the terraces, and increasingly, for women sitting in the interior. Different crowds attend different cafés. They are loyal to their establishments and their favorite tables, even if some are well known fronts for money laundering for wealthy drug barons. When a new café opens, people treat it as an important occasion, as it seeks to gain new clientele within this competitive market. Out of a sense of loyalty to the past, I find myself heading to the cafés on the main square, even though the quality of their coffee does not always compete with those of newer establishments and their imported machines and fancy lighting.

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For cultural historians of the Arab region, cafés also offer a barometer of media and cultural consumption.<sup>33</sup> Since the early 2000s in Larache, newspapers, religious cassettes, and pan-Arab satellite television channels had found a way to coexist. The first two media dominated the mornings while the other took over the afternoon and evenings, particularly during football games such as the Spanish Clasico or the World Cup which, up until recently, came with heart ache for supporters of the Moroccan national team. However, in the past decade, smart phones have supplanted newspapers and televisions as the choice mode of entertainment for café goers. Alongside the customary cigarette box and keys, smart phones are the most common object found on café tables. When they are not keeping in touch with relatives, in Morocco or in the European diaspora, its patrons scroll endlessly and giving their opinions on a range of online forums. The digital revolution in Larache has made it possible for social media groups to foster an appetite for the city's history as a form of entertainment.

I came to learn of these Facebook groups in the mid to late 2010s. At first, they resembled other nostalgia groups for other cities on the colonial period. I dismissed them because they resembled those online platforms by the former pied-noir in Algeria hoping to keep in touch with former Europeans they had known under the colonial system, and of little relevance to North Africa after independence.<sup>34</sup> One of those groups on Larache fit that description, titled “*Fotografías Documentos Anécdotas Historias de Larache y Alcazarquivir*”

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<sup>33</sup> Said Graiouid, “A Place on the Terrace: Café Culture and the Public Sphere in Morocco,” *Journal of North African Studies* 12.4 (2007), 531-50; Jim Bowman, “Time to Smell the Sweet Smoke: Fantasy Themes and Rhetorical Vision in Nargile Café” in *The Journal of Popular Culture* 42.3 (2009), 442-57; Helena Nassif, “Consuming the Past in Contemporary Beirut: The Case of Café Rawda during Ramadan,” in *Culture, Time and Publics in the Arab World: Media, Public Space and Temporality* ed. by Tarik Sabry and Joe Khalil (IB Tauris, 2019); Ami Ayalon, *The Arabic Print Revolution: Cultural Production and Mass Readership* (Cambridge University Press, 2016).

<sup>34</sup> Amy Hubbell, *Remembering French Algeria: Pieds-Noirs, Identity and Exile* (University Nebraska Press, 2015); Claire Eldridge, *From empire to exile : History and memory within the pied-noir and harki communities, 1962-2012* (Manchester University press, 2016).

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[Pictures Documents Anecdotes History of Larache and Ksar el-Kebir].<sup>35</sup> To my surprise, those who commented on pictures were not only Europeans but Moroccans, much younger Larache inhabitants who joined the conversation where no travel visas are required. Despite this observation, I paid little attention to these groups in the following years.

It was during the Covid-19 pandemic in March 2020 that the situation changed. When the country went into a rigorous lockdown, Morocco drew praise on the international stage for the strength of the government's response which involved curfews enforced by the police and closing the country's borders. Few thought about the ordinary people who were unable to visit their cafés. Instead, these Larache inhabitants invested the digital space, to escape and pass the time. Nostalgia groups on social media increased in numbers and in traffic from that point on. They were, I suspect, also a way for Moroccans abroad to revisit their homeland when borders were closed.

From that point, I began to compile these Facebook pages more systematically while noting how users engaged with them. Several more groups appeared on my radar which catered more toward a Moroccan audience. Their goal, broadly defined, was to tell the younger generations about a past they do not know. In some cases, the pages reflected organizations outside the digital sphere, such as "Larache Archives" (18 thousand followers) which consists of an association for historical studies with dedicated events and a website containing a section on nostalgia and the Spanish protectorate.<sup>36</sup> On the other side of the spectrum are pages launched and run by individuals, as a hobby and with the intention of building an online community of followers. Akmim, in the interview cited above and the one I conducted, brought up his page *Nostalgie de Larache* (2.8 thousand followers) and what motivates him:

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<sup>35</sup> Direct link: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/126957740677873>.

<sup>36</sup> Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/LaracheArchives> and website: <https://larachearchives.blogspot.com/>

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I am not a journalist, I am an educator and a civil society activist. Journalism has its rules and mechanisms. I am an activist on Facebook [*nachit facebooki*]. Indeed, I do a form of journalism work on the city of Larache, I do some journalism work: when I see sinkholes, I take pictures and write on them. I cover cultural events. I do [Facebook] lives to share with other Moroccans, in the diaspora or in the country, to let them know about our history... that we have a long and important history, but that it suffers from marginalization [*tahmich*]. Some things get achieved, others don't... That is my conception of journalism in Larache on my page. And I made another one called *Nostalgie de Larache*.<sup>37</sup>

In between these two examples, there are a multitude of unmoderated groups which are plagued by spam posts, unrelated to history, memory, nostalgia or Larache, with short time spans.

These groups on social media represent the first way that colonial nostalgia can have value for historians of the cosmopolitan Mediterranean, but from the outset, I acknowledge this is a difficult case to make. We know of the shortcomings of nostalgia, ranging from selective recollection, loss of objectivity, and oversimplification. Even the recent literature on social media groups devoted to nostalgia of the “good old days” avoid attributing historical value to their content. Instead, they underline the emotional nature of its participants in online communities.<sup>38</sup> Robin Ekelund has recently argued that retrospective Facebook groups creates a double-edged sword... they offer a sense of positive emotional belonging for likeminded members, they also risk producing simplified notions of the past that feeds into retrotopian tendencies of the present.”<sup>39</sup> The study of identity-based Facebook groups holds significant potential to shed new light on questions of nationalism, migration, mobilization, crisis,

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<sup>37</sup> Direct link: <https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100063623649936>

<sup>38</sup> Katharina Niemeyer, *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for Past, Present and Future* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Robin Ekelund, “Fascination, nostalgia, and knowledge desire in digital memory culture: Emotions and mood work in retrospective Facebook groups,” *Memory Studies* 15.5 (2022), 1248-1262.

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modernity, as illustrated by recent studies on groups devoted to a variety of topics, from Italian culinary recipes to old buildings in Perth.<sup>40</sup> In Turkey, such groups draw on the collaborative nature of social media to “enact citizenship” from the past and seek its reactivation in the present as part of a strategy for political change.<sup>41</sup> However, more specifically in Arab countries, Facebook groups on the “good old days” point toward the rise of chauvinism and xenophobia toward foreigners in Tunisia or the call for depoliticization and bourgeois modernity in Egypt.<sup>42</sup> In both cases, these groups neither inform a rigorous knowledge of the past in question, nor do they lead to the reactivation and pursuit of past norms of coexistence that form the basis of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism.

In opposition to this literature, I claim that these groups can act as gateways into more formal relationships with the past. These groups should not be seen in isolation but alongside other initiatives with which they interact and which have similar individuals hovering between them through the digital space. For this argument, I draw on Clare Veal who has recently engaged with the historiographical value of these nostalgia groups in Thailand. Veal sees in these groups “new forms of archival practice and historical dissemination,” especially digital images, might shape the plot of Thai history and its implications in a contemporary context.”<sup>43</sup> Granted, these proto-historical groups pose serious questions of a methodological nature, nonetheless,

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<sup>40</sup> Inconronata (Nadia) Inserra, “Transnational Nostalgia in an All- Female Italian Facebook Group and Cooking Blog,” in *Transmissions of Memory: Echoes, Traumas, and Nostalgia in Post-World War II Italian Culture*, ed. by Patrizia Sambuco (Farleigh Dickinson University Press, 2016), 197-210; Jenny Gregory, “Connecting with the past through social media: the ‘Beautiful buildings and cool places Perth has lost’ Facebook group,” *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 21:1 (2015), 22-45;

<sup>41</sup> Özlem Savaş, “Facebook communities about nostalgic photos of Turkey: creative practices of remembering and representing the past,” *Digital Creativity* 28.1 (2017), 48-57.

<sup>42</sup> in Tunisia: Monika Salzbrunn, Simon Mastrangelo, Farida Souiah, “Migrations non-documentées et imaginaires sur Internet: Le cas des harraga tunisiens.” *Visions croisées autour des frontières européennes : mobilités, sécurité et frontières* (Editions de l’Université de Galatasaray, 2017), 91-113; in Egypt: Nermin Elsherif, “The City of *al-Zaman al-Gamil*: (A)political Nostalgia and the Imaginaries of an Ideal Nation”, *Égypte/Monde arabe* (2021).

<sup>43</sup> Clare Veal, “Nostalgia and nationalism: Facebook ‘archives’ and the constitution of Thai photographic histories,” *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 51.3 (2020), 4-5.

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they invite us to think differently about collaborative and grassroots approaches to the past especially in highly regulated historical fields such as in Morocco.<sup>44</sup>

Here is where I argue that the Mediterranean cosmopolitan framework comes in with a useful device to organize the outpouring of memory on social media and convert it into a series of categories around which a historical narrative can be formed. These groups offer “coordinates” that can offer a starting point to replace diffuse memory with specific recollections. I focus on the page *dhakirat madinat al-‘ara’ich* [Memory of the city of Larache], which was created in 2010, and with 138 thousand followers, is seemingly the most popular and well-run of the many one many find on the digital sphere. I draw on an observation of this page to start identifying and mapping the conceptual features of the past in Larache by identifying the most recurrent motifs or images that keep returning, or those that elicit the greatest number of reactions (likes or comments).<sup>45</sup> I will discuss three such coordinates: architecture and the beautiful city, the seafront, and elegant women.

**Archetype 1: “The Beautiful City.”** The first type of posts tends to show the urban landscape of Larache during the Spanish protectorate. They contain images of buildings and street in the colonial architectural style, occasionally classical cars and trees lined up on the pavement and most tellingly, little to no people.

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<sup>44</sup> Mohammed El Mansour, “Moroccan Historiography since Independence,” in *The Maghrib in Question: Essays in History and Historiography* ed. by Kenneth Perkins and Michel Le Gall (Texas University Press, 1997).

<sup>45</sup> These “results” are at an early stage of observation, and in the future, more scientific modes of accounting would be required to make these determinations.



Picture shared by Mohamed  
Elasri (14 December 2020).<sup>46</sup>

Elsewhere, such pictures show monuments that still exist today in order to create a sense of contrast between then and now, especially when those monuments appear pristine on the pictures, and dilapidated in Larache today. Comments tend to point to the cleanliness of the streets and the sense of architectural coherence that is lacking today. Finally, another common picture shows the *Plaza Central* from above, including how the city's arteries lead to the center, with the ocean in the backdrop. I have also seen commentators lament the disappearance of the fountain in the middle of the square with ornaments reminiscent of the Andalusian style, and where all populations socialized.

**Archetype 2: “The seafront.”** The second type of posts tend to situate the city and its inhabitants alongside the water, be it through the port, the boat crossings to the beach on the other side of oued Loukos, or on the *Balcon Atlantico* promenade. These type of posts do not feature the Spanish colonial era with as much frequency as those devoted to architecture and urban landscape, with the exception of the promenade. These pictures are often set within the

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<sup>46</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/photo/?fbid=149611390254803>

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youth span of those post them, where we see Spanish colonial architecture in the background (including the stairs from the old town where one would take the boats crossing to the beach).



“al-batil laysa mujarad wasilat ‘obour”

The boat is not only a means of crossing.

Picture shared on 20 July 2023.<sup>47</sup>

This picture shows a family crossing from the port in the old town to the beach on the *batil* (the Arabization of the word “bateau”), which is a summer ritual from families to go spend the day at the beach, an economical mode of transportation which is communal and made the beach accessible even to those without cars. It resonates with a wave of discontent from this past decade from the local population over the poor state of the landing also known as *al-escalera* colloquially, and in protest against the authorities’ decision to ban them in favor of car transportation. This picture connects with the theme of Mediterranean cosmopolitanism as an experience of leisure, but also with the maritime industry, fishing, and sea-migration that gives Larache its character (represented with pictures of boats, sailors and grilled sardines).

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<sup>47</sup> Direct link: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=669537325200161&set=pb.100064316994351.-2207520000&type=3>



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**Archetype 3: “Westernized women and the modern city.”** The third type consists in one picture which has been shared so often that its original ownership cannot be established. It shows four women on the *Balcon Atlantico* in 1962 (though this cannot be established definitely), dressed up in western yet modest outfits. They are smiling and looking elegant, and it is difficult to determine whether they are Spanish or Moroccans. This picture resonates with pictures of women in pre-Islamic Revolution in Iran which abound on the digital sphere. This type of picture receives the most comments every time it is reposted with self-deprecating humor about how “we are living in the 1950s while they are living in 2023.”<sup>48</sup>



Picture shared on 11 October  
2023.

This picture taps evidently into the themes of modernity and backwardness which my respondents mobilized when trying to explain how the city has declined since its height under the era of the Spanish. They contrast this example of elegance and respectability with how the rural populations comport themselves – their discourse, which is not supported by facts when

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<sup>48</sup> The picture was most recently reposted on 11 October 2023:  
<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=716506670503226&set=pb.100064316994351.-2207520000&type=3>

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advanced. Other such pictures depict children in school recitals wearing smart outfits, pictures of public demonstrations of Scouts and musical troupes, artists and actors performing on stage, and a seemingly inter-communitarian compositions made of Europeans and Moroccans to suggest their peaceful cohabitation.

I have suggested in this section that these visual archetypes can constitute the starting point to rewrite Larache's recent history in a manner that assimilates its aspiration for a cosmopolitan past, expressed as colonial nostalgia for the Spanish. These pictures should not be taken for fact, and I have demonstrated that they need to be understood in relation to present day concerns. There are other archetypes that also deserve inclusion, ranging from images of the old town as an authentic and peaceful space, traces of Jewish culture in the architecture and monuments, images of football teams of Moroccan young men, or culinary delicacies from Larache. This can, with further investigation, represent a starting point for the historicization of colonial nostalgia.

### **Larache After the Nostalgia: Civil Society and Plural Belongings**

It is telling that this paper on Larache's cosmopolitan past was written with a combination of oral interviews, social media posts, and documentaries shared on the digital space, rather than Spanish colonial archives or Moroccan newspapers.

After nostalgia is examined critically, I claim that it can lead to more rigorous historicization of the city's past, which fulfills Will Hanley's standard for the term of cosmopolitanism, namely to "provide a satisfying account of diversity, and the critique of

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nationalism that they entail is reflexive rather than creative.”<sup>49</sup> There are already indications that colonial nostalgia and social media pages on the “good old days” have led to more professional attempts to bring Larache into history. One of those examples is the YouTube channel *barnamaj nafida bi-‘oyoun muhajira* [A window with immigrant eyes] from a Larache-born amateur historian residing in the Netherlands. The channel was launched in 2018 and has released 258 episodes of lengthy biographical conversations with Larache personalities or round table debates over topics of interest. For example, the channel interviews local historians on the city’s history, such as Muhammad Azli. More recently, a better produced documentary on the history of Larache has been released by a new broadcaster, Télé Maroc. With the help of professional historians from the city, it portrays Larache at the intersection of multiple civilization influences, its historical significance in the Moroccan past, and in the last third, on the monuments of the Spanish past though without integrating memory, social history or nostalgia.<sup>50</sup> The historian Muhammad Azli, who also runs the blog “Larache Archives” operates the connecting thread between the digital sphere and more traditional forms of historical writing, including by organizing seminars and sharing digital archives, in the hope of gaining a greater foothold within the national institutions of historical writing such as the Royal Academy or the Moroccan Association for Historical Research.<sup>51</sup>

Nostalgia for Larache’s cosmopolitan past has also equipped certain individual members with the ability to recognize new directions in state discourse and leverage them for the benefit of their city. By that, I refer to a shift in the Moroccan national discourse toward interfaith tolerance and the Spanish cultural diplomacy toward Spanish-speaking territories abroad. When I

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<sup>49</sup> Hanley, “Grieving Cosmopolitanism,” 1358.

<sup>50</sup> “barnamaj madinat wa dhakirat ya’khuduna ila jawharat al-muhit madinat al-‘ara’ish” Télé Maroc (18 September 2023). Direct link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f-JMK47Pwxw>

<sup>51</sup> Direct links: [larachearchives.blogspot.com/](http://larachearchives.blogspot.com/); <http://www.amrh.ma/> and <https://alacademia.org.ma/>.

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visited Lhachmi Jebari in the bazar, he told me about the efforts he made to document the part of the city that were left abandoned. In the early 2010s, he took it upon himself to pressure the local authorities to take care of monuments that celebrated the city's inter-faith past, especially the Jewish and Christian sections of Larache's cemetery.<sup>52</sup> Similarly, through the help of the association "Larache del mundo" of which he is a leading member, they have sought and obtained from the *Junta Andaluca* funds to rehabilitate several monuments from the colonial era such as the central market.<sup>53</sup> In the first case, these actors are benefitting from the ongoing drive by the Moroccan authorities to restore and value the country's Jewish heritage, several other monuments in the old town have received funds and been restored.<sup>54</sup> Here, Lhachmi mobilized similar tropes about tolerance and Muslim-Jewish Convivencia that undergirds the new Moroccan national discourse, thus ensuring that requests made on media and toward the national authorities are taken seriously.<sup>55</sup> In the second case, Lhachmi Jebari deployed another strategy by being a Spanish-speaking figure of civil society connecting past and present, while working with local partners across borders to make more detailed requests through formal channels that lead to more sustainable funding streams, while conforming to Spanish agendas first and foremost.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> <https://cementerio-judio-larache.com/>

<sup>53</sup> "Rehabilitacion del mercado central de Larache" (2004). Direct link:

<https://www.juntadeandalucia.es/fomentoyvivienda/portal-web/web/areas/cooperacion/ArquitecturaObras/09677ad7-cbf5-11e4-8e2c-cd15664339ce> and a progress report with images from the Spanish ministry of foreign affairs and cooperation: [https://www.rehabimed.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/C29\\_AECI\\_poster\\_Mercado%20Larache.pdf](https://www.rehabimed.net/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/C29_AECI_poster_Mercado%20Larache.pdf)

<sup>54</sup> N.A., "Welcoming Ceremony in Honor of Jewish Community from Larache," MAP (06 September 2022). Direct link: <https://www.mapnews.ma/en/actualites/culture/welcoming-ceremony-honor-jewish-community-larache>.

<sup>55</sup> See Emily Gottreich Benichou, *Jewish Morocco* (IB Tauris, 2020); Aomar Boum, "Branding Convivencia: Jewish Museums and the Reinvention of a Moroccan Andalus in Essaouira," in *Exhibiting Minority Narratives: Cultural Representations in Museums in the Middle East and North Africa* ed. Virginie Rey (Edinburgh University Press, 2020), 205-223; Eric Calderwood, "Moroccan Jews and the Spanish colonial imaginary, 1903–1951," in *The Journal of North African Studies* 24.1 (2019), 86-110

<sup>56</sup> Beatriz Marin-Aguilera, "Distorted Narratives: Morocco, Spain, and the Colonial Stratigraphy of Cultural Heritage," in *Archaeologies* (2018).

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In the second instance, these civil society members have leveraged the dynamism of the digital sphere to promote a practice of community building and citizenship mobilization toward the local authorities. In March 2023, *barnamaj nafida bi-‘oyoun muhajira* [A window with immigrant eyes] released a round table on the “public development plans for the Atlantic terrace in Larache,” the Spanish architectural cornice overlooking the ocean.<sup>57</sup> This discussion took place following an announcement by the local authorities that they would belatedly renovate the *Balcon Atlantico*. Members of Larache civil society were trying to ensure that the renovation kept the Spanish architectural character of the promenade.<sup>58</sup> These media outlets worked in conjunction with social media and civil society while mobilizing themes of nostalgia and Larache’s cosmopolitan past to justify the need for appropriate renovation. This includes Larache architect Anas El Himdi’s much relayed post, drawing a link between his souvenirs of the *Balcon* “a favorite space to stroll, in front of the sea with its spectacular view, with its long and white balustrade... with simplicity hanging over the wall of the cliff... constantly brushed by powerful waves.” El Himdi instated this monument as a central part of its heritage alongside “the Plaza Espana, Cuatro Camino rotunda, the El Bosque de la Hipica, and Jean Genet’s burial place.”<sup>59</sup> Whether these initiatives will lead to success remain to be seen, however what matters in this case is that a significant part of the population has been mobilized to safeguard an element of their urban landscape which has been popularized in no-small part by the practice of colonial nostalgia on social media channels.

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<sup>57</sup> “mahsrou’ tahyi’at al-fada’ al-‘umumi al-shurfa al-’atlasia bi al-‘ara’ish” Youtube channel: *barnamaj nafida bi-‘oyoun muhajira* (04/03/2023). Direct link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OrnlbFCOxiM>

<sup>58</sup> N.A. “Plan de réaménagement du Balcon Atlantico: A Larache, le débat est très brûlantPlan de réaménagement du Balcon Atlantico,” *La Dépêche du Maroc* (27 February 2023). Direct link: <https://ladepeche24.com/plan-de-reamenagement-du-balcon-atlantico-a-larache-le-debat-est-tres-brulantplan-de-reamenagement-du-balcon-atlantico/>

<sup>59</sup> Post shared by Anas El Himdi on 19 February 2023. Direct link: <https://www.facebook.com/ElhimdiAnas/posts/10222268061633823>

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### **Conclusion: Larache in the Mediterranean Imagination**

This paper began with the claim that feelings of colonial nostalgia for the Spanish period among Moroccans in Larache can offer a path toward reversing the city's sense of marginalization. This claim is conditioned by the insertion of Larache's past in a Mediterranean cosmopolitan framework. This paper had two objectives: to consider the value of colonial nostalgia and to open the possibility of a Mediterranean framework to study neglected historical experiences. I frame colonial nostalgia as the remnants of a disillusioned present and an unprocessed past. Rather than dismiss these statements of longing and regret, I treat them as entry points into a different type of social history *in* the Mediterranean: through a series of ordinary encounters, I recreate the social experience of banal colonialism that and people's experience of Spanish departure, the early years of independence, and the slow calcification of the colonial legacy. Through a series of recorded interactions, I interrogated how nostalgia for cosmopolitanism can offer a way for historians to (re)write the historical narrative of Larache in a creative dialogue with its inhabitants, in other words, a participatory history that pays close attention to social relationships to the past, and identifies feelings of disillusionment with the present. In so doing, we must give more place to the agency of these actors rather than dismissing their aspirations as merely being "nostalgic" particularly when they repeat tropes about a past many have heard through second-hand sources or reconstruct through images and social media posts. Hence, cosmopolitanism in Larache as a category of practice, which offers a fruitful route to explain how local individuals relate to their city's past, while opening a space to explore their other strategies that flow from their nostalgia.

In the latter stages, I have looked beyond colonial nostalgia to trace a link between proto-historical initiatives such as the Facebook groups and the wider effort to bring Larache back

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from its sense of marginalization. Aside from the mushrooming of amateur-historian initiatives that build on the momentum of nostalgia, I explored the efforts from key individuals and civil society to leverage discursive shifts to insert their city within them: Morocco as a country of inter-faith tolerance, as a space of Spanish cultural influence, and social media as a space for citizen involvement in local affairs. All these three dimensions of ongoing urban dynamics in the city draw on a vision of Larache's multilingual, inter-communitarian past that took place under the Spanish colonial period and its aftermath. Without the Mediterranean cosmopolitan framework, this history would be unintelligible and maintain the city's historical marginalization. This paper has not sought to dismiss the criticism levelled against simplistic uses of this concept, as identified by Will Hanley (2008). Instead, the cosmopolitan framework offers a grid to write the city's history upon which ordinary people can form an affective bond while guiding the work of historians to pay more attention to social interactions, whether they be in bazars on the eve of Christmas, in the old town between kids playing games in the street, or in an improvised concert hall at the beach.