



Counter-Narratives about Sub-Saharan Migrant Women in the Digital Public Sphere

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Abstract

This article looks at counter-narratives of sub-Saharan migrant women in the digital public sphere in Morocco. It aims to highlight the civic engagement of migrant social media activism. Whereas migration and media have been covered in other contexts, this study contributes to the debate in Morocco and North/Sub-Saharan Africa. It will tackle the topic of media migrant representation in Morocco, with a particular focus on women's representation. It examines Hassan Yemcheu's YouTube page, on which he uploads videos for the association *Planet Migrant*. This case study is significant because it provides rare content about the situation of sub-Saharan migrant women in Morocco in a male-dominated narrative space. *Planet Migrant's* videos at times focus on migrant women's entrepreneurship or domestic violence, an outlier from most other migrant narratives in Morocco. The methodology relies on textual analysis (Bainbridge 2010), which is supplemented with insights and comments derived from an interview conducted with Yemcheu about the processes, conditions, and content of his work. It will highlight ways of "talking back" (Hooks 1998) to gain some symbolic digital space through participatory/citizen journalism. Through this media intervention which stands against a backdrop of misinformation and limited coverage, Yemcheu capitalizes on digital storytelling to share stories about fellow migrants. Despite the small social media reach and limited engagement, the selected videos shed light on gender issues for sub-Saharan migrants in Morocco in their struggle to regain some symbolic power and socio-political agency.

Introduction

This article explores the digital self-representation of sub-Saharan¹ migrants

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¹ I have used here the term "sub-Saharan" to specify a region of Africa: sub-Saharan Africa that lies south of the Sahara. The relevant scholarly literature on the topic, including several of the studies cited in this article, use this same terminology, except when they work on a specific population (e.g., when the study looks exclusively at the Senegalese population). For the videos that I analyze in this=



in Morocco, particularly when it comes to gender-focused representation on media platforms. Previous research has examined the topic of migration in the Moroccan context from the vantage points of sociology, anthropology, and geography (Alioua 2014; Therrien 2019; Gross-Wyrtzen 2020), with rare forays into the gender perspective (Stock 2012; Freedman 2012; Tyszler 2019). The intersection between migration and media is even less present in the literature, with some scholars focusing on the use of smartphones and social media by refugees and undocumented migrants (Ennaji & Bignami 2019). My contribution here looks at the intersection of media, gender, and migration.

As the dominant mainstream representation of sub-Saharan migration is limited and tends to be negative (Alexander 2019), migrant self-representation in the Moroccan digital sphere is a particularly salient issue, especially when it comes to its unexplored gender component. Alternative media scholars indicate that it is imperative for communities that have been under-represented or misrepresented in the media to participate in the creation of their own self-representation and influence discourse (Baltruschat 2004; Ginsburg 1995; Juhasz 1995; Oumlil 2016 & 2022; Rodriguez 2001; Salaita 2006). Therefore, this study aims to bridge the gap in the scholarly literature on migration and gendered migrant representation in Morocco. The objects of my analysis, derived from *Planet Migrant*, include representations of women's issues that challenge the status quo and present counter-narratives. The videos I extracted for this analysis particularly focus on women's issues, such as domestic violence and job opportunities. For the analysis of these media interventions, I rely on Bainbridge's (2010) guidelines for conducting a textual analysis, which I outline in the methodology section.

As a Moroccan feminist researcher, I must acknowledge my standpoint and the privilege afforded by my citizenship status. I have undertaken this study to unlock some of the potential of alternative media for providing positive social change that would serve the interests of sub-Saharan migrant women and communities. I have attempted to trace the circulation of meaning in the digital public sphere by focusing on women's migration journeys and pointing to how migration is gendered; it exceeds the domains of race and social class. It has been challenging to collect data, given the scarcity of sources.

Although the creator of the selected videos posted on Youtube is himself a man, I argue here that the site presents one of the rare venues where sub-Saharan migrant women may express their views. Nonetheless, their expressions and articulations about their living conditions in Morocco are

=article, the participants come from a variety of countries, and their country of birth is not always indicated. They generally come from West Africa and Central Africa, which are regions of sub-Saharan Africa.



mediated through the lens of Yemcheu, as some parts of the analysis below will point out.

Background about Planet Migrant

In the Moroccan media landscape, due to the precarious situation of sub-Saharan migrants, few migrant voices are speaking about their socio-political situations. Ghazouani (2019) states that an estimated 700,000 sub-Saharan migrants and refugees currently reside in Morocco. According to journalist Aida Alami, "About 24,000 [sub-Saharan migrants] got their papers during a legalization campaign begun in 2014 and another 28,400 in a similar effort in 2017" (Alami 2018). In 2013, King Mohammed VI announced a new Moroccan migration policy, which led to two regularization campaigns in 2014 and 2016 (Natter 2018). However, despite these efforts, it seems that a regression of the status of migrants has taken place since no new campaigns have happened since. Very recently, on June 24, 2022, hundreds of migrants from sub-Saharan Africa attempted to cross the border between Morocco and Spain through Melilla. At least 23 of them died in clashes from the fences of the border, in addition to serious injuries to law enforcement officers (BBC 25 June 2022). Morocco has indeed been occupying center stage as one of the focal points of "transit" migration to Europe for Moroccans and sub-Saharan migrants, pointing to the importance of showing "political agency" (Bachelet 2018).

In the struggle over representation, some voices have emerged in the digital public sphere in this "permanent transit country," to borrow Mekki-Berrada's (2019) phrase to describe Morocco, where sub-Saharan migrants have now a permanent presence, although the dream of reaching Europe is still there (unaccomplished due to the risks of undertaking the journey). Some of the most prominent voices that have emerged in the search for migrant voices include a Facebook page with 600 likes and subscribers for Association REFIME (Immigrant Women and Wives' Network – *Réseau des Femmes Immigrées et Épouses*); Hassan Yemcheu's YouTube account with 352 subscribers, on which he uploads videos for the association *Planet Migrant*; and Franck Nama's "Identité Africaine" blog with over 50 articles written by him. The latter represents a male voice and narrative that can often overshadow the rare representation of women's voices, and the efforts to make a change offered by the former two. Association REFIME brings light to various educational, entrepreneurial, professional, and administrative opportunities and support for migrant women and children that place attention on their current state and aim to improve it for the better. REFIME's focus on capacity-building through job and entrepreneurship training for women, advocacy for migrant children's right to education and



inclusive education, food and school kit distributions, and administrative support for women differentiates it from other migrant associations.

This analysis focuses on the web TV *Planet Migrant* whose “main goal is to reveal all the wealth that there is in accepted and valued difference. Migrants are an added value to all countries of departure and host countries” (mission statement translated from French and extracted from *Planet Migrant*’s official Facebook page on July 1st, 2023).

Born in Douala, Cameroon, Yemcheu left his country around the early 2000s and traveled around twelve African countries, including Libya and Morocco, where he currently resides. He is a videographer reporter, a profession that he practiced in his country of origin. In 2015, he created the association, as revealed in the interview conducted with him. Before then, he did many video reports on migration. Yemcheu explained during the interview conducted with him that his motivation for creating *Planet Migrant* emerged from the lack of positive communication about migrants.

Although *Planet Migrant* reaches a small audience (352 subscribers as of July 12, 2023), it represents an attempt to capitalize on digital storytelling tools to occupy a counter-public sphere that is usually monopolized by Moroccans. This is particularly true for migrants who focus on women’s issues, as the intersection (Crenshaw 1991) between gender and migratory status creates a burgeoning self-representation in a hostile digital public sphere.

The Question of Representation

I have been interested in the question of media representation: how ideas about identity are formed, challenged, and constructed. Here, I draw significantly from the work of cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall, for whom identity is fluid and socially constructed. For Hall (1997), representation is the language and images created to provide conceptual maps of the world and create culture. As indicated in the Introduction, I also draw from alternative media scholarship and endorse its call for the need for self-representation—how communities who have been historically silenced must take voice and articulate their perspectives and interests (Baltruschat 2004; Ginsburg 1995; Juhasz 1995; Oumlil 2016 & 2022; Rodriguez 2001; Salaita 2006). And here, I draw on Hooks’ (1998) seminal notion of “talking back”, through which she signifies attempts to take voice by moving from the position of being an object of representation to becoming the subject of representation to challenge oppressive and normative ideologies. The analysis is further informed by critical race, feminist studies, and postcolonial theory. For Beauvoir also, as for Hall (1997), identity is socially constructed: “one is not born a woman, one becomes one” (2015). By postcolonial theory, I mean the efforts of scholars from the Global South and others to challenge “Eurocentrism” (Shohat and Stam 2014), white



supremacy, and any attempt to position the West as ethnically and ideologically superior to the East (Said 1978).

Few studies have focused on the topic of sub-Saharan migration in Morocco from the vantage point of media representations of migrants (Bahmad 2015; Bentaleb 2017). None of these studies, however, has specifically looked at women's representation, which constitutes a gap in the scholarship that this study endeavors to help to fill.

Bahmad (2015) reveals how migrants are represented as "Others within" but also as active agents of social change. Bentaleb's (2017) study highlights the occasional, negative, and limited mainstream media coverage of sub-Saharan migrants. To my knowledge, only one study has been done on the topic of migrant self-representation (Labayen and Gutierrez 2021).

Looking at sub-Saharan migrant videos at the Moroccan-Spanish border, Labayen and Gutierrez (2021) focus on young men's counter-discourses against border control.

However, Labayen and Gutierrez (2021) also note the limitations of these technologies of dissent, given their use by state institutions as technologies of surveillance and border control. The police can use them to track down undocumented migrants.

The act of self-representation, as revealed in Labayen & Gutierrez' (2021) study, bears witness to the migrants' journey in case they die and as "camera dissidence" ("we will make it/you will see"); displaying migrant agency and an empowered voice. An earlier study by Ennaji and Bignamo (2019) took on a similar topic of inquiry when they investigated refugees and documented migrants' use of smartphones and social media in Fes.

Concerning sub-Saharan migrants' use of new technologies and social media, Ennaji and Bignami's (2019) study of refugees and documented migrants' use of smartphones and social media in the city of Fes in Morocco found that they use new technologies and social media as logistical tools to navigate the migration routes. For instance, they allow them to verify the credibility of smugglers on Facebook pages, or to ask for financial support from their families to carry on their journey.

Given the limited number of studies on media and migration, it is also worth extracting information from reports, such as the European Union-financed report on "media and migration" (in French) by journalists Byrs and Burpee (2016). In this report, the journalists point out that Morocco became a "transit" country in the 1990s and that most sub-Saharan refugees and migrants arrive by land through the East Oujda border with Algeria after having crossed the Sahara by land, generally via Niger. Drawing from the expertise of journalist Salaheddine Lemaizi, Byrs and Burpee's (2016) report situates early representation of migrants (2002-2005) in the Moroccan



press as oscillating between compassion and sensationalism, culminating in racist coverage appearing in the Moroccan weekly publication, *Achamal*, which resulted in the director of publication receiving prison time. The second phase of the coverage in the Moroccan press, according to Lemaizi oscillated between quality journalism and security-focused journalism between 2006 and 2013, with some racist coverage including the 2012 *Maroc Hebdo International* magazine cover titled “Le Peril Noir” (“The Black Peril”), which was widely criticized in social media (Lemaizi 2017).

The year 2013 signals a key turning point through the change of migration strategy/policy with King Mohamed VI launching the regularization campaign, and the king’s speech on the new immigration and asylum policy in the kingdom of Morocco. Journalists Lemaizi, Sarah Talbi, and Hassan Bentaleb, who chose to specialize in the question of migration, deplore the lack of in-depth coverage and interest in the topic of migration by other Moroccan journalists. They note, however, a clear change of tone and style after the royal speech on November 6, 2013.

Whereas these studies and the report on “media and migration” have pointed out issues with negative representations of migrants, they haven’t focused on representations of migrant women specifically. The next section synthesizes findings from relevant studies about gender and migration, emerging from social science fields other than communication studies.

Gender and migration

Sex work and domestic work

Studies that have looked at the topic of sub-Saharan migration in Morocco from the nexus of gender are limited (Ait Ben Lmadani 2018). Stock (2012) has examined African migrant mothers and ‘transit migration’ in Morocco and Freedman (2012) wrote about sub-Saharan women migrants in Morocco. Some studies have focused on the Senegalese population (Pian 2010; Lanza 2011; Ait Ben Lmadani 2018), looking at the broad themes of sex work and domestic work, the latter being grounded in the history of slavery in Morocco until the mid-twentieth century during which bourgeois Moroccan families enslaved black women as domestic workers or concubines (Pian 2010; Lanza 2011). The more recent phenomenon of Senegalese domestic women workers in Morocco since the 1990s highlights the lack of a legal framework to protect the rights of domestic and foreign workers, also due to the abundance of the local workforce (Lanza 2011). Within this context, reports of abuse including the confiscation of domestic workers’ passports by the employers/families resemble many experiences of Moroccan domestic workers in the Gulf countries, who also have had their passports confiscated by their employers. In the Moroccan context, it is the Senegalese consulate that exerts pressure to return the confiscated passports (Lanza 2011). Other forms of exploitation of Senegalese women working



for Moroccan families include working very long hours from early morning to late night and being cut off from social relationships (Ait Ben Lmadani 2018). The demand for Senegalese domestic workers can be linked to a recent trend in Moroccan bourgeois society which wishes to distinguish itself by recruiting non-Moroccan domestic workers (Ait Ben Lmadani 2018).

Motherhood

There is an interplay of different factors with migration, and motherhood appears in the literature as a central theme. In some cases, children can become the reason for migration (Stock 2012). In her article about sub-Saharan African transnational mothers, Magallanes - Gonzales (2018) describes how sub-Saharan migrant women who find themselves stuck in the transit country of Morocco experience painful separation from their children whom they have left in their home countries in the pursuit of a better future but find consolation in thinking that they will be better mothers in the future. They see their migration as a sacrifice for their children. Despite the blame they face from their communities for leaving their children “behind,” they reasoned that they left their children in good care and are protecting them from the dangers of the migration journey by not bringing them along. Nonetheless, they also expressed the pain of their children forgetting about them, not seeing them grow, and not communicating with them sufficiently. Maintaining their status in the “transit” country of Morocco and the fear for their children’s lives may deter migrants from continuing their journey and undertaking a risky journey to Europe (Stock 2012).

Gender-based violence

The experiences of sub-Saharan migrant women in Morocco are not only marked by racism but also by gender (Stock 2012; Tyszler 2021). Magallanes-Gonzales (2018) cites civil society reports about racial discrimination against Sub-Saharan migrants by Moroccan public institutions such as administrations and hospitals (GADEM 2013) and discrimination in housing, employment, and education (Conseil National des Droits de l’Homme 2013). Women’s experiences are also severely impacted by gender-based violence¹ (Freedman 2012; Magallanes- Gonzalez 2018; Mekki-Berrada 2019), making women more affected than men by certain traumatic experiences (Mekki-Berrada et al. 2019). Sub-Saharan women migrants in Morocco experience sexual violence during their migration journey and/or in Morocco; they experience sexually transmitted diseases

¹ “In 1993, the United Nations General Assembly adopted the Declaration on the Elimination of Violence against Women (A/RES/48/104). The Declaration defines violence against women as ‘any act of gender-based violence that results in, or is likely to result in, physical, sexual or psychological harm or suffering to women, including threats of such acts, coercion or arbitrary deprivation of liberty, whether occurring in public or in private life’” (UN Women, 2013).



and conduct risky abortions following sexual violence (Médecins Sans Frontières 2010 and 2013, cited in Magallanes-Gonzalez 2018).

Further, “clandestine” immigration seems to be an important trigger of emotional distress for migrant women:

The quantitative data do not suggest a direct connection between emotional distress (HSCL-25 scores) and repressive government practices (*persecution by the police or army*), but these repressive practices force migrant women to live in hiding, $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 3.886$; $p = .012$, and *living in hiding* seems to be the primary predictor or trigger of emotional distress, $\text{Exp}(\beta) = 3.783$; $p = .047$. In other words, in a context where clandestine immigration is hyper-securitized, consequent institutional violence forces sub-Saharan migrant women to live in hiding, and this kind of forced social invisibility is the most closely associated with emotional distress (Mekki-Berrada 2019, p. 13).

Their forced social invisibility inspires Mekki-Berrada (2019) to situate them, citing Appadurai (2001) as an invisible population, “uncounted and uncountable.”

It seems that gender-based violence is underreported and “... is in most cases without sanction or redress for the victims” (Freedman 2012). Freedman (2012) highlights that the causes for migration for women exceed economic insecurity (which impacts women more) and may intersect with other gender-based factors like sexual violence, domestic violence, the threat of forced marriage or female genital mutilation, or sexual orientation discrimination. For the specific case of Morocco, Freedman (2012) reveals that gender-based violence or persecution was a key factor behind women’s decision to migrate. And here the lines become blurred between migrant status and refugee status, as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) recognizes gendered forms of persecution as within the scope of the 1951 Refugee Convention. Women fleeing gendered persecution are eligible to apply for refugee status but are often unaware that they may make an asylum claim. Sexual violence for many has become “part of the journey” (Freedman 2012) and they, therefore, resort to traveling with a male partner for increased security (Freedman 2012; Sock 2012).

Women’s migration journeys thus carry different experiential realities, including the selected mode of migration. It is typical for women to use the maritime route for migration to attempt a precarious border crossing towards Spain for exorbitant prices (Tyszler 2018/2). In the camps in the forest on the Moroccan side of the Moroccan-Spanish border, the “warriors” affirm that their experiences are harsher than men’s. Women often play the role of providers of sexual services, and they can be sent to the city to beg and bring back food as the perception is that women do not



get arrested. Even if they have the financial means to pay for the crossing, they can still be subjected to sexual appropriation (Tyszler 2018/2). There is therefore a clear need to express and collect women's perspectives and experiences related to migration, as the difficulties they experience exceed the domains of race and social class.

Methodology

The media analysis in this paper relies on a textual analysis (Bainbridge 2010) informed by feminist and postcolonial studies to unpack the dominant gendered and racialized frames as well as the structuring absences embedded in the selected media texts from *Planet Migrant*. For Bainbridge (2010), *exnomination* is one of the key principles of textual analysis and represents "the process by which dominant ideas become so obvious they don't draw attention to themselves; instead, they just seem like common sense" (p. 230). Looking at the framing of the text thus involves extracting dominant themes and examining their assumptions. Moreover, for Bainbridge (2010), *structuring absences*, as "elements in the text that have meaning despite or because they have been left out" are key to the study of the framing of a media text (p. 230). What is missing in a text is just as important as what is represented, as cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall (1997) has pointed out for the study of representation. Hence researchers shall not only focus on the dominant discourses and images displayed but also ask what else could have been included in the representation.

The fact that Hassan Yemcheu, the Youtube channel owner is a man, is a point that must be addressed. Whereas he is himself a migrant, his positionality as a man does not grant him the breadth in his lens to represent the nuances of migrant women's experiences and embodied stories and realities. However, given the scarcity of media texts by migrants, I selected this channel for the analysis because it represents a long-term intervention and provides sufficient content for an in-depth qualitative analysis. As Jiwani (2006) explains, interventions are:

...momentary when viewed against the larger backdrop of the continuous and cumulative stock of knowledge being produced and reproduced by the media in their telling and retelling of stories. For such change to be long-lasting, the interventions must be equally consistent and persistent in challenging dominant definitions... (p. 85).

I also conducted a semi-structured interview with Hassan Yemcheu (in French) to inform the analysis on June 23, 2023. I asked Yemcheu questions about his motivations for creating *Planet Migrant*, his personal and professional trajectory, choices of content, and challenges he might have encountered in the process of making his work. I furthermore asked him to provide information about his audience and the reception of *Planet Migrant*.



The interview concluded by seeking his comments about his impressions on the impact of his media interventions, as well as plans for the channel.

I did not apply here the social media methodologies of netnography, small-stories research, or computer-mediated discourse analysis/digital discourse studies due to comments being disabled and the very low numbers of views (ranging from 57-411, as of July 6, 2023) and low numbers of likes and followers, showing a very low engagement rate. I argue, however, that these media texts are worthy of academic inquiry because one of the main functions of small media and alternative media is to carry through marginalized voices. This study did not conduct a quantitative analysis of the content, although social media is about interactivity and sharing. The selected videos specifically did not engage many people through likes, shares, and views. I have therefore focused here on textual analysis. For this analysis, I selected all the videos that are about sub-Saharan women migrants on the web TV channel *Planet Migrant*. After examining all videos on Yemcheu’s Youtube page, I extracted all videos that discussed women’s issues and/or represented sub-Saharan women migrants in significant ways [i.e., not in passing, but where the core of the video revolves around and presents/represents sub-Saharan migrant women]. The selected videos are:

Table 1: Selected videos: *Planet Migrant*

	Title of Video	Title Translated to English	Year	Length (in minutes)	Views (as of July 6, 2023)
1	“Témoignage d’une migrante ivoirienne”	“Testimony of an Ivorian migrant woman”	2017	5:11	411
2	“8 mars 2017: la femme africaine à l’honneur au parlement”	“8 March 2017: African women in the spotlight in parliament”	2017	21:39	162
3	“8 mars 2018 au Maroc avec les femmes migrantes et réfugiées”	“March 8, 2018 with migrant and refugee women”	2018	31:41	363 views
4	“COFMIMA/Sensibilisation pour la santé reproductive des femmes migrantes »	“COFMIMA/Awareness raising for the reproductive health of migrant women”	2018	10:15	82
5	“Journée de réflexion sur la violence à l’égard des femmes: et l’intégration des femmes migrantes au Maroc”	“Day of reflection on violence against women: and the integration of migrant women in Morocco”	2019	4:27	57
6	“Reportage femmes migrantes entrepreneurs au maroc”	“Report migrant women entrepreneurs in Morocco”	2021	15:47	113
7	“A la rencontre d’une femme migrante au Maroc: Boutique la Bamakoise”	“Meeting a migrant woman in Morocco: Boutique la Bamakoise”	2022	4:51	74

These 7 videos about migrant women are spaced out over the years, like alternative media, which tends to be momentary and short-lived (Oumlil 2016). Yemcheu does all the reporting and editing of the videos. The language of the videos is French, which excludes anglophone migrants. However, French being an unofficial language in Morocco, this language



choice increases the accessibility of these videos for a Moroccan audience and francophone migrants.

Analysis

The name *Planet Migrant* may symbolically allude to the ‘world’ and ‘realities’ of migrants. The site responds to dominant views about migrants to reclaim identity and challenge dominant discourse. *Planet Migrant*’s motto “la culture dans la difference” (Culture within Difference) additionally alludes to the respect for difference and perhaps even implies that sub-Saharan culture has become part of Moroccan culture. The engagement rate for these videos is low, which presents a challenge in terms of exerting an impact given the very small audience. *Planet Migrant* has 352 subscribers (as of July 12, 2023).

The number of views is low. The video with the highest number of views on the *Planet Migrant* YouTube page is “Maroc/Traite Negrière du 21^{me} Siècle/Manifestation devant l’Ambassade de la Libye” (“Morocco: 21st Century Slave Trade: Demonstration in front of the Libyan Embassy”) and it has 8956 views (as of July 6, 2023). This video is not included in the sample for this analysis because it does not exclusively focus on representing women migrants. For this analysis, the selected video with the highest number of views is “Testimony of an Ivorian migrant woman” (2017), with 411 views (as of July 6, 2023). In the interview conducted with Yemcheu, he revealed an interesting take on the point of exerting an impact, stating:

Hassan Yemcheu: (...) You know, people don’t like to see what is instructive. They like the Buzz. What is instructive, people don’t like to see. People love to see what’s buzzing, which talks about anything that has nothing concrete. We are not looking for quantity. We see the quality. If you look at the people who come to see certain reports in your country, it is researchers like you, people who are interested in migration. If people aren’t interested in migration, he goes to see *Planet Migrant*, if they don’t see a buzz thing [...] the migrants are dead [...], they don’t see it. They won’t linger on the page. [...] They need to see ah Morocco blow up [*sic*], or the migrants are begging. This is what they need to see.

People look for the negative side... The regularization in Morocco was good. We have it documented. Now we see that fewer people are being attracted, although searches come into the page. It is qualitative, not quantitative.

Kenza Oumlil: Yes, yes, I understand. Thank you. And how has the *Planet Migrant* channel been received by the sub-Saharan community, especially the migrant community, and the public?



Hassan Yemcheu: People welcome it very well, very well. That's what I think because there is work to be done about migration in neighborhoods.

Interestingly, Yemcheu made an argument that is consistent with alternative media logic—that the goal of alternative media is to not replicate the model and practices of mainstream media by reaching a large audience, but to remain small and represent the interests of a marginalized community. This is consistent with what I have argued in my book *North American Muslim Women Talk Back: Assertions of Unintelligibility* (Oumlil 2022).

Exnomination

Looking at the representation of sub-Saharan migrant women, and applying here Bainbridge's (2010) concept of exnomination (as explained in the methodology section), it becomes evident that the interlocking effects of race, class, and gender are impossible to separate, bringing to the fore the intersectionality (Crenshaw 1991) of women's identity. Hence, some issues and themes that are represented in the videos apply to both women and men. However, this analysis has been interested in bringing to the fore the specificity of women's migration experiences, as represented in this corpus of data.

The selected videos reveal that the figure of the ideal migrant predominates as well as a clear politicization of migrants. There is a focus on positive representation by showcasing successful migrant stories. Yemcheu, like the previously mentioned communication studies scholars who investigated the representation of migrants, finds that they are portrayed negatively. Hence, his response has been to show migrants in a positive light. However, Mamdani (2005) has warned against the deployment of such stereotypical tropes by exposing how Muslims are constructed within the binary of "good Muslim" versus "bad Muslim." In this regard, Jiwani (2006) adds that Muslims walk a "fine line of acceptability" and may at any time lose their status of ideal citizens of color. Hall (1997) further asserts as a proposed solution to negative representation (of black people in the United Kingdom and other racialized groups) that rather than exclusively relying on positive representation, one should aim for producing diversity in representation, something that is missing in the work of *Planet Migrant*.

In contrast to the previously cited gender studies scholarship, which has revealed that gender-based violence, sex work, domestic work, and the challenges of motherhood during the migration journey are central concerns, *Planet Migrant* has failed to engage properly with these issues, favoring instead to promote images of successful and "integrated" migrant women. In contrast, the interview conducted with Yemcheu revealed that he



is aware of some of the challenges that women face. Yet, they do not take center stage in his media productions.

An overt focus on positive representation may lead to a simplification of the complexities of human nature, which is neither essentially “good” nor “bad.” In *Planet Migrant*, the video titled: “A la rencontre d’une femme migrante au Maroc: Boutique la Bamakoise” (2022) features the success story of a woman entrepreneur who opened a shop in Morocco, despite receiving no support from the government or civil society. Similarly, in a video titled “Reportage femmes migrantes entrepreneurs au Maroc” (2021) about migrant women entrepreneurs in Morocco, two featured speakers, Zoe Mavouemba, president of the association COFMIMA and an entrepreneur, and Pauline Manyater, artist and woman entrepreneur, advocate the need for “tenacity and motivation” to succeed (Mavouemba) and working “a lot” to “win” (Manyater). Whereas the focus on positive representation appears for all genders, for women it takes the form of showcasing their bravery, entrepreneurship, and ability to make do and achieve financial independence despite the lack of resources. As Yemcheu explained in the interview conducted with him:

Hassan Yemcheu: As you have seen, there are a lot of video reports like that [...] They are made on migrant women because they are vulnerable [...] The vulnerability of women, of certain women, does not mean their weakness. I made videos to encourage them because they [...] take initiatives [...] We see women with very little [...] Even in the domestic work of the houses, it is always women. We must support them. Despite the efforts they make in the shops, they have difficulty renewing residence permits [...] That doesn’t stop them from fighting [...] The men have children with them and abandon them with the children; they have no assistance. You will find them every day in the streets with children...

Politicization: Calls for the “integration” of migrant women

There is a very clear politicization of migrants (mobilization, organized activism, appeal to King Mohamed VI). Migrants are very well-informed about key politicians, institutions, and organizations that deal with migration in Morocco. From a gender perspective, there is a very clear call for the “integration” of migrant women. The video “8 Mars 2017: La Femme Africaine à l’Honneur au Parlement” starts with a view of the parliament in Rabat. The Authenticity and Modernity Party (PAM) paid tribute to African women on March 8 by organizing a day of celebration. During this event, one of the invited speakers, Yamta Hemene, president of the association “Voix des femmes Immigrées au Maroc” (Voice of Immigrant Women in Morocco), begins by mentioning the conditions of both migrant and refugee



women. She acknowledges that March 8 is International Women’s Day and addresses her thanks to the Moroccan king “May God assist him for his humanist vision (...) Long live Morocco! Long live the King!” She positions herself as an ideal migrant, with an emphasis on promoting a positive representation of migrants. Hemene calls for “access of African women, especially women migrants, to integration” in Morocco. The word choice “integration” represents a particular public positioning of the type of advocacy mobilized to attempt to exert some influence on Moroccan politics. We find the use of this same word choice of “integration” in other migrant articulations of their desired positionality in Morocco, representing a visible trend in migrant politics (through the politicization of their cause). Hemene described the new immigration policy as a considerable step forward that they [migrant women in Morocco] welcome. Despite the regularization campaigns, she laments that migrants are still struggling for their integration into economic and socio-cultural life and live in great precarity, pointing out that the application of the “regularization”—with all it encompasses beyond legal status—is lacking. Another video (“Témoignage d’une migrante ivoirienne victime de la fausse politique de retour au pays”) also displays a direct appeal to King Mohamed VI when Ivory Coast asylum seeker and sub-Saharan migrant in Morocco Judith Kodia says: “It is a cry that we send to his majesty so that we can make ourselves heard (...) it's true we're not the only sub-Saharans here but especially for Ivorians frankly, we ask that justice be done, that we can be restored in our rights, in our dignity.”

In the interview conducted with Yemcheu, he articulates that women have difficulties renewing residence permits, stating that “they have no assistance.” He suggests as a solution “to regularize all women unconditionally,” mentioning as well that women have to fight and that “men abandon them with children (...) you will find them every day in the streets with children.” Here Yemcheu reasserts his view of women as vulnerable yet strong and struggling to carve space for themselves and their children in Morocco.

Similarly, the video “Journée de réflexion sur la violence à l’égard des femmes: et l’intégration des femmes migrantes au Maroc” (Day of reflection on violence against women: and the integration of migrant women in Morocco, 2019) shows the politicization of migrants and is clearly organized around the theme of the “integration” of migrant women. The day of reflection was organized by the platform ASCOMS in partnership with Oxfam, which has been promoting women’s rights in Morocco since 1994. The video documents the anti-violence day against women and is also titled a day “for the integration of migrant women in Morocco.” The use of the



word “integration” is again here very interesting, and frames migrant women perceived positionality as they are shown as existing in the Moroccan landscape, and outside the dominant frame of “transiting” through Morocco while waiting to cross to Europe (similarly to other videos and articulations of migrants’ advocacy within the framework of “integration”). The emphasis on the desire and need for “integration” highlights the fact that whereas politicians in Europe designate migration as a problematic issue, the hosts of most migrants are countries in the global south. As Khachani et al. (2012) demonstrate, it has not been possible to utterly stop immigration to Europe; countries and communities may only strategize in the organizing of inevitable movements of populations.

Further highlighting the politicization of women migrants, a video titled “COFMIMA/Awareness for the reproductive health of migrant women” features Zoe Mavoemba, president, and founder of COFMIMA “the collective of migrant women in Morocco,” speaking during an awareness day for women on reproductive health, hence highlighting that migrant women’s advocacy addresses issues that women deal with, including reproductive health. Mavoemba explains the steps of creating the association to “make our struggle official. We have formed our office. We had a general assembly...” Their office was created in 2015, after filing the necessary application and documentation.

Sub-Saharan migrant women voice some of the key challenges they face in Morocco; they have difficulty gaining access to housing, health, and employment. Even when documented, many migrant women can’t find work. One of the speakers during the anti-violence day (video “Journée de réflexion sur la violence à l’égard des femmes: et l’intégration des femmes migrantes au Maroc” (Day of reflection on violence against women: and the integration of migrant women in Morocco, 2019)² Aime Lokake, from the association CMSM, for instance, denounces the difficulties that migrants face to gain access to housing, health, and education. She mentions that the shelter “Entraide Nationale” offers housing only to Moroccans in need. Another migrant, Aicha Barry, President of the association “Pont Solidaire” (Solidarity Bridge), who is featured in the same video, denounces how migrants “with papers” can’t find work and advises fellow migrants to pursue the entrepreneurship route to generate income and make a living. However, she also denounces some of the hurdles of the entrepreneurship journey for migrants. After securing a grant of 10 000 euros to open a restaurant, she relays how the police “came down to shut down” her restaurant “... because the migrants who come to eat are undocumented. Now we talk of integration. Where is the integration?”



Structuring absences

To highlight the structuring absences, following Bainbridge's (2010) guidelines for conducting textual analysis (as explained in the methodology section), I must first point out that in the selected *Planet Migrant* videos, the language used is French. Anglophone migrants are not represented. Their experiences in Morocco might differ from those of francophone migrants (given that French is spoken in Morocco as an unofficial language and as the language of business). However, it is more likely that Moroccans will view these media texts since they understand the language, giving a more significant advantage in terms of reach and reception than if they were in English.

Secondly, the voices of undocumented migrants are not represented. All the migrants who participate in the videos show their faces and reveal their identities, except in one of the selected videos which showcases the testimony of an Ivory Coast migrant who faced persecution when she returned home, contrary to her expectations based on false information she received that returning home would be safe. Whereas this person was presented as a migrant, she could have been qualified and described as a refugee—I note as well very limited discussion of the distinction between a migrant and a refugee and a lack of explanation of what refugee status legally entails. Hence, only the migrants who were lucky to secure regularization speak, and those who are undocumented—too vulnerable of a population to film—remain voiceless, with a clear emphasis on “integration” stories.

Third, there is very little discussion about the role of the Moroccan state regarding migration, except for appeals for help from the king, as mentioned in the previous section. In contrast, sub-Saharan migrant women mention civil society and humanitarian organizations, and on one occasion the responsibility of African states due to “bad governance” (Helene Yamta, in the video titled COFMIMA/Sensibilisation pour la santé reproductive des femmes migrantes”).

Finally, unlike the gender studies literature on sub-Saharan migrant women in Morocco (e.g., Magallanes-Gonzales 2018), the selected videos did not foreground the theme of motherhood or mention the pain of leaving children behind in the “home country,” except for the Ivory Coast migrant/refugee who mentioned, in passing, leaving her children in the Ivory Coast. Contrary to the relevant scholarly literature as well, the theme of gender-based violence was utterly absent in the selected videos, along with the themes of domestic work and sex work that did not receive sufficient attention.



Style

As alternative media scholar Dorothy Kidd (1999) reminds us, alternative media is not always “smooth” and “pretty.” Due to the lack of financial resources and professional training of media creators, the stylistic features of alternative media often appear different from popular culture and lack sophistication. Unsurprisingly, *Planet Migrant* videos displayed poor sound quality (particularly the video “8 mars 2018 au Maroc avec les femmes migrantes et réfugiées”) and poor image quality (e.g., the video “8 mars 2017: la femme Africaine à l’Honneur au Parlement”). The camera work was also basic, with some repetitions in the videos that could have been removed during post-production. Furthermore, Yemcheu often cuts off the speeches of the women featured in his videos to keep the videos short (for example in the “8 Mars 2017: la Femme Africaine a l’Honneur au Parlement” video). Nonetheless, the migrant women enacted the power of oral culture (Ong 1982) in their ability to articulate their voices and interests and present counter-narratives to mainstream discourses and stereotypes. There would be increased opportunities for dissemination if these social media narratives become more audio-visually appealing to attract attention.

Conclusion

This analysis has taken an interest in the question of self-representation. Given the precarious situation of sub-Saharan migrant women in Morocco, and the dominant framings of their identity and socio-political conditions, how does a small indigenous media intervention like that of the web TV channel *Planet Migrant* use basic camera work, a YouTube page, and a Facebook page to advance a social justice agenda and give voice to a vulnerable community? I have argued here that although this case study represents small media, and hence begs the question of impact, it is worthy of academic inquiry because it gives voice to voice-deprived communities by presenting their perspectives. Furthermore, the creator of these images Hassan Yemcheu explained during the interview that I conducted with him that he has aimed to reach a targeted audience of scholars and people interested in the topic of migration, rather than having as a goal maximizing the size of the audience. Citizen journalism hence appears as an essential feature of alternative media. The selected videos foreground the politicization of sub-Saharan migrant women and their call for “integration” and dignity. They also represent their effort to “talk back” (Hooks 1998) and move from being the objects of representation to becoming the subjects of their own representation.

Some of the structuring absences include the lack of representation of undocumented migrants and anglophone migrants. At the level of style, the media production could be improved to gain attention. The very small



number of views and likes, and the absence of comments, point to an engagement rate that is too low for exerting significant impact. It, therefore, seems necessary for these types of media to gain more visibility to effect socio-political change, perhaps using influencer techniques or other tactics of the weak (De Certeau 1984). Future research should delve into the processes of creating such media texts and the conditions of their emergence by conducting audience analysis and expanding the corpus of alternative media texts to enable broader claims and generalizations to be made. This study has only scratched the surface of how migrant women “talk back” (Hooks 1998) to mainstream discourses, while keeping in mind both the processes and contexts of creating these small media interventions. It aimed to contribute to bringing to the fore the forgotten perspectives of migrant women in their struggle for a more dignified and humane life, by unthinking racism, eurocentrism, and sexism.

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