

ROUNDTABLE

ECOCRITICAL TERRAINS: RETHINKING TAMAZGHAN AND MIDDLE EASTERN
ENVIRONMENTS

Introduction: Thinking Ecocritical and Indigenous Terrains

Edwige Tamalet Talbayev^{1,2} and Brahim El Guabli³

¹Department of French and Francophone Studies, Tulane University, New Orleans, LA, USA, ²Institute for Social and Health Sciences, University of South Africa, Lenasia, South Africa and ³Department of Comparative Thought and Literature, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, USA

Corresponding author: Edwige Tamalet Talbayev; Email: etamalet@tulane.edu

The essays in this roundtable emerged from a panel we organized at the annual meeting of the Middle East Studies Association that took place in Montreal in 2023. With a focus on “ecocritical terrains,” the panel sought to rethink environments in the Middle East and Tamazgha (the broader North Africa) by paying attention to more-than-human ecologies. We use “Tamazgha” to acknowledge the reimagination by the Imazighen, the Indigenous people of North Africa, of the geography of their ancestral homeland, which encompasses the expansive space extending between the Canary Islands and west Egypt, from the Mediterranean Sea to sub-Saharan Africa.¹ This remapping of the territory offers tremendous environmental and ecocritical opportunities that current methods of knowledge production about the region have not permitted to emerge or become part of academic conversations.

For centuries, colonial narratives have cast Middle Eastern and Tamazghan land as a blank canvas on which dynamics of exploration and exploitation could be inscribed. Whether as blighted landscapes or degraded environments, the region’s natural landscapes were painted by the domesticating forces of colonial modernity as a reified, mostly uninhabited backdrop to human endeavors and appetites. Land only came to gain meaning through a dichotomy of value and waste.² It acquired value whenever it sustained extractive projects, often through the erasure of Indigenous populations’ sovereignty rights over the land and its resources.³ Mostly conceived as sources of oil, gas, and minerals, Middle Eastern

¹ On the academic potential and theoretical underpinnings of Tamazgha, see Brahim El Guabli, “The Idea of Tamazgha: Current Articulations and Scholarly Potential,” *Tamazgha Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2023): 7–22; Paul Silverstein, “The Productive Plurality of Tamazgha: Boundaries, Intersections, Frictions,” *Tamazgha Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2023): 23–34; and, in the context of (counter)mapping, Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, “Elemental Borders: Countermapping the Geophysical Maghrib” in this roundtable collection.

² See, for instance, the distinction made by the French protectorate authorities between *le Maroc utile* and *le Maroc inutile*.

³ See Ernest Carette, *Recherche sur la géographie et le commerce de l’Algérie méridionale* (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1844); and Eugène Daumas, *Sahara algérien: Etudes géographiques, statistiques et historiques sur la région au sud des établissements français en Algérie* (Algiers: Dubos Frères, 1845).

and Tamazgha environments have been subjected to the discursive and material onslaughts of global capital through what have been called the “oil cartels,” which are supposedly more influential than elected governments.⁴ These areas’ entire human and natural geographies have been cast as being available for extraction through a variety of discursive strategies and ensuing undertakings. These practices—which include, but are not limited to, Orientalism, imperialism, and Saharanism—have conceptually produced Middle Eastern and Tamazgha landscapes as mostly uninhabited terrains eliciting all manner of exploitation.⁵ The region’s geography has been configured as “wastelands,” inviting both securitization to domesticate space and development to dominate the human and nonhuman subjects that survive on it.⁶

At the core of this vision lies the tension between the human desire for mastery—not only over nature but also over other human groups—and the forces of nature, which sometimes lend themselves to human control through extractive or accumulative practices, yet at other times evade it by conforming to natural laws that lie far beyond the purview of human agency. Understanding the origins of these ideas and the factors that have sustained their perpetuation is important to replace the current anthropocentric focus with an analytical framework hinging on natural spaces in their interconnection with the human. It is high time to chart approaches that pay attention to indigenous cosmogonies, world-views, myths, and rituals, in order to highlight the various environment-focused knowledges that are embedded in these time-proven practices.

A larger part of this situation is a legacy of colonialism and imperialist expansion. Concepts were mobilized as a central force in colonialism’s onslaught on spaces of interest, regardless of the existence of an established and important human presence. Unfamiliar landscapes characterized by drought and meager vegetation, like the ones in the Middle East and Tamazgha, were appropriated to justify securitization and pacification, with the goal of making them suitable for exploitative endeavors. The notion of *terra nullius*, literally “unowned land,” was used to impose an exclusive Latin definition of property on societies and communities that had their own spatial and ownership logic. This mode of governance, adapted to both the mobility and nomadism prevalent in some of these societies, was dismissed as nonexistent on account of its divergence from Western norms and models. These dynamics were only compounded in areas where the climate did not allow for human settlement. From a colonial perspective, deserts became *terra nullius* when in fact they were not. A deeper look into areas that support human and animal activity reveals a world that is both alive and vibrant not only in relation to the life it sustains, but also, and most important, in the possibilities it opens up for the conceptualization of relationships between human and nonhuman subjects. In fact, what became *terra nullius* was rather *terra communis*

⁴ Known as the “Seven Sisters,” these cartels’ establishment on the ruins of the Ottoman Empire is the clearest indication of their colonial genealogy, which continues to exert both harsh and soft power to achieve the goals of their stakeholders. See Office of the Historian, “The 1928 Red Line Agreement,” US Department of State, accessed 14 May 2025, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1921-1936/red-line> (accessed 14 May 2025). See also Anthony Sampson, *The Seven Sisters: The Great Oil Companies and the World They Shaped* (New York: Viking Press, 1975); and Geneviève Ferone, *Le Crépuscule fossile* (Paris: Stock, 2015).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Diana K. Davis, *The Arid Lands: History, Power, Knowledge* (Boston: MIT Press, 2016); Brahim El Guabli, *Desert Imaginations: A History of Saharanism and Its Radical Consequences* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2025).

⁶ We are here referring to the 2017 Mellon Sawyer Seminar “Grounding the Ecocritical: Materializing Wastelands and Living on in the Middle East” that Anne-Marie McManus and Nancy Reynolds convened at Washington University in St. Louis, MO. See also Samia Henni, ed. *Deserts Are Not Empty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2022).

(common land), in which different levels of property rights, in their most basic form grazing and water rights, intersected.⁷

As a result of the tortuous historical process through which colonialism disrupted indigenous conceptions of space, the biases toward the predominantly desertic nature of Middle Eastern and Tamazghan environments came to distort scholarly frameworks and reinforced the hegemonic idea that life and liveliness were restricted to green and water-rich areas. These Western ideas about space and environment have become policy and inform global initiatives geared toward the desertic Middle East, particularly through UNESCO's Arid Zone Programme. As geographers Diana Davis and Perrin Selcer have demonstrated in their work, UNESCO bureaucratized, disseminated, and sustained many colonialist assumptions about desert research and desertification. From newsletters to school curricula, a host of colonial-minded bureaucrats and scholars continued to disseminate knowledge they gained through their involvement in British and French colonialism, making them a gold standard for dealing with arid zones in the postindependence period in Africa and the Middle East.⁸ Although the proponents of these ideas and the programs that propagated them are long gone, their legacies continue to shape visions of Middle Eastern and Tamazghan environments. Changing this situation requires a wider perspective that takes into account the existence of a long tradition of indigenous environmental thinking and practices balancing need and greed, excess and necessity. More fundamentally, it entails restoring the forces of the environment to their rightful, central place. It is not fortuitous that inhabitants of these areas never spent time carving out arable fields or constructing homes in dried-up river banks; their environmental memory carried the stories of those who did and lost their lives to floods and other natural phenomena.

This roundtable emerges from our combined interests in deserts, indigenous studies, and geopowers—the more-than-human forces of the earth that perturb, interrupt, and resist human ecological arrangements. We contend that, in addition to paying attention to histories of ideas about arid places, centering the agency of natural elements—land, water—is a prerequisite to a truly decolonial, nonextractive conceptualization of Middle Eastern and Tamazghan environments.⁹ Often dismissed as unscientific in the past, indigenous environmental knowledge—be it expressed through myths, rituals, or cosmogonic worldviews—has gained renewed attention with the rise of indigenous methodologies.¹⁰ Centering nature's agency, in both its predictable and unpredictable movements, does not negate human agency. Instead, it illuminates how the human and the more-than-human converge, diverge, and play out in ways that either exacerbate environmental issues or mitigate their impact. Only the interaction of natural and human agencies enables a balanced planetary existence.

Two examples drawn from literature put to the fore the need to craft novel critical narratives that also attend to the material, sensory, embodied experiences of Middle Eastern

⁷ See Yogi Hale Hendlin, "From *Terra Nullius* to *Terra Communis*: Reconsidering Wild Land in an Era of Conservation and Indigenous Rights," *Environmental Philosophy* 11, no. 2 (2014): 141–74.

⁸ Davis, *Arid Lands*, 45–46, 146; Perrin Selcer, *The Postwar Origins of the Global Environment: How the United Nations Built Spaceship Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 97–132.

⁹ On geopowers, see Kathryn Yusoff et al., "Geopower: A Panel on Elizabeth Grosz's *Chaos, Territory, Art*: Deleuze and the Flaming of the Earth," *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 30, no. 6 (2012): 971–88; Nigel Clark, "Politics of Strata," *Theory, Culture, and Society* 34, no. 2/3 (2017): 211–31; Kathryn Yusoff, "Geophysics after Life: On the Way to a Political Geology of the Anthropocene," *Springer* 3 (2020), <https://www.springer.in.at/en/2020/3>; and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, "Hydropower: Residual Dwelling between Life and Nonlife," *Angelaki* 28, no. 1 (2023): 9–21.

¹⁰ Readers interested in pursuing the questions of indigenous knowledge production and colonial-minded epistemologies can read Linda Tuhiwai Smith's landmark book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2021).

and Tamazgha ecologies and the social practices into which they are embedded. Abdulrahman Munif, the author of the quintet *Mudun al-Milh* (Cities of Salt), is probably the best known example of a prescient author who engaged deeply with the consequences of petromodernity and the continuing impacts of anthropogenic extraction on indigenous Gulf societies.¹¹ Following the transformation of a small bedouin community after the discovery of oil, *Cities of Salt* addresses both the humanitarian and the ecological impacts that the arrival of American oil prospectors have visited on the community. Beyond the political and societal changes that the oil industry ushered into the Gulf as a whole, Munif was probably the first of his generation to pay attention to the ways the abundance of oil royalties created modes of consumerism and architectural imitation that were detrimental to nature in what Stacey Balkan and Swarapili Nandi have called “an exploitative system of extraction facilitated by the systemic violence of imperial forces compounded under state- and corporate-sanctioned neoliberal regimes.”¹² Whether responding to new notions and mechanisms of land ownership or to the construction of skyscrapers, Munif’s critical positions represented the first manifestation of a contemporary indigenous Middle Eastern environmental consciousness that explicitly underlined the need for a more sustainable attitude toward the desert ecosystem.

In Tamazgha, Amazigh rituals contain an impressive array of practices that are rooted in an ancient ecological tradition that is aware of the environment’s fragility and its need of nurturing and repair. The ritual of *Anzar* or *Taslit n unzar* (the bride of the rain) has been observed throughout the territory to mend the damages inflicted on the ecosystem by successive droughts.¹³ During this ritual, Amazigh women make the effigy of a bride that they beautify and accompany to the water source in their area. Accompanied by singing and chanting, the *Taslit* ritual addresses the god of rain to release water to revive what the drought has killed. This restorative practice indicates an optimistic attitude that conveys a hopeful message that no deregulation is beyond repair as long as humans are willing to engage in the process.

The organization of the ritual relies entirely on women who orchestrate the event, execute it, and accomplish the necessary tasks for the arrival of the rain. At bottom, this ritual demonstrates the awareness that the environment is dynamic and that its system is subject to both deregulation and regulation. Drought is a sign of deregulation of the environment, and the organization of the ritual of *Anzar* is an intervention to bring order to the system to make it function properly again. Although not expressed in elaborate terms, Amazigh care for the environment also can be discerned in the different customary laws that regulate access to grass, pasturelands, and water during different periods of the year. The enforcement of these customs allows nature to renew itself and follow the cycles of growth before its riches are harvested.

This Amazigh environmentalism puts forward an entire desert-based environmental ethics named *waḥdat al-kānāt* (the unity of creatures), which finds its clearest incarnation in

¹¹ A similar dynamic animates Maghrebi petrofiction. See, on Morocco, Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, “Engineering Nature: Extractivism, Risk, and Environmental Crisis in Ahmed Tazi’s *Du pétrole et des outardes*,” in *Ecotexts in the Postcolonial Francosphere*, ed. Nicki Hitchcott and Nsah Mala (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2025), 85–100; or, more generally, Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 2011); and Brahim El Guabli, “Saharan Gothic: Desert Necrofiction in Maghrebi and Middle Eastern Desert Literature,” in *Middle Eastern Gothics Literature, Spectral Modernities and the Restless Past*, ed. Karen Grumberg (Cardiff, UK: University of Wales Press, 2022), 187–209.

¹² Stacey Balkan and Swarapili Nandi, *Oil Fictions: World Literature and Our Contemporary Petrosphere* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021), 11.

¹³ Gabriel Camps and Salem Chaker, “Anzar,” *Encyclopédie berbère*, vol. 6, 1989, <http://journals.openedition.org/encyclopedieberbere/2554>.

Ibrahim al-Koni, Libya's most renowned Arabic-language novelist.¹⁴ In his novel *Nazif al-Hajar* (The Bleeding of the Stone), al-Koni stages the tragic end that awaits anyone who recklessly contravenes the laws of nature to appease the human propensity to greed.¹⁵ Unfolding in the Libyan desert, the novel follows the story of Asouf, a vegetarian loner who finds company among his sheep and the waddan, the mythical desert animal that is enshrined in Tuareg mythology, as he tends to both nature and his animals. However, his peaceful and quiet life is disturbed by the arrival of Qabil and Mesoud, who seek the waddan. Qabil, cursed since childhood to relentlessly pursue meat, exterminates all the gazelles in his oasis area before going after the waddan in the deeper Sahara.

The Bleeding of the Stone uses the notion of "creaturely unity" to introduce the idea of kinship between humans and nonhuman subjects. In fact, Qabil's massacres against the gazelles in the oasis area is depicted as an act of cannibalism because, when he was a little child, a mother gazelle nursed him. However, Qabil is blinded by his greed and, armed with American weapons, causes mayhem and bloodshed among desert animals. As the novel unfolds, the reader discovers that Asouf incarnates an environmental ethos in which both human and nonhuman animals matter equally within the equation of the creaturely unity. *The Bleeding of the Stone* depicts a world in which humans are not more important than other creatures because all creatures are interlinked, and any imbalance that strikes any part of this creaturely order will impact the other creatures and therefore the entire order of things. Al-Koni's depiction of this Amazigh environmental ethos does not foreground specificity but rather reveals that the line separating life from death in the desert is very flimsy.

These samples indicate that Middle Eastern and Tamazgha environmental consciousness is not to be explained in terms of exception, but rather in terms of its precociousness and the visionary nature of its proponents, who explicitly ground it in their indigenous worldviews. Both al-Koni and Munif were writing at a time when the environmental crisis was not yet a global concern, but both of them were able to capture the anthropogenic impact on nature and other nonhuman subjects. Consequently, one cannot discuss environmentalism in Tamazgha and the Middle East without engaging with the significance of their pioneering work, which may be considered a reflective and critical manifestation of their Indigenous communities' environmental wisdom. Their work opens a window onto decades, if not centuries, of practices and value systems in which concern for the environment is intertwined with cosmogonies and narratives of origin.

Building on a variety of disciplinary approaches, including political ecology, biopolitics, and the environmental humanities, the essays in this roundtable examine the sociopolitical pressures placed on Middle Eastern environments, particularly desert spaces. The ever-increasing incorporation of deserts in the EU's logic of border securitization in the face of global migration has overlaid new geopolitical coordinates on these purportedly empty spaces. The mushrooming of detention camps, the afterlife of nuclear waste, and the deep-time anthropogenic damage inflicted by intensive mining all usher in new experiences of time extending far beyond the teleology of empire and its contemporary incarnations. Rereading landscapes as geophysical, indigenous terrains places the focus on the specific deep-time entanglements through which natural spaces exceed the strictures of human exploitation.

¹⁴ Ibrahim al-Koni, *Watani Sahara' Kubra: Hiwarat* (Beirut: al-Mu'assasa al-'Arabiyya li-l-Dirasat wa-l-Nashr, 2009), 8, 233. For a detailed analysis of this concept and its significance for deserts, see chapter 5 in El Guabli, *Desert Imaginations*.

¹⁵ Ibrahim al-Koni, *Nazif al-Hajar* (Limassol: Tasili li-l-Nashr wa-l-I'lam, 1992); Ibrahim al-Koni, *The Bleeding of the Stone*, tr. May Jayyusi and Christopher Tingley (Northampton, MA: Interlink Books, 2013).

This interdisciplinary cluster asks the following questions: How does an ecocritical lens reshape conceptions of Tamazgha and Middle Eastern landscapes inherited from colonialism? How do actions carried out in, and discursive practices built around, natural spaces shape their environmental valence and impact their futurity? What new entanglements between the human and the more-than-human do these spaces sustain? What is the history of ideas driving conceptions of space and environment that have played out in Tamazgha and the Middle East? Bringing together scholars of visual arts, literature, cinema studies, anthropology, and the environmental humanities, this cluster engages these questions through six case studies rooted in different geographies and time frames.

The first two essays take a magnifying lens to the construction of desert landscapes as instances of *terra nullius*, spaces marked by their inhospitality and barrenness—a depiction marking their supposed hospitality to exploitative practices. By spotlighting the destructive ramifications of colonialist frameworks, they make an impassioned case for the importance of revised conceptions of arid land in a paradigm more attuned to longstanding human and more-than-human interactions.

Tracy Valcourt’s “Rethinking Aerial Orientalism: Picturing Deserts from Above” provides an illuminating analysis of the aerial photography of deserts. The article examines how Sophie Ristelhueber’s work makes use of the very same tactic of ambiguity that 19th-century Orientalist artists used to convey the supposed emptiness of barren, arid landscapes. Through an analysis of satellite and aerial imagery as contemporary proxies of maps, the essay “considers how ambiguity not only plays into the extended repertoire of media techniques listed above, but has been produced in the service of empire throughout Western art historical landscape traditions.” As a counterpoint, the article studies Fazal Sheikh’s use of aerial perspectives to interrupt and undermine imperialist readings of the desert in *Desert Bloom* (2011), a work of photography in which oral testimony and dialogue with Negev bedouin come to activate a repressed history saturating the land on the granular level.

Bringing the reflection to bear on the space of Tamazgha, Brahim El Guabli’s “Extractive Saharanism” defines the notion of Saharanism as a transdesertic discursive practice and mode of action that emanates from and sustains a desert imaginary of deserts’ emptiness and availability for human endeavors. Investigating French actions in the Sahara in the second half of the 20th century, El Guabli discusses how the desert space became central for French officials and technocrats who turned their attention to the Sahara as a panacea for French economic and geopolitical problems. El Guabli uses the concept of Saharanism to explain how the enterprises that France undertook in the Sahara were justified and pursued, opening space for more reflection on the history of ideas behind concrete actions and political designs that mark the French colonial legacy in the Sahara.

Reflecting the Martian dimension of Saharanism’s grandiose projects, Raymar D. Rossoukh’s paper entitled “Colonizing Mars in the Arabian Desert” explores the Gulf states’ increasing interest in the conquest, settlement, and exploitation of Mars. The United Arab Emirates have particularly fixated on the colonization of Mars. Focusing on the UAE’s Mars 2117 initiative, Rossoukh highlights the continuities between desert and Martian landscapes as projected by the rich Gulf state. In Rossoukh’s words, the UAE’s harnessing of resources to accommodate both human life and resource extraction on Mars “produces a dual ecological utopian narrative: as demonstrations of technological triumph over arid environments and as acts of stewardship for planetary futures, drawing on Islamic and Bedouin heritage.” Rossoukh highlights how this as an Emirati interpretation of the desert as “a frontier for ecological experimentation and a shared home for humanity.”

Drawing the cluster into further engagement with theories of geopowers, Edwige Tamalet Talbayev’s “Elemental Borders: Countermapping the Geophysical Maghrib” rethinks North Africa’s terrains against the grain of colonial cartography and its rigid conception of borders. Emphasizing the materiality of natural spaces like the Sahara and the

Mediterranean, the essay analyzes hand-drawn countermaps created by illegalized migrants crossing the Maghrib as alternative cartographic practices that engage the land's elemental forces as sites of agency. Ultimately, the article proposes to reposition North African space within the expanded theoretical horizons of Tamazgha, advocating for a renewed spatial narrative that acknowledges the interplay between human and geophysical forces in an ecology of coexistence.

Matthew Brauer's "Unsettled Grounds: Earthquakes between Metaphor and Materiality in Tahir Wattar's *al-Zilzal* (1974)" furthers this materialist perspective by integrating earthquakes into a robust reflection on Maghribi ecocriticism and environmental history. The article restores seismicity to the core of North Africa's political ecology, here rethought to incorporate the inhuman and its uncontrollable agency. Through an innovative reading of al-Tahir Wattar's 1974 novel *al-Zilzal* (The Earthquake) as "earthquake literature," the argument examines the way in which the phenomenological experience of seismic activity produces an "earthquake language" that "opens a totalizing, nihilistic metaphorization of politics with catastrophe in the Anthropocene to the inhuman, not as a morality tale about hubris, but to imagine futures that are never just anthropogenic."

At the tail end of our exploration, Anna Levett's "'The Trees POV': Refugee Landscapes in Postrevolutionary Tunisian Cinema" brings our roundtable full circle by illuminating a materially involved redefinition of the Orientalist and colonialist landscape trope. Through a study of postrevolution Tunisian films on migration, the article proposes to read the questions of migration and environmental harm in their interconnections. This reflection on the changing fortunes of hospitality in our contemporary, repressive context foregrounds the inescapable integration of humans and their more-than-human environments. As natural environments are elevated to the position of hosts, their human guests are revealed in their extreme vulnerability, one which unites humans and nature in a common position of undesirability. The call to hospitality, writ large across the human and inhuman spectrum, resonates with increased urgency.

We hope that this roundtable will inspire scholars across the disciplines to join us in creating new avenues for rethinking Middle Eastern and Tamazghan environments through an ecocritical perspective dedicated to unseating colonial paradigms of value and waste. By incorporating materialist ecocritical frameworks and centering indigenous narratives, these efforts can advance a more holistic and inclusive vision of Middle East studies. In light of today's increasingly interconnected and ecologically challenged realities, this approach is more urgently needed than ever.