[Important note: I am no professional musician; I enunciate what I hear not with a sophisticated music language, rather with wordy sensations.]

Please launch Youtube and type Ibrahim Maalouf, Beirut. It is the twelfth track of the album *Diagnostic*.

Start listening to the song; and start diagnosing the following introspection.

*0:20 The trumpet is playing solo, mournful, bewildered, almost impaired*.

It is my first African Studies class at my new boarding school in Johannesburg, South Africa. The motion of the day is “Who is an African?”.

*2:30 The trumpet is changing its mode in curiosity and uncertainty.*

The debate is advancing, and multiple questions are being raised in my mind, without an answer: Am I African of the blood? Or am I African of the soil, as the notable writer Ali Mazrui categorised me? Am I both? Am I neither of them?

*3:25 The trumpet takes a step backwards.*

I begin reflecting on my background. I grew up in Tunisia and I must assume that my African identity was completely neglected. Ironically, the maps in our geography and history textbooks stop at the borders with the Great Sahara. Our TV news never reflect what is going on *down (t)here*. More surprisingly, Tunisians proudly announce when traveling to Kenya, Gabon or any other African country “I’m visiting Africa!”.

*4:10 The trumpet takes a long sigh.*

I do not look African enough*.* My wavy nut-brown hair, the wheat-like colour of my skin and my deep Arabic accent strongly deny my belonging to this continent.

*4:40 The trumpet is trying to detach itself.*

I wished my DNA could roar the answer and reveal the mystery behind my origins. Instead, I was left alone, chained to my obscured mind and my perplexed thoughts.

*5:15 The trumpet takes another attempt.*

I recalled my maternal grandmother telling me that her family emigrated from Turkey during the Ottoman Empire. I asked every other member of my family; no one had a clue of where we might come from. I spent days searching for the origins of my last name. Apparently, it was given to a middle-eastern man who built a mosque upon his settlement on the northern shores of Tunisia. “It makes sense!” I shouted, “*Somaa* means minaret; and my family name is *Somai.”*

*6:15 The trumpet is fading away gradually.*

My research for my genesis is converging and I sense it coming to a sombre end. I am unable to find anything more relevant that would lead me to resolve this enigma: no data, no genealogical tree, no historic background.

*7:05 The trumpet* a*ttains a sudden halt in total hopelessness. You surmise that the Jazz composition concluded, and you are ready to proceed to the next song on your playlist.*

My identity has been effaced without a single hint.

*7:30 The trumpet reappears in resilience.*

My mind is suddenly illuminated with assurance and hope.

*8:00 The trumpet is escalating and the rhythm is accelerating. You feel something is about to burst in bravery*.

I cannot be foraging for my identity in history textbooks, in pigments of my skin or in curls of my hair.

*8:20 A brusque alternative rock tune erupts in vigour. It is a cheerful protest, an ambitious revolution and a dynamic rebellion.*

My identity is a composed poem, not a given title.

Beirut cannot be categorised into western jazz, alternative rock or arabic chords. It is rather the compilation of divergent genres by Ibrahim Maalouf, a French-Lebanese trumpet player. Receiving a music education oscillating between European and Oriental repertoires, Ibrahim composes mixes of Middle Eastern maqams and Western jazz. Indeed, the performer is a virtuoso of Arabic music with quarter notes on the trumpet, an exceptional prowess. Because playing quarter notes, or playing “in between notes”, would not be conceivable with the traditional three-valve instrument, his father fabricated a unique four-valve microtonal trumpet.

I cannot be labeled as Arab or African, liberal or conservative, native or immigrant. Just like Maalouf’s eclectic composition, I am the artifact of an ever shrinking world; I am many in one. I write in English, speak in Arabic and think in French. I listen to Tunisian tunes, (try to) dance to West African music and chant to the airs of Italian opera. I am the Muslim girl who went to church on Sundays with her Jewish boyfriend. I am the Chicago Cubs fan who cheers for Real Madrid and sometimes follows the South African cricket team. I am the green mountains of the Atlas, the blue sea of the Mediterranean and the sandy desert of the Great Sahara. I am the tulips of Europe, the lotus of Asia and the jasmine of North Africa. I am the heat of the Middle Eastern sun, the breeze of the Red sea and the cold of the North Atlantic frost. I am the victories of my Carthaginian ancestors and the defeats of my Numidian ones. In my veins rushes the blood of my Ottoman grandmother and my Berber grandfather.

Beirut and I are both the manifestation of a multi-faceted, multi-cultural identity. We are the query of belonging and the moan of diaspora. Most importantly, we are a challenge to the conventional hierarchy of race, language, ideology, ethnicity, privilege, spirituality and origins. Maalouf translates his identity into notes and melodies, played through his rare and unique four-valve trumpet. I translate my identity into daily practices and interactions. To my hackneyed three-valve instrument -of which I am proud: my DNA, my socio-cultural inheritance and my educational upbringing, I add a fourth eccentric valve that enables me to “play between notes” or rather “play between identities”: my cross-national life experiences.