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### A Transmodern Approach to Afro-Iberian Literature

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## 45

A TRANSMODERN APPROACH  
TO AFRO-IBERIAN LITERATURE*Cristián H. Ricci*

The literature of migration (re)presents radical renegotiations of personal identities and nationalities through “archeological excavations” and “transversal communications” that put in motion the “impure” and hybrid quality of identity. At a more formal level, migration literature emanates from linguistic impurities and heteroglossia, errant perspectives, foreign voices, and foundling, multidimensional and rhizomatic narrative and poetic forms. Sten Pultz Moslund associates the rhizomatic nature of migration texts with “linguistic homelessness,” producing a cacophony of voices and languages (6). Gilles Deleuze’s poetics accumulate an entire vocabulary of geographical and migratory terms, such as root-networks, nomads, movement, speed and lines of flight, territories and borders, in-betweenness and multiplicities. Minor literature is rhizomatic: it involves a linguistic deviance, an impoverished vocabulary, and improper use of grammar; an unadorned, minimalistic style, which turns it into a sign machine that avoids closure, that keeps pushing language to its limits, breaking down signification and multiplying meaning potentials. Minor literature is thus supposed to radically disrupt the purity and homogenising unity of major cultures (2010, 7–8).

I have analyzed elsewhere the paradigms of Moroccan and Equatorial Guinean literatures dealing with the Maghrebi and sub-Saharan diaspora in Spain, which began in the 1960s and continues to the present.<sup>1</sup> Building on this previous work, I pose the following series of questions: What is the potential readership of this literature of diaspora? Why does it not have a place in Spain’s book market? What is its future? In this essay, I frame Moroccan and Equatorial Guinean literature written in Castilian and Catalan within the broader context of border studies and approach it from the theoretical perspective of intercultural and postcolonial studies. There is a group of Moroccan authors who show in their writings what Enrique Dussel (2005) calls “alteridad cultural de la poscolonización,” incorporating the best of Spanish and European modernity to develop, not a cultural style that tends to a globalized unit, undifferentiated or empty, but a *trans-modern pluriverse* that draws on a number of cultural contexts: European, Asian, African, Islamic, Christian, and Latin American. Before I begin my analysis of Moroccan and Equatorial Guinean literature, I want to acknowledge that there is also a very prolific and active group of Saharawi authors who write poetry, narrative, and theater in Castilian. Because of the limited space of this article, and because most (if not all) Saharawi literature in Castilian does not reflect hybridizing processes, I do not analyze it in this article.<sup>2</sup>

### An overview of Afro-Iberian literature

The first literary works addressing the modern migration of African citizens to Europe during the seventies were written in Arabic: Abdallah Laroui (*al-Gurba*, 1971, translated in English as *The Exile* or *The Loneliness*) and Mohamed Zafzaf (*al-Mar'a wa-l-warda*, 1970, in English *The Woman and the Rose*). Since the second largest arrival of Maghrebis to Spain on February 7, 1992, new Moroccan authors have opted to use Castilian to address the migration outburst in Moroccan and Spanish newspapers and literary journals. Moroccan literature in Castilian remained somewhat dormant between 1956 and 1992, except for literary publications in *L'Opinion's* weekly section called "La página en español," and *La mañana*, Rabat's first and only Spanish-language newspaper produced by Moroccan nationals. As the result of the awakening of this literature, Mohamed Azirar and Mohamed Sibari published the first two Moroccan novels written entirely in Spanish, *Kaddour "el fantástico"* (Azirar, 1988, as a feuilleton in *L'Opinion*), and *El caballo* (Sibari, 1990 as a feuilleton in *L'Opinion*, and as a book in 1993). The latter is the story of a migrant from Larache, whose trip to Spain is frustrated by Tangier's mafia. After *El Caballo*, there have been a number of other short stories published in Spanish, principally by Sibari, Mohamed Bouissef Rekab (today, Morocco's second most prolific writer, with nine novels and one book of short stories), and León Cohen Mesonero, a Sephardic writer from Larache. Ahmed Daoudi's *El diablo de Yudis* (1994), addressing the subject of migration, is the first novel by a Moroccan author in Spanish to have been published in Spain. In all these texts, the desire to migrate, the moral degradation of the characters, and a moralizing rhetoric are recurrent features.

Some of the Castilian-language texts about the customs and people of Morocco help to demystify a series of ethnocentric clichés that many travelers, historians, and European literati had made about Morocco and the rest of the non-Western world. However, if we take into account that most of these authors do not manage to sell their books in Spain (nor in the rest of the Spanish-speaking world), we cannot measure the impact these texts have in reducing the prejudices that exist about Morocco and its customs, nor do we know if these texts will be taken seriously by researchers. In this vein, Alicia Gaspar de Alba says that a book gives a writer a green card to venture into the world of letters. However, as in all such worlds, there are different levels of cultural citizenship (2000, 14). To avoid being a "literary wetback," these writers would have to fulfill at least two guidelines: to begin writing what the Western market is consuming at the moment, or to be exotic, magical, and sensual enough to captivate the Western reader, "always eager and restless for romanticism" (Said 1978, 10). Therefore, Moroccan borderland writers have reconstructed their alternative position within European modernity from an outsider's perspective; that is to say, from a worldwide standpoint, as opposed to the provincial perspective of the European. Consequently, as Homi Bhabha (1995, 12) proposes, transnational histories of migrants, of colonized (or neo-colonized), or of political refugees are the fertile lands where a worldwide literature could settle.

Regrettably, Spanish publishers are not interested in the Moroccan literature written in Castilian that narrates the crossing of the Gibraltar Strait. At this point, it is necessary to clarify that the realist aesthetic and the didactic-moralizing nature of these writings (chronicles, diaries, memoirs) are common to the sprouting of other borderland literatures that try to show the socioeconomic and cultural problems of migrants. Simultaneously, this kind of literature essentially responds to the Arabic tradition in Moroccan literature. More particularly, the short narratives of the seventies respond to a concept of social intention. In this sense, it seems that these texts on the crossing of the Gibraltar Strait have not managed to overcome the immediacy of a testimonial urgency, without greater historical depth. It is also true that with time, this

type of literature begins a process of maturity towards purer forms of fiction that incorporate myths, the fantastic or supernatural effects, and the use of non-linear time. As Jean Cazemajou states (quoted in Martín-Rodríguez 2000, 255), mythical structures contribute to organize the narrative in order to be presented to distant readers. This rhetoric contributes to the enjoyment of the work by a non-Moroccan reader.

The opening towards Western literature can result in the loss of the Oriental flavor of Moroccan literature. As pointed out by Said, those same “Orientals,” using Western methods of *Orientalization*, might weaken their raw material. In other words, there is a plea for a multi-cultural and multi-dimensional literature, but not one that is committed to assimilation, because assimilation implies an acceptance of superiority of the target culture (Said 1978, 278). I do not believe there is any risk of the latter, because while Western travelers to the East defined their identity in contrast to the image of the Other, Moroccan writers such as Ahmed Ararou, Ahmed El Gamoun, Larbi El Harti, and Mohamed Lahchiri are very conscious of the ontological and epistemological differences between both cultures, and can cross from one side to the other (from Occident to Orient) and criticize both cultures, with no need to request a “visa” from any academic guard, neither from the East nor from the West. Without apostatizing their Arab-African-Muslim culture, in many cases they have a better knowledge of “la hermosa casa del vecino [España], más que la propia” (El Harti 2004, 40).

In the narratives of Ararou, El Gamoun, El Harti, and Lahchiri, there is a “selective rejection” of Westernization, which is typical of postcolonial literature. These narratives are consistent with the concept of the philosophy of liberation. In this regard, they are not revolutionaries who fight for a completely new beginning; they do not represent the typical liberal discourse that mystifies national emancipation from Spain, nor are they Indigenists who deny history after the French and Spanish invasions. They propose, instead, to reconstruct their integrity within an Eastern and Western historical framework. In this sense, they recapture the historical identity of Morocco, a history that shares some characteristics with other post-colonialist literatures – a history that is conscious of the neocolonial relations that the new world order imposes.

Ahmed Ararou’s fiction is a part of this literary paradigm, which is still marginal and trying to find its way. When I interviewed him in 2005, he described himself as a “writer without a portfolio.” He talks, for example, about comparative linguistics, applied psychology, and literary criticism, uses stylistic resources taken from both Western and Eastern canonical writers, and incorporates stories or anecdotes from Moroccan folklore. From this amalgam of literary resources, Ararou constructs a marginal work that is immune to being reduced by categorization. Nonetheless, as a writer who affirms the modern Western literary canon, his narratives also contrast with those who pride themselves in being transgressors semantically and structurally. Ararou manages to surpass the artistic flexibility of postmodernism through the recognition of cultural differences and their coexistence with tradition. In this sense, his literary project exceeds, in form and content, the mere tracking of roots and the romanticizing of the Arab presence in al-Andalus. Whereas in the case of Moroccan writers of the eighties, such as Miloudi Chaghmoum and Mustafa Al-Misnawi, the stories of exploitation, submission, and the evolution of resistance strategies are authenticated from the periphery, Ararou situates the reader on what Homi Bhabha (1995) and García Canclini (2001) refer to as the cultural hybridization of the borderland condition. The hybridization allows Ararou to translate – and therefore to make a record of – the social imaginary of the metropolis as well as the cultural and technological modernity imposed upon or consented to in Morocco.

Writers such as Ararou, El Gamoun, and El Harti are aware that the pact of civilizations is based upon an implicit recognition of a multicultural space, with an enormous variety of

traditions from which to choose the elements for a new model of literary development. The writer is not confined to espouse a single literary technique. At the same time, this type of literature is inseparable from the modernization of Morocco. Yet it observes analytically the Western imposition of products and beliefs, especially those that arrive through the signals of satellite television. Leafing through the annals of mythology is fundamental to the narratives of El Gamoun and Ararou, so that the Spanish reader, regardless of their familiarity with Moroccan and Arab myths such as Gilgamesh, can relate the narration to other utopian territories in literary history. In this regard, I see that a peripheral dialogue “South-South” exists between these Moroccan writers and others who face imperialistic cultures. I am referring here to thinkers from Asia and Latin America, as well as indigenous North Americans and Chicanos. The literary projects of El Gamoun and Ararou manifest what Enrique Dussel and the Moroccan philosopher Mohamed Mesbahi (2006) call “popular post-capitalist culture,” that is, they surpass the reductive limits of a fallacious monolithic culture, reconstructing the cultural history of Morocco within the frame of global history: from Asia, through the Asian-Afro-European proto-history all the way to Hispanic Christianity; through the Spanish protectorate and onto postcolonial and neocolonized Moroccan culture.

### Imazighen (Berber)-Catalan and Afro-Iberian identity

Castilian is no longer the only language of the Peninsula used by Moroccans; nor is it any longer the case that men dominate the literary field. In the past ten years, Catalan presses have been publishing female Moroccan-Amazigh voices, who write in Catalan and who have lived in Catalonia since childhood.<sup>3</sup> The significance of these narratives adds controversy to the ongoing political and language rivalry between Castilians and the different nationalisms of the Iberian Peninsula (particularly Catalan). Laila Karrouch published her autobiography in 2004, *De Nador a Vic* (“Premi Columna Jove,” published by Planeta/Oxford in Castilian in 2005 under the title *Laila*). During the same year (2004) the Catalan press Columna, published Najat El Hachmi’s autobiography, *Jo també sóc catalana*. Moreover, in 2008, El Hachmi was awarded the “Premi de les Lletres Catalanes Ramon Llull” for her first novel *L’últim patriarca* (in Castilian, *El último patriarca*, 2008), a novel that could be defined as autobiographical fiction. El Hachmi published a second novel, *La caçadora de cossos* (in Castilian, *La cazadora de cuerpos*) in 2011. Saïd El Kadaoui, the only male among these writers, published a novel in Castilian, *Límites y fronteras*, in 2008, and an autobiographical essay, *Cartes al meu fill. Un català de soca-rel, gairebé*, in 2011. Finally, Jamila Al Hassani published *La lluita de la dona bereber* in 2013. These narratives of cultural and economic survival bind together the immigration experiences of Karrouch, El Hachmi, El Kadaoui, and Al Hassani with the founding texts on exile by the already mentioned Muhammad Zafzaf, Abdellah Laroui, and Rachid Nini, a sociological narrative in Castilian by Pasqual Moreno Torregrossa and Mohamed El Gheryb, *Dormir al raso* (1994), and the essays of Sami Naïr and Juan Goytisolo, *El peaje de la vida* (2000) and *España y sus ejidos* (2003).

The four Imazighen-Moroccan authors refer to their writing as a therapeutic process that assists the characters towards the closure of their life-learning cycles. In this respect, Morocco (the Rif) lies in the past and Catalonia in the future. Linguistically, these authors confirm that their “Catalanness” does not define itself through antithesis with their “Moroccanness” or “Amazighness,” but rather, their identities multiply themselves according to their class status, the male or female version of their testimony, and their place in the generational lines. Thus, my goal is to analyze how the subaltern voices of immigrants may disrupt (or antagonize) the modern canon of the literatures of the Peninsula, as well as, following Anjali Prabhu’s

reminder, how hybridity discourses are able “to dismantle power structures” (2007, xiv). In the same vein, Marianne David and Javier Muñoz-Basols indicate that diaspora narratives generate “a multitude of sub-narratives, each one unstable and specific to place and moment, each a distinct and idiosyncratic language system of pain and hardship with its own history and tradition, its own socioeconomic and political underpinnings” (2011, xvi).

Given the implicit pedagogical and moral intention of the author to promote tolerance and *convivència*, Karrouch’s autobiography tends to lessen the identity crisis she suffers upon arrival in Catalonia. However, it does bring forth the economic hardships that her family must overcome to live in Spain, and the contradictory role of Muslim women living in the West that must submit to the will of their husbands and fathers. Al Hassani in *La lluita de la dona bereber* is emphatic on this point when she claims that:

mai he sabut què és l’amor d’un pare i què és realment tenir un pare, suposo que si hagués estat un nen hauria tingut més sort [ . . . ]. No volia seguir el pas de la mare, que es va casar amb un desconegut, sense amor, sense respecte, només per procrear i cuinar [ . . . ]. [S]empre he vist un dictador a casa i no un pare. D’ara endavant treballaré fort per oblidar la teva cara, aquella cara d’horror, d’odi, d’indiferència cap a nosaltres.

(11, 27, 109–110)

At the same time, Al Hassani does not hesitate to blame Amazigh women for contributing to their “esclavisme” (86), for accepting that women should not go to college and must wear the hijab and djellaba (61–62); “la lluita pels drets d’un mateix comença a casa” (84). However, Al Hassani, following El Hachmi in *Jo també sóc catalana*, concludes that Western women are also victims of male abuse: “la dona occidental no anava tapada però també perdia la seva identitat quan havia de patir maltractament físic y psicològic” (90). Learning Catalan is the key to success in Al Hassani’s character’s “fight” to overcome prejudices and become a lawyer on behalf of oppressed women: “El fet de dominar la llengua li va obrir moltes portes [ . . . ] [E]star més preparada per ajudar-se i ajudar els seus fills [ . . . ] tot allò que era prohibit per les famílies tradicionals dels pobles berebers” (62, 79).

El Hachmi combines the contradictory feelings arising from the contact between languages with a certain degree of alienation that will “regnar en [her] vida ” (2004b, 47). Such an assertion suggests a parallel to the mental state of *nepantlismo* (“being or feeling in between”) that Chicana writer Gloria Anzaldúa asserts in *Borderlands/La Frontera*, and that refers to the “transference” of cultural and spiritual values from one group to another (1985, 78); *nepantlismo* that, in the specific case of Muslim women “located between god and man,” Abdelkebir Khatibi translates as “the *mise en abyme* of theological order” (1985, 80). In *L’últim patriarca*, the narrator’s (and main character’s) intention is to “negotiate” her beliefs with God as well as the ritual practices of Islam, and, above all, mark her situation as a “retournée” to emphasize her condition of *mestiza*, of foreigner both in her North African culture as well as in Europe.

Thus, it is not coincidental that Najat El Hachmi assumes a traumatic-anomalous-deviated discourse in writing *L’últim patriarca*. That is, with this novel, El Hachmi accounts for the complex, controversial and contradictory literary and hybridizing processes of marginal and borderland literatures, aware that the colonial difference of the “borderland enunciating subject” (Mignolo 2000, 28) is not only uttered through a resisting and dissenting discourse, but is also materialized in the literary representation of the pain and anger of her “fractured” stories, of her memories, of her subjectivities. Overall, the novel highlights the *misovire* (neologism

coined by Cameroon writer Warewere Liking) nature of the narrator; that is, of a woman who does not seem to find a man worthy of admiration, as well as the clear intention to apply what Abdelkebir Khatibi defines as “the double criticism of the paradigm-Other” (2001, 72); the narrator questions and “disengages” (2001, 73) the values imposed by Muslim-Amazigh society, “so theological, so charismatic, so patriarchal” (2001, 72), and the hegemonic structure of Western society, be it Catalan/Spanish/European. The coexistence with the Catalans/Spanish, her Muslim-Amazigh origins, and the voluntary adoption of Catalan as a means of artistic expression results in four perfectly defined cultures, with their sum acting as the basic foundation for a fifth: hybrid, interstitial, and interpellating in equal amounts Amazigh and Catalan culture.

In the writings of Karrouch, El Hachmi, and Al Hassani there is evidence of a continuous conflict between exoticism and the universal scope of North African literature, reinforced in this case when dealing with female writers. For her part, Najat El Hachmi writes a “Carta d’un immigrant” in 2004, a message to an anonymous immigrant whose ending I consider very appropriate for the development of the borderland concept: “Aprendràs a viure, finalment, a la frontera d’aquests dos mons, un lloc que pot ser divisió, però que també és encontre, punt de trobada. Un bon dia et creuràs *afortunat de gaudir d’aquesta frontera*, et descobriràs a tu mateix *més complet, més híbrid*, més immens que qualsevol altra persona” (2004a; my emphasis). In this mutation process, we must acknowledge, as Walter Mignolo points out, that language is not merely a neutral tool that represents the honest wish to tell the truth, but also – as borne out by the narratives of Ararou, El Gamoun, El Harti, Lahchiri and, of course, El Hachmi – a tool for the construction of a history and the invention of realities (Mignolo 1993, 122).

I concur with Prabhu in making a distinction between diasporic and creolization narratives, as while the first is premised on a past trauma that constitutes and links the members of a group in a discourse of victimhood, the second can be seen to display an overweening pride in hybrid agency, being forward-looking and concerned with interaction (2007, 13–14). According to David and Muñoz-Basols, host nations and migrant writers should be engaged in “the exploration of legitimate demands and aspirations together with adaptive modes and strategies with the goal of community building” (2011, xviii). Altogether, host countries must adapt “to a changing world, balancing competing interests, and revising traditional concepts of nationhood to make them more capacious and tolerant of difference” (David and Muñoz-Basols 2011, xviii). Najat El Hachmi combines both impulses, crucial to the forging of a discourse adequate to the multiple tactics required for a successful postcolonial praxis. This is why I consider El Hachmi’s literary project to be significant, because it goes beyond a merely feminist view of the social situation, to render what could be the origin of an Afro-Iberian identity, critically engaged in feelings of *unhomeliness* and exclusion.

Judging by the marketing strategy of Editorial Planeta (including the book cover design and the spending of more than euros 300,000 in “Orientalist” advertisements in *El País*), some people might argue that El Hachmi is a doubly colonized subject (by gender and race). Planeta is certainly more interested in selling postcolonial women’s writing – and, at the same time, fulfilling the European’s desire for exoticism – than giving voice to those traditionally kept in the shadows. The fact that Spanish publishing houses care about publishing subaltern voices of immigration is surely a good sign (and, in fact, there are positive examples as the above-mentioned presses in the Castilian section); however, we should investigate what exactly the authors are willing to “negotiate” for their books to appear in display windows of bookstores.<sup>4</sup>

I end this section with a note from El Hachmi with regard to what kind of reader *Jo també sóc catalana* was aiming for: “A los que se llenan la boca con la inmigración y sólo han visto

al inmigrante de lejos. Pero también a los que están preocupados por el tema de la identidad catalana” (Nuria Navarro 2007). Regardless of the Orientalist marketing strategies of Planeta, *L'últim patriarca*, by showing critical perspectives in relation to the double postcolonial oppression of women, and not leaving up the task of unmasking the differences in race, class, and gender in the immigration communities, finally achieves the objective El Hachmi has previously delineated in her autobiography: “desferme del meu propi enclaustrament, un enclaustrament fet de denominacions d’origen, de pors, d’esperances sovint estroncades, de dubtes continus, d’abismes de *pioners* que exploren *nous mons*” (2004b 14; my emphasis).

### Colonial and postcolonial literature of Equatorial Guinea

The progressive transformation of a collective patrimony into a more personal imprint culminates in 1953 with the appearance of the first African novel in Castilian, *Cuando los combes luchaban* (*Novela de costumbres de la Guinea Española*) by Leoncio Evita.<sup>5</sup> The novel is about the life of a white Protestant missionary in pre-colonial continental Guinea who acts as an asymmetrical literary symbol of contrast with the native characters. There is an ethnographic approach to the autochthonous culture in the plot, but in turn, there is a departure from a traditional lifestyle, which is measured up against the superior civilization. The phenomenon is obviously striking, particularly because the other relevant novel of the colonial period, *Una lanza por el boabí* (1962),<sup>6</sup> written by Daniel Jones Mathama – even when its main character is not white – still admits that the *boabí* becomes a better man through contact with the superior civilization, and considers it “an inescapable duty to proclaim all the way the great work Spain is doing on the island” (1962, 309; my translation). Although this narrative of “un-resistance,” which defends and even justifies the colonial enterprise, is regarded by Ndongo-Bidyogo “as a positive sign of serenity and respect for the folklore and tradition of Guineans” (1984, 30; my translation), there is a clear point of divergence from other African literatures such as those written in French and English, which master the discourse of anticolonialism and a quest for black identity. This uniquely Guinean trait of “tolerance” towards domination shows a clear alienation as well as the impossibility of self-recognition, the *aliénation intellectuelle* described by Frantz Fanon (1961, 16).

After Equatorial Guinea’s independence in 1968, and its later coup d’état (1969), all cultural production came to a sudden halt. Francisco Macías Nguema’s dictatorship not only suspended the previous constitution (Decree nº 115, May 7, 1971), but also jailed or murdered nearly half of the population, expelled all foreigners (Lipski 2002, 70), and “silenced” the voices of dissidents and any sort of intellectual expression, a prohibition that resulted in a massive Guinean exile during the mid seventies. These years of silence, 1969–1979, meant that all creative work was produced in exile (N’gom 1993, 414). The literature of writers in exile was fragmented from within as there was little or no contact between exiles, given their presence in Spain was not only clandestine, but also geographically scattered. Had these writers found one another and gathered in literary/intellectual circles in cities such as Madrid or Barcelona, I believe that the creative production and collective artistic and literary testimonies of Guineans could have followed a similar pattern as that of the Latin American *boom* in Barcelona or the earlier *négritude* movement in Paris.

Guinean exiles include writers such as Juan Balboa Boneke. Their diasporic discourse is clearly against the dictatorial regime and makes a point of exploring the historical and cultural trauma experienced by Guinea. The poetic genre of the time introduces the configuration of an alternative form of fixated nostalgia that embodied itself in the rhetoric of orphanhood. This diasporic poetry coexists with the emergence of the narrative of writers such as Donato



Ndongo-Bidyogo and Francisco Zamora Lobocho. These authors again evoke the loss of their Motherland in opposition to the un-homely European city. However, according to N'gom, after the end of the Macías' regime and with Teodoro Obiang's coup d'état, a renaissance of these dislocated writers was possible, both through the now democratic Madrid of the late seventies and the Centro Hispano-Guineano of Malabo's Press under the direction of Donato Ndongo-Bidyogo (1993, 416). The latter publishes *Las Tinieblas de tu memoria negra* (1987) [trans. in English by Michael Ugarte, *Shadows of Your Black Memory*], a point of inflection for the modern *postcolonial* Afro-Hispanic novel, and the first volume of his diachronic trilogy *Los hijos de la tribu*, completed by *Los poderes de la tempestad*, 1997, and *El metro*, 2007. The title of Ndongo's first novel, *Las tinieblas*, is a reflection (and translation) of a poem by Léopold Sédar Senghor, and "a homage to the cultural *négritude* movement" (Fra Molinero 2002, 163). The child protagonist of Ndongo's novel is torn between two excluding paradigms. On the one side, his uncle (Tío Abeso) appears as the symbol of a traditional culture that resists colonial ideological oppression while reassessing the indisputable value of the native culture, and on the other, his own father impersonates "the white mask," the mimicry of the agent of civilization. The boy acts as a dislocated translational link between his uncle and Padre Ortiz, the Catholic priest of the colonial *mission civilisatrice*. As Baltasar Fra Molinero points out, "[a]s a linguistic interpreter, this boy has to alternatively adopt the voice of the two adults without being able to speak out his own opinions" (2002, 167). Also, during this highly productive period for Guinean literature and the subsequent Spanish discovery of these outlying emerging signs, another relevant and versatile author, Francisco Zamora Lobocho, publishes an ironic essay of black resistance against racism in Spain, *Cómo ser negro y no morir en Aravaca* (1994) and, five years later, a poetry book entitled *Memoria de Laberinto* (1999).

The women writers of this period, though, had left Equatorial Guinea when they were young. The first Guinean female writer is Raquel Ilonbé, who in 1978 published a book of poems titled *Ceiba*, and in 1987, a book of children's literature entitled *Leyendas guineanas*. Her poetry does not reflect the diasporic experience present in the poetic corpus of her contemporaries, but rather she delves into a fascinating search for a traditional culture and its influence in the Western world (N'Gom 1996, 60). On the other hand, María Nsué Angüe, author of *Ekomo* (1985), introduces a novel that explores cultural attitudes towards African women through the voice of a male character, and more interestingly, addresses new questions that arise from the growing conflict between the patriarchal Fang tradition on the verge of extinction and the realization of a changing modern present. According to Adam Lifshy, this is the first post-independence novel of Equatorial Guinea, whose "[...] collective cultural memory at hand is being lost at a tribal and continental level, not being gained within a new national context" (2003, 173). Among the few female voices present in the literature of Equatorial Guinea, there is also a playwright, Trinidad Morgades Besari, and a writer of short fiction, María Caridad Riloha. In 2005, Guillermina Mekuy made her debut with a novel entitled *El llanto de la perra* (Plaza y Janés 2005). Mekuy's first novel was a success and soon she became a mass media phenomenon. In 2008, Mekuy published *Las tres vírgenes de Santo Tomás*, which narrates the story of three mulatto sisters under the strong influence of a black African father who believes he is the reincarnation of St. Thomas Aquinas, and a white Spanish mother, an animist sorcerer initiated in Africa. This parental crossing-over of cultures ("[...] tenían las almas cambiadas" 2008, 39), enables an extreme metaphysical dialogue between African traditional beliefs and a mystic, radical version of Christianity.

Moreover, the first group of authors to have been writing since the nineties and into the twenty-first century are identified with the "Nuevo costumbrismo nacional" or "Nueva

narrativa nacional.” José Fernando Siale Djangany’s *Autorretrato con un infiel* (2007) presents the reality of Equatorial Guinea through an African “mythical realism,” which not only offers a new symbolic cartography of historical trauma (*Poór Donanfer*, Fernando Poo; *Franck Nkó* for Franco; *Isco de Coor*, Isla de Corisco), but also where the author builds a plot of underlying criticism aimed at both the old colonizing empires (*Puerto Galo* for Portugal and *Cabo Norte* for Spain) and the new African state. This novel depicts a polyphonic representation of the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial era as a much needed mechanism to avoid the loss of history; the literary figures of historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and missionaries all act to adulterate and conspire to destroy material records of African history. The painting by Father Delatorre, “Autorretrato con un infiel,” that gives the novel its title is an ironic statement asserting that the subaltern cannot yet “sketch himself.” In other words, the African character is still being drawn by the dominating powers in their own aesthetic terms. The other revealing element is the figure of the traditional storyteller who is asked about the underlying meaning of the folk tales, and is not able to answer at all; and while in the novel, reading is also censored, the native characters are trapped in a space where they are not able to speak out their own culture (the traditional rites and customs have lost their original content and act as empty containers, pure forms) nor have access to the typographical culture. In Siale’s novel there is an absolute nullification of the postcolonial subject dispossessed both of the oral and the written. “Do you exist?” asks Roberto Fernández Retamar (1995, 23), evoking the colonized as a distant echo, a cultural and historical void.

In the same way, references to the past in Siale’s novel (as well as in other African authors such as Ben Okri and Nuruddin Farah) is construed through common mechanisms of interpreting the chaotic present. Such a narrative strategy is not only designed to represent a re-visiting of the past, but also attempts to determine whether the old colonial framework has really collapsed or whether it is maintained under different signs through neo-colonial practices. *Nambula* (2006), a short novel by Maximiliano Nkogo Esono, also follows the narration of the process of formation of a new African republic:

El vendaval de la democracia y su irresistible corriente multipartidista procedente del Norte levanta auténticos torbellinos de ambiciones fraticidas y sacude con portentosa fuerza los sagrados pilares sobre los que hasta ahora se había asentado cómodamente el tradicional modo de ser del Sur.

(2006, 5)

This making and unmaking of African reality through corruption, incompetence, unemployment, mercenarism, bureaucracy, and paramilitary violence brings forth the depiction of an “Afro-Occidental” political parody, in which there is a clear questioning of the authenticity of the African transition process towards the creation of modern nation-states shaped after “democratic-civilized” Western models.

In the novels of the authors mentioned previously, the characters see themselves as involuntary protagonists of a situation they disapprove of and, therefore, mock through an absurd exaggeration of charismatic power demonstrations, and humorous misinterpretations of Western political formulae. There is still a manifest depiction of traditional African elements that find themselves unnaturally placed in a fossilization process that clashes deeply with what seems to be a rehearsal of modern, foreign ways. In this “Nueva narrativa nacional,” we find issues such as the coexistence of tradition (amulets, fetishes, witchcraft, initiation rites, griots), Western political methods, and theatrical diplomatic equations that are narrated as clumsily

embedded in African society. Such deeply hypercritical, yet comical passages, are absorbed into the text in a satirical manner, ridiculing not only the new African politics, but also its original Western forms, expressing the disillusionment of the postcolonial era and overcoming simultaneously the “rhetoric of blame” against the West (Said 1978, 19). This group of writers shares two major themes with other African authors: the clash between a modern way of life and tradition, and the need to reconcile past and present, using literature as an agent of social transformation; and they agree that even if the idea of European modernity cannot be validated, neither can the newly installed African republic, which is as deceitful as the previous one.

The twenty-first century marks a period of dynamic coexistence between this last generation, that produced the Guinean literature of the past two decades of the twentieth century, and what I consider the breakthrough work of César Mba Abogo, who in 2007 opened up a new path for Guinean literature with his eclectic *El porteador de Marlow. Canción negra sin color*, and continued in 2010 with the publication of *Malabo blues. La ciudad remordida*. The structure of *El porteador de Marlow* and *Malabo blues* combines short stories, vignettes, poetic prose, poetry, and short descriptive catalogues of European, African, and Latin American cities. In *El porteador de Marlow* there is an explicit intertextual relationship with Italo Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, a literary game that also interconnects the gazes of Marco Polo’s West and Genghis Khan’s Far East. At the same time, both Mba’s books introduce a new literary object that cannot be properly defined except on its own terms. The configuration of the books is polyhedral, subverting the rigid form of European narrative by introducing a flexible and pragmatic aesthetic sense, more akin to African oral traditions. Mba’s texts do not share the coordinates in content and style of his contemporaries, but rather occupy a contingent in-between space that innovates and interrupts the discourse of the past: “Estoy condenado a vivir en una frontera / En la desidia ambigua y en la tormenta del exilio / No hay paredes en este mundo para mis rótulos” (2007, 100), a “[l]iminal space, in-between designations of identity” (Bhabha 1995, 5). In this way, the narrator is a “traseúnte” that portrays himself as a sort of alien that, indeed, recognizes his borderland path, but at the same time attempts to legitimize his ontological search for belonging:

Había vivido aventuras insólitas en las capitales modernas; en Malabo yo era como todos ellos, mi piel no desentonaba con el latido de la calle, conocía las especias y licores locales, y sin embargo me sentía tan extranjero en Malabo como en todas partes. Recuerdo que viago por el mundo pero en realidad viago a mí mismo.

(243–44, 248)

The *retournée*’s mission of *Malabo blues* is to alert Africans “de las patologías coloniales “[. . .], de la mentira de la razón cínica de Occidente” (2010, 77). However, the narrator of *Malabo blues* soon realizes the opposite, that *retournées* are “caballos de Troya que ocultan un tumulto de ideas importadas en sus entrañas. S[ueltan el] vómito occidental y envenen[an] la percepción de hermanos y hermanas” (2010, 78). The narrator blames his parents for the irreparable damage: “Deberían haber tenido huevos y criarnos aquí en lugar de mandarnos a España o a donde quiera que soplaran los vientos” (2010, 87). The interstitial location, caught in between monolithic and directly opposing identities, offers the chance of a hybridizing outlook that not only negotiates difference without the presence of identity hierarchies, but also searches for a new definition, a definition that targets the colonized subject as well as the old colonizing Metropolis. Europe is no longer taken as the absolute symbolic ego of postcolonial

rejection, as an ontological trap for the Other's creative expression, but becomes an ambivalent scenario of "newness:"

Así, pues, no paro de avergonzarme de mi cotidianidad en esa Europa en la que soy a la vez hijo y forastero. Pero, por mi parte, cuanto más intento vaciarme de las nomenclaturas de la historia para ser tan transparente como la conjunción de varios neo-mundos que forman un todo-mundo inédito que ignora las nociones de centro y periferia y del que ninguna sociedad es la metrópolis de otra, el lamento de Wallcot en su *A Far Cry from Africa*, ya sea en forma de mosquitos o libélulas, siempre acaba llegando hasta mí y aplastándome bajo su peso.

(2007, 123)

The subversive dialogism that attempts to level an outdated North-South discourse through literature, endures simultaneously a social and ideological fragmentation within a single estranged language of Europe-as-Self and Europe-as-Other: "He vivido en Europa / He vivido en el paraíso / He vivido en el infierno / Cuando me reúna con mi gente / Hablaré de los hombres y las mujeres de Europa / hombres y mujeres como nosotros" (2007, 97–98). This challenging division in the locus of enunciation is perfectly defined in a dreamlike episode of one of the characters: "Mantuvo una conversación indiscifrable con un hombre muy extraño. Tenía dos bocas, una estaba donde están las bocas habituales y la otra en la nuca "[. . .]. Hablaron como si fueran miembros de una familia desunida y extensa" (2007, 51). As I suggested already, following Bhabha (1995) and García Canclini (2001), the borderline engagements of cultural difference may as often be consensual as conflictual and indeed, as Mba points out (2007, 2010), the postcolonial subject has now two mouths from which he can speak, one mouth "where it should be," the other hidden yet not silent.

To end this article, I quote César Mba Abogo: "[E]s preciso sembrar algo en este continente que arrastra tantos monólogos y diálogos inconclusos" (2007, 120). In this regard, the reader is not sure exactly which continent he is referring to, or whether the message is aimed at both Europe and Africa in a timid statement of a transmodern project of Afro-Europeanization, present in what I believe to be an inaugural work for Afrohispanic literatures in the twenty-first century. To close the circle I proposed at the beginning of this essay, a question remains: Where is Iberian literature produced? As Rebecca L. Walkowitz states, texts belong to the places where they are classified and given cultural and social purposes ([2006] 2013, 919, 921). Iberian literature is no longer imagined to exist in a single literary system but in several, through various and uneven practices of world circulation. The multilingual circulation of immigrant fiction destabilizes nation-based conceptions of literary culture. As I have described herein, African authors who write in Spanish or Catalan rely on multiple literary traditions, trends, and techniques in others to fulfil two immediate needs: to speak about their fractured, hybridized condition, and to insert themselves in the Iberian literary market, a market that has not always welcomed African writers. The case of Imazighen-Catalan writers is quite different because of linguistic and political circumstances, equating culture with community and literary inclusion with national inclusion, presenting this as an alternative social model that distinguishes Catalonia from other parts of Spain. In short, African literature is written, printed, and read in multiple places, and the authors mentioned in this essay force us, as philologists and literary critics, to rehearse different strategies of theoretical analysis, to consider the relationship between the production and circulation of non-canonical and marginal literature because – apart from being read within several literary systems – African literature makes the Iberian system less inclusive.

## Notes

- 1 Ricci (2010, 2014).
- 2 Adolfo Campoy-Cubillo (2012) wrote a chapter of his book, *Memories of the Maghreb: Transnational Identities in Spanish Cultural Production*, on Saharawi literature.
- 3 Mohamed Toufali published in 2007 an anthology of Contemporary Imazighen authors (*Escritores rifeños contemporáneos. Una antología de Narraciones y Relatos del Rif*). Some of the writers in the anthology, like himself, Karima Toufali, Karima Aomar, Driss Deiback, Rachid Raja, and Mohamed Lemrini write in Castilian.
- 4 For this article, let's say that addictions and (supposed) perversions depicted by the characters of both *L'últim patriarca* and *La caçadora de cossos*, Muslim as well as "Christian" (alcohol, drugs, lesbian episodes, prostitution) are recurrent topics in other "rebellious writers" from Africa: authors such as Ken Bugul, Calixte Beyala, or Halima Ben Haddou, first Moroccan woman to write a novel (*Aïcha la rebelle*, 1982), who express in critical ways the degradation of the moral values of the West as a starting point for a search of another Africa. A clear case of self-orientalization is mentioned in my book, *¡Hay moros en la costa!* (2014).
- 5 The Combé or Ndówé tribe is an ethnic group of Equatorial Guinea.
- 6 *A boabi* is a minor monarch in African political systems.

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