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## **The Afterlife of Al-Andalus: Muslim Iberia in Contemporary Arab and Hispanic Narratives**

Christina Civantos

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*Ignacio López-Calvo*

In what she sees as a South-South paradigm, Christina Civantos's comparative study addresses; ~~in what she sees as a South-South paradigm,~~ how medieval Muslim Iberia (al-Andalus) has been imagined in Spain, Argentina, and the Arab world (especially in the Middle East and North Africa [MENA]). Through her analysis of international narratives, film, television, and drama, Civantos reveals how the contested cultural reference point of al-Andalus has sometimes been romanticized as a contact zone, ~~as a chronotope~~ of interfaith peaceful coexistence and tolerance, where knowledge and the arts flourished. In other cases, it has become an exclusivist, even imperialist cultural sign of Muslim identity, often responding to the ~~restorative,~~ retrospective nostalgia of Islamist discourse. By the same token, al-Andalus has also been (re)presented by Islamophobic, nationalist ideologies as a time of intolerance under an ominous Muslim power. Overall, in her view, research has focused on particular periods, which have been interpreted in order to fit particular ideological agendas. Fortunately, new, alternative narratives in the Arab world, published from the 1960s through the 1990s, have questioned traditional views and legends, all the while critiquing gendered and imperial implications, with the goal of establishing what the author considers fruitful intercultural translations. Their new

interpretations of al-Andalus question received narratives regarding topics such as Arab superiority over the Amazigh peoples, the representation of al-Andalus as an objectified woman, pan-Arabism, and promises of national liberation.

In her theoretical approach to the sociopolitical dimensions of what she terms the “afterlife” of al-Andalus, the author makes use of concepts such as “metafiction,” “empire, “coloniality,” and “transcoloniality,” and then connects topics such as migration and gender. As Civantos explains, through the use of reflective and prospective nostalgia, some of the recent literary and visual texts analyzed in her book translate received stories into new ones, producing new meanings and counter-memories that question dominant ways of conceiving the past. They also point out the diversity within the Arab world in order to contest essentialist views, all the while highlighting the shared challenges and commonalities between Western and Eastern worlds.

The author then proposes the term “transcoloniality” to expose the temporarily-layered nature of coloniality (including before the advent of Modernity), as well as its multiple origins (including non-European colonizations). She frames her book within mnemohistory, that is, she focuses not so much on history or the past proper but on how people remember the past, by analyzing historical memory as portrayed in narratives about specific historical figures. Al-Andalus, therefore, emerges as a collection of sites of memory invested with a symbolic aura associated with a particular group identity.

Civantos exposes how the image of al-Andalus has been manipulated in Spain by the nationalist ideology of conservative groups proud of the past reestablishment of a purported Visigoth homogeneity after expelling the supposedly bloodthirsty Muslims. At the same time, in the past Spain has also been Orientalized by other European countries

who resort to the almost eight centuries of Arab-Amazigh Muslim rule to accuse the country of barbarism, particularly in regards to the Black Legend. She likewise explores the role of the identification with al-Andalus in regional nationalism in Andalusia, as well as right-wing Spanish populists' purported fear, since the 1990s, of a Muslim reconquest of Spain. Civantos speculates that the abundance of Spanish historical novels dealing with al-Andalus may respond to anxieties about the future or to a displacement of anxiety produced by recent Moroccan immigration. Similarly, in early-twentieth-century Latin America, and particularly in Argentina, a new movement of Hispanism tried to reconcile with Spain and to revalorize the region's Spanish heritage, thus bringing about, according to Civantos, the option of using al-Andalus in the negotiations of national cultural identity.

She analyzes, with a comparative, postcolonial approach, twentieth and twenty-first century memoirs, plays, novels, and commercial visual media, organizing them according to the most recurrent figures appearing in modern works on al-Andalus. Thus, Part I; focuses, from the prism of translatability, on Averroes, the medieval polymath from Córdoba. Chapter 1 considers cross-cultural relations and Orientalism in Jorge Luis Borges's short story "La busea de Averroes's Search" as compared to two early twenty-first century short stories: the Moroccan Abdelfattah Kilito's "Concerning Averroes's Balcony" and the Iraqi Jabar Yassin Hussin's "The Buenos Aires Day." According to Civantos, Borges's visualization of the radical Otherness of the East prevents translatability. Kilito's dream-based text, by contrast, deromanticizes cultural contact, showing an awareness of postcolonial hierarchies. In turn, Hussin's story re-creates Averroes as a symbol of cultural connection and reveals the endless possibilities

of signification, thus affirming, once again, the possibility of cross-cultural dialogues.

Chapter 2 retakes-situates Averroes in the context of freedom of expression and with narratives about identity and truth: the Egyptian Youssef Chahine's 1997 film *Destiny*, which addresses freedom of expression in the conflict between secularists and Islamists in Egypt; the Spaniard Antonio Gala's 1985 television screenplay "Averroes," dealing with the regionalist nationalism of *andalucismo* and condemning the lack of freedom of expression under Franco; and the Tunisian 'Izz al-Din al-Madani's 2000 play *Fragments from the Averroan Biography*, which resorts to Averroes to combat religious dogmatism. All three, explains Civantos, portray Averroes as a rationalist who conceived of Islam and secularism as compatible. In contrast with Borges, they present a highly translatable version of Averroes and show belief in the access to meaning.

Part II analyzes, from the point-of-viewperspective of transcoloniality, historical figures known for entering and leaving al-Andalus, such as Tariq ibn Ziyad, the Amazigh general who began the conquest of Iberia; Boabdil, the last Muslim ruler of Granada; and today's immigrants. It explores their legacy in the core narratives of identity and the power dynamics between Iberia, North Africa, and the Americas. Chapter 3 concentrates on Tariq, proving that works from the MENA region tend to represent him as a Muslim Arab, thus erasing his non-Arab identity and the subjugation of Amazigh people by Arabs. Among the works analyzed are the Egyptian Mahmud Taymur's *Tariq of al-Andalus*, the Syrian-Argentine Zaki Qunsul's *Under the Skies of al-Andalus*, and the Moroccan Driss Chraïbi's *Birth at Dawn*. According to Civantos, some of these romanticized portrayals respond to a compensatory celebration of the greatness of the Muslim empire in order to offset the current economic and sociopolitical conditions of

the MENA region. By contrast, in the 1970s and 1980s Maghrebian writers dismantled this triumphalist mythification by connecting Tariq's conquest of Iberia with the Muslim invasion of Amazigh lands, the French colonization of Morocco, or contemporary destitute Moroccan labor migration to Spain.

Chapter 4 studies historical novels such as [the](#) Argentine [Enrique](#) Larreta's 1926 novel *Zogoibii*, the 1998 Spanish miniseries *Réequiem for Granada*, and [the](#) Spaniard [Antonio](#) Gala's bestselling 1990 novel *El manuscrito €carmesí* ([The Crimson Manuscript](#)), in which Boabdil is repeatedly represented as a sad, tragic, and melancholic figure ~~embodying the Other's weakness and concomitantly affirming Spanish power~~. On the other hand, works from the MENA region such as [the](#) Lebanese [Amin](#) Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* and [the](#) Moroccan [Rachid](#) Nini's *Diary of an Illegal Immigrant* link Boabdil to labor migration and exile. In turn, [the](#) Spaniard [Mercé](#) Viana [Martínez](#)'s 2010 children's novel *Las lágrimas de Boabdil* ([Boabdil's Tears](#)) uses Boabdil to normalize migration and to highlight the shared experiences of Maghrebians and Spaniards in al-Andalus. ~~A coda to Part II compares the representations of Columbus in late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century works from Spain, North Africa, and Syria, along with recent U.S. Hispanics' conversion to Islam and their invocation of al-Andalus to refer to a return to the religion of their ancestors.~~ All these texts point out the destructiveness of empire as well as different shifts between religious identifications and the colonizer-colonized hierarchies.

Part III turns to issues of gender, sexuality, and narrativity by focusing on representations of the two most famous women of al-Andalus and on women as storytellers. Thus, Chapter 5 examines the representations of Florinda [la Cava](#), the

legendary woman whose rape or seduction is traditionally believed to have opened the doors to the Muslim invasion of Iberia, and Wallada [bint al-Mustakfi](#), poet and daughter of the penultimate Umayyid ruler of Córdoba. Among the texts analyzed are [the](#) Lebanese-Egyptian [Jurji Zaydan](#)'s 1903 historical novel *The Conquest of Andalusia* and [the](#) Spaniard [Juan Goytisolo](#)'s 1970 postmodern novel *Count Julian*. Whereas Florinda is often objectified and presented as a passive victim or a dangerous seductress, Wallada becomes, in Arabic texts, an ornamental figure with a secondary role as the love interest of the famous poet Ibn Zaydun. In turn, in recent Spanish texts she is re-created as a proto-feminist and outspoken woman, or even as a butch lesbian, but still from an Orientalist perspective. However, according to Civantos, two texts, [the](#) Spaniard [Miriam Palma Ceballos](#)'s 2009 novel *The Trace of Absences* and [the](#) Syrian ['Abd al-Rahman Muhammad Yunus](#)'s 1997 novel *Wallada, Daughter of al-Mustakfi, in Fez*, question this construction of historical figures by reversing the process of representation of al-Andalus as a subjugated or seducing woman, bringing attention to narratives of al-Andalus as a process of seduction.

Chapter 6 continues to explore narrativity issues in other works: [the](#) Iraqi [Daisy al-Amir](#)'s 1964's short story "An Andalusian Tale," which problematizes the construction of history as seduction, and [the](#) Egyptian [Radwa Ashour](#)'s 1995 [novel Granada novel Trilogy](#), which provides women with creative agency in the construction of al-Andalus and Arab tradition. Civantos claims that these works suggest a Scheherazade figure that questions the conceptions of gender and al-Andalus, thus creating equity as opposed to being muted objects of male narrative creation. These

reworkings of historical figures, adds Civantos, take al-Andalus away from the nostalgic invocation and reveal different types of oppression by reinterpreting the past.

Overall, *The Afterlife of Al-Andalus* is an eye-opening study of how reinterpretations of the past, of historical events and periods, such as al-Andalus, can help create cultural integration. They can also ~~open the door to the denunciation of different types make possible a critique~~ of current oppressions and sociopolitical issues, rather than keeping them at the level of nostalgia. ~~It is a highly recommended, The book is~~ brilliant, well-researched, and theoretically sound ~~study that goes well beyond its subtitle~~: this South-South approach ~~also~~ represents a useful model for other potential studies on how storytelling informs individual, collective, and national identity. ~~It also suggests offering~~ new ways ~~of using the past to arrive to a better future, of achieving increased greater~~ tolerance and social justice ~~through self-conscious metanarration~~.

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