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What is Moroccan Literature? History of an Object in Motion¹

Introduction

Moroccan literature, or at least the history of Moroccan literature, was born in 1937. That year, the Moroccan polymath ‘Abd Allāh Kannūn (1908–1989) published *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī fī al-adab al-‘arabī* (Moroccan Genius in Arabic Literature, hereafter *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*), a work that has often been considered, since the time of its publication, the first literary history of Morocco.² With the publication of *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, Kannūn set in motion an object of study, Moroccan literature, whose fluid contours we aim to map in this essay. Such a project entails mapping shifting configurations of space, time, and language. It also elicits a cluster of deceptively simple questions, namely: what is Moroccan literature, where and when does it happen, and in what languages? The answers to these questions have evolved since the publication of Kannūn’s pioneering work. With evolving answers have come shifts in ideas about the spatial, temporal, and conceptual borders of Morocco and Moroccaness. These shifting borders are at the center of our inquiry. We will place particular emphasis on the dimensions of space and language. Borrowing a phrase from Edward Said, we ask: what is the

¹ The idea for this article emerged from a panel at the 2018 World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies and from our conversations with members of the “Multilingual Locals and Significant Geographies” (MULOSIGE) research group at SOAS. We would also like to thank the following colleagues for their helpful input: Ana González Navarro, July Blalack, Alexander Elinson, Mourad Kadiri, Peter Kitlas, Hasna Daoud, and Jaafar Ben El Haj Soulami.

² Although most historians of Moroccan literature have stated that Kannūn’s work was first published in 1938, we now know, thanks to the recent publication of Kannūn’s memoirs, that *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī* was published in 1937. See ‘Abd Allāh Kannūn, *Mudhakkirāt ghayr shakṣiyyah* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-‘Arabī, 2020), 159. Our discussion of Kannūn’s work builds on ideas developed in Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, *La literatura marroquí contemporánea: La novela y la crítica literaria* (Cuenca: Ediciones de la Universidad de Castilla-La Mancha, 2006), 91–104. Gretchen Head also addresses Kannūn’s place in Moroccan literary historiography in “Space, Identity, and Exile in 17th-Century Morocco: The Case of Abū ‘Alī al-Ḥasan al-Yūsī,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 47.3 (2016), 231–259.

“imaginative geography” of Moroccan literature, and when, how, and why does that “imaginative geography” evolve?³

As the imagined map of Moroccan literature (and, indeed, of Moroccanness) expands, contracts, morphs, and migrates, it takes on new problematics, new modes of expression, and new languages—including, but not limited to, French, Amazigh, Moroccan Arabic (*Dārijah*), Spanish, Catalan, and English. Mapping the mobile terrain of Moroccan literature is not a sterile exercise in literary historiography. Indeed, we contend that the malleable notion of “Moroccan literature” is a productive site for interrogating larger questions of politics, identity, territoriality, and history. In this sense, the question “what is Moroccan literature?” inevitably leads us to another question: “what is Morocco?”

Our aim, here, is not to offer a normative definition of Moroccan literature. This essay does not present an ontology of Moroccan literature, but rather a phenomenology: it is not about what Moroccan literature *is*, but rather about how the notion of “Moroccan literature” *manifests* in different historical contexts.⁴ Likewise, we are not setting out, here, to uphold a national framework, but rather to track the shifting contours of a national imaginary—and, in particular, to track the surprising resilience of the national imaginary in the face of changing circumstances. One of the patterns that will emerge in this essay is that the notion of Moroccan literature has continually expanded, over the last century, to absorb cultural forces that once eluded its gravitational pull.

³ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 54. Our discussion of the spatial dimensions of Moroccan literature is also indebted to recent work by Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini, including their article “Significant Geographies. In lieu of World Literature,” *Journal of World Literature* 3.3 (2018), 290–310.

⁴ Our framing of this question draws some of its inspiration from David Damrosch’s work on world literature and, in particular, Damrosch’s assertion that, “To understand the workings of world literature, we need more a phenomenology than an ontology of a work of art: a literary work *manifests* differently abroad than it does at home.” See Damrosch’s *What is World Literature?* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003), 6.

Mapping Literature in the Age of Moroccan Nationalism

As it happens, Kannūn had fairly straightforward answers to the question “what is Moroccan literature?” Kannūn’s answers (and his omissions) helped lay the groundwork for the debates that have unfolded in the ensuing decades. For Kannūn, Moroccan literature denoted a textual tradition that began with the conjoined arrival of Islam and Arabic to North Africa in the seventh century CE. This is the narrative framework that animates Kannūn’s treatment of Moroccan literature in *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*. In his prologue to the first edition, Kannūn describes the aims and scope of the work in the following terms:

هذا كتابٌ جمعنا فيه بين العلم والأدب والتاريخ والسياسة ورميْنَا بذلك إلى تصوير الحياة الفكرية لوطننا المغرب وتطورها في العصور المختلفة من لدن قدوم الفاتح الأول إلى قريب من وقتنا هذا؛ فالحركة العلمية وما طرأ عليها من نشاط وفتور، في جميع العصور، مبسطة فيه أحسن البسط والسياسة واتجاهاتها التي كانت تتخذها بحسب طبيعة كل دولة مفصلة فيه تفصيلاً مستوفى.

This is a book in which we brought together science, literature, history, and politics, with the aim of drawing a picture of the intellectual life of this homeland [*waṭan*] of ours, Morocco, and of its development throughout the ages, from the time of the first conqueror up to the present day. The scholarly movement, its ups and downs, through all ages, is discussed in detail, along with the political orientations taken up by each dynasty.⁵

These sentences, the first of *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, illuminate three key facets of the work. First, Kannūn’s literary history of Morocco revolves around a place that is also an idea: the *waṭan*, a

⁵ ‘Abd Allāh Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī fī al-adab al-‘arabī*, 3rd ed. (Beirut: Maktabat al-Madrasah wa-Dār al-Kitāb al-Lubnānī li-l-Ṭibā‘ah wa-al-Nashr, 1975), 1: 37. All quotations from Kannūn’s work will come from the third edition, which includes the paratexts that accompanied the first two editions (1937 and 1961, respectively). Throughout the article, all English translations are ours, unless otherwise noted.

term variously rendered in English as “homeland,” “fatherland,” or “nation.” Second, Kannūn associates the *waṭan* and its literary history with the arrival of “the first conqueror”—that is, with the arrival of Islam in North Africa. Third, Kannūn traces the historical development of Moroccan literature from the arrival of Islam to the present day, using the ruling dynasties as the organizational structure for narrating said development. In other words, for Kannūn, the history of Moroccan literature is coterminous with the history of Islam in Morocco, which is, in turn, intimately linked to the Arabic language and the evolution of the Moroccan state.

While linking Moroccan literature to the histories of Islam and the Moroccan state, Kannūn also goes to great lengths to assert Morocco’s rightful place in the history of Arabic letters and, in so doing, to highlight the ties between the history of Moroccan literature and the cultural history of the Arab heartlands to the East. Kannūn speaks directly to this point in his prologue to the second edition (1961), where he writes:

وانما كان مقصودي الأهم من تأليفه، هو بيان اللبنة التي وضعها المغرب في صرح الأدب العربي الذي تعاونت على بنائه أقطار العروبة كلها، وذكر الأدياء المغاربة الذين لم يُقَصِّروا عن إخوانهم من المشاركة ومغاربة بقية أقطار المغرب العربي في العمل على ازدهار الأدبيات العربية على العموم.

My most important intention in composing [this book], was to illustrate the brick that Morocco placed in the edifice of Arabic literature, which all the Arab lands worked together to build, and to mention the Moroccan men of letters, who did not fall short of their Mashriqi brothers or Maghribis from the other lands of the Arab Maghrib in working toward the flourishing of Arabic letters in general.⁶

Kannūn articulates here a concern that had motivated his research for several decades—namely, the need to highlight the contributions of Moroccans to the development of Arabic literature and,

⁶ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 1:13.

by extension, to bring the Arabic literature of Morocco to the attention of scholars in the Mashriq.

Kannūn's prologues to the two editions of *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī* bring into relief a series of interlocking organizational frameworks that give meaning to Moroccan Arabic literature and that structure its temporality, spatiality, and political valence. The first of these frameworks is Islam, which marks a beginning for Moroccan literature for Kannūn and adumbrates an imagined geography in which Moroccan literature is affiliated (in time, space, and belief) with the Islamic *ummah*. The second framework is Arabness (*al-'urūbah*), which designates a language for Moroccan literature and which affiliates it with classical Arabic literature and with the Arab world. The third framework is the *waṭan*, a national space that is inserted in the temporality of Islam and in the imagined geographies of the *ummah* and the Arab world. We may therefore characterize Kannūn's literary-historical project as an attempt to define the *waṭan* and to place it within the spatial and temporal coordinates of Islam and Arabness. Kannūn acknowledges as much when he describes *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī* as an attempt to document Morocco's "development in the framework of Arabness and Islam" (*al-taṭawwur dākhil iṭār al-'urūbah wa-al-islām*).⁷

Kannūn's emphasis on Moroccan literature's Arab and Muslim character places his work squarely in the ideological domain of the Moroccan nationalist movement—known in Arabic as *al-ḥarakah al-waṭaniyyah*. (It bears noting that the notion of the *waṭan* is the center of gravity for both Kannūn's book and the Moroccan nationalist movement.) Starting from the 1930s, Moroccan nationalists had begun to emphasize an "Arab-Islamic" Moroccan national identity that aimed to unite Arab and Berber Moroccans under one umbrella. Their insistence on

⁷ Ibid., 1:18.

Morocco's "Arab-Islamic" identity was largely a response to the French Protectorate's Berber policy, which sought to divide Moroccan along ethnic lines.⁸

There are many indicators that Kannūn's work, when it was first published in 1937, was interpreted by both Moroccan nationalists and European colonizers as a milestone in the ongoing efforts of the Moroccan nationalist movement to resist French colonial policies and to promote, in their place, a unitary Moroccan national identity. The book was published in Tetouan by Muḥammad Dāwud's Mahdiyyah Press, a clearinghouse for Moroccan nationalist writings and the publisher of the early Moroccan nationalist periodical *Al-Salām* (Peace), whose cover featured the motto *al-'urūbah, al-islām, al-Maghrib* (Arabness, Islam, Morocco). Soon after being published, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī* was banned from circulation in the French Protectorate zone.⁹ The authorities of the Spanish Protectorate, which controlled territories in northern and southern Morocco, saw an opportunity to distinguish themselves from their repressive French counterparts and moved to commission a Spanish translation of Kannūn's book and to award Kannūn an honorary doctorate from Madrid's Central University.¹⁰ Kannūn later wrote that the French ban of his book was

تأكيداً لكون الكتاب عملاً وطنياً فوق كونه عملاً أدبياً ولذلك استحق أن يحظى من الاستعمار الفرنسي الغاشم بهذا
الجزاء الظالم.

⁸ The bibliography on this topic is extensive. For an introduction, see Jonathan Wrytzen, *Making Morocco: Colonial Intervention and the Politics of Identity* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), 136–178.

⁹ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 1:15–16. New documents and details concerning the ban of Kannūn's work have recently appeared in Kannūn, *Mudhakkirāt*, 162–166.

¹⁰ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 1:16; Eric Calderwood, *Colonial al-Andalus: Spain and the Making of Modern Moroccan Culture* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 279–280. For the Spanish Protectorate's efforts to present itself as a defender of Morocco's "Arab-Islamic" identity, see Calderwood, *Colonial al-Andalus*, 167–246.

the confirmation of the book's being a work of nationalism, more than a work of literary study. For that reason, it earned itself such an unjust punishment from the tyrannical French colonizers.¹¹

Despite being banned by the French colonial administration, the book circulated widely among nationalist circles, where it was hailed as a milestone in Moroccan culture and anticolonial efforts. Among the many testimonials to the book's positive reception among Moroccan nationalists is a letter that 'Allāl al-Fāsī, the charismatic leader of the Moroccan nationalist movement in the French zone, sent to Kannūn in 1946 to congratulate him on the book. Al-Fāsī praised Kannūn's work in the following terms:

وقد سد فراغاً كانت مكتبتنا العصرية في أمس الحاجات إليه، وقام بواجب كان كلنا في تقاعس عنه، وأعطى للناشئة المغربية بياناً عن نبوغ أسلافها، يدفعها للطموح ويهيئ بها للعمل، وفتح باباً للمقتدرين من إخواننا على مواصلة ما بدأتكم وإكمال ما أسستكم.

It closed a gap that our modern library was in urgent need of closing; and it fulfilled a duty that we were all neglecting. It gave to the Moroccan youth an explanation of the genius of their forefathers, and it pushed them to ambition and encouraged them to work. It opened a door for the most talented of our brothers to continue what you began and to complete what you founded.¹²

As al-Fāsī's letter suggests, Kannūn's book performed one of the primary functions of nationalism—namely, to endow the nation with a glorious past, one that legitimates the claims of the present and undergirds the projects of the future. In this sense, Kannūn's book is an illustrative example of a particular moment in Moroccan cultural history, a moment in which

¹¹ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 1:16.

¹² Al-Fāsī's letter is reproduced in Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 2:5.

Moroccan nationalists were trying to lend legitimacy to their cause by projecting it onto the past and, at the same time, by linking it to the broader Arab and Muslim worlds.

Kannūn's organization of Moroccan literature under the twin banners of Islam and Arabness was not, of course, the only possible way of writing or understanding the literary or cultural history of Morocco. Considered from a twenty-first-century perspective, Kannūn's omissions are as resonant as his inclusions. His work leaves many unanswered questions, among them: Where do texts in languages other than Arabic fit into the history of Moroccan literature? And what can we do now with Kannūn's concept of the *waṭan* ("homeland") at a moment when Moroccan literature has become increasingly diasporic? For Kannūn, the *waṭan* was both a place and an idea. But how far can we stretch that place and that idea? What is gained and what is lost when we sort figures as disparate as Ṭāriq Ibn Ziyād, 'Abd Allāh Kannūn, Ṭāhar Ibn Jallūn (Tahar Ben Jelloun), and Najāt al-Hāshimī (Najat El Hachmi) under the heading of "Moroccan literature"? Can the center of such an unwieldy object of study hold? These are some of the questions that we propose to take up in the remainder of this essay by tracing the long afterlife of Kannūn's foundational work as well as more recent attempts to update and challenge the spatial, temporal, linguistic, and ideological assumptions that underpinned Kannūn's work.

From "Arabic literature in Morocco" to "Moroccan literature"

As Claudio Guillén has argued, literary histories and anthologies are symptomatic of the first stages of the formation of emerging national literatures, when literatures become critically conscious of themselves.¹³ Over the course of the twentieth century, literary histories and anthologies both

¹³ Claudio Guillén, *Múltiples moradas: Ensayos de literatura comparada* (Barcelona: Tusquets, 1998), 331.

reflected and shaped changing conceptions of Moroccan literature. Through a survey of several Moroccan literary histories and anthologies, we hope to document, in this section, the rise of the idea of “Moroccan literature” – an idea that was set in motion by Kannūn and that emerged from an earlier but related concept: that of “Arabic literature in Morocco.”

A few years before the publication of Kannūn’s seminal work, the poet Muḥammad Ibn al-‘Abbās al-Qabbāj (1906–1979) published an anthology of Moroccan poets, *al-Adab al-‘arabī fī al-Maghrib al-aqṣā* (Arabic Literature in Morocco, 1929), a work that many Moroccan scholars now regard as a pathbreaking contribution to the study of Moroccan literature.¹⁴ Like Kannūn, al-Qabbāj states in a foreword that his work intends to highlight the contributions of Moroccans to Arabic literature. As Moroccan critic ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Aqqār has pointed out, both Kannūn and al-Qabbāj sought to “legitimate” Arabic literature in Morocco, “establishing its identity features” within the canon of Arabic literature (which itself was under construction at the time).¹⁵ The works by Kannūn and al-Qabbāj also aimed to address the neglect that Mashriqī elites had shown toward Moroccan contributions to Arabic literature. These two landmark studies stressed Morocco’s Arabness and highlighted the existence of a long Arabic literary tradition in Morocco. They did not, however, claim “Moroccan literature” as such; instead, they claimed the existence of an “Arabic literature in Morocco” (to quote the title of al-Qabbāj’s anthology). Both authors advanced this claim in similar terms, through the insertion of a Moroccan national space (*waṭan* or *quṭr*) within the broader (imagined) geography of the Arab world. Kannūn calls this space a land “among the lands of

¹⁴ Muḥammad Ibn al-‘Abbās al-Qabbāj, *al-Adab al-‘arabī fī al-Maghrib al-aqṣā* (Rabat: al-Maktabah al-Maghribiyyah, 1929). The work’s foundational status is reflected in Ḥasan al-Wazzānī’s canonical bibliographic work, *al-Adab al-maghribī al-ḥadīth 1929–1979* (Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 2002), where al-Qabbāj’s anthology marks the beginning of modern Moroccan literature.

¹⁵ ‘Abd al-Ḥamīd ‘Aqqār, “Taṭawwur al-naqd al-adabī al-ḥadīth fī al-Maghrib,” *Fikr wa-Naqd* 6 (1998), 58.

Arabness,” while al-Qabbāj calls it a land among those of the “Arab nation” (“*al-ummah al-‘arabiyyah*”).¹⁶

After Kannūn and al-Qabbāj, other key works of Moroccan literary historiography followed the same pattern of claiming the existence of an Arabic literature in Morocco, without explicitly identifying a “Moroccan literature.” One such example is *al-Waḥī fī al-adab al-‘arabī fī al-Maghrib al-aqṣā* (Compendium of Arabic literature in Morocco, 1982) by Muḥammad Ibn Tāwīt (1917–1993).¹⁷ As Ibn Tāwīt notes in the introduction, *al-Waḥī* drew on material from a series of lectures that he had delivered on Moroccan National Radio after independence under the general title of “Tārīkh al-adab al-maghribī” (History of Moroccan literature), and from classes that he had taught on the same subject at Moroccan universities since the early sixties.¹⁸ The book follows Kannūn’s pattern, starting with Arabic literature in the time before the Almoravids (c. 1040-1147) and ending with Arabic literature in the time of the Protectorate. Although Ibn Tāwīt occasionally alludes to “Moroccan literature,” the idea of the nation that emerges in his work is rather murky, as it is in the earlier works by Kannūn and al-Qabbāj. All three authors primarily stressed the contributions that Moroccans had made to Arabic literature. Ibn Tāwīt even openly objected to the idea of a “Moroccan literature,” voicing his preference for the idea of an “Arabic literature in Morocco.”¹⁹ For Ibn Tāwīt, as for his contemporaries, there was a subtle but important difference between highlighting “Arabic literature in Morocco” and claiming a Moroccan literature as such.

¹⁶ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 1:13; al-Qabbāj, a.

¹⁷ Muḥammad Ibn Tāwīt, *al-Waḥī fī al-adab al-‘arabī fī al-Maghrib al-aqṣā* (Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1982). During the 1960s, Ibn Tāwīt also collaborated with the Egyptian scholar Muḥammad Ṣādiq ‘Affī to produce two other works on Moroccan literary historiography: *al-Adab al-maghribī* (Beirut, 1960) and *al-Qiṣṣah al-maghribiyyah al-ḥadīthah* (Casablanca, 1961).

¹⁸ Ibn Tāwīt, *al-Waḥī*, 5.

¹⁹ Ibn Tāwīt, *al-Waḥī*, 5. Likewise, Kannūn wrote that he “did not intend to distinguish the literature of Morocco with a singularity different from Arabic literature in general.” *Al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 13.

It was not until the seventies that authors such as ‘Abbās al-Jarārī (b. 1937), the first professor of “Moroccan literature” at a Moroccan university, began advocating for a clearly defined national literary space, one that was autonomous from the pan-Arab sphere. Al-Jarārī signaled this move in the title of his best-known work: *al-Adab al-maghribī min khilāl zawāhirihi wa-qaḍāyāhu* (Moroccan Literature Through Its Phenomena and Issues, 1979). In that book, al-Jarārī built on the work of his predecessors by lamenting the marginalization of Morocco in the histories of Arabic literature produced in the Mashriq. Unlike his predecessors, however, al-Jarārī emphasized that Morocco was a crossroads of civilizations whose cultural history far predated the arrival of Islam.²⁰ He asserted the existence of a pre-Islamic Morocco that had been neglected because of the importance bestowed on the Islamic conquest.²¹ In his search for cultural Moroccaness, he even claimed the existence of a prehistoric Moroccan subject (*insān maghribī*) from the Stone Age.²² Moving beyond the pan-Arabist and Islamic frameworks of his predecessors, al-Jarārī approached the Moroccan literary heritage within a framework that included but moved beyond Arabic. He introduced two elements that would eventually become canonical in Moroccan literary historiography: claiming popular culture and oral literature as pillars of Moroccan heritage (which also meant opening the door to claiming Amazighness); and claiming the culture of the Western Sahara as a key element of the territorial and cultural nation.²³ Al-Jarārī also went a step further in expanding the temporal and spatial borders of Moroccan literature: he claimed the literature of al-

²⁰ ‘Abbās al-Jarārī, *al-Adab al-maghribī min khilāl zawāhirihi wa-qaḍāyāhu* (Rabat: Maktabat al-Ma‘ārif, 1979), 7.

²¹ Ibid., 11.

²² Ibid., 14.

²³ Al-Jarārī’s emphasis on the Western Sahara is likely a result of historical context: al-Jarārī’s work was published after the Green March of 1975, when Moroccan claims on the Western Sahara began to reach academic circles.

Andalus as part of Moroccan literature, paying particular attention to the poetic genre known as the *zajal*.²⁴

The emphasis on the cultural continuity between al-Andalus and Morocco is an important point of convergence between al-Jarārī and the generation of Moroccan scholars that preceded him. Since the 1930s, many Moroccan scholars have treated Andalusī literature and Moroccan literature as part of one continuous cultural tradition. A key rhetorical strategy often marshalled in support of this position is to trace the origin of Moroccan literature back to the founding moment of al-Andalus: the Muslim conquest of the Iberian Peninsula led by the Berber commander Ṭāriq Ibn Ziyād in 711 CE. As legend has it, Ṭāriq Ibn Ziyād delivered a rousing speech that spurred his outnumbered troops to victory in the battle against the forces of the Visigoth leader King Roderic.²⁵ In a short but influential essay on the history of Moroccan literature published in 1940, the Moroccan nationalist intellectual Muḥammad al-Fāsī called Ṭāriq’s speech “the oldest Moroccan literary text.”²⁶ Ṭāriq’s speech also occupied pride of place in Kannūn’s *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, where it appeared at the beginning of the section devoted to the genre of speeches (*al-khuṭab*).²⁷ Kannūn thus implicitly cast Ṭāriq as the founder of Moroccan oratory. He also offered a sharp retort to Mashriqī scholars who doubted the authenticity of Ṭāriq’s speech, on the grounds that Ṭāriq, a Berber, would not have been able to deliver such an eloquent speech in Arabic. In response, Kannūn asserted:

²⁴ To this endeavor al-Jarārī devoted works such as *al-Zajal fī al-Maghrib: al-Qaṣīdah* (Rabat: Maktabat al-Ṭālib, 1970) and *Muwashshahāt maghribiyyah* (Casablanca: Maṭba‘at Dār al-Nashr, 1973). Al-Jarārī opened the introduction to *al-Zajal* by stressing popular culture, where he locates “Moroccan genius” (*al-‘abqariyyah al-magribiyyah*).

²⁵ For the earliest sources of Ṭāriq’s speech, see al-Jarārī, *al-Adab al-maghribī*, 59–65.

²⁶ Mohammed El Fasi, “La littérature marocaine,” *L’Encyclopédie Coloniale et Maritime*, fasc. 22 (Paris, 1940), 410.

²⁷ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 383.

طارق بن زياد ان كان أصله بربرياً فقد نشأ في حجر العرب والاسلام

“Ṭāriq Ibn Ziyād, though of Berber origin, grew up under the protection of Arabness and Islam.”²⁸

Kannūn’s defense of the authenticity of Ṭāriq’s speech closely parallels his defense of Moroccan literature. He places both phenomena within the frameworks of Arabness and Islam. With this move, Kannūn inserts Ṭāriq Ibn Ziyād and other Berber cultural figures into his Arabic-centric narrative of Moroccan literature, and he incorporates the Muslim conquest of al-Andalus, led by Ṭāriq, into the history of Moroccan literature.

The effort to interweave the history of Moroccan literature with the history of al-Andalus did not stop with the founding figure Ṭāriq Ibn Ziyād. Both Kannūn and his contemporary Muḥammad al-Fāsī treated Andalusī texts as part of Moroccan literary history—especially texts from the eleventh to thirteenth centuries, when al-Andalus was ruled by two North African dynasties, the Almoravids and the Almohads. In their surveys of “Moroccan literature,” Kannūn and al-Fāsī mention many writers from al-Andalus, such as Ibn Saʿīd and Ḥafṣah bint al-Ḥājj. Thus, for Kannūn and al-Fāsī, the imaginative geography of Moroccan literature includes al-Andalus: the literature of al-Andalus and the literature of Morocco converge to form one continuous literary tradition, whose center of gravity moves, over time, from the Iberian Peninsula to North Africa.

Al-Fāsī and Kannūn’s vision of continuity between al-Andalus and Morocco has left a significant imprint on Moroccan literary historiography. Since their time, many Moroccan scholars and writers have imagined themselves as the direct inheritors of the Andalusī cultural

²⁸ Ibid., 29 n. 1. The comment appears in a footnote that Kannūn added to Shakīb Arslān’s 1942 review of *al-Nubūgh*. Kannūn also defends the authenticity of Ṭāriq’s speech in his article, “Ḥawla khuṭbat Ṭāriq,” *Daʿwat al-ḥaqq* 7/8 (1968), 111.

heritage. This trend builds on a longstanding North African interest in the cultural legacy of al-Andalus, but it recasts that legacy in a distinctly nationalist idiom, one that identifies modern Moroccan culture (including literature) as the continuation of, and standard-bearer for, Andalusian culture.²⁹ Along these lines, the critic Saʿīd Yaḡfīn has called Moroccan literature the “natural extension” (*imtidād ṭabīʿī*) of the literature of al-Andalus.³⁰ By claiming a “natural” and genealogical connection with al-Andalus, Moroccan scholars have endowed Moroccan literature with the prestige associated with al-Andalus, whose culture is revered in both the Maghrib and the Mashriq. At the same time, they have claimed al-Andalus as a badge of cultural distinction—that is, as a cultural heritage that both nourishes Moroccan literature and that also distinguishes it from the literary traditions that have emerged in the other parts of the Arab world. Finally, they have evoked an imagined geography in which the borders of Moroccan literature expand to encompass works and authors from al-Andalus.

The works surveyed in this section reveal a paradox that exerts pressure on Moroccan literary historiography: the evolving definitions that have accompanied the rise of “Moroccan literature” have almost always been *transnational*. In other words, the definition of a Moroccan national literary canon is an exercise that necessarily enters into dialogue with the Arabic literature of the Mashriq and also with the cultural heritage of al-Andalus. Put differently, the *waṭan* that sits at the center of Moroccan literature is a space and an idea that must be culturally distinct from, yet

²⁹ For several examples of this trend in contemporary Moroccan poetry, see Abderrahmane Bouali (ed.), *Poemas marroquíes y al-Andalus* (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2009). For the place of al-Andalus in early modern North African culture, see Nizar F. Hermes, “Nostalgia for al-Andalus in Early Modern Moroccan *Voyages en Espagne*: al-Ghassānī’s *Riḥlat al-wazīr fī iftikāk al-asīr* (1690-91) as a Case Study,” *Journal of North African Studies* 21.3 (2016), 433–532; Nieves Paradela, *El otro laberinto español: Viajeros árabes a España entre el siglo XVII y 1936* (Madrid: Siglo XXI, 2005), 26–75.

³⁰ Saʿīd Yaḡfīn, *al-Adab wa-l-muʿassasah* (Casablanca: Manshūrāt Jarīdat al-Zaman, 2000), 18.

at the same time culturally affiliated to, other spaces and traditions. What this tension reveals is that the idea of Moroccan literature has always been predicated on an illusory unity, one that quickly dissolves to reveal migrations of peoples, ideas, and cultural forms in and out of the territory that we now call Morocco.

Moroccan Literature in French

In a text published in French in 1971, Muḥammad al-Fāsī claimed that a general history of Moroccan literature was a task that remained undone.³¹ Notably, al-Fāsī made this claim when Kannūn's *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī* was already in its second edition. Al-Fāsī's comment reveals the split between two academic and critical traditions, one written in Arabic and the other in French—traditions that have often failed to communicate with each other. This schism has often hampered a comprehensive vision of Moroccan cultural reality.³²

Moroccan literature in French was a category that developed after independence, emerging on the back of broader debates about the relationship between language and identity in the age of decolonization. One of the terms that arose in the 1960s to address the new phenomenon of North African authors writing in French was *Maghrébin*. The idea of a Maghribian literary identity was launched by Tunisian Albīr Mimmī (Albert Memmi) in his *Anthologie des écrivains maghrébins d'expression française* (1964) and was later taken up in the open-minded spirit of the Moroccan journal *Souffles*. That journal was founded in 1966 by a

³¹ El Fasi's preface to Mohammed Lakhdar's *La vie littéraire au Maroc sous la dynastie `alawide (1664-1894)* (Rabat: Éditions Techniques Nord-Africaines, 1971), v.

³² Another resonant omission in Kannūn's work was the phenomenon of Moroccan literature in French, which was already a reality when Kannūn published the first history of "modern Moroccan literature": 'Abd Allāh Kannūn, *Ahādīth 'an al-adab al-maghribī al-hadīth* (Casablanca: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1964).

group of Moroccan writers, with ‘Abd al-Laṭīf al-La‘bī (Abdellatif Laâbi) at the helm.³³ In 1968, the journal published its first bilingual issue, dedicated to “the young Maghribi literature in Arabic and French [*d’expression arabe et française*].” The bilingual issue featured forewords by two of the rising stars in Morocco’s literary criticism scene: ‘Abd al-Kabīr al-Khaṭībī (Abdelkebir Khatibi) and Muḥammad Barrādah. Barrādah later translated into Arabic Khatibi’s seminal work *Le Roman maghrébin* (1968), which introduced new coordinates of identity and analysis, placing the Moroccan novel in the transnational “Maghribian” space.

Khatibi, Barrādah, and their contemporaries in the *Souffles* generation moved beyond the monolingual paradigm of their predecessors and envisioned a multilingual North African literature that would incorporate French without losing ties with the Arab world. Khatibi especially associated the use of French with the emergence of the North African novel. Along these lines, Khatibi wrote: “The *roman maghrébin* is mostly related to those writing in the French language, while those writing in Arabic have cultivated especially poetry, the essay, and the short story.”³⁴ Although this comment suggests a clean division of labor between French and Arabic, Khatibi remained aware of the strong interrelations between the literatures produced in both languages. For that reason, he also included Arabic-language texts, such as ‘Abd al-Majīd b. Jallūn’s autobiographical novel *Fī al-ṭufūlah*, in the category of *roman maghrébin*. This inclusive spirit of dealing with Arabic and French together as essential features of a bilingual (trans)national entity was a means of going beyond the colonial legacy and beyond the

³³ For an introduction to *Souffles*, see Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio, *Souffles-Anfas: A Critical Anthology from the Moroccan Journal of Culture and Politics* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015).

³⁴ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Le Roman maghrébin* (Paris: François Maspero, 1968), 112.

constraints of monolingual nationalism. Tahar Ben Jelloun also contributed to this enterprise with *La Mémoire future* (1976), an anthology of Francophone and Arabophone authors.³⁵

Despite these efforts to bridge French and Arabic, Francophone writers in Morocco continued to pose an intractable challenge to the hegemonic Arab-Islamic identity that had been promoted by Moroccan intellectuals associated with the nationalist movement. Given the emphasis that Moroccan nationalist elites had placed on the Arabic language and the *Arabness* of Moroccan identity, Khatibi and the *Souffles* generation had to address the paradox of being Moroccan authors writing in French, a language that did not fit into the dominant paradigm of Moroccan national identity.³⁶ Khatibi acknowledged this tension in many of his subsequent works, where he confessed his love for a language that he and his contemporaries were supposed to despise.³⁷

Though writing primarily in French, Khatibi and other writers associated with the journal *Souffles* forged links between their work and Arabic literature from the Mashriq. In this spirit, Khatibi, Laâbi, and a handful of other young Moroccan writers published a manifesto in *Souffles* in 1969, calling on all Maghribi writers, especially those who wrote in French, to engage in “a radical geo-cultural reorientation” toward the Mashriq, “in order to establish that in reality our literature, regardless of its language of expression and in this precise phase of decolonization, is

³⁵ Tahar Ben Jelloun, *La Mémoire future: Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie du Maroc* (Paris: Maspero, 1976).

³⁶ These language debates mirror ones that emerged in other postcolonial Arab contexts, such as Lebanon, where writing in French has often been viewed as inauthentic and politically suspect. Michelle Hartman has addressed this issue in *Native Tongue, Stranger Talk: The Arabic and French Literary Landscapes of Lebanon* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2014). For more on languages and literary history in Morocco, see Roger Allen, “Rewriting Literary History: The Case of Moroccan Fiction in Arabic,” *The Journal of North African Studies* 16.3 (2011), 311–324.

³⁷ Abdelkébir Khatibi developed this idea in such works as *La mémoire tatouée: Autobiographie d'un décolonisé* (Paris: Denoël, 1971) and *Amour bilingue* (Paris: Fata Morgana, 1983).

an integral part of Arabic literature, to which its fate is in every way tied.”³⁸ The manifesto claimed, paradoxically, that North African literature in French was “an integral part of Arabic literature.” This claim challenged the linguistic criterion that Kannūn and others had used to tie Moroccan literature to the broader Arab world. At the same time, the *Souffles* manifesto reproduced aspects of Kannūn’s imaginative geography: like Kannūn, the authors of the manifesto imagined themselves to be part of a geographical and cultural tradition that linked the Maghrib to the Mashriq. In other words, the *Souffles* generation still located themselves within the imaginative geography of the Arab world, while acknowledging that the Arab world is not monolingual.

In the wake of foundational texts dealing with Moroccan literature as part of a “Maghribian literature,” the idea of a Moroccan literature in French began to emerge, first in the work of French scholars such as Marc Gontard, and later in the work of Moroccan scholars such as ‘Abd al- Raḥmān al-Ṭinkūl (Abderrahman Tenkoul).³⁹ Writing in 1985, Tenkoul recalled that some Moroccans had perceived literary production in French as a “heresy” and condemned it to an early death (“mort prématurée”).⁴⁰ Francophone authors of his generation even thought they would be the first and the last to write in French.⁴¹ Yet, contrary to all forecasts, Moroccan literature continued to be written in French. Furthermore, not only did it not disappear, but it became a crucial element in the development of intellectual, academic, and cultural life in

³⁸ “Appeal to Maghrebi Writers,” trans. Anne-Marie McManus, in *Souffles-Anfas*, ed. Olivia C. Harrison and Teresa Villa-Ignacio (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2016), 210.

³⁹ Marc Gontard, *Violence du Text: Études sur la littérature marocaine de langue française* (Paris: L’Harmattan, 1981); Abderrahman Tenkoul, *Littérature marocaine d’écriture française: Essais d’analyse sémiotique* (Casablanca: Afrique-Orient, 1985).

⁴⁰ Tenkoul, 15.

⁴¹ Kirstin Ruth Bratt, introduction to *Vitality and Dynamism: Interstitial Dialogues of Language, Politics, and Religion in Morocco’s Literary Tradition*, ed. Kirstin Ruth Bratt, Youness M. Elbousty, and Devin J. Steward (Leiden: Leiden University Press, 2015), 12.

Morocco and the Maghrib. The bestowal of the Goncourt Prize in 1987 on Tahar Ben Jelloun for his novel *La nuit sacrée* (The Sacred Night) contributed decisively to enhancing the reputation of authors writing in French and to their gradual recognition as part of Moroccan culture. Other Moroccan authors would go on to win the prestigious Goncourt Prize—including Laâbi and, most recently, Laylā al-Sulaymānī (Leïla Slimani) for her novel *Chanson douce* (2016).

Nevertheless, the success of these authors has not resolved the tensions ascribed to Moroccan literature written in French. Slimani put her finger on the problem when she stated, in an interview with *The New Yorker*: “Beckett writes in French and we consider it romantic, but when we, the North Africans, write in French we’re thought of as victims of neocolonialism, as traitors!”⁴² The problem posed by Slimani extends beyond the domain of language. Slimani has faced skepticism for her decision to write about themes that are not directly related to Morocco or the Moroccan diaspora. When asked by *The New Yorker* why she has not written anything autobiographical, Slimani responded: “Because I’m North African, and I didn’t want to identify myself uniquely with that. I told myself: You’re going to weave a web in which you’re going to imprison yourself, when you have in front of you a much larger horizon.”⁴³ Slimani’s remarks point to the continued relevance of language debates in Morocco and the Moroccan diaspora. They also point to other issues that have emerged around Moroccan literature in French: such as the problem of authenticity and the question of how writers of the Moroccan diaspora address, reject, or elide expectations of what Moroccan literature “should” look like. As such, Slimani

⁴² Qtd. in Lauren Collins, “The Killer-Nanny Novel That Conquered France,” *The New Yorker*, December 25, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/01/01/the-killer-nanny-novel-that-conquered-france>.

⁴³ Ibid.

joins a long list of diasporic writers who have resisted the ethnic, racial, or cultural labels that have been imposed on them by publishers, critics, and readers.⁴⁴

As we have seen, Khatibi, Laâbi, and the first generation of Francophone writers worked to overcome bilingual dichotomies, such as Arabic/French. The journal *Souffles* also highlighted the importance of oral popular culture and of Amazigh culture as pillars of Moroccan cultural identity. To this end, the journal published the work of young writers who claimed a strong Amazigh/Berber identity, such as Muḥammad Khayr al-Dīn (Mohammed Khaïr-Eddine).⁴⁵ This embrace of Morocco's linguistic and cultural pluralism paved the way for the emergence of written literatures in previously marginalized languages, including Amazigh and Moroccan Arabic (*Dārijah*).

New Languages, New Directions

Amazigh and *Dārijah* were neglected in the first configurations of Moroccan national literature, but they have emerged in the twenty-first century as, in the words of Moha Ennaji, “the languages of change.”⁴⁶ In the amended constitution of 2011, Amazigh was finally recognized as one of Morocco's official languages. Indeed, the Amazigh heritage gets prominent billing in the new constitution's preamble, which asserts that Morocco's “national identity” was “forged by

⁴⁴ For the case of Arab diasporic writers, we draw, in particular, on Iman Mersal, “Eliminating Diasporic Identities,” *PMLA* 123.5 (2008), 1581–1589; and Nouri Gana, “Introduction: The Intellectual History and Contemporary Significance of the Arab Novel in English,” in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Arab Novel in English: The Politics of Anglo Arab and Arab American Literature and Culture*, ed. Nouri Gana (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 1–35.

⁴⁵ Laura Casielles, *Los cantos inolvidables. Souffles: una revista marroquí de poesía y política entre el colonialismo y los años de plomo* (Córdoba: Alción Editora, 2018), 66–68.

⁴⁶ Moha Ennaji, *Multilingualism, Cultural Identity, and Education in Morocco* (New York: Springer, 2005), 229.

the convergence of its Arab-Islamic, Amazigh, and Saharan-Hassani components” and was “nourished and enriched by its African, Andalusī, Hebraic, and Mediterranean tributaries.”⁴⁷ The statement illustrates recent efforts by Moroccan state institutions to highlight and celebrate the country’s linguistic and cultural pluralism.

The modern cultural Amazigh movement emerged in the 1960s and took off at the turn of the new millennium, ushering in a new literary tradition that one critic has called “a Moroccan literature written in Amazigh.”⁴⁸ An early precursor of this literary movement was an anthology of popular oral poetry, *Amānār* (The Minaret, in Amazigh), which was published in Arabic in 1968 with the subtitle “Moroccan Amazigh poetry.”⁴⁹ Although the earliest manifestations of modern Amazigh literature, such as this anthology, focused on the oral poetic tradition, writers soon turned their attention to new literary genres and new uses of the Amazigh language. The shift from oral literature to written literature began in the 1970s, with the publication of new works written in Amazigh, such as the literary journal *Arraten* (Writings) and Muḥammad Mustāwī’s poetry.⁵⁰ In 1994, ‘Alī Ikān published what was widely considered the first Amazigh novel, *Asekkif n-inzaden* (Hair Soup).⁵¹

Such publications did not enjoy much public recognition or institutional backing until the foundation of the Royal Institute of Amazigh Culture (IRCAM) in 2001, a watershed event in the

⁴⁷ *La Constitution*, Secrétariat Général du Gouvernement, July 29, 2011, www.sgg.gov.ma/Portals/0/constitution/constitution_2011_Fr.pdf.

⁴⁸ Stéphanie Pouessel, “Writing as Resistance: Berber Literature and the Challenges Surrounding the Emergence of a Berber Literary Field in Morocco,” *Nationalities Papers: The Journal of Nationalism and Ethnicity* 40.3 (2012), 373.

⁴⁹ Aḥmad Amāzāl, *Amānār: shi’r maghribī shilhī* (Rabat: al-Maṭba‘ah al-Markaziyyah, 1968).

⁵⁰ Muḥammad Ufqīr and Aḥmad al-Munādī, *Bībliyūgrāfiyā al-ibdā‘ al-adabī al-amāzīghī bi-l-maghrib* (Rabat: IRCAM, 2012), 5.

⁵¹ Gonzalo Fernandez Parrilla, “Morocco,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Arab Novelistic Traditions*, ed. Wail Hassan (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 351.

recognition of the Amazigh cultural heritage. The IRCAM promotes the publication of Amazigh literature in several genres, including poetry, short stories, novels, and plays. It has also played a decisive role in consolidating Amazigh literature's transition from its earlier status as an oral literature to its current status as a written literature. As part of this project, the IRCAM has organized conferences on the history of Amazigh literature and published several works on the same topic in Amazigh, Arabic, and French.⁵² In one such publication, the Moroccan critic Muḥammad Aqdād chides earlier literary historians, such as 'Abd Allāh Kannūn, for failing to account for the place of Amazigh literature in Moroccan literature. On this point, Aqdād writes: "Among the most important literatures that have shaped the Moroccan literary and cultural scene, we find Amazigh literature."⁵³ As Aqdād's quote indicates, many of the new histories of Amazigh literature criticize the long-standing emphasis on Morocco's "Arab-Islamic identity" without abandoning the nationalist framework that animated earlier works of literary history.

The recent efforts to promote linguistic and cultural pluralism in Morocco have also opened up space for the emergence of a new literature in *Dārījah* (Moroccan Arabic).⁵⁴ Although *Dārījah* is one of the main languages of everyday life in Morocco, it has often been neglected in debates about Moroccan literature. This neglect stems, at least in part, from a widespread

⁵² See, for example, *La littérature amazighe. Oralité et écriture* (Rabat: IRCAM, 2004). Many of the IRCAM's publications use the Tifinagh alphabet, an ancient script that the IRCAM has helped to revive as part of its efforts to standardize the Amazigh language. For debates over the standardization of the Amazigh language, see Dris Soulaimani, "Writing and rewriting Amazigh/Berber identity: Orthographies and language ideologies," *Writing Systems Research* (2015), doi:10.1080/17586801.2015.1023176.

⁵³ Muḥammad Aqdād, "al-Tarīkh li-l-adab al-maghribī bayna al-kā'in wa-al-mumkin," *Ta'rīkh al-adab al-amāzighī: Madkhal naẓarī*, ed. Muḥammad Aqdād (Rabat: IRCAM, 2005), 69.

⁵⁴ We build here on Alexander Elinson, "Writing oral and literary culture: The case of the contemporary Moroccan *zajal*", in *The Politics of Written Language in the Arab World*, ed. Jacob Høigilt and Gunvor Mejdell (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 190–211. See also Murād al-Qādirī's work on the aesthetics of the *zajal* in *Jamāliyyat al-kitābah fī al-qaṣīdah al-zajaliyyah al-maghribiyyah al-ḥadīthah* (Fez: Mu'assasat Nādī al-Kitāb bi-l-Maghrib, 2012).

assumption, among Moroccan writers and scholars, that *Dārijah* is not a suitable vehicle for literary expression, and that *Dārijah* lacks the precision and eloquence of Standard Arabic (*al-fuṣḥā*).⁵⁵ In recent decades, several Moroccan writers have challenged this longstanding belief and have promoted literary uses of *Dārijah*.

Of particular importance in this regard has been the contemporary resurgence of the *zajal*, a form of poetry using Moroccan Arabic. The *zajal* dates back to al-Andalus (where its practitioners included such luminaries as Ibn al-Khaṭīb), but its contemporary iteration took off in the 1970s, when a vibrant school of poets came on the scene, building on the *zajal* and on another poetic genre that uses Moroccan Arabic, the *malḥūn*.⁵⁶ One of those poets, Aḥmad Lamsiyyaḥ, published in 1976 the first complete collection of *zajal* poetry in the modern era: *Riyāḥ... allatī sa-ta'tī* (The Winds of... that Will Come).⁵⁷ Since then, over three hundred collections of *zajal* have been published, according to a recent bibliography.⁵⁸ Along the way, the new *zajal* has slowly gained recognition from major Moroccan institutions. A milestone came in 1992, when the journal *Āfāq*, published by the Moroccan Writers' Union, devoted a special issue to the contemporary *zajal* that featured an introduction by Lamsiyyaḥ. Other leading voices in the contemporary *zajal* scene include Idrīs Misnāwī and Nuhād Bin 'akīda. While these writers have gained fame as proponents of the *zajal*, a genre that has experienced a new life in the age of

⁵⁵ The origins and implications of these assumptions are discussed in Alexander Elinson, "Dārija and Changing Writing Practices in Morocco," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 45.4 (2013), 715-730; and Dominique Caubet, "Darija and the Construction of 'Moroccanness,'" in *Identity and Dialect Performance: A Study of Communities and Dialects*, ed. Reem Bassiouney (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 99-124.

⁵⁶ The *malḥūn* genre in *Dārijah* can be traced back to the sixteenth century. Critics such as Yaqṭīn have argued that the *malḥūn* is the genuinely Moroccan genre. See Yaqṭīn, 24.

⁵⁷ Elinson, "Writing," 198.

⁵⁸ Muḥammad Yaḥyā Qāsimī, *al-Shi'r al-maghribī al-mu'āṣir (1923-2016)* (Rabat: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfah, 2016).

the Internet, they have also pushed the literary uses of *Dārijah* into new forms.⁵⁹ For instance, Misnāwī has published several novels in *Dārijah*, while Nuhād Bin‘akīda has tested the boundaries between the written and the spoken word by releasing sound recordings of *zajal* texts.⁶⁰

These figures have not only helped to develop the contemporary *zajal* but have also challenged longstanding ideas about the cultural and sociolinguistic status of *Dārijah*. Countering the entrenched view that *Dārijah* does not have the same expressive power as Standard Arabic, Misnāwī has written that *Dārijah* is “the most fertile, most lofty, most pure, most eloquent [*aḡṣaḡ*], and most simple Arabic dialect.”⁶¹ Bin‘akīda, for her part, has asserted, “I believe that Moroccan Arabic is our true language. The Moroccan *zajal* is the historical register [*dīwān*] of the Moroccans.”⁶² Here, Bin‘akīda frames her challenge to Standard Arabic in terms of linguistic authenticity. She suggests that *Dārijah*, as the primary language of everyday life in Morocco, is best suited to capture Moroccaness.

Alongside literature in Amazigh and *Dārijah*, the popular culture of the Western Sahara has also emerged as a crucial element in constructing a new Moroccaness, as outlined in the 2011 Moroccan constitution. Although the recent efforts to integrate Sahrawi culture have precedents that date back at least to al-Jarārī’s work in the 1970s, *Ḥassāniyyah* (colloquial Arabic from the Sahara) and the popular culture of the Sahara have gained visibility over the past decade as relevant cultural and literary elements of Morocco. Under the aegis of the new constitution, a process of nationalizing *Ḥassānī* poetry, music, and folklore as a regional

⁵⁹ For the Internet’s role in the *zajal* revival, see al-Qādirī, 8.

⁶⁰ Elinson, “Writing,” 201–205.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Elinson, “Writing,” 202.

⁶² Qtd. in Elinson, “Writing,” 206.

Moroccan minority culture is taking place. This process is illustrated by a recent boom in works published on the popular literature of the Sahara.⁶³

Furthermore, against the background of four decades of unresolved political and territorial conflict in the Western Sahara, a new symbolic fight for cultural legitimacy is taking place in Morocco and beyond. The culture of the Sahara, especially the oral Arabic *Ḥassānī* culture, is also being claimed, of course, by Sahrawis in exile and in the diaspora. Many works of Sahrawi literature have been published in Algeria by the Sahrawi Ministry of Culture in cooperation with the Algerian Ministry of Culture.⁶⁴ In addition, a clearly articulated tradition of Sahrawi literature and criticism written in Spanish has emerged among the Sahrawi diaspora in Spain. An illustrative example is Bahia Mahmud Awah's (Bāhiyah Maḥmūd Awāh) *La literatura del Sáhara Occidental* (The Literature of Western Sahara, 2009). In that work, Awah constructs Sahrawi literary identity around two main pillars: the use of the popular *Ḥassānī* literary tradition and the use of the (once colonial and now diasporic) Spanish language.⁶⁵ Sahrawi literature, like Moroccan literature, is thus torn between competing languages, colonial legacies, and political geographies.

Diasporic Moroccan Literatures

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the Moroccan Writers' Union convened a series of conferences and publications under the motto "al-Hijrah wa-l-ibdā'" (Migration and Creativity)

⁶³ Examples include Ibrāhīm al-Ḥaysan, *al-Shi'r al-sha'bī al-ḥassānī* (Casablanca: al-Markaz al-Thaqāfī al-'Arabī, 2013); and Būzīd al-Ghalā, *Dirāsāt fī al-ma'thūr al-sha'bī al-ḥassānī* (Rabat: Rabat net Maroc, 2013).

⁶⁴ These works are mostly collections of poetry in Arabic and *Ḥassānī*, such as 'Alāl al-Dāf's *Min yanābī' al-thaqāfah* (Reghaia: Manshūrāt Wizārat al-Thaqāfah bi-l-Jumhūriyyah al-'Arabiyyah al-Ṣaḥarāwiyyah al-Dīmuqrāṭiyyah, 2013).

⁶⁵ Bahia Mahmud Awah, *La literatura del Sáhara Occidental* (Madrid: Bahia Mahmud Awah, 2009).

Con formato: Español (España)

that sought to address “Moroccan literature in whatever place and language,” as one of the conference participants put it.⁶⁶ Undergirding this initiative was the bold assumption that “Moroccan literature” was no longer defined by a specific place or language. The initiative soon found echoes in other projects promoted by major Moroccan institutions. For instance, in 2009, the Moroccan Ministry of Culture published Muḥammad Yahyā Qāsimī’s *al-Adab al-maghribī al-mu’āṣir (1926–2007)* (Contemporary Moroccan Literature, 1926–2007), whose treatment of Moroccan literature’s “different genres and various languages” encompassed works not only in Arabic and French, but also in Amazigh, Spanish, and English.⁶⁷ Such official recognition of greater linguistic diversity in Moroccan literature not only reflects the broad geographic scope of the Moroccan diaspora in the twenty-first century, but it also signals an increasingly capacious view of Moroccanity, one that is no longer firmly tethered to a specific territory or a monolithic historical narrative. Can “Moroccan literature,” as a unitary concept, survive under the pressures of such geographic and linguistic dispersion? We turn here to this question, taking into account some of the ways in which writers of the diaspora, along with institutions and critics, have articulated their (often vexed) relationships to the unitary “Arab-Islamic” identity that underwrote early visions of Moroccan literature.

Our aim here is not to demonstrate or promote an essential or inherent notion of Moroccanity, nor is it to defend a model of Moroccan literature based on ethnic criteria.⁶⁸ Instead, we ask: what are the conditions that make it possible to claim a given text as a piece of “Moroccan literature” or to describe an author as “Moroccan,” especially in a historical moment

⁶⁶ Abdallah Mdarhri-Aloui, “Tendances de l’écriture dans les œuvres des romanciers marocains résidant à l’étranger,” in *al-Hijrah wa-l-ibdā’* (Rabat: Ittihad Kuttāb al-Maghrib, 2010), 38.

⁶⁷ Qāsimī, *al-Adab*, 3. Qāsimī also includes works in Dutch and Italian in *al-Shi’r*, 10.

⁶⁸ We draw inspiration here from a similar caveat in Hartman, xiii.

characterized by the increasing prominence of writers who live outside Morocco and who publish in several languages? It would seem that Moroccan literature, in its diasporic dimension, is no longer defined by a predetermined language or a specific set of territorial or historical imaginaries. Rather, Moroccan literature has become a strategic *position* that may be claimed, deployed, or imposed by diverse actors in diverse settings. How, then, do writers of the Moroccan diaspora negotiate and express their affiliation to the malleable idea that we are calling “Moroccan literature”? And to what extent is the label of “Moroccan literature” claimed by the writers themselves, rather than applied from the outside (by editors, readers, critics, journalists, and so on)? There are varying answers that can be given to these questions, revealing important and ongoing debates about the contours of Moroccan culture and, more broadly, about the tenability of national literary categories in an age of transnational flows.

One of the most exciting Moroccan diasporic writers to emerge on the literary scene in recent years is Laylā al-‘Alamī (Laila Lalami, b. 1968), who has published several acclaimed novels, while also contributing essays and opinion pieces to such venues as *The Washington Post*, *The Nation*, and *The New York Times*. One of the particularities of Lalami’s literary trajectory is that she writes in English, even though she was brought up in an Arabic-speaking household in Rabat and educated in Moroccan schools where the dominant languages were French and Arabic.

Lalami began writing in English after she moved to the United States in her mid-twenties to pursue a Ph.D. in linguistics. In an essay published in 2009, Lalami explains the thought process that led her from French, the language of her earliest literary experiments, to English, the language in which she has become an acclaimed author:

I spent most of my days [while in graduate school] working on research articles and conference papers that had to be written and delivered in English, which made me think even more about the relationship between Arabic and French in Morocco. French was not just a prominent language in Morocco. It was the language of power; an indicator of social class; a means to include or exclude people. The education I had received had emphasized the importance of French to the detriment of Arabic. ... The role of French in my life became clearer. Writing in French came at a cost; it inevitably brought with it a colonial baggage that I no longer wanted to carry. ... Because English had not been forced upon me as a child, it seemed to give me a kind of salutary distance. The baggage that, to me, seemed inherent in the use of French to tell a Moroccan story seemed to lessen when I used English to tell the same story.⁶⁹

What is striking here is that Lalami describes the English language as a gateway for telling “a Moroccan story” in a new way, one that is not encumbered by the “colonial baggage” of French. For Lalami, then, the decision to write in English was not just the result of a specific migration experience, but also the sign of an attempt to overcome the French-Arabic binary that had defined her education and upbringing in Morocco. Lalami suggests that writing in English is not a departure from her Moroccan roots; rather, it is a choice that freed her to discover new stories about Morocco by side-stepping the language debates that have dogged North African literatures since the 1960s.

As the case of Laila Lalami shows, the emergence of Moroccan diasporic literature in new languages has not only brought Morocco to the attention of new audiences but has also shed

⁶⁹ Laila Lalami, “So to Speak,” *World Literature Today*, Sept. 2009, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/so-speak-laila-lalami>.

light on experiences that were previously absent or marginalized in Moroccan literature. This trend is particularly noticeable in the growing phenomenon of Moroccan writers of Amazigh origin who write in Catalan.⁷⁰ A number of demographic, historical, and institutional forces have contributed to this phenomenon. Catalonia is home to the largest Moroccan community in Spain, and a large portion of this community comes from the Rif region, where Amazigh culture predominates.⁷¹ In response to the growing Amazigh presence in Catalonia, the Catalan government has stepped up its efforts to bring visibility to Amazigh culture. These efforts came to a head in March 2002, when the parliament of Catalonia issued a resolution “in support of the identity, language, and culture of the Amazigh people”—the only government resolution of its kind in Europe.⁷²

These factors have certainly contributed to the recent boom of authors of Moroccan origin who write in Catalan. The most famous figure in this emerging literary scene is Najat El Hachmi, who was born in Nador in 1979 and immigrated to Catalonia at the age of eight. El Hachmi rose to fame when her first novel, *L'últim patriarca* (The Last Patriarch, 2008), won the Ramon Llull Prize, the most prestigious award for a work of literature in Catalan. Before publishing her first novel, El Hachmi wrote a memoir in Catalan, *Jo també sóc catalana* (I Too Am Catalan, 2004), in which she reflected on her migration experience and on her complex positioning between the languages and national imaginaries of Spain and Morocco.

⁷⁰ For a helpful overview of this phenomenon, see Cristián H. Ricci, *¡Hay moros en la costa! Literatura marroquí fronteriza en castellano y catalán* (Madrid: Iberoamericana, 2014), 217–245. Ricci’s work also offers an introduction to Moroccan literature written in Spanish.

⁷¹ Ibid. See also Mohand Tilmatine, “L’enseignement de l’amazigh en Catalogne: bilan et perspectives,” in *Langue maternelle et diaspora maghrébine*, ed. Moha Ennaji (Fez: Centre Sud Nord, 2014), 65–88.

⁷² “Resolució 1197/VI del Parlament de Catalunya, sobre el suport a la identitat, la llengua i la cultura del poble amazic,” www.parlament.cat/activitat/bopc/06b286.pdf#page=15.

In an illuminating passage from the memoir, El Hachmi explains the decision she made to study Arabic at the University of Barcelona. The topic of language leads her to an imaginary dialogue with her son:

And you, son?... Will you want to learn Arabic, even if by muddling along through the dictionary and irregular roots? In the end, it's not even the language of your parents, it's the language of the oppressors in a kingdom where Amazigh has always been considered second-rate, nothing more than an oral language—barbarians [*bàrbars*], they call us. Will you feel hurt the day that you return to Morocco, and those who hold power speak to you in the language of the prophet, the language of the king? Surely, they will look down on our sounds, but this sensation won't be unfamiliar to you. Your other mother tongue, Catalan, was, in other times, persecuted and disdained. It's not for nothing that your mother feels them to be two sister languages.⁷³

Calling Catalan and Amazigh “sister languages,” El Hachmi suggests a structural parallel between the place of Catalan culture in Spain and the place of Amazigh culture in Morocco. Both cultural traditions have been, in El Hachmi's view, victims of an oppressive centralizing government. Thus, El Hachmi not only depicts the Catalan language as a vehicle for communicating with readers in her adopted home, but also claims it as a tool to shine a light on processes of oppression and marginalization in Morocco. Throughout this section of her memoir, El Hachmi stresses the importance of her son's maintaining ties with Morocco. But El Hachmi's Morocco is a far cry from the one that 'Abd Allāh Kannūn envisioned when he placed Morocco squarely “in the framework of Arabness and Islam.”⁷⁴ El Hachmi's Morocco is one that speaks

⁷³ Najat El Hachmi, *Jo també sóc catalana* (Barcelona: Columna, 2004), 27.

⁷⁴ Kannūn, *al-Nubūgh al-maghribī*, 1:18.

back against the power that Moroccan elites have invested in their country's "Arab-Islamic" identity.

Laila Lalami and Najat El Hachmi could both be considered leading examples of "Moroccan diasporic literature," but the two writers have reacted very differently to the "Moroccan" label that has often accompanied their work. The Moroccan press frequently refers to Lalami using descriptors such as "a Moroccan voice," "a Moroccan pen," and "the Moroccan novelist, settled in California."⁷⁵ These designations clearly identify Lalami as "Moroccan," even as they acknowledge that she lives in the United States and writes in a language that has not, until very recently, been considered part of the Moroccan literary tradition. The implication is that, from a Moroccan perspective, the domain of Moroccan literature now extends to the work of all writers of Moroccan origin, regardless of their geographic location or the language in which they publish.

Lalami, for her part, has frequently embraced her Moroccan identity. In a recent interview, while speaking about her latest novel, *The Other Americans* (2019), Lalami observed: "I'm Moroccan, my protagonist is Moroccan, and I wanted this Moroccan family to be at the center of the story."⁷⁶ The comment draws attention to Lalami's status as a Moroccan writer who writes about Moroccan protagonists in English. Yet, it is also important to note that the comment came in the context of a discussion that took place in English about a novel called *The Other*

⁷⁵ We have taken these phrases from an illustrative sampling of Moroccan press coverage of Lalami and her work, including "La romancière marocaine Laila Lalami nominée au National Book Award," *Médias24*, Sept. 25, 2019; "Laila Lalami: une plume marocaine qui dérange Donald Trump," *Bladi*, May 14, 2019; "Laila Lalami: Une voix marocaine en Oregon," *Bladi*, Oct. 31, 2005.

⁷⁶ Qtd. in Jocelyn Frelier, "Cultivating Empathy and Humility: A Conversation with Laila Lalami," *World Literature Today*, Autumn 2019, <https://www.worldliteraturetoday.org/2019/autumn/cultivating-empathy-and-humility-conversation-laila-lalami-jocelyn-frelier>.

Código de campo cambiado

Americans—a novel in which characters from diverse backgrounds come together in California. Given this context, it would seem that Lalami, by asserting her Moroccan identity, is positioning herself as a cultural translator between her country of origin and her adopted country.⁷⁷ As such, Lalami's claim of a Moroccan identity serves multiple purposes. On the one hand, it marks her cultural affiliation with Morocco; on the other, it authorizes her to interpret Moroccan culture and Moroccan subjects for an English-speaking (and mostly non-Moroccan) audience. The fact that these purposes are not mutually exclusive is yet further evidence that Moroccan literature today is not a fixed essence but rather a malleable position that is available to be claimed and deployed in response to different circumstances.

Najat El Hachmi represents a different embodiment of Moroccan diasporic literature. When news broke that El Hachmi had won the prestigious Ramon Llull prize in 2008, the Spanish press repeatedly referred to her as “a young Moroccan writer” or “a writer of Moroccan origin.”⁷⁸ Likewise, the Moroccan press identified El Hachmi with such phrases as “a young Moroccan author who lives in Granollers.”⁷⁹ Nevertheless, in her first meeting with the press after she was announced as the award's winner, El Hachmi pushed back against these labels and declared, “I'm not a symbol of anything.”⁸⁰ Since making that defiant statement, El Hachmi has

⁷⁷ The role of cultural translator is one that has been exercised by many Arab American writers, as Wail S. Hassan has shown in *Immigrant Narratives: Orientalism and Cultural Translation in Arab American and Arab British Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷⁸ See, for instance, Marcos Torío, “Najat El Hachmi logra el XVIII premio Ramon Llull con *L'últim patriarca*,” *El Mundo*, Feb. 1, 2008, <https://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2008/02/01/baleares/1201857699.html>; Israel Punzano Sierra, “He intentado alejarme de unos orígenes que duelen,” *El País*, Feb. 2, 2008, https://elpais.com/diario/2008/02/02/cultura/1201906804_850215.html.

⁷⁹ “Najat El Hachmi remporte le prix Ramon Llull,” *Le Matin*, Mar. 5, 2008, https://lematin.ma/express/2008/L-ultim-Patriarca_Najat-El-Hachmi-remporte-le-prix-Ramon-Llull/86844.html.

⁸⁰ Qtd. in Israel Punzano Sierra, “No soy un símbolo de nada,” *El País*, Feb. 1, 2008, https://elpais.com/diario/2008/02/01/catalunya/1201831660_850215.html.

frequently expressed frustration about being labeled a “Moroccan” or “immigrant” writer. For example, in a 2008 interview with the Spanish newspaper *El País*, El Hachmi said, “When you’ve spent 20 years living in a place, it is very tiresome that people still consider you a foreigner. ... I feel Catalan, period.”⁸¹ El Hachmi’s frustration is symptomatic of a dilemma faced by many diasporic writers, who often have to respond to ethnic, national, religious, or racial labels that are imposed on them by publishers, critics, journalists, or readers.⁸²

How should we interpret Lalami and El Hachmi’s divergent responses to the “Moroccan” label that has often been ascribed to them and to their literary works? They are, at least in part, illustrations of the diverse reactions that individual writers have to the categories of collective identity that are fitfully associated with them. They are also reactions to political and cultural dynamics that are specific to the Moroccan context. For example, it seems relevant that El Hachmi was born in the Rif, a region that has long been a site of contestation against the authority of the central Moroccan government. Moreover, El Hachmi’s first language, Amazigh, is a language that, until recently, was not recognized as an official language of Morocco—or as a legitimate language for the expression of “Moroccan literature.” Lalami, in contrast, comes from an elite Arabic- and French-speaking milieu in the capital city of Rabat. In other words, Lalami and El Hachmi encounter Morocco—and the category of “Moroccan literature”—from very different perspectives, marked by language, region, and class.

It is too early to tell whether the emerging literatures of the Moroccan diaspora will resolve any of these longstanding tensions, or whether they will merely reflect them in new languages and from new geographic positions. Likewise, it is unclear whether “Moroccan

⁸¹ Qtd. in Punzano Sierra, “He intentado.”

⁸² Mersal addresses this problem in “Eliminating.”

literature,” a national category, can survive by transforming itself into a transnational, multilingual, and multiethnic category. At first glance, it would seem that the national framework is merely a drag on this wide-ranging enterprise. Nevertheless, over the course of the last century, Moroccan literature has shown a remarkable ability to reinvent and reconstitute itself by absorbing cultural forces that initially appeared to pose intractable challenges. In this sense, the unfolding story of Moroccan literature—with its shifting definitions, imaginaries, and sites of production—is not only a good place for tracking broader debates about modern Morocco; it is also a parable about the state of the nation as a framework for cultural analysis in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion

In one of his many visionary reflections on Moroccan culture, Abdelkebir Khatibi argued: “We Maghribis took fourteen centuries to learn Arabic (nearly), more than a century to learn French (nearly), and from time immemorial, we have not known how to write Berber. Which means that bilingualism and multilingualism are not recent developments in this region.”⁸³ Khatibi suggests here that among Moroccans themselves, multilingualism is not the exception but rather the norm. But the same cannot be said of scholarship on Moroccan literature, which has often been divided along linguistic lines. Yet, in recent years, there have been many changes and negotiations in scholarly and public debates about the meaning and contours of “Moroccan literature.” These negotiations have taken into account cultural debates that emerged around the use of French in the early post-independence period, but they have increasingly also centered on the emergence of Moroccan literatures (articulated as such) in new languages, both indigenous and diasporic. The

⁸³ Abdelkebir Khatibi, *Maghreb Pluriel* (Paris: Denoël, 1983), 179.

shifting definitions of Moroccan literature reflect broader shifts in the understanding of what it means to be “Moroccan.” In this sense, literary historiography, as we have tried to show in this essay, is a resonant site for tracking ongoing debates about the history, contours, and limits of national cultures, in Morocco and beyond.