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Migration and the Foreign in Contemporary Spanish Poetry: El sueño de Dakhla (Poemas de Umar Abass) by Manuel Moya

Abstract

Many critical studies have addressed the issue of immigration in contemporary Spanish narrative and film, but far fewer have analyzed this topic within the context of poetry. The representation of immigrant experience in poetic texts is significant not only because poetic works have received less attention, but also because of the significance of poetry within North African and Islamic culture. Manuel Moya's recent award-winning collection places the question of North African immigration as a central concern. The text purports to offer a compilation of poetry produced by the Western Saharan immigrant Umar Abass, who currently resides in Madrid. The work focuses on the experience of exile, and employs the poetic *yo* to describe exilic longing and explore the bonds of friendship. What the text does not mention, however, is that Abass, far from being a Saharan immigrant, is in fact a pseudonym employed by Moya. The poetic *yo* thereby elides the silence of the immigrant community through a veiled pseudonymic existence. This study analyzes what such identification between the poetic *yo* and the immigrant other signifies in the context of changing migration patterns and cultural frameworks in contemporary Spain.

Keywords

immigration, poetry, Manuel Moya, North Africa, Western Sahara, exile, poetic *yo*, friendship, other, identity

Migration and the Foreign in Contemporary Spanish
Poetry: *El sueño de Dakhla (Poemas de Umar Abass)* by
Manuel Moya

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Changing flows of immigration in contemporary Spain have led to a heightened interest in cultural production dealing with immigrants and Spanish cultural identity. This trend has perhaps been most evident in film, with numerous critical studies of works like *Las cartas de Alou* (1990) 'Letters from Alou,' *Bwana* (1996), *Flores de otro mundo* (1999) 'Flowers from Another World' and *Princesas* 'Princesses' (2005). Yet narratives have also received attention through critical studies such as Tabea Alexa Linhard's analysis of *Inmenso Estrecho* (2005) 'Immense Strait,' the first Spanish anthology focused solely on immigration narratives, and Daniela Flesler's *The Return of the Moor: Spanish Responses to Contemporary Moroccan Immigration* (2008). Far fewer studies, however, have addressed the issue of immigration in contemporary Spanish poetry, yet poets, like novelists and cinematographers, have also begun incorporating changing migration patterns into their works.¹ Exploring poetic representations of immigration is important in part because the field has been underrepresented, but also because poetic representations of immigrant experience are often produced by non-immigrant nationals. Several issues surface when native cultural producers attempt to represent immigrants, including a concern for how authors voice and conceive of the immigrant "other." The voicing of the other is particularly significant within the context of poetry, which often employs the lyrical *yo* 'I,' and thus offers a unique space for representing (or subverting) contemporary subjectivities.

Manuel Moya's recent award-winning poetry collection *El sueño de Dakhla (Poemas de Umar Abass)* (2008) 'Dream of Dakhla (Poems of Umar Abass)' places the question of immigrant voices and voicing as a central concern. The text purports to offer a

compilation of poetry produced by the Western Saharan immigrant Umar Abass, who currently resides in Madrid. The work focuses on the experience of exile and employs the poetic *yo* to describe exilic longing and explore the bonds of friendship. It quotes from Rumi and Hafiz, as well as Juan Ramón Jiménez and Seamus Heaney, situating itself within Islamic as well as Spanish and transnational poetic traditions. What the text does not mention, however, is that Abass, far from being a Saharan immigrant, is in fact a pseudonym employed by Moya. The poetic *yo* thereby elides the silence of the immigrant community through a veiled pseudonymous existence. This study analyzes what such identification between the poetic *yo* and the immigrant other signifies in the context of changing migration patterns and cultural frameworks in contemporary Spain.

The title of Moya's text, *El sueño de Dakhla* or *Dream of Dakhla*, refers to the Western Saharan coastal city that served as the provincial capital under Spanish colonial rule. Originally termed "Río de Oro" 'River of Gold' and then "Villa Cisneros," Dakhla was first controlled by Spain in 1885 when the nation had lost most of its other territories and was turning to Africa to reassert its colonial legacy (Hodges 95). Moya's title thus inserts the text into Spain's colonial past, and the work extends these connections as early as the second poem, whose title, "Tindouf," refers to a refugee camp where more than 100,000 Saharais fled in 1976 after Spain's withdrawal from the region (Zunes and Mundy 126). Spain had promised a referendum of self-determination for the Saharai people, but instead turned the territories over to Morocco and Mauritania, which have been battling Saharai independence movements for control ever since (Jensen). The poem thus signals the no-man's land inhabited by former Spanish colonial subjects who find themselves pawns in a battle between national interests competing for control of the Maghreb. Moya's poem introduces a dialogue between the poetic narrator and texts written by actual Saharai refugees who belong to an organization called "Generación de la amistad saharai" 'Generation of Saharai Friendship' and write poetry in Spanish about the plight of the Saharai people ("Generación"). Moya condenses the original works while adding provocative differences in perspective. Indeed, these subtle changes reveal the ghosts of

Spain's imperial legacy as it becomes voiced through Moya's poetic narrator. Consider, for example, the emphasis on the owner of the land in the first half of Moya's poetic variation:

Tindouf

(dos variaciones)

[variación de un poema de Alí Salem Iselmu]

Si alguna vez cruzas la raya de mi tierra,
 recuerda que su dueño no está allí,
 sino al otro lado de esas dunas que avanzan,
 como camello que espera
 cobijado de la tormenta [...]. (10)

Tindouf

(two variations)

[variation of a poem by Alí Salem Iselmu]

If some time you cross the line of my land,
 remember that its owner is not there,
 but on the other side of those dunes that advance
 like a camel that waits
 sheltered from the storm [...].²

The poem begins with the conditional “si” ‘if,’ emphasizing the uncertainty of being able to enter this land of violently contested borders. As the first verse continues, the notion of crossing “la raya de mi tierra” ‘line of my land’ alludes to the arbitrary marks drawn on paper to delineate political boundaries. In the second verse, Moya's speaker addresses the issue of ownership, reminding all potential visitors that “su dueño no está allí” (10) ‘the owner is not there.’ However, the final three verses affirm the existence of an owner, who is “al otro lado” (10) ‘on the other side,’ beyond the force of foreboding natural elements, like a camel that waits out a storm. Here the poet employs a trope that will recur throughout the rest of the collection. He uses simile (or at times metaphor) to connect a longing for return with stereotypical desert scenes such as sand dunes, camels, and storms. Moya's variation implies the return of the “owner,” ostensibly offering a hopeful future for Saharai refugee subjects, but also recalling Spain's history as a former “dueño” that

also resides “al otro lado.” Indeed, a close look at the original poem further highlights the colonial ghosts present in Moya’s version.

The original poem to which Moya’s text responds is called “Tiris,” written by Ali Salem Iselmu, a Saharai refugee who currently resides in Spain. It is instructive to compare Iselmu’s biography with the pseudonymous biography Moya offers at the end of *El sueño de Dakhla* for his poetic narrator. Iselmu, like Moya’s narrator, was born in Western Sahara, in the city of Dakhla, while it was under Spanish rule. Both are active contemporary poets with many publications in Spanish. One major difference, however, is that while Moya’s fictional narrator joined the armed resistance (*el Frente Polisario*) and spent time in prison, Iselmu pursued university studies in Cuba, where he received a journalism degree, and returned to the refugee camps as a radio announcer before migrating to Spain (*Um Draiga* 13). Iselmu publishes poetic works like *La música del siroco* (2008) ‘The Music of the Sirocco’ in order to draw attention to the plight of the Saharai people, and his original poem “Tiris” can be found in the anthology *Bubisher: Poesía saharai contemporánea* (2003) ‘Bubisher: Contemporary Saharai Poetry.’ While Iselmu’s poem is not included in Moya’s text, it is instructive to consider Iselmu’s poetic representation of Saharan geography and his poem’s approach to the land:

“Tiris”

Si llegas alguna vez
a una tierra lisa y blanca
acompañada de inmensas estatuas negras
y el andar pasivo de camellos y beduinos,
recuerda que existe una tierra sin amo y sin dueño
espejo y alma de todo ser inocente. (*Bubisher* 60)

“Tiris”

If you arrive some time
in a smooth, white land
accompanied by immense black statues
and the patient motion of camels and bedouins,
remember that a land exists without master and without owner
mirror and soul of all innocent beings.

Moya's "Tindouf" mirrors the form and many of the concepts found in "Tiris." Both begin with the conditional "si," and Moya's poem repeats other key terms, including "alguna vez" 'some time,' "tierra" 'land,' "camello" 'camel,' "recuerda" 'remember,' and "dueño" 'owner' (60). Both poems employ imagery related to the land; however, in "Tiris," descriptions of the Bedouin desert are more concrete. For example, the notion of a land "lisa y blanca" 'smooth and white' gives a geographical picture not present in Moya's version. The third verse also complicates stereotypical desert images by populating this white plain with "inmensas estatuas negras" 'enormous black statues,' evoking the complexity of a chessboard rather than a typical desert scene. Although in the next verse we see traditional images in the slow movement of camels and Bedouins, these images are employed not as metaphors but as physical reality. Most importantly, Iselmu's approach to the "dueño," the owner of the land, differs markedly from that implied through Moya's poetic narrator. Here the "amo" 'master' is not absent, but rather nonexistent: "recuerda que existe una tierra sin amo y sin dueño" 'remember that a land exists without master and without owner' (60). Thus while in Moya's text the term "recuerda" calls readers to remember the presence and potential return of the land's owner, what is being recalled in Iselmu's text is rather a perspective that resists ownership. Iselmu's final verse employs the metaphor "espejo y alma de todo ser inocente" 'mirror and soul of all innocent beings' to assert a connection between the unruliness of Bedouin lands and the innocent suffering of those who are victimized by the violence implied by ownership of space (60).

The two poems call for distinct types of remembering. Moya's approach reveals postcolonial ghosts in its use of stereotypical images such as camels, sand storms, and distant owners that recall ways in which Spaniards have imagined Africa and the Arab world since colonial times. Tabea Alexa Linhard notes how common such a sense of loss is in works on immigration, describing it as a profound melancholy that "blurs the boundaries between self and other (or, ego and love object) making these shiftings, at times, ungraspable" (405). Linhard argues that in order for this type of melancholia to be critical or ethical, it must recognize the loss without ever allowing it to become assimilated or resolved, and that "to do away with the

remainder would be an impossible and unethical assimilation of otherness” (405).

Yet doing away with the difference between self and other seems to be precisely one of the effects of the heteronym Moya employs when he takes on the persona of Umar Abass, creates a detailed biography for the character, and then writes as a Saharai immigrant about life in Western Sahara. Moya has used pseudonyms in other publications, such as *Cosecha Roja* ‘Red Harvest’ and *La posesión del humo* ‘The Possession of Smoke,’ both published under the name Violeta Rangel, and there is literary precedent for using a heteronym, as in the poetry of Fernando Pessoa, which Moya has translated from the Portuguese. However, in the context of immigrant voicing, the use of such a heteronym raises ethical questions such as those posited by Jo Labanyi in her introduction to the collection *Engaging with Ghosts; or, Theorizing Culture in Contemporary Spain* (2002), namely, “who stands to benefit from such cultural representations of ethnicity” (17).

It is important to question the market benefits of Moya’s appropriation of immigrant identity, particularly how Moya’s poetic yo makes nationalist and imperial language marketable through immigrant voices that somehow usurp what Isabel Santaolalla calls “Spanish mass culture[’s] ... surprising indifference to the country’s colonial history” (67). Consider, for example, the way Moya reworks the epic tradition, a genre deeply marked by territorial and imperial ambitions. Moya dedicates several poems to Firdausi, the great tenth-century poet most revered for writing Persia’s national epic. Moya’s poem, entitled “Recordando a Firdausi” ‘Remembering Firdausi,’ remembers the great Persian poet by employing epic language to envision a literary adventure:

Ya de tempranas rosas ...

Hafiz

He de caminar por senderos hostiles, tortuosos,
cuando no campo a través o por sedientas arenas
a fin de evitar los sicarios.

Me oculto de los hombres. De su crueldad me oculto.

*De las primeras rosas
cubro mis cabellos*

*y alzo mi copa
junto a los míos
me río entonces
de los sultanes
y de su necia pompa.*

Cuando al fin llego a alguna parte, me digo:
hasta aquí has llegado.
Cuando algo me corta el paso,
lo rodeo y prosigo. Podría entregarme
y argüir que erré los versos,
que en mi ánimo no estuvo el ofender,
mas no lo hago, a qué hacerlo.
A casa llegaré si he de llegar, cuando tenga que llegar,
porque tengo que llegar,
pero no atajando, pero no retrocediendo.
De las primeras rosas... (27)

“Remembering Firdausi”

As of early roses ...

Hafiz

I am to walk through hostile paths, torturous,
if not through fields or thirsty sands
trying to avoid the assassins.
I hide from men. From their cruelty I hide.

*Of the first roses
I adorn my hair
and raise my cup
together with my loved ones
I laugh then
at the sultans
and their stupid pomp.*

When at last I arrive some place, I'll tell myself
this is it - you have arrived.
When something intercepts me,
I'll go around and continue. I could surrender
and argue that I missed the verses
that I did not intentionally offend,

but I will not do it, why do it.
I will arrive home if I am to arrive, when I have to arrive,
because I have to arrive,
but not taking short-cuts, but not retreating.
Of the first roses...

The poem begins with phrasing reminiscent of Spanish medieval texts such as the use of truncated present perfect forms like “He de caminar” ‘I am to walk’ in the first verse. The poem continues with traditional epic themes including a hero’s struggle against assassins (“a fin de evitar los sicarios”), and passage through treacherous landscapes (“senderos hostiles, tortuosos”). Yet the threat comes not from the desert landscape (“sedientas arenas”), but from men (“Me oculto de los hombres. De su crueldad me oculto”).

After setting up this epic adventure, the poem continues with a quote from Hafiz, another ancient Persian poet. Hafiz’s poem presents a scene of revelry (“y alzo mi copa”), intimacy (“junto a los míos”), and story-telling related to resistance (“me río entonces / de los sultanes / y de su necia pompa”) (27). Moya’s subsequent verses emphasize the act of narration, where the speaker is both the epic hero and a self-conscious poetic narrator. The next stanza “Cuando al fin llego a alguna parte” ‘When at last I arrive some place’ refers not only to geographical spaces mentioned in the epic tale, but also to segments of the story itself, a literary geography that presents poetic obstacles. The speaker of the poem, like the epic hero, avoids hindrances because “Cuando algo me corta el paso, / lo rodeo y prosigo. Podría entregarme, / y argüir que erré los versos / que en mi ánimo no estuvo el ofender” (27) ‘When something intercepts me / I’ll go around and continue. I could surrender / and argue that I missed the verses / that I did not intentionally offend.’ The speaker thus proceeds through the poem with as much pluck as his epic hero, and apologizes for any poetic license, any “error” or wobbling of the lyrical arrow that misses not the mortal enemy but rather the immortal verses.

The speaker plays with a range of epic traditions, the Persian in particular, but also the great epics of Spanish literature, and most importantly, the struggle of poetry as another epic feat. The last three verses speak of returning home (“A casa llegaré”) at some future date, but the emphasis is placed on never retreating, never

stopping or taking shortcuts in the story. Here the use of repetition and subjunctive mood in the phrase “si he de llegar, cuando tenga que llegar, / porque tengo que llegar” ‘if I am to arrive, when I have to arrive, / because I have to arrive’ emphasizes alternative versions or endings to future stories. Indeed, the epic genre has never relied heavily on historical accuracy. The epic is a literary tradition that creates a sense of cultural identity, and it focuses on military victory in the effort to claim cultural and often geographic spaces. While Moya’s text creates provocative intertextuality with Islamic poetic forms, the epic genre recalls nationalist and colonial aims, and it also often implies a gendered approach to the cultural other, as we shall see in the next poem.

Moya’s text addresses not only cultural but also sexual difference, and it does this through poems that refer to Islamic mystical poets known for homosocial and homosexual themes. Scenes of male friendship and homosocial bonding link the cultural otherness of the immigrant to the sexual otherness of the homosexual community. Yet while the interior otherness of homosexual relationships provides a point of connection between cultural and sexual struggles within contemporary Spain, the emphasis on male relationships and masculinity further confirms a series of colonial ghosts that haunt the way immigrant perspectives are voiced. For example, “En tanto tú y yo hermano” ‘While You and I Brother’ celebrates bonds between men, but also presents feminized and stereotypical images of Islamic religious symbols and Arabic culture:

En tanto tú y yo, hermano,
 charlamos bajo la sombra fiel
 de estas palmeras y late sobre el cielo
 un sol hambriento,
 un coro de huríes sin compasión nos llama.
 Nada saben las huríes del atardecer del mundo,
 sus largas piernas quiebran la tarde en tres mitades
 pero ellas fingen que el mundo les importa
 y quién, quién les niega nada.
 No ignoran que es la luz
 la que en ellas llame su despótica hermosura
 y a la luz se dan como la sombra al peso,

mientras tú y yo seguimos,
sentados y brindando a la sombra fiel de estas palmeras. (34)

While you and I, brother,
chat beneath the faithful shade
of these palm trees while over the sky throbs
a hungry sun,
a chorus of *houris* without compassion calls us.
The *houris* know nothing of the dusk of the world
their long legs break the afternoon in three parts
but they pretend that the world matters to them
and who, who would deny them anything.
They are not unaware that it is the light
that through them will call their despotic beauty
and they give themselves to the light as shadow to weight,
while you and I continue,
seated and toasting the faithful shade of these palms.

The poem begins “En tanto tú y yo hermano” ‘As you and I, brother,’ emphasizing distinctions between self and other (“tú y yo”) while simultaneously affirming deep interpersonal bonds (“hermano”). It sets the stage for this scene of male friendship, marking differences between subjectivities, but also softening them thematically (through brotherhood) as well as grammatically (through the use of the *nosotros*-form “charlamos” ‘we chat’). The phrase “En tanto” ‘While’ reveals that these first four verses are background, contrasting with the centerpiece of the poem. This background offers traditional (and somewhat stereotypical) images for Arabic culture, complete with a desert landscape of burning sun, palm trees, shade, and men conversing together. In verse five the foreground appears in the form of “un coro de huríes” ‘a chorus of houries’ that calls without compassion. “Huríes” refers to the famed creatures of Islamic culture that sing and greet Muslims when they arrive in Paradise, much like angels in Christian parlance. However, within western culture, “huríes” have a very troubled history of representation. They are often depicted as a harem for Muslim men after death. In this poem, the huríes are not portrayed as sexual slaves, but presented in a very negative light. Indeed, negation and negative

images dominate the central verses, with “huríes” described using terms like “sin compasión” ‘without compassion,’ “nada saben” ‘they know nothing,’ “ellas fingen” ‘they pretend,’ “quién les niega nada” ‘who would deny them anything,’ “no ignoran” ‘they are not unaware,’ and “su despótica hermosura” ‘their despotic beauty’ (34). While the men are presented in intimate fellowship, chatting under the palm and toasting each other, the “huríes” are presented as a compassionless, femme fatale chorus calling the men toward death. The “huríes” know nothing (“nada saben”) of the dusk of life or worldly toil. They merely pretend to care (“fingen”). The interrogative “quién, quién” ‘who, who’ is repeated to emphasize the despotism of the *houris*’ beauty, but it also lends a sense of disdain or denial from the poetic speaker towards those that succumb to the *houris*’ appeal. While few seem able to resist them, the poetic speaker seems to deny their power both poetically through the use of negation, and formally, by keeping the *houris* imprisoned in the middle verses, while the men escape under the shade at the edges of the poem. The speaker says that it is not their physical beauty (such as their “largas piernas” ‘long legs’) that is so attractive, but rather their association with light. The *houris* are fleeing across the sky as dusk approaches, and the image offers more resonance with the gods of ancient Greek literature than with Islamic or Koranic teachings about the *houris* or the divine. While the women are not overly sexualized, they are portrayed as despotic, compassionless receptacles of light, while the men are in another realm, brothers who carry on unchanged (“tú y yo seguimos” ‘you and I continue’). The poem is ostensibly about a relationship between men, but the feminine, as well as the cultural other, become distorted in this representation of male friendship. Many critics have noted the history of feminizing colonial spaces and cultural forms. Here, a brotherhood is affirmed, but at the expense of both Islamic religious images and positive representations of the feminine.

In the introduction to *The Black Atlantic*, Paul Gilroy notes the “instability and mutability of identities which are always unfinished, always being remade” (3). Moya’s text offers provocative representations of the mutability of identity that are worth analysis in the context of contemporary cultural movements in Spain. Indeed, exploring poetic representations of these issues is important not just

because the field has been underrepresented, but also because of the significant role of poetry in Arab and North African cultures, an important segment of Spain's immigrant population. Indeed, in Bedouin and other nomadic tribes like the Saharai, poetry has been the privileged art form. Ahdaf Soueif, one of the foremost literary critics in the Middle East, notes that for Bedouin tribes, architecture and bulky art work were not practical: "Poetry was, by necessity, the art form. [...]. They were people who were on the move. Their art was the words, which they could carry in their memories and sit down and recite" (qtd. in "In Arab World" 2). Yet such privileging of poetry was not just an ancient phenomenon. Poetry continues to be a privileged medium for cultural and political expression. Consider for example the wildly popular television program *The Prince of Poets*, which has been broadcast widely out of Abu Dhabi since 2007 and is now in its fourth season (ADACH). It is a reality show somewhat like *American Idol* in which contestants compete, but by performing original poems instead of songs. Listeners vote via cell phones and text messages, and winners become cultural icons. One recent winner, Tamim al-Barghouthi, describes why he believes poetry holds such an important place in Arab culture:

I think of poetry as a collective act, as an act of self expression not only for the individual poet but for the collective that listens to that poet and that sees in him a representative, a rare one because they seldom get somebody really to represent them. They are not represented in the parliament, they are not represented by their governments, and they are not represented almost anywhere. ("In Arab World" 1-2)

Al-Barghouthi raises the issue of representation and marks poetry as a medium of great significance. Indeed, in Western Sahara, and among the Saharai people, lack of representation and self-government are central cultural concerns. Considering contemporary cultural tensions in Spain, particularly regarding North African immigrants, it is important to consider the role of poetry in Islamic culture and the ways poetic texts in particular offer points of cultural connection perhaps not as readily available through film or narrative traditions. Moya's work inserts itself into a long tradition of Islamic poetry and creates intriguing intertextualities between

Arab, Persian, and Peninsular cultural forms. However, its approach to voicing the other, which elides differences with the self, reveals a troubling nostalgia for Spain's colonial past. This melancholy can be seen through Moya's title, in the notion of the dream or "sueño" of return to Dakhla. However, literary critics must not be lulled into this dream, but rather continue to raise questions about who can represent the immigrant, or as Linhard puts it "who has the right and the responsibility to narrate the becoming of post-national Spain?" ("Between" 400).

Notes

1 Texts like Juana Castro's *El extranjero* (2000) 'The Stranger' do this explicitly by analyzing transnational citizenship. Other authors address border crossings through translations and bilingual collaborations (see Faszer-McMahon, *Cultural Encounters in Contemporary Spain*). North African immigrants such as Bahia Mahmud Awah have published texts like *Versos refugiados* (2007) 'Refugee Verses,' marking the plight of Saharawi refugees through Spanish verse. Joanna Allan analyzes gender within Saharawi poetry in "Nationalism, Resistance, and Patriarchy: The Poetry of Saharawi Women." Works by other Saharawi poets in Spanish include Ali Salem Iselmu's *La música del siroco* (2008) and Mohamed Salem Abdelfatah Ebnú's *Voz de fuego* (2003) 'Voice of Fire.' Anthologies include *Bubisher* (2003), *Aaiún: gritando lo que se siente* (2006) 'Aaiún: Shouting What is Felt' and *Um Draiga* (2006). In addition, sub-Saharan immigrants such as Francisco Zamora Lobo have also published poetic works like *Memoria de laberintos* (1999) 'Memory of Labyrinths' offering an Equatorial Guinean immigrant perspective. Critics such as Silvia Bermúdez, Ana Rueda, Jorge Mari and Susan Martín-Márquez have also published studies on how contemporary music connects lyrical creation with race and immigration. Rueda also includes some Spanish poetry by the Moroccan poet and university professor Abderrahmán El Fathi, whose collection *Africa en versos mojados* 'Africa in Wet Verses' was set to music by Ramón Tarrío.

2 All translations are mine.

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