CULTURAL EXHIBIT

Transfrontier Writings

Literary Exhibit

Meritxell Joan Rodríguez, Ahmed Ghazali, Mohamad Bitari, Asmaa Azaizeh



Illustration by Carole Hénaff

In October 2018, on a flight from Algiers to Barcelona and after an enjoyable conversation in a mixture of French and English with the odd word of Arabic thrown-in, Neila, a Tunisian journalist, gave me a copy of *Nejma*. The memory of that moment has stayed with me because Neila's presence continues to help me comprehend the present of a Mediterranean in a state of constant transformation which, in turn, allows me to understand my place in the world. Up in the air, suspended over the middle of the sea, we talked about literature and art, identities, exchanges and mixes, violence and encounters.

Issue 10 of the literary magazine *Nejma*—named after the heroine of Kateb Yacine's homonymous novel of the same name—is dedicated to Algeria. Nejma has been published in Tangier since 2010, and in its tenth instalment it seeks to explore the "diverse perspectives" of the two most populous countries in the Maghreb to shed light on a region "full of literature, history, theatre, music and encounters", but also "linguistic tensions" [1]. Through this lens, the French and Arabic texts collected in the publication promote the conception of literature as a tool that reveals the rich artistic fabric of the region and helps us explore its frictions and hierarchies. From this standpoint, the boundaries are blurred, and categorisations cease to be rigid; borders become problematic because hybridism is foundational.

The Mediterranean is and has long been understood as a border that serves, on the one

hand, as the hard-to-define seed of Mediterranean identity and, on the other, as an exclusionary barrier, determined by (post) colonial logics. In Alice Zeniter's novel, *The Art of Losing*, Annie is a *pied-noir* who grows up in Kabylia. At school, she is taught "that the Mediterranean traverses France just as the Seine traverses Paris" [2], an idea that underlines the symbolic weight of the Algerian colony for French historiography. In a novel that spans three generations of a Harki family, Zeniter portrays the linguistic, historical and socio-cultural complexities of the relationship between France-Algeria, leading us to the realisation that it requires a depth of understanding beyond its simplifications and binarisms.

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The first part of the novel introduces us to the life of Ali, a Kabyle man who fought for the French canton in the Franco-Algerian war as a *harki*—a denomination that would become synonymous with betrayal after the conflict, in both Algeria and France. In 1962, he and his family were taken to France and accommodated in camps which, in previous decades, had been used by the French state to imprison Spanish republicans fleeing fascism and the French Jews who would be sent to their extermination under the Vichy regime. Raised under these layers of history, Ali's Algerian-born son, Hamid, will turn to Marxist ideas in his search for a way to heal the wound caused by his interstitial position. His daughter, Naïma, is the heroine of the third part of the text, and art will become her gateway to an Algeria she knows very little about, having inherited nothing but silence. In these generational leaps, we encounter linguistic modulations, memories, projections and prejudices. Question marks: What does nationhood mean? How is belonging defined and deployed? We also find absences and many losses. And by reading the novel, we improve our reading of the Mediterranean.

The title of the book is, in fact, taken from the first line of Elizabeth Bishop's poem "One Art". Zeniter incorporates the poem into her novel by having one of her characters recite a translation of it while on the move. As typified by other works of Mediterranean literature, Zeniter feeds on multiple voices and has them converse in her texts, despite them belonging to different geographies and communicating with phonemes from different languages. Bishop's verses invite us to reinterpret loss and draw on it as a source of resilience. They also ask us questions, aimed at grasping what we lose when we move, both symbolically and physically. Bishop's experiences of grief are closely linked to her travels and stays in countries other than the United States, where she was born; in Brazil she cultivated her multilingualism thanks, in large part, to translation.

Bishop registered her writing and subjectivity in the north and south of the Americas. The idea that the movement also shakes-up our conceptions of "north" and "south" and the

power relations they imply stems from her travels. On the American continent, one of the boundaries that best exemplifies the inequalities associated with this binomial is the border between the United States and Mexico. In the “north” the 1960s and 70s saw the emergence of the Chicano community civil rights movement, which aimed to dismantle the crossroads of racism, classism and colonialism to which it was subjected. The “Chicanx” categorisation appeals directly to the concepts of crossing and mixing; being situated in the margins, on the border. Those who identify themselves as Chicanx claimed the term to own its frontier-culture implications and endow it with transformative meanings. A border doesn’t necessarily have to signify exclusion or restriction. It can be thought of as a place of empowerment. The interstice in which Chicano subjects find themselves in is a privileged position for understanding the ontological hybridism we referred to above.

Mediterranean Borderlands

For anyone seeking to grasp the complexity of this way of looking at the world, reading Gloria Anzaldúa is enlightening. In 1987, she published *Borderlands/La Frontera*, a work that searches the past for the keys to understanding our syncretic present, and also questions the linear conceptions of history. It is conceived, spoken and written in a language described as “wild” because it defies the rules of academia and questions the (post)colonial legacies to which Chicanxs are connected; a “border tongue” that parallels standard English, Spanish, working-class slang, and the North-Mexican Spanish dialect. A language that is, therefore, heterogeneous and translates the heterogeneous subjectivities of its speakers. In this language, Anzaldúa positions herself as the inhabitant of a space; the Borderlands, which “exist whenever two or more cultures rub against each other; when people of different races occupy the same terrain, when the lower, middle and upper classes touch each other” [3]. Far from being comfortable terrain, the Borderlands are full of contradictions. A space of overlaps, frictions and tensions which force those who are aware of inhabiting them to question themselves constantly, in an effort to highlight the intersections that construct plural subjectivities.

On the basis of this concept, the Mediterranean can also be understood as an Anzaldunian borderland that facilitates cultural exchanges on both sides. Some academics have referred to it in these terms. The Mediterranean Sea has been described as the “Rio Grande of Europe” and even as the “liquid continent” [5]. The Mediterranean Borderlands rise from all the cultural traditions, languages, artistic practices and identities that circulate and permanently translate there. Anzaldúa believes that awareness is a crucial stage in the journey towards identifying and owning the hybridism of these spaces and the multiple subjectivities that inhabit them. In the Mediterranean, writing has become a tool that delivers this awareness, as the texts in this volume show.

Precisely because it is a space for storytelling, description, analysis, projection and questioning, because it avoids simplifications, literature is a practice of multiple belonging. It allows us to register absence and loss, even silence, and build imaginary constructs—sometimes healing; sometimes hurtful—from the mix. The Mediterranean can

also be thought of, in fact, as a wound. A sore caused by the power relations that criss-cross the regions it delimits. In *Borderlands*, Anzaldúa wrote that the border between the United States and Mexico "is an open wound where the third world rubs against the first and bleeds. And before a scab forms, it bleeds again, the sap of two worlds that come together to form a third country—a frontier culture" [6]. The Mediterranean wound is the result of migratory logics, tainted by racism, capitalism and precariousness, which determine the value of the bodies located on its two shores, based on skin colour, places of birth and the accents that accompany them. Scriptural gesture makes it possible to heal all the symbolic wounds that arise from these violences.

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The scars remain; highlighting and revealing the experiences that are not seen, that cannot be written, that are not verbalised. They challenge and invite us to continually question and problematize. The scars brand us and emphasise discontinuity. The wounded Mediterranean is also an exposed body, open to the other; a body shaped by the difference of otherness. The wounded Mediterranean that bleeds and scars is a transformed body that gives birth to another Mediterranean, to a Mediterranean other. This birth is made possible by writing, which generates wounded and open narratives that allow the silences to enter the skin of the hermetic body that seeks to be well-defined and delimited. In the Mediterranean, writing is a threshold that gives access to memories, to counter-stories that verbalise and register things that have not been named or written: new genealogies that lead us to view the region from a different perspective.

Multiplying the Mediterranean

Staying in an Algeria that is equally *other* Mediterraneans, in *Mersault, Contre-enquête*, Kamel Daoud reinterprets and, therefore, rewrites Albert Camus's *L'Étranger*. He speaks directly to it, to ask it questions and underline the silences that helped to write it. In Camus's novel, the body, wounded—and killed—by the protagonist has no name. It is deserving only of a denomination that identifies it as "the Arab". In Daoud's novel, the dead body has a presence and a name, Moussa, as well as a story. Daoud uses the figure of the brother of the "foreign" victim, to name and give existence not only to Moussa but also to what he represents: the stories of those who have never occupied a place in history, understood as a hegemonic narrative. In this sense, by interrupting the linearity of history, the author is suggesting a new way of thinking about it. Another shock to the temporalities, hierarchies and Eurocentric approaches. From his present, the narrator reveals his brother's life story to project a more complete and truer past.

The opening line of Camus's celebrated novel is "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte*". Daoud communicates his desire to respond to the novel right from the beginning: "*Aujourd'hui, M'ma est encore vivante*", says Haroun, Moussa's brother. The way Haroun refers to his mother is significant because it exemplifies how literature can become a tool that makes the mix and syncretism visible, allowing us to put different registers and languages on the same level; cultural elements registered in multiple spaces. Daoud's novel is written in French, but like the language used in *Borderlands*, it is a "wild" French. A dilated, stretched and twisted French that makes room for the sounds and twists of Arabic and Amazigh that roam the areas of Algeria where Haroun and his mother live, even if they are not necessarily explicit.

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Interestingly, Haroun speaks of his mother, and it is precisely in the word mother that we first grasp this decentralised French. As a result of the constant displacement in the Mediterranean, many people in the region write and narrate in languages other than their mother-tongue (understood as the language of their mother). The pages that follow this introduction are proof of that. These displacements modify individual, family and community language practices. As we said before, they shake up concepts often conceived as fixed, such as nationhood, and mother-tongue. What does *mother tongue* mean when the language you use to communicate with your mother is not the language that communicates the heterogeneity of your subjectivity? In writing, these tensions become the seed for thinking beyond set constructs. Thus, with a reappropriated French shaped by centuries of Algerian history, Daoud continues to push us to value ambivalence; to look at the narrative through polyhedral glasses, to question the officialness of discourses.

Plural Perspectives for a Plural Mediterranean

The texts collected in this section are multisensory; the authors have put their bodies into them. Bodies sensitive to all the experiences that run through them, captured with all of their senses. Experiences filtered through writings which solidify and leave their mark, yet, at the same time rooted in the constant transitional flow of Mediterranean magma. What follows are works of art that bring us closer to the overflowing creativity of the Mediterranean, overflowing because it transcends its edges and flanks. And they are also works of situated knowledge that provide us with elements to deepen our comprehension of the historical relationships that run through this space, to gain a little more understanding of the footprint of events that have determined and continue to determine Mediterranean identities. Texts that blur the binomials of the *self* and the community, orality and writing; reflections that challenge us because they invite us to rethink our own subjectivity, and the

life shared in different Mediterranean territories.

Ahmed Ghazali, Asmaa Azaizeh and Mohammad Bitari suggest we view literature as a space for knowledge, as a sea of dialogue; a spark that ignites prejudices but also gives us warmth because we begin to understand the Mediterranean, the *Mediterraneans*, through their original diversity.

At the end of *The Art of Losing*, Naïma returns home to France after an Algerian journey of discovery. She arrives loaded with photographs, gifts and stories collected from all her encounters in her father's country of birth, and which, at the turn of the century, is no longer the country where her grandfather fought. We see a transformed Naïma, who has unlocked the door to all the cyphers and experiences left out of her identity and silenced. The journey changes the way she looks at the territories and histories on the other side of the Mediterranean. After her search, she notes: "the Mediterranean has become a bridge once more and no longer a border" [7].

May the readings that follow refine our perspective and fill us with questions.

Collection of texts

The Sheep and the Whale
Ahmed Ghazali

Cities of Jasmine
Mohamad Bitari

Revolution on my mouth walls
Asmaa Azaizeh

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4 — White, P. (1995) Geography, literature and migration. *Writing Across Worlds: Literature and Migration* (Rusell King *et al.*). London; New York: Routledge, 1-19 (p. 8).
5 — Tamalet Talbayev, E. (2017) *The Transcontinental Maghreb: Francophone Literature across the Mediterranean*. New York: Fordham University Press (p. 51).
6 — Anzaldúa, *op. cit.* (p. 25).
7 — Zeniter, *op. cit.* (p. 499).



Meritxell Joan Rodríguez

Meritxell Joan Rodríguez holds a PhD in literary, linguistic and cultural studies from the University of Barcelona. Her thesis is entitled “Writing the In-Between: Transmediterranean Identity Constructions in the Works of Najat El Hachmi and Dalila Kerchouche”. She has worked as a translator and a teacher of languages and literature, and she currently coordinates the Gender Equality Programme at the Institute of Mediterranean Studies. She is also part of the University of Barcelona "Literary Cartographies of the Mediterranean" research group, which is registered within the UNESCO Women, Development and Cultures Chair. She has lived and studied in several countries.



Ahmed Ghazali

Ahmed Ghazali is a writer and founder of Jiwar Creació i Societat, a Barcelona-based cultural organization promoting creation and residency of artists. He pursued scientific studies in Rabat and Paris and worked as a geophysical engineer in the Sahara desert before devoting himself to playwriting. His first text, *The Sheep and the Whale*, was awarded the 2001 SACD Prize for French written drama. It has been produced in Montreal, Toronto, Montpellier, Brussels and Trier, along with numerous public readings. Since then, he has written several texts, some of which have enjoyed international success, such as *Timbuktu 52 days on camel’s back* (Spanish edition by Editorial Icaria, 2005), *Crossings* (Catalan edition in Pausa magazine), *The sky is too low* and *Mellah*. Along with writing, he works as a museologist in the design and production of museums and interpretation centres, particularly in the Arab world.



Mohamad Bitari

Mohamad Bitari is a Palestinian-Syrian poet, translator, writer and journalist. He was born in 1990 in the Palestinian refugee camp in Yarmouk, Syria. He studied in the Department of Hispanic Philology and Dramaturgy at Damascus University. In 2011, when the revolution in Syria began, he documented human rights violations in the southern neighbourhoods of the Syrian capital. He escaped from the intelligence services to Beirut. In 2013, he went to Spain and moved to Catalonia, where he studied Arabic and Hebrew Studies at the University of Barcelona. For the past eight years, he has written for various Arab newspapers, magazines and websites. He authored numerous articles on the history of Catalonia and its cultural specificity, and translated Spanish and Catalan poets. Currently, he is part of the Council of Catalan PEN Writers Persecuted: Bitari works as an Arabic teacher and as a translator of Catalan and Spanish literature. His latest book was published in 2019: *Jo soc vosaltres: sis poetes de Síria* (*I am you: six poets of Syria*).



Asmaa Azaizeh

Asmaa Azaizeh is a poet, essayist and cultural manager based in Haifa. She is founder of Poetry Yard independent initiative. In 2010, she received the Debutant Writer Award from Al Qattan Foundation for her volume of poetry *Liwa* (2011, Alahlia). She has published two other volumes of poetry: *As the woman from Lod bore me* (2015, Alahlia) and *Don't believe me if I talk of war* (2019) in Arabic, Dutch and Swedish. She has also published a bilingual poetry anthology in German and Arabic, *Unturned stone* (2017, Alahlia). Azaizeh has contributed to and participated in various journals, anthologies and poetry festivals around the world. Her poems have been translated into English, German, French, Persian, Swedish, Spanish, Greek and other languages. Currently, she works as an editor in Raseef22 newspaper. In 2012 she was the first Director of the Mahmoud Darwish Museum in Ramallah. She has worked as a cultural editor in several newspapers, a presenter on TV and radio stations and as the artistic director of the Fattoush gallery in Haifa, where she had also set up an annual book fair.