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Narrating North Africa in Europe
Review on Cristián Ricci, *New Voices of Muslim North-African Migrants
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Cristián H. Ricci's latest book engages with migrant writers and their diasporic status in the era of transnationalism, culture wars, and globalization. It is the outcome of his project on Moroccan literature, which aims at reconceptualizing the "idea of a Moroccan literature with regard to the transnational and plurilingual experiences from which it arises" (7) and broaden the field of postcolonial studies. In recognizing the complexity of Moroccan diaspora in Europe, Ricci's book encompasses a core narrative wherein issues such as gender, religion, language, race, history, and space are thematized. Thus, the book offers an insight into the complex cultural, historical, and political concerns of a cluster of narratives by a fast-growing number of Morocco-based writers belonging to migrant communities in Europe. As he overtly admits, this study targets the often-silenced plurilingualism of literatures from the Maghreb (19), which have not yet been systematically explored in diaspora and postcolonial studies (for instance, Neerlandophone or Gay Muslim literature). By adopting a trans-modern-postcolonial approach, Ricci unravels different narratives of Afro-European literature that aims at developing "key connections along lateral axes with other Moroccan literatures written in Castilian, Catalan, Dutch, and English through a trans-colonial perspective" (163).

As regards the structure of the book, it comprises five major chapters that endeavor to bring theory and analysis together. In the introductory chapter, Ricci lays the ground for what he calls a trans-modern postcolonial approach to reading Afro-European literature, especially, literature of writers in diaspora from Moroccan descent. Such approach is inspired by Ella Shohat's theory of postcolonialism - which investigates the intersection of First/Third worlds - combined with Enrique Dussel's concept of *transmodernity* and the Moroccan philosopher al-Jabri's theory of modernity and tradition. More particularly, he focuses on al-Jabri's contention that "modernity would perhaps consist in going beyond [an] understanding of tradition that is confined within tradition, in order to establish a modern understanding and a contemporary view of tradition" (al-Jabri qtd in Ricci, 13). Hence, Ricci develops this approach to dismantle the conventional center-periphery dichotomy and, in return, to bring about "multiple and interchangeable centers and peripheries, whose cultures interact with one another without the mediation of the European metropolitan centers" (11).

In the first chapter, Ricci recalls memories of al-Andalus and how this historical encounter has contributed to the negotiation of the Afro Iberian identity in Moroccan literature. Exploring contemporary writings of Moroccan diaspora, the author resorts to the scrutiny of contemporary representations and depictions of Muslim Spain - Al-Andalus - in the poetry of Abderrahman El Fathi. Ricci argues that El Fathi's poetry depicts moments in the history of Moroccan-Spanish migration that are juxtaposed: the late twentieth-century emigration from Morocco to Spain and the late fifteenth-century emigration

from the fallen Muslim sultanate of Granada to North Africa (19). Such juxtaposition, as Ricci points out, enables El Fathi to “deconstruct the concepts of purity and religious affiliation that are the basis of Spanish rejection of North African immigrants as well as the North African idealization of Europe” (20). Ricci’s reading of El Fathi’s poetry comes up with the conclusion that his poetry represents what he describes as “frontierless” literature owing to the belief that his poetry unifies both the subaltern’s voice of *pateristas* (Boat people) and *barragas* (undocumented immigrants). Not only do his works mark a yearning for al-Andalus, but they also acknowledge the “modern interpellation toward a shared economic and cultural-religious parameter” (49). Hence, the liminal poetic space penetrates the official borderline set between Spain and Morocco and creates a space where the poetic voice and perhaps the reader can feel at home.

Entitled as “Negotiating Afro-Iberian Identity in Moroccan and Riffian Literature,” the second chapter discerns Moroccan literature in Castilian. To discuss the Afro-Iberian dimension of Moroccan diasporic identity(ies) Ricci works on the narratives written by the authors who reject the idea of monolithic identities. Hence, he explores Moroccan literature in Castilian which comprises poetry, fiction, and theatre. Special emphasis is put on the impact of Amazighness and its representation beyond borders through both the Amazigh writers whose cultural identity has been refashioned as Afro-Iberian and through characterization that reflects the diasporic consciousness of migrants. Regarding Amazigh-Moroccan authors as subaltern voices of immigrants, Ricci investigates their subversive potentials to disrupt “the modern canon of the literatures of the Iberian Peninsula, as well as how hybridity discourses are able to dismantle power structures” (20). Therefore, Ricci’s commitment to these literary works written in Castilian, allows him to frame Moroccan literature within a broader context of borderland studies which foregrounds their potential to reconfigure an alternative space with European modernity from an exterior perspective.

Along with language and space, gender constitutes one of the key markers in Moroccan diaspora and literature. In this respect, through the third chapter entitled “marginal sexualities in/from Morocco and France,” Ricci sheds light on one of the unwelcomed authors in Morocco; that is, Abdullah Taii. His sexual identity and literary writing have forced him to seek solace elsewhere. His two narratives, *Salvation Army* and *An Arab Melancholia* are analyzed in the context of new diasporic voices from North Africa. Ricci problematizes the issue of sexual identity across time and space stating that Taii’s novels depict how homosexuality represents the site of a cultural and religious “war” in contemporary MENA region, and more significantly, lays bare the repression of homosexuality by the official *daxa* (83). Through this chapter the author questions binary representations and the image of the foreigner/native, along with homosexual/heterosexual practices

in migration. Ricci highlights that Taïi's narratives are deeply personal revelations. He is caught within the predicament of how "North African tradition disallows his homosexuality as Paris disavows his North African/Muslim presence" (84). What makes Abdullah Taïa's works peculiar is that he contests colonial readings of his novels rather than accentuates them. Further, his narratives target anxiety and failed desires rather than exploring issues related to race and class. Therefore, Ricci stresses that Taïi's *Salvation Army* and *An Arab Melancholia* may not be seen as political manifestos (107); but rather, radical accounts that will be likely cited in political discourse related to gay civil rights and homosexuality.

The fourth chapter shifts the reader's attention to a series of Moroccan novelists who live in diaspora, namely, Abdellakader Benali, Hafid Bouaaza, and Brick Oussaid. Their narratives, *Wedding by the Sea*, *Abdullah's Feet* and *Mountains Forgotten by God*, are studied from the perspective of language, spatiality, temporality, gender, and dislocation. Belonging to the category of Dutch authors of Moroccan descent, these narratives share certain commonalities that make their inclusion in the same chapter possible; meanwhile, they display certain differences that enrich the discussion of diasporic identities. Ricci puts emphasis on the impact of the language of these narratives and the linguistic competency of the novelists to disclose the intricacies of cultural identity formation as they also represent voices of the Moroccan diaspora in the Netherlands and Belgium. Furthermore, Ricci continues to investigate the significant role of memory and space, affirming that these "stories use memory as a space to reflect the predicament accompanying diasporic writers" (125). Deemed as an alternative space, as Ricci points out, memory is deployed to voice a deeply fragmented consciousness and a split sense of identity that induces dynamic negotiations along the borderlines.

In trying to weave the complexities of Moroccan diaspora, the last chapter shifts the reader's attention to Moroccan Anglophone literature and the narratives of Laila Lalami. This chapter aims at tracing the leading thread in her narratives *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits*, *The Turning Tide*, *Secret Son*, and *The Moor's Account*, which all depict Lalami's perspectives and readings of the border crossings of North African subjects, namely from Morocco, to the North bank of the Mediterranean. The inception of this chapter is marked by the affinities Lalami has with Arab American Literature. Ricci contextualizes her writings within this tradition that encompasses voices outside the Anglo-American literary canon as well as their engagement with the socio-political malaise of their homelands. As he asserts, Lalami's characters, whose identities are in the process of becoming and in eternal quest of home, narrate their stories of in-betweenness. For instance, in *Hope and Other Dangerous Pursuits* Lalami does not depict "home" as space of confinement and obedience, but rather, her female characters symbolically "destabilize this pre-established notion by leaving "home," "the country," "the inside" and transcend geographic,

historical, and cultural boundaries through the act of migration” (141). In fact, through Lalami’s creation of a discursive space that disrupts the rigidness of both the Islamic and western worlds, she opens new horizons for her migrant characters. Thus, as Ricci affirms, she is an epitome of those voices that frame an endless negotiation of postcolonial subjectivity.

All in all, Ricci’s *New Voices of Muslim North African Migrants in Europe* succeeds in contesting the weaknesses of the francophone literary tradition - which has overshadowed Moroccan literary landscape - to encompass new voices from other European countries (Spain, Holland, Belgium) with different historical and cultural concerns in diaspora vis-à-vis postcolonialism. Adopting a transcolonial perspective efficiently reinforces Ricci’s critical reading of diaspora literature, but the book still has its weak points. The title seems broad while the content is limited in the sense that while the title refers to the narratives of the Muslim North African diaspora, the content of the book focuses on Moroccan narratives. North Africa, for instance, stands for at least four countries: Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. It is evident that the author is aware of this fact, but the question is whether Moroccan diaspora literature can be considered as an epitome of the other North African countries. All things considered, Ricci’s book remains one of the books that enrich critical readings of Moroccan diaspora literature. Thanks to his subtle and comprehensive grasp of the cultural and historical conditions of Moroccan literary production, *New Voices of Muslim North-African Migrants in Europe* has expanded the boundaries of postcolonial literary studies to include Moroccan literature as vital area for critical inquiry. It is then a requisite reading for students and scholars of North African studies, Iberian studies, postcolonial studies, migration and borderland studies.