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Poetics and Politics: Digital Interventions in Sahrawi Cultural Production

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Abstract: This study addresses how Sahrawi authors are employing social media in support of the Sahrawi cause. Via new media literary studies and theories of postcolonial nostalgias, this article demonstrates how Sahrawi digital interventions differ from, and capitalize on, competing political and historical discourses. The focus centers on the Sahrawi blog hosted by *El País*, analyzing its use of communal poetry, nostalgic discourse, and transnational appeal to communicate and support Sahrawi political and literary goals.

Recent political and cultural events such as the Arab Spring have raised awareness about the role of digital media in fomenting social change. This study analyzes how contemporary Sahrawi culture in Spain is employing various digital poetic forms in order to support the Sahrawi cause. The Spanish Sahrawi immigrant community, known as the "Generación de la Amistad Saharaui," has a very active literary culture, particularly in the field of poetry. They have published (often self-published) more than fourteen poetic anthologies, and individual members have also produced numerous poetic works.[1] Perhaps the group's most prolific genre, however, involves diverse forms of digital texts, particularly blogs, but also ebooks, videos, films, and other forms of social and new media.[2] Their cultural contributions online have garnered high profile attention, as evidenced by their regular blog hosted by *El País,* Spain's highest circulation newspaper. However, their literary presence has been hard fought, and publication obstacles with established editorial houses remain daunting for the group. The challenges of traditional publication within Spain and the creative opportunities of social media for poetic and communal representation have made digital poetics a medium of choice for many Sahrawi immigrants. This study employs theoretical approaches to new media literary studies along with personal interviews to contextualize how Sahrawi authors are using social media to advance their poetic and political concerns. The essay offers a close reading of Sahrawi digital poetics via the group's blog on *El País*, arguing that Sahrawi use of digital media centers on a creative nostalgia that attempts to imagine and share a better future.

For Sahrawi immigrant poets, traditional publication via established editorial houses in Spain has been a difficult endeavor, and this has led many to pursue alternative publication options. Limam Boisha, an active member of the Generación de la Amistad, describes the challenges for immigrants like himself: "Es muy difícil [la publicación]. Yo he intentado, y a nivel personal, es muy complicado, y lo es todavía más con la poesía. Hay que tener mucha sensibilidad hacia el tema poético, tener alguien conocido y tener cierto nombre para que te publiquen, y eso en mi caso era imposible" (Boisha "Personal Interview" n.p.). Boisha notes that publication is very difficult for immigrants, that you must know someone or be well-known, and he highlights the additional challenge of genre for Sahrawi immigrant authors–the complications of publishing are "todavía más con la poesía." Within Sahrawi culture, poetry is the most highly esteemed and popular literary form, but in Spain, editors are hesitant to take on poetic publications. Sahrawi poets have thus sought alternative publication formats, and the internet has provided an important venue for their poetic work.

In *Resistencias con lo digital*, Enrique Ferrari Nieto argues that online publication has become an important format for many excluded voices within Spanish letters. He describes social media as "buscándole alternativas . . . al tejido editorial más asentado, a sus preferencias. Buscando lo otro, lo que ha quedado hasta ahora en la sombra, en un segundo plano, oculto tras los protagonistas más queridos" (177). Ferrari Nieto identifies "the other" as relegated to "un segundo plano," referencing the way Spanish bookstores are often arranged with alternative texts far removed from the bustle of shoppers. Sahrawi poets can relate to this scenario, although often the question is not so much being relegated to the far corners of the store as not having access to the store at all. Indeed, Boisha emphasizes that Sahrawi poets have moved beyond editorial houses: "Nos hemos desentendido de las editoriales porque sabemos que no lo van a difundir, de ninguna manera. Si ellos lo descubren, me parece perfecto, pero mejor que lo hagamos nosotros" (Personal Interview n.p.).

In the midst of publication obstacles, Sahrawi immigrants have embraced many forms of digital media, particularly blogs, and while blogs certainly facilitate political commentary, Sahrawis are by no means limited to the political genre. Indeed, the focus of the blogs from the Generación de la Amistad has always been literary, but with the savvy to see that cultural productions can lead to (or mask) political conversations. Bahia Mahmud Awah describes this perspective when speaking about his role as a cultural producer within the Sahrawi community and the ways such work gives him access beyond that of his diplomatically engaged peers:

> Hay muchos escritores saharauis, hay muchos poetas saharauis en lengua castellana. Son muy buenos. Pueden ser el brazo, la mano franca, que se extiende al latinoamericano, al estadounidense, al europeo en general, al asiático en general. *Y con nuestra literatura podemos también abrir otro frente y servir ayudando al diplomático saharaui en su frente y lenguaje. Muchas veces hay lugares que nosotros llegamos, los escritores, y el diplomático no puede llegar.* Y esto yo lo he experimentado en los años que he estado en California haciendo conferencias, en Minnesota, que los diplomáticos me llaman y me dicen, "Bahia, con este trabajo nos está abriendo puertas y allanando caminos." (Awah, Personal Interview, emphasis mine. N.p.)

Awah's experience confirms that he and his fellow Sahrawi immigrant authors have been able to reach audiences and spaces that the Sahrawi diplomatic corps sponsored by the Polisario cannot access.

In *The Global Impact of Social Media*, Dedria Bryfonski brings together a series of authors to analyze the political potential and limitations of various forms of new media. Malcolm Gladwell argues that "the platform of social media are built around weak ties" (99-100), and for Gladwell, weak ties will never lead to social change because they are only "effective at increasing *participation*– by lessening the level of motivation that participation requires" (101). From this perspective, social media is too accessible, too easily incorporated to make it very meaningful for long-term, intractable, violent conflicts like the political stalemate over Western Sahara. Nonetheless, other critics contend that social media offers a forum for significant and meaningful political interaction. According to Simon Mainwaring,

> Social media provides a complex and deep infrastructure perfect for the activist processes of social transformation–which include information acquisition, knowledge development, transfer and sharing; ideation and thought leadership; empathy and emotional connection; and the spread of credible ideas that inspire cognitive dissonance. These tools are accessible to everyone, available 24/7, infinitely scalable, real time and free. (90)

The notions of information acquisition and emotional connection highlighted by Mainwaring are central for understanding Sahrawi immigrant authors' use of social media. While Gladwell may be correct that weak ties lead to weak participation, for Sahrawi exiles the aim of social media need not necessarily be to garner active political participation, but rather to raise awareness and foster a sense

of emotional connection and nostalgic remembering among Spaniards. Indeed, one might argue that in the case of Sahrawis in Spain, the goal of active political advocacy by Spaniards in defense of the Sahrawi cause may not be a feasible proposition no matter how much awareness Sahrawis raise, but that perhaps that level of active engagement is not essential for the larger global political goals of the Polisario. While Gladwell and Mainwaring see a zero sum game where social media either foments active political change or it does not, I argue that the Sahrawi case in Spain offers an alternative model for effective and savvy use of social media, even when it does not lead to overt political resistance. One way this occurs is through the consumption of political solidarity, in which social media serves different purposes for Spaniards than it does for Sahrawis. While Spaniards may not access social media because of a desire for political change, they might be drawn to political consumption out of nostalgia, engaging with Sahrawi media because it recalls a sense of loss related to colonial power relations. Yet this nostalgic impetus can still be politically beneficial for Sahrawis. Spaniards may be avid consumers of Sahrawi literature for reasons other than their willingness to become actively engaged in the Sahrawi conflict (i.e., nostalgic longings for a bygone era), but their emotional engagement with Sahrawi literature creates positive public opinion for the Sahrawi cause in Spain. It may be a subtle nuance, but it is one that the poets themselves, and certainly the Polisario, have been able to harness. In *Social Media and Politics,* the editors note that the link between technology and social participation stems from three important mechanisms: "reduction of costs, promotion of collective identity, and creation of community" (Patrut and Patrut 37). While social media may not be garnering active political change in Spain, it is providing Sahrawis with low-cost access to new communities, and providing a forum for developing cultural knowledge, nostalgic consumption, and historical memory creation.

For Sahrawi poets, much of their use of social media involves sharing memories, historical vignettes, poetry, and cultural traditions, and it often includes a strong undercurrent of nostalgia. The term nostalgia comes from the Greek for pain (*algos*) related to a desire to return home (*nostos*). This pain for home or for a remembered experience is complicated by the vicissitudes of memory. As Wilson describes in *Nostalgia: Sanctuary of Meaning*, "expressing and experiencing nostalgia require active reconstruction of the past – active selection of what to remember and how to remember it" (25). This selective recall is one way displaced groups often deal with the trauma of dislocation. Indeed, nostalgia has often been seen as "using communication to move through time" (Wilson 34), but this movement is not always backwards. Indeed, nostalgia can be linked to a desire to reimagine

the future. Katharina Niemeyer, in the introduction to her edited collection *Media and Nostalgia: Yearning for the Past, Present and Future*, defines nostalgia as "the name we commonly give to a bittersweet longing for former times and spaces," yet she emphasizes that this return to the past is often tied to "an interlinking imagination of the future" and to new media (1). Nostalgia can thus involve an ambivalent and fragmented move. Svetlana Boym's *The Future of Nostalgia* posits two distinct types of nostalgic remembering that are helpful for analyzing the Sahrawi case. The first, which she terms "reflective" nostalgia, focuses on the pain of loss and the ruins of the past. It "does not follow a single plot but explores ways of inhabiting many places at once and imagining different time zones" (Boym xviii). The other type, termed "restorative" nostalgia, attempts to rebuild or recapture what has been lost, protecting "absolute truth." Boym notes the problematic nature of restorative nostalgia, but argues for the "ethical and creative" potential of reflective nostalgia because it "dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and does not shy away from the contradictions of modernity" (xviii). Such future-focused, creative, reflective nostalgia is the kind that readers often find in Sahrawi digital poetic forms.

Boym's typology helps clarify the differences between the nostalgic discourses employed by Sahrawi authors and that often found in Spanish popular reception of Sahrawi texts. For Sahrawis, nostalgia for autonomy, political agency, and ancestral lands leads to a generative, creative potential, what Boym calls a "reflective," imaginative nostalgia. At the same time, Sahrawi authors also cannily manipulate a different kind of nostalgic discourse, referred to by Boym as "restorative," that tends to naturalize and historicize a sense of colonial loss by linking it to notions of brotherhood articulated through reference to Spain's Islamic past.[3] Dennis Walder affirms Boym's typology, and he extends it to consider how reflective nostalgia plays out in postcolonial contexts like that of the Sahrawi immigrant population. He explains, in *Postcolonial Nostalgias*, that "there is a long history of colonial and postcolonial writing that invokes nostalgia as a means of resuscitating the forgotten or obscured histories of both colonised and coloniser . . . as writers seek to transform their sense of cultural disinheritance and loss into new identities for themselves and their communities" (16). This study aims to elucidate how a creative nostalgia functions within Sahrawi social media. Sahrawi blogs demonstrate how immigrant poets are employing nostalgic discourses as part of their poetic and political strategies.

One can see these types of nostalgic connections to memory and identity in posts on the Sahrawi blog hosted by *El País*. For example, one entry dated January 7, 2015 is titled "Aires de

nostalgia en la literatura saharaui," indicating that this is a self-conscious reflection on the pain of longing for home. In the blog post, Bahia Mahmud Awah states that he wants to "desempolvar viejos pergaminos del registro oral saharaui" and he reflects on how "la poesía, las tertulias, la buena oralidad y los géneros musicales" have functioned over time to create community within Sahrawi culture. Yet Bahia acknowledges the ambivalence of looking backward with rose colored lenses: "Se dice que 'cualquier tiempo pasado fue mejor'; pero creo que el concepto o intención del refrán en sí sólo cobra sentido si buscamos lo transcendental de los más relevantes hechos del pasado como referente histórico y guía de memoria" (Awah "Aires"). The group La Generación de la Amistad perceives social media as a way of curating communal memory and raising awareness of Sahrawi culture beyond the formal systems of governmental power and official history. The unique format of social media, housed in a virtual environment in which anyone can create a new identity, also lends possibilities to the reflective nostalgia practiced by the Generación de la Amistad. Their publications are often nostalgic, but in the futuristic, creative sense, as part of a globalized movement to foment cultural awareness and perhaps, eventually, political change. Indeed, at the most practical level, social media offers a platform for conversation–it offers a space in which to publish, reshape identities, and establish emotional and cultural connections.

"Y… ¿dónde queda el Sáhara?": The Sahrawi blog on *El País*

The blog "Y … ¿dónde queda el Sáhara?" was established in September of 2013 on *El País.com*, and the main page emphasizes the cultural goals discussed above and also reveals some of the nostalgic focus of the blog:

> Intentar mostrar la riqueza de la cultura saharaui. Ese es el objetivo de este espacio. Una cultura nacida de la narración oral, de los bellos paisajes del desierto, de las vidas nómadas y el apego a la tierra, de su origen árabe, bereber y musulmán, de sus costumbres únicas y de la relación con España que se remonta a más de un siglo. Una cultura vitalista, condicionada por una historia en pelea por la supervivencia desde 1975. Coordina Sukeina Aali Taleb. ("Y … ¿dónde?" n.p.)

The definition foregrounds "Sahrawi culture," "oral storytelling," and "nomadic lives," among other topics, while simultaneously highlighting "la relación con España" and "una historia en pelea por la supervivencia desde 1975." One can see how this articulation, while serving Sahrawi goals, also resonates with "restorative" colonial nostalgia through its references to Spain's historic

role in the region, connections to Muslim and Arabic cultures, and the language of "primitive peoples." The statement also highlights the coordination role of Sukeina Ali Taleb, an important young female voice in the Sahrawi movement. She is the daughter of a Sahrawi exile and a trained journalist, and when *El País* offered a blog space, the Generación de la Amistad immediately began blog development under Ali Taleb's leadership. She and other Sahrawi authors are strategically employing nostalgia via the blog to build a virtual territory for the Sahrawi cause. Even Ali Taleb's use of allusion might be seen as a form of nostalgia. For example, in one of the first posts, from Sept. 10, 2013, Aali Taleb offers a poetic response to the question of the blog's title:

> "Y … ¿dónde queda el Sahara?"
>
> A un palmo de tu casa cuando ves su perfil dibujado en un mapa. A dos horas de vuelo de España. A un salto enérgico desde la isla más alargada canaria. A un beso de agua Atlántica.
>
> En tus ojos cuando recuerdan, veo el Sahara. En tu habla, que es mi habla. En las palabras de una lengua que los saharauis aman, tanto como amaba Lope, Tirso, Calderón de la Barca.
>
> Queda a 38 años del final de su historia colonial. A 100 años de historia borrada. Olvidada. Queda a pocos pasos de la gente sin memoria.
> . . .
>
> ¿Y dónde queda el Sahara? preguntas por romper el hielo. Queda, pienso, a un te quiero hoy y no te quiero mañana. Muy cerca de un dulce sueño que arrebatan al alba. (Aali Taleb)

As is evident from Aali Taleb's poetic response to the question of Western Sahara, the issue is complex, personal, cultural and political. The poet begins by trying to bridge any perceived distance between Western Sahara and Spain, raising political questions by focusing on proximity ("a un palmo de tu casa . , . en un mapa"), accessibility ("a dos horas de vuelo" n.p.) and using both the Atlantic Ocean and the Canary Islands as points of connection between Spain and its former colony ("A un salto enérgico desde la isla más alargada canaria. A un beso de agua Atlántica").[4] Most

importantly, however, the poet emphasizes linguistic connections ("En tu habla, que es mi habla" n.p.) and literary ties between Western Sahara and the masters of Spanish literature: "En las palabras de una lengua que los saharauis aman, tanto como amaba Lope, Tirso, Calderón de la Barca" (n.p.). These references once again play on Spanish imperial desires (producing what Mary Louise Pratt calls "imperial eyes"), given that the "Golden Age" coincided with the Conquest. While nostalgia is not mentioned explicitly in the poem, memory is referenced several times and in ways that recall how nostalgia links historical memory, identity construction, and the emotions of displacement. The poet responds to the question of Western Sahara by referencing bitter and bittersweet memories, reminding readers that Western Sahara "queda a 38 años del final de su historia colonial" but is nonetheless "borrada," "olvidada," just steps away from "gente sin memoria" and yet so close to the "sweet dream that is snatched away at dawn" (n.p.). As Dennis Walder argues in *Postcolonial Nostalgias,* "the rosy, sentimental glow most commonly associated with nostalgia is only a part of the story, and . . . pursuing its manifestations with a proper sense of the complex of feelings and attitudes it engages, and the contexts upon which it draws, reveals its potential as a source of understanding and creativity" (3). The possibilities and fragilities of understanding and creativity are alluded to in the final verse, which emphasizes the discursive nature of the question that titles the blog. The poet highlights how the question might be used simply as a phrase to "break the ice" without implying any real or genuine interest: "¿Y dónde queda el Sahara? preguntas por romper el hielo" (n.p.). The blog format, however, ensures opportunities for a more in-depth exchange and a globally accessible conversation. The blog offers both "ice breaking" exchanges about culture, language, literature and politics, as well as difficult political conversations, dialogues between Sahrawi poets and a larger readership within Spain and abroad.

Readers can find the beginnings of such real-world conversations in the initial responses to the blog post. Reactions include sixteen comments over the span of one month, from September to October of 2013, and they range from acknowledgements by readers of a lack of knowledge about Western Sahara to an interest in translating the poem into other languages. Responses also include frustration from a Sahrawi about Arab tourists at a Spanish hotel who appeared to know nothing about Western Sahara, as well as anger from an anonymous reader over the blog's focus on Western Sahara when there are so many other problems in Spain. That last topic was raised by a reader self-identified simply as "Lector" and the exchange that it initiated from the blog writer, who responded directly, demonstrates the power of social media for fomenting conversations across diverse groups

with very different political perspectives. The blog author notes in her response that, among other things, "mirar al Sáhara no excluye mirar a otros lados," and offers a lengthy explanation of why concern for justice in Western Sahara in fact supports efforts to fight corruption, abuse, and political injustice within Spain and everywhere (n.p.).

The blog is noteworthy both for the interest it has generated as well as the social aspects of its form. In Markku Eskelinen's *Cybertext Poetics*, the author employs a range of literary, ludic, and other analyses to develop a description of cybertext narratology. Following these theories, one of the most interesting features of the blog created and hosted by the Generación de la Amistad is its "configurative" and "textonic" functions, configurative meaning that they are unique because users have random access to a wide range of texts that are never read in the same particular order, and textonic meaning that users can co-create or permanently add or change the text itself. One section of the blog, titled "Mil voces para un poema" demonstrates how important the textonic features of the blog are for engaging in meaningful poetic and political exchange.

"Mil voces para un poema:" Communal poems

The section of the blog titled "Mil versos para un poema" is of particular interest for this study because of its unique social media and poetic aspects. This segment sits on the homepage of the *El País* blog, and its focus is the development of a collaborative and public poem. The work was begun with the founding of the blog, as the very first post, on September 2, 2013. "Mil versos para un poema" begins with an explanation of the importance of public and communal poetry within Sahrawi culture: "En el Sahara, desde hace mucho tiempo, hay grandes poetas que lanzan al mundo un par de versos con la intención de que otro gran poeta los continúe. Hasta que no aparece alguien a la altura de la calidad de los primeros versos, el poema queda incompleto. Y así, poco a poco, se va construyendo un poema con muchas voces" ("Mil versos" n.p.). The title of the segment, "Mil versos para un poema" thus implies the potential collaboration of many diverse online poets, and it asserts a creative nostalgic endeavor–to revisit a traditional Sahrawi practice, but to also transform it for new times and spaces. The editors emphasize the long-term nature of this poetic endeavor, and the way time and reception influence quality. The public poem remains unfinished until a poet of sufficient stature is able and willing to take on the challenge. The title of the segment, "Mil versos para un poema," thus implies the potential collaboration of many diverse online poets, each adding part of a final whole. After this explanation of communal poetry within Sahrawi culture, the editors

offer the first portion of the blog's communal poem, written by a well-known and respected Sahrawi poet and scholar, Larosi Haidar, one of the regular contributors to the *El País* blog. His opening poem is comprised of a four-verse stanza, and the blog notes that the theme is a bit ironic for the opening of a communal poem, since it addresses ruptures or farewells, and as readers will see, nostalgic overtones are evident:

> Cuán dulce es amar
>
> y sentirse a la vez amado
>
> pero amargo es el dejar
>
> a quien tanto se ha esperado. (Haidar n.p.)

The initial verses form a quatrain and follow an ABAB consonantal rhyming scheme and a variable rhythmic pattern of octosyllabic meter (7, 9, 8, 8). The focus is on love and love lost, with brief initial verses that are meant to be evocative and attract collaboration. Indeed, the quatrain is followed by an invitation from the blog authors, calling on readers to contribute: "¡Poetas! os animamos a participar y así completar, esperamos, un gran poema coral" (n.p.). Since the poem's publication, many additional entries have appeared, the most recent in May of 2015. Some of the readers who have contributed verses are well-known Sahrawi poets like Mohamed Ali Ali Salem, who added four verses two weeks after the original stanza was posted. His contribution hints at the political themes many readers have chosen for their additions:

> Es terca y tediosa la espera
>
> cuando impacientemente se aguarda
>
> el crujir de un fuego que arda
>
> en la posma de quien se espera. (Ali Ali Salem n.p.)

Focusing on the "tedious" and "impatient" frustration of those who are left waiting in a fraught relationship, Mohamed Ali Ali Salem's contribution calls to mind the postcolonial status of Sahrawis, offering a metaphor that connects the frustration of waiting with the crackling of an inner fire, hinting at the combustible and liminal relationships between Sahrawis and various governmental and cultural bodies. His contribution matches the quatrain form of the original verses, evidencing poetic expertise and knowledge of Sahrawi poetic structure. However, many other contributors depart from the original form. These departures tend to come from unknown readers, who at times self-identify as being from other countries, and often from Latin America. For example, one reader signs her contribution as "María de Lourdes Barsallo J (Panamá)" and writes:

> Porque conozco el dolor
>
> pido posada en tu alma,
>
> que rehaga
>
> la palabra insondable
>
> lo que ya escrito fue en las arenas
>
> del Tiempo
>
> mi puro amor vencido... (Barsallo J. n.p.)

Barsallo J's post continues the theme of "dolor," but shifts away from the political connotations of Ali Ali Salem's contribution, focusing on a more traditional free verse lyric, seeking "posada en tu alma" and acknowledging "mi puro amor vencido" (n.p.). Most contributions, like Barsallo J's, are fairly short, between four and eight verses, but one contributor offered eleven stanzas, and several other poets posted only one or two lines of verse.

One of the most interesting segments of the poetic postings involves a series of contributions and commentary by a user identified as Brahim Salem Buseif. He first posted two stanzas in response to the opening salvo:

> Mientras te sientes dolido
>
> por haber alguien dejado
>
> sigue un rescoldo encendido
>
> ¡tiene que ser avivado!
>
>
>
> No dejes que la amargura
>
> sepulte aquella ternura,
>
> el amor y la dulzura
>
> de los que nos has hablado,
>
> pues tu nostalgia perdura
>
> por aquel dulce pasado. (Salem Buseif n.p.)

This addition begins by maintaining not only the thematic issues raised in the original stanza, but also the original form, following the *cuarteta* style by continuing the poem with four octosyllabic verses and a consonantal rhyme pattern of ABAB. Buseif maintains the tone and subject matter of the original poem, emphasizing the theme of love lost and noting how "nostalgia endures/ for that sweet past". While the poet in one sense laments a traditional romantic rupture, the references to

feeling "dolido," having been "dejado," and feeling "amargura" make the poem also speak metaphorically to the relationship between Spain and Western Sahara. Read in the light of that historical relationship, the use of the term "nostalgia" appears problematic, as the final two verses, "pues tu nostalgia perdura / por aquel dulce pasado", would seem to imply a longing for the return to a colonial style power relationship.

However, it becomes clear from subsequent commentary on the communal poem that the nostalgia needing to be "avivado" here is a search for new kinds of relationships within a shifting cultural dynamic. Indeed, globalized power relationships and literary connections become explicit in a separate commentary that creates a kind of pastiche aesthetic. Within the poem itself, Salem Buseif adds several posts analyzing his own and other contributions. He first notes what he describes as a "curious" coincidence between traditional Sahrawi poetic form (in Hasanía) and Spanish verse, namely that the "cuarteta" style matches "totalmente" the metrical and rhyme pattern of the most common verse form in Sahrawi poetry, the "Gaf":

> Curiosamente, la estrofa castellana de arte menor denominada cuarteta (la de versos octosílabos) coincide, totalmente, en métrica y rima con el "Gaf" (القلف) de la poesía saharaui y las composiciones poéticas de hassania en general de las que el "Gaf" (rima consonante: abab) es la piedra angular.

> Sugiero a los críticos literarios y poetas saharauis estudiar, si aun no lo hayan hecho, esta coincidencia ya que la "Talaa" (الطلعة) cuya rima es (ccc, bcb)[5] podría ser nuestra contribución a la poesía española. (Salem Buseif n.p.)

Buseif not only links Sahrawi and Spanish poetic form, he calls on literary critics and poets to study the connection, and thereby to expand Spanish letters via the influence of Sahrawi literature. He implies that the style of poetry on the Sahrawi blog might hint at mutual literary confluences (octosyllabic verse is the most common form in both Sahrawi and Spanish poetry), and argues that the aspects unique to Sahrawi verse might provide a rich avenue for future contributions to Spanish letters. The "Talaa," or traditional Sahrawi poem, begins with a "Gaf," or four verse octosyllabic line following an abab consonantal rhyming pattern, and then continues with a new rhyming pattern in subsequent verses (ccc, bcb), with each verse offering a new perspective on the thematic focus of the original gaf.[6] This is precisely what Salem Buseif has modeled in his poetic response, by providing a new contribution, in Spanish, but one that follows not the traditional Spanish *cuarteta*

style but rather the Sahrawi Talaa. His hope is for this verse form to be recognized as a contribution to Spanish poetry and poetic tradition. And this contribution need not be limited to Peninsular letters, but could extend throughout the Spanish-speaking world.

Indeed, a quick internet search yields that the blog contributor "Brahim Salem Buseif" is a Sahrawi immigrant living in exile in Argentina and the author of his own popular blog titled "Voz del Sahara Occidental en Argentina." His participation in developing the poem and his literary criticism on the blog attests that the co-creators of the communal poem are not just Sahrawis in Spain or autochthonous Spaniards, but also Latin American speakers of Spanish. The successful linking of the *El País* blog to Latin American literary culture is an astute political connection, and opens up the conversation to a much larger Spanish-speaking public, and one in Latin America potentially more sympathetic to the political and cultural concerns of exiled groups with close ties to Cuba and Algeria. Social media has clearly facilitated efforts to link the Sahrawi cause with global Spanish cultural production, and its effectiveness is evident in the blog via the international contributions that have followed.

Salem Buseif's commentary connects the communal poem to a creative nostalgia that invites Spanish-speaking readers to recall Spanish history in certain ways in order to see how Sahrawis might contribute to Spanish cultural forms. It also links Spanish literature with Sahrawi political objectives. Walder argues that nostalgia is "central to political debate" because it functions to reveal alternative histories and potential futures (16). Here it is the Sahrawi with agency, not the Spaniard, and the former colonized is the one who is crossing geographic and cultural divides (via immigration and access to a blog on *El País)* and is suggesting how Spaniards might need to rethink their own poetic history and literary development.

Nonetheless, the notion of "nostalgia" voiced in Salem Buseif's contribution, and throughout the blog, continues to mark the conversation in sometimes contradictory and unsettling ways. For example, Salem Buseif offers opinions about what he perceives as the lack of etiquette displayed by other contributors, who have not followed the original format of the verse and thus are not adhering to the norms of a Sahrawi communal poem. He writes:

> Por otra parte, me parece bien la idea de un poema "coral" o colectivo pues esa es
> una característica de la poesía hasaní, sin embargo, quiero señalar que los poetas se
> deben amoldar al tipo de estrofa inicial, en este caso el que compuso el Sr. Larosi

> Haidar., si eso, además del tema de los versos, no se respeta, no corremos el riesgo
>
> de componer un "poema babel? (Salem Buseif n.p.)

While Salem Buseif acknowledges that the idea of a "collective poem" is attractive and follows hasaní poetic tradition, he nonetheless argues that contributors must "mold" their responses to the original verse form: "quiero señalar que los poetas deben amoldar al tipo de estrofa inicial" (n.p.). He extends this to suggest that unless poetic traditions are discussed and mutually respected (as he is trying to model via his added commentary), communication, and thereby political efficacy, will be impossible: "[¿]no corremos el riesgo de componer un 'poema babel'?" (Salem Buseif n.p.). On one hand the poet wants to embrace new media in order to facilitate a creative nostalgic endeavor that could lead to a choral or collective poem much like in Sahrawi tradition, but on the other hand, that nostalgic desire becomes ambivalent in the face of the uncontrollable context of an online blog, which can feel like Babel, a cacophony of mutually indecipherable voices speaking without being understood. Salem Buseif seems concerned to protect the communicative (and thereby political) potential of the communal poem "Mil versos para un poema" by encouraging participants to become acquainted not just with the Sahrawi cause but also with Sahrawi cultural and literary forms. He claims that while he likes the idea of a choral poem, certain traditions, patterns, memories and norms are required to make participation meaningful.

Indeed, Bahia Mahmudd Awah seems to second these concerns with his own implicit critique of the online group poem. He initially posts to the blog a few days after the choral poem began, offering seven verses following the thematic focus of the original:

> Y dulce son las décadas
>
> que agrandan mi sed de libertad
>
> entre las perfiladas cuencas
>
> de tus inagotables ojos.
>
> Tú beduina que esperas,
>
> fuente de inspiración
>
> a quien tanto he anhelado. (Awah "Mil voces" n.p.)

Once again the political import of the verses is apparent. The poem references "decades" that have only increased "my thirst for liberty." The poet maintains the love trope within the political message by personifying the desert, and using direct address: "You Bedouin who awaits." He also follows the variable octosyllabic metrical form of the original, although not the rhyme scheme. Bahia

describes in a recent interview how the blog poem began and how it would traditionally have been expanded within Sahrawi culture, with an initial Gaf comprised of various themes in each hemistich that are subsequently developed by other poets:

> Entonces, nosotros, siguiendo esta tradición que se hace en hasanía, dijimos, bueno pues, Larosi escribió por ejemplo el primer Gaf, verso, compuesto de los tres hemistiquios, primero, segundo y tercero. Y luego yo lo desarrollé como primer poema, otro lo desarrolló como segundo, otro como tercero, y así hasta que finalmente se queda desarrollado la temática del primer Gaf. (Awah, Personal Interview n.p.)

The idea of developing more fully the themes and ideas from the first stanza or Gaf is apparent if one goes back to read some of the more well-known Sahrawi postings on the choral poem page. However, most contributors do not seem aware of this function, and that lack of knowledge likely explains, in part, the commentaries from Sahrawi poets and contributors criticizing how the communal poem has evolved. Indeed, Bahia himself, while adding to the poem with his own development of the Gaf focused on the first hemistich and the notion of "sweetness," nonetheless also seems frustrated enough with the "Babel-like" hodgepodge of the choral product that he posts subsequent additions to the communal poem on a separate page in the blog. His separate communal post begins with some contextualization of the choral poem and emphasizes the desire to move the poem towards conclusion: "El poeta Bahia M. Awah continúa el poema que inició el también poeta Larosi Haidar, hace unos meses. Añade los siguientes versos para ir completando este gran poema coral" (n.p.). This addition, or attempt to close out the poem, was posted on February 18, 2014, five months after the choral poem was initiated. But as might be expected, posting has continued on the main communal poem site, with nearly half of the entries created after Bahia's February 18th posting. Despite Bahia's desire to "ir completando este gran poema coral," the structure of the internet and choral reception make it impossible to fully bring it to a close without cutting out that portion of the blog from the site altogether or disabling postings. Nostalgia for a traditional poetic practice must yield to the realities of twenty-first century digital media. Walder notes in his study of postcolonial nostalgia that all nostalgias have "both positive and negative aspects," and that while the negative is usually the focus of theory, the positive side "admits the past into the present in a fragmentary, nuanced, and elusive way" that offers a "complex negotiation between remembering and forgetting" much like what readers find in the Sahrawi blog on *El País*

(16). The reactions of both Awah and Salem Buseif may come across as a nostalgic desire to recreate a type of literary exchange that is not so easy to replicate in the wild west of online blogs, but if the ultimate goal of the choral poem is to promote political awareness, even such ambivalent responses do not stymie the online conversations. The poets consciously offer a Sahrawi pastiche that blends traditional forms and digital possibilities, providing opportunities for cultural and historical re-membering.

Conclusion

While many contemporary cultural critics are skeptical about the political capacity of social media like that employed by Sahrawi immigrants in Spain, this study demonstrates that Sahrawi poets are astute about how their literary work might help promote particular historical and cultural perspectives in politically impactful ways. Sahrawi blogs like that hosted by *El País* are centered on cultural and literary dissemination, yet the literary focus assists more long-term political goals. While political changes feel distant, creative nostalgias like those employed in the *El País* blog allow for complex, unsettling exchanges. Online interactions offer space for less linear remembering and reflection, allowing former colonial subjects and those caught in diaspora to analyze and respond more creatively to the power structures that generally control distribution networks and publication industries. The goal is not so much to shift the networks of power as it is to make them visible by building a more diverse knowledge base and global sense of historical memory and collaboration in the Spanish-speaking world. In this sense, use of social media is far sighted and effective. Nostalgia is creative, albeit complicated and always a bit problematic. And because this creative nostalgia is housed on social media, the book remains open, never complete, always a work in progress, ever accessible.

Indeed, the most recent project on the blog involves a YouTube channel created by Sukeina Aali Taleb and Willy Villega called "Antropólogo en prácticas." The channel offers a range of comical videos focused on explaining Sahrawi culture to a neophyte Spanish anthropologist. Rather than offering a sentimental idealism about Sahrawi culture, the vlog (video blog) offers an ironic, humorous critique of Spanish ignorance regarding Sahrawi history. With entries all beginning with the title "Trabajo de campo #_" and featuring episodes like "Mapa, Sahara Occidental," "El Sáhara en los medios," "Leyendas saharauis" and "Antropología," viewers can sense the critical distance in the comedy that does not focus simply on the past or tradition, but offers a reflective perspective on

future relationships. Walder argues that "multiple, non-linear, and yet historically and politically informed perspective[s] can and should reveal what the representation of memory tells us in today's divided world, in which new empires are taking over from the old, in technology as well as in territory, and nostalgia can be seen as neither intrinsically good or bad, but part of what we all experience and which may or may not lead to desirable effects" (14-15). The Sahrawi blog on *El País* offers precisely this type of "non-linear" and yet "historically and politically informed" space, a place that functions to reveal not only "whether memory is reliable, but *whose* memories are reliable–whose past is politically relevant" (Walder quoting Smith 16). Sahrawi history and culture are politically relevant, and if the author's of the blog have their way, more and more Spanish speakers will begin to slowly be drawn into the literary and cultural conversation, and thereby perhaps also into the political debate.

Notes

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[1] Poetic anthologies include *Añoranza* (2002), *Bubisher* (2003), *Um Draiga* (2006), *Aaiún, gritando lo que se siente* (2006), *Treinta y uno: Thirty-One* (2007), *Don Quijote, el azri de la badia* (2008)*, La fuente de Saguia* (2009), *En la jaima a las seis (2009), A los cuatro vientos* (2010), *Los colores de la espera* (2011), *Retratos saharauis* (2011), *La primavera saharaui* (2012), *Poetas saharauis* (2013), and *Mil y un poemas saharauis* (2013). Individual works include *Versos refugiados* by Bahia Mahmud Awah (2007), *La música del siroco* by Ali Salem Iselmu (2008), *Nada es eterno* (2009) by Fatima Galia, *Ritos de Jaima* by Limam Boisha (2012), and many more.

[2] Saharaui group blogs include "Generación de la amistad saharaui" (http://generaciondelaamistad.blogspot.com/), "Y … ¿dónde queda el Sáhara? (http://blogs.elpais.com/donde-queda-el-sahara/), "Poemario por un Sáhara libre" (http://poemariosaharalibre.blogspot.com.es/), and many others (on the "Generación de la amistad website" they list 31 other blogs on the main page under the title "Nuestra lista de blogs"). Saharaui poets have self-published many ebooks, including several via their own editorial Bubisher, as well as others like the freely available *Mil y un poemas saharauis* (2013). They have also established a podcast and youtube channel called "Antropólogo en prácticas" (https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC5F0Ea1vF1c9z1aJsAgrBIg/about) and produced films such as *Legna: habla el verso saharaui.*

[3] Martin-Márquez's article "Brothers and Others," her book *Disorientations*, and Campoy-Cubillo's *Memories of the Magreb* address Spanish colonial nostalgia and how Spaniards have received Sahrawi literature.

[4] This is perhaps ironic, given the role that the Polisario claims the Canary Islands played in the story of the torture and death of Mohamed Basiri, an early liberation leader against Spanish colonial rule (see Mayrata's *El imperio desierto*)

[5] Originally the post read (ccc, abab), but Salem Buseif subsequently issued a correction saying he meant to write (ccc, bcb), which reflects the correct form of the traditional saharaui poetic Talaa, and also is the form Buseif himself used in his contribution to the communal poem.

[6] A *gaf* is a "composición poética muy breve" and *Tal-a* a "poema que se construye sobre un gaf." An *Aguilal* is a *gaf* that has not been developed into a *Tal-a.* http://sahliya.blogspot.com/. Bahia also discusses this in another blog post: http://blogs.elpais.com/donde-queda-el-sahara/2013/09/el-verso-y-la-tierra.html

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