CHAPTER 2

Mestizaje in Afro-Iberian Writers
Najat El Hachmi and Saïd El Kadaoui Moussaoui through the Borderland
Theories of U.S. Third World Feminisms

CARMEN SANJUÁN-PASTOR

IN THIS ESSAY, I use feminist mestizaje theories from the borderland (Moraga and Anzaldúa; Anzaldúa; Saldívar-Hull; Sandoval)¹ as a lens through which to examine two texts produced from a border position by Catalan-Amazigh writers Najat El Hachmi and Saïd El Kadaoui Moussaoui: L’últim patriarca and Límites y fronteras.² These two novels address the feeling of material and psychological insecurity experienced by the daughters and sons of Moroccan immigrants in Spain who are confronted with contradictory sociocultural demands and belongings. Both authors fictionalize these anxieties in the form

¹. My use of mestizaje as a lens in this essay follows two specific analytical perspectives found in Anzaldúa’s own use of this term. First, Michael Hames-García has distinguished “the historical process of racial mixing (through sexual relations) in Latin America (mestizaje) from Anzaldúa’s theoretical extrapolation from mestizaje: […] understood as any mixing of cultures, languages, or philosophies” (“How to Tell” 109). Second, Yvonne Yarbro-Bejarano has proposed to study Anzaldúa’s “mestiza consciousness” as “a constructionist project” “that gives voice and substance to subjects rendered mute and invisible by hegemonic practices and discourses, and is understood as the necessary prelude to political change” (Trinh T. Minh-ha, Women, Native, Other, 87) (Yarbro-Bejarano 13). Furthermore, Paula Moya has contextualized this analytical project as part of Anzaldúa’s contribution to developing “a woman of color identity and politics” (Learning 65–66). In this essay, I link feminist mestizaje theories from the borderland to the practice and theories of third world feminisms (Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “Cartographies”).

². It is estimated that 80 percent of the Moroccans that live in Catalonia are of Amazigh origin (“Imazighen en la sociedad”). Akioud and Castellanos explain that the original inhabitants of the North of Africa are the Imazighen (the plural form of Amazigh). Although they are also known as Berbers, this term has negative connotations (7). For more information, also see Holgado and Razgalla.
of a fractured subjectivity and point to writing as a way of reconstructing the multicultural self. Yet, even though both texts seem to address a similar form of pain associated with the complex lived realities of the border subject, the authors construct the confusion and isolation felt by their main characters in substantially different ways, both theoretically and creatively. I argue that in her investigation of “the gradual incarceration” (The Last Patriarch 245) that looms over her central protagonist, El Hachmi sheds light on the silences and marginalizations felt by those individuals who fall through the cracks of normative identities—in this case, the daughters of Moroccan-Amazigh immigrants from The Rif. I read this exploration of living with multiple marginalities through the concept of mestizo or border thinking as articulated by women of color and Chicana feminist theory. The first-person voice in L’últim patriarca imagines writing as a way of recreating “one’s own identity narrative” (relato identitario) (El Hachmi, “El inherente” 156–57). I propose reading this “identity narrative” as the product of multiple negotiations and as a form of addressing various manifestations of personal and social violence. Similarly, Ismaïl, the main character of Límites y fronteras, writes a first-person account of his own process of reconstituting his subjectivity after suffering a psychotic break in hopes of understanding and healing the pain he feels. El Kadaoui Moussaoui nonetheless is less interested in exploring the multiple social realities that constitute the border self, and instead focuses on exploring the danger that essentialized identities or “prison identities” pose to developing his own political thinking. I approach his creative elaboration of a borderland identity through the theories of two authors the writer himself has cited as his influences: Amin Maalouf’s discussion of identities and individualism, and Kwame Anthony Appiah’s views on cosmopolitanism and ethics. Moreover, I point to the limits of this apparatus to integrate true cultural diversity and a reflection on social justice.

L’ÚLTIM PATRIARCA

L’últim patriarca is conceived structurally in two parts comprising thirty-eight and thirty-nine vignettes or short chapters respectively and preceded by a

3. All quotes are from the English edition: The Last Patriarch (2010).

4. In “El inherente espacio de la creación literaria,” El Hachmi has explained this state of “identitary schizophrenia,” which daughters of immigrants often feel to an extent that impedes their ability to develop their own “identity narrative,” “in order to not become either devoured by the paternal narrative or overly diluted by alternative discourses of the “host society.”

chapter zero, which functions as a prophecy of sorts, told in a narrative style imitating that of storytellers, that warns us: “This is the story of Mimoum, son of Allal, son of Mohammed. [...] It is his story and the story of the last of the great patriarchs who make up the long line of Driouch’s forebears” (vii). This false prophecy, though, ultimately winds up straying toward another story: that of Mimoum’s daughter (vii). In this prologue, El Hachmi already suggests a number of the themes that she revisits throughout the novel and that I seek to analyze: the essentialist gaze toward Arab-Islamic cultures, the role of “narratives”—“whether determinist or pseudo-magical in character” (vii)—in the creation of one’s own identity, and the construction of gender identities within the specific Moroccan-Amazigh social and cultural system—located first in the rural zone of The Rif and later in the immigrant community of Catalonia. The two parts that form the body of the novel weave a singular reflection upon the origin and nature of Mimoum’s power, which is presented from the point of view of his daughter. Both parts, however, respond to different creative criteria. The first section of the novel takes place in The Rif and describes events to which the narrator lacked direct access or was too young to remember. This part of the story is narrated in a distant tone by a narrative voice that seems aware of the motivations that drive the characters who inhabit the familial stories she chooses to share. Through an analysis of the various clues suggested by the narrator, the reader can reconstruct the moments in which she gained access to these familial stories, heard and repeated in different intimate family circles, along with traces of explanations offered by the protagonists and the language in which these explanations were codified (“I will get rid of all the djinns he’s got inside him [16],” “whores who needed a male the way bitches or doe rabbits do [42]”). When viewed collectively, these narrative fragments reveal the ideologies upon which the characters operate and also must negotiate on a day-to-day basis. The second part of the novel, however, is narrated with a less-certain pulse. The first-person voice does not order the pieces of a puzzle from a distance but rather tackles her own partial comprehension of the material and discursive relations that regulate her social position as the daughter of Moroccan-Amazigh immigrants in Spain. El Hachmi represents, in a movement of great complexity, the narrator’s process of reconciling differing aspects of her multicultural self, first through the perspective of a child and later of a young woman, while at the same time addressing various manifestations of personal and social violence that she experiences in her liminal position.

In my argument, in *L’últim patriarca* El Hachmi shows the process of forming the “self and collective consciousness” (Mohanty, “Cartographies” 33) of the first-person voice that ties together the narrative. I suggest that this process can be read alongside the theorization of a “multiparticuous subjectiv-
ity” (Ruiz-Aho 357) provided by “U.S. Third World Feminists’ (Moraga and Anzaldúa 1981; Sandoval 1991)” (351). Theoretical constructs such as Gloria Anzaldúa’s “mestiza or borderland consciousness” (Borderlands/La Frontera) or Cherrie Moraga’s “theory in the flesh” (This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color) emphasize the notion of a subjectivity “structured by multiple determinants—gender, class, sexuality, and contradictory membership in competing cultures and racial identities” (Yarbro-Bejarano 11). Moraga explains how this critical approach not only signals the physical realities (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23) experienced by the border subject as a source of knowledge about the oppressions she suffers, but also calls for an articulation of these relations of oppression: “Here, we attempt to bridge the contradictions in our experience. [. . .] We do this bridging by naming ourselves and by telling our stories in our own words” (23).

Two facets of this critical apparatus merit further commentary in order to develop my argument regarding the theory of mestizo or border thinking that I read in L’últim patriarca’s narrative composition. First is the need to situate this theorization of mestizaje in the realities that exist at the U.S. and Mexican border (Yarbro-Bejarano 8–9, J. D. Saldívar 152). Chicana feminism should not be understood as a reflection on “signifying spaces,” but [rather on] material geopolitical issues that redirect feminist discourse” (Saldívar-Hull 208). A second area of interest is the way in which feminist thinking has been defined under this formulation. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has explained how third world women have delineated a feminist ideology and practice, independent of their rejection of this label in various instances due to its association with cultural imperialism or “shortsightedness in defining the meaning of gender in terms of middle-class, white experiences, and in terms of internal racism, classism, and homophobia” (7). Rediscovering the feminist interventions and practices of third world women in their daily experiences or in their histories requires, as Mohanty suggests, “reading against the grain of a number of intersecting progressive discourses (e.g., white feminism, third world nationalist,

6. Jessica Folkart already has indicated the plurality inherent in the border position from which the narrator in L’últim patriarca speaks, one she suggests reading through the lens of the border theories of Anzaldúa, Homi Bhabha, and Parvati Nair. Likewise, Cristián H. Ricci and Folkart, reading L’últim patriarca through the lens of Abdelkébir Khatibi’s key concepts of “penseé-autre” and “double critique,” have pointed out that El Hachmi’s narrator questions “the logocentrism of the unitary Cartesian subject of the Occident as well as the metaphysical Islamic subject of the Orient” (Folkart 360). My reading complements their interpretation by pointing out U.S. third world feminism’s emphasis on challenging the “individualist subject of much of liberal feminist theory” (Mohanty 36) or of ethnic nationalist movements (Moya, Learning 65–66) that are primarily focused on the analysis of gender relations or of racism, at the cost of rendering invisible the simultaneously occurring oppressions experienced by women of color.
and socialist), as well as the politically regressive racist, imperialist, sexist discourses of slavery, colonialism, and contemporary capitalism” (4). Positioned at the interstices of the different worlds in which they live, women of color do not feel safe “within the inner life of her Self” (Anzaldúa 42) and often must pause during the performance of their daily activities to evaluate the power relations that determine the options available to them. In this process of comprehending the complex discursive framework that can obscure or invisibilize the hegemonic structures that regulate their lives, the role of memory and writing possesses a fundamental importance “as a space for struggle and contestation of reality itself” (Mohanty 35). The use of private memories and personal stories that imply a political act of consciousness-raising is one of the key processes that allow for the creation of “mestiza consciousness” in Borderlands (Yarbro-Bejarano 14).

Similar to the narratives written by women of color that I employ as critical reference, I suggest that L’últim patriarca can be studied as “a space of contestation about reality” (Mohanty 35). I argue that El Hachmi creatively tackles this analysis through a type of literary artifice that reflects the thoughts of the character telling the story. This artifice simulates oral expression and allows the writer to embed fragments of conversations and forms of speaking and explaining reality into the narrative, all of which are linked by an interpretive framework that reveals the work of a posteriori reconstruction by the narrative voice. In my reading, this artifice stems from three diegetic sources, all of which have a profound impact upon the subjective constitution of the protagonist. The formal composition, for example, recalls Mercé Rodoreda’s writing style in La plaça del diamant (1962), which Carme Arnau has described as “a way of writing that reflects the voice of the character who is speaking, thus necessitating the use of a complicated literary artifice that evokes orality” (Rodoreda, Obres completes xxxii). The apparent simplicity of this writing style allows El Hachmi to create an intimate dialogue with the reader. We can also see an example of a first-person meditation by a female character “about her own world” (Rodoreda, Obres completes xxxiii) in the second diegetic source: The House on Mango Street (1984) by Sandra Cisneros. In addition, critics have interpreted this novel as an example of “reading against the grain” (Mohanty 4) of the very discourses that attempt to invisibilize the pain that young Esperanza feels. The references to Cisneros’s novel

7. In this essay I follow Chandra Talpade Mohanty’s views on “the inherently political definition of the term women of color (a term often used interchangeably with third world women)” (7).

8. All translations from sources originally written in Spanish into English are mine.

appear in the second part of *L’últim patriarca* in which, unlike the first part of the novel that focuses on the interpretive apparatus that the protagonist’s family circle provides, the narrator begins to create her own interpretive paradigms based partially on a collection of texts written by women of color and by Catalan women writers who have reflected upon notions of belonging and representations of national and cultural identity in their works. Both novels also contain vignettes narrated from the perspective of an adolescent who must face the confusion that often results from growing up as a minority both racially and culturally. Ramón Saldívar highlights the rhetorical strategy that Cisneros employs in order to represent, “from the simplicity of the childhood vision, the enormously complex process of the construction of the gendered subject” (181). The richness of Cisneros’s technique is pulled into focus as we explore the strategies that El Hachmi uses to expose the multiple layers of mediation that filter her subject’s access to reality, such as when the young protagonist reflects aloud about her difficulty recognizing the origin of her own memories as a result of having heard them repeated countless times by her mother. This awareness, however, does not alter the narrator’s belief that there are both better and worse “views that explain the world” (*The Last Patriarch* 223). Thus, the final source that influences the construction of the literary artifice that drives the narrative and captures the narrator’s process of subjective constitution emerges: the strategies that the women belonging to the protagonist’s family and cultural community in The Rif have developed in order to circulate information. In a context characterized by a separation of the sexes and the confinement of women to the private sphere, young girls learn the rules and language in these female spaces that allow them to share “pertinent” information in one space and undesired information in others.10 In *L’últim patriarca*, El Hachmi recuperates this situated act of resistance by women as a strategy that requires a political reading of the social relations that constrict their spaces of agency and that can be read through the feminist definition of *epistemic privilege*.11

Just as the women in her family must decipher the mixture of ideas, personalities, and social realities that have an effect on their personal develop-

10. See Holgado Fernández and Razgalla, Aceval.

11. In my analysis, I reference the definition of *epistemic privilege* offered by postpositive realism (Mohanty, *Literary 1999*), one that is constructed on a cognitivist vision of experience and whose emphasis rests upon the subject’s interpretation of her own experience. A cognitivist vision of experience, in the words of Satya P. Mohanty, assumes that experience can be both a source of knowledge about social hierarchies as well as error: “our social locations facilitate or inhibit knowledge by predisposing us to register and interpret information in certain ways. Our relation to social powers produces forms of blindness [my emphasis] just as it enables degrees of lucidity” (234).
ment, Mimoum’s daughter understands that her survival depends upon her ability to interpret her own experience. In my analysis, I propose that the protagonist’s *mestizo* thinking operates on a political rereading of versions of reality offered by different individuals within her intimate circle and an evaluation of their consequences. Facing the task of expressing this reconstruction in the creative realm, El Hachmi employs a range of strategies that supplement the artifice that drives the narrative. I pay special attention to three: (1) the emphasis on illuminating spaces of blindness or higher epistemic perception of the characters in accordance with “their relation to social power” (Mohanty, *Literary* 234); (2) the interruption of misogynistic, racist, or classist ideologies that guide the behavior of certain characters by inserting their comments or reasoning within a framework that destabilizes them, through either a facetious or ironic tone of the narrator or a distant tone that manifests her ulterior judgment (another dimension of this strategy also includes displaying the effect of these ideologies on the day-to-day lives of the same individuals who champion them); and (3), the inclusion of relevant contextual information that frames the memories or descriptions of events that have been recuperated by the narrator.

12. See the definition of a cognitivist vision of experience in previous note.

13. Jessica Folkart already has proposed this reading of the use of “double voicing” in *L’últim patriarca*, which presents the violent acts or the language of authority of the patriarchs in the novel alongside “ironic” or “matter of fact” comments that have “the effect of uncovering the threads and gaps that undergird the surface design of the text(ile) of patriarchal authority” (364). Folkart theorizes El Hachmi’s “cross-cultural” voice as an example of “bilingual writing” using Abdelkéebir Khatibi’s formulation of “double critique” (360). In her reading, female oral storytelling, which she reclaims as a subversive narrative of written law following Fatima Mernissi’s discussion in *Scheherezade Goes West* (2001), is that which filters the written Catalan language of the protagonist (360–64). In my reading of this “double voicing” strategy, however, the critical gaze does not derive from a subversive oral narrative that precedes or filters the subjectivity of the narrator, but rather from a political investigation developed by the mestizo subject who explores the best and worst explanations of her world. Yet, I agree with Folkart that the subversiveness of the oral narrative of the women from The Rif is one of the fundamental influences upon the protagonist’s critical gaze.

14. My reading of this strategy parallels a comment by author Junot Díaz in an interview with Paula Moya (“The Search for Decolonial Love”), in which he discusses the influence of narratives by women of color on his prose and the compositional technique that he employs in his collection of short stories, *Drown*. In the collection of writings, Díaz strives to go beyond simply describing racist and sexist violence and instead creates a “hidden underlying counter-current” in his texts that reveals how oppressive discourses shape his characters: “are Yunior’s gender politics, his generalizations and misogyny, rewarded in the book’s ‘reality’? [. . .] it appears to me that Yunior’s ideas about women, and the actions that arise out of these ideas, always leave him more alone, more thwarted, more disconnected from his community and from himself” (Moya, “The Search” 2012).
The protagonist returns to the past in search of “determinist or pseudo-magical explanations” (El Hachmi, *The Last Patriarch* vii) that consolidate the patriarch Mimoum’s power and dictate the terms of the “prison” (245) in which he has enclosed her. Along the way, the protagonist reclaims experiences and knowledges that she has lost in Catalonia. *L’últim patriarca* explores the impact of a historically prevalent ideological interpretation of Islamic sexual morality on the construction of gender identities and the organization of domestic and social life within the Moroccan-Amazigh community in which Mimoum has been educated, as well as the way in which this interpretation reproduces itself within the narrator’s familial circle in Catalonia.15 As Fatima Mernissi explains, “Islamic sexual ideology is predicated on a belief that women’s inherent sexual power, if left uncontrolled, would wreak havoc on the male-defined social order—hence the necessity to control women’s sexuality and to safeguard Muslim society through veiling, segregation, and the legal subordination of women” (Rassam and Worthington). Note that this threat toward the Amazigh and Arab patriarchal system is perceived not only on the level of sexuality but also on that of thought. The Amazigh imaginary accords to “female nature, the power of *fitna*—an Arabic word that means ‘the power of seduction [. . .] and anarchy—combined with *kayd*, a form of intelligence that is essentially feminine and is devoted to the calculated destruction of the system” (Holgado Fernández and Razgalla). Significantly, the novel constructs Mimoum’s personality through a stylization of specific ideas belonging to this common imaginary. A reading of this ideological substratum in conversation with feminist critics of Islam permits not only to contextualize Mimoum’s obsession with “domesticating” his wife: “The woman he’d choose [. . .] would be faithful to him even in her thoughts. And if she wasn’t [. . .] he’d soon tame her” (*The Last Patriarch* 28) but also the subversive potential shown by the decisions made by various female characters regarding the control of their own body, sexuality, and imagination.

A crucial aspect of El Hachmi’s creative approximation to her character’s Riffian memories is that, while she roots the vignettes within a distinct cultural reality, she also highlights the habitual negotiations that take place in porous societal systems inhabited by individuals who possess differing values and interests. For example, after his first sexual experience with his adult cousin Fatma, twelve-year-old Mimoum decides to marry her and “make her respectable.” Fatma, on the other hand, has several lovers and is in no hurry to marry. While for Mimoum, Fatma’s unsatisfied desire confirms her

15. Read Fatima Mernissi’s study of this ideology that spans “all the cultures of the Islamic tradition, even those whose language is not Arabic” (*Islam* 176).
inescapable betrayal, for Fatma, sex is about pleasure. Practicing anal or oral sex protects her virginity and creates a space of agency “within a culturally structured discourse that expresses personal conflicts in cultural terms and therefore terms that are intelligible and acceptable to the larger social group” (Plantade cited in Holgado Fernández and Razgalla). In different interviews and talks, El Hachmi has linked her own imaginative process with the stories, or oral literature, that her mother used to tell her and has characterized the women in The Rif “as creators.” Specifically, in her prologue to the edition of Cuentos libertinos del Magreb (2011), by Nora Aceval, El Hachmi presents oral fables passed on through generations of women as part of their process of negotiating social conventions in the domestic sphere. As Aceval further explains: “In these fables, the obscenity that exists does not neglect a larger social critique, one that does not avoid the political nor religious order, such as the example of the goat who loses her virginity and searches for a husband. The irony is often cruel” (16). Another way in which El Hachmi incorporates forms of oppositional thinking in the text is by saturating it with different versions of the same facts that circulate in the various intimate circles of the Driouch family as a way to counteract the patriarch’s control on the familial narrative.

From a critical point of view, it is important that Mimoum’s daughter is the first woman who openly questions the patriarch in the private sphere at the end of the novel. The adult narrative voice understands the danger of “[yielding] to his [father’s] blackmail” (The Last Patriarch 49) and confronts him about her mother’s supposed betrayal. Yet, as relevant as resisting his father’s vision of reality is as an expression of political feminist mestizo thinking, it is equally significant that Mimoum’s daughter also challenges him to face his own contradictions. She realizes that she needs to look at the factors limiting her father’s own personal and social development in order to expose both his own pain and the pain that he inflicts on others. In the process, her relational perspective also challenges the reader who seeks to confirm the discourse of cultural difference in the text (Sommer). We can observe the originality of the narrative’s literary artifice through the novel’s articulation of young Mimoum. An example of this relational perspective arises during the account of Mimoum’s trips to Spain. While the sexual ideologies of the future patriarch do not change during his first experience abroad, the narrator’s ironic discourse transforms

16. See Holgado Fernández and Razgalla for an analysis of the different symbolic languages used by women to “appropriate their own time and space within the public sphere,” (Holgado Fernández and Razgalla).
the landscape through which Mimoum moves while in Spain into contested terrain for the reader. The *mestizo* thinking of his daughter—who through anecdotes and memories alludes to the educational deficits, poverty, and rural isolation that shaped young Mimoum while living in the small village of The Rif—weaves a textual framework in which Mimoum’s loneliness and ignorance are drawn against a background of racism, economic exploitation, and the fetishization of North African bodies in the industrial Catalan city.\(^{18}\) The narrator’s distant tone seamlessly bridges Mimoum’s out of touch explanations of the strange behavior of Spaniards with the larger stereotypes that still pervade the Spanish imaginary about Moroccans (such as stories of Moroccan beheaders during the civil war), just as she makes sure to allude to the severity of the economic inequalities in European society that are silenced by the modern social veneer: “He [. . . ] went to the bar in the square where he was fascinated by the music blaring from the fruit machines while the television, covered in olive oil stains, displayed images of the world where he supposed he must be living” (73). Mimoum’s interpretive tools do not adequately prepare him to understand the complexity of the social framework in which he must exist. Yet, the narrator, who has grown up as a daughter of immigrants in Spain, knows it well.

The second part of the novel continues El Hachmi’s exploration of sources of knowledge that may help the first-person narrator of *L’últim patriarca* build the interpretive tools she needs to understand her pain and sense of confusion and to address them. The inability of the protagonist’s mother to guide her through life in Catalonia and the scarcity of her relationships with other young people leads her to search for interpretive perspectives in literature. Novels by Mercè Rodoreda and Víctor Català accompany Mimoum’s daughter during her childhood and help her to understand the way in which her father’s absolute power has destroyed both him and her mother.\(^ {19}\) The family’s move to another town and the arrival of adolescence opens up a new realm of literary references. The themes that appear in this moment of the protagonist’s social and psychological development depict a gendered experience:

\(^{18}\) For an analysis of *L’últim patriarca*, and specifically the character of Mimoum-Manel, in the context of a criticism of the discourse on European multiculturalism that fails to deal with the economic factors that feed it and the subsequent cultural instrumentalization and de-personalization of immigrants, read Palmar Alvarez-Blanco.

\(^ {19}\) An example is the way in which the young protagonist imagines her mother’s transformation since her arrival in Catalonia vis-à-vis the experiences of Mila in *Solitud* (1965) and Natalia in *La plaça del diamant* (1962). For an analysis of the rich intertextual dialogue in *L’últim patriarca* with works by Víctor Català and Mercé Rodoreda, see Ricci, Everly, Campoy-Cubillo, and Folkart.
I talked to her about crises, crises I still couldn’t recognize as being about 
*identity* [my emphasis], about breasts that grew too much, a mother who 
didn’t want me to depilate and who’d thrown my tampons away, just like 
that, without telling me, for fear I might lose my virginity, [. . .]. I told her 
about father being obsessed with me not seeing boys outside of school. (247)

The decision to make the young female protagonist’s discovery of the impact 
that her sexuality has on the way she is perceived as a woman both socially 
and within her own home coincide with her arrival at “our house on Mango 
Street” (210) illustrates the author’s preoccupation with showing how women 
of color—in this case the protagonist of *L’últim patriarca*—should ultimately 
create their own “identity narrative (*relato identitario*)” (“El inherente” 156– 
57). Meaningfully, El Hachmi paints the narrator’s “ruptured subjectivity” 
(Ruiz-Aho 354) through terms of “confusion:” “That was how everything was 
changed into transgression and tinged with fear. [. . .] I couldn’t understand 
what was wrong with that” (248). As Ruiz-Aho has noted: “It is [the] constant 
clash of differently-positioned cultural norms that make lived-experience 
painful for postcolonial subjects” (354). The narrator’s need to work through 
the consequences of occupying a gendered, racialized, and classed position in 
her Catalan neighborhood further accentuates the relevance of the diegetic 
links she creates between her experiences and those of the central characters 
in novels such as *The House on Mango Street* (1986) or—less emphatically—

Just like Esperanza in her alley on *Mango Street*, it is within books that 
Mimoum’s daughter finds a community of women whose experiences allow 
her to understand how sexual violence operates in conjunction with racial 
and economic ideologies (Saldívar, *Chicano* 186). The loneliness of this bor-
der subject, who warns us about her house in her new neighborhood, “but no 
Lucy and no *chicanos*” (210), pushes her to search for “theories” (Saldívar-Hull 
206) that can help her create an alternative space in which to develop her own 
subjectivity (Saldívar, *Chicano* 186), first through reading (233–34) and later 
through writing as an act of political reflection. Writing is conceptualized in 
*L’últim Patriarca* as a space of resistance (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23), as well 
as a way of creating the very community that the protagonist lacks: “a space

20. *L’últim patriarca*’s first person voice also connects her experiences to characters from 
Zadie Smith’s *White Teeth* (2000)—which explores postcolonial identities within Britain’s mul-
ticultural society, and Leïla Houari’s *Zeida de nulle part* (1990), which has been theorized as an 
example of Beur literature in France. See Josefina Bueno Alonso for an analysis of El Hachmi’s 
work in dialogue with this literary corpus. *L’últim patriarca* only refers to the film version of 
this novel.
to share my own experiences with everyone else” (The Last Patriarch 248). As the second part of the novel progresses, El Hachmi focuses on the silences and deficits that are part of the daily lived reality of her main character and other young border women (“He intentado”) like her, including, for example, the experiences that she cannot share with her supposed best friend because they seem “too serious” (The Last Patriarch 233), the reasons for her well-being that doctors do not understand (291), the low expectations of the Catalan educational system for the daughters of Muslim immigrants (252), or the failure of traditional Riffian cultural codes to help young women survive intergenerational changes that occur both in Morocco and in the immigrant community in Spain (El Hachmi, “El inherente” 156). This is, in fact, a story about their “loneliness” (El Hachmi, Gent de paraula).

El Hachmi configures the final part of the novel as a succession of ineffective “routes to liberation” for her protagonist (287). This creative solution offers the reader access to some of the narrator’s “forms of epistemic blindness” (Mohanty, Literary 234) that result from her liminal position, as well as to the consequences of her difficulty to read “against the grain” (Mohanty, “Cartographies” 4) of the different ideologies that limit her personal development. At various times, El Hachmi has spoken of the burden that falls upon the daughters of immigrants due to “the loss of ‘our’ customs, which are identified with decency and religious compliance” (El Hachmi, “El inherente” 155). The novel provides a space to reflect on how these two social and familial narratives (religious compliance and decency) may function in a context of immigration to help bridge the main character’s border self. Nonetheless, L’últim patriarca barely touches upon the religious practices of Muslim Moroccan immigrants in Spain. El Hachmi seems more interested in exploring how the process of migration has contributed to the creation of the narrator’s dysfunctional family. One way in which she delves into this subject is by overemphasizing Mimoum’s social hypocrisy “with regard to religion, that double life, that double moral” (“Mimoum”). Mimoum is a failed patriarch who “chooses” what interests him from “his culture of origin:” “Drinking doesn’t have as much importance because after you drink, you can repent and transform yourself into a regular mosque-goer. Toying with the family’s


22. The author has reflected on her Muslim identity in the context of her Catalan-Amazigh identity in other texts, especially in Jo també sóc catalana (2004) and in “Navidades Musulmanas” (2011). In addition, her analysis in Jo també sóc catalana delves into some of the challenges encountered by Spain’s Islamic communities.

23. El Hachmi explores the “social hypocrisy” of the patriarch in conversation with an earlier literary corpus: “The writer Naguib Mahfuz, in his Cairo Trilogy very often deals with this type of character. The boss of Mahfuz’s family is similar to Mimoum” (“Mimoum”).
honor is a different story” (“De Nador al Liceu”). El Hachmi thematizes the incoherencies that exist in the Driouch household by exaggerating seemingly arbitrary facets of the patriarch’s personality, such as his fondness for Bud Spencer and Terence Hills films. The author herself has pointed out that this strategy allows her to highlight the connection between processes of social disintegration and this type of “trivialized violence” (“De Nador al Liceu”). Within this context, Mimoum’s daughter’s futile attempt “to be a good Muslim, the best” (The Last Patriarch 206), as a way of finding order and peace at home, is constructed in the novel as out of step with the family’s dynamics. The patriarch’s “social hypocrisy” alongside his wife’s remote popular religiosity bring to an end their daughter’s hopes that religious compliance may help her break out of her “gradual incarceration” (The Last Patriarch 245). The other social and familial narrative, that of decency, emerges as an alternative “way out”: “the only one I thought was left to me, the one that was to reconcile my worlds” (The Last Patriarch 287). Significantly, marriage with a Riffian man is linked in the text not only with traditional expectations but also with the latent, essentialist gaze in Catalan society toward Moroccan women: “I’d been told so many times about how in your culture women shift from being under their father’s tutelage to being under their husband’s, I’d come to believe it” (298). The mestiza or fronteriza narrative thus implicates various parties in the process of eroding the self-esteem of this young woman (268).

The accumulation of familial pressures and misguided decisions drives the main character to a state of extreme fatigue that ultimately triggers a rupture of subjectivity: “I only wanted to sleep, not have that perpetual queasiness in my guts, [. . .] not think I was the worst person in the world. I still had those pills you put under your tongue and I started to swallow them” (The Last Patriarch 293). This near-death experience is nevertheless transformed in the text into a moment of clarity. Through her writing and reflection, the narrator has achieved a fuller understanding of the social relations that oppress her and is able to discover a way out of her own “prison.”24 She first confronts her father about his lies and the pain he has caused her and her mother. Then, she enters into a marriage that allows her to “simply look ahead for the first time in my life” (297). Just to add, though: “it was Paroxetine, not optimism” (297). It does not come as a surprise that shortly thereafter, she ends up getting a divorce and clearly states: “It was then I began to think I had to make my own destiny” (303). The echoes

24. My reading of this process of consciousness-raising is in dialogue with Moya’s postposi-
tivist realist interpretation of Anzaldúa’s “conception of mestiza consciousness”: “Significantly [. . .] [it] provides her with a more accurate perspective on the world than she previously had, enabling her to see the ‘Chicana anew in light of her history’ and to see ‘through the fictions of white supremacy’ (87)” (Learning 78).
of The House on Mango Street return in L’últim Patriarca through the connection that Cisneros establishes between writing as a form of liberation for Esperanza: “You must keep writing. It will keep you free” (Mango 61), and the knowledge that even if she finally manages to leave her neighborhood, writing will be her “ineluctable tie to community” (Saldívar, Chicano 84). Cisneros’s sense of a collective and precarious struggle resurfaces in L’últim patriarca, which ultimately draws attention to the difficult set of expectations and constraints this border woman must navigate. A case in point may be the fragility of the protagonist’s final steps toward “emancipation” (El Hachmi, Gent de paraula) or even more so, the symbolic violence that the text reintroduces in the final vignette, “Revenge with a vengeance,” in which the centrality of sex in El Hachmi’s construction of the end of the patriarchy for her protagonist and its association with pain, pleasure, betrayal, and liberty leaves the ending open to numerous interpretations, as Folkart has discussed (370).

However, as I have argued already, the author seems equally invested in creating a narrative landscape that sheds light upon a complex array of social violences that are visible from this particular borderland location.25 An illustrative example may be that while the protagonist’s husband reproduces her father’s patriarchal ideologies, it is not by mistake that the descriptions of their relationship are accompanied by the background noise of Spanish television programs about “stories of deceptions and abuse” (288). From her unique position, Mimoum’s daughter can observe ideologies of inequality that operate in Spanish society and that tend to be rendered invisible by discourses of racial and cultural difference, especially when contrasting the experiences of working-class women with those of North African immigrant women. This is a form of political critique that El Hachmi already began to develop in her first book, Jo també sóc catalana (2004).

**LÍMITES Y FRONTERAS**

In Límites y fronteras, El Kadaoui Moussaoui fictionalizes the condition of the “eternal foreigner” (27) that characterizes the immigrant experience. The novel seeks to explore the effects of essentialized definitions of cultural identity on Ismaïl’s inability to forge a subjectivity inclusive of multiple sociocultural belongings. The author textualizes this premise in the first pages of the book by situating Ismaïl as a patient in a psychiatric clinic in Barcelona, to which he is admitted after suffering a psychotic break. Right from the start, the reader

---

25. See Paula Moya’s realist definition of epistemic privilege correlated to minority identities (Learning 60), as presented in footnote 10.
is exposed to a wealth of stereotypes about Arabs, Imaziguen, Spaniards, and Catalans, all of which are interiorized and shouted by the sick protagonist as he wanders through the streets. Upon arriving at the clinic, Ismaïl begins a process of “delving into the written word” (84) as a way of understanding his pain and ultimately healing it. \textit{Límites y fronteras} is conceived as a first-person account of this healing process told retrospectively by Ismaïl from a present, when some truths have been uncovered, and he feels hopeful. The principal uniting thread of this narrative is Ismaïl’s internal monologue, facilitated by conversations with his therapist, Doctor Jorge, which, on occasion, he literally transcribes, although they are always framed by Ismaïl’s own comments. Additionally, the narrative is composed of pages from Ismaïl’s diary, poems, fragments of articles, or stories written by himself, as well as fragments of other conversations that he remembers. The protagonist attempts to access “pieces of my life that not even I knew that I knew, that I remembered and that were so important to understanding something about who I was in those instants” (27). This dialogue, however, takes place in a closed space, not only in the hospital but also in the closed space of Ismaïl’s mind. I argue that \textit{Límites y fronteras} is a novel that presents various contradictions. On one hand, although this is a text written through the remembrance of the pain and trauma of the immigrant experience, it paradoxically moves almost immediately to a level of abstraction that makes it difficult to access the causes that have provoked this pain. On the other hand, the narrative seeks to dismantle a series of binaries that exist in society, not simply in the mind of the patient, that have contributed to the rupture of his subjectivity—foreign/autochthonous, Moroccan/sick, European/normal—but instead, the text activates other dualistic conceptions; for example, a vision of culture as high culture or literary culture versus cultural practices understood as “signs that identify you to the outside world” (Cartes 48) and that El Kadaoui Moussaoui associates with “prison identities.”

The psychotic break that Ismaïl suffers leads him to experience “total disorientation” (15). In my study of \textit{L’últim patriarca}, I discuss “the contradictions in our own experience” (Moraga and Anzaldúa 23) felt by postcolonial subjects or women of color. Mestizo thinking, theorized by third world feminism, “emerges from the material reality of multiple oppressions and in turn conceptualizes that materiality” (Yarbro-Bejarano 6). The confusion felt by Mimoum’s daughter or Esperanza, the narrative voice in \textit{The House on Mango Street}, requires that they “read” (Mohanty, “Cartographies” 4) and “write against the grain” (35) of the different discourses on race and gender that converge at their position on the interstices of various cultures and social realities in order to develop their own voices. In contrast, the vision of a borderland subject that El Kadaoui Moussaoui portrays in \textit{Límites y fronteras} is
associated with two concepts introduced at the beginning of the novel: that of country or homeland (30) and that of culture. The form in which El Kadaoui Moussaoui presents both concepts reintroduces in the text a tendency to search for an authoritative subject that coincides with “the dominant Western philosophic and humanist paradigm for understanding selfhood [. . .] whose inner workings as a rational mind can be made transparent through introspective reflexivity” (Ruiz-Aho 354). While the identification with this stable subject allows Ismaïl to articulate social and political demands, the ultimate effect is the silencing and marginalization of other experiences of oppression and resistance in the text.

The feeling of having a “double nationality” (Límites y fronteras 97) is explained, for example, as an inferiority complex that has accompanied Ismaïl since childhood and that leads him to become angry and defend “Morocco when he is in Spain and Spain when he is in Morocco” (29). As for Ismaïl’s views on culture, there is no reflection in his narrative on day-to-day practices and struggles within communities that share cultural values as theorized by feminist mestizaje thinking from the borderland. A notion of culture that is relevant for Ismaïl corresponds with what Josefina Bueno Alonso has called a “pluricultural doxa” (“Hispanisme” 42), referring to a type of knowledge privileged by El Kadaoui Moussaoui in his second book, Cartes al meu fill. Un català de soca-rel, gairebé (2011).26 Bueno Alonso has described Cartes al meu fill as “a polyphonic text from a cultural, intellectual, and existential point of view” (42). Ismaïl’s thinking and narrative seem to already be incorporating elements of this “pluricultural doxa,” even if it is clearly skewed toward authors of “universal literature” (Bueno Alonso 41) who write in the West: “I enjoyed reading Baudelaire, José Agustín Goytisolo, Hölderlin, Gioconda Belli, Pushkin, Chekov, Saint-Exupéry and his little prince, and many more” (Límites y fronteras 61). Other authors that populate Ismaïl’s imagination and narrative are Fatima Mernissi and Mahoud Darwich alongside Leo Tolstoy, Gustave Flaubert, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Jorge Luis Borges, or references to the sculptures of Michelangelo. Ismaïl’s fascination with these works of art or authors seems to derive from their ability to capture some part of the common humanity of their subjects or characters, something that can be accessed from and by all cultures. It is therefore significant that the only mention of a literary work authored by a Moroccan writer, Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem

26. Some of the authors that form this “doxa” in Cartes al meu fill are: Kwamey Anthony Appiah, Víctor Català, José Agustín Goytisolo, Abdallah Laroui, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Amin Maalouf, Joan Margarit, Miquel Martí i Pol, Malika Mokkedem, Edgar Morin, Hanif Kureishi, Edward Said, Wole Soyinka, George Steiner, Mohammed Talbi, Leo Tolstoy, Mario Vargas Llosa, and Virginia Woolf.
Girlhood (1995), by Mernissi, appears in order to speak about “fantastical stories” that “transported women far from the walls” of the harem. Furthermore, Ismail connects the brief mention of Mernissi’s book with the nostalgia that he feels for the stories that the women in his family told in his presence when he was a child in which “they got revenge on men, converting them into punch lines for their jokes” (123–24). Ultimately, Mernissi’s book comes to serve in Límites y fronteras the function of establishing or perhaps reaffirming for the reader “a cruel truth”: “the lack of liberty and the submission of women” (124), a “truth” that serves as a prelude to an even larger one: “Sometimes all of Morocco comes to be that for me. A world of traditionalisms that stifle freedom” (124). The contextual emptiness and exotic framework in which the oral tradition of women in Maghreb is introduced reinforces, as noted before, the absence of a reflection on negotiations of power and agency developed by individuals within culturally structured discourses and practices (Mohanty, “Cartographies” 35; Plantade cited in Holgado Fernández and Razgalla).

This example reveals a pattern that repeats itself in the text. Morocco is constructed in Ismail’s narrative as a series of dreams or memories told by a narrator who positions himself as a “documentalist” (125) of practices and traditions that take place in small towns of The Rif that lack “light or running water” (98) or in the city of Nador. Ismail becomes progressively aware that these images (97–99) respond to his own anxieties, which he seems to link to his ignorance about a “homeland” that he had to abandon as a child, or to the clichés about “Moroccan culture” that both Spaniards and Moroccans have internalized (191). Nevertheless, Ismaïl’s identification with the liberal subject becomes clear when, after arriving at a number of conclusions on the lack of freedom of Moroccan women, illustrated in his mind by Mernissi’s book, Ismaïl himself speaks up to denounce the use of the veil as an imposition of traditionalism in an article that he writes for the clinic’s magazine (124). Through this article, Ismail posits an idea that El Kadaoui Moussaoui later explores at the end of the novel, as well as in Cartes al meu fill: “There are different cultures and there are different norms. Freedom will never be a cultural difference” (124). Ismaïl’s narrative nonetheless fails to communicate other points of view—particularly those of women—regarding how the veil is used in a Moroccan or Spanish context.

Límites y fronteras offers an explanation of what causes the pain experienced by those occupying a borderland position. In one of Ismaïl’s conversations with Don Jorge, Ismaïl declares that “my own demons are those that make me feel inferior” (30). The implication of this assertion is further clarified when El Kadaoui Moussaoui chooses a quote by Amin Maalouf for the epigraph of Cartes al meu fill, a book that is both autobiographical and
theoretical, in which Maalouf states: “For it is often the way we look at other people that can imprison them within their own narrowest allegiances. And it is also the way we look at them that may set them free.” 27 Ismaïl associates his experiences of rejection in Spain to the pervasiveness of “simplistic” identities in the public imaginary, understood as a response given by a population that feels threatened or humiliated (Maalouf 35). Just as his Moroccan family members are imprisoned by an impoverished vision of “culture,” Ismaïl provides anecdotes about the perception of Moroccan culture or Islam as signs of “a backwards world” (166) in Spain. 28 Daniela Flesler has studied the effect of the arrival of immigrants from North Africa, and specifically from Morocco, to Spain in the last three decades, on the adoption of “European discourses of ‘new racism’” (5),29 as well as the reactivation of images belonging to the collective imaginary about the “Moor” as a threatening and radically different figure (4–5). Flesler explains that it is not the difference exactly but rather the proximity and similarity of the Muslim immigrant (8–9) that activates “the anxiety over symbolic and literal boundaries, which results in an attempt to establish Spanish identity as unequivocally ‘European’ and set up clear cut differences with those deemed as outsiders” (10). 30 One of El Kadaoui Moussaoui’s central preoccupations, in both Límites y fronteras and Cartes al meu fill, is to denounce the artificiality of these “symbolic and literal” barriers that, in the Spanish context, are perpetuated by Spaniards, Catalans, and Moroccan immigrants alike.

The first of two ideas developed by El Kadaoui Moussaoui in Límites y fronteras and later in Cartes al meu fill as a theoretical response to the danger posed by essentialized or “prison” identities to the construction of a multicultural subjectivity is that of portraying identity as “a dress that you make for yourself as you go” (Cartes 61). In Cartes al meu fill, El Kadaoui Moussaoui enters into conversation with Maalouf in order to explain to his son that “each individual identity is unique, complex and irreplaceable” (Maalouf, qtd. in Cartes 11) and a compendium of “different mixtures and influences, some

27. Maalouf, In the Name of Identity and the Need to Belong, 25.
28. I use the concept of imprisonment in this context, following El Kadaoui Moussaoui’s El Kadaoui’s definition of “prison identities.” See footnote 28.
29. Flesler uses Étienne Balibar’s explanation of this phenomenon to describe how “this new or differentialist racism replaces the belief in biological inferiority with that of the presumed incompatibility of different cultures, lifestyles, and traditions” (Return 5). She further contextualizes this term in the analysis provided by Martin Baker, Étienne Balibar, Pierre-André Taguieff, Robert Miles, and Paul Gilroy (5).
30. Read Martin-Márquez for a study that delves into different representations of the Andalusian legacy, the Spanish colonial project, and their influence on the “performance” of Spanish national identity.
of them quite subtle or even incompatible with one another” (Maalouf, qtd. in Cartes 11). El Kadaoui Moussaoui seeks to structure his argument around his right as an individual to exercise a critical opinion without feeling that he is “betraying” his Moroccan or Imaziguen roots (Límites 185, Cartes 67). In his vision of border identity, the subject should be free to choose between “a diversity of ideas, of sounds, of music, of smells [. . .] of languages that others do not have” (Cartes 68). The second idea addresses the rejection of cultural relativism. In Cartes al meu fill, El Kadaoui Moussaoui suggests the concept of “cosmopolitanism,” theorized by Kwame Anthony Appiah, as the best way to integrate cultural differences: “It deals with a cosmopolitanism that does not advocate for a dialogue between static and closed cultures but rather whose primary goal is respect for human dignity and personal autonomy” (66). Paul Jay explains that the vision of cosmopolitanism that Appiah suggests in the book that El Kadaoui Moussaoui references, Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers (2006), “wants to look beyond cultural and ‘identitarian’ differences in the interests of fostering a view of identity organized around shared human traits, values, and rights” (Global Matters Kindle file).

Límites y fronteras and Cartes al meu fill are two texts full of profound tensions related to the notions of culture and identity that are activated. While, at certain points, El Kadaoui Moussaoui points to the possibility that democratic ideals may have originated within various cultures (Cartes 116), in general he tends to assimilate the democratic project with the liberal project (67, 151) and with an abstract perspective separated from local knowledge about the definition of violence, justice, and values. In addition, although he mentions the European “imperialist” (Cartes 67) past, he isolates democracy as “a bright idea” that Europe should “export” (151). El Kadaoui Moussaoui delineates a project, in this sense, similar to Appiah’s, one that is susceptible to the reproduction of a Eurocentric conception of modernity. Moreover, El Kadaoui Moussaoui fails to illuminate acts of resistance in Límites y fronteras

31. Cristián H. Ricci has analyzed Límites y fronteras as an example of a text written from a “paradigm of the formation of cultural identities that are marked by immigration, hybridization, and créolité” (Moros 25). Ricci appreciates the ability of the text, in agreement with Maalouf’s criticism on murderous identities, to “reach a universality of values and at the same time avoid the categorization of a single identity (101, 117)” (Moros 245).

32. See Paul Jay’s reading of Appiah’s concept of cosmopolitanism through the prism of Walter Mignolo’s theory of critical cosmopolitanism. According to Jay: “Traditional European forms of cosmopolitanism dating from the Enlightenment, like the one invoked by Appiah, can only be ‘thought out from one particular geopolitical location: that of the heart of Europe, of the most civilized nations’ with their ideals of ‘justice, equality, rights, and planetary peace’ ([Mignolo] 735–36).” However, he insists, “it remains difficult to carry these ideas further without clearing up the Renaissance and Enlightenment prejudices that surrounded concepts of race and manhood (736)” (Jay, Global Matters Kindle file).
that exemplify his interest in showing cultures as porous entities that are continually evolving. Finally, his rejection of an essentialized definition of cultural identity that impedes the psychological survival of the borderland subject ultimately leads him (and Ismaïl) to a constructivist vision that does not allow him to theorize and make visible the contradictions this border subject confronts on a daily basis.

CONCLUSION

In “Another Way to Be: Women of Color, Literature, and Myth” (2010), Paula M. L. Moya proposes the study of literature written by “marginalized peoples” (483) as a way to conceptualize social justice projects. Moya explains: “Some works of literature can help readers understand [. . .] how the social processes of gender, race, and ethnicity become materialized in individual lives” (488). She has also posited that works of literature written from minority positions may give access to forms of knowledge rendered invisible by dominant discourses: “Examining minority identities is [. . .] central to the project of discovering new—or reviving old—forms of knowledge that might help chart a way out of an oppressive society or social formation. (Mignolo 2000; Moya 2002; C. Mohanty 2003; Hames-García 2004; Teuton 2008; Siebers 2008)” (Moya, “Another Way to Be” 485). In this essay, I suggest that Límites y fronteras successfully elaborates the dangers of being imprisoned by “dualistic thinking” (Anzaldúa 80) but fails to articulate the complex set of oppressions and silences that bring Ismaïl to suffer a psychotic breakdown. The novel also tends to overlook views of the self or of agency that have been developed by individuals through day-to-day practices within culturally structured discourses. L’últim patriarca (2008), meanwhile, creates a nuanced narrative of the ways in which the border subject may negotiate (though not always competently) her way through “the different worlds she inhabits” (Anzaldúa 20). Moreover, the text constructs representations of sexuality, storytelling, or writing as spaces of interpellation or negotiation of dominant relationships carved out by women on the margins of different hegemonic systems.

WORKS CITED


