

Nomadism as Lifestyle: The Construction of a Narrative Borderland in *Un Beduino En El Caribe*

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Abstract This article analyses the short story collection *Un beduino en el Caribe* (*A Bedouin in the Caribbean*), written by the Sahrawi author Ali Salem Iselmu and published in 2014. Although the Saharan desert remains at the core of the collection, representing the quintessential and predominant place in the author's literary universe, these short stories also depict an amalgam of places, the cohabitation of different cultures, and thus, the Sahrawi migration as a multi-space phenomenon. Drawing on the idea that fictional literature can be an effective tool for political resistance, and that the negotiation of an alternative identity within a hegemonic order requires a space, this article argues that Iselmu's short stories project resistance literary spaces where the author expresses his disapproval of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara and vindicates a nomad and transboundary identity. This resistance is achieved through the construction (and habitation) of a borderland at a narrative level, characterized by a fluid and flexible identity and multiple and juxtaposed geographical spaces, where the Sahrawi narrative voices can reimagine their identity and their sense of sovereignty.

Keywords border poetics; borderland; Sahrawi literature; refugees; identity

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Introduction

Un beduino en el Caribe (A Bedouin in the Caribbean) is a collection of short stories written by the Saharawi author Ali Salem Iselmu and published in 2014. It portrays the experiences of displacement and political refugeehood that Iselmu's generation underwent, and still undergoes, because of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara in 1975. As early as in 1960 the UN urged Spain to initiate a decolonization process (through a referendum of self-determination) of what was then known as Spanish Sahara. The UN's backing of Western Sahara's independence triggered the emergence of the Polisario Front in the early 1970s. This is a group that embodies the national liberation movement that had been gaining support in the Spanish Sahara for a decade. However, to everyone's surprise, in 1975 the Spanish government ended up transferring the administration of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania without the consent of the Saharawi people. The transfer of the territory to Morocco and Mauritania was carried out in secret tripartite negotiations that led to the Madrid Accords, a text that granted Morocco and Mauritania the power to occupy and annex the ex-Spanish colony. Morocco's intentions to invade Western Sahara dated back to the early 1970s, when the North-African country turned to the International Court of Justice (ICJ) to claim this territory. Morocco based its claim on its historical links with the Sahrawi tribes prior to the Spanish occupation of the land at the end of the 19th century (Fernández-Molina & Ojeda-García 2020). Even though the ICJ's conclusion was unfavorable to the Moroccan government, rejecting the country the right to assume control over the Spanish Sahara, the Moroccan government decided to invade it through the so-called Green March of 350,000 civilians. After the UN Security Council's failed attempt to call upon Morocco to withdraw from Western Sahara, and the parallel Spanish abandonment of the Saharawi people through the Madrid Accords, the Polisario Front started a guerrilla war against the Mauritanian and Moroccan armies, resulting in the flight of half of the indigenous Sahrawi population to refugee camps near Tindouf, in south-western Algeria. In 1979, Mauritania made peace with the Polisario Front and relinquished its share of the territory, which was rapidly appropriated by Morocco. However, the Moroccan government still refuses to accept Sahrawis' independence and imposes strict measures of national control over the annexed territory (Fernández-Molina & Ojeda-García 2020).

Drawing on the idea that fictional literature can be an effective tool for political resistance (Harlow 1987; Adichie 2009; Mayer 2014; Borst 2019), and that the negotiation of an alternative identity within a hegemonic order requires

occupying a space (Hall 1986; Said 1990; Rose 1995; Agnew 2008), this article argues that, in *Un Beduino en el Caribe*, the author builds a liminal literary territory where Saharawi narrative voices reimagine their identity and their sense of sovereignty. The term “border poetics,” or the study of how narrative and symbolic representations can give form to territorial (or metaphorical) borders have been a widely discussed topic in the academic sphere during the last two decades (Schimanski 1996; Sidaway 2005). Iselmu’s short stories generate a border poetics and project literary spaces of resistance where the author expresses his disapproval of the Moroccan occupation of Western Sahara while claiming a nomad and transboundary identity. These spaces are, in essence, borderlands (Anzaldúa 1987), characterized by the juxtaposition and intermingling of geographical spaces and a nomad and mutable identity. Significantly, they could likewise be viewed as “third spaces” (Bhabha 1990), “contact zones” (Pratt 1992), and “spaces of refusal” (Jones 2012) since they “provide the [liminal] terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity” (Bhabha 1). Considering this, I will also be using Anzaldúa’s concept of “borderland” to address the interstitial spaces that are built within the narratives.

The title of the collection—*Un beduino en el Caribe (A Bedouin in the Caribbean)*—encompasses the Saharawi’s history of nomadism as well as their experience of exile by connecting two distant and, in many ways, divergent worlds: the refugee camps in Tindouf and Cuba. The connection between the Caribbean country and Western Sahara was reinforced during the Cold War due to a common political and ideological position, and the assistance that Cuba offered Western Sahara in the face of the latter’s social emancipation processes (Gómez Martín & Correa Álvarez 2014). The Cuban revolutionary ideology, led by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, spread internationally to other Latin American countries, and to European, and African political contexts. For example, the revolution had a direct or indirect influence on some decolonization processes such as the Algerian revolution and the Saharawi national liberation movement. Indeed, Cuba and other “friendly countries,” such as Poland and Algeria, participated in the construction of the Polisario Front’s political project of independence through civil cooperation and the provision of financial support. In 1980, the Cuban government officially acknowledged the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) as an independent State, which caused the breakup of Morocco’s and Cuba diplomatic relations. As the alliance between the Polisario Front and Fidel Castro’s government grew stronger, the latter encouraged the arrival of exiled Saharawi people to its territory between 1980 and 1999 (Monje 2012) to receive an education in different disciplines. The

lengthy stay of many young Sahrawis in Cuba (some stayed for up to 15 years) fostered strong affective bonds between both cultures, which translated into these Sahrawis' preservation of Caribbean idiosyncrasies once they left the island. Due to this significant influence, which manifests through their Cuban accent when speaking Spanish, their Latin way of interacting with others, or their distinctive way of understanding life, they are known as *Cubarauis*. The term alludes to their stay in Cuba as a cornerstone of their identity (Gómez Martín & Correa Álvarez 87).

Ali Salem Iselmu, the author of the short story collection at hand, belongs to the generation of Sahrawi children who received an education in Cuba. He was born in the old town of Villa Cisneros (Western Sahara) in 1970, and as with most Sahrawis of his age, his childhood was marked by war and exile. In 1979, when the war between the Polisario Front and Mauritania ended, he had to flee with his family to the refugee camps in south-east Algeria, where he stayed until he was sent to Cuba in 1982. He lived in the island for 14 years, obtaining a degree in Journalism from the University of La Habana. In 1995, he returned to the refugee camps in Algeria and started working in the Spanish department of Sahrawi National Radio. Nowadays, he lives in Spain, and has participated in several anthologies of contemporary Sahrawi poetry, such as *Añoranza. Imágenes del pueblo saharauí* (2002), *Bubisher. Poesía saharauí contemporánea* (2003) and *Aaiún, gritando lo que se siente* (2006). He is a solo author in the book of poetry *La música del siroco* (2008), and the short story collection *La luz de cuatro velas en el Sáhara* (2018). In addition, he is a member of the so-called *La Generación de la Amistad* (The Sahrawi Friendship Generation), a group of Sahrawi writers constituted as such during a meeting in Madrid on July 9 in 2005 with the goal of “raising awareness about Saharawi political limbo and advocating for international recognition of their territory” (L. Ellison & Colledge 75). This literary cooperative includes the authors Mohamed Salem Abdelfatah, Bahía Mahmud Awah, Chejdan Mahmud Liazid, Limam Boicha, Zahra Hasnaoui and Ali Salem Iselmu, among others. Although its members share evident political experiences of migration and could be approached as a “generation” in the conventional meaning of literary history, they also constitute a network of interconnected heterogeneous members. These authors have made their literary work known both individually and collectively, with the intention of bringing visibility to their life experiences as displaced people as well as to the Sahrawi political cause. This is the case of the anthology *Don Quijote, el azri de la badia saharauí* (2008), to which Iselmu contributes with his short story “La Libertad del ingenioso hidalgo” to highlight the figure of Don Quixote, who is, due to his own status as a knight-errant, a true epitome of the eternal nomad. Some

of his short narratives, such as “Reencuentro” or “El barco y la camarera” have been included in *La fuente de la sagaia* (2009), a short story collection in which various members of the Friendship Generation try to convey the suffering and hope of their people.

Even though since the beginning of the 21st century the Sahrawi community in Spain has maintained a prolific literary production and their texts have started to receive some academic attention, scholars such as M’bare N’gom Faye have noted that African literature written in Spanish is still relatively little studied and that, more specifically, the Spanish literature from Western Sahara remains quite unexplored (N’gom Faye 2011). There are, however, relevant studies that have encouraged the emerging critical attention on Sahrawi literature and that have hugely contributed to shedding light on the border as a Hispano-Sahrawi space of creative expression (Odartey-Wellington 2017), as well as the poetic representations of the Saharan desert (L. Ellison & College 2018), the migratory question in Sahrawi literature (Gómez Martín 2013), and its search for alternative political spaces through their writings (Odartey-Wellington 2018). But such studies are scarce and do not really analyze short narratives written by Saharawis deeply. They rather approach Sahrawi’s literature from a holistic perspective and/or mainly focusing on poetry, the predominant genre in Sahrawi literature. While it is true that poetry has always been intrinsic to Sahrawi culture because it fits well into its traditionally nomad character, the desire to document oral history from one generation to the other, and its capacity as an effective literary tool of political resistance (Deubel 2012; Robles et al. 2015), it is important to highlight that short narrative (in the form of popular tales and legends) also constitutes a relevant dissemination tool of Sahrawi traditional values, beliefs, and desires. Indeed, Barreras Gómez has pointed out that this genre’s features (briefness, intensity of action, importance of themes) make it ideal for marginal authors to denounce certain political and social situations, as it has been historically used by those who have never formed part of the dominant narrative, such as exiles, women, and migrants to provide alternative point of views to the dominant discourse (Barreras Gómez 2014). Thus, there is a need for more studies that analyze Sahrawis’ short stories as another key instrument for these authors to mold a Sahrawi identity, as well as research that explores how short narratives engage with other literary genres to enhance a transborder spirit and a mindset independent from Moroccan domination. The present article finds inspiration in Odartey-Wellington’s understanding of physical barriers as sites of aesthetic production in Saharawi creative expression (Odartey-Wellington 2017), and in Bahia Mahmud Awah’s approach to *Un beduino en el Caribe* as an example

of cultural multi-stratification (Mahmud Awah 2018), to provide a close analysis of Sahrawi short narrative and, more specifically, of Iselmu's short story collection. The main purpose of this study is to highlight short narrative as an equally important genre of Saharawi cultural expression, and to demonstrate that these stories contribute to a better understanding of Sahrawi literature as a site of political resistance.

Un beduino en el Caribe (A Bedouin in the Caribbean) contains thirty short stories that narrate Iselmu's and other children's daily life in the hostile Tindouf camps and their subsequent journey to Cuba, the land where the author, and many other Sahrawis, spent their youth as political refugees. They also tell the experience of departure from the Caribbean Island many years later, and the strangeness of the return to the place where these Sahrawis spent their childhood after having spent so many years abroad. Such return caused them a consequent feeling of being uprooted, even though their Saharawi origin had always been inherent in their hearts. Some of the short stories also aim at dignifying the Saharawi culture by presenting several popular tales and legends which highlight the nomadic and peaceful lifestyle of Sahrawis, their tough spirit and their adaptation capacity. In essence, Iselmu combines autobiographical literature with journalistic chronicles and popular legends. The book forms a portrait that is rich in perspectives, simple in its composition, but that fulfills its objective: to bring us closer to the reality of the Sahrawi people from the period prior to colonization to the present, passing through exile and the war. *Un beduino en el Caribe* is, as the author brilliantly explained in the book's introduction,

la historia de un niño que creció fuera de su tierra persiguiendo la libertad de su pueblo y aceptando los retos y desafíos que supone para una persona vivir durante muchos años y de forma indefinida, los amargos momentos de la separación de su familia y la fractura de su pueblo mediante un conflicto originado entorno a la soberanía del Sáhara Occidental (Iselmu 11).

the story of a child who grew up abroad, pursuing his people's freedom and accepting the challenge of living for many years, and indefinitely, the bitter separation from his family and the fracture of his people, due to a conflict originated around the sovereignty of Western Sahara (Iselmu 11)¹.

More specifically, the short stories in this book revolve around four themes:

1 All translations, unless otherwise indicated, are mine.

the projection of past childhood memories in Western Sahara as a symbolic act to claim this territory, the migratory experience outside the Sahara, a negative portrayal of Moroccan occupation while claiming independence, and the special relationship between the Saharawi people and the desert. In fact, these four themes are recurrently used in literary texts that fall under the *Generación de la Amistad* (the Sahrawi Friendship Generation). Their unifying themes are the depiction of an errant condition, the experiences of exile and displacement, the evocation of a lost land and its reclamation through memory, and the use of the Spanish language to reach an international audience and look for alliances in their self-definition project (Odartey-Wellington 313). Thus, Iselmu's book, *Un beduino en el Caribe* (*A Bedouin in the Caribbean*), is an archetypal piece of writing within the Sahrawi Friendship Generation for two reasons. Firstly, it aims at shedding light upon the Moroccan occupation and, secondly, its four thematic areas are characteristic of the literary works of other Sahrawi writers from this group.

In some of the narratives conforming this book, such as "La amarga noticia" or "El sueño de Chej," the author aims at reclaiming Western Sahara by projecting past childhood memories that lead to strong emotional links between the characters in the stories and the Moroccan-occupied territory. While the former story narrates a Sahrawi child's long journey through the desert to escape from Moroccan armies and his conversion into a refugee, "El sueño de Chej" also depicts a child who lives in a camp in the middle of the desert, but dreams of sailing the seas like his grandfather once did, presumably when the coastal part of Western Sahara was not yet occupied by Morocco. The last sentence in the story carries a powerful political burden and confirms the child's inability to reunite with his grandfather due to her exile and the so-called "wall of shame," a physical barrier between Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara and the Sahrawi-controlled areas: "the wet blue sea is still lost, and a human barrier of hatred prevents Chej from reuniting with his grandfather's boat" (*el mar azul y húmedo sigue perdido y una barrera humana de odio impide a Chej reencontrarse con el barco de su abuelo*) (Iselmu 74). These stories, as others in the collection, project a stolen childhood marked by war, conflict, displacement, and the Sahrawi children's subsequent traumatic separation from their relatives, and highlight their right to return to the occupied territory.

The second thematic area focuses on an imposed migratory experience and the depiction of the Sahrawis' displacement. "El barco y la camarera," "El largo paseo," or "Un beduino en el Caribe" focus on the characters' stateless condition and their hybrid identity in between Cuba and the Sahara, while "Los olivos y la escarcha" and "La prisa de Madrid" portray an immigrant who feels misunderstood by the

natives. All these stories depict a transnational and nomad identity in permanent flight, moving through borrowed lands, and representing the voice of Sahrawis in the diaspora.

The exaltation of a nomad identity in *Un Beduino en el Caribe* is accompanied by a negative portrayal of the Moroccan government and the passivity of international entities regarding the Moroccan-Saharawi conflict. “Atrapados en el desierto” or “La Güera y el barco de azúcar,” adopt the form of journalistic chronicles to shed light upon the suffering of thousands of Sahrawis, while vindicating their right to reclaim the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. The former story recalls the abandonment of sub-Saharan immigrants close to the “wall of shame,” as the Moroccan government did not allow them to trespass, consequently letting them die in the middle of the desert. While the narrator acknowledges the immigration issue as a complex one, he also criticizes the passivity and cruelty of governments and international organizations. The latter short story focuses on La Güera, a city in Western Sahara where in the 1990s the Moroccan government tried to build here the necessary roads and infrastructure. However, they later realized that the land was not suitable for such constructions because the sand swallowed everything as it was built. In 2016, the Polisario Front was established in the city, and it has become a symbol of Saharawi resistance to Morocco. The narrative is another example in which the author employs the journalistic tone to raise awareness about certain historical and political incidents, such as the attacks that La Güera suffered in 1975:

La Güera suffered an attack by the Mauritanian army in 1975, when this country decided to occupy the southern part of Western Sahara. The population resisted in their homes and fought for every meter of the city. [...] With the support of the Saharawi guerrillas they were able to reach the border with Algeria and save their lives (Iselmu 71).

La Güera sufrió el ataque del ejército mauritano en 1975, cuando este país decidió ocupar la parte sur del Sáhara Occidental. La población resistió en sus casas y luchó por cada metro de la ciudad. [...] Con el apoyo de los guerrilleros saharauis pudieron llegar a la frontera con Argelia y salvar sus vidas (Iselmu 71).

The last thematic area in *Un beduino en el Caribe* explores the powerful link between Sahrawis and the desert in emotional and identity terms. “El enigma de la bahía,” “La sabiduría de los cien dromedarios” or “El calendario de mi nacimiento”

portray Sahrawis' traditions and positive values, such as loyalty and wisdom, with the purpose of molding a common Saharawi identity in relation to the land they inhabit. Following the Saharawi literary tradition of contributing to the mythification and personification of Tiris and other desert areas occupied by displaced Sahrawis (Odartey-Wellington 2017; L. Ellison & College 2018), *Iselmu* provides the desert with an ideological dimension and depicts a symbiotic and symbolic relationship between the Saharawi people and it, where the former's identity is influenced by the inhabited territory.

The Construction and Habitation of a Narrative Borderland as a Means of Political Resistance

Drawing on the idea that cultural and aesthetic practices can be used to negotiate borders, disrupt expectations of what they are, and redefine them through the creation of imagined and imaginary borderlands (Schimanski & Stephen Wolfe 2010), I argue that the four thematic areas in *Un beduino en el Caribe* serve as strategies for creating a space of resistance at a narrative level. Indeed, they are counter-sites where the boundary that marks the nation's selfhood [...] disrupts the signification of the people as homogeneous" (Bhabha 1994: 198), and "the frontier between differences also operates figuratively as a conceptual space for performative identities beyond the fixed essentialisms of fundamentalist or absolutist identity politics" (Friedman 273).

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has narrowed the relationship between aesthetic production (more specifically fictional writing) and political power since, as she puts it, power is "the ability of not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person" (Adichie "The Danger of a Single Story"). In a similar fashion, Julia Borst has supported the potential of literature to unsilence "immobile voices" (Borst 2019: 113), echoing scholars such as Frederick W. Mayer, who acknowledges that "fictional narratives can be as powerful as non-fiction in establishing ideological interests" (Mayer 92).

In fact, the role of literature as a potential weapon for political resistance stems from its ability to create spaces and, consequently, shape identities. In this analysis, I am using Ludger Pries' definition of space, approaching this concept as "different from place in that it encompasses or spans various territorial locations" (Pries 67). It does "not only refers to physical features, but also larger opportunity structures, the social life and the subjective images, values and meanings that the specific and limited place represents to immigrants" (40). In this regard, I base myself on Ian Chambers' belief that writing is a key activity when it comes to the construction of

alternative spaces, as he claims that “to write is, of course, to travel. It is to enter a space, a zone, a territory [...] writing opens up a space that invites movement, migration, a journey” (Chambers 10).

Indeed, the short stories in *Un beduino en el Caribe* give shape to different spaces that are key in the construction of the territoriality that the author pursues. As is common among the Sahrawi authors of the Friendship Generation, the Saharan desert is a pivotal element in the book, acting as a common thread between the stories and assuming a symbolic function that articulates “Sahrawi conceptualizations of identity, community, [...] and also political legitimacy” (L. Ellison & Bridgewater College 75). As in much of Saharawi literature, such as in Bahia M. Awah’s memoir *La maestra que me enseñó en una tabla de madera* (*The Teacher Who Taught me on a Wooden Board*), the short stories “La otra despedida,” “La despedida de mi abuela,” and “El sueño de Chej” connect the desert with the maternal lineage by portraying the figures of the mother and the grandparents as representatives of the land. By means of this connection, they legitimate claims of matrilineal links and hereditary rights to both the Moroccan-occupied territory and the refugee camps. Similarly, in “El deseo nómada,” the narrator claims that “the inexperienced shepherd is amazed at how a person feels the desert as his own, that runs [it] through his blood [...] his existence has no meaning without the immensity, in it he finds his reflection and that of his ancestors” (*el pastor inexperto se queda asombrado de cómo una persona siente el desierto como algo suyo, que corre por su sangre ... su existencia no tiene sentido sin la inmensidad, en ella encuentra su reflejo y el de sus antepasados*) (Iselmu 54).

By emphasizing the emotional ties to the desert homeland through short stories in which characters and narrators conceive of the desert as their home and deny any government or institution the right to own it, the author claims the desert as part of him, and vice versa, inhabiting it from exile. As L. Ellison and College suggest, in the work of Iselmu and other Saharawi authors the Saharan Desert appears as a “blank canvas onto which humanity projects its hopes and fears” (95). For instance, in “El reencuentro,” the first—person narrator claims that one night in the desert, while watching the stars next to his mother, he understood that his land is “free from armies, United Nations’ motions, free from peace and war missions” (*libre de ejércitos, de resoluciones de las Naciones Unidas, libre de misiones de paz y guerra*) (Iselmu 63), and that he felt that, for a moment, they were the real owners of the night. Thus, as happens in many other stories in Iselmu’s collection, the desert works as an “emotional canvas” in which multiple narrative voices express their desire to see a free Western Sahara, the frustration that exile produces in them, or

the longing for their loved ones.

Nevertheless, although pivotal, the desert is not the only setting of the stories, nor is it the only space that works as a “blank canvas” for the author. Likewise, the narrative voices project their emotions on other settings such as Madrid in “La prisa de Madrid” or “Atrapados en la penumbra,” Teruel, in “Los olivos y la escarcha,” and Cuba, in “El corazón de la música.” The first three texts depict the migration experience in Spain by dealing with the difficulty of finding a job, the harshness of the long, precarious working days, and the individualistic and shallow life in European cities to dismantle the image of an idealized welcoming and racism-free Spanish society. In “Atrapados en la penumbra” the narrative voice claims that in Spain,

el primer acto de supervivencia era la lucha constante por sobrevivir sin papeles aceptando trabajos desde limpiar granjas, coger fruta. [...] Ser inmigrante, exiliado y apátrida es algo imposible de asimilar. A veces presentas en una comisaría de la policía la documentación que acredita que eres refugiado saharauí pero el funcionario que tramita los papeles sólo entiende que eres argelino o mauritano. La burocracia y las leyes injustas de este mundo le impiden a un saharauí ser lo que realmente es (Iselmu 34).

the first act of survival was the constant struggle to survive without papers, accepting jobs from cleaning farms to picking fruit. [...] Being an immigrant, exiled and stateless, is something impossible to adapt to. Sometimes you present the documentation at a police station that proves that you are a Saharawi refugee, but the official who processes the papers only understands that you are Algerian or Mauritanian. The bureaucracy and unfair laws of this world prevent a Saharawi from being who he really is (Iselmu 34).

This excerpt shows the precariousness that Saharawi immigrants experience in Spain because of the native’s inability to understand their situation, caused by a deep ignorance and lack of empathy. Later in this story, the narrator compares the European country with other territories to feed a negative image of the former. He asserts that “when you travel to South Africa or Cuba and see how they treat you, you are simply surprised and moved knowing that there are countries in the world that support the Saharawi cause boldly” (cuando uno viaja a Sudáfrica o Cuba y ve cómo le atienden, simplemente se queda sorprendido y emocionado sabiendo que existen en el mundo países que asumen la cuestión del Sáhara sin complejos) (Iselmu

34), and concludes that “no immigration law can ignore the fact that the Sahara was the fifty-third province of Spain” (ninguna ley de extranjería podrá ignorar que el Sáhara fue la provincial número cincuenta y tres de España) (Iselmu 34).

In “El corazón de la música,” as in other short stories in the book, the experience of displacement is addressed to in positive terms, as the author depicts Cuba as a hospitable place that welcomes displaced Sahrawis and provides them with an education. Cuba is a territory on which the author projects a variety of positive feelings, that go from the happiness he feels “in the middle of the Santiago Carnival” (en medio del carnaval santiaguero) (Iselmu 49) to the warmth he experienced on his arrival to the island, as told in “Un beduino en el Caribe.” Iselmu’s love for Cuba and his *cubaraui* identity are reflected in “La vuelta a las raíces,” which tells of the sadness that the author feels upon leaving the island. This story explains the trauma that, in the early 1990s, many young Sahrawi graduates experienced upon their return to the refugee camps (Gómez Martín 230). The feeling of being uprooted and the cultural shock of those who had grown up in Cuba, away from the Arab cultural influence, is depicted when the narrator claims that when he saw his family, after fourteen years, he could only recognize his grandfather, or when, once in Tindouf, the narrator gets off the plane and a mass of warm air burns his face, so he decides to get inside the plane again.

Although the desert takes center stage in *Un beduino en El Caribe*, the short stories are also set in other geographical spaces such as Santiago de Cuba, Madrid, or Teruel, and refer to La Güera and other specific places. The book has a multi-spatial character that allows the author to establish a connection between distant geographical spaces and cultural contexts and, in this sense, acts as a bridge between these territories at a symbolic level. The different settings dialogue with each other, allowing the reader to travel from one story to the other smoothly, across borders, and the interconnection of these settings contributes “to mitigate the feeling of detachment that the loss of their land of origin [and displacement] generate” (Gómez Martín 239). The juxtaposition of geographical spaces is explicitly portrayed in “El corazón de la música,” which opens with the sentence,

Esta noche mi cuerpo viaja despacio entre los copos de nieve y se acuerda de cómo la arena caliente le quema los pies y en medio de los contrastes el ritmo obsoleto de las cosas continúa, mientras la húmeda lluvia en las calles de Santiago de Cuba es una tormenta tropical (Iselmu 49).

Tonight, my body travels slowly among the snowflakes and remembers how the

hot sand burns its feet and, in between contrasts, the obsolete rhythm of things continues, while the wet rain in the streets of Santiago de Cuba is a tropical storm (Iselmu 49).

Elements such as the snowflakes, wet rain, obsolete rhythm, and the warm sand evoke distant lands and contribute to an amalgam of geographical spaces. Later in this text the narrative voice specifies that he wants to talk about several places: Santiago de Cuba, the *jaimas* in the Saharawi camps, and the small villages in Guipúzcoa, in Northern Spain. This interconnection of distant geographical and cultural contexts is also very present in the literature of other Sahrawi authors belonging to the Friendship Generation (Gómez Martín 2013; Odaty-Wellington 2018). Such as in Mahmud Awah's poem "Húérfano en un Starbucks," where the author establishes a link between Tiris and Europe, Salem Abdelfatah's "Nómada en el exilio," built upon the association of desert and ocean, Tiris, La Habana or Paris, or Iselmu himself in his poem "Translation," with a clear transnational message. The nexus among the places that the narrator mentions in "El corazón de la música" is precisely the music. He begins an inner journey upon hearing the Cuban singer Isaac Delgado. Then he continues travelling through the "catchy rhythm of the Oriental Conga" (el contagioso ritmo de la Conga Oriental) (49), the sound of the *tbal* (a Saharawi drum) and the *txalaparta* (a Basque instrument). This metaphorical journey positions music as a powerful vehicle of communication among faraway lands. In this sense, Iselmu joins other authors from the Saharawi Friendship Generation in the construction of a more fluid, dynamic and relational space, an imagined alternative territory in which the Moroccan government does not exert any control over Saharawi citizens. The blurring of the political borders between nations and connections across cultures occur in the borderland that the narrative voices in this book inhabit since, as Odaty-Wellington suggests, "the identity of the Friendship Generation, and by extension that of their nation without its own territory, depends on their collaboration with others [...] in their aim to recover their lost sovereignty" (la identidad de la Generación de la Amistad, y por extensión la de su nación sin territorio propio, depende de su colaboración con otros [...] en su propósito de recuperar la soberanía perdida) (313). This interconnection between geographic spaces, despite being an omnipresent aspect throughout the book and a unifying axis between the stories, reaches its maximum expression in narratives such as "La resignación de Brahim" or "El barco y la camarera." The former narrates the departure of Brahim from Cuba and his separation from Carmen and the rest of his friends on the island. The story itself is set in a borderland, a space in

between Cuba and the Sahrawi Camps:

Aquella madrugada era la última de Brahim en Cuba, después de quince años seguidos [...]. El hecho de tener que marcharse, dejar a Carmen y a sus amigos era una prueba de fuego para sus sentimientos. Él, que conocía la palma real, la cotorra, la yuca, el boniato, y el batido de zapote y todos los sabores y colores que había vivido intensamente a lo largo de esos años. Pero también sabía que al otro lado del océano le esperaba su madre, su padre, sus hermanos y todo su pueblo abandonado en unos campamentos de refugiados (Iselmu 35).

That morning was Brahim's last in Cuba, after fifteen years in a row [...]. The fact that he had to leave, leave Carmen and his friends, was a litmus test of his feelings. He was a person who was familiar with royal palms, parrots, yucca, sweet potatoes, and sapote smoothies and all the flavors and colors that he had experienced intensely throughout those years. But he also knew that on the other side of the ocean his mother, his father, his brothers and all his people were waiting for him, abandoned in some refugee camps (Iselmu 35).

The character in this short story gets access to a “third space” where distant elements such as yucca, parrots, sweet potatoes, and royal palms, representing Cuba, converge with some members of his family and the refugee camps. The connection between these two worlds is constant throughout the narrative. Later, the narrator claims that Brahim is overcome by a vague feeling that reminded him of his mother and the *jaimas*, and to calm his anxiety he goes back to the hostel and finds a Cuban cigar in his pocket. The in-between territory that the character occupies is further represented by liminal spaces in the story, such as the sea, José Martí International Airport, and the Sahrawi embassy, where he collects the necessary documentation to leave the island. Airports, embassies, or maritime areas can be approached as in-between spaces in that they act as “contact zones” (Pratt 1992), or inter-national spaces, where different nations converge. Even though in this short story the sea is mentioned superficially, it constitutes a key symbol of liminality in “El barco y la camarera,” a story that also epitomizes the interconnection between distant territories because it tells the departure of a Saharawi child from the refugee camps heading to Cuba. As in the former story, the protagonist accesses a “third space” on his way to the opposite shore. Elements representing distant territories, such as the Oran Port, America, the Mediterranean, Cuba, or Tatiana, the woman from Leningrado who takes care of the refugee children, intertwine giving rise to

a transnational space. There is indeed a fusion of distant elements, symbolized by Tatiana's words when claiming that the desert and the sea are alike in that both are monotonous, but the jump of dolphins and lizards break their uniformity.

The Redefinition of a Sahrawi Identity

All the narratives in *Un beduino en el Caribe*, and in particular the aforementioned stories, depict the displacement of Sahrawis as a complex and multi-layered phenomenon due to its multi-spatial character (occupied territories, Northern Mauritania, refugee camps in Tindouf, Cuba, or Spain) and the diversity of population flows. Indeed, as some scholars, such as Gómez Martín, have pointed out, the vital experience of those Sahrawis who have emigrated from the refugee camps since the second half of the 1990s, complicates the phenomenon of Sahrawi migration, as they face a real lack of land of origin. The place from which they emigrate is represented by a refugee camp anchored in a perpetual state of transience, which means that, to this very day, it is conceived of as an intermediate, ephemeral space (Gómez Martín 233). Consequently, the search for a Saharawi identity acquires a higher level of complexity, as it must combine several identities, mainly the Saharawi, the Cuban, and the European. Indeed, the short stories in *Un beduino en el Caribe* corroborate a resistance to the Moroccan occupation through the construction of a liminal identity that results from the inhabiting of spaces of transit.

The notion of space as a site of political resistance in that it is closely attached to identity has been widely discussed in academia and, more specifically, it has been argued that the negotiation of a subcultural and alternative identity within a hegemonic order requires achieving “a space [...] to mark out and appropriate territory” (Clarke et al. 45). Gillian Rose and J. Agnew have highlighted the relevance of space in the construction of identities, asserting that “identities themselves, our self-definitions, are inherently territorial” (Agnew 2008: 179), and that “the meanings given to a place [...] become a central part of the identity of the people experiencing them” (Rose 88).

In *Un beduino en el Caribe*, Iselmu finds an alternative way of interpreting his reality and reaffirming a nomadic consciousness (yet preserving his Saharawi identity), by rethinking a space in fiction where the narrative voice of a refugee can build an identity freed from national territorial boundaries. The nomadism that Iselmu's short stories and a lot of literature written by other Sahrawis such as Bahia Mahmud Awah or Liman Boicha depict, serves them in two ways. Firstly, it must be approached as a sociological phenomenon that is characteristic of Bedouin and

other desert pastoral communities. Its enhancement helps these authors highlight an aspect of Sahrawis' idiosyncrasy that differentiates them from Moroccans and feeds the feeling of community. Secondly, nomadism in *Un beduino en el Caribe* can be understood as being attached to Iselmu's and other Sahrawis' migration experience. In this respect, Gómez Martín remarks that "the life narratives of the members of the *Friendship Generation* show the existence of an intense dialogue between the migratory experience and the process of literary creation" (las narraciones de vida de los componentes de la *Generación de la Amistad* muestran la existencia de un diálogo intenso entre la experiencia migratoria y el proceso de creación literario) (238). In this light, she also adds that "the Saharawi writer perceives himself as a nomad without a desert, wandering, with no clear destination, among different realities, diverse cultures, and a variety of geographical spaces" (el escritor saharawi se percibe a sí mismo como un nómada; un nómada sin desierto, moviéndose, sin rumbo fijo, entre realidades distintas, diversas culturas, diferentes espacios geográficos) (238). This nomad identity, detached from the Moroccan identity, emerges from the spatial amalgam that the author builds in the book. In other words, the renegotiation of the space triggers the redefinition of his Sahrawi identity as nomadic and free from national impositions. Consequently, nomadism as an inherent aspect in the construction of the Sahrawi selfhood is explicitly portrayed in many of the narratives that make up Iselmu's book. For instance, "La amarga noticia" and "El fuego de las piedras" depict the flight from the Moroccan army, escaping from the bombs, and the conversion of thousands of Saharawis into refugees, while "El largo paseo" and "La resignación de Brahim," further portrays an identity in motion that travels from refugee camps to Cuba and vice versa.

Likewise, the short stories whose central thematic axis revolves around the special relationship between the Sahrawi people and the desert, with the purpose of enhancing and promulgating the Sahrawi lifestyle, seek to shape an identity project based on highlighting the nomadic spirit as the main characteristic of the inhabitants of the Sahara. Thus, "El viajero nómada" tells the story of a sixty-year-old traveler riding Zeireg, his camel. Due to high temperatures, and dehydration, this man loses consciousness, and miraculously he is taken by Zeireg to a small water well where another man assists him and is surprised that such an old man manages to survive. In the last lines of the text the narrator mentions that,

el viajero nómada volvió a nacer volvió a nacer del polvo de la arena; una vez más salía victorioso en su permanente huida de la muerte. Él era un amigo del agua de los oasis, de las tormentas de arena y amaba el desierto desde la

profundidad de aquel pozo que le devolvió el último aliento cuando creía que todo estaba perdido (35).

the nomad traveler was reborn from the dust of the sand, once again he was victorious in his permanent flight from death. He was a friend of the water of the oasis, of the sandstorms and he loved the desert from the depth of that well that gave him his last breath when he believed that all was lost (35).

This story highlights the link between the Sahara and its inhabitants, showing a symbiotic, almost sacred relationship between the traveler and characteristic elements of the desert, such as camels and oases. Likewise, it shows that the capacity for survival and resilience are intrinsic aspects of the Sahrawi identity, and that they contribute to the creation of a nomadic spirit. In a similar fashion, other narratives in the collection such as “El deseo nómada” and “La nostalgia del andante” delve into the Sahrawi lifestyle while creating a nomadic consciousness that is intrinsic to the desert dwellers. The former story contains a dialogue between a Bedouin grandfather and his grandson. The old man tells the young boy about some of the traditions that people in the desert follow and the ways of surviving in such extreme climatic conditions. He says that “the Bedouin speakers speak of water wells, pastures, livestock and merchandise” (en la palabra de los oradores beduinos se habla de pozos de agua, de pastos, de ganado y mercancías) (53), and that “the autumn is a warm movement of people, animals, and winds blowing in all directions” (el otoño es un movimiento caluroso de personas, animales, y vientos que soplan de todas las direcciones) (53), which stresses their wandering lifestyle. Finally, the wise man also addresses this nomadism by concluding that “the inexperienced shepherd is left amazed at how a person feels the desert as his own, that runs through his blood and his happiness is tied to the valleys, mountains and plains that he traveled for many seasons” (el pastor inexperto se queda asombrado de cómo una persona siente el desierto como algo suyo, que corre por su sangre y su felicidad está atada a los valles, montañas y llanuras que recorrió durante muchas estaciones) (54). “La nostalgia del andante” likewise reflects an individual in motion, as it narrates the story of, presumably, an exiled Saharawi who “wanted to embrace the horizon and feel free from attachments” (que quería abrazar el horizonte y sentirse libre sin ataduras), that is, to return to the Moroccan-occupied Western Sahara. He regrets not being able to go beyond the wall that divides the Western Sahara in two, referring to the so-called Moroccan “Wall of Shame” and, mentally, decides to travel from his exile the places of the Moroccan-occupied

Western Sahara, “with his bare feet chasing seagulls and snails” (con sus pies descalzos persiguiendo gaviotas y caracoles) (51).

Most importantly, the identity fostered by the spatial amalgam created in the narratives is a fusion of different selfhoods that are mutable and open. In other words, the multi-spatial character of the book (and the Sahrawi migration itself) shapes a Sahrawi selfhood as the sum of multiple identities. As in many other texts belonging to the Friendship Generation, in *Un beduino en el Caribe* the author perceives the Sahrawi immigrant as the conjugation of a triple identity adscription: the Sahrawi, Caribbean and European (Gómez Martín 63-64). Thus, in “El corazón de la música” the narrator understands the Caribbean nights, the Sahrawi *tbal*, and the isolated villages in Northern Spain as part of his inner self. The triple identity of the author is further projected onto the short stories using words in *Hassania* (the language spoken by Sahrawis), such as *jaima* or *badía* (house in the desert), the love that the narrative voices show towards Cuba, and the inclusion of multiple Spanish elements, such as Seville, Madrid, or Basque music, that also shape the Sahrawi immigrant’s selfhood and way of thinking.

Conclusion

In short, the combination of geographical spaces shapes a narrative borderland where a liminal and mutable identity is created and where the author resists Morocco’s political impositions. This resistance is fueled by the creation of a nomadic consciousness that constitutes the axis on which the short stories are based, and that allows Iselmu, as a Sahrawi exiled immigrant, to rethink his selfhood, his individual autonomy, and the Sahrawi people’s sense of sovereignty. Indeed, *Un beduino en el Caribe* is built upon four thematic axes that shape a Saharawi identity and a resistance space at a narrative level. Drawing on Odartey-Wellington’s idea that the liminal status of Sahrawis (both in the refugee camps and abroad, from a geographical and political point of view) incites the creation of alternative boundaries within which Sahrawis reimagine their identity and their sense of sovereignty (1), I have argued that the short stories in *Un beduino en el Caribe* serve the author in the construction of an alternative and liminal space, or “third space,” which results from the multi-spatial character of the book. In this sense, the reader can travel throughout the narratives across time and space since the stories do not follow a logical chronological and spatial order. The nomadic consciousness that the book generates, and the juxtaposition of distant geographical elements, allow the author to build his identity freed from territorial and ideological impositions. Therefore, *Un beduino en el Caribe* constitutes itself a symbolic borderland in between territories where Iselmu

finds refuge and can resist the Moroccan occupation of his territory by depicting it as borderless. By using the words of Odartey-Wellington, I define the book as “no home to monoliths, [...] an ode to transformations, to cultures in motion” that “sum[s] up quite accurately the Saharawi reality put forth by the author” (11). Iselmu’s literary work constitutes, indeed, a place of aesthetic production that challenges the Moroccan hegemonic ideology.

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