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## Cultural Resistance and Textual Emotionality in the Sahrawi Poetic Anthology *VerSahara*

### Abstract

A group of Hispanophone Sahrawi poets founded their own *Generación de la Amistad* 'Friendship Generation' in Madrid in 2005. Ever since, Sahrawi poetry in Spanish has found in the anthology an ideal format to present itself to the Spanish reader, counting more than a dozen publications of poetry collections. Such profusion has nothing to do with the struggle for the cultural hegemony characteristic of other currents within the Spanish poetic field. By contrast, these collections keep to the anthologists' double logic of cultural preservation and literary activism, which emphasize the communitarian character of their poetry. In this paper, I examine the critical contribution of such double logic to peninsular literary and cultural studies in the anthology *VerSahara* (*Looking at Sahara*). In this editorial project, authors from the Canary Islands, one of the seventeen autonomous communities that comprise the Spanish State, and Sahrawi poets share pages and territorial concerns about the political conflict in Western Sahara, which has remained unsolved since the Moroccan occupation in 1975. In particular, I study the production and circulation of emotional attachments between Spanish and Sahrawi poets, and the resulting poetic space of transnational solidarity in dialogue with the colonial discourse of *Hispanidad* 'Spanishness' and human rights' activism. From this angle, I explore the choice of Spanish as the *lingua franca* between these communities and the collective praxis present in their writing, characterized by the use of a communal "we" and the inclusion of *Hassaniya*, the native language of Sahrawi poets. I argue that Sahrawi poetic anthologies in general and *VerSahara* in particular attempt to consolidate an additional cultural front in the struggle for the recognition of self-determination in Western Sahara. They do so by interpellating the Spanish-speaking community while delving into textual emotional resources that converge in three rhetorical topoi: the Sahrawi people's resilience in the face of repeated Moroccan aggressions, the romanticizing of their nomadic past, and the linguistic and literary ties with Spain.

### Keywords

Sahrawi Hispanophone Poetry, Canarian Poetry, Peninsular Literary and Cultural Studies, Emotion Studies

Cultural Resistance and Textual Emotionality in the Sahrawi Poetic Anthology  
VerSahara

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In their famous work *Kafka. Toward a Minor Literature* (1975), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari discuss the notion of a minor literature: “that which a minority constructs within a major language” (16); a literature whose very social milieu “forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics,” and “finds itself positively charged with the role and function of collective, and even revolutionary, enunciation [producing] an active solidarity” (17). Sahrawi Hispanophone literature can be considered minor in such a sense: Its exponents adopt the language of the colonizer from a subaltern position, and the political and the personal are inseparable in it—the authors’ biographies are imbricated in the Sahrawi conflict with Morocco and its consequences. Additionally, it has a collective value as a means of transmission of cultural heritage while visualizing its dramatic situation in the Spanish-speaking world and international community. Notably, despite the Moroccan occupation, Spain is still recognized as the *de jure* administering power of Western Sahara, according to international law.<sup>1</sup> The unfinished decolonization of the territory has been pending since Spain withdrew from the area in 1976, after the tripartite Agreement of Madrid with Morocco and Mauritania. In October 1975, with the mobilization of nearly 300,000 people toward Sahrawi territory—the so-called Green March—Morocco started an occupation characterized by the repression, torture, and murder of supporters of the independence of Western Sahara, also causing the exile of the Sahrawi population, which has indefinitely settled in refugee camps. Stephen Zunes and Jacob Mundy argue that the dispute goes beyond seizing the territory’s economic resources such as phosphate mines or fishing areas. According to them, it is imaginary, in the sense that the conflict is deeply rooted in the incompatibility of the basic tenets of Moroccan and Western Saharan nationalism. On the one hand, Moroccan nationalism pursues the idea of a postcolonial Greater Morocco encompassing not only the Spanish Sahara but also Mauritanian, Malian, and the Algerian territories, all of which had allegedly been severed from Morocco through European colonialism. On the other hand, Western Saharan nationalism emphasizes the distinct Sahrawi identity and its people’s struggle for self-determination as the

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<sup>1</sup> The United Nations’ doctrine states that an administering Power cannot end its responsibilities unilaterally with a Non-Self-Governing Territory. Thus, Law 40/1975 on the decolonization of Western Sahara does not exempt Spain from granting the Sahrawi their right to self-determination (Mariño 60).

rightful inhabitants of the territory. Depicting the Sahrawi as natives and the Moroccan as settlers, it advocates for a long-overdue decolonization of Western Sahara (Zunes and Mundy). The efforts of different diplomatic missions to hold a referendum on self-determination have always met with obstacles on the Moroccan side, leaving all the initiatives deadlocked without any sign of resolution of the conflict.

Such struggle and the consequences of the Western Sahara stalemate have inevitably shaped Sahrawi contemporary cultural manifestations. This essay aims to analyze a singular project within a cultural phenomenon that is noteworthy in recent Sahrawi literary production: the profusion of poetic anthologies published since the beginning of the twenty-first century. In a non-exhaustive list, the following are the most notable: *Bubisher* ('Small Bird of the Desert') (2003), *Aaiún, gritando lo que se siente* ('Aaiún, Crying What Is Felt') (2006), *Um Draiga* (2007), *Los colores de la espera. Antología de nueva poesía saharawi* ('The Colors of the Wait. Anthology of New Sahrawi Poetry') (2010), *La primavera saharawi. Escritores saharauis con Gdeim Izik* ('The Sahrawi Spring. Sahrawi Writers for Gdeim Izik') (2012), *Mil y un poemas saharauis* ('A Thousand and One Sahrawi Poems') (2012), and *Las voces del viento* ('The Voices of the Wind') (2014). Some were motivated by a commemoration of a tragic event, such as the bombing of *Um Draiga*, while others celebrate milestones, such as the *Gdeim Izik* camp protesting the Moroccan occupation.<sup>2</sup> These collections focus on Sahrawi authors, mostly members of the *Generación de la Amistad* 'Friendship Generation,' and are often self-published or supported by small presses.<sup>3</sup> *VerSahara* ('Looking at Sahara') (2016) is a word game with *ver* 'to see' and *verso* 'verse,' alluding to how its poems will contribute to unveiling the political and social disenfranchisement of the Sahrawi peoples. The anthology was presented at the *I Festival de literatura y música saharawi* 'First Festival of Sahrawi Literature and Music,' in Santa Brígida, Gran Canaria, in November 2016. Published by the Canary Islands' Center for Caribbean Studies through its publishing house *Cuadernos de la Gueldera*, this anthology's peculiarities distinguish it from other collections of recent Sahrawi poetry. Following the national selection criteria normally applied by Spanish editorial houses, Sahrawi anthologized work rarely includes authors from other latitudes who sympathize with the Sahrawi cause and/or have denounced the

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<sup>2</sup> In February 1976, Moroccan military forces bombed thousands of the Sahrawi people with napalm and white phosphorous at the narrow gorge of Um Draiga; these victims were attempting to seek refuge in Algerian refugee camps after Spain refused to guarantee a referendum of self-determination for Western Sahara. Gdeim Izik was a protest camp against human rights abuses that was established on October 9, 2010, and was dismantled by Moroccan authorities on November 8 of that same year. The protest gathered thousands of *haimas* 'cloth tents,' and has been considered the start of the Arab Spring by activists such as Noam Chomsky.

<sup>3</sup> All translations are the author's.

oppressive political situation of the Sahrawi people. However, *VerSahara* features both Sahrawi and Canarian poets—by birth or adoption. In this collection, poets from the Canary Islands sympathize with their desert neighbor, affirming historical bonds that cross the political borders that define the Spanish nation-state. Given their geographical proximity—the island of Fuerteventura is 100 kilometers from the Western Saharan coast—Canarian and Sahrawi have shared a rich cluster of historical experiences. They have fished and traded in the same waters for centuries and even lived in close proximity during the colonial period, when many Canarians moved into the Spanish province of Western Sahara. In *VerSahara*, Canarian poets explore their ties with the Sahrawi by relying on their *Guanche* heritage—the language and culture of the aboriginal, pre-Hispanic inhabitants of the Canary Islands, whose origin has been traced to the Berber peoples—rather than their privileged cultural and political bonds to Spain.

Although literary canons have traditionally been compartmentalized in nation-state containers, *VerSahara* demands a different, cross-cultural approach, and for that purpose, my work adopts a transnational studies perspective aimed at “rethinking taken-for-granted categories like identity and membership” (Khagram and Levitt 10). More specifically, I am interested in exploring *VerSahara* and its cultural logic as transnational phenomena to replace, complement, and transform local, national, and state institutional logics (Khagram and Levitt 12). From this angle, I propose that the anthologized texts re-imagine and re-configure Spanish–Sahrawi societal and cultural connections based on their experience and interpretation of their peoples’ shared colonial history. The intended outcomes are geared toward creating and reinforcing a transnational bond of solidarity between the Sahrawi and the Spanish-speaking world and involve triggering certain emotional responses. My argument focuses on the mobilization of emotions through the discursive, rhetorical, and poetic strategies proposed by *VerSahara*’s authors to raise awareness in support of the Sahrawi cause. In particular, my claims are based on Sara Ahmed’s notion of textual emotionality. In her introduction to *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (2004), she explains her understanding of the emotionality of texts while stating the purpose of her work:

I offer close readings of texts, with a concern in particular with metonymy and metaphor: my argument will suggest that ‘figures of speech’ are crucial to the emotionality of texts. In particular, I examine how different ‘figures’ get stuck together, and how sticking is dependent on past histories of association that often ‘work’ through concealment. The emotionality of texts is one way of describing how texts are ‘moving’, or how they generate effects. I will also consider the emotionality of texts in terms of the way in which texts name or perform different emotions. (12)

Thus, the term refers to how certain figures of speech favor the circulation and attachment of emotions to social and physical bodies, simultaneously shaping their subject positionings and subjective agency.

However, *VerSahara* is not a programmatically homogeneous anthology. The poetry selected does not force dialogue between Sahrawi and Canarian contributions. Indeed, the linkages are deliberately subtle, such that the work is even structurally divided into two content blocks introduced by two different prologues. In that sense, the anthology seems to honor the uniqueness of both poetic traditions, while affirming a message of cultural and political interconnection amidst obvious differentiation. This collection of poems also offers notable clues on the construction of a common cultural identity between Sahrawi and Canarian authors, based on the territorial conflicts that fuel their respective creative processes.

### *VerSahara* in the Spanish Cultural Field

The centrality of poetry as the vehicular genre of the Sahrawi experience is indisputable not only in recent Hispanophone production (Faszer-McMahon 223) but more generally in the nomadic tradition of the North African peoples (Castelli Gattinara 30). In Madrid, in 2005, a group of exiled Sahrawi poets organized themselves and set, among other objectives, “La defensa y divulgación de la causa saharauí y su cultura” ‘The defense and deployment of the Sahrawi cause and its culture,’ and “Instar a la Real Academia Española y al Instituto Cervantes a reconocer a los saharauis como pueblo de habla hispana” (“Congreso constituyente”) ‘To urge the Royal Spanish Academy and the Cervantes Institute to recognize the Sahrawis as a Spanish-speaking people.’ The name they chose, *Generación de la Amistad* ‘Friendship Generation’ is significant. The name is a tribute to the Spanish Generation of 1927, also known as the *Generación de la Amistad* because of the friendship that some of its authors developed at the *Residencia de Estudiantes* ‘Student Residence,’ an important cultural institution in Madrid. Authors of the Generation of 1927 such as Federico García Lorca are among the poetic referents of their Sahrawi counterparts, although the stylistic coordinates of the Sahrawi Friendship Generation are closer to those of the later social poetry of the 1950s.

The notion of a literary generation, which is controversial, implies the adoption of a series of assumptions—an unlikely stylistic homogeneity among its members among others—and conventions within the literary field that typically

respond to pedagogical, marketing, or cultural hegemony logics.<sup>4</sup> However, in the case of the Sahrawi Friendship Generation, the use of generational poetics as a contextualizing cultural marker seems justified based on its reflection of the common journey of many of its members. For example, Bahia Mahmud Awah, Limam Boisha, and Saleh Abdalahi, went through a formative stage in Cuba, stayed for a period of time in Sahrawi refugee camps, and finally settled in Spain (“Entrevista Limam”).

The eleven cosigners of the Friendship Generation’s founding manifesto are also regular contributors to the long list of anthologies of contemporary Sahrawi poetry: Mohamed Salem Abdelfatah Ebnu, Mohamed Ali Ali Salem, Limam Boisha, Ali Salem Iselmu, Bahia Mahmud Awah, Zahra El Hasnaoui, Chejdan Mahmud Liazid, Saleh Abdelahe, Lehdia Dafa Mohamed, Luali Lehsan, and Mohamidi Fakal-la (“Congreso constituyente”). In the case of *VerSahara*, seven of ten anthologized poets are founding members of the Friendship Generation, and the remaining three, Bachir Ahmed Aomar, Salka Embarek, and Sukina Aali-Taleb, subsequently joined the group. The personal story of Embarek exemplifies the *Guanche*–Sahrawi familiarity: The daughter of a Sahrawi father and a Canarian mother, she fled continental Africa to the Canary Islands with her family after the Moroccan invasion. Overall, and even though the Friendship Generation is mainly composed of male poets, the presence of women writers in Sahrawi Hispanophone literary projects has been a constant in the past two decades and has recently increased with the addition of younger authors such as Aali-Taleb.

On the part of the Canarian poets, it is more difficult to find a common denominator beyond their territorial origin and pro-Sahrawi activism. Cultural historian and folklorist Francisco Tarajano, popularizer of Canarian and *Guanche* culture and a stock name of insular nationalism, is arguably the most famous component of the group. María Jesús Alvarado and Maribel Lacave share some biographical coincidences because they both spent part of their childhoods in the Sahara and are social activists who support Sahrawi political groups. The intergenerational component of the anthology is also striking. It includes authors who have lived through the Spanish Civil War and experienced exile—such as Agustín Millares Sall, Francisco Lezcano, and Tarajano—and others born in the 1950s and 1960s—such as Helio Ayala Díaz and Fernando Senante. For some of these authors, Latin America has been a temporary or permanent destination—Chile for Lacave, and Venezuela for Tarajano—contributing to the development of a pan-Hispanic literary identity, a cultural marker that Canarian poets share with their Sahrawi counterparts. The two introductions to the collection, by Bachir

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<sup>4</sup> Eduardo Gambarte explains that behind its pedagogical utility there is an inherently nationalist vision of literary history. The establishment or designation of a literary generation is a mechanism of cultural power with an undeniable marketing component (6).

Ahmed Aomar and Ayala Díaz, which respectively precede the Sahrawi and Canarian contributions, stress that the colonial imposition of the Spanish language has now become an instrument of union, capable of “acercar a pueblos hermanos” (10) ‘nearing our people into brotherhood,’ within which “los poetas canarios siguen escribiendo sueños de libertad para sus hermanos y hermanas saharauis” (13) ‘Canarian poets continue to write dreams of freedom for their Sahrawi brothers and sisters.’

Beyond the use of Spanish as the *lingua franca*, the constant references to fraternal ties in *VerSahara* become a trope of unity within a specific framework of spatial and temporal references. For example, Ayala Díaz points out that Canarians and Sahrawi share “el mismo océano, la misma historia periférica en una España de ultramar” (12) ‘the same ocean, the same peripheral history in an overseas Spain.’ However, there are two more peripheral scales common to the two cultural halves that conform to this anthology and add to geographic isolation. On the one hand, the Spanish/Latin American paradigm prevailing in histories of Hispanic literature (Lifshey 21) contributes to the marginalization and exclusion of Hispanophone literature on the African continent. On the other hand, academic denominations such as peninsular or Iberian studies seem to implicitly exclude literary production in the Balearic and Canary Islands. Within the Spanish State, poetic anthologies have traditionally been prescriptive instruments of canonization and provided the material ammunition necessary in the struggle for aesthetic and ideological hegemony within the cultural field (Molina Gil 57); however, this is not the aim of *VerSahara* and its anthologized poets, clearly located at the fringes of contemporary Spanish poetic landscapes.

In the Spanish field of poetic production, positions of prestige and prominence are currently more contested than in previous decades but remain strongly held by the so-called “poesía de la experiencia” (Mora 104) ‘poetry of experience,’ a school of authors versed in the poetics of everyday life. Initially dubbed *la otra sentimentalidad* ‘the other sentimentality’ in reference to an homonymous manifesto signed by Granada-born poets Luis García Montero, Álvaro Salvador, and Javier Egea, the poetry of experience received the attention of poetry awards and publishing houses from the mid-1980s until the financial crisis of 2008. The favored parameters in the writing of poetry at this time were characterized by its resolute anti-avant-gardism and delved into a melancholic solipsism of sorts, leaving little space for formal innovation or social topics, which were often dismissed as pamphleteer or eccentric (Alicia bajo cero 35-6). The literary production by authors associated with the poetry of experience occurred during the years of consolidation of the young Spanish democracy and, together with other cultural practices, conformed to what cultural critic Guillem Martínez calls the *Cultura de la Transición* ‘Culture of the Transition,’ or CT, a credulous, uncritical culture suitable for the political regime born out of the 1978 Spanish



Constitution, which shies away from the politicization of social issues and questioning the political legitimacy of Spain's institutional pillars such as the Crown or the congressional two-party system (Martínez).

The CT started facing wider social scrutiny in the years after the 2008 financial crisis, when the Spanish government's crude imposition of neoliberal austerity measures detonated a crisis of political representation. However, several cultural initiatives and movements have challenged the CT's status quo since its consolidation. The centrality of the poetry of experience within the Spanish cultural field has been disputed, or at least pointed out, by a heterogeneous current of aesthetic dissent that dates back to the 1990s, to which literary critics have referred as "poesía de la conciencia" (Bagué Quílez 160) 'poetry of conscience.' This label encompasses various poetic projects, although they coincide in posing a formal or thematic subversion of the poetry of experience. Some authors, such as Antonio Méndez Rubio, recover avant-garde indeterminacy, whereas others, such as Antonio Orihuela, use a prosaic, accessible style in favor of the immediacy and clarity of the message. The critic and poet Alberto García-Teresa mentions a subgroup that he calls "poesía de la conciencia crítica" 'critical conscience poetry,' whose members did not limit themselves to protest or denouncing a given social issue but also adopt "un posicionamiento y una perspectiva de clase social, incluso cuando tratan temas de naturaleza íntima como el amor" (11) 'a social class position and perspective, even when they address topics of an intimate nature such as love.'

Within the Spanish field of cultural production, Sahrawi poets have created their own space in the poetic scene, and although it is a relatively autonomous space, it could be easily located within the aesthetic coordinates set by the poetry of conscience, together with the youngest of their Canarian counterparts.<sup>5</sup> Such a case can be made based on the centrality of social matters in their poetics, and how these specific matters are rooted in the authors' biographical experiences, located in specific geographical settings within the Sahrawi and *Guanche* cultural heritage. In his prologue, Bachir Ahmed Aomar describes Sahrawi poetry as a "grito desgarrado que pide justicia" (11) 'torn cry that asks for justice.' The popular support for their cause within Spain, articulated in multiple non-governmental associations, and a public opinion favorable to a potential referendum of Sahrawi self-determination, has not been accompanied by corresponding literary recognition or editorial attention. Precisely for that reason, Sahrawi Hispanophone poetry has remained in an invisible periphery within the Spanish literary field.

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<sup>5</sup> This ascription is based exclusively on coincidences of style and themes; according to my review of the literature, there has been neither a dialogue nor effective exchange between the poets considered of the conscience and the authors of the Sahrawi Friendship Generation, as I will explain later.

Although the dominant literary movements branching out from the poetry of experience and the poetry of conscience in Spain have frequently resorted to a systemic anthologizing of related work, the editorial aim of these poetic groups seems utterly distinct from Sahrawi goals in using the same format. Spanish poets and editors resort to anthologies to consolidate cultural hegemony, whereas Sahrawi poets use them to increase awareness of the unsustainable situation of the Sahrawi people, appealing to the Spanish sympathetic reader in his or her native language: “Nosotros los poetas de la “Generación de la Amistad” condenamos enérgicamente la violación de los derechos humanos de los saharauis en los territorios ocupados . . . Ponemos nuestros versos al servicio del pueblo saharauí en su lucha por la libertad e independencia” (“Congreso constituyente”) ‘We the poets of the Friendship Generation strongly condemn the violation of the Sahrawi people’s human rights in the occupied territories . . . We offer our verses to the Sahrawi people in their fight for freedom and independence.’ Thus, the authors demand the complicity and support of the Spanish-speaking community and its institutions, both political and cultural (Awah and Moya). Spain’s aid is considered crucial for the Sahrawi to finally exercise their right to self-determination and end their dispute with Morocco. Honoring the Sahrawi-Canarian ties, Canarian poets featured in *VerSahara* participate in the anthology and are motivated by their solidarity with their neighbors’ cultural and political struggle. Notably, the authors of *VerSahara* do not endorse, or dialogue with, either of the aforementioned currents—experience and conscience. Apart from their admiration for the Chilean writer Pablo Neruda and the Spanish Generation of 1927, Sahrawi poets’ aesthetic referents date back to the Spanish post-Civil War *poesía desarraigada* ‘uprooted poetry.’ By dialogue, I mean explicit references or allusions to the Spanish poetic currents of conscience and experience in the Sahrawi Friendship Generation’s poetics and critical texts—or, for that matter, some sort of acknowledgment of the existence of such currents. However, there are some important parallels and shared traits between the Sahrawi poets and the peninsular poetic currents still worth mentioning. *VerSahara* poets show stylistic and formal resemblances with authors from the school of conscience and share with them an understanding of ethics and poetics as two intertwined dimensions of writing. Again, awareness and potential mobilization of the Spanish reader is the primary motivation for the texts included in *VerSahara*.

### Textual Emotionality and the Sahrawi Cause

The poems of *VerSahara* present recurrent elements in the form of images, figures, and pragmatic positionings that should be carefully considered to understand the anthology’s focus on the sympathetic Spanish reader. Regarding a wider variety of texts and genres, Ahmed reflects on how language can facilitate

the circulation of emotions understood as cultural practices rather than psychological states, and with the purpose of strengthening or creating a sense of community. Ahmed defines the emotionality of texts as “the way in which texts name or perform different emotions” (13). According to her argument, figures of speech such as metaphors and metonymies play a critical role to assign emotions to different social groups, welcoming or excluding them from the enunciating subject “we” but also configuring an object, the “they” that usually functions as an external threat. Ahmed offers a significant example by analyzing the expression “the nation mourns,” which “is [used] to generate the nation, as if it were a mourning subject” (13). Additionally, “the nation becomes a shared ‘object of feeling’ through the ‘orientation’ that is taken towards it” by those “who might mourn on behalf of the nation” (13). However, not everyone is allowed to mourn and be mourned, since that depends on how emotions circulate. As Ahmed explains, “The word ‘mourns’ might get attached to some subjects (some bodies more than others represent the nation in mourning), and it might get attached to some objects (some losses more than others may count as losses for this nation)” (13).

From this perspective, it seems more appropriate to ask what a particular text does, rather than attempting to unveil or ascertain a given meaning (Labanyi 232). The discussed tropes and expressions of textual emotionality can have material effects in certain social and physical bodies by attaching empowering or crippling emotions to some bodies and not others, for example, making immigrants an object of hatred. In the case of the Sahrawi and Canarian poets featured in *VerSahara*, these authors explore and develop tropes of transnational historical, linguistic, and geographic proximity in an attempt to build a cross-cultural “we” that transcends the political borders of the nation-state. They seem to do so to emotionally move the Spanish-speaking readers into caring about Sahrawi territorial and humanitarian issues as if they were their own. However, a careful reading of these poems also reveals differences between Sahrawi and Canarian poets in how the emotionality of their texts is built, something that can be explained by the poets’ different approaches to their common Spanish colonial heritage. Western Sahara is commonly known as Africa’s last colony because of its unfinished decolonization process from Spain. In this case, by decolonization, I do not refer to the ongoing process of exposing and confronting Western forms of epistemological dominance, conducted by disciplines and schools such as postcolonialism and decoloniality (Bhambra 120). More literally, as far as the case of the Western Sahara is concerned, what is at stake is the Sahrawi people’s exercise of their political independence and sovereignty over their territory.

As we will see, Sahrawi poets embrace their colonial heritage through spatial tropes of closeness with their Canarian counterparts, and they seem to do so in an attempt to make the Spanish government accountable as a guarantor of Western Sahara’s autonomy against Moroccan occupying forces. By contrast, for

Canarian poets of *VerSahara*, tropes of closeness with the Sahrawi people are primarily grounded on geographic proximity; then, as a felt condition of cultural periphery with respect to Peninsular Spain, the *Guanche*–Sahrawi ties; and finally, an openly belligerent position regarding Spain/Castile’s colonial past. A particularly recurrent figure in this insular poetry is that of the Canarian–Sahrawi fraternity. Francisco Lezcano makes it explicit: “No es ilusión, hermano. / Mírame. Aquí estoy, / con el hombro presto para el empuje. / Te acompaño” (154) ‘It is not an illusion, brother. / Look at me. Here I am, / my shoulder ready for the push. / I go with you.’ Salka Embarek also resorts to family ties but reformulates the relationship in terms of an erotic play whose consummation blurs borders or turns them into the site of an encounter: “Eres desierto, mar yo, / me retiro y te beso / en un juego de amor / que desnuda fronteras” (95) ‘You are desert, sea I am, / I recede and I kiss you / in a game of love / that uncovers borders.’

The poem “Sahara” by Francisco Tarajano highlights the fraternal bond, which is emphasized with an augmentative suffix: “Las manos que tú me extiendes, / hermanazo saharai, / están caladas con nervios, / están bordadas con sangre” (161) ‘The hands that you extend to me, / dear Sahrawi brother, / are pierced with nerves, / are embroidered with blood.’ The formula repeats itself in its conative function at the beginning of the second and third sections of the poem “Hermanazo que acá vienes” (163-65) ‘Dear brother who is coming here’ and appears up to five times in the last of the series, where the speaker reflects on the origin of this brotherhood:

Tu desdicha y la mía  
van por cauces similares:  
nos robaron nuestras tierras,  
nos mataron a los padres,  
sepultaron nuestra historia,  
mañanas hicieron tardes,  
redujeron a cenizas  
tabaibas y tarahales . . .  
y no sé si ya nos venden  
o nos venderán más tarde . . . (165)

Your misfortune and mine  
go through similar courses:  
they stole our land,  
killed our parents,  
buried our history,  
made mornings afternoons,  
reduced to ashes

tabaibas and tarahales . . .  
 and I do not know if they already sold us  
 or if they will sell us later. . . .

The fraternal bond to which this poem alludes is not that of the coexistence of Spanish and Sahrawi in what was a Spanish overseas province from 1958 to 1976. Through a feeling of contempt, Tarajano establishes an affective relationship between Sahrawi and *Guanches* as victims of the same colonial dynamic, that is, the occupation and consequent exploitation, submission, and cultural erasure to which both peoples, *Guanches* first and then Sahrawi, were subjected.

Adolfo Campoy-Cubillo says that the discourse of Spanish–Sahrawi fraternity has no historiographical support based on cultural, geographic, or ethnic ties (153-54). However, in the case of the *Guanche* people, there is evidence of ancestral genetic connections between them and the Berber population (Maca-Meyer 155) and of ancestral migratory movements toward the islands, probably because of the desertification of the Sahara. Moreover, linguistic studies affirm the kinship of the *Guanche* language and the Berber dialects of northern Sahara (Hayward 74). These historical and cultural ties are to some extent articulated in “La Saharaui” ‘The Sahrawi woman,’ a poem by Tarajano that concludes by expressing his desire for the effective decolonization of the two peoples: “¡Que Sáhara y Canarias / en formidable union / canten el beñesmen / de un sol libertador” (160) ‘May the Sahara and the Canary Islands / in formidable union / sing the beñesmen / of a liberating sun,’ where *beñesmen* is the *Guanche* voice for the month of August and the name of the main aboriginal *Guanche* festivity, Harvest Day, celebrated on the fifteenth of the month.

Sahrawi authors in *VerSahara* elude the fraternity trope, perhaps to avoid concealing or whitewashing the colonial relationship with Spain. Alternatively, Spanish–Sahrawi proximity is presented through the authors’ common experiences with canonical figures in the peninsular literature. For instance, Bahia Awah’s “Exilio IV” ‘Exile IV’ begins with the following lines: “Largo rato dialogué con el exilio, / triste lo que me contó: ‘A Machado / el exilio le consumió”’ (41) ‘Long I conversed with exile, / sad what it told me: ‘Machado / the exile consumed him.’ Another example would be “Sigo aquí” ‘I am still here’ by Bachir Ahmed Aomar, a poem that transitions from the persecution and repression that the Sahrawis suffer to the memory of Federico García Lorca’s lost body: “en la cuneta / con las manos cortadas, / escribe un poema de amor / a su amado que llora” (31) ‘in the ditch / with his hands cut off, / he writes a love poem / to his crying beloved.’

An obvious but important link that *VerSahara*’s Sahrawi poets share with their admired Spanish counterparts is their use of Spanish as a vehicular language. On the Canarian side, this choice is tacitly problematized. Tarajano seems to point out the dilemma of using the language of the colonizer and occasionally switches

into *Guanche* to address the Sahrawi people—such is the case in the poem “Neigag, aicad maragat (Hermano, sé bienvenido)” (168) ‘Brother, be welcome.’ For the Sahrawi poets; however, the Spanish language is not only a tool to reach out to the Spanish-speaking audience as potential allies for their cause but also a form of cultural resistance against the imposition of Moroccan francophone culture. In his prose poem “Y... ¿dónde queda el Sáhara?” ‘And... Where is the Sahara located?’, Sukina Aali-Taleb responds by stating, “Queda muy lejos del vecino que ansía lo que no es suyo. A años luz de distancia. Hablamos lenguajes distintos. Y no entiendo nada” (119) ‘It is very far from the neighbor who craves what is not his. Light years away. We speak different languages. And I do not understand anything.’ Another prose poem, “Las primeras letras” ‘The first letters’ by Embarek describes clandestine Spanish classes conducted in a Moroccan women’s prison, with the looming risks of being discovered and punished:

Alguna vez fueron sorprendidas en plena clase recitando los tiempos verbales, ‘tú viviste, él vivió, nosotros vivimos...’ y fueron llevadas ante el juicio de los perros y pasaron por el osco zumbido de las barras de madera. Lo que nunca descubrieron los guardianes, fue aquel pedacito de cal que, con gran cuidado, la maestra volvía a colocar en la esquina inferior de la pared. (101)

Once they were caught in the middle of class reciting the verb tenses, ‘you lived, he lived, we lived...’ and were brought before the judgment of the dogs and passed through the fierce buzz of wooden bars. What the guardians never discovered was that little piece of lime that, with great care, the teacher put back in the lower corner of the wall.

The Popular Front for the Liberation of Saguia el-Hamra and Río de Oro (Polisario Front) and Sahrawi intellectuals have successfully appropriated and redeployed the neo-imperialist discourse of Hispanidad. Simultaneously, they embrace and boost the use of the Spanish language, supported by educational programs in refugee camps and the poetic production of the Friendship Generation (López Martín 44). Susan Martin-Márquez speaks of an exercise of ventriloquizing the former mother country by the Sahrawi (335-39), which manifests in strategies of opposing ideological signs. On the one hand, the Sahrawi take advantage of neo-colonial narratives rooted in Spanish national identity, such as the salvation of Western Sahara from Moroccan institutional power to initiate a process of political and cultural modernization in the region. On the other hand, they explore connections with projects of cultural preservation and political emancipation normally proposed by peripheral nationalisms in and outside Spain. The CT ostracizes works that put

constitutionalism—or Spanish nationalism—into question, in favor of other national projects within the Spanish nation-state. Therefore, the representation of a *Guanche*–Sahrawi emancipatory fraternity that underlies *VerSahara*—a representation explicitly highlighted in Tarajano’s contributions—displaces the anthology further towards positions of greater marginality within the Spanish cultural field.

However, it could be objected that since 2008 and during the subsequent years of economic hardship, the political regime that resulted from the Spanish transitional process to democracy has entered a period of deep questioning. Aided by the *Indignados* ‘outraged’ and anti-austerity movements since 2011 and the emergence of new political forces, a cultural critique of CT has gained greater visibility and legitimacy (Caballud 192). The poetics of conscience benefited from—and also contributed to—this momentum with their decided criticism of political and financial powers, a stylistic feature that also plays a critical role in *VerSahara*’s demarcation of a “we” and a “they” and the reader’s illocutionary position within this dynamic. Frequently, in compositions featuring an explicit interpellation, the implicit reader is necessarily Spanish, and the poetic voice seeks his or her complicity by appealing to a shared language or any other of the discussed bonds of closeness, cultural or historical. Referring to the aforementioned poem by Aali-Taleb, the author affirms that the Sahara is situated “En tu habla, que es mi habla. En las palabras de una lengua que los saharauis aman, tanto como amaba Lope, Tirso, Calderón de la Barca” (118) ‘In your speech, which is my speech. In the words of a language that the Sahrawi love, as much as Lope, Tirso, Calderón de la Barca loved it.’ Thus, the texts featured in *VerSahara* distinguish between Spanish society and its leaders regarding attributing responsibility for the abandonment of the Sahrawi people.

Ayala Díaz’s poem “La noche encima” ‘The night above,’ dedicated to the activist Aminetu Haidar, illustrates how, by opposing Moroccan aggressions, the poetic voice figuratively becomes an extension of the inspiring figure, weaving a “we” out of political and humanitarian commitment: “Cada insulto que lance tu verdugo / caerá en nuestra espalda / en nuestro rostro / en nuestro orgullo . . . yo seré Aminetu. / Y tú estarás conmigo.” (174) ‘Every insult thrown by your executioner / will fall on our back / on our face / on our pride . . . I will be Aminetu / And you will be with me.’ Apart from Morocco, personified in repressive figures such as policemen, jailers, or unscrupulous monarchs, the anthology’s poems identify other antagonists in the Spanish and international political classes, who are accused of incompetence and impassivity as they distance themselves from the territorial conflict of Western Sahara. Tarajano speaks of “la traidora España / que al Sáhara vendió” (159) ‘the treacherous Spain / that sold the Sahara’ in an unequivocal reference to the 1975 tripartite Agreement of Madrid and its economic motivations, namely Spanish fishing interests in Moroccan waters. Bahia Awah, a

resident of Madrid, locates his exile “en el vientre alquilado / de una vieja metrópoli / retrógrada y carcomida en sus entrañas” (42) ‘in the rented belly / of an old metropolis / backward and rotten in its entrails’; however, the speaker directs its reproaches more specifically to the “mercenarios del capital” (39) ‘mercenaries of capital,’ politicians “carentes de humanidad” ‘lacking in humanity’ who “pasean en sus impolutos jardines, / comparten opíparos banquetes, / intercambian carcajadas / y hablan del previsto briefing / en Madrid, en Berlín, en París” (40) ‘walk their immaculate gardens, / share sumptuous feasts, / exchange laughter / and talk about the planned briefing / in Madrid, in Berlin, in Paris.’

Aali-Taleb and Francisco Lezcano also blame the ruling class through references to their usual attire: The former suggests that, for “Los políticos de chaqueta y corbata . . . no existe el Sáhara” (119) ‘Politicians in jacket and tie . . . the Sahara does not exist,’ and the latter warns that “cuervos con corbata / nos sobrevuelan” (148) ‘crows with tie / fly over us.’ As aforementioned, this is a message contemporary to Occupy Wall Street and the post-15-M Movement’s “They do not represent us” and its crisis of confidence in professional politics, circumstances that undoubtedly accompany the reception of *VerSahara*. Zahra El Hasnaoui offers a more nuanced view in her poem “Culpables” ‘Guilty.’ From a broad “we,” the poetic voice lists different actors involved in the fate of the Sahrawi people: “los que llegaron del mar” (126) ‘those who came from the sea,’ “los que treparon por la tierra” (126) ‘those who climbed the earth’ or “los que buscan alegrías / cargadas de sudores ajenos” (126) ‘those who seek joys / at the expense of others’ suffering.’ The poem seems to forgive them, only to conclude with a blunt “De vez en cuando / culpables somos todos” (127) ‘Sometimes / we are all guilty.’ The distribution of responsibilities proposed by the text suggests that each people, and each person, must take sides in the humanitarian crisis that the Sahrawi suffer. In summary, compositions that configure an antagonistic “they” in the political class and El Hasnaoui’s poem opt for different ways of awakening their reader: The former rely on the circulation of mobilizing indignation against political and economic power, and the latter calls to the reader’s conscience; guilt is also potentially mobilizing because it is typically linked to a desire for reparation.

Another source of textual emotionality in *VerSahara* is the mention of spaces, activist figures, or topics imbued with emotional weight for the Sahrawi people. Some of them are generic and collect elements of their nomadic tradition: mentions of the desert abound (Ahmed Aomar 32, Aali-Taleb 112, Ayala 176), always pointing out its harshness, although it is sometimes referred to alongside idealized spaces capable of providing water, such as wells (Iselmu 17, El Hasnaoui 123). Also echoing the nomadic life and the importance of water, El Hasnaoui indirectly alludes to the Sahrawi people’s nickname, sons of the clouds, when the poetic voice laments that “A las nubes no les quedan pastores” (123) ‘The clouds no longer have shepherds.’ The *haima*, a characteristic tent made of cloth, and the



frig, a group or node of *haimas*, function as metonymy of the Sahrawi people and their traditions (Aali-Taleb 111, Ayala 177, El Hasnaoui 123). By contrast, Moroccan prisons, where activists and pro-Sahrawi combatants were incarcerated, represent the repression and the curtailing of freedoms of an entire community, and these references metaphorically extend to confinement in refugee camps (Boisha 49-50, Ebnu 75, Embarek 102). In one of his poems, Ayala Díaz more specifically mentions the fearsome “Cárcel negra” (175) ‘Black prison’ of Laayoune. Originally a colonial Spanish prison and later repurposed as a confinement facility and a deportation center by Moroccan authorities (Sampedro 30-31), it has been repeatedly denounced for its inhumane treatment of prisoners, including torture and murder.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, the Western Sahara military wall erected by Morocco between 1980 and 1987 to protect the occupied territories from incursions of the *Polisario Front* (Ali Ali Salem 65) plays a similar role in these poems: Spaces of restriction and violation of freedoms and rights alienate the reader from Moroccan authorities by attaching emotions of anger and indignation to the latter. Salem Iselmu describes this wall in one text as a “Muro de la vergüenza” ‘wall of shame’ in a clear allusion to the Berlin Wall, with which it shares dire consequences for the people: “A unos les impidió el paso, / a otros, / les encerró en su tierra” (19) ‘It prevented some people from passing, / while for others, / it locked them up in their land.’ Thus, the wall determines the two realities of the Sahrawi as refugees and citizens of an occupying state (Sampedro 23). Additionally, place names such as Tiris, considered the Sahrawi city of poetry and the arts, or Layuad, whose caves have originated numerous legends, provide the Spanish reader with references to emblematic sites for the Sahrawi letters (Ali Ali Salem 67, Ebnu 78, Embarek 104). There are also mentions of *Gdeim Izik* (Lacave 226), or ‘Camp Dignity,’ a landmark of Sahrawi peaceful protests that occurred in the fall of 2010, when several thousand *haimas* camped near Laayoune. Initially, this gathering was to express discontent over the economic situation in the region, but it quickly became a protest in favor of the self-determination of Western Sahara.

This inventory is not limited to a recollection of significant spaces and includes relevant figures related to the Sahrawi cause; multiple poems praise Aminetu Haidar, perhaps the most widely known Sahrawi activist (Boisha 52, Ayala Díaz 174, Junco 181), or Mohamed Abdelaziz, ex-secretary of the *Polisario*

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<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have repeatedly denounced the conditions in which Sahrawi political prisoners are held in Moroccan prisons. More specifically, the Moroccan Observatory of Prisons, an independent nongovernmental organization, has denounced the overcrowding and insalubrity of Laayoune’s Black Prison, which has accommodated approximately 700 inmates with a maximum capacity of 250. Many Sahrawi politicians and activists, including Aminetu Haidar, Hmad Hamad, and Ali Salem Tamek have been held there and reported routine torture and continuous medical negligence (Deiros).

Front and president of the SADR until his death in May 2016, shortly before the edition of *VerSahara* (Ahmed Aomar 29, Lacave 222).

Finally, the composition “Poema tambor” (53) ‘Drum poem’ by Limam Boisha deserves a separate comment. Instead of syntactically articulated sentences, the poem consists of an enumeration of terms that are representative of life in the desert and the Sahrawi culture. It proceeds in a series of couplets—predominantly octosyllabic—imitating a percussion rhythm. The poem begins with two verses that do not pose comprehension difficulties for the Spanish reader: “Piedra, pozo, acacia, huella / Viento, nido, nube estrella” (53) ‘Stone, well, acacia, footprint / Wind, nest, star cloud.’ However, the composition progressively provides more room for voices in Hassaniya, until these predominate in the final couplet: “Mehraz, elberd, Atil, diente, / Neyma, salat, Salam aleikum” (54), where the only remaining Spanish word is *diente* ‘tooth.’ Such a combination of expressions reterritorializes the Spanish language in a liminal cultural space by introducing untranslatable terms from Sahrawi daily life. It also emphasizes bilingualism as a defining trait of Sahrawi cultural identity. Boisha’s poem reaffirms a hybrid identity rooted within concrete ecosystems, customs, and worldviews. The Hassaniya voices reconnect Spanish–Sahrawi poetry with an earlier oral ancestral tradition central to Sahrawi nomadic culture. In that sense, “Poema tambor,” like the whole *VerSahara* anthology, serves as a repository of memory, compiling historical milestones, cartographies, and new forms of transnational dialogue that provide openings for fresh cultural and political movements.

#### Conclusion: Re-imagining the Spanish–Sahrawi Cultural Ties

*VerSahara* transgresses the cultural logic that underlies the very notion of a literary anthology within a national literature. Despite its structural compartmentalization, it opens avenues to rethink the relationship of the two peoples involved and contributes, albeit from a modest position, to sustain a transnational space of solidarity. Indeed, the anthology does not work strictly as an exchange between Sahrawi and Canarian poets because as I have shown, Sahrawi poets do not reflect directly on their relationship with their islander neighbors—instead, they address Spanish readers in general. This exploration remains unidirectional, from the Canarian side, but it still offers important clues. First, the trope of fraternal ties avoids reproducing the colonial discourse of Hispanidad. Instead, Canarian poets base the brotherhood of both peoples on a geographic proximity that includes a shared feeling of peripheral experiences with respect to the ex-metropolis, and the evocation of a common origin and coexistence that precedes Castile’s arrival to the Canary Islands. The second layer of peripheral experiences includes that of the anthology in the Spanish poetic field. The recent distrust of domestic and European governments, the re/politicization of cultural

production, and the questioning of the culture of the Spanish transition to democracy—with its systematic marginalization of works and authors associated with peripheral nationalisms—suggest a potentially more favorable ground for the anthology’s reception. Its impact in terms of editorial and thematic scope remains marginal, but the growing prominence of the poetics of conscience, because of socioeconomic changes in post-2008 Spain, provides prestige to a type of social, committed poetry in which the Canarian–Sahrawi proposal certainly fits.

If the premise is accepted that *VerSahara*’s objective is to mobilize the Spanish-speaking reader, increasing the awareness of the humanitarian drama suffered by the Sahrawi people, it does so by deploying strategies of textual emotionality that are reiterated throughout the anthology. Where Canarian poets resort to the *Guanche*–Sahrawi fraternity, the Sahrawi poets avoid extending this problematic rhetoric to Spain as a whole, opting instead for staging their proximity through strategic mentions of Spanish canonical poets who suffered exile, persecution, or political repression. They also do it through a celebration of the shared language in two aspects: as cultural heritage and as a tool of resistance against the Moroccan occupation. Emotional interpellations to the reader play a fundamental role in this mobilization, and the configuration of the “we” and “they” in the poems is an affective catalyst. Poems channel the indignation toward politicians and institutional powers incapable of ending the territorial conflict but also foster collective guilt for the inaction and forgetfulness towards it. Finally, by naming spaces, figures, or elements of relevance for their tradition and history, *VerSahara*’s poets make the Sahrawi cultural imagery accessible to the Spanish reader while evoking poetry’s traditional function of preserving the cultural memory of a collective body.

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