

Eric Calderwood, “On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of al-Andalus”, Harvard University Press, 2023

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In this book, Eric Calderwood, Professor of Comparative Literature, explores the diverse uses of al-Andalus in contemporary culture. The book encompasses literature, cinema, television, music, tourism, and political discourse, in Arabic, Spanish, French, and English. Calderwood takes a great research opportunity focusing on Arab and Muslim visions, usually dismissed in contemporary perspectives, to address nostalgic views of al-Andalus. This innovative approach is one of the highlights of the book, as al-Andalus can be either manipulated as a historical gap by the Catholic-nationalist discourse on the *Reconquista* or pictured as a model society in the framework of Convivencia theories.

The book, as the author underlines, is not a history of al-Andalus. Rather, it deals on how al-Andalus has been imagined as a model for contemporary societies. Calderwood considers this nostalgic view on al-Andalus, popularized by modern Arabic literature as *al-firdaws al-maqfud* (the lost paradise), in the framework of what he calls “al-Andalus futurism” (p. 10). How do writers, artists and their audiences position themselves with respect to al-Andalus, and how are they positioned by al-Andalus? This question reflects the two main methods of the book, metonymy and position, used to examine the different perspectives on al-Andalus, exploring how writers, artists, and communities establish relationships with the Andalusí heritage, depending on their contexts.

Another of the book’s highlights is its thematic structure, examining how different ways of approaching al-Andalus emerge to respond to different aspirations worldwide. Chapter 1 The Arab al-Andalus analyses the view of al-Andalus as an Arab phenomenon, from the 19th century to its impact contemporarily, usually supported due to Umayyad rule of al-Andalus (8th – 11th cents.), a dynasty arriving from Damascus. It argues that this view served to present al-Andalus not only as Arab but also as whiter, downplaying the North African and Berber influence. Arabness of al-Andalus was especially emphasized by the

Nahda (renaissance) discourse and pan-Arab ambitions in the 20th century, shadowing the Muslim identity of al-Andalus. A 1966 concert of the renowned Lebanese Christian singer Fayruz, in Kuwait, stresses an Arabness uniting different Arab nations, through the performance of her album *Andalusiyyat*, in which she recites verses of the Andalusí poet Ibn al-Khatib. The chapter focuses on the novels about al-Andalus authored by the Christian Lebanese Jurji Zaydan.

Various examples raise issues on the author's knowledge of Andalusí sources and contemporary state of the art. He argues how Zaydan relied on European literature emphasizing Arab contributions to al-Andalus (p. 27-28), however the examples described by the author are also accounted in historical sources. In other occasions, Calderwood seems to point out literary liberties of Zaydan to stress Arabness. For example, he asserts that in the novel *'Abd al-Rahman al-Nasir* (1910), the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Rahman III is significantly called "the ruler of the Arabs of al-Andalus," in a letter sent by the Byzantine emperor, which Calderwood criticizes, as the caliph was rather "the ruler of a diverse society with multiple ethnic, religious and linguistic communities" (pp. 34-35). But, in fact, this letter is described by the 11th century Andalusí historian Ibn Hayyan, through the transmission of the 17th century chronicle of al-Maqqari, which mentions this title, an episode that has been studied in secondary literature. This example also raises concern about 19th century essentialist views on whether the ethnic diversity of al-Andalus should or should not be considered part of an Arab identity. Issues about the methods of survey and collection of case studies are also at stake, if they respond to adequate quantitative and qualitative methods and how the material is selected.

It would have been useful to explore how the tendency of underling the Arabness of al-Andalus is shaped or even inherited by the discourse prevailing in medieval Andalusí sources. He also points out how the narratives on Arabness explored in the book are based on the 19th century Dutch historian Reinhardt Dozy (p. 21). While Calderwood stresses that Dozy promised a history of Muslim Spain but narrated a history focused on the Arabness of al-Andalus, he does not look critically on the concept of Muslim Spain versus Arab Spain (e.g., Marín 2014). Furthermore, ideologically, Dozy does not stress so much the Arabness of al-Andalus, but rather an Andalusí identity forged by the mixture of previous ethnic groups, in the 10th century. This tendency will be followed by historians such as Lévi-Provençal or García Gómez, to impose a Spanish proto-national identity on al-Andalus.

Chapter 2 The Berber al-Andalus is perhaps the best accomplished and documented of the book. It examines the efforts, especially of North African writers, scholars, and filmmakers to reclaim the contributions of Berbers to al-Andalus, especially under the North African dynasties of the Almoravids and Almohads, seen as the unifiers of al-Andalus. These narratives also reshaped Moroccan nationalism, shifting from Arab-Islamic to Berber identities and perceiving the Almoravids and the Almohads as Moroccan dynasties part of the national discourse. For example, in Ahmad Balafríj and Muhammad al-Fasí's discourse against French colonialism. Writers such as 'Abd Allah Gannun are analysed in the chapter, placing for example the speech of Tariq b. Ziyad to his troops preparing for the conquest of al-Andalus as the foundation for Moroccan oratory and literature (p. 72). This also meant a shift from the importance of Arabic to Amazigh, as stressed, for example, by the positions of Muhammad Shafik, a leading figure in the

Amazigh cultural movement who hailed for the recognition of Amazigh as an official language, which he saw as logical if, as he asserted, this was the language of the Almohad court (p. 97-98).

While the interconnected analysis of this chapter is remarkable, between national anti-colonial discourse and literary narratives, works which have studied the negative vision of Berbers, e.g. Helena de Felipe (2020) or Alejandro García-Sanjuán (2020), would have been useful. When presenting the Alhambra exhibition on the Zirid Granada and the Berber Universe (2019), organized by Antonio Malpica, Calderwood speaks of “a radical reimagining of Granadan, Iberian and Mediterranean history,” as a “novel narrative” (pp. 60-63). He concludes that until recently the Berber al-Andalus was a vision that did not enjoy much representation in European and Middle Eastern institutions (p. 105). But the traditional vision of Arabs, Berbers and their agency in shaping the conquest and society of al-Andalus was already questioned in the 70’s by Pierre Guichard (1972, 1976), carrying a renewal in historiographical visions which for long have been abandoned.

Chapter 3 The Feminist al-Andalus explores how al-Andalus represents a model to Arab and Muslim feminists, since the late 19th century, to articulate an indigenous feminism independent of the history of feminist movements in Europe and the United States. It examines works by women writers and artists who have imagined al-Andalus as a place of freedom and creativity for Arab and Muslim women, remarkably intersecting debates about gender, religion, and ethnic identity. Calderwood points out how this movement was seen by personalities such as the Egyptian writer and scholar Layla Ahmed as a reaction to European colonial manipulation of feminism to promote the culture of the occupiers. The author traces the genealogy of this discourse, starting with the writings of women in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, e.g. Zaynab Fawwaz and Maryam al-Nahhas al-Yaziji, who focused on Andalusí women such as the poets Wallada, Aysha bt. Ahmad or Buthayna.

These views were also a reaction to Orientalism which characterized Islam as a religion systematically oppressing women, while at the same time opposing to these religious tendencies an environment of freedom specific of the indigenous Andalusí identity. It would have been interesting to further develop this idea, as al-Andalus was manipulated as less of a result of Islam or Arabness and more as a construction of a superior native identity. On this aspect, essentialist views on ethnic diversity are again a concern. Calderwood points out how Subh – the wife of Caliph al-Hakam II – is considered by Fawwaz as one of the most famous Arab women, which he finds surprising as she “was actually of Basque origin” (p. 122). But, in fact, the Umayyad entourage or the Arabic language were also part of her identity and sources do not seem to raise identitarian issues on her diversity. In chapter 1 the author had already found critical to equate Andalusí with Arabness for Subh’s identity (pp. 48-49), when describing a re-taking of al-Andalus as an Arab identity. When approaching the lectures of the Syrian writer Salma al-Haffar al-Kuzbari, Calderwood then shifts and compares her perspective with that of the Moroccan scholar Fatima Mernissi. For him, while the first emphasized the Arabness of the feminist al-Andalus, the second focused on the question of women in Islam (p. 128). However, while the first has a literary or dissemination objective, the second has a scholarly approach. The comparison is unfounded and might be perceived as a reduction of gender

perspectives of history to something ideological and less academic, as something women do, regardless of their approach.

On the issue of sources, again Calderwood attributes to the authors he analyses the views on Andalusí women which are rather accounted by historical sources. For example, he attributes to Fawwaz the assertion that Wallada did not rely on a powerful husband for her fame (p. 116), when this in fact should be attributed to sources, such as al-Maqqari.

Chapter 4 *The Palestinian al-Andalus* explores how Palestinian writers and intellectuals have invoked al-Andalus to reflect on the Palestinian experience of displacement and loss, thus presenting an interestingly brave and uncommon approach in academia. The chapter analyses works by poets like Salma Khadra Jayyusi and Rashid Hussein, as well as Mahmoud Darwish, one of the most renowned Palestinian poets. The author examines how al-Andalus serves as a metaphor for the lost homeland and to denounce occupation and cultural erasure, to call for resistance and to warn how Palestine is endangered of becoming an elegy like al-Andalus. But, while al-Andalus is a far nostalgic metaphor for poetry and a lost paradise, “Palestine is the aesthetics of al-Andalus, it is the al-Andalus of the possible.” In Darwish’s words, “was al-Andalus here or there? On earth or in poems?”, a sentence which significantly gives the book its title. The chapter also discusses Israeli uses of al-Andalus, especially focusing on the publishing house Andalus, which translated Arabic literature to Hebrew, between 2000 and 2009. However, this is a residual cultural interest in Israeli society and unfortunately usually part of an agenda presenting both parts as equals, in an intent of whitewashing the Nakba (the catastrophe) and the Israeli colonial project and apartheid.

In this chapter, despite looking critically at views which see the end of the Umayyad Caliphate as the end of the united al-Andalus, Calderwood sometimes seems to share this perspective when simplifying the *taifa* period(s) (independent principalities) as merely internal strife and territorial loss, stretching from the 11th century to the conquest of Granada in 1492 (p. 160).

Chapter 5 *The Harmonious al-Andalus* examines how the musical legacy of al-Andalus has been used to promote ideas of cross-cultural harmony and coexistence. The author explores how flamenco in Spain and fado in Portugal have been ideologically seen as inheritors of musical traditions of al-Andalus, despite lack of proof, designing a time continuum between Andalusí music and contemporary traditions. This was used, in the case of flamenco, by Blas Infante to forge contemporary Andalusian nationalism, based on the Andalusí identity. Calderwood voices unreliable theories that attribute Arabic etymologies to the words flamenco and fado, considering them dubious, while scholars have stressed the inconsistency of such ideas.

The chapter also looks at how contemporary musicians such as Enrique Morente and Jalal Chekara, who worked on musical fusions of flamenco and Moroccan music, attempt to engage with the musical heritage of al-Andalus.

On the musical genres of hip hop and rap, Calderwood focuses on a well-known trap artist from Granada, Khaled (pp. 243-251). Calderwood attributes to Khaled the intention of making a “provocative statement” by declaring in “Los Foreign” – a theme performed as a member of the Pxxr Gvng - “al-Andalus es mi raza” (“al-Andalus is my race”). But the intentions and awareness of Khaled are uncertain. This is the only reference to al-Andalus in all of Khaled’s repertoire that Calderwood finds to conclude how al-Andalus

is the framework for his self-proclaimed mestizo identity, floating between Granada and Tangier, Spanish and Arabic, flamenco and trap (p. 243). Calderwood appears to project his own expectations onto Khaled's lyrics, rather than relying on a solid comprehension of the social and artistic context of the rapper. In Arab communities and countries, the term al-Andalus is used frequently as a synonym for Andalucía (the southern region of Spain), due to etymological connections, without a significance or reminiscence of a nostalgic medieval Islamic past. The concern of essentialist views is yet again raised considering Khaled's origins. Being the son of Moroccan and Spanish parents, singing about gypsies and Muslims living in Granada with the Alhambra on the back, due to ethnic diversity or immigration, are part of the reality of the city, rather than a reference to a nostalgic al-Andalus. While Calderwood claims that the varied languages and cultural references in Khaled's music are "aimed at an audience that does not exist but might be on the horizon" (p. 250), in fact this multi-ethnic diversity is not uncommon nor in Granada nor in Spain and is surely not unique.

Calderwood closes the book with an epilogue centred on the example of the mosque and Islamic centre of Illinois in his neighbourhood, which reproduce Umayyad architecture resembling the mosque of Cordoba. Inasmuch as al-Andalus could serve as a method for thinking across borders and challenging fixed categories of identity, as Calderwood suggests, it should be so provided we consider how either essentialist, negative or nostalgic views can be equally historical manipulations. Al-Andalus should be so much approached as what it is: a historical period and territory in its own Iberian, Muslim and Mediterranean framework. Although the book is not a history of al-Andalus, much of its analysis on novels, music or films is based on inaccurate interpretations of Andalusí history, which demand a deeper knowledge of its sources and literature. To conclude, the innovative approach of the book is a good first step for more in-depth research and consistent methodology.

