



The Afterlife of al-Andalus: Muslim Iberia in Contemporary Arab and Hispanic Narratives

by Christina Civantos, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2018, 378 pp., US \$33.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781438466705

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BOOK REVIEW

The Afterlife of al-Andalus: Muslim Iberia in Contemporary Arab and Hispanic Narratives, by Christina Civantos, Albany, State University of New York Press, 2018, 378 pp., US \$33.95 (paperback), ISBN 9781438466705

In this book, Cuban American scholar Christina Civantos analyzes a number of twentieth and twenty-first-century literary and visual texts that centre on al-Andalus – Iberia under Muslim rule – and different Andalusí historical figures by authors from the Arab-Muslim and Hispanic worlds. She views these texts, which include novels, short stories, films, and television miniseries, as narratives that “translate” al-Andalus into the present in the same way that a translator transfers a text into another language. As in the case of linguistic translation, these narratives are informed if not fashioned by power, class, gender dynamics, and cultural and linguistic differences. Based on these factors, the author divides her book into three parts.

The first part examines texts that explore the linguistic and cultural accessibility of al-Andalus and its historical figures, such as the twelfth-century Cordobán philosopher and polymath Ibn Rushd in the Argentinian writer Jorge Luis Borges’ short story “La busca de Averroes”. Contrasting Borges’ text with other literary works by Maghrebi authors, she argues that al-Andalus can still be a space of cultural contact between all its cultural inheritors in the Hispanic and Arab-Muslim worlds, despite cultural and religious differences between Spain and the Middle East/North African (MENA) region.

In the second part, Civantos discusses Arabic and Spanish cultural and educational products dealing with Tariq ibn Ziyad (the Muslim general considered to be the initiator of the Umayyad conquest of Visigothic Hispania in 711), Boabdil (the last Muslim ruler of Granada), and Christopher Columbus. She establishes a link between these historical figures and immigration between North Africa, Spain, and Argentina within texts produced in the Arab-Muslim and Hispanic worlds. According to her, some of these texts break with the standard mythical image of al-Andalus and its figures. Their authors reject the ideological underpinnings of old narratives that are used to serve the political agenda of official Spain, regionalist movements in Spain, or settler nationalist ones in Argentina.

The book’s final part examines texts focusing on Florinda, a legendary female character generally held responsible for the fall of the Visigothic kingdom and the Muslim conquest of Iberia in 711, and Wallada, an Andalusí poetess from the eleventh century, often viewed as a sexually liberated proto-feminist, especially in the western imaginary. Civantos argues that Florinda and Wallada are used to re-enact the seduction and subjugation of al-Andalus. She believes that these gendered and Orientalized narratives should be dismantled so as to depart from conceptions of al-Andalus that are nostalgic or based on east–west power dynamics.

Civantos believes that it is through text that the commonplace narratives surrounding al-Andalus can be dismantled to give way to new, more resilient ones. However, it is clear from her study that what are arguably more accessible visual forms than the written text, such as historical drama television series or film, seldom break with the dominant literary-historical discourse on al-Andalus. This is especially due to state patronage and sometimes even censorship.

Through an adept study of a diverse series of texts produced by the common cultural inheritors of Muslim Iberia, *The Afterlife of al-Andalus* lays out the set of disparate but

interconnected representations of al-Andalus between “East” and “West”, as well as their possible present-day sociopolitical implications. However, the full reliance it places on the potential of these modern texts to affect the reality of their respective societies might be contested. The author places too much weight on their ability to generate useful narratives for the present. As a result, *The Afterlife of al-Andalus* decontextualizes these very texts politically, lending a somewhat non-pragmatic aspect to its own theoretical premise.

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