1492, al-Andalus and modern-day conflicts in Amin Maalouf's *Leo Africanus*

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In his 2004 book entitled *Freedom and Orthodoxy*, Anouar Majid situates our present in what he terms a post-Andalusian age and points to the year 1492 in the Iberian peninsula as the start for a "Western" colonizing mission or—in Majid's words—as the beginning of "the Euro-American insistence on (…) a one size fits all approach to human freedom" (Majid 58). Building on Majid's observations, Nouri Gana identifies a post-Andalusian critique in his work on contemporary Arab fiction about al-Andalus. Gana describes this post-Andalusian critique as a melancholic engagement with Andalusian *convivencia* that emerges "in the (…) space between two competing impulses—the one seeking to recover it and the other to recover from it."[2]

This paper examines how al-Andalus is construed by those "two competing impulses"—recovery from al-Andalus and recovery of al-Andalus—in one 20th century historical novel in particular: Amine Maalouf's *Leo Africanus.*[3] I argue that in while *Leo Africanus,* 1492 in al-Andalus figures as the temporal and spatial point of departure into exile for both Muslim and Jewish characters, Maalouf does not advocate a return to or re-conquest of a lost territory.

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[2] Nouri Gana, "In Search Of Andalusia: Reconfiguring Arabness In Diana Abu-Jaber's Crescent," *Comparative Literature Studies* 45.2 (2008), p. 231.

[3] *Leo Africanus* is the English translation of the French original *Léon l'Africain*, first published in 1986.

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Instead, al-Andalus provides Maalouf—himself in exile from an ex-colony, Lebanon—with the figurative tools with which to imagine a (post-1492, post-colonial, post-1948) space where different communities and multicultural individuals can live in relative peace.

Beginning with those who lived it, the year 1492 in the Iberian Peninsula was judged a turning point, both an end and a beginning, felt either as a victory or as a tragedy. From a Christian, and later colonial and Eurocentric perspective, the year 1492 figures as a victory: it was in January1492 that the Catholic monarchs Isabel of Castille and Fernando of Aragon took over the last Muslim kingdom of the peninsula. In March, they signed the Alhambra Decree, ordering the expulsion of all Jews who did not convert to Roman Catholicism by July 31st of that year, thus beginning to rid a newly formed Christian Spain of its overwhelmingly Semitic content. It was also in 1492 that Christopher Columbus, funded in part by the plundering of Iberian Jews and Muslims, stumbled upon not-quite-India. Not-quite-India was inhabited by not-quite-Semites who nonetheless became known as Indians and overlapped with the Moors in the conquistadores' imagination—a palimpsest that destined them to either conversion or annihilation.[4] For the Jews of al-Andalus, the year 1492 was characterized by persecution and dispossession in a place that for several centuries had been a relatively safe environment. Their expulsion from the peninsula marked the departure into a new exile where *Sefarad* substituted Palestine as the long lost homeland. 1492 had equally lasting effects on the Muslim psyche, even if—unlike the Iberian Jews and American Indians—they did not feel its corporeal effects immediately. The *taifa* of Granada was the last vestige of Muslim political and cultural dominance in Iberia, the last reminder of an intellectual and artistic Golden Age and of the fragile *convivencia* of three religions.

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[4] Anouar Majid, *Freedom and Orthodox: Islam and Difference in the Post-Andalusian Age*, California: Stanford University Press, 2004, p. 38.

Hishaam D. Aidi points out in "The interference of al-Andalus, Spain, Islam and the West" that over the past century, "imperialism, decolonization, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict have polarized interpretations of al-Andalus" both inside and outside of Spain.[5] Osama bin Laden's 2001 infamous mention of al-Andalus,[6] José Maria Aznar's 2004 speech at Georgetown University,[7] and Barack Obama's more recent address[8] in Cairo in June 2009 are just a few examples of the recuperation of al-Andalus to serve political agendas regarding the Middle East—the differences in agendas of the respective political entities attest to the conflictual nature of al-Andalus.

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[5] Hishaam D. Aidi, "The Interference of al-Andalus, Spain, Islam and the West" *Social Text* 87, Vol. 24, No. 2, Summer 2006, Duke University Press, p. 68.

[6] In his "Messages to the World," Osama bin Laden has repeatedly drawn a parallel between the "loss" of al-Andalus and the plight of Muslims in the world today. He has said: "If we are silent, then what happened in al-Andalus will happen to us." See Osama bin Laden. *Messages to the World: The Statements of Osama bin Laden*. Bruce Lawrence, Ed. London: Verso, 2005, p. 92.

[7] José Maria Aznar: "The problem Spain has with Al-Qaeda and Islamic terrorism did not begin with the Iraq crisis. In fact, it has nothing to do with government decisions. You must go back no less than 1300 years, to the early 8th century, when a Spain recently invaded by the Moors refused to become just another piece in the Islamic world and began a long battle to recover its identity. This Reconquista process was very long, lasting some 800 years. However, it ended successfully. There are many radical Muslims who continue to recall that defeat, many more than any rational Western mind might suspect." For the complete text, see "Seven Theses on Today's Terrorism." *Georgetown University*. Web. 26 July 2010. <www3.Georgetown.edu/president/aznar/inauguraladdress.html>.

[8] In a speech at Cairo University on June 4th 2009, Barack Obama said the following: "Islam has a proud tradition of tolerance. We see it in the history of Andalusia and Cordoba during the Inquisition. I saw it firsthand as a child in Indonesia, where devout Christians worshiped freely in an overwhelmingly Muslim country. That is the spirit we need today. People in every country should be free to choose and live their faith based upon the persuasion of the mind and the heart and the soul. This tolerance is essential for religion to thrive, but it's being challenged in many different ways." For complete speech, see: "President Obama Speaks to the Muslim World from Cairo, Egypt." *The White House*. Web. 26 July 2010. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/video/President-Obama-Speaks-to-the-Muslim-World-from-Cairo-Egypt>.

In literature, imperialism, decolonization, post-colonialism and conflicts in the Middle East have similarly polarized interpretations of al-Andalus. Postcolonial writers seem to find in their invented, mythical, inherited visions of al-Andalus something that resonates with their experiences and their understanding of identity, humanity, and interpersonal relations in our postcolonial context. More particularly, Maalouf finds in al-Andalus a useful metaphor for postcolonial states where different religious and cultural groups must coexist, such as his native Lebanon and the neighboring Israel/Palestine. A first step of Maalouf's use of al-Andalus to imagine a peaceful, diverse state in *Leo Africanus* is to emphasize that the fate of the Muslims and Jews of al-Andalus were intimately intertwined—as they are today, although under quite different circumstances.

Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* is the four part fictive autobiography of the historical 15th century ambassador and translator Hassan-al-Wazzan, a Muslim exile from Granada, who became known in Europe as Leo Africanus after he was captured by Portuguese pirates, offered as gift to Pope Leo X and baptized by him in St. Peter's. Hassan al-Wazzan wrote, among other things, *La Descrittione dell'Africa*, a description of sub-Saharan Africa and various multilingual glossaries. The first part of Maalouf's *Leo Africanus* is entitled "The Book of Granada" and describes the years leading up to the Fall of Granada. Hassan's subsequent exiles make up the other three parts of the novel. For Hassan, as well as for most Muslim characters of the novel, the year 1492 marks a defeat, the loss of territory for Islam, the loss of home for its followers, the eradication of the Arabic language and its mythical function in the peninsula: "The words 'Allahu akbar' could no more be pronounced upon the soil of Andalus, where for eight centuries the voice of the muezzin had called the faithful to prayer. A man could not now say the *Fatiha* over his father's corpse"[9] (*Leo* 115). This nostalgia is nothing new,

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[9] Amin Maalouf, *Leo Africanus*, Trans. Peter Sluglett, New York: Norton, 115.

and if it is described here in literature, it brings to mind the "Andalus syndrome" theorized by Akbar S. Ahmad or the "Arab melancholia" that Gana finds symptomatic of contemporary Arab literature (Gana 234). More problematically, it somewhat accounts for the words of Osama bin Laden, who, following the post-9/11 US military strike in Afghanistan, declared: "Let the whole world know that we shall never accept that the tragedy of Andalusia would be repeated in Palestine. We cannot accept that Palestine will become Jewish."[10] What Osama bin Laden seems to ignore or to omit, and what Malouf emphasizes in *Leo Africanus*, is that the so-called "tragedy of Andalusia" was a tragedy that afflicted Jews first, or Jews as well.

The stories that Hassan's mother, father and uncle tell him about the fall of Granada illustrate this fact. Hassan, who was only a few years old when his family left Granada, recalls from one of his father's stories the people of Granada who had been in favor of a preemptive war against the Christian armies prior to 1492 had predicted that the fate of the Jews in the Christian kingdoms will also be that of the Muslims. They would say: "See how the Inquisition has raised pyres for the Jews of Seville, of Saragossa, of Valencia, of Teruel, of Toledo! Tomorrow the pyres will be raised in Granada, not just for the people of the Sabbath but for the Muslims as well" (*Leo* 25). Furthermore, the principal Jewish character of *Leo Africanus*, a woman by the name of Sarah who is a "pedlar-clairvoyant…a midwife, masseuse, hairdresser…plucker of unwanted hair," storyteller, and a close friend of Hassan's mother Salma, also predicts that the Jews will not be the only victims of the Castilians' persecution (*Leo* 8). When Salma asks Sarah what she thinks will happen to the Muslims of Granada, Sarah answers bitterly: "When this city is taken, do you think that your lands, your houses and your gold will be less coveted than ours?...Do you believe that the fire

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[10] "Transcript of Osama bin Laden - ABC News." ABCNews.com, ABC News. Web. 26 July 2010. <http://abcnews.go.com/International/story?id= 80490&page=1>.

burning at the stake will be kinder to one of the sons of Shem that to the other? In Granada it is as if we were on an ark, we have floated together and we shall sink together. Tomorrow on the road to exile…" (*Leo* 51).

In *Leo Africanus*, it is not only the violence and exile of 1492 that Jews and Muslisms must recover from. The tragedy of al-Andalus is not only the turning point, the break, the year 1492. The tragedy is also the four-century long decline of a relatively tolerant, multi-faith and multilingual society, of which 1492 marks the symbolic and actual end. Al-Andalus as remembered by his parents is far from being a multilingual paradise of *convivencia*. Arriving in Fez after his family goes into exile in 1494, a young Hassan marvels at the new city he enters. To justify his amazement, he quickly adds: "Of course, I was born in Granada, the stately capital of the kingdom of Andalus, but it was already late in the century, and I knew it only in its death agonies, emptied of its citizens and its souls, humiliated, faded, and when I left our quarter of al-Baisin, it was no longer anything for my family but a vast encampment, hostile and ruined" (*Leo* 83).

Hassan only knows of his native city's past grandeur, once again, from his parents' stories. According to Hassan's father, Muhammad, the golden age of al-Andalus and of Islam in al-Andalus was characterized by a quest for knowledge that crossed cultural and linguistic boundaries. Abu-Amr, or Abu-Khamr, one of the few remaining individuals in Granada interested in languages, science and the arts in *Leo Africanus* also mourns such a time: "The greatest epoch of Islam…was when the caliphs would distribute their gold to wise men and translators" (*Leo* 38).

In *Leo Africanus*, Al-Andalus as a multicultural, multilingual Golden Age remains in the realm of memory and fiction, outside of the experience of the characters of the novel, conjuring up the question of whether al-Andalus was ever the ideal so extensively remembered and lost. Hassan does not at any point consider to return to al-Andalus because, as we have seen, a return to the al-Andalus where Hassan was born would mean to return to a

grim, desolate place. How, then, does one recover the al-Andalus that even those who never knew it so clearly believe in, miss and want? Would not the logical step be the re(or re-reconquest) of lost territory (as Bin Laden advocates in the case of modern Spain), the creation of a nation state, with its national language, its national religion (even if it is secularism) and its flag? This is indeed what many of the characters of *Leo Africanus* advocate. As Denise K. Filios points out in "Expulsion from Paradise: Exiled intellectuals and Andalusian tolerance," most characters from al-Andalus in Maalouf's novel hold a "single world view or identity," [11] as if they were fixed caricatures of fixed stances found in the Muslim (and Western) world today. Abu-Amr, who is known by his nickname Abu-Khamr or "father of wine" is the stereotype of the liberal Muslim scientist who drinks alcohol with little remorse, makes of secularism his religion and tolerates no other opinions. His archenemy, naturally, is a religious fundamentalist, a character known also by his nickname, Astaghfirullah, due to his constant use of the formula *Astaghfirullah*: " '*Astaghfirullah! Astaghfirullah!* I implore the pardon of God!' he would cry at the mere mention of wine, murder, or women's clothing" (*Leo* 32). Hassan's own father, Muhammad, is a patriarchal husband who, when his wife does not conceive after a few years of marriage, takes a Christian slave as a second wife, with little regard for his first wife's heartbreak. The Pope, who adopts Hassan in Italy, is the patronizing white man who uses Hassan for his linguistic aptitudes, so that Hassan can help him maintain his papal power against the threatening Ottomans. As it turns out, in *Leo Africanus*, the efforts of all of these "single world-view" characters to resist change are proven futile: Astaghfirullah's preaching does not prevent drinking, kissing and the re-conquest. Muhammad does not manage

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[11] Denise K. Filios, "Expulsion from Paradise: Exiled intellectuals and Andalusian tolerance," *In the Light of Medieval Spain: Islam, the West and the Relevance of the Past,* Ed. Simon R. Doubleday and David Coleman, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008, p. 97.

to keep a harmonious, polygamist household. The Pope's exploitation of the "Orient" does not successfully prevent his Church and power from collapsing.

Hassan also finds himself powerless in the face of the events and changes he witnesses. Hassan constantly insists that what he knows, the languages he speaks and the things he has experienced are the result of God's will and fate; he holds them responsible for his captures, his exiles, his fortunes and misfortune. For example, when falsely accused of a crime and exiled from Fez, Hassan goes to Cairo where he witnesses its capture by the Ottomans because this was God's will: "God has ordained that I should be witness to this decline, as well as the calamities that preceded it" (*Leo* 221). And again, when he finds out that he is the sole protector of the Turkish heir in the midst of a fratricidal dispute for the throne, Hassan accepts his fate: "Of all this I had chosen nothing; life had chose for me, as well as my temperament" (*Leo* 246).

However, unlike the single-minded stereotypes that surround Hassan, Hassan is able to adapt to new situations, in new environments. After he is kidnapped and realizes that he will be in Rome for quite some time, Hassan's first resolution is to learn Italian. As he expresses his intention to learn Italian to the Papal envoy, Francesco Guicciardini, his tone is not a tone of defeat, but one of active acceptance and challenge: "Before the end of the year, I shall speak your language. Not as well as you, but sufficiently to make myself understood" (*Leo* 290).

Hassan's attitude towards his life and his ability to adapt via language and writing reflect Maalouf's own fatalistic attitude towards his birth in a French colony, his exile from a fragmented Lebanon and his consequential refuge in literature.[12] For instance, Maalouf writes all of his novels in French, and when questioned about his language choice, Maalouf—like his character Hassan—explains that it is not a

[12] John C. Hawley, "Colonizing the mind: *Leo Africanus*, in the Renaissance and today," *Colonial and Postcolonial Incarceration,* London, New York: Continuum, 2001, p. 64.

matter of choice, but rather of chance: "French, then, was the language of my education, and even if *I did not choose it*, I entered its universe and I adopted it." [13] It is also by chance that he was born in Lebanon, where people often speak Arabic, French and English: "Like many Lebanese people, I was born with three tongues in my mouth: Arabic, French and English. To me, each language has its importance. With regards to writing, I write more fluently in Arabic and French" (*El-Tibi interview*).

For Maalouf, the adoption of French as his literary medium, like that of Italian for Hassan, is also part of a process of communication that is both adaptive and contingent. Unlike Italian for Hassan, French is already a part of Maalouf's identity and cultural make-up prior to his move to the French metropolis in 1976, as is the case for most (post)colonial subjects vis-à-vis the formerly colonial language. The Lebanon of Maalouf's childhood is already characterized by an integral multilingualism. However, the enduring presence in Lebanon of a formerly colonizing language—French—would not have prevented Maalouf from writing in Arabic had the war not broken out and had he stayed there: "If I had stayed in Lebanon, I would most certainly have written in Arabic" (*El-Tibi interview).*

While Hassan cannot and does not return to al-Andalus, he recovers the Golden Age of al-Andalus by becoming a wise man and a translator himself. Maalouf and Hassan's linguistic adaptability does not imply complete assimilation into one dominant language or culture, but rather multiplicity. Neither Maalouf nor Hassan choose one language, one nationality or even one faith, at the expense of all the others that they find to be also constitutive of their identity. This is most evident in Hassan's opening letter to his son that precedes the Book of Granada of *Leo Africanus*. In this letter, Hassan writes that while he has several names and nicknames that indicate geographical

[13] Zeina El-Tibi, "Entretien avec Amin Maalouf," in *La Revue du Liban*, No 3954, du 19 au 29 juin 2004. My translation and italics.

origin, he is "from no country, from no city, no tribe" and while he speaks "Arabic Turkish, Castilian, Berber, Hebrew, Latin and vulgar Italian…all prayers and all tongues belong to [him]" (*Leo* 1).

This passage just cited from *Leo Africanus* is reflective of Maalouf's own worldview and attitude towards identity, multiculturalism and multilingualism, supporting the underlying affirmation that Hassan is to some extent the literary incarnation of Maalouf himself. Maalouf, who left his native Lebanon in the wake of the civil war and took residence in France, has often refused to claim one culture, one language over another: "I am poised between two countries, two or three languages and several cultural traditions. It is precisely this that defines my identity."[14] Like Hassan, he refuses to claim one "essential identity," whether it be "familial, national […] religious" or linguistic (Filios 100): "How many times, since I left Lebanon in 1976 to live in France, have people asked me, with the best intentions in the world, whether I felt "more French" or "more Lebanese"? And I always give the same answer: "Both!" I say that not in the interests of fairness or balance, but because any other answer would be a lie" (*Identity* 1).

To complaints of authenticity and of persisting colonization via the continued used of a colonial language, Maalouf responds with a question: "Would I exist more authentically if I cut off a part of myself?" (*Identity* 1). The answer might appear obvious, yet this question is tricky. Maalouf, of course, leans towards the negative and expects his readers to come up with the same answer: no. The rejection of a language, of a culture for the sake of a singular identity amounts to violence and damage; who would ever advocate self-mutilation—whether literal or figurative—for the sake of being more authentic? Well, some. In fact, many. In *Leo Africanus,* one can think of Astaghfirullah's fundamentalism and whose given name no

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[14] Amin Maalouf, *In the name of identity: violence and the need to belong,* trans. Barbara Bray, New York: Time Warned Trade Publishing, 2000, p. 1. Hereafter *Identity.*

one will ever know or of Hassan's father Muhammad who rejects his second, and Christian, wife after the Reconquista so as not to appear any less of a true Arab and a true Muslim. One can think of writers who were not as comfortable as Maalouf with using the language that formerly colonized them—for instance, Kenyan author Ng_g_ wa Thiong'o has written that to continue writing in a colonial language is equivalent to treachery and now writes almost exclusively in G_k_y_.[15] One can also think of those who were unable to write in anything but the colonial language that colonized them and who, like Algerian writer Malek Haddad, resorted to silence—a figurative amputation of the right hand, or the left, or perhaps of the tongue. One can think of other, more literal and explosive examples outside of literature, involving suicide bombers, airplanes crashing into towers, wars of terror as well as wars on terror.

Against the kind of literalizations of al-Andalus that lead to violence and war, Maalouf's literary undertaking in *Leo Africanus* is precisely to vouch for a multilingual, multicultural subject that resists being imposed a singular identity or being limited to a singular worldview. Through his appropriation of Hassan's life and voice and of al-Andalus, Maalouf "envision[s] a cosmopolitan future that mirrors the idealized, inclusive al-Andalus of the past" (Filios 101). This al-Andalus is neither Northern nor Southern, neither Oriental nor Occidental. It is not a space under the umbrella of a normalizing Western universalism or of religious fundamentalism, both with their ironing out difference in the name of tolerance or of God, but rather a space where individuals can exist with all of their provincialisms, languages, religious and cultural specificities. This space, in the imagination of Maalouf and his Hassan, is al-Andalus as it is revived in language by means of literature.

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[15] Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature,* London: James Currey, 1981, p. 9.

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