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On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus,

by Eric Calderwood, Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2023, ISBN:9780674980365.

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Book Review

On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus

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Eric Calderwood's *On Earth or in Poems: The Many Lives of Al-Andalus* is a significant and timely exploration of how the legacy of al-Andalus, the period of Muslim rule in medieval Spain and Portugal from 711 to 1492, continues to resonate in contemporary cultural memory. At the heart of the book is the argument that al-Andalus functions today not as a mere historical relic but rather as a powerful and dynamic cultural metaphor. Unlike traditional scholarship that often romanticizes al-Andalus through the lens of *convivencia*, portraying it as a model of harmony and interfaith coexistence, Calderwood complicates this narrative by examining how al-Andalus is evoked by writers, artists, and thinkers to serve political, artistic, and ideological purposes. Scholars such as Christina Civantos, in Between Argentines and Arabs, and co-authors Rachel Scott and AbdoolKarim Vakil, in Reimagining al-Andalus, also diverge from nostalgic and idealized readings of al-Andalus. Yet, while they bring to the fore themes such as translation and symbolic mobility, Calderwood delves further into the influence of the political context, positionality, and ideological contradiction in shaping modern evocations of Andalusi memory.

Calderwood's blend of literary analysis with cultural historiography structures the book thematically, with each chapter focusing on a distinct interpretive lens. The first two chapters investigate how the memory of al-Andalus intersects with debates about ethnic identities. The first chapter, "The Arab al-Andalus," highlights how Arab writers and artists, from the eighth century to the present, have imagined al-Andalus as a pinnacle of Arab civilization. They celebrate it as an integral part of Arab cultural identity and heritage, often downplaying the foundational role of North African Berbers (Amazigh), despite their central involvement in the conquest and defense of al-Andalus. Calderwood focuses on the works of the Lebanese novelist and intellectual Jurji Zaydan, which he considers as the predecessors to a more recent phenomenon: the rise of Arabic-language television dramas in the early 21st century. Both Zaydan's novels and these television dramas, according to Calderwood, construct an Arab-centered vision of al-Andalus that glosses over ethnic and cultural diversity. On the other hand, the second chapter, "The Berber al-Andalus," examines the Berber intellectual and artistic efforts to reclaim their role in shaping the legacy of al-Andalus, thereby challenging the prevailing Arab-Islamic narrative of al-Andalus. By analyzing significant milestones in this ongoing debate about the role that Berbers have played in the history of al-Andalus, such as Driss Chraibi's *Birth at Dawn,* Calderwood foregrounds a specifically Berber al-Andalus that diverges from the dominant narrative embedded in Moroccan national identity since the 1930s.

Building on this exploration of identity, the third chapter, "The Feminist al-Andalus," sheds light on the intersection of gender and the Andalusi legacy. It showcases how feminist writers and artists have portrayed *al-Andalus* as a space of freedom, creativity, and cultural achievement for Muslim women, offering an alternative genealogy of feminism. In the late nineteenth century, Orientalist discourses dominated Western perceptions of the Muslim world, portraying it as stagnant and oppressive, particularly towards women. As a response to these stereotypes, female writers, scholars, and artists began to challenge the dominant narrative by exploring alternative historical perspectives. In more recent years, Arab and Muslim women continue to use the memory of al-Andalus as a tool to challenge patriarchal structures, combat stereotypes, and advocate for gender equality. By reclaiming and reimagining the history of al-

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Andalus, they seek to empower themselves and challenge the limitations imposed by enduring, traditional gender roles and societal expectations. The chapter on feminist al-Andalus discourse emphasizes the contributions of Muslim and Arab women in various fields, including literature, science, philosophy, and governance, demonstrating how al-Andalus provides a historical precedent for the empowerment of Muslim and Arab women that counters Orientalist assumptions.

The Fourth chapter in Calderwood's book, "The Palestinian al-Andalus," analyses the different meanings and uses of al-Andalus in the Palestinian context, revealing how it has been invoked as a metaphor for displacement, exile, and cultural endurance. The comparison between al-Andalus and Palestine has turned historically into a widespread idiom embraced by Palestinian writers and poets throughout the Arab world. They contend that Palestine faces a similar fate to al-Andalus, with foreign powers encroaching upon its sovereignty and displacing its people. Hence, al-Andalus serves as a shared cultural touchstone for understanding Palestine and situating its struggles within a broader historical context. However, Calderwood argues that al-Andalus holds a much deeper significance for Palestinian writers and their allies beyond being a mere cautionary tale. Drawing on the renowned Palestinian poet, Mahmoud Darwish, Calderwood articulates a distinct perspective on al-Andalus, stating that it continues to shape Palestinian literature by linking past, present, and future. The last chapter, "The Harmonious al-Andalus," shifts the focus to music, exploring how artists from diverse cultural backgrounds have utilized their cultural medium to perform and engage with the memory of al-Andalus. Finally, the epilogue revisits the symbolic resonance of Cordoba both in Spain and the United States, showcasing how the legacy of al-Andalus continues to create political, ideological, and cultural debate in the present.

One of the book's most significant strengths is its groundbreaking application of two conceptual tools: metonymy and position, which effectively navigate the varied and contested meanings of al-Andalus. Given the symbolic and ideological complexity of the legacy of al-Andalus, Calderwood notes that metonymy is a compelling conceptual tool that allows him to trace how specific elements of al-Andalus, such as the Umayyads, Cordoba, female poets, or the Moriscos, are selectively invoked to stand as representative of the broader whole. Hence, Calderwood's deployment of metonymy opens up new avenues to explore how various communities appropriate specific aspects of Andalusi heritage to stand as representatives of the entire legacy. On the other hand, the concept of position, derived from Stuart Hall's notion of the "politics of position," further grounds these interpretations by emphasizing how each cultural player—writers, actors, or readers, position themselves in respect to al-Andalus based on their geographic location, political ideology, or communal identity; it is their standpoints that inform representations of al-Andalus. Therefore, by bringing together metonymy and position, Calderwood seeks to highlight how different subject positions enable various approaches to the legacy of al-Andalus and its relevance to both the present and the future.

Another significant strength of the book is its innovative interdisciplinary and multilingual scope. Calderwood effectively bridges cultural studies, historiography, literary theory, and anthropology to map the cultural afterlives of al-Andalus, investigating how its memory functions as an active tool of meaning-making in contemporary culture. Calderwood also engages with sources in Arabic, French, Spanish, and English, drawing on a wide array of cultural texts that include poetry, novels, music, cinema, and political discourse. These texts, in turn, span diverse geographies, including the Middle East, North Africa, Europe, and the United States, highlighting how the legacy of al-Andalus is not tied to a specific place but instead circulates globally. Rather than reinforcing the romanticized and idealized representations of al-Andalus, the book challenges this narrow Eurocentric framework, emphasizing that it often marginalizes Arab and Muslim voices. Nevertheless, the book not only includes Arab and Muslim voices as supplementary perspectives but also places them at the center, ethically

reorienting the discourse about Andalusi legacy. This also enables Calderwood to provide a global perspective that deals with al-Andalus as a contested cultural terrain where narratives about belonging, identity, and power are frequently negotiated.

However, although the book does provide a comprehensive and wide-ranging exploration of the cultural afterlives of al-Andalus, it omits certain voices and perspectives. Calderwood himself acknowledges the limited engagement with the cultural memory of al-Andalus in certain regions beyond the Mediterranean and Arab-majority contexts. These omissions, while understandable given the book's already broad scope, point out new avenues for future research that could further enrich the study of al-Andalus and its legacy. Moreover, the book's thematic organization, while it allows for a focused analysis of diverse representations of al-Andalus, Arab nationalism, Berber identity, feminist discourse, and music, it also tends to compartmentalize the analysis. It may inadvertently reinforce the notion that these strands of memory exist separately, rather than as intersecting narratives. Hence, a more integrative and intersectional analysis across themes—especially where narratives overlap—could have enhanced the book's central thesis and underscored the entangled nature of cultural memory. Nevertheless, these limitations do not detract from the valuable contributions of this seminal book; instead, they open up new avenues for research in contemporary scholarship on al-Andalus.

Eric Calderwood's *On Earth or in Poems* is a decisive contribution to contemporary scholarship on the Andalusi legacy. Rather than presenting al-Andalus as a fixed historical period, Calderwood reimagines it as a dynamic and contested cultural space where identities, ideologies, and power structures are continuously negotiated. Through his interdisciplinary approach, multilingual sources, and nuanced analysis, Calderwood challenges reductive and romanticized narratives, offering instead a pluralistic vision of memory and identity. This work is an essential resource for scholars of cultural memory, historiography, postcolonial studies, and the political uses of the past.