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# *Al sur de Tánger: Un viaje a las culturas de Marruecos*,

**by Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla. 6th ed., Madrid: La Línea del Horizonte, 2025. 176 pp., ISBN: 978-84-17594-93-0.**

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# Book Review

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First published in 2022, Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla's *Al sur de Tánger* is a gem of a book. It is also a slippery object of study. At first blush, the book's aims and approach seem simple enough, but upon closer inspection, and with each re-reading, the book reveals complexities and ambiguities that add to its richness. The book opens with a first-person narrator describing his first trip to Morocco, on a ferry from Algeciras to Tangier. While crossing the Strait of Gibraltar, the ferry runs into stormy waters that almost lead to a shipwreck, but the ship weathers the storm and safely carries the narrator and his fellow passengers to Tangier. As the narrator looks back at that fateful first journey across the Strait of Gibraltar, he observes that it changed the path of his life, linking him irrevocably to Morocco.

Judging from the book's opening paragraphs, a reader might reasonably assume that the book's narrator and author are one, and that the book represents Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla's personal reflections as a scholar and writer who has spent more than four decades working in Morocco. And, undoubtedly, there are areas of overlap between the narrator and the author. Yet the relationship between narrator and author is not what it appears to be at first glance, and the narrator slowly reveals himself to be an unreliable source of information. A careful reader might suspect that some kind of trickery is afoot when, in the book's third chapter, the narrator makes up a Moroccan saint, "Sidi Bellarech"—whose name, translated into English, would mean something like "Saint Stork." And a little later, the narrator gives a new account of his first trip to Morocco, providing details that contradict the story that is told at the beginning of the book. Such inconsistencies appear sporadically throughout the book, lending an air of mystery to the narration but also generating a relationship of distrust between the reader and the narrator. Put simply, the reader does not know what to believe, and the narrator underscores, and delights in, this feeling of doubt. These tensions come to a head in the book's final chapter, where the narrator tells us, "Often, the borders between memory and imagination get blurry, and what is lived [lo vivido], what is read, what is dreamed, and cinema get mixed up" (161).1 Soon after making this remark, the narrator confesses that some of the stories that he has shared about his life are fiction, just as the imagined communities created by nation and religion are fictions—powerful fictions, but fictions nonetheless.

The book's reliance on an unreliable narrator is not an idle bit of literary gamesmanship; instead, it is intimately linked to the book's main themes. Indeed, the ambiguous relationship between the narrator and the author points to other ambiguities that run throughout the book:

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the blurry lines between reality and representation, between past and present, and between self and other. In all cases, Fernández Parrilla's book suggests that the categories that we use to anchor our lives and to make sense of the world often turn out to be fragile, contingent, and unstable.

Let's take, for example, the tension between reality and representation. The narrator introduces this theme early in the book when he alludes to one of the most famous cinematic representations of Morocco, the classic American film *Casablanca* (1942). The film *Casablanca* made the city of Casablanca famous, and yet, as the narrator is quick to point out, the inspiration for *Casablanca* was actually Tangier. Building on this illusion, the narrator observes, "We often go to Morocco in search of something that we have seen in movies but that perhaps doesn't exist, that maybe has never existed, and that prevents us from seeing the real Morocco. Understanding this game of mirrors, of reality and fiction, is key for being able to see another Morocco" (27).[2] From this quote, we might deduce that the aim of Fernández Parrilla's book is to help readers move beyond the misleading representations that have shaped how many Spaniards—and, more broadly, people from Europe and the United States—have viewed Morocco in order to give them access to a different Morocco, a "real" Morocco, which is obscured by films like *Casablanca* and other forms of media. Here, Fernández Parrilla is following in the footsteps of Edward Said, who famously argued that Orientalism is a mode of representation that structures and delimits what Europeans have known, said, and seen in Morocco and other parts of "the Orient." Yet Fernández Parrilla's book eventually lands on a more original, and provocative, claim: namely, that the clear-cut distinction between representation and reality might not hold, and that it is difficult to disentangle the "real" Morocco from the "represented" Morocco. Indeed, the narrator seems to nod in this direction in the book's final pages, where he notes that the line between fact and fiction, life and imagination, often gets blurry.

Fernández Parrilla's response to this quandary is to widen the field of representation, welcoming in Moroccan voices that have not received the attention that they deserve from audiences in Spain (and elsewhere). In fact, *Al sur de Tánger* is, among other things, a love letter to modern Moroccan culture and an annotated guide to the Moroccan books, movies, songs, artworks, and cultural figures that have left a mark on the narrator, shaping his view of Morocco.[3] For this reason, the book is often punctuated by moments of slippage between physical spaces and literary texts. In one passage, the narrator's description of the *medina* (old city) of Fez moves seamlessly into a discussion of Abdellatif Laabi's *Fez es un espejo*, the Spanish translation of Laabi's autobiographical account of a childhood in Fez in the 1950s. In another passage, the narrator's discussion of cannabis cultivation and consumption in Morocco flows directly into a discussion of Muhammad Zafzaf's *La mujer y la rosa* (*Al-Mar'a wa-l-warda* in the original Arabic), a novel that depicts drug culture in Morocco and Spain in the 1970s. In the two passages mentioned here, the narrator's attention moves from Morocco proper to its representation in Moroccan literature. But sometimes the movement goes in the other direction, from representation to lived experience. One such example is in the chapter titled "*Las gaviotas de Tánger*" (The seagulls of Tangier), where an allusion to Zoubeir Ben Bouchta's play *Pies blancos* (*Aqdam bayda'* in the original Arabic) leads to a story about an encounter between the narrator and Ben Bouchta in the playwright's home in Tangier. In all of these examples, there is a two-way street between reality and representation. And what emerges from these examples is a sort of symbiotic relationship, in which literature nourishes lived experience, and vice-versa.

Just as Fernández Parrilla's book blurs the line between reality and representation, so too does it blur the line between past and present. In fact, the book is chock-full of palimpsests, where the traces of the past subtend, and seep into, the present. Such moments capture the

narrator's attention, as he works to illuminate layered histories in which different time periods and actors are superimposed on each other. Along these lines, the narrator notes that one of the cemeteries that serves Madrid's Muslim community today, the cemetery in Griñón, traces its roots back to the cemeteries that were created for the burial of Moroccan soldiers who fought in the Spanish Civil War (95). And, in a similar vein, the narrator observes that Tangier's bullfighting ring (*plaza de toros*), designed by Francisco Rodrigálvarez in the 1950s, would eventually serve, in the late twentieth century, as a make-shift detention center whose inmates included many undocumented migrants trying to make their way to Spain (23). The present, as these examples eloquently show, rests on the unresolved remains of the past.

Some of the palimpsests in Fernández Parrilla's book point to histories of violence, like the cemetery that bears the memories and remains of the Spanish Civil War. But others are more playful. For instance, in a ludic chapter titled "*Los churros que vienen de África*" (The churros that come from Africa), the narrator traces the roundtrip journey of the Spanish *churro*. As the narrator explains, Spanish settlers brought the *churro* with them to Tetouan, Tangier, and other cities in northern Morocco in the twentieth century. Today, Tangier and Tetouan still boast a vibrant *churro* culture, and the fried treat is making the return journey to Madrid and other Spanish cities, where many *churrerías* are now owned by Moroccans who immigrated to Spain in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Language is one of the arenas where the narrator explores the overlaps between past and present. In fact, among the many kinds of memory that are at work in this book is one that could be called "etymological memory." Fernández Parrilla (or, at least, his narrator) suggests that words themselves are carriers of memory and sites where people, on both sides of the Strait of Gibraltar, experience the conflation of past and present. To illuminate this point, the book has some delightful philological excursuses on words like *moro*, *sidi*, *ghurba*, *beldi*, among others. In these passages, the narrator shows how words from Spanish, standard Arabic, or Moroccan Arabic have traveled across the Strait of Gibraltar, creating new meanings along the way. "Sometimes words travel badly," the narrator observes (91).[4] But even when words travel badly, they produce interesting results, as Fernández Parrilla shows. His chapters about words and etymology are pure candy for language nerds (like this reviewer). And they are also evidence that travelers—be they Arabists or Arabic words—are not in total control of their itineraries.

What makes Fernández Parrilla's book most compelling is also what makes it difficult to describe. The book straddles various genres—memoir, travel narrative, cultural criticism, autofiction. It is also a wonderful introduction to modern Moroccan culture, surveying some of the major figures, events, and cultural movements that have shaped Moroccan history over the last century and offering lucid commentaries on famous works of modern Moroccan literature, including Muhammad Shukri's *Al-Khubz al-hafi* (perhaps the most frequently cited work in the book). But the author is equally at ease with personal anecdotes as he is with literary analysis, and his book exudes warmth and humor. It is a deeply personal book written by a deeply knowledgeable student of Moroccan culture. And the fact that the book is already in its seventh edition shows that it has struck a chord with many readers, in Spain and beyond. The forthcoming Arabic translation of *Al sur de Tánger* will extend the book's reach in Morocco and will represent another leg in the two-way relay that has inspired and sustained the book and its author.

## Notes

1. "A menudo, las fronteras entre el recuerdo y la imaginación se desdibujan, y lo vivido, lo leído, lo soñado y el cine se confunden" (161). All English translations are mine.
2. "Solemos ir a Marruecos en busca de algo que hemos visto en las películas, pero que tal vez no existe, que puede que nunca haya existido, y que nos impide ver el Marruecos real. Entender ese juego de espejos, de realidad y ficción es clave para poder ver otro Marruecos" (27).
3. For a full list of the works cited in Fernández Parrilla's book, see biblioaecidmadrid, "Las referencias bibliográficas de *Al sur de Tánger* de Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla, localizadas en la Biblioteca Islámica," *La reina de los mares*, 30 September 2024, https://reinamares.hypotheses.org/80954.
4. "A veces las palabras viajan mal" (91).