

History, Literature, and Settler Colonialism in North Africa

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The novel *Cassard le Berbère*, published in 1921 by Robert Randau (1873–1950), a key figure in the Francophone culture of Algeria, tells the story of a settler named Cassard-colon who traces his ancestry to a pirate, Cassard-corsaire. The family of Cassard-corsaire settled in the mountains of Provence during the Islamic invasion of the region. Cassard-colon returns to North Africa and barricades himself in Borj Rais, formerly a Byzantine castle built on the remains of a Roman villa, which in turn stood atop a Punic necropolis. The invention and staging of a historical memory for the homecoming of Cassard-colon may be spectacular, but there is nothing fantastic about their implications. In fact, neither Cassard-colon's ancestry nor his fortress, given Mediterranean cultural and historical contexts, is totally implausible.¹ Randau's

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¹ Other plots that would legitimate France's claims over the territories it occupied run from the implausible to the bizarre or outrageous. The Académicien Claude Farrère writes, “We, the French of Asia, we, the Western peacemakers of the Far-East . . . , are the legitimate heirs of the ancient Khmer civilization, [we are]

book enacts the complexity and interconnectedness of space and time in the Mediterranean: layers of history (Punic, Roman, Byzantine, Islamic); languages (Latin, Berber, Arabic); patterns of conquest (the Islamic invasion of France, the French occupation of North Africa); architectural markers (necropolis, villa, castle, *borj*); and the resulting hybrid identities (Cassard-Berbère, Cassard-corsaire, Cassard-colon) and bicultural names (behind the French-sounding Cassard there is the Arabic *qasr*, “fortress”). Because cultures of the Mediterranean basin share significant layers of history, they often tell the same stories and refer to similar icons. But what role does colonialism play? How did the French occupation of North Africa and the establishment of European colonies there make use of this shared history and these shared icons in literature?

A colonial conflict that pitted two Mediterranean cultures against each other would seem to have featured an element of familiarity, since both sides knew each other in historical and cultural terms. Cassard-colon is not entirely alien from those he comes to conquer. Yet an unmistakable, entrenched otherness separates him from them. Algeria and Tunisia, occupied in 1830 and 1881, respectively, fell within what the French called the Orient. As far back as the seventeenth century they had associated this land with an Orient where political intrigue mixed with erotic pleasure, the cruel with the primitive. Racine’s plays speak of an Orient replete with harems and scheming sultans, where things appear homogeneous and permanent, a world that might corrupt France if not kept apart from it.² In the eighteenth century Antoine Galland published his version of *The Thousand and One Nights*, which had a pervasive effect on French literature and art and contributed to an enduring if misleading image of the Orient. Nineteenth-century novelists and poets, from Chateaubriand and Lamartine to Hugo and

better than anything that succeeded it until our arrival on those distant and sacred shores” (Panivong Norindr, *Phantasmatic Indochina: French Colonial Ideology in Architecture, Film, and Literature* [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1996], 27). The bracketed text is Norindr’s.

² See Roland Barthes, *Sur Racine* (Paris: Seuil, 1960), esp. the analysis of the plays *Bérénice* and *Bajazet* (94–105). See also Harriet Stone, *Royal Disclosure: Problematics of Representation in French Classical Tragedy* (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 1987), esp. the chapter “Oriental Reflections: *Britannicus* and *Bajazet*” (99–116).

Flaubert, and painters like Delacroix and Ingres then traveled to the Orient themselves and depicted it at first hand. They sought inspiration but also attempted to investigate the traces of classical European civilizations and biblical stories in these lands. Chateaubriand, expressing their disappointment, likens himself to a traveler following the footsteps of great ancestors but finding on the ground only an Islam that has “neither a civilizing principle nor a precept capable of improving the character.”³

By the time direct colonization started, the orientalist tradition had become simply an integral part of French culture and, as Edward W. Said argues, one of the factors that prepared the ground for the domination of oriental lands.⁴ Soldiers, colonial officials, and settlers, or *colons*, landed on the shores of an “oriental” North Africa “already known” to them. Indeed, so oriental had the people of Algeria and Tunisia been in the minds of the French that the *colons* intent on calling themselves Algerian or Tunisian had to contend with the orientalist perception of Algeria and Tunisia. They had to domesticate and render familiar what had been other. A process of deorientalization had to take place. The *colon*’s very identity in North Africa depended on it. Cassard-colon, as an emblem of the settler, has to do more than barricade himself in the fortress or “tame” the land. He has to assume the burden of representation as well. Were *colons* prepared for the role? How did they go about it? How did the colonized, in turn, wrestle their own identity and history out of the *colons*? What do languages have to do with this struggle? How does literature fit into the contest over representation? Does colonialism in the Mediterranean have a character all its own?

By their very composition, settlements or colonies mimic the metropolis. Here I am concerned with the replication of the way of life, the racial and cultural complexity, and the politics of the homeland. However, colonies likewise affect and reflect on the metropolis. (One need only consider how greatly France depended on its colonies when it fell under German occupation and how much support fascism had in

³ Christopher L. Miller, “Orientalism, Colonialism,” in *A New History of French Literature*, ed. Denis Hollier (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 701.

⁴ Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 2003), 12.

these colonies during the Vichy period.) For this reason, French colonies in Algeria and Tunisia were neither homogeneous in their politics nor unanimous in their understanding and use of Mediterranean history. Not all French intellectuals in the colonies glorified Roman history. The cultural politics of French North Africans was indeed complex and often pitted *colons* against each other. In this essay I treat the “Roman” strand, represented by Louis Bertrand and others, first and then discuss the ideas of Albert Camus. However, Camus could hardly be called a *colon* in the usual sense. Therefore I use the term mainly to refer to Bertrand and his circle.

This essay focuses on Tunisia as an instance of the interface between colonialism, orientalism, and nationalism in the Mediterranean context. Tunisia’s colonial history, however, is closely tied to Algeria’s. The first settlers, informed by Roman history in “Africa,” viewed the area as a single land, which included not only Algeria and Tunisia but also parts of Libya, with Carthage at the center and satellite cities scattered along the coast and inland. In Roman Africa settlers found justification for their claim and a language to express it. But the French, whose occupation of the region began in Algeria, developed their most articulate and comprehensive discourse of settler colonialism there. French thought about Algeria often touched on Tunisia and informed the writings of local colonialist theorists. In this sense, colonial discourse on Tunisia can be viewed as derivative of colonial thinking on Algeria. French *colons* and writers knew no borders in North Africa and moved unimpeded across the region, as did their publications and ideas. By the time the French moved on to Tunisia in 1881, settler colonialism was already in its second generation in Algeria. But in Tunisia the settlers and their culture expanded quickly, for what had started as a temporary strategic move developed into a protracted occupation. The European population there jumped from 12,000 in 1881 to 184,000 in 1931. Out of this massive movement of people arose a community of settlers intent on making Tunisia their permanent home. They needed to base their claim to the colony on historical foundations.

It is important to note that the use of history in the construction of communal identity is neither restricted to settler colonies nor peculiar to the French case. Movements of national liberation, perhaps in response to colonial claims, have refashioned the histories of the ter-

ritories in which they take place to create narratives of rootedness in these disputed lands. Such narratives feature images ranging from exclusive, racially pure societies to multiethnic melting pots. Benedict Anderson draws a parallel between the nation and prenational cultural systems of affiliation such as the “religious community” and the “dynastic realm.”⁵ In his view, nationness is a form of communal identity. Like personal identity, it is fashioned through narrative and language. “Nations, however, have no clearly identifiable births,” observes Anderson, “and their deaths, if they ever happen, are never natural. Because there is no Originator, the nation’s biography cannot be written evangelically, ‘down time,’ through a long procreative chain of begettings. The only alternative is to fashion it ‘uptime’—toward Peking Man, Java Man, King Arthur, wherever the lamp of archeology casts its fitful gleam” (205). For the occupied societies, the model of the nation is taken from Europe through the educational system. Language helps transfer this concept. “Bilingualism meant access, through the European language-of-state, to modern Western culture in the broadest sense, and, in particular, to the models of nationalism, nation-ness, and nation-state produced elsewhere in the course of the nineteenth century” (116). Anderson suggests that it is more fruitful to study nationness as a narrative because communities are distinguished by the style in which they are imagined. In the last two decades Anderson’s insights have been widely applied to the study of local or “native” representations of the nation in the colonies and former colonies. His ideas apply with equal usefulness to the formation of colonies within the occupied nations.

“Reviving” Roman Africa

Louis Bertrand, the leading theorist of a French identity for Algeria and the inspiration behind what may be called the “Latinist” movement, laid the foundations of this theory as early as 1899 in his novel *Le sang des races*. The book depicts the lives of settlers from Provence, Italy, Spain, and Malta who, despite “their meager means, rude manners,

⁵ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Verso, 1991), 12.

and colorful costumes and language, approach their tasks of digging and spreading fertilizer as if they were working for glory alone" (7).⁶ These men were considered to embody a history and the hope of its revival. Bertrand explains: "In today's Mediterranean man I recognized the timeless Latin. Latin Africa allowed me to tear through the smoke screen of modern Islamic decor. . . . The Africa of triumphal arches and basilicas, the Africa of Apuleius and Saint Augustine, sprang to life in front of me" (11).⁷ This North Africa, united only under Roman rule, had tried ever since to keep Roman laws even under "oriental" Byzantine, Arab, and Turkish rule. The indigenous population was either attached to Roman administrative ways or under the strong influence of Latin renegades and artisans (11).

Bertrand's work was, as he acknowledges with pride, explicitly and immediately used for political ends:

Because I revived that idea [the Latin origins of North Africa], I gave back to our settlers their letters patent and their rights as first inhabitant. As the inheritors of Rome, our rights are older than Islam. In the face of the Arab usurper and even the native he enslaved and reshaped, we represent the descendants of the fugitives, the real masters of this land, who landed in Gaul with their reliquaries and the archives from their churches. We are at home wherever the fasces of the proconsul and the eagle of the legions were raised. We represent the noblest and most ancient Africa.⁸

⁶ Louis Bertrand, *Le sang des races*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Ollendorff, 1921). All translations from the French and Arabic are mine unless otherwise stated.

⁷ Michel de Certeau argues that colonialist "historical accounts articulate a vision or memory of other worlds as a blank space on which Western desire is written" (Norindr, 2). In the case of North Africa, colonization was deemed necessary to reconcile the area with a past it seemed to have forgotten. Western desire was not written on a "blank space" but sought to revive what it perceived as historical amnesia. Indeed, the seeds of this desire had taken root centuries earlier. In act 2 of Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, for example, Adrian remarks that "Tunis was never grac'd before with such a paragon to their Queen," but Gonzalo demurs. "Not since widow Dido's time," he says, and then explains, over Adrian's protestations that Dido "was of Carthage, not Tunis," that "this Tunis, sir, was Carthage" (*The Tempest*, ed. Frank Kermode, 6th ed. [London: Methuen, 1958]).

⁸ Louis Bertrand, preface to *Les villes d'or: Algérie et Tunisie romaines*, 9th ed. (Paris: Fayard, 1921), quoted in Peter Dunwoodie, *Writing French Algeria* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998), 107.

Colonist intellectuals readily acknowledge the political significance of Bertrand's historical narrative. Jean Pommier writes: "The buried Latin spirit, revived in us by you [Bertrand], thus becomes an honourable justification for the brutal fact of occupation. Indeed, it entirely changes the legal nature thereof by infusing it with all the strength of a civil right, analogous to the right to inherit" (quoted in Dunwoodie, 170).

Bertrand and other right-wing *colons* found in this North Africa a space in which to enact ideologies rejected by more liberal approaches to colonialism in France. Bertrand saw colonial Algeria as giving rise to a race of masters who would dominate a subjugated race and reinvigorate France itself (139). In 1915 he would use Nietzsche to draw the picture of the *colon* as *Übermensch*. Two decades after the publication of *Le sang des races*, he could admire the achievements of the *colons*: "I thought then what I have not ceased to proclaim ever since, namely, that France, which was worn out by centuries of civilization, could be rejuvenated through contact with this visible, vigorous Barbary" (Bertrand, 9).⁹ How did this discourse on French North Africa play out in the context of Tunisia?

To assemble a "coherent" plot, *colon* writers and intellectuals made effective use of the systematic cultural and physical mapping of Tunisia that French students of the country's archaeology, geography, folklore, linguistics, and medicine had undertaken. The first literary history that attempts, in a seemingly smooth and logical manner, to chart colonist conceptions of Tunisia's past, present, and future is Yves Châtelain's *La vie littéraire et intellectuelle en Tunisie de 1900 à 1937*.¹⁰ The plot mimics the

⁹ Modern and early modern European literature refers to North Africa as "the Barbary Coast," "Barbary," or "the Barbary States," harking back to the ancient Greek term for North Africa. This historiography severs North Africa from Mediterranean history. See Ken Parker, "Barbary in Early Modern England," in *The Movement of People and Ideas between Britain and the Maghreb*, ed. Mohamed-Salah Omri and Abdeljalil Temimi (Zaghouan: Fondation Temimi pour la Recherche Scientifique et l'Information, 2003), 125–50.

¹⁰ Yves Châtelain, *La vie littéraire et intellectuelle en Tunisie de 1900 à 1937* (Paris: Geuthner, 1937). The book's preface is by General Paul Azan, president of the Société des Ecrivains de l'Afrique du Nord, a French institution devoted to promoting the idea of French North Africa. Another relevant source is Habib Belaid, "Les associations régionales françaises en Tunisie pendant l'époque coloniale," *Revue d'histoire maghrébine* 23 (1996): 65–70. One recent reference, *History of Tunisian Lit-*

tale of *Sleeping Beauty* by presenting the history of Tunisia as a well-constructed narrative of search, discovery, revival, and appropriation.

Châtelain finds in Bertrand's historiography a basis for his claim that Tunisian literary writings "spread their roots" into a past that he considers his own and, in doing so, "rejoin an Afro-Latin tradition" (149). Such an identity, he suggests, gives the French rights to the country that predate those asserted by Muslims. Once evidence of this identity is unearthed, the task becomes one of revival and appropriation. One strategy of appropriation is to use the colony's historical symbols for political ends. For instance, in a well-calculated gesture, a French journal was named after Kahena, the famous Berber queen who had resisted the Islamic conquest of North Africa. A literary group baptized itself *L'Ane d'Or*, recalling the book *The Golden Ass*, by the African Latin writer Apuleius. Louis Carton (1861–1924), a military physician and amateur archaeologist, played a key role in the revival. He staged historical plays celebrating Roman Carthage, along with tragedies by Racine and Corneille. The historical links between France and "its" Latin Tunisia that were put onstage had a calculated symbolic effect. "Natives" were considered to have a past but no historical memory. These performances were part of reviving that memory, conceived as exclusively Latin.

The role of the colonist intelligentsia was not only to construct a convincing version of Tunisia's history but also to make certain that it took hold: "While administrators, civil servants, and *colons* organized and colonized the country materially, they also ensured intellectual colonization" (Châtelain, 35). They formed an elite whose membership was carefully delineated. To become a "Tunisian" writer, one had to be French or Italian, born in Tunisia, native Tunisian, or a long-term resident of the country; one also had to write in French and use it to adapt to the local milieu. Châtelain, for example, recognizes in the aptly titled poem "La sieste sous l'olivier" ("Siesta under the Olive

erature, 1860–1985 (*Tarikh al-Adab al-Tunisi (1860–1985)*) (Tunis: Bayt al-Hikma, 1993), lists under "Tunisian Literature of French Expression" only the work of indigenous writers. See also Jacques Berque, *French North Africa: The Maghrib between Two World Wars*, trans. Jean Stewart (London: Faber, 1967); and Ahmad Khalid, *Documents secrets du 2ème bureau: Tunisie-Maghreb dans la conjoncture de pré-guerre, 1937–1940* (Tunis: Société Tunisienne de Diffusion, 1983).

Tree”) the prototype of what he calls “Tunisian” literature and finds in the *colon* the Nietzschean hero proclaimed by Bertrand. “These natives, he [the settler Nicholas] loves them,” Châtelain observes, “despite their laziness and carefree attitudes, which contradict his own energy. He tastes the archaic charm of their lives and regrets that all this may disappear in the face of modern life. But we have to destroy the past and break ancient habits, take torch and iron to the sterile bushes and dark mountains to ensure that future crops germinate” (107). There was a need to project an image of belonging and authenticity. To this end, writers adopted pen names with Arabic connotations: the geographer Charles Monchicourt published as Rodd Balek (Beware!) and the novelist Charles Schambion as Bulbul Bou-Said (Bou Sa’id’s Nightingale). In addition, writers had to relearn what Châtelain calls “primitive ways” and develop an appreciation for *les indigènes*.

Colon literature had not only to contend with “native” culture but also to dissociate itself from orientalist representations of the colonies and assert its difference. In Tunisia as well as in Algeria, “traditional” orientalism in art and literature came under attack in these writings. A battle was waged to determine who was the most authentic and least orientalist *colon*. Châtelain praises Charles Boussinot for his attempt to portray local people accurately: “He went into huts, at the risk of catching lice, to talk to Bedouins and unveil the secrets of their minds. Furthermore, he knows rural Tunisians, their life, instincts, and feelings” (123). “Local” writers even acquired a “local” behavior that Châtelain calls “African warmth.” He commends Pierre Hubac for launching a battle against pretenders to “local” literature. Without a hint of irony he writes that Hubac “waged a war to the death against false orientalisms, bazaar North Africanisms, the harmful literature of tourism practiced by certain metropolitan writers who, having spent a couple of weeks or months in a colony or an exotic country, think that they have discovered a new world and write supposedly definitive works. In reality, these books contain mistakes that the French public cannot see but that are all too obvious to true colonials” (60). Robert Randau, writing about Algeria, considers orientalist literature to be based on a set recipe: “Give your hero a turban, drape a burnoose around him, plant a palm tree in one corner, a minaret in another, add a mirage a bit farther off, sprinkle a little sand around, throw in a sunset, voice disconcerting phrases on

the Arab arch and the Moorish palace” (Dunwoodie, 132). Writing in 1927, Gojon declares that “Algeria is no longer the fleshy but sterile odalisque of operettas that Ingres dreamed of and that Henri Regnault, [Eugène] Fromentin, and Benjamin Constant sought in impenetrable casbahs” (122). There were, however, acknowledged links and similarities between the two discourses. For instance, the closed door, the space that bothered the *colon*, seemed to be the one that most troubled the orientalist, namely, the mind of the indigenous people. Châtelain confesses: “Nothing is more closed to a Westerner than Islam, and more particularly the life and mind of an Arab woman” (60). More crucially, the *souvenir* or “memory” that French colonist culture found in North Africa owed its very existence to French orientalist representations of Africa. Hence Flaubert’s *Salammbô* (1863) becomes at the same time a precursor to and a reference for the Carthage often used by colonist historians and novelists alike. Carton, Châtelain, and Bertrand find in Flaubert a genealogy and legitimacy.

Yet Tunisia and Algeria, which had been “oriental,” were somehow severed from the Orient by colonization. They were no longer available for orientalist depiction, vision, or phantasm. The former Orient was no longer an Orient; it had become European. Colonist discourse disorientalized the Orient by finding shared roots with it—“a past, which is our own,” says Châtelain—or by creating a new identity for the colony. In the process, it redirected (disoriented) exotic and tourist literature into “local” knowledge. There were then these two pasts, a remote Latin one to be revived and a recent orientalist one to be rewritten. But in a complete narrative of nationhood, the revival of the past and the control of the present must be complemented by the imagined future of the nation. This future must be depicted as certain and glorious.

In this case, however, the future was already there. For the *colon*, a future Tunisia could be imagined only in relation to the metropolis. Carton’s book *La Tunisie en l’an 2000* imagines the colony as a utopian land where the *mission civilisatrice* has achieved spectacular success.¹¹

¹¹ Louis Carton, *La Tunisie en l’an 2000 (Lettres d’un touriste)* (Tunis: Namura et Bonici, 1921). The book was originally published in the journal *La dépêche tunisienne* from February 10 to December 1, 1919. At that point the imagined date was 1930, but when the book was republished in 1921, Carton changed it to 2000.

It reads like a guided tour through revived Roman relics and impressive French “developments.” Tunisia has become a clone of Provence, an open museum of Roman civilization and a Club Med at the same time. French urban policy has transformed the country into Provençal villages.¹² In even the most difficult regions, such as the northwest, an inspired second generation of *colons* has turned hamlets into French villages, with all the amenities and appeal of the native land (Carton, 174–75). Developments in air travel and comfortable holiday resorts beckon to metropolitan tourists and allow colonization to take deeper root. The country is no longer seen as a mere target of economic exploitation; it is a permanent home for the French. *La Tunisie en l’an 2000* looks beyond the initial phase of arduous settlement to a Mediterranean space where *joie de vivre* and productive work are equally valued. It portrays an ordered space that allows for leisure but does not stray from the work at hand, that is, from development and progress. Both goals enact the phantasmatic desire of the *colon*.

French colonist culture attempted to root itself in Tunisia by appropriating icons from the Latin presence in North Africa. It considered French the unifying mode of expression of a culture in step with modern life; “literary Arabic” was thought anachronistic and the vernacular inappropriate for contemporary culture. The Mediterranean was conceived as Roman in origin, exclusive in nature, and Latin in racial terms. In literature, this version of history and identity is inscribed on the *colon*, who is represented as the new Mediterranean man: young, ambitious, practical, and free—in short, a leader of “natives” and a pioneer. This, however, was not the only colonial discourse on French North Africa or on the Mediterranean. The poet and essayist Gabriel Audisio (1900–1978), his friend Camus, and others had a different view altogether.

Audisio was a key figure in the development of an inclusive conception of the Mediterranean in the 1930s. He recognized the past legacies as well as the contemporary diversity of an area to which he was

¹² “The dilapidated huts of the past have given way to small stone cottages, bleached white inside and out and covered with tile roofs. The three valleys, which I mentioned . . . before, recall in fact many a place in the mountains of France” (Carton, 119).

proud to belong. “I am a citizen of the Mediterranean,” he declares, “in the sense that my fellow citizens are all the peoples of the sea, including Jews, Arabs, Berbers, and black people. I devote myself to Mediterranean humanism because it takes into account not only the Roman order, the Greek miracle, and Christianity but also the civilizing contributions of Egypt, Persia, and the Phoenician, Hebraic, and Muslim Orient.”¹³ While Bertrand attempts to preserve racial purity, Audisio favors intermixing: “Rome gave its laws to the world, not its blood. . . . On the other hand, I do recognize a ‘Mediterranean’ race, but it typifies impure races, made up of all additions and all mixes. . . . Just as I cannot see a chosen race in the Mediterranean, I cannot see a chosen nation. To base Mediterranean patriotism on the Latin and the imperialistic *mare nostrum* of Rome is, quite simply, a betrayal” (quoted in Dunwoodie, 212).

Camus makes a more overtly political argument for these ideas. In the lecture “La culture indigène: La nouvelle culture méditerranéenne,” delivered on April 8, 1937, to inaugurate the Maison de la Culture, a forum for antifascist voices in Algeria, he suggests that nationalism is linked to the fall rather than the rise of culture and that it is time for “internationalism.”¹⁴ Like Bertrand, Camus keeps the metropolis in mind as he considers a role for the colonies. But unlike his right-wing compatriot, he appeals to the political Left, urging it to espouse this idea in order to oppose fascism, racism, and war. He argues that the Mediterranean is an ideal space in which to reconcile culture and life while keeping an inclusive international spirit. The Mediterranean finds its fullest expression in North Africa, not because it is the home of “vigorous” southern European races but because it is the meeting point of East and West:

As an international basin crossed by all currents, the Mediterranean is perhaps the only area that links up with the great Eastern ideas, because it is not classical and ordered but diffuse and turbulent, like these Arab quarters or the ports of Genoa and Tunisia. North Africa is the only space where East and West live together. In this confluence, there is no

¹³ Quoted in Emile Témime, “Repenser l’espace méditerranéen: Une utopie des années trente,” *La pensée de midi* 1 (2000): 60.

¹⁴ Albert Camus, *Essais*, ed. Roger Quilliot and Louis Faucon (Paris: Gallimard, 1965), 1321.

difference in lifestyle between the Spaniards or the Italians of the Algerian docks and the Arabs around them. What is most essential in the Mediterranean genius emerges perhaps from this unique encounter of history and geography born between East and West. (1325)

For Camus, the Mediterranean has produced an alternative culture to contemporary Europe; it is a center in its own right rather than a periphery. To tie it to Rome is to relegate it to the past rather than endow it with a role in the present. Indeed, Camus believes that Rome is the antithesis of the Mediterranean and that the uncertainty about conceptions of this space is largely the result of conflating the two: “The big mistake is that one confuses the Mediterranean with Latinity and that we attribute to Rome what belongs to Athens” (1321). To those who see glory only in the Roman past, Camus replies: “Of course there were Romans here, but I find it hard to articulate just how cold that leaves me” (1346).

This “humanist” conception of the Mediterranean, representing a shift away from racial and Latin domination and toward the inclusion of other cultures, gained currency in the 1930s and 1940s. Islands and ports were seen as the privileged sites of this conception. They embodied physical beauty, pleasure, and *joie de vivre*. The south of France shared with the North African colony the sense of belonging to the sea. Pagan cultures, both pre-Islamic and pre-Roman, were valorized. The French Algerian writer Emmanuel Roblès thought that “friendly similarities are the rule governing the Mediterranean in which what divides merely marks nuances between relationships” (quoted in Dunwoodie, 245). The sea united rather than divided those who inhabited its shores. It was therefore natural that, unlike colonist writers who privileged narratives about labor and land, Audisio favored narratives about peregrination, whose protagonists followed in the steps of Homer’s Ulysses rather than of Virgil’s Aeneas. They preferred sailing to settlement and thus were polar opposites of the *colon*. The conceptions of the Mediterranean put forth by Camus, Audisio, and Roblès did not firmly take root at the time, although they appealed to some Arab francophone writers (e.g., Mouloud Feraoun and Idris Chraïbi).¹⁵

¹⁵ Reflections of this project could be seen in Egypt, particularly in the ideas of the Egyptian intellectual and writer Taha Husayn. In his controversial book *The Future of Culture in Egypt* (1938), Husayn argues that his country has always been

But in the 1940s and 1950s the nature of the conflict changed, making the cohabitation of “natives” and Europeans, which Camus and his colleagues had supported, unlikely. In addition, despite the inclusiveness of their ideas, Camus and others did not stress the Islamic and Arab components of Mediterranean history and culture. It was left to Algerian and Tunisian intellectuals to respond to colonist discourse and argue for the appropriate positioning of their countries in Mediterranean history. In Tunisia the Bertrandian project and its local variant, outlined by Châtelain, were the targets, both as historical accounts and as literary works.

In Search of Ifriqiyya

The argument that Tunisia, known in Islamic sources as Ifriqiyya, was a distinct entity before colonization relies on evidence of cultural homogeneity and on historical events. These included the “Arabization” of the cities and of most tribes through the Bani Hilal and Bani Salim invasions after the eleventh century, the virtually complete domination of the region by the Maliki Islamic code of law, the long-term stability of borders, and a common history.¹⁶ *La Tunisie martyre* (1920) was the first systematic argument for the historical existence of a Tunisian

Mediterranean in spirit despite its subjection to Pharos, Greek, Roman, and Muslim rulers. In ancient times Egypt, he claims, was “one of the creators of the Mediterranean civilization”; now it must link up with Europe rather than with the East (Albert Hourani, *Arabic Thought in the Liberal Age, 1798–1939* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983], 324–40).

¹⁶ On the issue of a common history see Muhammad al-Hadi al-Sharif, *Tarikh Tunis (A History of Tunisia)* (Tunis: Cérès, 1985). Of religious homogeneity Sa‘ad Ghurab writes: “There is no doubt that the Maliki School has become through the ages an essential component of the Maghribi personality or character” (*Al-‘Amil al-dini wa al-hawiyya al-tunisiyya [The Religious Factor and Tunisian Identity]* [Tunis: al-Dar al-tunisiyya li al-nashr, 1990], 70). Ghurab argues that even before Islam religion had played an important role in the people’s identity in times of war or foreign invasion (26). Al-Bashir Ben Slama, the Tunisian novelist and minister of culture from 1981 to 1986, put forward a comprehensive defense of Tunisianness in his *al-Shakh-siyya al-tunisiyya: Khasa’isuha wa muqawwimatuha (Tunisian Personality: Specificities and Constituents)* (Tunis: ‘Abd al-Karim Bin ‘Abdallah, 1974). For a discussion of his argument in English see Norma Salem, *Habib Bourguiba, Islam, and the Creation of Tunisia* (London: Croom Helm, 1984), 79–93.

state by “native” intellectuals. In part a study of the effects of colonial policies on Tunisia, it also constituted a “manifesto for the nationalist movement” (al-Sharif, 116). The book’s influence on subsequent nationalist thought was pervasive.¹⁷

In the 1930s and 1940s, however, the threat of the *colons* to Tunisia’s identity drew a variegated reaction in the region.¹⁸ The remainder of this essay focuses on the work of a group of intellectuals whose influence on the cultural politics of Tunisia as a colony and as a nation-state after independence in 1956 was decisive. The journal *al-Mabahith* (*Investigations*), in particular, was a landmark in the formulation and promotion of Arab Tunisian culture during the late 1930s and early 1940s and served as a forum for these intellectuals. *Al-Mabahith* fostered a discourse of cultural politics both expressed directly and inflected by editorial choice.¹⁹ Covering literature, art, history, and philosophy, it enjoyed wide appeal in Tunisia and abroad, reaching a circulation of seven thousand in 1947 at a time when the average circulation of simi-

¹⁷ ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Tha’alibi, *La Tunisie martyre: Ses revendications* (Paris: Jouve, 1920); *Tunis al-Shahida*, trans. from the French by Sami al-Gindi (Beirut: Dar al-Quds, 1975). ‘Abd al-Aziz al-Tha’alibi (1874–1944), a prominent nationalist leader, used his book to appeal directly to the French public. Among members of Parliament and influential figures in French society it had a noticeable effect.

¹⁸ The circumstances were too complex to do justice to here. Nationalist discourse, in Tunisia as elsewhere, was neither homogeneous nor harmonious. As “native” intellectuals endeavored to assert the concept of Tunisianness, they did not hesitate to question and redefine the terms *nation* and *nationalism* themselves. Tunisian historians have pointed out the elitism of the most prominent nationalist parties and have drawn a detailed picture of the national liberation movement as a whole. See, most notably, Hedi Timoumi, *Intifadat al-fallahin fi tarikh Tunis al-u’asir* (*Peasant Revolts in Modern Tunisian History*) (Tunis: Bayt al-Hikma, 1993).

¹⁹ *Al-Mabahith* continued the work of prominent predecessors but marked a significant departure for the culture as a whole. The leading precursor was *al-‘Alam al-adabi* (*The Literary World*), founded in 1932 by Zin al-‘Abidin al-Sunusi, an influential catalyst of culture in Tunisia in the 1920s and 1930s (Collective, 41). *Al-Mabahith* appeared in two series. The first, produced single-handedly by Muhammad al-Bashrush (1911–44), comprised only two issues, January and March 1938. After al-Bashrush’s death, the journal was led by Mahmud Al-Mas’adi, aided by ‘Abd al-Wahhab Bakkir, Ahmad ‘Abd al-Salam, and others with a common intellectual background and outlook. My research here is based on the full collection, edited by Muhammad Rauf Belhassan and Ahmad Jlid and introduced by Jum’a Shiha (Tunis: Tunisian National Library, 1994).

lar periodicals was two thousand.²⁰ In the course of forty-five issues it also came to embody a particular conception of culture, as well as a distinctive style of writing.²¹

The founder of *al-Mabahith*, Muhammad al-Bashrush, clearly considered it his mission to perpetuate a legacy. He was keen to point out the need to recover the intellectual history of Tunisia in order to expand the historical evidence in support of the argument for independence. “I see it as my duty,” he writes in the first issue, “to be faithful to the memory of Ibn Rashiq, Ibn Sharaf, Ibn Khaldun, Ibn Hani’, and al-Shabbi. They have eternalized with their works the spirit of Arab civilization and culture in this country.”²² Al-Bashrush links his contemporary, the fiery romantic poet Abu al-Qasim al-Shabbi (1909–34), to illustrious classical and medieval Islamic figures who lived or worked in the region, such as the critic Ibn Rashiq al-Qayrawani (1000–1063), the poets Ibn Sharaf (d. 1068) and Ibn Hani’ al-Andalusi (d. 975), and the eminent philosopher of history Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun (1332–1406). In doing so, al-Bashrush both projects the nation back in history and gives evidence of its continuity in the present.

Al-Mabahith undertook to affirm the historical existence of a national culture through histories of cities, biographies of prominent figures, general articles, theoretical or position articles, and literary history. Such documentation occurs in a discourse on the renewal of Tunisia, for which engagement with European Mediterranean culture, past and present, was deemed necessary. But since Tunisian culture was undergoing reconstruction, the journal chose its contents with careful selectivity. It treated foreign cultures critically and valorized particular aspects of Islam. It pursued a comparative approach to foreign literatures through reviews, biographies, and translations from Asia, Latin America, and eastern Europe. In the area of translation, for instance, it emphasized the relevance of the source material to Arab or Tunisian

²⁰ Muhammad Hamdan, *Dalil al-dawriyyat al-sadira bi al bilad al-tunisiyya 1830–20 Maris 1956* (*Catalog of Periodicals Published in Tunisia between 1830 and March 20, 1956*) (Carthage: Bayt al-Hikma, 1989), 112–13.

²¹ Issue 37 (April 1947) assesses the journal’s achievements: “Tunisians are not without a sense of common heritage. We have given evidence of this in all the articles published by the journal during the last three years.”

²² *Al-Mabahith*, January 1938, 1.

cultures. In general, *al-Mabahith* sought analogues rather than models. Local intellectuals had enough self-confidence to adopt comparison, rather than imitation or adaptation, as a means of engaging European culture.

The pillars of the Tunisian community that emerged from *al-Mabahith* were the country's Islamic history, the Arabic language, and a conception of the world drawn from Islam and from other Mediterranean civilizations. The intellectual activity in *al-Mabahith* created an environment suitable for the development of a type of fiction directly relevant to the nationalist project. This fiction drew its narrative style from classical Arabic literature; it was written in polished literary Arabic; it tended to explore spiritual and existential issues; and, finally, it drew on Islamic as well as European sources.²³ In all these respects, the literature published in *al-Mabahith* was diametrically opposed to *colon* literature.

The journal's orientation was formulated into a narrative of national history and identity by Mahmud Al-Mas'adi (1911–), *al-Mabahith*'s leading figure between 1944 and 1947. Al-Mas'adi was the prototypical “native” intellectual, well equipped to face the colonialist challenge and to construct a cultural politics for Tunisia. In profile he mirrors other compatriots but also prominent figures in the postcolonial world, such as the Egyptian Taha Husayn, the Senegalese L. S. Senghor, and others. Al-Mas'adi studied at the prestigious modern school al-Madrassa al-Sadiqiyya, the Zaytuna Islamic University, and the Sorbonne. After independence he was put in charge of “Tunisifying” the educational system, which resulted in the integration of the Zaytuna within the university system as a college for religious studies, and maintaining bilingual education in Arabic and French.²⁴ Al-Mas'adi and his contem-

²³ Examples include the series *Hadith al-ghar* (*Tales from the Cave*), in issues 17–18, by al-Sadiq Mazigh; some of Mahmud Al-Mas'adi's fiction; and stories such as “Nuskhat dhalika kadhhalika” (“Carbon Copy”), which deals with Adam, Eve, and Satan. The fiction promoted by *al-Mabahith* found its fullest expression in the work of its influential editor, Al-Mas'adi.

²⁴ Outside Tunisia, Al-Mas'adi and al-Shabbi are the country's best-known cultural figures. Al-Mas'adi was Tunisia's representative to UNESCO for ten years (1958–68), a member of its Executive Council (1977–78, 1980–85), and a member of several Arabic-language academies and boards.

poraries, who were acutely aware of the power of self-representation, set out to tell in Arabic their own story of Tunisia and their own version of the Mediterranean.

Al-Mas'adi argues that Islamic culture—he often uses the term *Arab-Islamic culture*—has an original contribution to make to a world culture in crisis. Taking stock of the aftermath of the Second World War, he points out that the key to a just “world system” lies with culture. The concept of “world system,” he claims, will remain replete with risks, such as repression and persecution carried out in the name of order and security, unless it is guided by the notions of “justice, freedom, and fraternity.”²⁵

Al-Mas'adi distinguishes between national culture as a legitimate project and nationalism in culture as a dangerous tendency to guard against. In response to the redefinition of Tunisia by the *colons*, Al-Mas'adi proposes an alternative reading of the colony's history. He rejects the metaphor of North Africa as a crossroads between East and West because, he argues, it empties Ifriqiyya from any meaning and denies her history.²⁶ His reading of Tunisia's history, published in *al-Mabahith* in 1945, goes as follows: Phoenicians, “who are Easterners,” established the first nucleus of a “civilized society” in Carthage in the seventh century BC. During the “Aryan” (Greek) dominance of the Mediterranean region, Carthage was able to preserve its Semitic roots. Romans then occupied the country, but they failed to “Latinize” it. When Muslims arrived in the seventh century AD, they were resisted by “the Kahina who was Berber, not Roman,” just as Berbers had opposed previous invaders. But the Muslims eventually won, not by force but by a “return of the spirit” to its Eastern origin. “Thus, the Eastern and Phoenician Carthage linked up with the Eastern Islamic Qairawan, shedding temporary appearances (Roman, Greek, Byzantine, and Vandal).”²⁷

²⁵ Al-Mas'adi taps into currents of thought whose proponents, including Camus, were critical of and sought alternatives to Eurocentric culture. He also upholds values expressed by the French and challenges the French to live up to their own ideals.

²⁶ *Al-Mabahith*, November 1945, 3.

²⁷ Al-Qairawan was the first major Islamic center west of Egypt. It was built by the general Uqba Ibn Nafi' in 670 to serve as a military and political stronghold for the Muslim conquest of North Africa and Spain. Under the Aghlabid dynasty (800–909), which ruled Tunisia, part of Algeria, and Sicily, the city became a center of learning, culture, and trade. Even after it was sacked in the eleventh century,

This theory leads Al-Mas'adi to conclude that French colonization was alien to the character of the Tunisian people and transient, destined to follow in the footsteps of its natural ancestors, the Roman invaders of Carthage. "No one," he writes, "should lose sight of a fundamental lesson drawn from history and reality. Ifriqiyya was Eastern before it became Western and was Semitic and spiritual before it became Aryan and materialist; we are Easterners, Arabs, and Muslims like the Arabs, Semites like the Jews."²⁸

Al-Mas'adi's narrative of rediscovery, revival, and support of the culture is at once the expression and the outcome of a concerted effort by "native" intellectuals to assert their national culture. It reverses Bertrand's history of North Africa by giving prominence to pre- and post-Roman "Eastern" influences on the region. Mediterranean Tunisia is located in a cultural frame that identifies with the southern shore of the sea and rejects everything from the north (Greek, Roman) as alien to the "spirit" of the nation.²⁹

Al-Mas'adi argues that Tunisia had a distinct national culture before occupation. The effort to revive it is better understood, therefore, when one considers precolonial efforts to do so. Under the leadership of the reformer Khayr al-Din Pasha al-Tunisi (ca. 1820–89), the country began its journey toward modernization, mainly through the

al-Qairawan remained important as the home of one of the oldest mosques in Africa and a number of influential shrines and schools.

²⁸ *Al-Mabahith*, November 1945, 3.

²⁹ Three decades later Ben Slama suggested that there were four periods of *nahda* (renaissance, revival) in Tunisian history (the Phoenician, the Roman, the Arab, and the nineteenth century), all of them tied to foreign invasions, rises in education and learning, and the assimilation of other civilizations (146). He argued that literary history should include pre-Islamic writers like Saint Augustine and Apuleius (23). Formulated in the 1970s, Ben Slama's theory is an aggressive intervention in contemporaneous debates on pan-Arab nationalism and the consolidation of the nation-state in Tunisia. Hence Arabness is considered one constituting feature of identity. The subtext of this theory is Hegelian, in a sense. It argues that a common spirit (*ruh*) ties together the entire history of the area known as Tunisia and that the leader at the time, Habib Bourguiba, was the ideal image and the realization of that spirit. "For this reason," Ben Slama says, "Bourguiba can be said to have brought to fruition the hidden desire of the people of this land. . . . He best embodies all the feelings of this people" (260). The historical destiny of the people is fulfilled, and the leader and his people have become one. In his eagerness to legitimate the state and the leader, Ben Slama appears to proclaim the end of the history of Tunisia.

founding of the Sadiqiyya School. Colonial occupation impeded this development by slowing the pace of education, diverting its goals, and “disfiguring” its character by putting emphasis on French language as a medium of instruction. “The goal was clear: to transform the cultural identity in this country into a Western French identity.”³⁰

An alternative type of assimilation was needed to counter the attempt at assimilation carried out in the metropolitan culture by the intelligentsia of the local *colons*. Al-Mas’adi argues that intellectuals must put into practice a two-pronged strategy: preservation of national culture and “digestion” of the foreign elements necessary for its renewal.³¹ Digesting foreign sources necessitates a firm grasp of the indigenous component of national culture, that is, a viable “digesting force.” The Arabic language plays a key role. Foreign elements, Al-Mas’adi speculates, will gradually become “Arab, Tunisian, and Islamic.” They are made “compatible with the character of national identity.”³² Tunisian culture, he asserts, will prevail despite colonial efforts to disfigure it. Examples from history confirm that “literary forces and cultural trends are able to emerge once they reach the strength and energy necessary for their existence.” In the Islamic context, for instance, minority literatures appeared despite Arab superiority during the Abbasid period, while “Shi’a literature managed to survive despite continuous persecution.”³³

Literature was particularly important to this revival. Al-Mas’adi, even during the French occupation, rejected what he calls “nationalism in literature.” He writes: “The foundations of intellectual life—of which literature is only a branch—are two principles without which genuine thought ceases to exist. The first is that thought and its outcomes must reach beyond restricted and limited concerns to general human issues.” The second is that literature must seek “originality [*tarafa*] or strangeness [*gharaba*] and avoid stereotypes and clichés.” Originality means that “one’s path in thought and feeling must be different from that of others, while it remains committed to the first principle.”³⁴ Wholesale

³⁰ *Al-Mabahith*, September–October 1947, 5.

³¹ *Al-Mabahith*, November 1944, 1.

³² *Al-Mabahith*, December 1944, 1; *al-Mabahith*, September 1945, 3.

³³ *Al-Mabahith*, November 1944, 1.

³⁴ *Al-Mabahith*, August 1944, 1.

imitation of Western ideas must be rejected if originality is to prevail and if the nation's position in history is to be regained. The pillars on which this original culture must be rebuilt are the Arabic language and a confident relationship to Western culture. Language is both the medium and a key component of the community constructed by "native" intellectuals.

The case of Tunisia demonstrates that the language of the narrative matters almost as much as the narrative itself. The French language policy in the Maghreb had rendered Arabic almost irrelevant. Hence the revival and use of Arabic became acts of resistance and self-definition. Because language mattered to both sides so deeply, in this particular colonial conflict a "battle of languages" was inevitable, but it was also inevitably uneven. French, supported by the colonial apparatus, almost won out; at some points, the only option seemed to be slavish imitation of the colonizer. The fourteenth-century historian Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun called this imitation, which he observed repeatedly in ancient North African history, "the tendency of the vanquished to imitate the victorious."³⁵ The modern history of North Africa appears to confirm his insight. Jacques Berque writes about the deep effect of language policy on colonial North Africa: "Even the vital power of describing its [North Africa's] inner perturbations was usurped by the French language. Henceforth not only action, but also feeling and revolution must speak and think in French. And so any movement aiming at recovery must seek to restore signs to things" (86).

While the *colon* community was inconceivable outside the French language, Al-Mas'adi and his peers could not think of Tunisia without the Arabic language.³⁶ *Al-Mabahith* considered Arabic both the vehicle of national culture and a key component of national identity.³⁷ It was

³⁵ Abd al-Rahman Ibn Khaldun, *Al-Muqaddima (Prolegomena)* (Tunis: Dar al-Ma'arif, 1991), 83–84.

³⁶ Berber languages, which were widely spoken in Algeria, had limited use in Tunisia, and therefore the issue of valorizing them over and against Arabic sometimes remained marginal to colonial politics.

³⁷ Anderson, citing the uses of the colonial language as a lingua franca in French West Africa, rejects the idea that languages are "emblems" of nationness: "Print-language is what invents nationalism, not a particular language *per se*" (134). Yet language may be both an emblem and a medium in which the national narrative is conceived.

unwavering in its defense of standard Arabic against foreign challenges and what it called “the threat” of dialects.³⁸ The journal promoted rigorous “Arabization” of new terminology, particularly in the sciences, and ridiculed the practice of transliterating foreign words into Arabic.³⁹ Tunisian Arabic literature meant, first and foremost, literature in standard Arabic. In the “battle of languages” this literature had become, of necessity, an ideological as well as an artistic undertaking.

Thus *al-Mabahith*, on the one hand, and Camus, Audisio, and Roblès, on the other, shared the conception of the Mediterranean as anti-Roman. They were also united in their opposition to discourses of division and domination propagated by the *colons*. But they differed considerably in their aims as well as on the question of Islam’s role in North Africa and the position of Arabic in North African Mediterranean literature. Their representations of the Mediterranean as a space of movement for people and ideas reveal divergent views of its history. While Audisio and his peers use Greek figures and myths, such as Ulysses, as metaphors and models, Al-Mas’adi rewrites Sindabad, the

³⁸ For example, Ahmad ‘Abd al-Salam, a member of the journal’s editorial board, strongly rejects the use of dialect in literature, including drama, in “Literature and the Masses,” *al-Mabahith*, June 1945, 3–5. *Al-Mabahith*, paradoxical as it may seem, agreed with colonist intellectuals in that both denied local dialect any role in the construction of a Tunisian national culture. Both excluded “native” popular culture from the project of nation building. In this sense, the *colonist* and “native” narratives of the nation that are outlined here share a certain elitism. Timoumi saw the nationalist movement in Tunisia as predominantly urban and elitist. But Tunisia was no exception. Of India, for instance, Ranajit Guha writes: “The historiography of Indian nationalism has for a long time been dominated by elitism—colonialist elitism and bourgeois-nationalist elitism . . . sharing the prejudice that the making of the Indian nation and the development of the consciousness—nationalism—which confirmed this process were exclusively or predominantly elite achievements. In the colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies these achievements are credited to British colonial rulers, administrators, policies, institutions and culture; in the nationalist and neo-nationalist writings—to Indian elite personalities, institutions, activities and ideas” (quoted in Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman [Cambridge: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993], 79).

³⁹ A rigorous style and polished language were part of the editorial policy of *al-Mabahith*. The journal organized competitions to reward writing in Arabic across the Maghreb. It was highly successful in the “Arabization” of the sciences, in which exposition of the latest developments in Western science is often combined with references to relevant Islamic texts and figures.

oriental epitome of travel, to stress spiritual self-discovery in his short story “Al-Sindabad wa al-tahara” (“Sindabad and Purity”) (1947). By contrast, his contemporary Ali al-Du’aji takes a parodic view of the theme in his narrative “Jawla hawla hanat al-Bahr al-Abyadh al-Mutawassit” (“A Tour of Mediterranean Taverns”) (1933). Both texts were published in *al-Mabahith*.

In Al-Mas’adi’s story, Sindabad is in a port waiting for a boat in which to continue his travels:

Since the heavens have given men no context other than humanity, no state other than the body, no inspiration but a self that tempts them to do ill; since he [Sindabad] had frequented a thousand and one brothels and sought refuge in prostitutes a thousand and one nights; since he was compelled to live among people and was unable to kill them all; and since he remained imprisoned in a body he was unable to purify like crystal, he felt no harm in entering yet another tavern.⁴⁰

The ugliness and filth of the tavern remind Sindabad of scenes from earlier periods of his life. In disgust, he boards the first boat that comes along: “This was the last of his journeys. Now the purity of the depths contained him” (Al-Mas’adi, *Mawlid*, 151). In rare flashbacks Al-Mas’adi inserts autobiographical detail, but the text draws heavily on classical Arabic literature. Decadent ports, taverns, and the name of Sindabad himself have their antecedents in *The Thousand and One Nights*.⁴¹ The main theme of the story, namely, the quest for purity in and salvation from a decadent world, is, however, of Sufi origin.

For al-Du’aji, travel is a means of conveying a hedonistic, sarcastic view of the Mediterranean in a picaresque style.⁴² “Jawla” draws on

⁴⁰ Mahmud Al-Mas’adi, *Mawlid al-nisyan (The Genesis of Oblivion)* (Tunis: al-Dar al-Tunisiyya li al-Nashr, 1974), 147.

⁴¹ Férid Ghazi, *Le roman et la nouvelle en Tunisie* (Tunis: Maison Tunisienne de l’Edition, 1970), 43.

⁴² In the history of Tunisian literature, al-Du’aji is considered Al-Mas’adi’s symbiotic other, the writer in comparison with whom Al-Mas’adi could be understood but with whom he has much in common. Al-Mas’adi, one of the very few contemporaries who immediately recognized al-Du’aji’s talent, published his work with great enthusiasm in *al-Mabahith* (al-Hadi La’bidi, *Tahta al-sur [The Tahta al-Sur Group]* [Tunis: ‘Abd al-karim Ibn ‘Abdalla, 1992], 13). But al-Du’aji would die in obscurity, despite a vast body of work that included 163 radio plays; 15 plays for the theater, which he also directed; 500 songs and poems in the Tunisian dialect; his narrative, “Jawla,” published in *al-Alam al-Adabi* in 1933; collections of stories; an unpublished novel; numerous cartoons; and a one-man newspaper, *al-Surur* (La’bidi, 198–204).

two Arabic narrative conventions. It recalls the *maqama* genre, in which the adventures of a character are recounted in comic, episodic fashion. “Jawla” also recalls, and at the same time parodies, the *rihla* (travel narrative) genre. *Rihla* was prevalent in nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Arabic writing about Europe. Jamal al-Din al-Afghani and Ahmad Faris al-Shidyaq, to name two prominent figures, wrote *rihla* to describe the societies, governments, and cultures in Europe. Their aim was generally reformist and didactic. Al-Du‘aji uses his *rihla* to describe women and bars along Mediterranean shores, from France to Turkey. He parodies journeys in search of knowledge and enlightenment. For al-Du‘aji, unlike Ulysses or Sindabad, the Mediterranean was a playground.

Al-Mas‘adi and al-Du‘aji show a Mediterranean experienced far from the northern shore. Their texts are rooted in Arabic culture in both style and reference. In this sense, they counter Roman as well as Greek representations of the Mediterranean. By not emulating European models, they also resist the depictions of Tunisia by the *colons* at the formal level. While Sindabad, the Arab, moves in a sea that he feels is his own, al-Du‘aji, the Tunisian traveler, represents a southern look at the North and a self-critique at the same time. The Mediterranean in both cases is a space of one’s own and a vantage point from which to see the self and the other.⁴³

Conclusion

More than a classic problem of colonialism, the conflict between France and North Africa was a specifically Mediterranean one. A key particularity of the Mediterranean region is the interconnectedness of its histories. The narratives outlined in this essay were built on overlapping and intersecting layers of Mediterranean history. One reading, which one might call “official” history, to use Fernand Braudel’s term, gives the Romans precedence over the Phoenicians in Tunisian history. It ignores Islam and deemphasizes all aspects of Mediterranean Tunisia,

⁴³ For an analysis of images of Europe in “Jawla” see Rasheed el-Enany, “Self and Other in Two Writers from the Maghreb, Ali al-Du‘aji and Muhammad Zifzaf,” in Omri and Temimi, 79–84.

except perhaps Carthage.⁴⁴ A second reading rejects the Roman order and the idea of nationalism by suggesting Greek antecedents and the cohabitation of various cultures and races. The “native” reading stresses the “Eastern” element in this history. It challenges “official” history by claiming that Carthage’s origins lie in the “Near East” and were never forgotten. Braudel lends credence to this claim as well when he says, “The first conquest of the Western Mediterranean was made by ‘Easterners,’” and adds: “Carthage remained the teacher of North Africa, and its influence on this area ran deep. Peasants spoke the Punic language and identified themselves with Canaanites and continued to do so until the fall of the Roman Empire” (78, 81).⁴⁵ There were other conceptions of the Mediterranean, but they were marginalized by two conflicting readings of history and two definitions of this cultural space, which came to dominate the conflict.

Colonist and indigenous imaginings appeal to icons and symbols; they use the same media, and they both declare themselves Tunisian. Settler colonialism in Tunisia sought to create a new community within an old one. The resulting conflict pitted “those who sought to take root” against “those who hoped to recover their own” (Berque, 36). Several plots were possible for the nationness that both sides claimed. Châtelain adopts a genealogy that predates the Islamic or Arab presence in Tunisia. Al-Mas’adi digs even farther back in history, yet he also applies selectivity and exclusion to establish a direct tie between the pre-Roman and Islamic periods, on the one side, and Roman and French claims, on the other. In doing so, he suggests that the first tie is legitimate and native to the land, whereas the second is alien, imposed by force and circumstance. The first constitutes the “spirit” of the nation, whereas the second is only a temporary shell. For the *colon*, “the lamp of archeology,” to use Anderson’s phrase, “casts its fitful gleam”

⁴⁴ Fernand Braudel, *Al-Bahr al-Mutawassit (The Mediterranean)*, trans. Umar Ibn Salim (Tunis: Alif, 1990), 77. Braudel was teaching in Algeria at the same time that Camus and Audisio were formulating their conception of the Mediterranean.

⁴⁵ Braudel compares Carthage, in its relations to Sidon and Phoenicia, to America in its relations to Europe, not only because Carthage was a melting pot of races but also because it featured a rough way of life (80). A similar point is made by Audisio, who talks about Algeria as a French California, that is, a multicultural, multiracial colony, set off from the “purity” of the metropolis (Dunwoodie, 212).

on the remains of Saint Augustine and Apuleius. Châtelain discovers a European (read: French) Tunisia lying dormant under layers of Islamic covers, or what Bertrand calls “decor.” She was perceived like Sleeping Beauty awaiting the *colon*, who would wake her up and make her his own. He was, however, not the only prince at hand.

The narratives of nationhood reveal a static conception of time and a mythological understanding of history, which is viewed as something to be discovered, revived, and possessed or consumed. In a word, history is conceived, like Sleeping Beauty, as passive, beautiful, virginal. The myth, however, cannot be inscribed on the “body” of the imagined nation. For in the end this colonial conflict was less about history, legend, or the best of the competing plots and narratives than about the stage on which to act them out. The Tunisianness constructed by the *colons* and by “native” intellectuals, whether it was called Africa or Ifriqiyya, was ultimately about territory.⁴⁶ The colonizer and the colonized, who were equally intent on claiming this territory, had to contend with layers of history, stories, and icons that divided as well as united them. But they also had to face the fact of colonization. The intersection between this “claimable” history, colonialism, nationalism, and orientalism makes the Tunisian example a particularly complex case study of literary and historical writing.

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⁴⁶ “I say again,” Frantz Fanon writes, “that no speech-making and no proclamation concerning culture will turn us from our fundamental tasks: the liberation of the national territory; a continual struggle against colonialism in its new forms; and an obstinate refusal to enter the charmed circle of mutual admiration at the summit” (*The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington [New York: Grove, 1963], 235).