Mauritania

J.S. Blalack

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter traces the origins of the novel genre in Mauritania. It first considers the cultural and historical context of the emergence of the Mauritanian novel, focusing on its link to the rise of Nouakchott as the country's capital. It then discusses the rise of the Arabic novel and the influence of the Nahḍa movement on many Arabic-speaking Mauritanians, including Aḥmad wuld 'Abd al-Qādir, Al-Sunnī 'Abdāwa, and Tarba bint 'Ammār. It also examines the Francophone novel. The chapter concludes by reflecting on the future of the Mauritanian novel, noting that Mauritanian literature suffers from marginalization in the Arab world and neglect on the part of academics and critics.

Keywords: Mauritania, Mauritanian novel, Nouakchott, Arabic novel, Nahḍa, Francophone novel, Mauritanian literature, Aḥmad wuld 'Abd al-Qādir

Cultural and Historical Context

THE rise of the Mauritanian novel is inextricably tied to the rise of the city of Nouakchott. When it was selected in 1957 as the capital of Mauritania, which gained independence in 1960, the city consisted of a defunct fortress and an old medina. Only 300 people lived in Nouakchott, and the vast majority of Mauritanians were nomadic herders in the north or subsistence farmers along the banks of the Senegal River (Dumper and Stanley 2007, 287). The new Nouakchott was an artificial symbol of modern nationhood in a country with arbitrary borders and little sense of a unifying history or culture.[1] While the river is the dividing line between Mauritania and Senegal, there are many Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof villages that span both banks. People freely crossed the river, and brothers could even be born on opposite sides of it. On the other hand, despite centuries of coexistence among the Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof groups, their cultures are still distinct, and each had its own caste system and social structure (Scionti 2001, 57).

The four ethnolinguistic groups of Mauritania consist of the Moors (Arabs), the Pulaar, the Soninke, and the Wolof. The desert was traditionally the domain of the Moors, while the Pulaar, Soninke, and Wolof lived in sedentary communities along the Senegal River Valley. The Haratine, Arabic-speaking Blacks, descended from former slaves of the Moors, can also be considered their own socially, if not linguistically, distinct group. The Haratine still suffer extreme social and economic discrimination, and many live in slavery-like conditions to this day, despite Mauritania outlawing slavery in 1981. Some common cultural threads run through all of Mauritania: namely Mālikī Islam and a strong emphasis on poetry and oral recitation. In "Land of a Million Poets," as Mauritania is often called, many children still attend traditional *maḥẓara* schools, where they learn by memorizing religious texts and classical poems, and almost every Arabic speaker has a corpus of *qaṣīdas* (odes) committed to memory.

In the case of the Soninke, poetic heritage is preserved by the *griots*, traditional storytellers present in many African cultures. The *griots*' epic poems are simultaneously (p. 326) history and legend, describing the people's conquests, victories, and heroes. The narration is characterized by dramatic construction, grandiloquence, and exaggeration, as well as improvisation (Belvaude 1989, 87). The popular oral literature of the Pulaar and the Wolof also includes poems revolving around heroic deeds and exploits. Additionally, the Pulaar have genres of poems recited by certain professions: the *pekane*, describing the great catches of the fishermen; the *gumbala*, which describe the code and conduct of warriors; the *kerooje*, lionizing the hunters, and so on (Belvaude 1989, 67, 103).

After Islam reached the Senegal River Valley in the twelfth century, new literary forms arose that synthesized Arabic prose and Islamic lore into local forms. This literature includes the Soninke *xissa* and the Pulaar *daarol*, epics describing the lives and deeds of the Prophet and the saints. Islamic stories were integrated into folklore, and sometimes even adapted to tell secular stories. Other Soninke forms influenced by Arabic include *beyti*, a long rhyming poem consisting of praises and sermons, and *darabu*, religious poetry performed by women. As for the Pulaar, they created the genre *lêlé*, poems inspired by pre-Islamic styles and themes, and *jaanis*, derived from the Arabic word *jināS* (play on words, alliteration). *Jaanis* poetry is not associated with a specific theme, but rather with the use of alliteration, pun, and assonance (O. Diagana 2003, 23–27). Beginning in the eighteenth century, Wolof and Pulaar religious scholars also used Arabic to write *ajami* prose. Most of this writing is either praises of the Prophet of Islam or instructions for the correct observation of religious precepts (Belvaude 1989, 67–68). While *ajami* is mostly limited to the clerical segments of West African societies, it still represents a rich and historically significant prose collection (Humery 2014, 1–2).

Before 1960, Mauritania's Arabic prose consisted of classical and local forms such as the *riḥla* (travel account), the *risāla* (short exposition), and the distinctly Maghrebi *qif* (plural *aqfāf*)—a brief, page-long story that commented on social issues, using humor and sarcasm. The *aqfāf* were usually derived from a teacher's lecture and sometimes were used by him to remember what he had already covered on a particular topic (Ibrāhīm 2001, 93).[2] Following independence, Mauritania experienced some of the most rapid and poorly

planned urbanization in African history. The devastating Sahel droughts led to larger and larger waves of migration to the capital as desertification made traditional livelihoods impossible. Nouakchott was built up in 1960 to accommodate a population of 15,000, and less than a decade after independence it was home to 20,000. By 1987, the population had grown to 600,000, and current estimates place the city and its surrounding shanties at one million (Dumper and Stanley 2007, 285). The move from the desert to the city, and from tribal life to a society struggling to urbanize, set the stage for the rise of modern prose and eventually the novel, which forced poetry and recitation to cede some of the dominance they had traditionally enjoyed (Ibrāhīm 2000, 79).

Independence brought a surge of interest in Arabism, socialism, and Third World liberation. It also birthed modernization movements in literature. The modern prose movement first supported the development of the short story, satirical article, and play. These new works allowed the poetics of the story to take hold and created a reading audience that found pleasure in the chaos of the unrhymed, unmetered page (Tattā 2006, 13–14). At first, short stories were little more than imitations of old prose forms, (p. 327) but then gradually two different writing approaches came to the fore. The first, which was followed by the majority of Mauritanians, leaned on the Western short story model but adapted it to an Arab audience's concerns and ways of thinking. The second school took inspiration from Saʿīd Yaqṭīn's ideas as expressed in his book *Al-Riwāya wa-l-turāth al-sardī: Min ajl waʿy jadīd bil-turāth* (1992, The Novel and the Narrative Heritage: For a New Understanding of the Heritage) and employed techniques of address found in Mauritanian oral narratives, along with traditional written forms such as the *maqāma* and the *riḥla*. This school, which aimed to create a distinctly modern Mauritanian story, was behind the typewritten magazine *Al-Muʿallimīn* and one of the first writers' associations in the country, Aqlām al-Ṣaḥrā' (established in 1974) (Ibrāhīm 1997, 55). In 1975, it became Ittiḥād al-Udabā' wa-l-Kuttāb al-Mūrītāniyyīn (Mauritanian Writers' Union), the name under which it currently operates.

New forms of media production and distribution also paved the way for the appearance of the novel. At the time of independence, there was still no daily newspaper in Mauritania. The most widely distributed periodical was a weekly gazette run by Ḥizb al-Shaʿb al-Mūrītānī (Mauritanian People's Party), with a circulation of about 1,300 (500 in Arabic, 800 in French). When the ruling party began printing the daily *Al-Shaʿb* in 1975, it became an important participant in the evolution of Arabic prose. It addition to printing new fiction, the paper frequently hosted lively critical and academic debates revolving around new literary forms (Abnū 1995, 302). Both radio and television channels hosted dramas and serials, which popularized the long form. For example, the radio serial *Laqaṭāt ḥayya* (Live Shots) was broadcast throughout the 1980s and became extremely popular and at the center of many cultural dialogues (Ibrāhām 1997, 56).

Cultural and literary clubs, such as Nādī Shinqīṭ, Nādī Gharnāṭa, Al-Nādī al-Adabī, and Nādī al-Qiṣṣa, also provided a forum for the cultural renaissance, starting in the early 1980s. Al-Nādī al-Adabī, which also produced the magazine *Zaman*, became famous for cultural events and lectures that brought prominent Arab artists and intellectuals to Mau-

ritania. Past guests included philosophy professor and cultural critic Muḥammad ʻĀbid al-Jābrī and the famous pioneer of contemporary Arabic theater Muḥammad Miftāḥ. Then the University of Nouakchott opened in 1981, providing an academic space for the production and study of literature. At the time of independence in 1960, a mere fifteen university graduates were recorded in the entire country. The university meant that Mauritanians no longer needed to travel abroad in order to pursue higher education, and it gave writers and scholars from outside the country a destination.

The Arabic Novel

The first Mauritanians who went on to write novels studied and were influenced by Egyptian novelists such as Iḥsān ʻAbd al-Quddūs (1919–1990), Tawfīq al-Ḥakīm (p. 328) (1898–1987), and Najīb Maḥfūẓ (Naguib Mahfouz, 1911–2006) (ʻAmmār 2015). The literary movement *al-Nahḍa*, which had transformed the Arab Middle East a century earlier, inspired many Arabic-speaking Mauritanians. The connection to modern Arabic literature, a product of *al-Nahḍa*, was strengthened by the arrival of hundreds of Egyptian teachers of Arabic and by the activities of the Egyptian Cultural Center and the Egyptian National Library (Tattā 2006, 12). The major themes of the Arabic novel in Mauritania have been the country's history, colonial legacy, national and cultural identity, urban migration, gender relations, and the 1989 border war with Senegal—themes also found in the Francophone Mauritanian novel.

When the well-respected master of both modern poetry and the classical *qaṣīda* Aḥmad wuld ʻAbd al-Qādir (b. 1941) wrote a novel, he gave a new level of prestige and legitimacy to prose. His vote for the novel as the medium through which to treat the nation's social and political issues influenced his country's perception of the genre and made it a part of the new cultural landscape. He became the first Mauritanian novelist, and his *Al-Asmāʼ al-mutaghayyira* (1981, The Changing Names) was the first Mauritanian novel. *Al-Asmāʼ* spans the period 1891–1977 and is an ambitious attempt to draw a comprehensive history of Mauritania. His second novel, *Al-Qabr al-majhūl, aw al-uṣūl* (1984, The Unknown Tomb, or Origins) uses a historical setting to deliver a much clearer nationalist message; it is a strong critique of inherited social standing. The novel takes place in the eighteenth century, before colonial contact, and revolves around the fates of three different tribes: an Arab warrior tribe, a scholarly tribe with claims to religious authority, and a Black-African tribe that enjoys neither status. While the scholarly and the warrior tribes try to justify their social status by appealing to their ancestral origins, by the end of the novel the three tribes have all switched roles because the formerly weak tribe has gained access to weapons. Once in power, this tribe also claims to possess prestigious "origins," proving that the concept of origins is, above all, a political tool (Aḥẓāna 1997, 80–81). In his latest novel, *Al-ʻUyūn al-shākhiṣa* (1999, Staring Eyes), wuld ʻAbd al-Qādir documents the Sahel droughts of the 1960s–1970s through the story of a family forced to abandon its nomadic lifestyle and to move to the capital.

Al-Sunnī ʻAbdāwa (b. 1950) uses Mauritania's history of resistance against the French invasion as the backdrop for *Al-Ashbāḥ* (1998, The Ghosts). The first part of the novel is rich with descriptions of traditional life in a Mauritanian Bedouin camp, told mainly through the perspectives of women. It ends with ʻĀʼisha, the *murābṭa* (nanny), telling the girl under her care about her life before she came to live with her, when she still had a family of her own. She speaks of her great love, a boy she knew since they both attended the *maḥẓara*, who eventually became her husband. Shortly after their wedding, however, he left to join the resistance against the French and fought bravely until his death. The second part of the novel is mostly ʻĀʼisha's husband's memoirs of his time with the resistance and includes references to real figures from the early French colonial era, as well as a description of the famous battle of Umm al-Tūnisī. Through the skillful blending of both the everyday and the historically momentous, ʻAbdāwa gives a panoramic (p. 329) view of Mauritanian life and memory. His second novel, *Mamlakat Ṭība* (2012, The Kingdom of Tiba), continues this approach of blending history and fiction, but focuses on Palestine and the fate of those displaced in 1948.

Women were active members of the country's Arabophone literary renewal from the 1970s onward, especially in the realm of the short story, but very few of them have published novels.[3] Tarba bint ʻAmmār (b. 1980), who is perhaps the most established woman writer in Mauritania, has published the novel *Wajhān fī ḥayāt rajul* (2008, Two Faces in the Life of a Man) and has written two unpublished ones: *Al-Ḥubb wa-l-qadar* (1997, Love and Destiny) and *Sukayna* (1999, Sukayna). *Wajhān* tells two love stories that show the contrast between traditional village life and the struggle to survive in the city. Maḥmūd, the most promising young man in his village, is sent to study at the University of Nouakchott. This move separates him from his cousin Laylā, whom he has loved and planned to marry since the age of fourteen. Although Maḥmūd eventually becomes financially successful, he is never able to marry either Laylā or ʻAzīza, the student with whom he falls in love at the university. The novel contains excerpts from classical love poetry by Ibn al-Rūmī, al-Mutanabbī, and ʻUmar ibn Abī Rabaiʻa, along with scenes from rural and urban life. Samīra Ḥammādī Fāḍil's (b. 1975) second novel *Ḥashā'ish al-afyūn* (2006, Opium Grass) takes a new lens to the oft-treated topic of migration in Mauritanian society. The story is told as a letter written by the protagonist ʻAbd al-Raḥmān to his childhood friend, describing his reasons for leaving his village and eventually Mauritania. It was not for success or opportunity, he confesses grimly, but rather to escape his past. Moving suited him because he was already alienated within his own country, and even within his own family. Fāḍil uses this story to examine sexual repression and social taboos, and the physical distance of migration is a stand-in for alienation within the family.

One of the early Mauritanian novels, *Aḥmad al-wādī* (1987, Ahmad of the Valley) by Mā' al-ʻAynayn Shabīh (1941–2012), was the first explicitly to explore the quest for identity. In the novel, the two main characters, Aḥmad and Qāsim, are unable to decide whether to live by the traditions in which they were raised or to embrace a Westernized lifestyle. Their actions are characterized by absurdity, as each in his own way feels obligated to continue resisting his fate, even though he knows it is inevitable. Perhaps due to this element of fatalism, the novel has been said to allude to *Oedipus Rex* (al-Muṣṭafā 1995, 2).

Identity is also the theme of more recent works, such as *Mawsim al-dhākira* (2005, The Season of Memory) by established poet and journalist al-Mukhtār al-Sālim Aḥmad Sālim (b. 1968). Globalization, culture clash, and Orientalism are treated in the story of a Mauritanian student who meets a Canadian researcher and eventually becomes a guide to her as she travels throughout the country. In his second novel, *Waja‘ al-sarāb* (2015, Mirage Pain), Sālim provides a portrayal of life in Mauritania before the colonial period. Using flashback narrative, the Bedouin warrior ‘Attāq recalls the struggles and triumphs of his life, his great battles, adventures, and loves.

Journalist Muḥammad wuld Muḥammad Sālim (b. 1969) has published five well-received novels: *Ashyā’ min ‘ālam qadīm* (2007, Things from an Ancient World), (p. 330) *Dhākirat al-raml* (2008, The Memory of Sand), *Durūb ‘Abd al-Baraka* (2010, The Routes of ‘Abd al-Baraka), and *Al-Mamsūs* (2014, The Insane), which was republished as *Daḥḥān* (2015), the protagonist’s name. *Ashyā’* depicts the change to the urban environment of Nouakchott through the story of a coal merchant forced to relocate his shop when the old market is torn down, while *Dhākirat* depicts the founding of a village by a woman who eventually finds herself facing the prospect of her lands being taken away from her. Sālim’s third novel revolves around the quest for identity of a young man searching for his father. ‘Alī ibn ‘Abd al-Baraka has never met his father and knows nothing about him except his name. He retraces his father’s steps and manages to piece together his biography, and although ‘Alī does not meet his father, he manages to gather all of his estranged half-brothers and sisters. *Al-Mamsūs* brings this quest to the present in the story of a young man educated by an American woman who promises to help him get a scholarship, but she is forced to leave Mauritania in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. This drives the protagonist to a desperate search for direction in his life.

Munīna Blānshayh (2014, Munīna Blanchet), by Muḥammad wuld Amīn (b. 1970), approaches the residue of colonialism and lost identity through the story of Joseph Blanche. The novel begins with Joseph’s mother Munīna, who escapes to Nouakchott after most of her tribe is arrested for insurgency against the colonial forces. In Nouakchott, she meets the French colonial governor Patrick Blanchet, who falls in love with her and converts to Islam so that he can marry her. Munīna’s status is instantly elevated and she enjoys a comfortable and happy life, except that the couple cannot conceive. They eventually turn to a Mauritanian man working as their house guard, and Munīna becomes pregnant with Joseph. She dies in a plane crash over Grenada, Spain, when Joseph is still very young. With mixed genealogy, Joseph becomes a pawn in the custody battle between the French Consulate and the Mauritanian Courts, then grows up suffering the stigma of disreputable parentage. In Belgium, his psychotherapist helps him travel through his dreams and memories in an attempt to understand himself and to remember his mother. The author is skillful in his portrayal of the characters’ inner worlds, and has the ability to match the connotations of a place with the psychological state of the characters—for example, Munīna’s plane crashes in Granada, where Islamic Spain fell.

The postcolonial predicament is also addressed in *Awdiyat al-ʻaṭash* (2012, Valleys of Thirst), by Baddī wuld Ibnū (b. 1970), which focuses on the issue of despotism in the Arab world. Each chapter is named after a day of the week, combined with the name of a valley (e.g., "Al-Ithnayn, Wadī al-Najm" [Monday, the Valley of the Star]). The events are narrated using "we," and through these valleys, the author presents a reading of the Arab world's various responses to political repression—rebellion, silence, collaboration, and so on. Despotism is embodied in the character of the sultan, whose rule becomes dictatorial to the point of stupidity, as exemplified by his ordering his people to drink sand instead of water. The narration uses Qur'anic verses, hadith, and excerpts from classical poems, and the novel stands out as portraying a widespread issue in the postcolonial world, rather than a specifically Mauritanian issue or story. The same could be said (p. 331) about the early novel *Al-Qunbula* (1993, The Bomb) by Aḥmad Sālim ibn Muḥammad Mukhtār, which treats class conflict and economic tyranny with a more general story and setting.

Tīrāngā (2012), by Saudi-born poet Muḥammad Fāḍil ʻAbd al-Laṭīf (b. 1973), focuses on the 1989 border war with Senegal. The word *tīrāngā* means "hospitality" in Wolof, and its use is a nod to Mauritania's non-Arab elements and to its cultural overlap with Senegal. The novel presents a history of Mauritania's interethnic violence, particularly the conflicts of 1966 and the events of 1989. The central character is a young, naïve Mauritanian of Arab descent who begins his police service and finds himself thrust into an atmosphere of racism and hate. The story begins with the repatriation of Black Mauritanian refugees living in Senegal and Mali in 2007, before going back to the 1989 conflict, which had displaced them, and then finally resolving the story in 2007. ʻAbd al-Laṭīf was a finalist for the Sharjah Prize in Creative Fiction for *Tīrāngā*, making him one of the first Mauritanian novelists to receive recognition outside the country. The 1989 conflict is also taken up in a number of earlier Francophone Mauritanian novels.

The Francophone Novel

The first French-language school was built in Mauritania in 1898 in Kaédi, a town from which several prominent Francophone authors hail. French schooling then spread to other villages along the Senegal River, including Rosso. These schools were created with the aim of producing a Westernized elite who would aid the colonial mission (M.-S. Diagana 2008, 20–23). The first French high school was then established in 1945 (M.-S. Diagana 2008, 23–24). Immediately following independence, many Mauritanian writers took inspiration from the Négritude literature of other West African countries. Early Francophone novels, even those written by Arab Mauritanians, were exaggeratedly blatant in asserting their Mauritanianess and usually contained an element of ethnography.

Tène Youssouf Gueye (1928–1988) is widely considered the father of Mauritanian Francophonie. He was active as president of the Mauritanian Writers Association and a delegate to UNESCO. During the authoritarian rule of Maʻāwiya wuld Sīdī Aḥmad al-Ṭāyiʻ (r. 1984– 2005), Gueye was accused of being a sympathizer of the political group FLAM (Forces de Libération Africaines de Mauritanie) and died in prison. Gueye published sev-

eral plays and poetry collections before authoring the country's first French novel, *Rellâ ou les voies de l'honneur* (1983, Rellâ, or the Paths of Honor). The novel was highly praised for both its beautiful and intricately detailed style and for its role in capturing the traditions of Kaédi's Pulaars. There are three overtures in the novel: the first narrates Rellâ and Hamma's joyous wedding, where they are sent a divine blessing in the form of rain. The second voice describes the end of the good times as the crops fall short. The third and final section describes the dreaded and inevitable conscription of Hamma at the beginning of the colonial era (M.-S. Diagana 2008, 133–138).

(p. 332) *Îlot de peine dans un océan de sable* (1984, A Small Island of Sorrow in an Ocean of Sand) by Di Ben Amar (b. 1950) is similarly concerned with capturing the history and culture of Mauritania, although in this case it is the traditional nomadic existence of the Moors. The protagonist Sidi leaves his Bedouin encampment to seek his fortune in Dakar, Senegal. His journey is an odyssey that ends in bitter disappointment, and Sidi concludes that his migration was based on "an ideal that came from a long dream that was unpleasant to live" (O. Diagana 2003, 29). Later Mauritanian novels similarly deal with the broken promises of immigration. Aïchetou mint Ahmedou's (b. 1961) *La couleur du vent: Il était une fois à Nouakchott* (2011, The Color of the Wind: Once Upon a Time in Nouakchott) uses a love story to depict the history of the Moors and the transformation of their society after independence (Fadel 2013).[4]

Although Francophone novels have expanded in their themes and styles, novels with a strong ethnological background continue to be a part of the literary landscape, such as Zakaria Soumare's (b. 1977) *Un Breton chez les Soninkés* (2014, A Man from Brittany among the Soninkés), which narrates a French teacher's stay in a Soninke village and his impressions of their culture and customs. While Harouna-Rachid Ly's (b. 1960) first novel, *Le réveil agité* (1997, Disturbed Awakening), has ethnographic elements similar to those of earlier Francophone novels, it adds a sociological element by commenting on the rigid caste system of the Pulaar. The novel centers on the marriage of a young man from an upper caste to a woman from a "lower" origin. *Le reveil* demonstrates that this system is enforced not only by members of the upper castes, but also by those of the lower castes, who equate subjugation with cultural preservation. Ly's *1989, Gendarme en Mauritanie* (2007; 1989, Policeman in Mauritania) also takes up issues of ethnic conflict, war, racism, and slavery through the story of an officer in the police force. Ly himself was a policeman before resigning in protest against the systemic racism he witnessed, and the novel is informed by that experience. The story starts in 1981, when the protagonist Rachid is still a rebellious teenager who listens to Bob Marley and accuses his teachers of being agents of colonialism. His exasperated uncle enters him in the police force, hoping to keep him out of trouble. The novel is a rare glimpse into the world of the police force during the 1989 border war with Senegal and the subsequent forced population swaps. Bios Diallo's (b. 1966) *Une vie de sébile* (2010, Life with a Begging Bowl) and Mama Moussa Diaw's (b. 1975) *Les otages* (2007, The Hostages) also deal with the aftermath of the 1989 conflict, specifically the struggles of the Black Mauritanian refugees who were deported to Senegal.

Abdoul Ali War's (b. 1951) *Le Cri du muet* (2000, The Scream of the Mute) is a novel with both historical and sociological elements, and was the first Mauritanian novel to comment on the situation of the Haratine. The book begins with the three brothers Issagha, Sidina, and Hartani at the bedside of their dying mother. Each brother represents a different group of Mauritanians: the Black, the Arab, and the Haratine, respectively. Issagha has become a ruthless politician concerned only with his own political rise, and Sidina is an Arab nationalist whose vision for his country's future ignores non-Arabs. However, the novel focuses on Hartani and his ultimately futile quest for (p. 333) belonging. Mauritania is depicted as a country where former slaves leave their masters, only to find that they have nowhere to go and no paths to improve their station in life. Another novel centered on the predicament of the Haratine is *Yessar: De l'esclavage à la citoyenneté* (2007, From Slavery to Citizenship), by Ahmed Yedaly (b. 1941). The story reveals that slavery is a social institution that can be dismantled. The idea that slavery is religiously sanctioned is also explicitly rebuffed in a scene in which the character Mouftah el Kheïr, an Islamic scholar of Moorish descent, tells the protagonist that the Haratine were captured not during a holy war, but rather during raids of aggression, thus making their enslavement un-Islamic. The legacy of slavery is also thematized in Mbarek Ould Beyrouk's (b. 1957) *Et le ciel a oublié de pleuvoir* (2006, And the Sky Forgot to Rain), which was awarded the Ahmadou Kourouma Prize at the Salon du Livre de Genève. The novel portrays the shifting power relations of Mauritania as the central government clashes with the tribes and traditional ways of life vanish with the droughts.

Moussa Ould Ebnou (b. 1956) is the first author to depart from the realistic and documentarian nature of most Mauritanian novels. In *L'amour impossible* (1990, The Impossible Love), Ebnou tackles gender relations and the nature of love in a conservative society through science fiction. Living in a future society in which the sexes are completely segregated and love is banned, the protagonist Adam decides to undergo a sex-change operation and to change his name to Eve in order to join the woman he loves. Ebnou's characters are all heavily symbolic, as implied by their names. His second novel, *Barzakh* (1994, Isthmus), follows the journey of Vara into the future in search of a better society. In a parallel story, a group of people are trapped in an unknown place awaiting the arrival of the Mahdī (Messiah), who will restore justice to earth. The story of the Mahdī, along with the appearance of the prophet al-Khiḍr in the protagonist's dream, ground this science fiction novel in Islamic myth and mysticism (see Qader 2002). Ebnou is also remarkable for his Arabiziation of his own novels: *L'amour impossible* is republished as *Al-Ḥubb al-mustaḥīl* (1999), and *Barzakh* as *Madīnat al-riyāḥ* (1996, The Windy City). As Muḥammad al-Amīn wuld Mawlāy Ibrāhīm demonstrates in his analysis of the French and Arabic version of the first novel, Ebnou does not perform an exact translation, but one that fits the Arabic context and cultural memory (2000, 81–99).

The Future of the Mauritanian Novel

Mauritanian literature suffers from marginalization in the Arab world and neglect on the part of academics and critics; it is indisputably the least-studied of Arabic literatures. The future of the Mauritanian novel depends upon its ability to find readers, and illiteracy and the lack of a general reading culture are significant problems. Additionally, Mauritanian writers face high printing costs and the dearth of local publishing houses that are willing and able to invest in literature. Due to the lack of press access, even (p. 334) established literary magazines such as *Al-Adīb* go through cycles of not being able to publish. Publishing costs are probably a more significant barrier to the novel's development than literacy, as Mauritania's literacy rate of 59 percent is close to Morocco's, but this has not prevented Morocco from producing a large number of Arabic and Francophone novelists.

A few years ago, a young Mauritanian Fulbright recipient found a way to work around the publishing barrier. Mohamed Bouya Bamba (b. 1982) self-published his English-language novel, *Angels of Mauritania and the Curse of the Language* (2011), online and made it available for download free of charge. The novel has been downloaded thousands of times, sparking local interest in web publishing. While Bamba states that English is still seen as a language to address outsiders and not fellow Africans, he wants to change this perception and is currently writing another Anglophone novel (Bamba, interview with Blalack).

Bamba also hopes that online publishing will fill the gap in Mauritanian press, and it already seems to be doing so. The same year Bamba published his novel, another young Mauritanian author, Muḥammad wuld al-Shaykh Aḥmad (b. 1982), re-published his novel *Fawḍā al-aḥlām: Yawmiyāt muhājir ilā Angūlā* (2011, The Chaos of Dreams: Diary of a Migrant to Angola) as an e-book under the title *Fawḍā al-aḥlām: Yawmiyāt muhājir ilā lā-makān* (2011, The Chaos of Dreams: Diary of a Migrant to Nowhere). The aforementioned Muḥammad wuld Amīn, author of *Munīna Blānshayh*, started writing for an online audience using the alias Ḥasan wuld Mukhtār; he then complied this material into his first novel, *Mudhakkirāt Ḥasan wuld Mukhtār, 4273* (2012, The Memoirs of Ḥasan wuld Mukhtār, 4273). The famous poet and activist Nājī Muḥammad Imām (b. 1956) allowed his novel *Al-Shāṭi' al-lāzawardī* (2014, The Azure Shore) to be published by the website Mauritania Today in a series of installments. Several Mauritanian news agencies and cultural magazines also publish online regularly. Given that growth in local web content and in web usage feed into each other, it is not far-fetched to imagine that e-publishing may become a major option to increase literary output and distribution.

While Bamba chose the global language for his work, former police officer Muḥammad al-Amīn wuld Khiyār (b. 1969) has taken language in the local direction and published the first Mauritanian novel written in Hassaniya Arabic. *Shaṭḥāt istaghrīs* (2013, The Meanderings of the Perpetually Young) weaves together the stories of four teenage girls who each face a different obstacle related to growing up in Mauritania. The decision to pub-

lish in Hassaniya is an intriguing throwback to the forms of address and storytelling that dominated Mauritanian culture before the literary renewal movement.

Whether the Mauritanian novel's next move is inward, toward more local forms, or outward, toward more global ones, remains to be seen. Until now, the development of the novel has been a microcosm of Mauritania's development as a nation. It is a mixture of different languages and origins, struggling to unite into a new common identity. It is a story of creation and survival despite seemingly insurmountable obstacles, both internal and external, and each novel is a testament to the resourcefulness of Mauritanians as well as to their love of language.

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Notes:

(1.) The first French contact with Mauritania was in the Senegal River Valley region in the 1880s. France was more concerned with its colonies in North and West Africa, and Mauritania was mostly a stopgap between other French possessions. Unlike in Mali or Morocco, the French never built up a colonial capital in Mauritania, choosing instead to govern the country from Saint-Louis, Senegal (Dumper and Stanley 2007, 286).

(2.) For the most complete overview of Mauritanian literary forms from the first contact with Islam to the 1990s, refer to Aḥmad wuld Ḥabīballah (1996).

(3.) ʻĀʾisha Zayn al-ʻĀbidīn (b. 1960) published the first short story by a woman writer, “Dalāl al-fatāh al-muʻadhdhaba” (1978, Dalal the Wretched Girl). Umm Kulthūm Bint Aḥmad (b. 1969), who published her first story in the newspaper *Al-Yanbūʻ* in 1986, became the first Mauritanian author to write prose to the exclusion of poetry. Other short story writers include poet Mubāraka Bint al-Barā (aka Bātah, b. 1957), Khadīja bint ʻAbd al-Ḥayy (1965–2002), Ḥawwāʾ bint Maylūd (b. 1966), Umm Kalthūm bint Aḥmad (b. 1969), Jalīla bint Miʻlām (b. 1983), and Ṭayyiba bint Islām (b. 1983). Francophone women writers include the prolific l'Harmattan author Aichetou Hadi (estimated b. 1959–1963), Sektou mint Mohamed Vall (b. 1958), and Kadia Sall (b. 1951). Maylūd has published the first critical study of Mauritanian women’s literature.

(4.) In a letter to the author (July 3, 2015), Ahmedou stated that the novel was written twenty years prior to its publication, and that publishing is extremely difficult in Mauritania because of the costs associated with it.

J.S. Blalack

July Blalack is a PhD candidate at SOAS, London University. She is currently researching pre-colonial North African literature as part of the European Research Council’s “Multilingual Locals, Significant Geographies” (MULOSIGE) project.