

MIQUEL POMAR-AMER  
University of Manchester

Voices emerging from the border.  
A reading of the autobiographies by Najat El Hachmi and  
Saïd El Kadaoui as political interventions<sup>1</sup>

Introduction

Moroccan immigration to Spain is inevitably linked to the oft-sensationalist treatment of the images of ‘pateras’, unseaworthy little boats, crossing the Strait of Gibraltar and of the pictures of drowned immigrants whose corpses lie on sandy beaches. Last November marked the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary since the first reported case, occurring in 1988.<sup>2</sup> At the time, few could imagine the dimensions that this phenomenon would reach from the 1990s onwards. Considering its increasing visibility, it should not come as a surprise that the combination of drama and adventure associated to this risky border-crossing has rapidly become a literary trope in a nascent corpus in Spanish, with authors on both sides of the border engaging with it since the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Regardless of the nationality of the author, all these texts have

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2J.C. Narváez, ‘Un marroquí muerto y 18 desaparecidos al volar una lancha en el estrecho’, *El País*, 2/11/1988, our ref.

[http://elpais.com/diario/1988/11/02/espana/594428418\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/1988/11/02/espana/594428418_850215.html).

3For a commented outline of these texts, see M. Kunz, ‘La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea: un panorama crítico’ in I. Andrés-Suárez, M. Kunz and I. d’Ors (eds.), *La inmigración en la literatura española contemporánea*, Madrid, Editorial Verbum, 2002, pp. 109-136; D. Soler-Espiauba, *Literatura y pateras*, Madrid, Ediciones Akal, 2004; C.H. Ricci, ‘El regreso de los moros a España: Fronteras, inmigración, racismo y transculturación en la literatura marroquí contemporánea’, *Cuadernos de ALDEEU* 11, 2005, pp. 1-26; M. Abrighach, *La inmigración marroquí y subsahariana en la narrativa española actual. (Ética, estética e interculturalismo)*, Agadir, Ormes, 2006.

in common an interventionist attitude with a double aim. Firstly, they denounce the social injustice and the hardships that Moroccan migrants suffer before, during and after the migratory project. Secondly, they challenge the dominant discourses that subalternise and misrepresent these migrants and attempt to make the voice of the migrant heard, instead. However, such an attempt is not always successful because the voice of the migrant is mediated by the writer. In many cases this results in what Flesler calls an 'ethnographic performance', that is the dominant representational regime is merely reified rather than challenged.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the prevalence of the writer's voice locates the 'patera' narrative in a central position, overshadowing other ways of crossing the border which are much more common but probably deemed with a lower potential for both literary aestheticism and spectacularisation of the tragic.

In the early 2000s, several studies anticipated that a generation of diasporic writers would emerge in the Spanish context.<sup>5</sup> This prediction has been definitely fulfilled during the last decade with the publication of the works by Laila Karrass, Najat El Hachmi and Saïd El Kadaoui, all of them based in Catalonia. Ricci sees in these writers the consolidation of a diasporic literature that goes beyond the crossing of the Strait of Gibraltar or the sojourning experience that had characterised the previous representations of the Moroccan subject in the Spanish context.<sup>6</sup> These new diasporic writers, who left Morocco being kids, set a contrast with the previous representations of immigration. The process of border-crossing is lived and incorporated by them, and not only imagined and recreated as it is the case for the writers on either side of the border. Hence, the current paper proposes a reading of *Jo també sóc catalana* ('I am Catalan Too', 2004) by Najat El Hachmi and *Cartes al meu fill. Un català de soca-rel, gairebé* ('Letters to My Son. A Born and Bred Catalan, Almost', 2011) by Saïd El Kadaoui, focusing particularly on how these authors position themselves at the border as a mediating space.<sup>7</sup>

For this purpose, I will firstly draw a brief outline of the social and

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4D. Flesler, *The Return of the Moor. Spanish Responses to Contemporary Moroccan Immigration*, West Lafayette, Purdue University Press, 2008, pp. 163-194.

5F. Candel and J.M. Cuenca, *Els altres catalans del segle XXI*, Barcelona, Planeta, 2001, p. 106; M. Kunz, 'La inmigración...', *op. cit.*, p. 136.

6C.H. Ricci, 'Identidad, lengua y nación en la literatura amazigh-catalana', *Aljamía* 22, 2011, pp. 79-94, p. 80.

7N. El Hachmi, *Jo també sóc catalana*, Barcelona, Columna, 2004; S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes al meu fill. Un català de soca-rel, gairebé*, Badalona, Ara Llibres, 2011.

historical context in which these two autobiographies are published and the literary trajectories of both El Hachmi and El Kadaoui. In this regard, it is crucial to explore the specifics of Catalonia because these may explain why this first generation of diasporic authors occurs there and not somewhere else in Spain. Secondly, I will discuss how the formal aspects of the two autobiographies contribute to conveying a message with political implications. Finally, I will analyse how El Hachmi and El Kadaoui position themselves at the border and use their intimacy as a political tool to set themselves up as referents for the next generation. From the border, they create a space of enunciation from which they can tell their story and warn their own children of the typifications that they may experience as diasporic subjects. The border becomes not just a space for public intervention but the legacy they hand over to the forthcoming generation.

#### Context of production

In their efforts to debunk the border from its negative connotations of division, El Hachmi and El Kadaoui stress the paradox of the border. They present it as a progressively open space that acknowledges difference inasmuch as it draws together what it allegedly keeps apart. This idea of contiguity, not just geographical but also cultural, is especially relevant to approach the long and complex history of encounters between Spain and Morocco.<sup>8</sup> This explains why the Moroccan presence is not conceived simply as any other migrant group and is met with an ambivalent reaction: “[u]nlike other Western European nations, Spain is not only experiencing the return of the colonized but also that of its medieval colonizers”.<sup>9</sup> As mentioned above, the centrality of the ‘patera’ conceals that an increasing Moroccan immigration to Spain can be traced back to the early 1970s or even the late 1960s, about two decades before the first ‘patera’ reaches the Spanish shores.

During the 1960s, the economic growth and labour shortage of several European countries such as France, Germany, Belgium and the Netherlands

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<sup>8</sup>See B. López García (dir.), *Atlas de la inmigración magrebí en España. Atlas 1996*, Madrid, Publicaciones Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 1996; R.C. Pennell, *Morocco since 1830. A History*, London, Hurst & Company, 2000; R.C. Pennell, *Morocco. From Empire to Independence*. Oxford, OneWorld Publications, 2003; B. López García and M. Berriane (dir.), *Atlas de la inmigración marroquí en España. Atlas 2004*, Madrid, Publicaciones Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2004.

<sup>9</sup>D. Flesler, *The Return...*, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

encouraged the signature of agreements to ease the arrival of Moroccan workers.<sup>10</sup> However, industrial decline affected these countries in the mid-1970s and they decided to close their frontiers. It is at this time that the contemporary Moroccan migration in Spain begins, with Catalonia taking a predominant position as a pole of attraction. According to a 1972 report by the Secretariado de Coordinación para el Desarrollo de Justicia y Paz, 1967 would be the starting point for the north-African migration to Barcelona.<sup>11</sup> However, these first Moroccan migrants do not arrive from their countries of origin but from other European countries from which they are expelled. Although they are not very important in number, they pioneer the presence of an established community in Catalonia. Indeed, about a third of the Moroccan population in Spain lives in Catalonia and this is the result of a geo-economic context that, according to López García,<sup>12</sup> becomes evident since 1973. Firstly, because many migrants wait for a re-opening of the European borders in Catalonia; secondly, because the internal Spanish migrations at the time stop and the shortage of labour makes Catalonia a suitable place to settle down; thirdly, chain migration encourages the concentration of migrants in the same area.

Besides the migratory relations between the two territories, Catalan institutions have also made an important effort to gain international projection and Morocco has been considered an ideal space for that goal. In fact, Morocco certainly plays a crucial role in consolidating Catalonia's self-appointed mediating position between Europe and the Mediterranean. In this regard, the recurring institutional visits by Catalan presidents to Morocco since the 1980s prove that there are both economic and political interests in the Maghreb.<sup>13</sup> These interests suggest, then, that the emergence of a

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10A. Bengueldouz, 'Marruecos frontera con España: ¿Socio o gendarme de Europa en África del Norte?', *Mediterráneo Económico* 1, 2002, pp. 33-74, p. 39.

11Quoted in J. Moreras, 'Marroquíes en Cataluña' in B. López García and M. Berriane (dir.), *Atlas de la inmigración marroquí en España. Atlas 2004*, Madrid, Publicaciones Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2004, pp. 305-313, p. 305.

12B. López García, 'La evolución de la inmigración marroquí en España (1991-2003)' in B. López García and M. Berriane (dir.), *Atlas de la inmigración marroquí en España. Atlas 2004*, Madrid, Publicaciones Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2004, pp. 212-220, p. 213.

13See G. Aubarell, 'Marruecos y Cataluña, viejas y nuevas complicidades mediterráneas', in B. López García and M. Berriane (dir.), *Atlas de la inmigración marroquí en España. Atlas 2004*, Madrid, Publicaciones Universidad Autónoma de Madrid, 2004, pp. 78-79; M. Noguera, 'Maragall visita Marruecos para reforzar los lazos euromediterráneos', *El País*, 16/1/2006, our ref.

Moroccan diasporic literature in Catalonia is not just a result of demographic predominance but also involves other aspects, especially in the symbolic field. Indeed, the concept of ‘conviviality’ has been relevant in constructing a cohesive Catalan identity which, discursively at least, welcomes and integrates all those who want to participate in such a project.<sup>14</sup> This idea is best summarized by Jordi Pujol’s famous motto “everyone who lives and works in Catalonia, and who wants to be so, is Catalan”.<sup>15</sup> Paradoxically, such a welcoming slogan still legitimises the centrality and supremacy of what is deemed as Catalan (i.e. white, Christian/secular, Catalan-speaking) above what is considered different, which is ultimately absorbed and subordinated by the hegemonic understanding of Catalanness.

In their autobiographies, both Karrouch and El Hachmi mark 1992 as a turning point for immigration in Catalonia, with a massive influx of Moroccans attracted by the migratory regularization process that took place a year before.<sup>16</sup> According to these authors the higher visibility of the Moroccan collective has a negative impact in their assimilation process because their religious and ethnic difference is stressed since then. Also in 1992, the Olympic Games of Barcelona supposes an opening of the city, and of all Catalonia indirectly, to the international sphere and mark(et)s it as a modern and cosmopolitan city. Ricci appeals to these events along with the timeline he draws between the expulsion of Muslims in 1492 and the first massive disembarkation of Moroccans in Spain five centuries later to constitute what he calls the 1992 generation.<sup>17</sup> In contrast, I argue that if a year should be related to this literary generation, it should certainly be 2004 because it is then that the 1992 seeds blossom into a significant literary production by diasporic authors in the Catalan context, and not exclusively

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[http://elpais.com/diario/2006/01/16/catalunya/1137377252\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/2006/01/16/catalunya/1137377252_850215.html); J. Tapia, ‘Acercar Catalunya a Marruecos’, *El Periódico*, 18/12/2011, our ref.

<http://www.elperiodico.com/es/noticias/barcelona/acercar-catalunya-marruecos-1276082>.

14B. Erickson, ‘Utopian Virtues: Muslim Neighbors, Ritual Sociality, and the Politics of *Convivència*’, *American Ethnologist* 38:1, 2011, pp. 114-131.

15Centre d’Estudis Jordi Pujol, ‘Cohesion and Coexistence According to Jordi Pujol’, 2013, our ref.

[http://www.jordipujol.cat/en/jp/ideoleg/cohesio\\_convivencia#sthash.1m7FVNLU.dpuf](http://www.jordipujol.cat/en/jp/ideoleg/cohesio_convivencia#sthash.1m7FVNLU.dpuf).

16L. Karrouch, *De Nador a Vic*, Barcelona, Columna, 2004, p. 109; N. El Hachmi, *Jo també... op. cit.*, p. 41.

17C.H. Ricci, ‘El regreso...’, *op. cit.*, pp 6-9.

of Moroccan origin.<sup>18</sup> In addition, the image of a cosmopolitan Catalonia is also definitely consolidated in 2004, when the Universal Forum of Cultures is held in Barcelona.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, it is significant that the Forum functions as the launch pad for El Hachmi as she participates in the event reading her speech 'Carta d'un immigrant'.<sup>20</sup> This inscribes her, along with the nascent generation of diasporic writers, within the articulation of a cosmopolitan Catalan identity. El Hachmi's previous public presence had been reduced and she had only enjoyed her five minutes of fame in 1997, when she wins a high school literary prize in Catalan and attracts media attention.<sup>21</sup> However, she later presents this event as a bittersweet moment in *Jo també sóc catalana* because she realises that she had not become the focus for being a talented writer but because of her origin.<sup>22</sup> This instance suggests that, looked through the lens of exoticism, the literary production of diasporic authors as El Hachmi is commoditised and its value lies precisely in an appraisal of difference.<sup>23</sup> Since then, she passes almost unnoticed and her re-mergence in

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18Not just Karrouch and El Hachmi feature as 'exotic' writers entering the Catalan literary system in 2004. Apart from being the Public Relations of the Forum, Asha Miró consolidates the success of her autobiography *La filla del Ganges* (2003) and publishes its sequel *Les dues cares de la Lluna* in 2004, narrating her return to India after having been adopted by a Catalan family. The Palestinian historian Salah Jamal also publishes his first novel, *Lluny de l'horitzó perfumat*, in 2004. Finally, Lolita Bosch, a writer of Mexican-heritage, also starts her literary career in 2004 with her novel *Això que veus és un rostre*.

19For a selection of quotes in this line taken from the inaugural speeches given by Pasqual Maragall, president of the Generalitat, and Joan Clos, mayor of Barcelona, see Instituto Europeo del Mediterráneo, 'Pasqual Maragall inaugura el diàleg sobre migracions afirmant que "la patria de cada uno se escoge"', 2/9/2004, our ref.

<http://www.iemed.org/actualitat-es/noticies/pasqual-maragall-inaugura-el-dialogo-sobre>.

20N. El Hachmi, 'Carta d'un immigrant', World Congress Human Movements and Immigration, Barcelona, Opening session 2/9/2004. Only the English translation of the speech is currently available at the Forum website, our ref.

[http://www.fundacioforum.org/b04/b04/www.barcelona2004.org/esp/banco\\_del\\_conocimiento/docs/PO\\_44\\_EN\\_HACHMI.pdf](http://www.fundacioforum.org/b04/b04/www.barcelona2004.org/esp/banco_del_conocimiento/docs/PO_44_EN_HACHMI.pdf). This speech was later published in French as 'Lettre' in A. Taïa (ed.), *Lettres à un jeune marocain*, transl. I. Gugnion, Paris, Seuil, 2009, pp. 136-143.

21O. Osan, 'Najat El Hachmi. La vida després del Ramon Llull', *Benzina* 37, 2009, pp. 30-35.

22N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, 44. For a discussion of *Jo també sóc catalana* as an instance of minor literatura, see M. Pomar-Amer, 'Play of Mirrors in the Border. Najat El Hachmi's Subjectivity Formation in *Jo també sóc catalana*', in press.

23G. Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic. Marketing the Margins*, London, Routledge, 2001, pp. 16-17.

2004 is certainly due to being mark(et)ed as different again. When El Hachmi presents at the Forum on the second of September her only publication is a short story, 'Sol d'hivern', compiled in 2000 as part of an anthology featuring Catalan women writers.<sup>24</sup> Her autobiographical account *Jo també sóc catalana* is published in October of 2004 and, in November, Albert Om interviews her and Laila Karrouch, who also publishes her autobiography *De Nador a Vic* in 2004.<sup>25</sup> This joint interview reinforces my argument that El Hachmi is initially inscribed in a new trend of diasporic writers, promoted by the dominant cosmopolitan discourse.

In 2008, however, El Hachmi consolidates her position as both a promising Catalan writer and a public figure when her novel *L'últim patriarca* is awarded the Ramon Llull literary prize, the most prestigious award for literature in Catalan.<sup>26</sup> As a consequence, this time she experiences a much more exhausting burst of fame than when she was a teenager. There is no doubt that this public profile is behind the inclusion in 2008 of both one short story in the book of the Marató, a yearly telethon organised by TV3, and the preface to the uncensored version of Francesc Candel's *Els Altres Catalans*, a pioneering study of the poor conditions of the southern Spanish migrants in Catalonia during the post-war period.<sup>27</sup> It is her debut novel, though, that proves an editorial success: it is the best-seller fiction book in Catalan of the 2008 edition of the popular Sant Jordi book fair and it is translated into ten different languages in the following years. According to Ricci, though, the sales figures of the Spanish translation of the novel are mediocre and definitely not comparable with those of the original in Catalan.<sup>28</sup> This suggests that the cosmopolitan discourse has been more successfully promoted in Catalonia at the local and autonomic levels than in the rest of Spain.

Saïd El Kadaoui also starts his literary trajectory in 2008 with his novel *Límites y fronteras* which includes references to Catalan singularity in

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24N. El Hachmi, 'Sol d'hivern', in M. Pascual *et al*, *Papers de dona*, Barcelona, Diputació de Barcelona, 2000, pp. 67-75.

25TV3, *El Club*, 9/11/2004.

26N. El Hachmi, *L'últim patriarca*, Barcelona, Planeta, 2008.

27N. El Hachmi, 'L'home que nedava', in X. Abad *et al* (eds.), *El llibre de la Marató. Vuit relats contra les malalties mentals greus*, Barcelona, Columna, 2008, pp. 25-32; N. El Hachmi, 'L'home que apostava pel matis', in F. Candel, *Els altres catalans*, Barcelona, Edicions 62, 2008.

28C.H. Ricci, *Literatura perifèrica en castellano y catalán: el caso marroquí*, Madrid, Ediciones del Orto, 2010, pp. 55-56.

the opening of the novel but, in contrast with El Hachmi's, is written in Spanish.<sup>29</sup> The controversy after the invitation of Catalan culture to be the guest of honour at the 2007 Frankfurt Book Fair is indicative of the relevance of the usage of Catalan to become part of the Catalan canon.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, this situation hinders the possibility that El Kadaoui's novel profits from the cosmopolitan discourse articulated by Catalan institutions. However, his novel does not pass unnoticed as in 2009 he prefaces the Catalan translation of Talbi's *Réflexion d'un musulman contemporain* and proposes secularism as an essential stage in the construction of conviviality.<sup>31</sup> When he publishes his autobiographical account *Cartes al meu fill. Un català de soca-rel, gairebé* in 2011, El Kadaoui articulates this work, allegedly addressed to his son, in Catalan. This linguistic choice is a clear nod to the discourse of Catalan normalisation as El Kadaoui associates the future generation and the use of Catalan. Nonetheless, the inclusion of his short story 'El artista del silenci' in Ricci's anthology *Letras marruecas* suggests that El Kadaoui inscribes himself in the literary tradition in Spanish, a language he feels more comfortable with,<sup>32</sup> and relegates Catalan to a more occasional use.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, Najat El Hachmi is included in Lolita Bosch's anthology *Veus de la nova narrativa catalana*.<sup>34</sup>

In 2011, El Hachmi publishes her second novel, *La caçadora de cossos*, but it does not receive as much critical praise as her previous novel.<sup>35</sup> For example, Ricci makes a harsh critique of the novel and argues that the pressures for its publication and commercialisation have occurred to the detriment of its literary quality.<sup>36</sup> Sexuality is indeed one of the main themes in *L'últim patriarca* but it is in *La caçadora de cossos* that El Hachmi makes her first proper incursion into erotica. This interest is confirmed with her preface and translation into both Spanish and Catalan of Aceval's *Contes libertins du Maghreb*, later in 2011.<sup>37</sup> This year proves

29S. El Kadaoui, *Límites y fronteras*, Lleida, Editorial Milenio, 2008, p. 14.

30S. King, 'Catalan Literature(s) in Postcolonial Context', *Romance Studies* 24:3, 2006, pp. 253-24.

31S. El Kadaoui, 'Musulmà contemporani. Un oxímoron?', in M. Talbi, *Reflexions d'un musulmà contemporani*, transl. J. Tarragona i Castells, Lleida, Pagès Editors, 2009, pp. 7-9.

32S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

33S. El Kadaoui, 'El artista del silenci', in C.H. Ricci (ed.), *Letras marruecas. Antología de escritores marroquíes en castellano*, Madrid, Ediciones del Orto, 2012.

34L. Bosch, *Veus de la nova narrativa catalana*, Barcelona, Editorial Empúries, 2010.

35N. El Hachmi, *La caçadora de cossos*, Barcelona, Columna, 2011.

36C.H. Ricci, 'Identidad, lengua...', *op. cit.*, pp. 84-85.

37N. Aceval, *Contes llibertins del Magreb*, transl. N. El Hachmi, Barcelona, Columna,

productive in terms of publications as El Hachmi also ventures into writing in Spanish. Her short story ‘Navidades Musulmanas’,<sup>38</sup> a spin-off to one of the anecdotes she explains in *Jo també sóc catalana*, is published in *Letras Libres*.<sup>39</sup> However, this switch to Spanish seems rather sporadic and probably targeting a potential Latin American readership as the journal was initially launched in Mexico although there is also a Spanish edition now. Another aspect that cannot just be ignored is that some of the most important publishing houses in Spanish are indeed based in Catalonia. As Lomas López highlights, Catalan publishing houses produce more than half of the titles published in the whole of Spain and this fact is determinant to understand why diasporic production in Catalan features both a major projection and the lead in the Spanish context.<sup>40</sup>

Besides their literary production, both El Hachmi and El Kadaoui are frequent contributors to several newspapers for which they write opinion columns. Media are crucial to amplify the message of the diasporic authors but these, just as the publishing houses, have their own agendas, intertwined with particular economic interests.<sup>41</sup> The commodification of the diasporic as ‘the new exotic at home’ is a promising niche market properly exploited and stressed in the paratext of these works, which target a readership that is avid for narratives featuring themes on difference and diversity.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, this appreciation of difference is indeed sustained on the institutional promotion of a cosmopolitan discourse. Foreign authors deciding to write in Catalan are a powerful source of legitimation for the claims of Catalan culture’s singularity as a whole, and of its language and literature more

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2011; N. Aceval, *Cuentos libertinos del Magreb*, transl. N. El Hachmi, Barcelona, Planeta, 2011.

38N. El Hachmi, ‘Navidades Musulmanas’, *Letras Libres* 123, 2011, pp. 8-11, our ref. <http://www.letraslibres.com/sites/default/files/0156-convivio01-e.pdf>.

39In the description included in the website of the Association of Cultural Journals of Spain (ARCE), *Letras Libres* is defined by its cosmopolitan vocation and its aims “at becoming a bridge between cultures, a tool for dialogue between countries and continents”. Such a definition could perfectly apply to the way El Hachmi’s works have been marketed. Our ref. <http://www.revistas culturales.com/revistas/91/lettras-libres/>.

40E. Lomas López, ‘La literatura hispanomagrebí y el mercado editorial: Esbozo histórico’, *Aljamía* 22, 2011, pp. 69-78, p. 74.

41C. H. Ricci, ‘African Voices in Contemporary Spain’, in L. Martín-Estudillo and N. Spadaccini (eds.), *New Spain, New Literatures*, Nashville, Vanderbilt University Press, 2010, pp. 203-231, p. 216.

42J. Bueno Alonso, ‘Hispanisme et catalanité: enjeux méthodologiques et littéraires d’un transnationalisme maghrébin’, *Expressions maghrébines* 11:2, 2012, pp. 27-44, p. 30.

specifically.<sup>43</sup>

#### Formal aspects

Needless to say, the context of production outlined above has a relevant effect on the shape that cultural products adopt. The emergence of a Moroccan diasporic generation of writers in Catalonia is certainly indebted to El Hachmi and el Kadaoui as its most prolific representatives but Laila Karrouch and, to a minor extent, Mohamed Chaib cannot be dismissed.<sup>44</sup> All of them have published at least one autobiographical work in which they recall their migration and their experiences of diasporicity in Catalonia. In fact, the Catalan singularity is highlighted in most of the titles, signalling a will to participate of the cosmopolitan discourse outlined above. Certainly, these references may smooth the inclusion of these works in a Catalan canon but they may be problematised in the rest of Spain. In this regard, it is paradigmatic the case of Karrouch's *de Nador a Vic* because all references to such a singularity disappear from both the title and the narrative, along with any reference to the translator, in the Spanish version.<sup>45</sup>

According to Gilmore, the increasing predominance of autobiographies by young authors is due to the fact that their "private lives are emblematic of a cultural moment".<sup>46</sup> In this case, the recurrence of Moroccan migration in the media and the higher visibility of this community awakens an interest for the lives of its members. As Hawthorne puts it, "the demand for autobiography by those deemed 'exotic' is [...] precipitated by voyeurism on the part of the dominant culture".<sup>47</sup> This

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43The promotional video created for the campaign 'Encomana el català' (2009-2010) is a good example of the ethnic (and religious) society promoted by the cosmopolitan discourse. Our ref. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XIH4ZLSi3YM>.

44L. Karrouch, *De Nador...* *op. cit.*; M. Chaib, *Enlloc com a Catalunya. Una vida guanyada dia a dia*, Barcelona, Editorial Empúries, 2005; M. Chaib, *Ètica per una convivència*, Barcelona, L'esfera dels llibres, 2006; L. Karrouch, *Petjades de Nador*, Barcelona, Columna, 2013.

45L. Karrouch, *Laila*, transl. unknown, Madrid, Oxford University Press, 2010. For a further discussion of this case, see C. H. Ricci, 'African Voices...', *op. cit.*, p. 216; C. Domínguez, 'Literatures in Spain: European Literature, World Literature, World Literature?', in S. Pérez Isasi and Â. Fernandes (eds.), *Looking at Iberia. A Comparative European Perspective*, Bern, Peter lang, 2013, pp. 99-120, pp. 107-109.

46L. Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography. Trauma and Testimony*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2001.

47S. Hawthorne, 'The Politics of the Exotic: The Paradox of Cultural Voyeurism', *National*

autobiographical tendency is common in the emergence of migrant and diasporic literatures<sup>48</sup> and it is sustained on what Spivak calls “the effect of the real”.<sup>49</sup> However, this convention may be constraining for the diasporic author if anything s/he produces is automatically perceived through that lens.<sup>50</sup> For instance, El Hachmi is frequently asked about the relevance of her experiences in her novels. I argue that, despite her apparent discomfort at the question, she indeed exploits the dominant culture’s voyeurism by creating a space of ambivalence concerning where the boundary between the fictional and the autobiographical lies.

This boundary between reality and fiction is certainly acknowledged by El Hachmi and El Kadaoui in the prologues to their autobiographies. They display a playful attitude in relation to genre that stresses the inevitable instability of such a boundary but their acknowledgement should be rather understood as a *captatio benevolentiae*.<sup>51</sup> The autobiographical pact is clearly established in their respective prologues, fulfilling the “clearly self-referential and metatextual” preface that Wild proposes in his typology of beginnings for autobiographies.<sup>52</sup> The function of their prefaces is to explain why they have written their autobiographical accounts and, consequently, to draw the connection between their own private experiences and the context in which the texts are framed. The ultimate goal of merging the private and public spheres is to turn their own intimacy into a politically charged tool that voices the migrant, who is otherwise uncritically perceived as a distant and unknown reality to most of their readership.

It should not come as a surprise, then, that their writings appeal to these two spheres. In the personal field, El Kadaoui states that his parental role has increased his anxiety to be accepted whereas El Hachmi confesses that she writes to break free of her own seclusion “fet de denominacions d’origen, de pors, d’esperances sovint estroncades, de dubtes continus, d’abismes de pioneers que exploren nous mons” (‘made of certificates of

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*Women’s Studies Association Journal* 1:4, 1989, pp. 617-629, p. 623.

48C. Domínguez, ‘Literatura comparada y emergencia literaria’, in J. Fontanille, J. Vion-Dury and B. Westphal (eds.), *L’Emergence*, Bern, Peter Lang, 2011, pp. 49-60, p. 57.

49G.C. Spivak, *In Other Worlds. Essays in Cultural Politics*, New York: Methuen, 1987, p. 243.

50S. Hawthorne, ‘The Politics...’, *op. cit.*, p. 623.

51N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 13; S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

52S. Wild, ‘Searching for Beginnings in Modern Arabic Autobiography’, in R. Ostle, E. de Moo rand S. Wild (eds.), *Writing the Self. Autobiographical Writing in Modern Arabic Literature*, London, Saqi Books, 1998, pp. 82-99, p. 83.

origin, of fears, of oft-broken hopes, of continuous doubts, of abysses of pioneers exploring new worlds’).<sup>53</sup> In their public intervention, El Kadaoui defines the distinction between *us* and *them* simply anachronic and El Hachmi dreams of a time when there is no need of defining oneself by his/her origins.<sup>54</sup> This interconnectedness confirms Lionnet’s argument that, for postcolonial writers, “autobiographical mythologies of empowerment are usually mediated by a desire to revise and rewrite official history”.<sup>55</sup> In this case, the aim of these works is not to reverse the historiography of a past colonial period but to rewrite the history of the everyday by reassessing the dominant discourse. For this purpose, El Hachmi and El Kadaoui use a pedagogical tone that reviews the current status of the Moroccan subject in Catalonia and propose a different approach.

As a result, they do not follow a conventional chronological order in their narrative but use a thematic structure instead. In this regard, El Kadaoui’s narrative voice is positioned as an adult that recalls his past experiences and uses them with a pedagogical aim. In contrast, the narrator of *Jo també sóc catalana* matures in the course of the actions she experiences and the act of remembrance is undermined in favour of a sense of progression. Yet, this progression is subjected to the division of *Jo també sóc catalana* in five thematic blocks. These are crucial for the constitution of El Hachmi’s subjectivity and they are language, national belonging, religion, gender and memory. In the case of El Kadaoui, as the title indicates, he articulates his book in the form of short letters focusing on different aspects. His training as a psychologist may explain the use of the prescriptive tone throughout the text, which looks more similar to a self-help book than an autobiography in epistolary form. The thematic structure sets an essayistic tone in both cases but El Hachmi’s recurrent use of a second person narrator and the display of her own experiences make her account much more direct than El Kadaoui’s. According to Bueno Alonso, he creates a polyphonic text from a cultural, intellectual and existential point of view through his array of references to writers and philosophers ranging from Anthony Appiah and Edward Said to Joan Margarit and Virginia Woolf, just to name a few.<sup>56</sup> However, such a display conceals El Kadaoui’s

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53S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15; N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 14 (my translation).

54S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 15; N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

55F. Lionnet, *Postcolonial Representations: Women, Literature, Identity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, p. 22.

56J. Bueno Alonso, ‘Hispanisme et catalanité: enjeux méthodologiques et littéraires d’un

own voice and makes his exercise of erudition sound slightly pedantic because the dialogue he establishes with renowned thinkers displaces his son from his position as the addressee.

The position of the son as the addressee may be just a literary convention but it is indeed an aspect that must be considered in both works because it grants the authors a position of authority.<sup>57</sup> In *Cartes al meu fill*, the son is identified as the addressee from its very title but, by the end of the preface, El Kadaoui acknowledges the literary quality of such a formula when he states “ja no som només tu i jo” (‘it’s not just you and me anymore’).<sup>58</sup> Obviously, the implied reader goes beyond the son and intends to appeal to the next generation and the whole society at large. Similarly, El Hachmi’s recurring use of the singular second person narrator apparently narrows the addressee to a single person, her son in most cases. Yet, the occasional shifts to a plural second person narrator reveal El Hachmi’s metatextual outreach to a broader readership. Thus, the figure of the son works in both cases as a mediator between the authors and their readers and allows them to use a patronising and authoritative voice that would be discouraged otherwise.

Indeed, at a certain point, El Hachmi praises her son for his passive and non-interrupting listening, “escoltaves sense interrompre gaire, de vegades arrufaves una mica el nas o esbossaves un mig somriure de desaprovació, però sabies guardar qualsevol secret” (‘you listened and hardly interrupted, sometimes you puckered your nose a little or insinuated a disapproving smile but you would keep any secret’).<sup>59</sup> The son becomes a convenient filter and this becomes clear in the picture of El Hachmi and her son featuring on the cover of *Jo també sóc catalana*. El Hachmi’s confident gaze does not look at the camera but at her son and it is him that looks at it, instead. This posse asserts the convention that the reader accesses the text in a filtered way as it is the son’s apparently innocent question “Am I Catalan?” that triggers the whole narrative.<sup>60</sup> The future that awaits their sons becomes an excuse to explore their own memories and to critically

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transnationalisme maghrébin’, *Expressions maghrébines* 11:2, 2012, pp. 27-44, p. 42.

<sup>57</sup>This convention has been previously used by the Moroccan-French writer Tahar Ben Jelloun, a referent himself for El Hachmi and El Kadaoui. He deploys the convention of the daughter as his addressee in T. Ben Jelloun, *Le racisme expliqué à ma fille*, Paris, Seuil, 1998; T. Ben Jelloun, *L’Islam expliqué aux enfants*, Paris, Seuil, 2002.

<sup>58</sup>S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 18 (my translation).

<sup>59</sup>N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22 (my translation).

<sup>60</sup>N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

assess the negotiations that the border has demanded them to go through.

#### Experiences of the border

El Hachmi closes her early text ‘Carta d’un immigrant’ with an invitation to explore the border as a ‘dividing line’ but also as ‘a place of encounter’: “[o]ne day you’ll think yourself lucky to be able to enjoy that border, you’ll think that you are more complete, more hybrid, bigger than anyone else”.<sup>61</sup> El Hachmi and El Kadaoui engage with this reflection and write about their own experiences of the border in their respective autobiographies. They draw the contours of the border and conceptualise it in a way that it is not contained in barbed-wire fences but turned into an open metaphor. The border lies at the intersection of their diverse linguistic allegiances, which are articulated in a compatible way despite the clashes that may occur among Catalan, Tamazight, Spanish and Arabic. Yet, both authors choose Catalan as the articulating language used in their autobiographies at the same time as they proudly claim their Tamazightness.

El Hachmi and El Kadaoui side with the minor languages and this gives consistence to their construction of the border as a liminal space. Bhabha refers to this as the ‘Third space’ which “may open the way to conceptualizing an *international* culture, based not on the exoticism of multiculturalism or the *diversity* of cultures, but on the inscription and articulation of culture’s *hybridity*”.<sup>62</sup> Bhabha’s proposal points at the possibility of raising the voice from the margins and El Kadaoui and El Hachmi’s autobiographies certainly fulfill this function. These texts have a therapeutic value for their authors because they can identify the traces that the border-crossing process has left in the configuration of their own selves and use them as the foundation to create a space of enunciation. For instance, El Kadaoui opens the chapter he devotes to the border by locating his home “a la intempèrie. Una cadira enmig dels gendarmes espanyols i marroquins al bell mig de la frontera que separa Beni Ansar de Melilla” (‘out in the open. A chair between the Spanish and the Moroccan police officers, just right at the border that keeps Beni Ansar apart from Melilla’).<sup>63</sup> At the end of her preface, El Hachmi also proposes a “pensament de

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61N. El Hachmi, ‘Carta...’, *op. cit.*

62H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 38 (italics in the original).

63S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...’, op. cit.*, p. 27 (my translation).

frontera que serveix per entendre dues realitats diferents, una manera de fer, d'actuar, de ser, de sentir, d'estimar, una manera de buscar la felicitat a cavall entre dos mons" ("border thought as a way of understanding two distinct realities, a way of doing, acting, being, feeling, loving, a way of pursuing happiness between two worlds").<sup>64</sup> Definitely, the border and its trespassing are significant for both of them.<sup>65</sup> For this purpose, I distinguish three types of border in their works, which I call the geographical, the chronological and the phenotypical borders. Yet, this classification should not be understood as an attempt of constraining their otherwise open-minded use as these categories often merge and concur with each other.

In the first place, the geographical border has further implications than simply establishing the limits of a given area. It also legitimises the distinctiveness of the entities that are on either side. As a result, a distinctive behaviour is anticipated for those who have crossed it as if this crossing implied the incorporation of the difference that the border sustains. As a child, El Hachmi conceals her Moroccanness lest she is criticised for being different. She splits into two different Najats: "una, la marroquina, seguia amb els costums anhelats, jugava a fer de núvia amb els mocadors de la mare, somiava en festes de dones ballant la dansa del ventre, de portes endins, i l'altra, la catalana, es mostrava de portes enfora" ("one, the Moroccan, kept the yearned customs, pretended to be a bride with her mother's scarves, dreamt of celebrations with belly-dancers, indoors; the other, the Catalan, showed herself outdoors").<sup>66</sup> Leaving aside the exotic appeal that this quote may have for the western reader, this distinction causes anxiety in the narrator since "the very fact of being at odds with culture is experienced like a visceral schism".<sup>67</sup> El Hachmi grows to accept and reconcile these two worlds but this involves a process of understanding that both worlds are integral to her self. In *Cartes al meu fill*, this process of self-discovery and acceptance is already finished and El Kadaoui can afford using irony to discuss this subject. For example, he remembers how in a hotel he was welcomed to Catalonia by a waiter. The exoticism of his name

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64N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 14 (my translation).

65El Kadaoui makes the significance of the border clear in the dialogue he has with Lolita Bosch in TV3, *Via Llibre* 47 'La frontera', 8/1/2013, our ref. <http://www.tv3.cat/videos/4408751/Via-llibre---capitol-47-La-frontera>.

66N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 67 (my translation).

67E. Probyn, 'The Spatial Imperative of Subjectivity', in K. Anderson et al. (eds.), *Handbook of Cultural Geography*, London, SAGE, 2003, pp. 290-299, p. 294.

placed him as a foreigner but he did not correct the man. Instead, El Kadaoui appropriates and exploits oriental images by bowing and profusely thanking the waiter, mocking what he calls a sign of the Arab character.<sup>68</sup>

Secondly, the chronological border is another axis that cuts along any migratory process. In other words, migration does not involve just a spatial displacement but also sets a landmark in time. Autobiographies are based on the diachronic experience of the subject but the restoration of past events requires the mediation of memory. As Climent notices, sensorial experiences are crucial in *Jo també sóc catalana* because they channel remembrance and bring El Hachmi to a utopic space that she has created, that one preceding her migration.<sup>69</sup> El Hachmi gives a transcendent value to this recreated space as she remembers all the details of the moment just before embarking for Spain: “aquelles hores que ens quedarien per sempre gravades a la memòria, la nosta veritable frontera” (‘those hours that would remain forever in our memory, our true border’).<sup>70</sup> Memories become eternal and she needs to repeat her journey over and over again to reconcile herself with her life before migration. For this reason, her work as a cultural mediator has a therapeutic aspect when she projects herself onto newcomers, “acollint-vos tan bé com sé fer-ho, em reconcilio amb mi mateixa, refaig el meu camí, que és el vostre, mil vegades, i cada cop deixo més enrere la recança” (‘doing my best in hosting you, I am reconciled with myself, I remake my way, which is yours, a thousand times, and every time I leave grief further away’).<sup>71</sup> El Kadaoui also expresses his need of rethinking the transcendental moment that his migration meant. Writing becomes his therapeutic exercise as one of the literary projects he has in mind is writing about what his life would have been if he had never migrated.<sup>72</sup>

The crossing of both the geographical and the chronological borders may sometimes go beyond the individual and subjective experience. Individuals relate to the contingencies of time and space and this relation interlocks a unique way of inhabiting them. Any displacement, whether temporal or physical, leaves its traces and it is the subject that needs to negotiate how these changes are incorporated. El Kadaoui merges these and

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68S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 22-23.

69L. Climent Raga, ‘Dones, immigració i literatura catalana’, *Anuari de l’Agrupació Borrianenca de Cultura* 21, 2010, pp. 23-36, p. 31.

70N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 181 (my translation).

71N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p.60 (my translation).

72S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 127.

places himself in a mediating position between his father and his son. He is trapped between the sorrow of seeing his father growing old in a space he feels hostile and the joy of seeing his son using different languages without any problem. By drawing this genealogical line, El Kadaoui presents the fulfilment of border-crossing as a process that demands the implication of different generations. In the end, he is satisfied of realising that “la frontera no va aturar el teu avi, el meu pare” (‘the border did not stop your grandpa, my father’).<sup>73</sup>

Finally, the phenotypical border is the most intricate one and is partially founded on the previous types. In 1995, Jordi Pujol states that the backbone of the Catalan national project is not ethnicity nor religion, but its language, its culture and its historical conscience.<sup>74</sup> Following this train of thought, King argues that Catalanness, either of people or literature, is based on the use of Catalan, “[I]a lengua, entonces, representa la frontera de la identidad” (‘[t]he language, then, represents the border of identity’).<sup>75</sup> However, the testimonies of El Kadaoui and El Hachmi question that Catalan language acquisition is enough to demolish all existing borders. Indeed, their texts bring to the surface the otherwise underlying notions of whiteness and Christianity that are still very present in the collective understanding of Catalanness. Both authors speak a flawless Catalan but they still find themselves fulfilling Bhabha’s definition of “almost the same, but not quite”.<sup>76</sup>

With his characteristic use of irony, El Kadaoui gives a further turn of the screw to such a status and proposes to create a real organization that brings together all the Moroccans that do not look so. For this purpose, El Kadaoui lists the features that Moroccans must fulfil to be eligible for membership: they are fair-skinned, they speak Catalan and/or Spanish fluently and they wear *normal* clothes.<sup>77</sup> Despite El Kadaoui’s discomfort, being recognized as a possible member of such an organisation is considered a compliment by the dominant discourse because this is a privileged position to occupy. Blurring the phenotypical border creates the

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73S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 77 (my translation).

74F. Valls, ‘Pujol reivindica los archivos de Salamanca ‘sin buscar el conflicto, pero con radicalidad’, *El País*, 24/4/1995, our ref. [http://elpais.com/diario/1995/04/24/cultura/798674404\\_850215.html](http://elpais.com/diario/1995/04/24/cultura/798674404_850215.html).

75S. King, *Escribir la catalanidad. Lengua e identidades culturales en la narrativa contemporània de Catalunya*, Woodbridge, Tamesis, 2005, p. 158.

76H.K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London, Routledge, 1994, p. 86.

77S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 29-30.

illusion of breaking free of the negative connotations of difference, especially those associated to Moroccans in Spain, but it only ends up reifying them.

In fact, El Hachmi experiences these prejudices when she starts looking for a job. She excels in the interviews on the phone but the assumptions associated to the phenotypical border play against her when possible employers see her, “els vaig odiar per fer-me sentir, per primera vegada a la vida, diferent d’ells, inferior només perquè els meus trets em delataven, el meu nom, els meus cabells, per arraconar-me en un indret que no és terra de ningú, un racó on només viuen aquells que no gaudeixen de la plena ciutadania” (‘I hated them for making me feel, for the first time in my life, different, inferior only because my traits betrayed me, my name, my hair, for burying me away in no man’s land, a place where only those not having full citizenship live’).<sup>78</sup> After a period of outrage, El Hachmi realises that denying the existence of the phenotypical border is just optimistic if not simply naïve. Nonetheless, she also discovers that this border dissolves with her friends and her acquaintances. As El Kadaoui writes to his son, “[l]a gent que m’estima en un país i en l’altre també t’estimarà a tu. I aquest és el millor patrimoni que puc deixar-te en herència” (‘[t]he people that love me in one country or another will also love you. And this is the best legacy that you can inherit from me’).<sup>79</sup>

Indeed, this idea of the border as a legacy for their sons underlies the two autobiographies. Migration is not a part of their sons’ lived experience and, consequently, they are alien to the chronological and the geographical borders. However, they will certainly be interpellated by the phenotypical border, be it by the exoticism of their name or because “els seus cabells rinxolats i la seva pell, encara una mica més fosca que la dels autòctons, sempre el delatarà” (‘his curly hair and his skin, still a bit darker than that of the locals, will always betray him’).<sup>80</sup> In their parental role, El Hachmi and El Kadaoui are concerned about how this difference may play against the children as some sort of racist remark. The children cannot appropriate the border as a space of enunciation because, unlike El Hachmi or El Kadaoui, they cannot cling on to the memories of chronological and geographical border-crossings.

For instance, El Hachmi inscribes the border on her body by recalling

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78N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p.85 (my translation).

79S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 33 (my translation).

80N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p.55 (my translation).

the event that caused the scar she has on her forehead, her *front*. Playing with the etymology *front/frontera*, she is able to reconnect with her past in Morocco just by touching her *front(era)*.<sup>81</sup> The scar, then, signals the pain involved in crossing the border but also her overcoming of that traumatic event. In the case of El Kadaoui, he also incorporates the border up to the point that he defines himself as such, “[s]óc la frontera, visc a la intempèrie i no em queixo. [...] I ara estic content perquè tinc una missió: oferir-te una llar a cada cantó” (‘I am the border, I live out in the open and I do not complain. [...] And now, I am glad because I have a mission: to offer you a home on each side’).<sup>82</sup> Some pages afterwards, El Kadaoui re-articulates the border with another etymological twist and becomes a *frontissa*, a hinge. Therefore, El Kadaoui stands for the referent that his son needs to cross the border himself, the same referent that El Hachmi missed herself as a child and that she wants to embody for the forthcoming generation.<sup>83</sup>

In *Borderlands/La Frontera*, Anzaldúa refers to the border as “*la rajadura*, the abyss that no bridge could span”.<sup>84</sup> Conversely, El Kadaoui and El Hachmi refuse this hopeless vision and aim at becoming this bridge themselves. They know that the phenotypical border may haunt the next generation but they can only provide relief against racism. Not by chance, both authors recommend love and friendship as the best weapons to disarticulate this ultimate border. For this reason, they strongly advise their own sons to think of all their friends and relatives whenever they meet rejection.<sup>85</sup> Face-to-face contact and interpersonal relations are the only way that the irrationality of racism can be revealed.

### Conclusions

In *Jo també sóc catalana* and *Cartes al meu fill*, Najat El Hachmi and Saïd El Kadaoui appeal to their own children to initiate a process of self-exploration. For this purpose, they need to dive into their memories and bring to the surface the trauma that migration meant at the time. However, after their own experience they have learnt how to cope with it and minimise its effects. Hence, their respective autobiographies go beyond the

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81N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p.191.

82S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 27 (my translation).

83N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

84G. Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera. The New Mestiza*, San Francisco, Aunt Lute Books, 1987, p. 45.

85N. El Hachmi, *Jo també...*, *op. cit.*, p. 92; S. El Kadaoui, *Cartes...*, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

conventionally intended addressee and reach a much wider audience: firstly, the new generation that has been born in Catalonia whose parents are from somewhere else; secondly, the Catalan society at large to raise awareness about the problems that need to be faced on an everyday basis even by those diasporic subjects who comply with the demands of 'integration'. These two autobiographies are, therefore, political interventions intending to contribute to build a better society in which religious and/or ethnic boundaries do not turn into borders that put social cohesion at risk.