

Considering the Western Sahara: Multi-Disciplinary Approaches to Post-Colonialism.
Special Issue on Western Sahara

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Introduction

The publication of this special issue on Western Sahara coincides with the fortieth anniversary of the Green March that marked the *de facto* occupation of the territory by Morocco in 1975. As the Spanish dictator, Francisco Franco, lay dying in the La Paz Hospital in Madrid, 350,000 Moroccan citizens arrived in Daoura, Hausa, Mahbes and Laayoune. Although the Moroccan King, Hassan II, presented the March an effort to free the Sahrawis from Spanish colonization, it resulted in a takeover of the territory by Morocco that did not account for the demands of the Sahrawis, as expressed by the Polisario Front, which had begun the Sahrawi insurgency against Spanish colonialism in 1973. Spain, for its part, eager to concentrate on its own domestic issues during the critical years after Franco's death, began to negotiate its way out of a territory in which it had maintained a colonial presence since 1884.

The United Nations, after sending a visiting mission to the territory, issued a verdict through the International Court of Justice on October 16, 1975, in favor of the Sahrawi cause, arguing that although there were "at the time of Spanish colonization... legal ties of allegiance between the Sultan of Morocco and some of the tribes living in the territory of Western Sahara," the Court could "not find any tie of territorial sovereignty between the territory of Western Sahara and the Kingdom of Morocco or the Mauritanian entity" (International Court of Justice 100). The Court's verdict, accordingly, recognized the right of self-determination for Western Sahara. On the day the International Court of Justice announced its verdict, King Hassan II claimed that the existence of legal ties of allegiance was sufficient proof of Morocco's sovereignty over the territory and announced his intention to organize the Green March.

The Spanish government promised in the Law on the Decolonization of Western Sahara to undertake the decolonization of the territory in accordance with what the United Nations Charter had stipulated. The latter was ratified by the Spanish Parliament on November 18, 1975. One of the most important points of the UN Charter was that administering power could not be transferred unilaterally from the colonizer to a third party or parties. The Spanish government, however, had signed on November 14 a secret agreement with Morocco and Mauritania, only four days before the ratification of the Law on the Decolonization of Western Sahara. Known as the Madrid Accords (*Acuerdos de Madrid*), it promised to grant both countries control of the territory of Western Sahara. The Madrid Accords claimed that the views of the Saharawi as expressed by the *Djemaa* would be respected in an effort to grant legitimacy to the process.

On February 26, 1976, Spain withdrew from Western Sahara and over forty thousand Sahrawis began to abandon their homes and move eastward. Algeria, considering the Madrid Accords a breach of the United Nations Charter, allowed the Sahrawi to settle down in refugee camps improvised along its western border. When the Polisario Front declared war on Morocco and Mauritania, Algeria was quick to provide them with weapons and logistical support. The ensuing war lasted for more than fifteen years until the Minurso, the United Nations peacekeeping mission in Western Sahara, negotiated a ceasefire on September 6, 1991, on condition that a referendum be held to decide on the sovereignty of the territory. A key sticking point in the referendum has been the identification of the Sahrawis with the right to vote, given the mixing of Moroccans and Sahrawis in the region as a consequence of the Green March, despite more than two decades of negotiations on this issue.

The conflict over Western Sahara shows few promising signs of immediate resolution. The Polisario Front has only recently won its first judicial battle in the European courts to assert its right to sovereignty over the territory. On October 12, the European Court of Justice nullified the 2012 trade pact between the European Union and Morocco for the liberalization of the agricultural exploitation of Western Sahara. The decision of the court is significant in that it recognizes the right of the Polisario Front to defend its interests in the territory. It also reiterates that Morocco does not hold the administering power over Western Sahara. Despite the favorable ruling of the European Court of Justice, the celebration of the long promised referendum over the self-determination of Western Sahara is still a remote possibility.

This special issue aims to bring together experts in Anthropology, International Law, Linguistics, Musicology, and Cultural Studies to examine the continued conflict over the territory.

The first section is devoted to cultural production. Thus, Tara Deubel analyzes the “mediascapes” created by Sahrawi activist through Internet communication, video, and photographic documentation. Deubel documents the important role played by digital media in supporting political dissension, increasing the visibility of the Sahrawi cause through dissemination of its cultural production, and raising awareness of human rights violations. Debra Faszler-McMahon, for her part, explores the use of social media by poets in support of the Sahrawi nationalist movement. Her article aims to demonstrate how social media have effectively contributed to popularize specific historical and cultural perspectives to promote the Sahrawi political agenda. The use of a nostalgic discourse, a discourse that incites colonial nostalgia only to destabilize it, manages to make networks of power visible, a strategy that has proved effective in gaining the support of very diverse constituencies. In their co-authored article, Violeta Ruano and Vivan Solana chronicle how Sahrawi musical production and the development of a unique Sahrawi musical style, the *nidal*, has greatly contributed to the increase the visibility of the Western Sahara conflict and the Sahrawi struggle to regain sovereignty of the disputed territory. Unlike political speech that, as Ruano and Solana, tell us has proven to be only relatively efficient in advocating for the Sahrawi cause, Sahrawi musical production has managed to raise awareness of the conflict internationally. Jill Robbins also explores the uses of culture on the political scene, paying special attention to the role of celebrity diplomacy in raising awareness of the Sahrawi cause in the international community. She explains how Álvaro Longoria’s documentary, *Sons of the Clouds*, produced by Spanish actor Javier Bardem, draws on the actor’s international fame, influence and sex appeal in an attempt to overcome the constraints imposed by the realpolitik dictated by the economic and strategic interests of the countries involved in the conflict.

Another set of articles focus more directly on politics and policies. From the Spanish side, Pablo Ignacio de Dalmases presents a detailed study of the correspondence between Jalihenna Sidi Ehamed Mohamed, leader of the Partido de Unión Nacional Saharaui (PUNS) and Coronel Rodríguez de Viguri. Dalmases draws on the archived conversations between Jalihenna and Viguri to analyze the efforts of the Spanish colonial authorities to co-opt the nascent Sahrawi nationalist movement. In a similar vein, Lofti Sayahi analyzes the history of Spanish in North Africa with special attention to the educational policies in Morocco and Western Sahara during the years of the Protectorate. As Sayahi explains, the importance of religion in Spain’s colonial educational system resulted in a fragmented network in which different curricula were designed for different groups based on their ethnicity, so that they were not fully indoctrinated into Spanish culture and language.

One of the results of this educational system has been that Spanish now lags significantly behind French and English among Sahrawis living under Moroccan rule as a language of business and social mobility.

The remaining articles consider the coexistence of Moroccans and Sahrawis under Moroccan rule. Raquel Ojeda and Angela Suarez study the impact of Morocco's Project of Advanced Regionalization, presented in March 2011, on the resolution of the Western Sahara dispute, either granting the territory in conflict greater autonomy or else consolidating and normalizing Morocco's control of it. In this contest, they look at the regionalization process in comparison with other initiatives of the Moroccan government, such as the proposal by the Economic, Social and Environmental Council (ESEC) for a new development model for the disputed territory and the role of the Royal Advisory Council for Saharan Affairs (CORCAS) in the integration of Saharan elites. In evaluating the effective degree of autonomy given to the regions by the Project of Advanced Regionalization first presented in March of 2011, they take into account six different criteria: democratization, human and fiscal resources, good governance, and agencification. Bernabé López García also argues that finding a way to incorporate Western Sahara into Morocco could be beneficial to both Moroccans and Saharawis, but claims that the present political climate in Morocco is a major obstacle to this goal and has resulted in the present stalemate. For the association to be successful, López García contends, Morocco has to provide satisfactory guarantees that its government will embrace a democratic process that allows the Sahrawis a voice in their destiny within the Moroccan state. Finally, Adolfo Campoy-Cubillos's article explores how the irredentist positions held by both Moroccans and Saharawis contrast with the ongoing reformist efforts in Morocco in recent years. The growing political dissatisfaction in Morocco, he explains, became articulated in coalitional movements that discarded identitarian positions in favor of pragmatic associations to reach specific political goals. Campoy Cubillo draws on Judith Butler's critique of identitarian discourses to argue that women's rights may be a productive ground on which to articulate a Moroccan/Saharawi citizen coalition that may contribute towards the democratization of the country and help facilitate a way out of the conflict.

In the closing article of the volume, Sahrawi poet Limam Boisha offers a testimonial account of life in exile for Sahrawi youth like him who traveled to Cuba to receive higher education and struggled to find their way back into their community after years abroad. As a poet and activist living in Spain far from the Cuba of his youth and the Sahrawi territory where he was born, Limam Boisha reflects on the complexities of transnational identities.