Materiality, modernity and the dialectics of reading in Amin Maalouf’s Mediterranean

Neil Doshi University of Pittsburgh

Abstract
This article reads Amin Maalouf’s novel Léon l’Africain (1986) to address the relationship between fiction-writing and the broader notion of Mediterranean identity that Maalouf advocates in his critical work. Conventional readings consider the representation of the early-modern Mediterranean in Maalouf’s oeuvre as recuperating a lost, and mythical Mediterranean that sustains a political call for conflict resolution in the present. This article argues that such readings overlook the historical critique articulated in the novel, which dismisses the golden-age thinking of a peaceful Andalusia. Second, through focus on the mise en abyme of the writer in the novel – the protagonist Leon who writes the text – this article suggests that the novel models a ‘Mediterranean mode’ of writing that at once preserves the notion of Mediterranean connectivity while making visible possibilities for reflexive critique.

Résumé
Cet article traite du roman Léon l’Africain (1986) d’Amin Maalouf pour examiner le rapport entre ses œuvres littéraires et les concepts « d’identité méditerranéenne » que l’écrivain développe dans ses essais. En ce qui concerne la représentation de la Méditerranée du début de l’époque moderne dans ses textes, la critique actuelle a tendance à considérer que l’œuvre de Maalouf reprend la vision d’une Méditerranée multiculturelle qui soutient ses efforts pour favoriser la paix dans cette région. Cet article suggère qu’une telle compréhension de sa démarche ignore l’esprit critique du roman qui en fait rejette l’idée d’un âge d’or de la Méditerranée. Suivant une analyse de la mise-en-abyme de l’écrivain, c’est-à-dire une discussion du positionnement du protagoniste Léon comme écrivain, cet article suggère que le roman formule un modèle d’écriture méditerranéenne qui à la fois préserve le concept d’une Méditerranée interconnectée, mais qui s’ouvre quand même à l’autocritique.

In the essay ‘Construire la Méditerranée’, the Lebanese writer Amin Maalouf describes the Mediterranean Sea as the site of two principal, sometimes overlapping fault-lines that both separate the Western European and Arab-Muslim worlds and divide the industrialized nations and the ‘Third world’ (1998: 91). Mediterranean space is, he asserts, a heterogeneous contact zone and border space marked by confrontation and
1. The term 'contact zone' refers ‘[...] to social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today’ (Pratt 1992: 34).


3. For consistency, the French Léon l’Africain will henceforth be used, and it will be indicated in context whether the reference is to the historical figure or fictional character.

Maalouf’s assessments echo those of other contemporary thinkers who have addressed the geopolitics of the Mediterranean to similarly describe it as both the limit and connecting point between civilizations. Violent and divided as the region may be, however, Maalouf nevertheless suggests it is the ideal testing ground for new forms of social imaginaries. The Mediterranean, he writes, ‘[...] est le laboratoire idéal pour une identité de rassemblement, pour une identité globale [...]’ (1998: 92). This Mediterranean space of convergence or rassemblement evolves, Maalouf continues, out of forms of organized cultural action committed to promoting forms of non-exclusive belonging. Maalouf therefore links Mediterranean space and forms of subjectivity not to claim importance for regional identity, but to suggest that the particular geographical space emerges as a prime site for the modeling of new, inclusive cultures.

As Maalouf suggests, a capacious ‘Mediterranean’ consciousness is a practical, unifying ideology that can potentially suture cultural and political rifts. Crucially, he maintains that this consciousness relies on both historical reflection and the gleaning of useful fragments and symbols from the past. He lays out the project: ‘Retrouver dans le passé les symboles – hommes, idées, lieux, actes, époques – qui rassemble. Oui, bâtir, face aux mythologies ethniques, identitaires, une mythologie commune’ (Maalouf 1998: 92). This call for a yet-to-come Mediterranean articulates a complicated relationship between past (source of the fragments for a new mythology), present (a moment marked by conflict), and future (a yearned for, coming community). Maalouf’s essay reads as a manifesto in its urgent call for cultural action as the means to an end that is ultimately universal.

This article focuses on Maalouf’s novel Léon l’Africain (1986), to explore the relationships between the author’s fiction, his larger project as advocate of a Mediterranean identity, and a ‘Mediterranean mythology’. Among Maalouf’s fictional works, Léon l’Africain is the only novel that engages in an active reading and re-writing of an actual text – the historical writings of the personage Léon l’Africain / Leo Africanus. As a work that therefore directly addresses questions of adaptation, and literary creation, in other words, questions related to the assembling and repurposing of the fragments of history, it is singularly well suited for an article examining the larger cultural-political project that motivates Maalouf’s oeuvre.

Where conventional readings of Maalouf’s novel have interpreted the representation of the early modern past in the novel as the poetic recuperation of a lost, multicultural Mediterranean, the argument presented here is that Maalouf’s novel does something quite different than to weave a narrative of origins. Rather, through the figuration of the protagonist Léon in the novel as writer of the text, in other words, through the mise en abyme of writing, the text models processes of myth-making and interpretation that are self-reflexive, and through which non-exclusive modes of belonging are continually re-imagined. In other words, through the protagonist Leon’s description of himself as engaging in the acts of writing and revision, the text models cultural production of a Mediterranean myth that corresponds to that evoked in Maalouf’s critical work. Such a perspective focuses on the Mediterranean as functioning allegorically in
Maalouf’s text and enabling dialectical reflection on the past and the present to illuminate possible futures.

‘Routes not roots’: The lives of Léon l’Africain
The life of the historical figure Léon l’Africain is quite literally, the stuff of adventure. Léon, whose given name was Hasan ibn Muhammad ibn Ahman al-Wazzan, was born in Granada around the year 1488 into an Andalusian Moorish family. Shortly before or after 1492 (the details remain vague), the year of the surrender of Granada to the Catholic monarchs Ferdinand II and Isabella I, Hasan’s family departed in exile to the North African city of Fez. There, early in his adult life, Hasan secured the post of diplomat in service of the local Sultan. Historical circumstance – the encroachment of the Portuguese into the Maghreb, political relations between the Fez Sultanate and the Ottoman Empire, and the burgeoning trade throughout the Mediterranean basin – offered Hasan ample opportunity to travel. In 1518, returning from a pilgrimage to the Mecca, Hasan was captured by Spanish pirates who, realizing that they had abducted a notable North African diplomat, presented the captive as an offering to Pope Leo X. The Pope adopted Hasan as his godson and, in 1520, had him baptized as Joannes Leo de Medici (I will use the French ‘Léon’ to refer to Hasan henceforth). The designation Africanus/Africain was added later, by his Italian peers, as a way of marking his foreign origins.

Though Léon was technically eventually freed, he chose to remain in Italy until after the death of Pope Leo X. In 1526, he completed the Descrittione dell’Africa/Description of Africa the text for which he is best known, which was subsequently published in 1550. As the first human geography of Africa that included in its purview the areas south of the equator, the text drew a wide audience and was an important reference for much subsequent travel writing (see Zhiri 1991). Léon returned to North Africa shortly after completing the Descrittione, and little trace of him remains after his departure from Italy.

Maalouf’s novel, which spans the years 1488 (just prior to Léon’s birth) until 1527, is framed by well-known preface in which the narrator Léon introduces the text (in other words, the novel itself) as an autobiography that he has destined for his son. In the oft cited opening paragraph of the text, the narrator announces:

Moi, Hassan fils de Mohamed le peseur, moi, Jean-Léon de Médicis, circoncis de la main d’un barbier et baptisé de la main d’un pape, on me nomme aujourd’hui l’Africain, mais d’Afrique ne suis, ni d’Europe, ni d’Arabie. On m’appelle aussi le Grenadin, le Fassi, le Zayyati, mais je ne viens d’aucun pays, d’aucune cité, d’aucune tribu. Je suis fils de la route, ma patrie est caravane, et ma vie la plus inattendue des traversées. (1986: 11)

From the first line, Léon’s multiple subjectivities are indicated by the repetition of pronoun ‘moi’, the notation of his different names, and the accompanying allusions to Islam and Catholicism. His use of ternary groups in the subsequent clauses – Europe/Afrique/Arabie; Grenadin/Fassi/Zayyati; and pays/cité/tribu – recall the timeless conceptions of the Mediterranean

4. For biographical detail, see Zemon Davis (2006).
5. ‘Fassi’ refers to a citizen of Fez.
6. For a useful overview of the vast body of critical literature addressing how the notion of the Mediterranean has been used to imagine common identity across geographically and culturally diverse spaces, see Giaccaria and Minca (2010).

7. Bahri and Sautman suggest that

[...] this historiography looks back at that past for solutions and positive models and for historical imprints that provide good answers for today. Arab/Muslim commentators seldom bemoan today's problems as 'medieval' and see them as distinctly modern – which is not tantamount to 'remaining medieval' and 'refusing' modernity, as many Westerners claim. (2009: 175)

Many have read in Léon l'Africain resonances between Maalouf's own life and that of Léon. Born in Beirut in 1949 to a family that self-identified as mixed Greek Melkite, Turkish and Maronite, Maalouf was raised in a Christian context steeped in Arab culture. Elements of Maalouf’s personal life and his sense of belonging to multiple worlds deeply inform both his fiction and non-fiction works. In her illuminating study of the historical Léon l'Africain, N. Zemon Davis suggests that Maalouf ‘[…] created in Leo-Africanus/al-Hassan a figure who perfectly represented his own way of rising above constrictive and exclusive identities of language, religion, and nation. […] Routes not roots: in Léon l'Africain, Maalouf saw a figure from his Mediterranean past who combined its “multiple cultures”’. (2006: 9). Here, the emphasis on routes underscores the thematic of movement and border crossing which, in the lives of both the historical Léon l’Africain and Maalouf, is associated with a form of cosmopolitanism. Critics focused on Maalouf’s novel have read in Maalouf’s representation of the intrepid Léon, a desire to recuperate alternative visions of the early-modern Mediterranean. In a wide-ranging and useful critique that deconstructs historical distinctions between ‘medieval’ and ‘modern’, for instance, Hamid Bahri and Francesco Sautman reread the past through Arab/Muslim historiographies that establish continuities between the Early-modern Mediterranean and the present day. They argue that Léon l’Africain recovers ‘[…] the world of the late medieval and early Renaissance as one of constant displacement, of shifting planes of belonging and identity, and intersecting political agendas and cross-cultural knowledge’ (2009: 189). In a similar vein, Ananya Jahanara Kabir, in the essay ‘Transnational Medieval Utopias’, reads Maalouf as a text that recovers the interconnectedness and heterogeneity of the Mediterranean. For her, the novel represents the lyric recovery of a ‘medieval utopia retrieved as an alternative to the linear march of history’ (2008: 382). Kabir construes authors like Maalouf as mediators of a lost cosmopolitan medieval culture, now preserved only in its literature.

These assessments work importantly to question historical perspectives that conceive of the past in terms of epochs, and that tend consequently to bracket the Medieval and Early Renaissance off as being pre-modern, and therefore having little to tell us about modernity. Further, they valuably indicate how Maalouf’s work offers a reflection on the present through a detour into the distant past. However, in their idealization of the Early-modern Mediterranean, which they characterize in terms of tolerant and cosmopolitan communities, Kabir, Bahri and Sautman overlook the critique that Maalouf’s novel offers of identity politics. It is of course clear that Léon l’Africain celebrates the history of connectivity in the
Materiality, modernity and the dialectics of reading in Amin Maalouf’s Mediterranean. But to read only recuperation without considering the ways Maalouf’s fiction also critically reflects on imagined, utopian pasts is to veer dangerously close to a reductive reading of Maalouf’s oeuvre as one that is invested in roots and the assertion of alternative pasts rather than in historical critique.

This critique notably emerges in the novel’s treatment of origins which, as the narrative progresses, are represented as being contingent rather than rooted in a particular place or time. Following Léon’s arrival with his family in Fez, the community of Andalusian immigrants organizes to send Léon’s uncle Khâli to Constantinople, where he petitions the Grand Sultan to retake Granada. Though Khâli is unsuccessful in his efforts, he none-theless reports to the community that the Sultan is preparing to lend his support. In response to Léon’s questioning, Khâli admits having dissembled, and Léon conveys in his uncle’s excuses:

Vois-tu, Hassan, tous ces hommes ont encore, accrochée à leurs murs, la clé de leur maison de Grenade. Chaque jour, ils la regardent, et la regardant ils soupirent et prient. Chaque jour reviennent à leur mémoire des joies, des habitudes, une fierté surtout, qu’ils ne retrouveront pas dans l’exil. Leur seule raison de vivre, c’est de penser que bientôt, grâce au grand sultan ou à la Providence, ils retrouveront leur maison, la couleur de ses pierres, les odeurs de son jardin, l’eau de sa fontaine, intacts, inaltérés, comme dans leurs rêves.

(1986: 127)

The evocation of a timelessly beautiful and sensually affective homeland notably contrasts with descriptions of the place offered early in the novel. Indeed, the Granada described in the first pages of the text is ruled by a debauched Sultan whose power is assured by his army, and who is the last in a declining house of rulers. This sense of Granada (and indeed the Arab world) in decline is forcefully conveyed in the first chapters, as Léon cites conversations with his father, Muhammad. Remembering Léon’s grandfather and the internal conflicts that divided the Arabic world in the late fifteenth century, Muhammad muses:

Ce sur quoi ton grand-père était d’accord: aux premiers siècles de l’islam, répétait-il souvent avec amertume, on ne comptait plus en Orient les traités de philosophie, de mathématiques, de médecine ou d’astronomie. Les poètes eux-mêmes étaient bien plus nombreux et novateurs, sans le style comme dans le sens.

(1986: 45)

Where the exiles in Fez long for the homeland of lost Andalusia, Léon’s grandfather, in the context of his life in Granada, imagines a yet earlier period, positing the early centuries of Islam as the an ideal past, marked by its great cultural production.

This telescoping of desired past that moves from Fez to Granada to early Islam is captured textually, in citation. In the first instance, Léon cites his uncle in direct discourse, in the second instance, Léon cites his father, who in turn indirectly cites his own father. Each citation in the
chain situates an ideal past vis-à-vis the present, and as one progresses through the narrative, the desired but lost material and spiritual worlds shift forward in time. Such displacements call into question the commonplace understanding of Al-Andalus in Maalouf’s *oeuvre* as the tolerant, multicultural site it is sometimes made out to be.

The significance of such telescoping origins emerges more fully when explored through the work of Walter Benjamin and his work on allegory. In his ‘Epistemo-Critical Prologue’ to *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1998), Benjamin describes the allegory in terms of ‘origins’, which he distinguishes from ‘beginning’ (*Enstehung*). Origin (*Ursprung*), he writes, [...] is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current, it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.

(1998: 45)

Origins evolve not out of *roots*, but are always already in a history in flux – a moment in a swiftly moving current, as though already en route. The *Ursprung* is the initial ‘leap’ into this ‘stream of becoming’. Understood in this way, the notion of ‘origin’ is dialectical in the sense that it describes the relationship each phenomenon has with the stream of becoming – the ‘en route’ – in which it finds itself. Benjamin explains:

That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and reestablishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete.

(1998: 45)

Put another way, origins can never be recovered as fully present; they are locked into a relationship with the present, and only partially recoverable out of the stream of becoming. ‘Origins’ can only be, in other words, allegorical.

To think of history allegorically, in Benjamin’s sense of the term, is not to aim to recapture events as they really were, but rather to seize hold of a memory that our present makes available. As he suggests in ‘Theses on the Philosophy of History’, published in the collection *Illuminations*:

A historical materialist cannot do without the notion of a present which is not a transition, but in which time stands still and has come to a stop. For this notion defines the present in which he himself is writing history. Historicism gives the “eternal” image of the past; historical materialism supplies a unique experience with the past.

(Benjamin and Arendt [1968] 2007: 262)

The past and present are mutually constitutive and must be read in and through each other. The allegory of origin does not restore lost meaning – it is not hermeneutic – but rather it illuminates aspects of the present just as it
allows a critical thinking about history unfettered by visions of redemption or totality. A key point in Benjamin’s theorizing is that only certain memories are available at any given time, such that the flashing up of a memory offers critical insight into the nature of the present in which it emerges.

The terms Benjamin employs lend themselves well to conceptions of the Mediterranean as unified not by geography or common culture, but by currents, trade routes, and crossings. Benjamin provides a framework for analyzing not only representations of an idealized past in Maalouf’s novel, but also the desire to read in Léon l’Africain the representation of a utopian Al-Andalus. As he prepares to leave for Fez, Léon’s father Muhammad’s reflects on Andalusian pasts:

En Andalousie [...] la pensée était florissante, et ses fruits étaient des livres qui, patiemment copiés, circulaient parmi les hommes de savoir de la Chine à l’extrême occident. Et puis ce fut le dessèchement de l’esprit et de la plume. Afin de se défendre contre les Francs, leurs idées et leurs habitudes, on fit de la Tradition une citadelle où l’on s’enferma. Grenade ne donna plus naissance qu’à des imitateurs sans talent ni audace.

(1986: 45)

As with Léon’s grandfather, a flourishing book culture is a metonym for exchange and worldliness. Evoking what is for him a longed for, mythologized past, Muhammad underscores the fractured and incomplete nature of his present. In their analysis of this citation, Bahri and Sautman assert that the text bears relevance to present-day political Islam, suggesting that this is ‘[...] a clear reference to the tumultuous landscape of Muslim countries whose postcolonial regimes have suffered from continuous malaise, squashed democracies, and incessant geopolitical conflict with Western states, and indicates that Leo the narrator can act as Maalouf’s voice’ (2009: 188). Clearly, Maalouf’s text has something to tell us about the present, and as a writer invested in thinking about syncretic identity, one might further imagine Maalouf as identifying with his protagonist. But to associate author and character in this way, to make Léon speak for Maalouf of the decline of Islam, perpetuates the golden-age thinking that the citational play in the novel seeks to complicate.

In the essay ‘Futures of Al-Andalus’, Gil Anidjar reflects on the important contemporary position that Al-Andalus occupies for Jews and Muslims. Questioning the narratives that posit site as a lost paradise, Anidjar contends that:

Al-Andalus bears as one or more of its futures the sense that it is no more; that it has vanished in a series of destructive events and occurrences. To be more precise, it was even before its destruction that al-Andalus had begun to manifest itself as a loss of place, a displacement and an unsettling translation from which one could not but feel exiled. [...] As a place, al-Andalus emerges belatedly, and precisely as a figure of exile, as the condition of exile rather than as its origin. Al-Andalus is not so much that from which one is exiled because it has ended. [...] It is the condition of exile precisely because it is still, because it lingers. It comes to existence as exile.

(2008: 193)
To understand Al-Andalus in this way is to think of it allegorically, as the experience of loss. In light of the historical critique expressed in *Léon l’Africain*, therefore, one may understand Maalouf’s call for a common Mediterranean culture as emerging out of a common sense of loss. Indeed, the idea is clearly conveyed by the organization of Maalouf’s novel, which is divided into four sections, each of which ends in Léon departing from a city as an exile. Utopias like Al-Andalus – for both Anidjar and Maalouf – represent sites of community which, while they may never have existed, are longed for as future possibilities.

**The mediterranean as ‘dreamhouse’**

To read Maalouf’s novel in this way is to ascribe a critical force to the text as one that dispels mythic images of the past as suffused with stable meanings. Though the novel may eschew the imagining of lost, utopian origins, the text nonetheless recovers through Léon a redemptive future that promises fulfilment of present desires for wholeness and totality. Consider, for example, the final chapter of the text, where Léon addresses his son Giuseppe. He writes:

> Une fois de plus, mon fils, je suis porté par cette mer, témoins de tous mes errements et qui à présent te convoie vers ton premier exil. [...] Où que tu sois, certains voudront fouiller ta peau et tes prières. Garde-toi de flatter leurs instincts, mon fils, garde-toi de ployer sous la multitude! Musulman, juif, ou chrétien, ils devront te prendre comme tu es, ou te perdre. Lorsque l’esprit des hommes te paraîtra étroit, dis-toi que la terre de Dieu est vaste, et vaste Ses mains et Son cœur. N’hésite jamais à t’éloigner, au-delà de toutes les mers, au-delà de toutes les frontières, de toutes les patries, de toutes les croyances. (1986: 349)

As the son of Léon, a Muslim-Christian convert, and Maddalena, the Andalusian-Jewish exile whom Léon marries in Rome, Giuseppe incarnates the fault lines that traverse both Léon’s own life and the Mediterranean itself. The only ‘home’ for Giuseppe is, in a sense, exile. But Léon enjoins him to seek out the plenitude that the past seems to deny, linking this hoped for future to an imagined space ‘au-delà de toutes les mers, au-delà de toutes les frontières, de toutes les patries, de toutes les croyances’. This beyond would seem to be on the other side of exile, neither home, nor alienating through the nostalgia that it inspires. Like the mythology that Maalouf evokes in ‘Construire la Méditerranée’, this beyond is ineffable but total. Gesturing to the future, Léon preserves for his son the element of hope.

The expression of utopian desire in Maalouf’s novel, which emerges out of historical consciousness but which also represents a moving beyond rather than a return to the past, resonates with Walter Benjamin’s critique of modernity in his later work, *The Arcades Project* (1999). As an incomplete manuscript that was recovered following Benjamin’s death – Benjamin committed suicide in 1940 as he fled Nazi Germany and sought passage to the United States – *The Arcades Project* is what many have called ‘an urban archaeology’ (see Gilloch 2002). The work consists of 36 sections, called ‘Konvoluten’, that gather Benjamin’s commentaries on
the Paris passages, the old shopping arcades built in the nineteenth century and that had been the early showcases of new and modern commodities. A fragmented work full of notes, commentaries, citations and pictures, the text is a fascinating read, and its fragmentary form mimics the crumbling Parisian arcades of Benjamin’s time.

For Benjamin, the Paris arcades represented the *ur-history* of modern capitalism. As ‘the original temple of commodity capital’ the arcades gave material expression to the promises of happiness offered to the urban masses by the new technologies of the modern, industrial era (Benjamin and Tiedemann 1999: 852). In the latter half of the nineteenth century, these arcades exploded into public life. Advances in iron and glass architecture design permitted the ubiquitous construction of phantasmagoric ‘dream worlds’ (shopping malls, cafés, exhibition halls …) in the modern city. In this context of rapidly evolving fashions, the obsessions of commodity culture with the new, and massive urban development, the arcades quickly became the half-forgotten remnants of an earlier era. Returning to them, Benjamin found the material for a political project that sought to recover, through dialectical critique, the ‘dreams’ (the promises of happiness) that once lodged in the old discards of the arcades.

By confronting the recovered dreams of the past with the dreams and unrealized longings inspired by new industrial technologies, Benjamin sought to bring critical consciousness to the urban collectives (see Buck-Morss 1995: 6). The juxtapositions that Benjamin sought to stage in his writing disrupt the phantasmagoria, and bring to light the rapid and relentless repetitions whereby the desire for ever-evolving and novel commodities is driven by promises that are continuously renewed and left unfulfilled. In her invaluable commentary on Benjamin’s work, Susan Buck-Morss has suggested, in a way that crucially underscores the political dimension of this project, that ‘Benjamin’s “Ur-history of the 19th Century” is an attempt to […] juxtapose the original, utopian potential of the modern (in which archaic, mythic elements have found nonmythical, historical content) and its catastrophic and barbaric present reality’ (1989: 251).

In the context of Maalouf’s novel, Benjamin’s *method* proves valuable for thinking about the links between the Mediterranean mythology advocated by the author and the fictional autobiography. In ‘Construire la Méditerranée’, cited at the beginning of this article, Maalouf enjoins his readers to excavate from Mediterranean pasts the raw materials for a new mythology. As the storehouse of texts, objects and narratives that speak of common identity and promise inclusivity, the Mediterranean Sea might itself be understood through Maalouf’s novel, as a ‘dreamhouse of the collective’. Adapting the historical Léon l’Africain’s texts into an autobiography, Maalouf in effect participates in the recuperation of Mediterranean symbols. The novel activates the past dreams of solidarity and community, which, when held up as a mirror to the present signal the unfulfilled potential of Mediterranean identity and underscore the need to move ‘au-delà de toutes les frontières’. Crucially, this moving beyond signifies not moving beyond the space of the Mediterranean, or returning to the past, but rather moving beyond the fault lines that divide it.

Such Mediterranean utopian desires are articulated clearly towards the end of the novel when Léon meets in Rome, a Saxon printer and disciple of
9. For a general overview of exchange in the Mediterranean, see P. Horden and N. Purcell (2000) and the essays collected in Cities of the Mediterranean (Kolluoğlu and Tokşüz: 2010).

the Dutch theologian Erasmus. As Léon explains, the printer has undertaken an immense project, titled the ‘Anti-Babel’, to compile a multilingual lexicon including, among other languages, Latin, Greek, French, Italian, Arabic, Hebrew and Castillian. The printer’s own justification for the work is as striking as the breadth of the project: “Sans doute, ce projet ne verra-t-il jamais le jour […]. Je suis prêt néanmoins à lui consacrer mon existence et mon argent. Faire en sorte que tous les hommes puissent un jour se comprendre, n’est-ce pas le plus noble des idéaux?” (1986: 321). The printer’s characterization of the project shifts focus away from the product-lexicon itself, to the motivating desire behind it – one that expresses longing for common understanding through the print text. Shortly after this scene in the novel, Rome is sacked and the ‘Anti-Babel’ ends as a story of frustrated hope for unity and intelligibility. Maalouf’s novel is replete with such allusions that evoke a Mediterranean utopia discernible at the horizon of historical event. Like Benjamin’s archaeology, then, the novel reactivates half-forgotten moments when a capacious Mediterranean identity was imagined.

**Writing exchange**

Where Benjamin wrote of the political necessity of ‘awakening’ his contemporaries to their own dream state, thereby raising consciousness activating their revolutionary potential, Maalouf speaks of new myths and cultural action. Though the contexts of Benjamin’s and Maalouf’s works are different, their texts similarly gesture towards the imagination of alternative communities. In Léon l’Africain, this possibility is tied importantly to writing and reading/interpretation. In the address to Léon’s son that opens the novel, Léon introduces the text to follow (the chapters of the novel itself) as his own autobiography:

Et tu resteras après moi, mon fils. Et tu porteras mon souvenir. Et tu liras mes livres. Et tu reviras alors cette scène: ton père, habillé en Napolitain sur cette galée qui le ramène vers la côte africaine, en train de griffonner, comme un marchand qui dresse son bilan au bout d’un long périple. (1986: 9)

In Story and Situation, the critic Ross Chambers has suggested that the *mise en abyme* of the writer in the text gives stories their ‘point’, insofar as discourses take on meaning depending on the contexts in which they are told. The image of Léon on a boat, madly recording the story that we are about to read therefore sets up a self-referential system – or context – that has performative force and infuses the narrative with meaning. As argued below, this representation of the writer in the text underscores the importance of the poetic act, and positions Léon as the author of a Mediterranean mythology that represents social connectivity in terms of commerce, trade, and shared practices of exchange.

There is of course a vast body of historical work and criticism addressing merchant cultures and exchange in the Mediterranean, and for many, the long history of commerce in the region provides the frame through which to understand the historical interconnectedness of Mediterranean cultures. The representation of Léon writing as though in a ledger taps into this rich
Materiality, modernity and the dialectics of reading in Amin Maalouf’s …

cultural and economic history to create multiple meanings. At the most basic level, ledgers are texts that establish equivalences and reconcile difference through abstraction into value. Understood in this way, Léon’s autobiography-ledger functions – like the ‘Anti-Babel’ – as a text that imagines translatability across spaces. Read through the simile, the autobiography-ledger is a simultaneous record of: the material exchanges Léon undertakes throughout his voyages (objects and parties in trade); of Léon’s own cartography of the Mediterranean (sites of trade); and of the accounting of a subjective experience to be read and judged (the profit or loss). Further, like Benjamin’s characterization in The Arcades Project of the commodity as the disguised representation of desire, Léon’s book is a repository of desires – for social bond, for a space beyond exile, or for a collective Mediterranean identity more generally. To put it another way, as much as it is a story of a life, the autobiography is a catalogue of people, moments, objects and texts that signal possibilities for imagining common belonging.

The metaphor of writer as merchant that the novel presents is entirely consistent with Léon’s autobiography: the mercantile allusion in the incipit refers directly to Léon’s family, his profession, and his Arabic name. He explains: ‘[Mon père] avait hérité de son propre père une importante charge municipale, celle de mitterand principal, avec pour fonctions de peser les grains et de s’assurer le l’honnêteté des pratiques commerciales; c’est ce qui valut aux membres de ma famille le surnom d’al-Wazzan, le peseur […]’ (1986: 49). As the muhtasib of the city, Léon’s father was charged with oversight of trade, regulating practice within the limits of the Sharia law, and the maintenance of public order. A figure of authority in the community, go-between for the sultan, and protector of the law, Muhammad was a prominent figure, and his ledger would have served as a record of the community insofar as he would have overseen transactions of all Granadans. The profession is one that would have been passed on to Léon, as with the proper name indicating profession.

Like the historical figure, the travels of Maalouf’s fictional protagonist are determined by his profession as trader-diplomat. The novel focuses at length on Léon’s observations as he moves through circuits of exchange and trades in goods/objects, the circulation of which delimits spaces of both trade and social relations. Upon arriving in Timbuktu, for example, Léon writes:

Les citadins sont souvent riches, surtout les marchands, fort nombreux à Tombouctou. […] On importe à Tombouctou toutes sortes de produits, notamment des étoffes d’Europe qui se vendent bien plus cher qu’à Fès. Pour les transactions, on n’utilise pas de monnaie frappée, mais des morceaux d’or pur; les petits paiements s’effectuent avec des cauris, qui sont des coquillages en provenance de Perse ou des Indes.

(1986: 168)

The mention of textiles from Europe traded in Fez and Timbuktou for pieces of gold and Cowrie shells from even further afield evoke the trans-regional exchange routes within and beyond the Mediterranean. In contemporary writing about the Mediterranean, these linkages have been
10. Regarding the concept of ‘connectivity’ in the Mediterranean, see Horden and Purcell (2000).

In an essay addressing merchant cultures in the Medieval Mediterranean, Sharon Kinoshita suggests that common cultures of practice (like courtesy, generosity and hospitality), and exchanges of goods defined ‘zones of intelligibility’ in the Mediterranean (2012: 46). Kinoshita’s analysis is consonant with the broader ways in which economic historians and sociologists like Janet Abu-Lughod have thought about Mediterranean trade. In ‘The Shape of the World System in the Thirteenth Century’, Abu-Lughod suggests that by 1250AD, Western Europe and the Orient were linked together by a system of trade and (to a degree) a system of production that had begun to form a ‘world system’. Characterized by ‘capitalistic’ institutions for credit, pooling capital and export production, this system worked to integrate sub-regions (notably the Mediterranean) into larger, interlocking networks. Though the zones and networks that both Kinoshita and Abu-Lughod treat had begun to radically change by the fifteenth century, the Cowrie shells traded for European textiles in Léon’s narrative capture in microcosm this larger, diverse and integrating world.

The notion of trade as mediating inter-subjective relations is expressed in the text through Léon’s travels to places like Cairo, where commerce sustains his integration into the city. Léon notes:

[...] je fis un tour de la vieille ville, m’arrêtais surtout à la célèbre mosquée d’Amr et au souk des étoffes, avant de pousser une pointe en direction du nouveau Caire d’où je revins la tête chargée de chuchotements. Désormais, cette promenade serait quotidienne [...] Car je rencontrais des notables, des officiers, de fonctionnaires du palais, je faisais des affaires. Dès le premier mois, je m’arrangeai pour placer dans une caravane de chameaux, affrê-tée par des commerçants maghrébins, un chargement de crêpe indien et d’épices à l’adresse d’un marchand juif de Tlemcen. À ma demande, il me renvoya un coffret d’ambre de Messa. Entre deux affaires, je recueillais des confidences.

(1986: 228)

The diversity of names, places and goods evokes a kaleidoscopic, bustling marketplace, where business deals shape relationships across social and geographic lines. But if circuits of commerce and the movements of goods trace spheres of social exchange, the items themselves can be said to index the longing for social bond. The value of the objects, and indeed the desire attached to them, are expressed and indeed materialized in the ledger (Léon’s autobiography).

The notion is writ small in the interpersonal and even intimate relationships that Léon establishes, which are mediated by exchange. In the Cairo bazaar, for instance, Léon catches a glimpse of a beautiful woman named Nur in a merchant’s shop. Léon quickly learns that she is the widow of a prince who had aspired to become the Sultan of Constantinople. As an exile in Cairo, Nur sells her treasures to support her infant son, who she hopes will eventually succeed where her husband did not. Léon watches as she attempts to sell a rare tapestry to a merchant who is only willing to buy the item at a discount rate. As a way of drawing closer to
the desired woman, Léon steps in to purchase the item at asking price. The Circassian is of course surprised that Léon has outbid the merchant, and to calm her suspicions, he insists that he desires the object, since, as he puts it, “Parfois, il suffit d’un aperçu pour qu’un objet devienne irremplaçable” (1986: 236).

In the context of a novel in which Léon witnesses cataclysmic shifts in the balance of power in the Mediterranean – the war between the Ottoman empire and the Mamelukes of Egypt, the defeat of Francois I, the sacking of Rome in 1527 – the example might seem trivial. I read in it however, a representation of the relationship between desire, the commodity and the ledger that equates them. The tapestry that Nur sells is a proxy for her sale of herself, and when Léon offers himself as a buyer, he imbues the object with his desire for connection with the woman. However problematic his objectification of Nur might seem, the successful transaction represents the fulfilment of a social desire.

In the frame of the ledger-book – or the narrative that Léon writes – Léon’s desires for Nur might be read more broadly in terms of a longing for greater social cohesion. By entering into a relationship with Nur, Léon transgresses the particular political ideologies that divide them. As the mother of a son whom she sees as the rightful heir to the throne of the Sultanate, Nur rejects the legitimacy of Salim, the Sultan of Turkey. Among the Andalusian émigrés, however, the powerful Ottoman armies represented the last great hope of a community longing for the re-establishment of a Muslim Granada. In this context, Léon’s marriage to Nur represents a denial of the political ideologies that split Muslim world in the fifteenth century.

In Léon’s autobiography-ledger, the recorded exchanges of goods, people and practices become a literary proxy for Mediterranean space as a ‘zone of intelligibility’. Further, through the framing of Léon as writer, the text models a version of myth-making insofar as the author-as-merchant records social exchanges mediated through objects, thereby producing an inclusive and open ended narrative, subject to revision as it traces shifting values of objects and renders visible the desires attached to them.

Dialectics of reading

As Maalouf affirms in ‘Construire la Méditerranée’, the creation of a Mediterranean mythology begins with a return to the past, out of which novel and inclusive cultural formations are created. These formations sustain a vital sense of community: ‘L’appartenance méditéranéenne n’est donc pas seulement une appartenance de plus, un qualificatif ornemental, une vague référence culturelle conciliante. C’est une identité essentielle’ (1998: 91). As suggested above, key in this formation of a mythology is reflection involving recuperating – or reading – symbols from the past that serve the present and future. Just as Maalouf’s novel allegorizes the writing of mythology, it represents modes of reading and critical interpretation as it traces Léon’s travels.

As Léon states in the opening of the novel, the autobiography-ledger is also redemptory in that it offers an account of Léon’s life against which he expects to be judged. This metaphorical ledger is, as the framing in the introduction makes clear, addressed to this son. By placing the reader in
of Ibn Battuta’s works noted the discrepancy between his descriptions of the pyramids and actuality, which subsequently led to questioning of whether Ibn Battuta had ever visited the pyramids at all. More recently, though, Ross Dunn has observed that Battuta’s description is more vague than inaccurate, and moreover that the goal of Battuta’s travel writing was to edify Muslims by presenting the Islamic marvels of the day, not to dwell on the pagan monuments of the time (1989: 63).

11. Early readers of Ibn Battuta’s works noted the discrepancy between his descriptions of the pyramids and actuality, which subsequently led to questioning of whether Ibn Battuta had ever visited the pyramids at all. More recently, though, Ross Dunn has observed that Battuta’s description is more vague than inaccurate, and moreover that the goal of Battuta’s travel writing was to edify Muslims by presenting the Islamic marvels of the day, not to dwell on the pagan monuments of the time (1989: 63).

A key moment of the type of reading alluded to here occurs late in the novel, as Léon and Nur cross part of the desert. Following their initial meeting in Cairo, Léon accompanies Nur on a weekly excursion that she takes out of the city. Anticipating that they will pass by the pyramids, Léon asks: “Est-ce pour voir ces bâtisses rondes que tu viens chaque semaine jusqu’ici?” (1986: 239). Hearing Nur laugh at the suggestion that the monuments are round, Léon defends himself by citing the travel narratives of the fourteenth century Moroccan/Berber explorer Ibn Battuta, in which the ancient monuments are described as being round. To this, Nur replies: “C’est qu’il ne les a jamais vues. […] Mais ne le blâme pas. Quand un voyageur raconte ses exploits, il devient prisonnier des gloussements admiratifs de ceux qui l’écoutent. […] Il est des mensonges pour lesquels les oreilles sont plus fautives que la bouche” (1986: 239–40). Suitably embarrassed, Léon launches into a summary of Ibn Batuta’s text, in which Ibn Battuta describes the pyramids as pre-flood relics, built to preserve man’s creation.¹¹ Nur replies:

Pour moi, les pyramides n’ont été bâties que pour être belles et majestueuses, pour être la première des merveilles du monde. Sans doute leur avait-on également assigné quelque fonction, mais ce n’était qu’un prétexte fourni par le prince de ce temps-là. […] Longtemps après que nos maisons, nos palais et nous-mêmes aurons disparu, ces pyramides seront encore là. Cela ne signifie-t-il pas qu’aux yeux de l’Éternel ce sont elles les plus utiles? (1986: 240)

Léon’s incorrect assumptions about the pyramids are corrected through first-hand experience and empirical observation. Beyond this, however, on a more figurative level, the conversation stages two different reading practices.

Léon’s expectations and indeed, his historical understanding of the monuments are predicated on his readings of Ibn Battuta and the conventional, historical, view of the structures as antediluvian remnants intended to preserve human knowledge. For her part, though she cannot claim true knowledge of what the purpose of the structures serve, Nur relativizes Léon’s interpretation by signaling the historically contingent character of his understanding. She affirms their common desire for knowledge that is absolute, while admitting that both of their assessments are incomplete. Importantly, she does not dismiss Ibn Battuta’s texts, but regards them as another perspective open to the judgment of the discerning reader. The example allegorizes how differences between readings raise questions
about the text and its insufficiency vis-à-vis the sought for sense of totality. To return to the discussion of interpretive frames, the novel frames reading as critical and dialectic. If myth-making therefore involves writing in mode of the accounting-ledger, reading and interpretation involve dialectics that test the text and open possibilities for revision.

The *mise en abyme* of writing and reading in Malouf’s novel work together to articulate a practice of myth-making that is recursive in nature and that anticipates its own rewriting. The cultural activism of which Maalouf writes, then, is a poetic literary act then, that makes visible – and records – the exchanges that take place in its own composition.

**Conclusion**

Current criticism on the Mediterranean has tended to conceive of Mediterranean literature as oscillating between perspectives that either attribute permanence to the region in ways that indirectly reference the Braudelian *longue durée* or imagine the region as intractably fragmented. This article has focused on the self-referential tropes in Maalouf’s text as interpretive hooks, to ask if and how literature might envision the Mediterranean otherwise. Through *mise en abyme*, Malouf’s novel models both ways of writing and reading that together, participate in envisioning a Mediterranean space in terms of a durable yet open-ended Mediterranean mythology. In *Léon l’Africain*, this mythology is allegorized through the protagonist’s narrative which, like an accounting ledger frames a literary elaboration of shared goods and practices that highlights connectivity and community in the region. But, as it makes visible its historical construction, Léon’s narrative invites critique and rewriting.

Further, this article additionally argues that Léon’s narrative theorizes its own reading, signaling possible interpretations, but without foreclosure. To read texts in such a manner involves what Roland Barthes might call moving from the ‘readerly’ to the ‘writerly’. Seen in this light, myth for Maalouf is not only a valorization syncretism, but the horizon of creative possibility.

**Acknowledgements**

Neil Doshi would like to thank Sharon Kinoshita, Brian Catlos, Renate Blumenfeld-Kosinski, and Laura Brown for their invaluable feedback on early iterations of this article. This text was first presented at the University of California Mediterranean Studies Multi-Campus Research Project meeting in 2012.

**References**


**Suggested citation**


**Contributor Details**

Neil Doshi is Assistant Professor of French in the Department of French and Italian at the University of Pittsburgh. He is currently completing *Staging the Novel: Performance Cultures and Contemporary Francophone Algerian Fiction*, a book project
that explores the intersections between popular performance in Algeria and the Francophone-Algerian novel.

Contact: Department of French and Italian, University of Pittsburgh, 1328 Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh, PA 15260, USA.
E-mail: doshi@pitt.edu

Neil Doshi has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the author of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.