Rachid Niny[1]

From *Journal of a Clandestine Migrant*

Translated by Angela Haddad

[1] Editor's note: "Niny" is the author's preferred transliteration of his name. However, it is often also written as "Nini," as in the two Works Cited entries below.

Translator's Reflection

Rachid Niny's *Yawmiyyāt Muhājir Sirrī* (Journal of a clandestine migrant), published in 1999, recounts the precarity and difficulties of undocumented migrants in Spain. Throughout, it evokes the experience of *ḥarrāga*, a Maghrebi term derived from the verb "to burn" which is used to label migrants who cross the Mediterranean Sea—often under hazardous conditions—and burn their documents upon arrival to make immediate deportation to their countries of origin more difficult if they are discovered by authorities. Indeed, the first page of the book visually recalls the term as Niny watches a news segment on television about several migrants' fatal attempt to cross the sea on a small boat, and the text repeatedly draws attention to migrants burning their documents.

The word *Yawmiyyāt*, which can be translated as "journal" or "diary," seemingly positions the work as a first-person reflection on the lives of such migrants. Niny sketches out the poor living conditions and the physically demanding labor in fields or behind establishment doors to which he and other migrants from low-income and marginalized regions are subjugated. He also illustrates the constant negotiation of relations with other marginalized communities like the Roma and poor Spaniards while also contemplating the ease with which wealthy tourists from Northern Europe vacation in Spain. While some commentators have opted to translate the title's first word as "diary," the text's non-linearity, irregularity in terms of installments, and reflective mode lend weight to the word "journal" as a translation. Rather than recounting daily events, Niny contemplates the forms of labor, types of sociality, and places available to *ḥarrāga* as various borders and boundaries cross their ways.

The second part of the title, which can be literally translated as "of a Secret Migrant," avoids the specificity of *ḥarrāga* as a term (whose singular would be *ḥarrāg*). Unlike the only full translation of the book, which exists in Spanish as *Diario de un ilegal* (Diary of an illegal immigrant, 2002), I concur with David Álvarez's usage of "clandestine migrant" in his analysis of the work, as the description conveys the layered meanings contained in the word *sirrī* (secret) in the context of the book. As depicted in the excerpt below, Niny

attempts to maintain a low profile to escape discovery by law enforcement authorities as an undocumented migrant. While *sirrī* can be translated as "undocumented," as opposed to derogatory adjectives like "illegal," it does not account for the second form of secrecy in the text, which is only revealed at the end. Niny's migration, he confesses, is not driven by necessity, but by the possibility of a challenge. Contrary to the experience of *ḥarrāga*, Niny enters Spain on a journalist's visa under the pretext of covering a conference on the Berber community and becomes an "undocumented" migrant only after he overstays his visa. Even when that point is reached, he never fully does away with his passport and manages to publicly report his activity in the press, albeit in Arabic. In fact, before appearing as a book, the work's contents appeared in a series of articles that Niny began writing in 1997 for *al-ʿAlam*, the daily newspaper of Morocco's Istiqlal Party, in order to provide an account of what Moroccan and other migrants arriving from the Maghreb faced on the other side of the Mediterranean. In this sense, "clandestine" operates between two points: "undocumented," on the one hand, and "covert" or "undercover," on the other.

In addition to highlighting the uncontrollable conditions that affect an undocumented migrant's daily wages, this translated excerpt is a reflection on Niny's positionality as an Arabic-speaking migrant from North Africa. This positionality is further complicated by Spain's history, which was shaped by the conquest of the Americas as well as the Spanish Crown's expulsion of Muslim and Jewish populations from what used to be Muslim-ruled Iberia during the *Reconquista*. Upon his arrival, Niny is labeled by Spaniards not as a Moroccan or migrant worker, but as a "Moro" or Moor, a term that accrued derogatory connotations in reference to Muslims during the late medieval and early modern periods. The summoning of this category of differentiation from *Reconquista* narratives points to contemporary actors' demarcations of self and other through residual ideologies or, at the very least, their terminologies. The differentiations between who can be seen as Spanish and not are put on stark display during a multiday, whitewashed festival in Benidorm that Niny attends called *Moros y Cristianos*, or "Moors and Christians." However, through language, writing, and allusions to certain

figures in Arab history and Arabic literature, Niny simultaneously re-establishes his identity as a cultural and social critic and reclaims the figure of the Moor within frames relevant to his educational formation rather than the lingering idiom of the *Reconquista*, even, as will be seen below, in its most romantic iterations.

Works Cited

Álvarez, David. "Recording Daily Life in the Margins of History and of the Nation: Rachid Nini's *Diary of a Clandestine Migrant*." *Biography* 36, no. 1 (2013): 148–178.

Nini, Rachid. *Diario de un ilegal*. Translated by Malika Embarek López and Gonzalo Fernández Parrilla. Madrid: Ediciones del Oriente y del Mediterráneo, 2002.

(4)

We didn't work for two days straight. We drank Manolo's awful coffee and then got to the field by seven, only to find the trees dripping wet and the sky overcast. It poured down an hour or so later. The guys were playing cards back at Merche's bar and having a good time. Merche was piggishly devouring chocolate and staring at the TV. No one had drowned today. "Things must be getting better," she jeered. I told her not to be so quick and that tomorrow she'd be proven wrong. People risk their lives every day. By land. On sea. Everywhere. I'm terrified that I'll see one of my friends' corpses floating in the water one day on TV. It'll be awful.

On the way back through the mountains yesterday, Merche said that her friend asked for a crate of oranges to bring to her dying father in Murcia, so she stopped by one of the fields and stole three crates. The whole way she kept talking about her youngest daughter, Sandra. A fortune teller told her that she had a special gift and could see things. I only ever see trees through the window, I said. Merche chuckled and said that was good. At least her daughter's future would be set. She lingered on the word "future," and I thought a bit about mine. I didn't see anything. The future is a place bereft of light, or it's a poorly lit one. That's why everything seems murky in it. At least I know what my immediate future will look like. It's held hostage by the rain, the morning fog, the sunrise, the trees, and Fernando the truck driver who comes by with empty crates and leaves with them filled with oranges at night. Well, the weather has to be clear and sunny and Fernando needs to stop drinking and leave the bar before eight for that last bit to happen.

It had been days since Cristián came to work. When Merche brought him in the morning in the car, he said that he started working again at the Italian restaurant that he had worked at before, though the restaurant wouldn't open its doors until the summer. He got himself some new, white front teeth. They looked great. He started smiling without pursing his lips together. Fernando Pessoa. I don't know why, but every time Fernando the truck driver comes by, I think of Fernando Pessoa, even though they are total opposites.

Fernando the truck driver doesn't wear prescription glasses like Pessoa and drives a truck. He doesn't even write poetry. It's pretty funny.

Since the forecast called for more rain, I headed out of Oliva and went to Benidorm. No one would be working there today. Rows of chairs had been lined up in front of the coffee shops and houses and along the alleys and pathways that the procession would pass in front of. Young girls were wearing marvelously decorated gowns. Older women had painted their faces and were sitting on seats or the sidewalks in front of the coffee shops hours before the procession began. Echoes of military music made their way from a distance. I was standing in the middle of the crowd. I'm fairly tall, but the Brits were blocking everything with their huge bodies. Older Spanish women were clutching their purses and smiling. The Brits don't care about foreigners, even when their wives are eyed up by them. Their unwavering indifference baffles me.

Every year the city's streets come to life with a story called *Moros y Cristianos*. The crux of the story is that a Crusader king approaches an Arab king with his army and, standing in front of the fort's gate, convinces the Arab king to leave by reciting poems. That's how the Arab king, accompanied by his soldiers, picks up and goes, returning to his land behind the sea. Then, the Crusader king enters the fort. Every bit is narrated in poetic meter. Knights dressed as Arabs and others dressed as Crusaders face each other in mock duels at night on the beach. A knight from one of the sides prevails every evening, but on the festival's last day, the Crusader knight reigns victorious, and the Arab knight falls onto the sandy shore. The audience claps for a long time until the Arab knight rises from his death and animates the crowd. There isn't a hint of defeat in the days leading up to the finale, but it is always reserved for the Arab knight. It's witty, this way of narrating history to foreigners. Forget about telling new generations about what really happened to the Arabs when they were driven out of al-Andalus. The Inquisition. Slaughter. Collective exile. None of that would bring in tourists. It would be too dramatic for a festival. It's better that the show goes on the way it does, commemorating the expulsion of the Arabs. The Moors. A more beautiful account of exile really couldn't be told. Even the dialogues are composed of rosy verses dripping with love and peace. The show is

awesome, though—beating drums, young women stringing Eastern melodies, college students everywhere, and pretty ladies in Arabic-fashioned dresses. They pretend to be Castilian bondmaids that have been captured by Arab knights advancing with pompous arrogance and brandishing their shiny swords. I was in awe for a bit. The leader of the Moors was a corpulent knight with a real beard, but his face was painted over black. Others hoped the fake beards they had fastened on would make them look like Arab knights.

The leader brandished his split-ended sword and fervently rallied the crowd. I thought of Sayyid Ali's sword that was drawn above the blackboard on yellow paper when I was in grade school. Sayyid Ali had pierced ghouls through the head with his two-pointed scimitar. The leader was riding a black horse and wore a helmet. His steps were more like those of a surveyor than of a fighter headed to war, so he didn't look afraid. He smiled and advanced.

Being there in that spectacle suddenly felt more ridiculous than the fake duel on the beach. I was also exhausted because I was going back and forth between watching the events and being on the lookout for police uniforms in case I needed to vanish into thin air. I went back home without watching the rest of the festival, but I knew the end well. The Crusader king would come with his soldiers and share a few poems he had learned by heart. The Arab king would then look down upon him from his horse and respond in crafted verse. He'd leave the fortress honorably without one drop of blood being shed. I returned home shattered. On the way back, the image of the leader of the Moorish troops in blackface flashed before my eyes. I don't know why, but I thought he resembled Antarah, whose face had been drawn above his poem—the satirical one that mocks a stingy king—in my high school's second-year reading room. I also recalled one *hakawati*'s tale that I had heard near Bab Lakhmiss in Salé. This storyteller said Antarah hadn't died in his bed like poets do today but had been killed like any real knight. The *hakawati* was surer about the anecdote than the professors of ancient literature at the university. The man said that Antarah uttered poetry as easily as he breathed and that one day there was a misunderstanding between him and a blind man. The reason being poetry, of course. The blind man was more certain of himself than Antarah was of his tongue, so

he challenged him to death. Conceited about his strength, Antarah shrugged his shoulders in the vast desert and kicked his horse which, according to the *hakawati*, was as black as its owner. He added that Antarah preferred having a black horse because it would help him hide in the middle of the desert at night, but the blind man clearly made him out. He made him out from the center of his inner darkness. It was Antarah who was blind because he hadn't seen the threat of the blind man for what it was and took him for a fool. Antarah's problem was that he was so massive that his piss could be heard from miles away. One day, after an entire lifetime's chase, the blind man heard Antarah's voice among all the knights. He finally smiled and pulled an arrow out from his quiver.

Like an experienced huntsman, he aimed in the direction of the giant's voice with close precision. He pulled on the bow and let death choose its most efficient position and then released. That's how the blind man lived and Antarah died.

No one, not even the *hakawati*, knows why Antarah didn't see the danger as he neared it. Why exactly did he insist on not seeing it? Why did he refuse to notice the blind man's threats when they were clearly written all over his face? The blind most likely see past their suffering. I've never seen a blind person fall in the street, but I've laughed at people who've stumbled and fallen with their eyes wide open. I guess Antarah didn't perceive his death because he couldn't see anything aside from Abla, that woman he loved to death. He had scattered his sights in hopes of seeing her. Now we know why he preferred having a black horse. It wasn't just about not being seen. He didn't care to see anyone, let alone his death. Love is like an arrow pointed aimlessly. It's like a blind man guided by a young lady on a lit path.

I still don't know what I'd say to the police if they were to stop me in the street. Early comers would tell you not to carry your passport outside the house, unless you want someone to know your nationality. Abdelwahab says they stop him more than once a day and do a full search. Sometimes they seize his goods. I told him that if I were an officer, I'd do the same because he looks suspicious. But he said that the elderly take to him. They pity him. Or something like that. He told me that things are better in Spain now than before. Just

three years ago, they'd burst into hotel rooms and send anyone they'd catch to Tangier. I told him I knew my rights well. Even though I'm here illegally, I'm not a criminal. I'm a problem asking to be solved. That's all. I told Abdelwahab this for the sake of philosophizing. Actually, I could very well be a criminal. Or at least become one.