

baby daughter, and a daughter to her own mother, whose loving care for her bereft daughter typifies the matrilineal strengths of the Sérère culture on the Senegalese coast, where a shipwreck triggered not only personal, but national, grief.

Rosemary Haskell
Elon University

Nancy Morejón
Before a Mirror, the City

Trans. David Frye. Buffalo, New York.
White Pine Press. 2020. 111 pages.

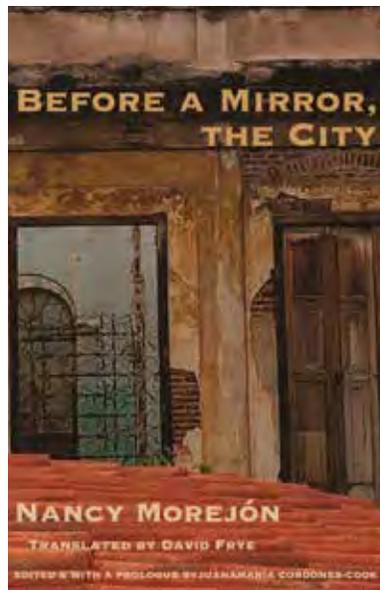
NANCY MOREJÓN HAS LONG been synonymous with Cuban poetry (see *WLT*, Summer 2002, Autumn 2019). In this succinct collection of poems, introduced by Juanamaría Cordones-Cook and beautifully translated by David Frye, Morejón is synonymous with Havana, embodying that dignified and downtrodden, anachronous place blessed with spirit and light; it feeds her soul, inspires her poetry, and breaks our hearts with its struggles and its rubble.

Morejón was the first Black Cuban woman poet to publish widely and be accepted as a professional writer, critic, and translator. The twenty-four poems here range over five decades, from some of her earliest collections, *Amor, ciudad atribuida* (1964) and *Richard trajo su flauta y otros argumentos* (1967), and poems from more recent collections, *Paisaje Celebre* (1993), *La Quinta de los Molinos* (2000), and *Pierrot y la luna* (2005). The selection herein reflects the city's sounds, smells, and textures, in verses devoted to Parque Central in Old Havana, the Quinta de los Molinos, the port, and the emblematic Malecón. Presumably, when she stands before her reflection, we see the city and the city sees her (*this city . . . will begin to stalk you / haunting your footsteps*).

Morejón's ode to Central Park ("Parque Central, alguna gente") ends with a battle cry to her fellow countrymen. She describes a park passerby and beseeches him, and us, to "walk slowly and breathe deeply . . . /

and give his whole life / with all his fervor / comrades."

In one of her earliest poems, "Love, City Attributed," from her eponymous second book, the dedication reads: "al lector, compañero" (to the reader, comrade), invoking a sense of selflessness and unity demanded and spurred on by the revolutionary times. In the poem she asks repeatedly, "who am i" and then: "does anyone hear the dream from my cursed mouth / who am i talking to." To this reader's mind, there's no doubt about who Morejón is, or to whom she is



speaking—she embodies all the elements of the city and the collective experiences of its inhabitants, and Havana and its residents are listening, now in English through these poems in her exquisitely translated voice. Comrades, indeed.

Erin Goodman
Arlington, Massachusetts

C. T. Rwizi
Scarlet Odyssey

Seattle, Washington. 47North. 2020.
546 pages.

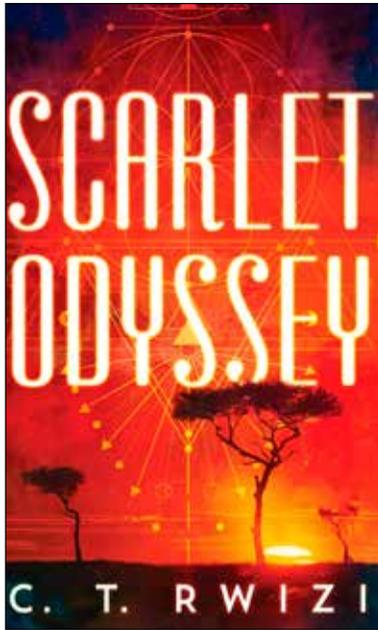
Afrofantasy. It's a largely unsung literary tradition in the making, one that grapples with the whiteness and westernness of mass-market genre fantasy and is exemplified

by recent work by N. K. Jemisin, Marlon James, Rivers Solomon, and the present novel, C. T. Rwizi's *Scarlet Odyssey*. In the best tradition of epic fantasy, *Scarlet Odyssey* is the first in a trilogy, a sprawling tale populated by dozens of characters exploring a complex world while taking on a dramatic, empire-sprawling quest, using magic, wielding swords and spears, and encountering legendary creatures.

Historically, fantasy fiction has looked like some version of medieval or early modern Europe. The last three decades, however, have seen an increasing number of fantasy novels set in worlds based on the histories and mythologies of non-Western cultures, so that it's virtually impossible to name any world culture and not find a fantasy novel based on it, from the Aztecs to, now, the Xhosa and Zulu. Rwizi's novel is very much in this tradition, taking Swazi cultures, languages, and folktales as the basis for a wonderfully realized secondary-world fantasy.

Not only is *Scarlet Odyssey* a novel treat in terms of its imagining a world that looks and feels very much like southern Africa prior to the arrival of Europeans, but Rwizi also goes beyond the norm to create an incredibly complex magical system that intermingles computer programming, environmental stimuli, a totem system, animal spirits, mecha, and so much more. Rarely does a first-time novel, let alone a first-time epic fantasy novel reaching toward six hundred pages, enthrall at the level of world-building in the way that Rwizi's *Scarlet Odyssey* does. Rwizi's use of Swazi cultures draws on traditional cosmologies and beliefs to give the book an uncommon sense of depth; it is a novel that demands attention to the meanings it creates/remixes.

Neither does the story disappoint. It follows a boy named Salo who wishes to become a mystic (taboo among his Yerezi people, since women are the learned ones and men the warriors), whose powerful mystic mother left behind dark magical secrets, and whose tribe is massacred in a plot by . . . well, I can't tell you by whom, because that'd spoil the mystery.



Salo is joined by other refugees from various attacks orchestrated by the Yerezis' malefactor and the warlord Dark Sun, with chapters regularly switching perspectives to tell an engaging story of young people growing into adulthood and newfound powers.

With *Scarlet Odyssey*, Rwizi has written a novel that is expertly plotted, incredibly well thought out where magical and cultural systems are concerned, and also quite bloody. While not as literarily deft as Marlon James's recent *Black Leopard, Red Wolf* (see *WLT*, Spring 2019, 80) or Jemisin's record-breaking Broken Earth trilogy, *Scarlet Odyssey* deserves to be recognized as a powerful force in the growing Afrofantasy movement.

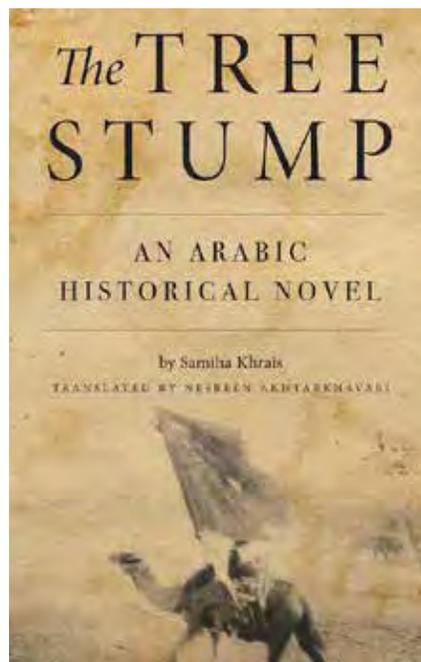
Sean Guynes
Michigan State University

Samiha Khrais
The Tree Stump:
An Arabic Historical Novel

Trans. Nesreen Akhtarkhavari. East Lansing. Michigan State University Press. 2019. 174 pages.

Samiha Khrais is a Jordanian novelist whose work has the imprimatur of those with heft, political and cultural, in her

native land. The winner of, among other awards, the Al-Hussein Medal for Distinguished Creativity (2015), she addresses herself in *The Tree Stump* to the question of Jordan's origins in the 1916 Arab Revolt against the Turks. It is perhaps inevitable, then, that one has a slight sense of reading, if not an official account, then at least one that will not displease her compatriots or the (admittedly largely benevolent) dynasty that rules over them. However, the historical background to the creation of the only



surviving Hashemite dynasty, that of Iraq having been bloodily overthrown in 1958 and the Kingdom of Syria strangled at birth, is further complicated by the controversial figure of T. E. Lawrence, prominent in the minds of many putative readers of this translation because of a memorable film and in the minds of a few because of a brilliant, if idiosyncratic, autobiographical account of his role in the region, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* (1926).

Indeed, the wish to provide an alternative account to Lawrence's, one rooted in the experiences of Arabs, is avowedly

The Heart of a Stranger: An Anthology of Exile Literature
Ed. André Naffis-Sahely

London. Pushkin Press. 2020. 352 pages.

Hardly a literary position exists that trumps that of the exile and the émigré. Of course, not every exile succeeds in fashioning from their banishment a new whole or fresh start, imprinting elsewhere; those who do succeed can acquire an aura akin to that of a saint. In this anthology, André Naffis-Sahely sizes up the phenomenon of exile across ages, cultures, and causes, from the ancient and biblical through the Dark Ages and into the age of nations, considering political, religious, and personal reasons for exile, right up to more contemporary notions of “cosmopolitanism and rootlessness.”

Many, but by no means all, of the authors of passages in this volume have themselves been exiles, including Naffis-Sahely himself. Yet in every case, care is taken to present excerpts that foreground exile and related states as their topic. Sometimes these converge—author and topic—as in the passage from Dante's *Divine Comedy*, where the author meets the exiled Cacciaguida, who warns Dante of his own coming

central to the book. Information obtained during Khrais's meetings with tribal elders “challenged the narrative that Lawrence and most Western historians provided,” resulting in a novel that celebrates the valor of Arab warriors fighting for their freedom and culture and the inspiration given by their strong women, whose strength, contra stereotyping views of the West, “is perceived as a source of honor and pride for the men.” One would expect the role