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Zones of Slippage between the Binary Oppositions

Reda Bensmaia opens this collection of his essays by explaining why francophone literature from North Africa should be of interest to all students of world literature. He feels that, too often, the works of these writers have been reduced to "ethnographic evidence" (p. 7). He seeks to draw attention to the literary strategies of writers who are trying "to reappropriate their national cultural heritage, to regain their idioms, and to reconfigure their history, territory, and community." Indeed, he suggests that Maghrebi francophone writers were precursors of the movement to re-evaluate nation, ethnicity, and authenticity in contemporary literary criticism and postcolonial studies. Writers from the Maghreb have long been engaged in demythologizing the nation. Bensmaia explains that they have also come to develop new modes of literary "interruption" that expose the nation as "an unfinished community" (p. 25). Through a variety of narrative strategies and stylistic inventions, these "interruptions" open up the possibility of a creative engagement with "the multiple voices and languages of Maghrebi popular culture" through the investment of the "deceptive neutrality of literary space" (p. 26). Hence the title of the collection, *Experimental Nations*.

Bensmaia's essays proceed through a reconnaissance of zones of slippage between the binary oppositions that tend to structure how we speak about languages, culture, and modernity when writing about the Maghreb. His analysis of the linguistic field is emblematic of his approach. He suggests that we need to take into account the various levels and temporalities that both Arabic and French involve. Berber, Tuareg, and Mozabite tongues must be included in consideration of the literary terrain that makes up the Maghreb. One must be careful to examine the linguistic field as a whole to come to terms with writings from North Africa. By experimenting with this linguistic terrain, writers and filmmakers, and presumably other artists or essayists, reconceive maps and memories. Bensmaia illustrates this through his analysis of Merzak Allouche's film *Salut Cousin*" a film that follows a group of young Algerians around Paris. Bensmaia argues that the film shows how their experiences "interrupt" the silence about the shared and tragic histories of France and Algeria, the two countries that shape the lives of the protagonists. Bensmaia wants us to recognize a shared polylingual terrain in the Maghreb. His analysis of *Salut Cousin* extends this idea of a hybrid or space to the history and experience of Paris and Algiers. He writes that in *Salut Cousin,* "Paris is revealed to be slightly Algerian, belonging to a complex network of exchanges that seals the fate of both cities" (p. 45). Algiers simultaneously becomes a site of French memory. Whether by recognizing French in Arabic, or Algiers in France, Bensmaia presents connections where ruptures are assumed to prevail. This does not mean that he envisages a kind of sunny coexistence that puts everyone on an equal footing once old objects of dispute are brought out of the shadows for examination. Rather, he describes the Maghrebi writer as someone who writes the experimental nation writer from a position of what Deleuze and Guattari have called the "minoritarian."

How might this be related to poetry or the novel?- Bensmaia selects Nabile Fares's work to examine the shape of experimental nations. Bensmaia writes that Fares rejects "the book-tree and the book root imposed by the verb 'to be."' In *Lost State*, Fares writes about immigrants. He also writes as an immigrant, but an immigrant who is free to become like a passageway, to be let loose of origin, filiations or the urge to return (p. 63). Bensmaia suggests that Fares's work operates through "an almost stochastic logic," which means that the coordinating conjunction "and" is given a privileged position. This leads Bensmaia to compare Fares to Ezra Pound. The development of the text through the "Poundian ideogram" comes to be equated with a rejection of the univocal nature of modern identities and states. Among the syllables and tenses of the modernizer's ten-year plan, the rhy-

zomic text develops an alternative that is not conceived as a model to be followed, a made-to-order instruction manual for the nation. The idea is seductive. But I cannot help but think about its political implications. In the course of studying how Morocco's King Hassan II wielded power through a savvy use of the mass media, I came to some oddly similar conclusions regarding the use of imagistic language based on conjunction (this and that and him and her) to develop a particular image of the nation. In that case, employing a (seemingly) endless number of "ands" was a strategy to limit and stifle public debate and exclude particular kinds of people from the national picture.[1] Do Bensmaia and I simply have different opinions concerning the role of the writer, the politician, or the nature of democracy? Or might these similarities indicate something about Maghrebi poetics and politics more generally? I think it would be worth pursuing this question through more comparative work on literary and media form. If there are many reasons to see the Maghrebi countries as comprising a shared writer's world, from the moment that we think of experimental nations, it is difficult to forget that rather different narratives of the nation have been developed in each of the North African states.

We may now recognize Paris as Algerian, but should we not also notice that the inhabitants of Tlemcen often point out their historical ties to Fez? To be comprehensive, should "the Maghreb" include works in Spanish or Italian by authors whose claim to being Maghrebi rests on their place of origin or that of one of their parents? These are some of the questions that I kept asking myself as I read Bensmaia's analysis of Tahar Djaout's *Invention of the Desert* and Assia Djebbar's "La nouba des femmes." I sought an explanation of how Bensmaia's Maghreb was related to their Algeria. Is it by chance that most of the writers he designates as experimenting on the nation come from a particular country? Is this due to Algeria's particularly dramatic history? It is telling that it is in his analysis of the Moroccan Abdelkebir Khatibi's work that Bensmaia's idea of writing as a movement through a multilingual terrain is most fully fleshed out.

Abdelkebir Khatibi's *Love in Two Languages* (Amour Bilingue/ 'Achk Ellissanain) moves beyond the French/Arabic dichotomy according to Bensmaia because Khatibi "rejected this dualism from the outset, attempting to conceive and, literally, to stage a space that had been unthinkable until then" (p. 104). Bensmaia praises Khatibi's ability to achieve this, without employing the kind of "technonarcissistic devices that characterize so many so-called modern Francophone works" (p. 106). By analyzing not only Khatibi's writing but a detailed discussion of the dust jacket of the book as well, he maintains that Khatibi's use of the French language is shadowed by Arabic and by calligraphy. This happens through a sheer "reflection, reverberation, and dissemination as far as the eye can see" (p. 111). Bensmaia notes that for Khatibi "the homeland of a writer does not refer to a specific land, native soil, or culture but to a circulation–even a migration–among lands, languages, and cultures" (p. 126). It is not suprising that Khatibi develops a special understanding of what it means to be a "professional traveler." But it is also worth noting that Bensmaia develops his analysis of this wanderer and of globalization with respect to particular bodies of literature. Travel could be discussed in terms of Arabic travel literature, be the travel genre known as "al-rihla," including accounts of modern travels like the Egyptian al-Tahtawi that have been translated into French and English, or contemporary works of fiction.[2] Questions of wanderers, cosmopolitans, or globalization might also call to mind the works of writers like James Clifford or Ulf Hannerz. Yet, malgre a nod in the direction of Arjun Appadurai, it is to Wallerstein, Mattelart, and Galissot that Bensmaia turns to develop his analysis. I notice this not to plead for an exhaustive bibliography, but to indicate how the primary spaces of Bensmaia's interpretation are dominated by something we might still conceive of as related to the French language and indeed, the French academy, given the lack of references to francophone critics writing from the Maghreb itself. I truly want to get a foothold in the arabo-hispano-amazigho Maghreb that Khatibi is unfolding. But to do this I need further explanations of how different levels of language as well as distinct languages shape the virtual worlds with which writers can experiment.

Experimental Nations makes Bensmaia's essays easier to access for English-speaking audiences. Each essay provides an elegant analysis of important works by key authors. Yet, for those unfamiliar with the Maghreb this book will be challenging, since a good understanding of the history and literature of the region is required to make sense of Bensmaia's choice of particular authors, and his clear disdain for other works. For instance, he berates writers who use "techno-narcissistic devices"–but offers no examples of what he means by this. Indeed, some examples would have added a touch of humor to the book! Although Bensmaia proposes a "new geolinguistics" one of the problems for the reader is trying to develop a clear conception of the way that Bensmaia locates "the maghreb" and maghrebi francophone writing with respect to national, linguistic, and cultural spaces, experimental or otherwise. Bensmaia writes that since "under

today's postmodern conditions, it is not geographic or even political boundaries that determine identities, but rather a plane of consistency that goes beyond the traditional idea of the nation and determines its new transcendental configuration" (p. 8). While the reader might carefully piece together the essays in this book to make sense of this affirmation, this is not an easy task, given the diversity of theoretical directions Bensmaia takes in essays written at different points in time. How is the reader to understand this "plane of consistency" in ways she might draw on in her own work? Given the importance of developing research out of the kinds of connected spaces and newly discovered common terrains that are pointed to in this collection, let us hope that Bensmaia is writing another book to show how scholars interested in literature and aesthetic form more generally can recognize and shape such spaces not only around the Maghreb but throughout the world.

Notes

[1]. Susan Ossman, *Picturing Casablanca: Portraits of Power in a Modern City* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

[2]. On the "rihla," see, for instance, Dale F. Eickelman and James Piscatori *Muslim Travellers: Pilgrimage, Migration and the Religious Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); Susan Miller, *Disorienting Encounters: Travels of a Moroccan Scholar in France in 1845-1846: The Voyage of Muhammad As-Saffar* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992); and Daniel Newman, trans., *An Imam in Paris: Al-Tahtawi's Visit to France, 1826-1831*, (London: Saqi Books, 2002).

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