The cover commands attention: a black map of Africa sits on a bold red ground. This striking design alerts readers to the thrust of *Maghreb Noir*: the book is a chronicle of high hopes for continental unity and left-wing ideals. The time is the long decade of the 1960s, and the place is the capital cities of the Maghreb. Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik tells the story how, as European colonizers began to leave Africa in the late 1950s, some “militant-artists” gathered in the Maghreb and clamored for a just and free future for the entire continent and all its social classes.

She calls these artists the Maghreb Generation. For them, the continent was one: they refused to be concerned only with the “white” North or the “black” South. They defined “black” not racially but to describe those who had been marginalized and colonized or, to use Frantz Fanon’s iconic phrase, the “wretched of the earth.” Galvanized by Fanon, these filmmakers, poets, and visual artists engaged in direct political action against imperial domination in the late 1950s. Then in the 1960s, animated by left-wing political goals rather than religion, they turned their critical attention to the authoritarian regimes that replaced the colonizers.

The Maghreb Generation was born in Rabat—rather than Algiers, as commonly supposed—from conversations among African colonial artists. In 1959 Lusophone poets began arriving in Morocco’s capital from Portugal’s African colonies via Lisbon and Paris.[1] They published their poetry in *Souffles*, a cutting-edge left-wing literary journal based in Rabat and Casablanca, in the hope that their verse would recruit supporters. Rejecting Léopold Senghor’s celebratory *négritude* in favor of Fanon’s defiant armed struggle, these African “militant-artists” initially enjoyed official Moroccan support in the form of military training and money. Their welcome was short-lived. From the early 1960s, Pan-African and Marxist-Leninist perspectives were increasingly coming under attack in Morocco from two directions: Pan-Arabism was displacing Pan-Africanism among Morocco’s liter-
ary intelligentsia, and King Hassan II had *Souffles*’ editors and writers arrested.

The Maghreb Generation did seem to flourish in Algiers, but reality was more complicated. Even though some celebrate Algeria’s capital as the site of the 1969 Pan-African festival (PANAF), the militant-artists saw through its pretensions. For them, the festival was designed to co-opt “the power and potential of revolutionary art, transforming it into a state project that served to uphold a corrupt post-colonial government [Algeria’s *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN)]” (p. 2). Disenchanted, the dissident attendees sought refuge in places like poet Jean Sénac’s Algiers apartment, where, outside official venues, they “materialized a community of belonging that they had been creating for a decade on paper and through the airwaves” (p. 73). The Black Panthers famously attended PANAF, but their understanding of Algeria was limited, obtained mainly through the lenses of the film *The Battle of Algiers* (1967), Fanon, and Malcolm X. As a result, the Panthers often offended local norms, particularly vis-à-vis women, when exercising their “revolutionary manhood” (p. 117). Women do not play a large role in this story.

Pan-Africanists’ hopes for a “utopian form of freedom ... of expression, of the mind, and of movement” were dashed in Tunisia, too (p. 66). In 1966 President Habib Bourguiba’s government created the first independent film festival in Africa (Journées Cinématographiques de Carthage) and made local film critic Tahar Cheriahaa its head. Ciné-clubs sprang up, attracting young people eager to debate the films they had just seen. Youth in these clubs, sometimes inspired by rebellious films like those of Senegalese filmmaker Ousmane Sembène, grew strident, even hostile to the establishment. One Tunisian remembers, “We wanted the liberty to think, to create, to critique, to talk about women’s rights, injustices, abuses of power, but the state did not want us to question” (p. 133). Bourguiba’s government quickly took control of the ciné-clubs, and Cheriahaa was arrested.

This tour through three North African capitals in the long decade of the 1960s could have been conducted in a depressing way, but the tone of *Maghreb Noir* is, on the contrary, celebratory. Tolan-Szkilnik’s energetic enthusiasm for her subject led her to unearth private archives and to explore under-acknowledged figures and relationships. Her cast of characters numbers forty-nine, including the likes of the king of Morocco and his foe Abraham Serfaty, along with a multinational roster of artists like Haitian poet and militant René Depestre. She interviewed thirty-three, especially those identifying themselves as Pan-Africanists and Marxist-Leninists. Like Brahim El Guabli, a literary scholar also hunting for other-than-official archives, she advocates searching out and preserving the letters, pamphlets, and memorabilia of once influential militant-artists, albeit with a critical eye. She scrupulously points out cases where nostalgia may have distorted their testimony, leading them to ignore, for example, racial prejudice within North Africa. She also notes where their stories conflict so radically that it is best simply to acknowledge the debate: Cheriahaa’s peers, for example, call him both a state functionary and a revolutionary.

Tolan-Szkilnik’s zest for her findings led her to put all references to secondary literature in footnotes so the chapters themselves read primarily as case-study narratives. They are largely descriptive, based on the primary material she worked hard to find. She retells the militant-artists’ stories with evident appreciation for their dreams and efforts. Two nemeses emerge. First, there are unnamed scholars who seem to prefer the authority of state archives and those who “have overlooked the importance of culture and arts as tools for recruitment” (p. 38). Second, there are the authoritarian North African states that claim to support Pan-Africanism simply to justify their own power. There is no doubt that the long 1960s were a heady period, full of idealistic rhetoric. There is
equally little doubt that subsequent disappointments have been profound.

A sign of *Maghreb Noir*'s provocative value lies in the questions it raises. Particularly difficult ones have to do with the overall significance of these artists and their work: What effect did the poems, magazines, films, festivals really have, beyond "inflam[ing] militants' political imagination"? What exactly did the Maghreb Generation achieve when it “weaponized cultural production,” and when does “weaponized” art cross a fine line and become simply propaganda (p. 63)? (One thinks of Sénac’s stunning line of poetry, “You are as beautiful as a management committee” [p. 75].) Further, what exactly is the nature of the alternative, transnational world they were trying to create, beyond one filled with “agency, freedom, and beauty,” and by precisely what means would they create it, especially after the armed struggle was won (p. 151)? Rather than intending to write a “definitive history of post-colonial Pan-Africanism in the Maghreb,” one that would address such questions, Tolan-Szkilnik set out to “explore relationships, unearth archives, and highlight characters” in the movement (p. 152). As the bold drama of her black and red cover design suggests, she has taken an exuberant first step toward that “definitive history.” She is opening a North African window on past dreams and struggles, when dissident Pan-Africanists used art to rebel against the constraints that repressive regimes had imposed on their potential and on their imaginations.

Note

[1]. Mario de Andrade, poet and founder of Angola's Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola (MPLA); Marcelino dos Santos, poet and founder of Mozambique's Frente de Libertação de Moçambique (FRELIMO); Amílcar Cabral, poet and leader of Guinea-Bissau's Partido Africano para a Independência da Guiné e Cabo Verde (PAIGC); and Agostinho Neto, poet, leader of the MPLA, and first president of independent Angola. Three errors of nomenclature in *Maghreb Noir* should be noted: not Rabat Kesha, but Robert Resha; not Robert Holden, but Holden Roberto; and Morocco claimed Spanish Sahara, not Mauritania (pp. 26, 174, 26).
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