



Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, ed. *Algeria in Others' Languages*. New York: Cornell University Press, 2002. x + 330 pp. \$45.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8014-8801-6.



Reviewed by Melissa Marcus

Published on H-Gender-MidEast (August, 2003)

Algeria's Language Labyrinth

This informative collection of essays has its origins in a conference, "Algeria in and out of French: Politics and Culture in Postcolonial Algeria," organized by the editor Anne-Emmanuelle Berger, held at Cornell University in 1996. Its purpose is "to account for the tribulations and partial failure of the 'politics of Arabization' in Algeria" (p. vii). In its scope, *Algeria in Others' Languages* admirably accomplishes this goal. In particular, most of the contributors are Maghrebian or born in the Maghreb. They included specialists in a variety of fields (literature, linguistics, history, sociology, french and english) as well as novelists, poets and critics, whose analyses are particularly influenced by the experience of living in the multi-lingual arena about which they write. They are specialists, not from the outside, but writers of their own heritage, in which they continue to be immersed. *Algeria in Others' Languages* is, thus, a particularly rich collection of essays.

Even a seasoned reader of the Algerian scene, its literature, history and politics, can learn a great deal from this book. A number of approach-

es are well represented: literary, philosophical, anthropological, and historical. As in Alexander Durrell's *Alexandria Quartet*, or Akira Kurosawa's famed "Rashomon," the variety of viewpoints on the troubled politics of Arabization leaves us with a better understanding of the subject. Yet many unanswered questions are raised and the reader finishes the book with a thirst for more knowledge. To this end, a lengthy bibliography of works cited will facilitate the curious reader's task, while extensive footnotes will supply background information. In addition to an audience of specialists, the book would also be appropriate for students in an advanced undergraduate course.

After Algeria won its independence from France in 1962, one of the main goals in forming the new nation was to achieve total Arabization. This policy was pressed for in the Tripoli program of the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) and stated in the 1963 Algerian constitution. By July 5, 1998, Arabization was supposed to have been fully implemented; yet, not coincidentally, Matoub Lounès, a well-known and beloved Kabyle singer, was murdered shortly before that date. His death,

under mysterious circumstances, became one of the symbols of the Berber struggle.

Arabization has been a source of conflict, debate, controversy and violence since its very beginning. For we must not forget Algeria's intricate linguistic history, masterfully summarized in Anne-Emmanuelle Berger's introduction. How was/is a country, in which "dialectical Arabic," French, and several Berber languages are spoken, to be Arabized? At the time of Algeria's independence, the majority of Algeria's intellectual elites and leaders were educated in French, and neither they, nor the people, were fluent or particularly functional in the language of Arabization, i.e., Modern Standard Arabic. Thus began "the founding ambiguity of the politics of Arabization" (p. 3).

Yet in her essay, "The Experience of Evidence: Language, the Law, and the Mockery of Justice," Ranjana Khanna echoes many Algerian writers and intellectuals with regards to the French language. "French paradoxically becomes the language of protest even as it carries within it the ghosts of the past. Perhaps the uncanniness of the language—its paradoxical status as the language of the Other and, simultaneously, as an elusive mother language that provided opportunities—has become the only viable alternative, however haunted it may be by its own colonial specters" (p. 134).

In contrast, Hafid Gafaïti, in "The Monotheism of the Other: Language and De/Construction of National Identity in Postcolonial Algeria," vividly protests against the vision of Arabic as a language with limitations. "I will not fetishize Arab-Muslim civilization as one of the most important of humankind, though it certainly is that. Let us simply recall that Arabic, in addition to being the language of the Koran, is also the language of literature and poetry, of mathematics and astronomy, of geography and history, of philosophy and medicine, the language of anticolonial resistance and popular revolutions [...] the characterization of Arabic as an obscurantist, antimodernist lan-

guage is quite simply racist" (p. 40)! His ideas may be compared with those of other Maghrebian writers who have emphasized that they found in the French language a liberty they could not find in Arabic. Gafaïti raises a question, which is ripe for discussion.

Algeria in Others' Languages is divided into three parts: "Algeria in Other(s)' Languages," "Symbolic Violence," and "Writing in Other(s)' Languages." In Part One, Djamila Saadi-Mokrane, in her essay "The Algerian Linguicide," gives an informative history of the various Berber languages as well as the planned death of these languages and dialectical Arabic, first, at the hands of Algeria's colonial rulers and second, by the country's postcolonial leaders, through the policy of Arabization. She aptly compares this glotticide to a psychic hell:

"The Arabic, French and Berber languages are all connected to the country's history, but in different ways. They exist as a collision of words, and endure all the fractures that destabilize society [...] a will to omnipotence endeavors to penetrate the intimacy of the ineffable human being and to remake the ontological character of the people of Algeria [...] the leaders of Algeria would like to linguistically castrate the people, and, to do this, have used the resources of the state to recreate a lost image of the Orient [...]. Literary Arabic is still misunderstood by the majority; dialectical Arabic and Berber cannot express things in writing since they are exclusively oral languages; French, often poorly spoken, is considered the language of colonial alienation. In spite of all these deficiencies, the imposition of one language as a national language, in this case Arabic, has not led to the establishment of a national cultural and linguistic unity" (p. 47).

Again, in Part One, Hafid Gafaïti tries to clarify the ideological and political biases, the existence of multiple ethnic identities, and the overly emotional reactions that have harmfully dominated the debate over linguistic policies in Algeria.

We learn some surprising facts, for example, that in spite of the irrational ways in which Arabization has been implemented, it is, nevertheless, supported by a majority of the population; that a "blindly nationalist ideology" (p. 34) is not the driving force behind Arabization, but rather, Algerian nationalism developed very much in the context of Third World and Pan-Arab unity; that Algeria's economic situation in the 1970's was tied to Arabization; that the Berbers, although often spoken of as a homogeneous and unified group, are not that; and finally, that extremism also exists among the Kabyle culturalists. Gafaïti dispels some existing myths and clarifies the multitude of stances taken in the debate over Arabization. He gives information that may be new to even some in the field. And most certainly, the average Western news-watcher, who sees reports of Algerian violence, remains ignorant of the multiple layers concerning issues at the heart of the conflict.

In "The Names of Oran," H el ene Cixous skillfully and creatively brings the reader into the psyche of those living in the multilingual environment of Algeria through a recounting of her experiences growing up in Oran and Algiers. We feel the same delights, mystification, and struggles, but also creative opportunities inherent in such linguistic spaces. Thus, her focus is less on the conflicts of that environment, but instead on its vast possibilities. "All the beach-words, the theater-words, the street-words were both strange and strangers, and, 'common' or 'proper,' they fluttered in the form of magic, incantatory verbal spirits, without ever making sentences but making 'things,' 'places,' 'goods,' dwellings, scintillate and appear, themselves, the words, being musical houses where sorceries kept watch The names of Oran smelled The name of Oran smells of the Bible and incense" (pp. 184-185). Cixous's essay is a gentle ending to an anthology that describes much of the searing pain and suffering of Algerians in the last fifteen years. Perhaps it is an expression of some hope for resolution and peace,

given the creative possibilities of multicultural and multilingual Algeria.

Copyright (c) 2003 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For other uses contact the Reviews editorial staff: hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-gender-mideast>

Citation: Melissa Marcus. Review of Berger, Anne-Emmanuelle, ed. *Algeria in Others' Languages*. H-Gender-MidEast, H-Net Reviews. August, 2003.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=8021>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.