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INTRODUCTION

Is an "Experimental" Nation Possible?

For a majority of the French at the time of the Third Republic (1870–1940), Algeria could be summed up by a few clichés from Alphonse Daudet's 1892 *Tartarin de Tarascon*, one of the contemporary classics for elementary school children. During this same period, the vast stretches of Algerian territory began to serve in the imaginary of a decadent elite as a kind of stock of images, animals, and workers where differences could flourish under the protection of the French flag. Perceived as a mix of sensuality and proud purity, of oasis and desert, Algeria became a catalyst for writers wanting to break with Parisian culture. It was, in a sense, a terrain of experimentation. Théophile Gautier, Eugène Fromentin, and Guy de Maupassant traveled to Algeria seeking out novelty, and were followed by Henri de Montherlant and other French writers on the prowl for new, exotic experiences.[1] It was not until 1925 that André Gide would discover (and finally denounce) the "misdeeds" of colonialism, in his *Voyage au Congo*. However, in 1893 it was chiefly pleasure he found in Algeria: its oases gave him a taste for the "fruits of the earth."

During World War II, tired of posing for these exotic portraits, Algerians themselves began actively to enter French literature. They could do so, however, only by resorting to the language of their colonizers. Tunisian writer Albert Memmi described this "linguistic wrenching" as one of the most painful aspects of the alienation suffered by the colonized. Analyzing the colonial situation in *The Colonizer and*

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the Colonized, he spoke of the "linguistic drama" (108) raging within the colonized person: "His mother tongue is humiliated, crushed. . . . He himself sets about discarding this infirm language, hiding it from strangers' eyes." (107; translation modified) This process of self-mutilation had to come to an end before the struggle for national liberation could succeed. The idea of an Algerian literature written in French was a contradiction in the context of decolonization, and it was believed that political independence would soon be followed by cultural and linguistic independence. And yet, since Algerian independence in 1962, the number of works written in French by Maghrebi authors has continued to multiply. This fact led Memmi to retract his words some thirty years later in the preface to his anthology, *Francophone Writers from the Maghreb* [Écrivains francophones du Maghreb]: "While I have never stopped believing that the Arabic language will ultimately find the place it deserves, I have had to admit that the *inertia of custom* is more powerful than logical or sentimental hope." (11)

In Algeria, this state of affairs reflects a profound linguistic pluralism. Several languages are spoken in addition to classical and dialectic Arabic. This situation predates the French conquest. Kabyle is spoken in the mountains of Kabylia, Touareg in the desert, Mozabit in the oases—and these languages are themselves divided into dialects. Furthermore, illiteracy has been the most serious problem in Algeria—as in most of the African countries that were colonized by France: in 1962, 85 percent of the population not only did not speak French but could not read or write in either Arabic or French, and today a great many Algerians remain illiterate. Algerian writers were therefore obliged to turn to the French language in order to find readers. Prior to Algerian independence, most Algerian writers were teachers who owed their schooling to the colonial educational system. The works of poet Jean Amrouche and novelist Mouloud Feraoun (Feraoun was assassinated in 1962 by the Organisation de l'Armée Secrète [OAS], the French far-right terrorist organization that was desperately trying to sabotage de Gaulle's final recognition of Algerian independence), for example, are emblematic of the contradiction in which Maghrebi literature of that generation was mired—a contradiction that independence did not manage to resolve. In an attempt to revitalize national culture,

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Amrouche devoted himself to the systematic translation of Berber popular songs into French. In his introduction to *Chants berbères de Kabylie* (1939), he insisted on the maternal roots of this popular oral poetry: "A man whose life is not separated from the life of the Mother is naturally a poet." (13) And yet it was only by being exiled in the French language that these songs could become literature: in this instance, transcription and translation are part of one and the same gesture of separation and distance. Amrouche's collection is representative of the fate of Algerian literature, a literature born of the severing of what Kateb Yacine would call the "umbilical tie" to the mother tongue. In several chapters in this book—and particularly in the first—I have attempted to show the complexity of the problems posed by the relation to language.

The end of World War II represented a liberation for the French; this was not so for the Algerians. For them the time of experimentation was only beginning. In May 1945, a general uprising was followed by a brutal repression during which tens of thousands of Algerians were killed. Kateb Yacine (1929–89), who was a high school student at the time, took part in these anti-French demonstrations, was imprisoned, and was forbidden access to higher education. In his first novel, *Nedjma*, Kateb interwove his high school memories with those of the uprising that led to the country's liberation from the colonial yoke. In one scene, Lakhdar, a student who was expelled from school after the demonstrations, boards a train to return home. He is the only one in his compartment who can read the names of the station stops, written in French, and he discovers that the educational system from which he has just been excluded has made him betray his linguistic universe: "If we had our own trains . . . [f]irst of all, the farmers would be comfortable. They wouldn't be fidgeting at each station, afraid of missing their stop. They could read. And in Arabic too! I'd have to reeducate myself in our own language. I'd be grandfather's classmate." (84) In this key episode of the novel, French school is no longer presented as a conciliating instrument or an institution designed to lead to assimilation; instead, it is a site where contradictions become visible and explosive. While for Feraoun school was a symbol of compromise, for Kateb it accentuated the sense of an impasse, of loss and betrayal. The most powerful image of the uprising in *Nedjma* is that of the old

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Si Mokhtar, who in May 1945 in Constantine "walked through the city alone, past the fascinated police officers, with a gag in his mouth showing two slogans of his own invention which crowds of people engraved in their memory: Vive La France/Les Arabes silence!" (206) This scene stages in miniature what Kateb himself said of his novel when he called it an Algerian work in "Arabic," despite the fact that it was written in French. As the editors of *Nedjma* wrote: "Conceived and written in French, *Nedjma* remains a profoundly Arab work, and we cannot arrive at a valid assessment of it if we isolate it from the tradition to which, *even in its repudiations*, it still belongs." (6; translation modified)

Kateb's second autobiographical novel, *Le polygone étoilé* (1966), also ends on a violent note. The narrator, born into a literate family, recalls that in his childhood, everyone had expected him to become a writer—"Kateb" means writer in Arabic—but a writer who would of course write in Arabic, "like his father, mother, uncles, and grandparents." (179) However, his father, a Muslim magistrate, sends him to French school. This decision leads to the explosion of jealousy on which the novel closes: the mother cannot bear the fact that her son is seeking approval from a French schoolteacher who, she believes, won her son over to a language that she does not even speak. Kateb evokes this moment of dramatic betrayal:

> Never did I cease, even on those days when my teacher praised me, to feel deep inside me a second severing of the umbilical cord, that internal exile that drew the schoolboy closer to his mother only to pull them apart yet again, each time a little more, with the murmur of the blood, the reproachful tremors of a banished tongue, secretly, in an agreement that was broken as soon as it was made. . . . *So I had lost at one and the same time my mother and her language, the only inalienable treasures—that were alienated none the less!* [179–80]

This is the situation that most colonized countries inherited after independence. For Francophone writers, the questions remained the same: to write, of course, but in which language? To write, but *for whom*? The question that Jean-Paul Sartre asked in his *What Is Literature?*

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(1947) became a tragic problem in a culture that had no real audience for literature.

Kateb settled in Annaba, near Algiers, with the explicit intention of creating a *public* for literature. *Mohammed prends ta valise* (1971) leaves no doubt regarding the public he decided to address. This play, the first he produced in popular Arabic, was a huge success with the Algerian public both in Algeria and in France. The main character is an immigrant worker, a typical figure in contemporary Algerian life. But around this modern nomad—the uprooted proletarian—multiple echoes of traditional nomadic culture, popular songs, and ancient tales and legends swirl. Unlike rigid, printed language, the language of the stage is more flexible. It more readily reflects the complexity of daily language and the plurality of tongues that coexist in Algeria. It makes it possible to avoid the strict linguistic choices imposed by writing and the printed word, and the uniformity and impoverishment they entail. Kateb, playing among languages, brings to a head the linguistic chaos in which most Algerians still live today. What literature should one promote? Is literature the best medium to use? And what can its contributions be to efforts to build the country, to construct the nation?

Contrary to pessimistic forecasts, Maghrebi literature has continued to be written in French after Kateb. Other writers have appeared on the scene to face the challenges not only of language and identity but also of existence itself. In Morocco, authors such as Abdelatif Laabi, Mohammed Khair-Eddine, Abdelkebir Khatibi, and Tahar Ben Jelloun; in Tunisia, Mohammed Tlili, Hélé Béji, and Abdelwahab Meddeb; and in Algeria again, poets and novelists such as Nabile Farès, Rachid Mimouni, Habib Tengour, and Assia Djebar all have succeeded in showing that this literature carries a message beyond mere revolt, all the while insisting that it is the product of an iniquitous historical situation. What the works of these writers prove is that Maghrebi literature exists. It was not something brilliant and illusory that faded away. In the past, it denounced a system that, by giving it a voice, caused it to lose its language. Today, using a broad variety of styles and themes, Maghrebi literature is producing works in French that contribute to an understanding of the "new world" (Farès) that has come into being since Algerian independence. This literature has also become an indispens-

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able tool for the elaboration—or perlaboration and anamnesis—of something that was believed lost for good: the idiosyncratic nature of indigenous cultures.

This book is a collection of texts each belonging to a different period in my research—periods that are marked by academia's increasing awareness of the importance of so-called postcolonial writers. I begin with the premise that the contribution of these writers to the awakening of what could be called a new literary consciousness has not always been fully recognized. This consciousness very rapidly moved beyond the limits of national boundaries to become open to—as well as to open—a field that is now planetwide.

What has long struck me was the nonchalance with which the work of these writers was analyzed. Whenever these novels were studied, they were almost invariably reduced to anthropological or cultural case studies. Their literariness was rarely taken seriously. And once they were finally integrated into the deconstructed canon of world literature, they were made to serve as tools for political or ideological agendas. This kind of reading resulted more often than not in their being reduced to mere signifiers of other signifiers, with a total disregard for what makes them literary works *in and of themselves.*

The works of Nabile Farès, for example, although they represent one of the most original undertakings of independent Algeria, have not yet been translated into English. And on those rare occasions when they have been studied, they have been reduced to a discussion of ethnic identities! Farès is considered to be a Berberist—a poet of Berber culture and identity—even though he has behind him a body of work that, according to Jacques Godbout, makes use of one of the most courageous and original techniques of the "reappropriation of culture and of the world." Another example: Kateb Yacine, the Algerian writer who is considered to have given Francophone African literature its letters patent of nobility and whose plays have mobilized tens of thousands, if not millions, of immigrant workers throughout the world, has not yet garnered the recognition he deserves in France or elsewhere in Europe and the Americas. As Edouard Glissant recently said, the French do not yet have the ability to assimilate, let alone understand, Kateb. And yet they were, theoretically, in the most logical position to do so.

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Examples of this kind of deafness or blindness to writers who have managed to make themselves known to their people without really arousing the interest of academics are rampant. I am thinking of writers such as Tahar Ben Jelloun, Assia Djebar, Patrick Chamoiseau, Yasmina Khadra, and many, many others. They have all succeeded in finding an audience in France and, in some cases, in the United States, Germany, Italy, or Great Britain, but, except in rare instances, they had never really been read or taken seriously until very recently. Nevertheless—and this is the line of questioning followed in this book—I do not think it possible to understand the current climate in contemporary world literature without paying close attention to what is at stake in the works analyzed here. Whether it is the problem of languages or of the nation or the "transnation" (Khatibi's term); whether it is the question of what is happening in the contemporary world—Glissant's "Tout Monde" or Appaduraï's "ethnoscape"; or whether it is a matter of intellectual output in general and the fight against neocolonialism and the avatars of imperialism—few "national" literatures have played as important a role as those called Francophone. As Edward Said has emphasized, "[I]n the decades-long struggle to achieve decolonization and independence from European control, *literature has played a crucial role in the re-establishment of national cultural heritage, in the reinstatement of native idioms, in the reimagining and refiguring of local histories, geographies, communities.* As such, then, literature not only mobilized active resistance to incursions from the outside but also contributed massively as the shaper, creator, agent of illumination within the realm of the colonized."[2]

This book is dedicated to bringing to light the originality of the *literary* strategies deployed by postcolonial Maghrebi writers to reappropriate their national cultural heritage, to regain their idioms, and to reconfigure their history, territory, and community. Whether in Assia Djebar's cinema, Khatibi's prose poems or critical essays, or the novels and poems of Farès, Dib, Meddeb, Béji, Bouraroui, or Djaout, it has always been a matter of raising the veil that hid the intrinsic richness of these works from the eyes of even the most attentive readers. That is to say, this book does not simply examine the way Francophone writers from the Maghreb have dealt with their nation. It also attempts to

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show how they were constantly opening up their nation to what was escaping it on all sides. And in this sense, what lies at the heart of this work, what unifies it, is not so much a theme as a problematic. This problematic allows us to see that there may be more affinities between an Algerian writer and an African American writer today than there were between this same writer and another writer from his or her own country in the past. Under today's postmodern conditions, it is not geographical or even political boundaries that determine identities, but rather a plane of consistency that goes beyond the traditional idea of nation and determines its new transcendental configuration. And it is in this sense that I use the term *experimental nations*. My nations are experimental in that they are above all nations that writers have had to imagine or explore as if they were territories to rediscover and stake out, step by step, countries to invent and to draw while creating one's language. It is in this sense that these nations may be called virtual, without for all that being imaginary or unreal. The virtual, as we know, "is opposed not to the *real*, but to the *actual*. The virtual *is fully real as it is actual*."[3] And so we can say that our writers invent what Proust called "states of resonance": the countries as well as the identities that they offer us to experiment with are, as Deleuze says, "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract, and symbolic without being fictional." (208)

Thus we ask the following questions in reference not only to memory (of places) and to thought (of difference), but also in reference to imagination (of the nation): Is there an *imaginandum* that is also a limit, what is impossible to imagine? And in reference to language: Is there a *loquendum* that is, at the same time, silence? (Deleuze, ibid.) It is experimental questions of this kind that our writers are asking and that I am attempting to reformulate here with them: Does the writer *belong* to a nation? What does this *belonging* mean for Francophone writers? How many different idioms are contained in their written language? How many countries, customs, crossed histories are to be found in their narratives? What are the relations between the actual nation and the virtual nation? And according to what plan? Each of the studies I propose here attempts somehow to reveal this plan. In the texts I consider in this book (mostly novels, but poems and essays as well),

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thought and imagination enter into a discordance and a violence, triggering a radical questioning of identity (in the concept of nation, for example) and of similarity in cultural artifacts. As Kateb so brilliantly put it: "Plans are overturned at every moment!" And this is what influenced both my choice of texts and my methodology.

Each text, exemplary in its own way, required the use of a particular critical protocol. But because of its attention to discord and to the disparateness of the texts, my investigation slowly uncovered what can paradoxically be called an empirical *transcendental* field where texts come together and intersect, while their differences remain intact and the uniqueness of their relationships remains undiminished. In any event, it is this kind of experimentation that I hope to have been able to reveal in this book.[4]

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