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Review of Réda Bensmaïa, Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb, trans. Alyson Waters

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Réda Bensmaïa, *Experimental Nations: Or, the Invention of the Maghreb*, trans. Alyson Waters. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2003. 215 pp. ISBN: 069108937X (paper).

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Experimental Nations is one of the most innovative studies of Maghrebi literature and film to have appeared in recent times. Although the book is composed from revised essays Bensmaïa had previously published in such respectable venues as *L'Esprit créateur*, *SubStance*, *Research in African Literatures*, *World Literature Today*, and *Yale French Studies*, the readings remain remarkably fresh and insightful despite having been published over a period of more than ten years (1992-2003). In chapters devoted to Merzak Allouache, Hélé Béji, Tahar Djaout, Assia Djebar, Nabile Farès, Mouloud Feraoun, Abdelkebir Khatibi, Kateb Yacine, and even to the French filmmaker, Chris Marker, Bensmaïa refuses to force the texts he examines into the kinds of theoretical straightjackets that are almost *de rigueur* today in what has now become "postcolonial studies." For instance, Bensmaïa's reading of Djebar's film, *La Nouba des femmes du Mont*, *Chenoua* never once mentions the now often overused notions of "veiling" and "unveiling" in discussions of Djebar's work. Rather, the chapter analyzes ways in which the film functions to constitute a "topography of feminine places" (86) by placing the male gaze "outside the film's field of vision" (85).

Indeed, *dépaysement* (translated by Alyson Waters as "un-homing") and dislocation are constant themes in this study. Bensamaïa draws both from Deleuze and Gauttari's notion of deterritorialization and from French filmmaker Chris Marker's notion of "dépays" as a means to analyze new experiences of space, language, and alterity in Maghrebi literature and cinema. In analyzing the kinds of displacements effected by Maghrebi writers and filmmakers (and Chris Marker) in their creative work, Bensmaïa also strives to dislodge certain reductive, and even ethnographic views of Maghrebi literature and film by Western critics who sometimes lack the deep understanding of the place that comes with having been born there, as was Bensmaïa.

Not that Bensmaïa ever claims to be a "native informant." To the contrary, he echoes Ania Loomba's doubt regarding the ability of non-Western critics located in the West to open up perspectives within which to view the non-Western world (voiced in her book, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. New York and London: Routledge, 1998, 256) and questions his own theoretical insights. "*Are* scholars who live and teach in the West -- specifically in the United States -- capable of transcending Western critical and theoretical frameworks and paradigms so as to create an original, *critical* work? Do they have the means to turn the tools with which Western culture has provided them to their advantage, to make them serve the peoples from which they come?" (159; author's emphasis), he asks.

Bensmaïa's book proves that such a feat is possible, as he uses the work of such Western luminaries as Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Michel de Certeau, Jacques Derrida, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Fredric Jameson, Paul de Man, and others to explore the "originality of the *literary* strategies deployed by postcolonial Maghrebi writers" (7; author's emphasis) within what Bensmaïa calls "the idiosyncratic nature of indigenous cultures" (6). While Bensmaïa's accentuation of the literary would seem obvious, as he points out, all too often the

writers he treats have been reduced to "anthropological or cultural case studies" (6), or are analyzed with a surprising "nonchalance" (6). For instance, he asserts that the work of Nabile Farès has been reduced to an expression of ethnic identities, while that of Kateb Yacine remains misunderstood, despite the writer's pioneering status in the field of Francophone literature. He shows that the political stakes and formal strategies of Mouloud Feraoun's "deceptively modest" novel, *Le fils du pauvre*, have long gone ignored, since the work has often been categorized as "ethnological narrative" (149).

In his own discussion of Kateb Yacine, Bensmaïa explains that Kateb preferred theater, performed in dialectical Algerian Arabic, to the French-language novel as a national idiom because of its links to popular music and oral literature and hence the possibility of a direct connection with the Algerian people. Regarding the work of Farès, Bensmaïa proposes to read his *L'Etat perdu* through Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*, calling it a "rhizomatic" book that does not merely represent the state of things but that constructs its own map. As Bensmaïa explains, the book is rhizomatic because, "unlike books that draw their inspiration from models of the tree or of the root, it does not hesitate to connect 'any point to any other'" (54), thereby bringing a different regime of signs into existence. This reading is indicative of a central premise of Bensmaïa's book: that "experimental" or "virtual" spaces, nations or "transnations" are being created today through the literary works of contemporary Francophone writers from the Maghreb and beyond.

In his discussion of the Maghrebi Medina, for instance, Bensmaïa uses de Certeau to show how the Medina is an anti-panopticon, where it is impossible to establish the power of an all-seeing entity. Here the "flâneur" of the modern Western city is replaced by the "medinant" who is constantly faced with a "multiplicity of contradictory signs" (36). Bensmaïa's reading of Tahar Djaout demonstrates the ways in which the unpredictable chaos of the recent Algerian civil war replaces the chaos of the Algerian war of liberation from France as a "bearer of hope" for the future nation in the work of Kateb Yacine (75). Bensmaïa further examines issues of national language, or "geolinguistic space" (103). By examining questions of translation between Arabic and French in his complex reading of Abdelkebir Khatibi's work, he also addresses the perennial questions of audience and readership present in Francophone literatures. In the case of the Maghreb, the question of language continues to be posed -- should one write in French, Arabic, or Kabyle? How can one be an "authentic" representative of the "Nation" if one writes in French? Bensmaïa proposes that Maghrebi (and other Francophone literatures) have in fact created their own languages while using French as an appropriated medium, and that Francophone literatures are contributing today to the formation of a new global literary consciousness.

This assertion brings me to the Appendix, entitled, "Le Dépays: On Chris Marker's *Lettre de Sibérie* (1957)." What, one may ask, does Marker's documentary film about Siberia have to do with the Maghreb? According to Bensmaïa, *Lettre de Sibérie* was meant to "wrest Siberia from clichés and stereotypes, to return it to its inhabitants ... and above all to its own imaginary" (167). This is of course Bensmaïa's project for the Maghreb as well. In borrowing Marker's notion of the "dépays" as a virtual country constantly lying between at least two horizons, Bensmaïa's study successfully and creatively reminds his readers that the "Maghreb" and its literatures are multiple. Just as Marker's film advocates "a passion for alterity" that seeks to avoid reducing the

other to "the same or to the self" (167), so Bensmaïa's *Experimental Nations* successfully and most creatively asks us to try to do so as well.