



Karima, Laachir (ed). *Special Issue: The Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Cultural Production in Morocco. The Journal of North African Studies 21.1 (2016).*

One of the most salient narratives that dominated the mass media's coverage of the popular uprisings - which later came to be known as the Arab Spring - was that the events had been unpredictable. When the uprisings spread across North Africa and the Middle East in 2011, the media were short of master narratives to explain what was happening. Confronted with the dearth of academic experts on the deep social and cultural factors behind the events, the media and think tanks overwhelmingly relied on pundits and political scientists. The leading media maintained that the events had been unpredictable and that the future of the region was equally uncertain. The MENA region thus became a modern-day heart of darkness under the veneer of civilised jargon particularly in western media. What was missing from the coverage of the so-called Arab Spring was the in-depth knowledge of the young people and societies of the region both in local academia and Global North universities. What is more, the scarce knowledge existing in this area has lacked adequate channels of distribution and popularisation.

Academics in and outside the region soon took note of this challenge. Dozens of publications have appeared and conferences organised since 2011. Cultural Studies scholars have been no exception to this trend even if they remain a minority in the academic circles specialising on the region. On 21 March 2014, Karima Laachir, who is a senior lecturer in cultural studies at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS, University of London), convened an international conference on "The Aesthetics and Politics of Contemporary Cultural Production in Morocco." The one-day conference brought together both established and young scholars from Morocco, UK and the US. Their papers provided research-based perspectives on the aesthetics and politics of cultural production in Morocco as one of the countries affected by the 2011 uprisings, even if in a different manner to most of the region. In January 2016, the conference papers were published in a special issue of *The*

Journal of North African Studies. In her editorial, Laachir underscores the importance of cultural analysis to understanding the deep transformations of the region, which engendered the 2011 uprisings and the ongoing turmoil across North Africa and the Middle East. As she writes, “when thinking about what precipitated the uprisings one must consider the decades of civil society activism from the cultural and artistic spheres—expressed through cinematic productions, literature, popular music, arts, cartoons and graffiti – which paved the way for the recent revolutionary fervour in the [MENA] region” (7). The special issue contributors successfully take up the challenge of revealing just how Moroccan artists, writers and filmmakers, among others, have articulated the revolutionary fervour long before the 2011 uprisings.

The first contribution by Mohamed Achaari, who delivered the conference keynote address, is appropriately entitled “Creativity as a Political Choice.” He argues that the Moroccan regime has never been able to fully silence artists despite heavy-handed repression during the Years of Lead (1956-1990s) and the persistence of censorship and persecution of artists and journalists in Morocco today. Formerly the Minister of Culture in Morocco (1998-2007), Achaari advocates the use of cultural creativity as a political weapon in Morocco because the cultural and political spheres are intertwined and influence one another. The following essay by Karima Laachir makes the case for ‘reading-together’—or, the entangled comparative reading—as a postcolonial practice in the face of “a reductionist understanding of language and cultural politics in Morocco” (22). The author argues that this rigid separation of Arabic and French novels from Morocco and their canonisation into different literary traditions misses the complexity of Morocco’s linguistic and cultural diversity. In their article “*Ihbāt*: Disillusionment and the Arab Spring in Morocco,” Taieb Belghazi and Abdelhay Moudden offer a unique reading of the disillusionment or *ihbāt* that characterised the February 20 Movement in Morocco after it failed to reach all its major aims during the 2011 uprisings. The authors argue that this affective state is due to the fundamental disunity of the social movements and people who took to the streets during Morocco’s unfinished uprising against a powerful and experienced political establishment.

Larbi Touaf’s essay on Mohamed Khair-Eddine and cultural diversity in Morocco takes the reader into Morocco’s geographical remote but politically significant southwest region of Sous. Touaf shows through a close reading of *Agadir* (Le Seuil, 1967) and other works by Khair-Eddine’s novel how current debates on linguistic, cultural and political diversity in the country were already high on the agenda of the ‘Souffles’ group in the 1960s and 70s. Cleo Jay complements Touaf’s journey in Morocco’s renascent margins. Her contribution explores the emergence of modern Amazigh theatre in Morocco and the role of contestatory performance politics in advancing the

Amazigh movement and the cause of democracy and the arts in the country. In his contribution, Abdellatif Akbib further develops this subaltern reading by unearthing the subversive oppositional politics at the centre of Mohamed Choukri's short story collection *Flower Freak*. This journey into Moroccan literature culminates with Soumia Boutkhil's reading of the deconstruction of masculinities in three novels and a short story collection by Baha Trabelsi.

Valérie K. Orlando's essay opens the film and popular culture section of the special issue. Orlando advances that recent Moroccan films such as Mohamed Mouftakir's *Pegasus* (2010) are instrumental in the reconciliation of Moroccans with their recent past as well as to the construction of new narratives about a better future together. Jamal Bahmad then unearths the political nature of melodrama in the films of Hakim Noury. He illustrates how such popular works of Moroccan cinema have been effective in chronicling social change in the country in the globalization era. The films of Noury, he argues, are simple in presentation yet subtle in their political critique of neoliberal Morocco. In her article on Moroccan *taqlidi* rap, Cristina Moreno Almeida argues that Moroccan rappers have staged novel ways of being Moroccan through creative adaptations of global subcultural flows. The last contribution to the volume is penned by M. Angela Jansen, who provides a critical account of the radical turn in Moroccan fashion design with the emergence of a new generation of stylists at the turn of the century.

This special issue is the first concerted attempt to foreground and examine the role of cultural productions in the revolutionary process in the region since independence. Its long-term focus allows it to stand out from the social science collections which have failed to grasp the deep origins and consequences of the 2011 uprisings. This recommended reading will be of great interest to scholars and students of cultural production in North Africa and the Middle East. It is also an invitation to more country-specific and comparative studies of the region from an interdisciplinary cultural perspective.

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