given the formidable roster of contributors—all specialists in their fields—the collection also bears reading as a single book, reminding the reader that, nostalgia aside, the Jews and Muslims of al-Andalus can indeed be studied together as parts of a single multicultural society.


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Experimental Nations is the title Réda Bensmaia chose for his book comprised of seven chapters and an appendix, “Le Dépays, On Chris Marker’s Lettre de Sibérie (1957).” The essays were previously published in various journals and as book chapters, between the years 1992 and 2003. Each chapter carries a title different from that of the original essay. Bensmaia is primarily interested in the experimental process that takes place in the nation formation of the recently independent Maghribi countries. He compares them to open air laboratories where the various experiments normally lead to nation building.

Bensmaia’s hypothesis is based on the position of a number of French romantic writers seeking exotic adventures in the new colonies. The inhabitants, especially the Algerians were, traditionally, perceived as exotic subjects, an outlook that continued to the day the colonized subjects assumed an active role and engaged the colonizer in the colonial language, French.

The ambiguous role of the colonizer’s language in the life of the Maghribi peoples led to a dramatic linguistic situation that has not ceased to provoke heated debates. It is the main theme of Experimental Nations in which Bensamaia “attempted to show the complexity of the problems posed by the relation to language” (3).

He examines Maghribi literary works in the context of postcolonial literature, in an attempt to provide an interpretation distinct from the existing one, which according to him was “reduced to mere signifiers of other signifiers, with a total disregard for what makes them literary works in and of themselves” (6).

Bensmaia’s purpose is to assess the literary qualities of Maghribi writings, to reveal “the originality of the literary strategies deployed by postcolonial Maghrebi writers . . .” (7). He undertakes this task within the context of a different definition of nations. The definition is neither geographic nor political, but one “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” (8). Bensmaia sees hope in the theater as the literary genre that would act as a unifying force for a diverse multilingual and still significantly illiterate population. The role that Ahmed Reda Houhou played in colonized Algeria is a case in point. His plays written in colloquial Algerian reached a wide spectrum of the population despite the high percentage of illiteracy in the country. His success was a source of concern for the colonial administration which, having failed to rally him to its cause, played a role in his assassination.

In his study of the issue of language in the Maghrib Bensmaia moves beyond the
question of colloquial versus modern standard Arabic, which had been at the center of the debate in the early post-independence years. He explains how Maghribi writers adopted a radical approach to French language, one that recalls Kafka’s recommendation, to “steal the baby from the crib.” In order to achieve this result they shook the hold of France’s French and created a French of their own.

Bensmaia tackles the topic of exile, both physical and emotional, in the chapter titled “Nabil Fares or How to Become a Minoritarian.” He examines the concept of being a minoritarian and becoming one through Fares’ book L’Etat perdu: Discours pratique de l’émigré (1982). Fares takes reference to pre-Arab Algeria and its Berber past. However, he does not call for a return to that past and looks toward a future made up of heterogeneous factors that, once connected, would result in a meaningful definition of a nation’s identity. Such a position exonerates Fares vis-à-vis his immersion in French culture and his use of French language. Bensmaia aptly describes Fares’ outlook as a tree that “takes root through its branches. It is a tree made up of multiple graftings, and these graftings produce new fruits, new plants, new words, new encounters new networks, and ever new alliances” (64).

In the chapter titled “Postcolonial Nations” Bensmaia offers an assessment of Tahir Djaout’s L’Invention du désert. He uses the novel to refute Frederic Jameson’s theory, which considers the postcolonial literature of Third World countries as national allegories. With the multiple possible interpretations of both the ‘desert’ and the ‘book’ in L’Invention du désert Bensmaia disproves Jameson’s theory. He is critical of the latter’s generalizations and accuses him of ignoring other aspects of Third World literature, such as language. He blames Jameson for his failure to pay attention to the huge gap caused by illiteracy, between Maghribi writers and their readers whose cause they espouse.

“(Hi)stories of Expatriation” is devoted to Assia Djeba’s film, La Nouba des femmes du Mont Chenoua. Bensmaia stresses the multi-dimensional significance of the film, the new concept of time introduced, and the difficulty viewers have in understanding the film, a difficulty that leaves them at a loss as to the producer’s intention and the meaning she intended to convey.

Chapter six, “Translating or Whiting Out Language,” reveals Bensmaia’s admiration for Abdelkebir Khatibi’s writings. It is as if Khatibi’s position on language, an ever thorny subject in the Maghrib, offered Bensmaia a balanced outlook on the issue and a way out of the dilemma. As a matter of fact, Khatibi provides a new definition of literature in the global world, in which language becomes the nation of the writer. Due to their extensive use of French as a language of expression, Francophone Maghribi writers are ready to occupy a place in the “transnational spaces of identity” (125). In a world where the narrow definition of a writer’s affiliation is based on geographical borders and ethnic connections, Khatibi’s concept of the professional traveler presented in Un été à Stockholm indicates his vision of the writer in a global society.

Bensmaia devotes chapter seven to one of Algeria’s pioneer novelists, Mouloud Feraoun, and specifically, his book, Le Fils du pauvre. Following in Christine Ashour’s footsteps he highlights the literary qualities of Feraoun’s first novel, which many critics had dismissed as an ethnographic book of little literary value. Bensmaia considers Mouloud Feraoun a precursor in his capacity to shed light on the problems of the young nation and the position of Francophone writers in post-independence Algeria. What many critics had failed to see was the message delivered in the writer’s choice of a language of expression. When Feraoun decided to