

Introduction: Women from the Maghreb: Looking Back and Moving Forward

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This special issue, titled *Femmes du Maghreb/Women from the Maghreb* addresses the struggles, concerns, aspirations, dreams, and hopes of key Algerian, Moroccan, and Tunisian women writers, filmmakers, intellectuals, and artists who write or create *from* and/or *about* the geopolitical and cultural vantage point of the Maghreb. The first part, titled “**Rewriting Women into History**” engages with women’s roles in the Algerian War of Independence (1954-1962) and the Algerian Civil War (1992-1999), highlighting how women have emerged as important players in the socio-political and cultural transformations that continue to take place since independence from France. Thus, **Maya Boutaghou** offers a historical account and analysis of the relationship that brought three women together during the Algerian War of Independence: Djamila Boupacha, the Algerian icon of anti-colonial resistance who was arrested and tortured by the French army, Gisèle Halimi, the Tunisian lawyer and women’s rights’ defender, and the feminist author Simone de Beauvoir. Through a detailed historiography of how this relationship developed in dialogue with the surrounding ideological wars and uncomfortable positioning of “feminism” alongside anti-colonial struggles, Boutaghou uncovers some of the tensions and paradoxes that have survived in the postcolonial era. Her focus is on the “amnesia” that lingers around the role of women in the Algerian liberation struggle; the use of rape as a weapon of war by the French army in Algeria is a topic that has long been silenced. It is only recently, fifty years later, that stories of rape and sexual violence endured by Algerian women are starting to emerge in the media and in court cases. One of Boutaghou’s essential contributions is the way in which she traces back some of the ideological battles of modern day Algeria—particularly the instrumentalization of religion—back to the tensions and conflicts that were faced by the *moudjahidates* during the war. This continuity is, according to the author, important to establish in order to understand women’s present condition and enable them to win future battles. Moreover, Boutaghou’s documentation and analysis of Djamila Boupacha’s story provides some important context to the recent awareness about rape as a weapon of war, not only in the context of Algeria but in the wider global context. At a time when women (and men) around the world are mobilizing around the issue of rape and violence against women, whether in India, Egypt, Syria, or inside the US military, understanding the relationship between women’s bodies and the dynamics of power, colonialism, and domination has never been so urgent. **Sylvie Brodziak**’s article continues to disentangle the intricate relationship between war, violence, memory, and women. Her theoretical premise is that the process of remembering war has traditionally been shaped by masculine words and images. Her objective is to uncover the particular ways in which women remember war traumas by looking at three texts about the Algerian War of Independence. Brodziak first examines the therapeutic role of discourse in Louissette Ighilahriz’s *Algérienne* (2001), a testimony about the author’s experience of rape and sexual torture that was inflicted on her by a French Army captain for many months after her arrest by the French colonial authorities in 1957. The fact that it took Ighilahriz almost half a century to break the silence around an issue still considered taboo complicates and intensifies the painful act of remembering. It is by looking at the complex process of enunciating trauma and understanding the relationship between the reader and the author that Brodziak raises some very important questions about what it means to fill the gaps of history by speaking the unspeakable. This is also the question

she raises in her discussion of two other authors, Assia Djebar and Maïssa Bey who, unlike Ighilahriz, choose fiction rather than autobiography as their way of narrating history. Assia Djebar's invention of rituals of mourning in *La femme sans sépulture* as a way of recalling and dealing with the trauma of war and Maïssa Bey's process of distancing in *Entendez-vous dans les montagnes...* are both attempts to reinscribe women's untold trauma into the remembrance of war. In all three examples, Brodziak's analysis highlights the importance of the imaginary in the articulation of historical truth and in the process of healing the traumas of the past. In her article, "*Le Cinéma de l'urgence: Revisiting Yamina Bachir-Chouikh's Rachida and Djamilia Sahraoui's Barakat!*," **Christa Jones** examines two socio-realist Algerian civil war films in the historical context of the civil war that lasted from approximately 1992 to 1999 along with reports by human right organizations such as Amnesty International and the International Federation for Human Rights to shed light on the collective trauma of a nation. Among civilians, women and children are generally presented as belonging to the most vulnerable elements of society; yet, the female characters in both films empower themselves and embrace solidarity and activism to fight against the devastating impact of human loss, terror-induced war trauma, suffering, and fear. These films underline the pervasiveness of violence throughout Algeria during the civil war decade, both in cities and in the countryside—a reality to which the international community by and large turned a blind eye, as historian Benjamin Stora reminds us in *La guerre invisible*, in the context of the country's diplomatic isolation and draconic media censorship. Given the relative dearth of real-time media coverage of this war, Bachir-Chouikh and Sahraoui are to be applauded for offering women's views and interpretation of the atrocities and for putting a human face on the war by portraying civilian characters that observe, take action, and are determined to seek justice.

The second part, titled "**Incorporating the Past and Moving Forward**," examines the complex role of the female storyteller, the work of mourning, and the concept of honor in literary discourse; it also features an interview with Djemila Benhabib, author of the controversial *Ma vie à contre-Coran*. In her essay "Que faire de la sultane des *Nuits* pour une écrivaine au Maghreb aujourd'hui ?," **Christiane Chaulet Achour** offers a *tour d'horizon* of contemporary novels by North African and Middle Eastern women writers that deal with the mythic Scheherazade—an unavoidable role model of *expression féminine*—by revisiting works by Nassira Belloula, Hawa Djabali, Assia Djebar, Salima Ghezali, Souad Labbize, Malika Mokeddem, Leïla Sebbar, Fatima Mernissi, Fawzia Zouari, Joumana Haddad, and Salwa Al Neimi. Most novelists do not rewrite a particular tale but rather retain the symbolic stature of the storyteller that Scheherazade has become over centuries, while embracing her call for female solidarity and oral transmission. This avalanche of recent novels that reference Scheherazade underlines the impact—marked by attraction and exasperation—this ancient role model still has on women writers today. Chaulet Achour argues that the ancestral storyteller is used as a reference to call to mind—in what can be shared with her today—the constraints of women in the private sphere and their difficulties in gaining access to the public sphere. This, she reminds us, is because the contemporary female writer is summoned to resemble her: to fit her mold to better explode it and liberate the female voice. **David Fieni's** article, "Algerian Women and the Invention of Literary Mourning," examines the work of literary mourning. He analyzes the language of personal and national loss and gendered social practices of mourning in a comparative reading of Yamina Méchakra's *La grotte éclatée* (1979), Ahlam Mosteghanemi's *Memory in the Flesh*, Assia Djebar's *Le blanc de l'Algérie* (1995), and Hélène Cixous's *Si près* (2007). These four texts, he argues, put in place modalities of listening, and produce active forms of remembering and forgetting. In his essay, Fieni poignantly dissects literary configurations of mourning such as constraints of trauma, substitutions of female loss, melancholy, and textual markers of

bodily memory in Méchakra's and Mosteghanemi's texts. Cixous's fused articulation of mourning or melancholia is marked by metonymy, allegory, substitution, and invention. Assimilation, he contends, is revealed as a catachresis, that is a perversion of language that holds out the hope of something undeliverable, while the narrator in *Le blanc de l'Algérie* pleads for a language that would allow for both a space of refuge and room for invention of the self and the homeland. In her article « La représentation de l'honneur au Maghreb dans le discours littéraire au féminin: Nina Bouraoui, Leïla Marouane et Malika Mokkeddem » **Cécilia W. Francis** revisits the topic of violence against women, and in particular the theme of honor, as represented in the work of three writers of Algerian background, Nina Bouraoui, Leïla Marouane and Malika Mokkeddem, to uncover some of the dynamics that underpin the violence of gender in the post-colonial context. Using a two-pronged approach that combines the works of anthropologists such as Pierre Bourdieu and postcolonial literary critics such as Homi K. Bhabha and Gayatri Spivak, this article highlights the symbolic transformations undergone by the notion of honor as represented in literary texts that, above all, operate a transfiguration of reality. According to Francis, the phantasmagoric flights of the imagination become a means of re-writing and re-interpreting the question of honor. The power of transfiguration thus gives these writers the potential to not only reinterpret but also appropriate the dispossessed and abused female body, thus delegitimizing honor through the creative process of writing as an act of resistance. In « Djemila Benhabib à contre-courant du multiculturalisme bien-pensant », **Anissa Talahite-Moodley** discusses some aspects of Benhabib's work in the light of present-day debates about multiculturalism in Canada. The introduction that precedes the interview examines the context of Djemila Benhabib's autobiography *Ma vie à contre-Coran: Une femme témoigne sur les islamistes* (2009), which was a bestseller in Québec at a time when the public was divided around the question of religious "reasonable accommodations." Benhabib's radical and uncompromising critique of multiculturalism is placed against the background of the tensions between cultural relativism and universalism, as well as part of the larger critique of the ways in which minorities' claim for cultural rights can at times reinforce patriarchal and oppressive practices. Benhabib's endorsement of universal and secular notions of citizenship is also to be understood against the background of her personal journey. By sharing her personal history and past experiences as part of a family shaped by militancy and political commitment, Benhabib gives fresh meaning to the feminist notion of the personal and the political as interconnected struggles. This conversation with an author who has in recent years continued to make inroads in the world of books, media, and politics, is a good illustration of the ways in which women from the Maghreb are crossing borders and engaging with struggles for justice and democracy in new, diverse, and global contexts.

The third part, "**Defining a Female Aesthetics,**" examines the re-writing of the female body in contemporary Maghrebi cinema, literature, and the arts. The essays underline that women artists, filmmakers, and writers embrace new representations of femininity that are more in line with hopes of modernity, freedom, and democracy. Clearly, artists such as Léa Véra Tahar and Lalla Essaydi (known as the digital Scheherazade) benefit from greater mobility and new technologies to make their artworks and cultural heritage known, in the process opening up the geographical and visual space of the Maghreb to places such as New York City, Boston, or Jeddah. While Maghrebi women artists and writers leave their footprints in the world, they also embrace causes at home, such as LGBT and women's rights, as **Naïma Rachdi** suggests in her discussion of Moroccan writer Bahaa Trabelsi's novels *Une vie à trois* (2000) and *Slim les femmes, la mort...* (2004). These two novels underline that political and socio-economic changes also shape women's cultural and literary productions and encourage artistic audacity, in particular the courage to address a taboo topic such as the existence of same-sex relationships in contemporary Morocco, which is presented as being on par with

heterosexual practices, rather than just constituting a marginal phenomenon. This is a very timely article indeed, given that Trabelsi frequently references France as a model, a country that in spring 2013 made headlines by finally legalizing same-sex marriage, “le mariage pour tous,” one of the electoral promises made by socialist president François Hollande. In her study, “The Semiotics of Change: Re-writing the Female Body in Contemporary Tunisian Cinema,” **Marzia M. Caporale** examines the concept of women’s subjectivity in contemporary Tunisian and Franco-Algerian cinema, focusing on the urgency for women to speak their own language outside the parameters of a masculine economy of female silence. Looking at Moufida Tlatli’s *Les silences du palais* (1994), Raja Amari’s *Satin rouge*, and Karin Albou’s *Le chant des mariées*, she argues that these directors use the cinematic medium to rewrite the post-colonial female body as an active subject that strives to overcome “decapitation” and “otherness” in a society still rooted in phallographic laws that deem women voiceless subalterns. Drawing on feminist and postcolonial criticism, including H  l  ne Cixous, Gayatri Spivak, and Nawal El Sadaawi, Caporale analyzes techniques used by these women directors, who provide a visual progression toward representation of female characters that come into their own as semiotic agents that celebrate femininity, resistance, and *diff  rence*. **Ines Horchani’s** article, “Maternit   et Cr  ativit  : Taos Amrouche, Baya, Fadhila Chabbi, L  a V  ra Tahar,” examines the relationship between maternity and creativity, two aspects of women’s lives that have traditionally been either regarded as antagonistic or have been fused into an idealistic merging of opposites. Using a feminist approach based on the theories of authors such as Simone de Beauvoir, Kristeva, Klein, and others, Horchani examines how maternity and creativity relate to each other as parallel processes in the context of women in the Maghreb. Focusing on four artists from the Maghreb: the Algerian writer and singer Taos Amrouche (1913-1976), the Algerian painter Baya (1931-1998), the Tunisian writer Fadhila Chabbi (born in 1946), and the Tunisian writer and artist L  a V  ra Tahar (1948-2012), Horchani attempts to tease out in their work the relationship between creation and procreation as parallel processes. One of her conclusions is that what is to be found in the work of these artists and writers does not seem to fit neatly within the dominant theories of contemporary European sociologists (such as Enright, Huston, H  ritier, and Agacinski). The way in which their work negotiates the relationship between maternity and motherhood, on the one hand, and artistic creativity on the other, often leads them towards new forms of creativity. One important outcome of this study is the idea that art becomes for these writers—and presumably for female writers creating outside the realm of tradition—a way of understanding their own lineage and their relationship with their own mothers. This attempt to connect with a female tradition and establish a matrilineal connection, although not new, is explored in Horchani’s article from a perspective that reveals how women artists mix the ordinariness of everyday life with the creative process of art. The ordinary is never far from the spiritual, whether it is Amrouche’s artistic rendition of age-old Berber songs, Baya’s paintings of birds, flowers, and doll-like female figures, Fadhila Chabbi’s poetry or L  a V  ra Tahar’s papier-m  ch   art. This is also the case in the interview with L  a V  ra Tahar conducted by Ines Horchani and appears at the end of her article. In this interview, conducted shortly before her untimely death in 2012, L  a V  ra Tahar shares her thoughts on maternity and her coming to writing, painting and sculpture as part of her quest for freedom and independence. **Anna Rocca’s** article, “In Search of Beauty in Space: Interview with Lalla Essaydi,” presents the famous Moroccan painter, photographer and installation artist, whose work has been exhibited in museums such as the Louvre, the Bab Rouah National gallery in Rabat, and the Smithsonian National Museum of African Art in Washington D.C., among others. Essaydi’s photographic series—*Converging Territories* (2005), *Les Femmes du Maroc* (2008) and *Harem* (2010)—challenges both Orientalist art and stereotypes of Muslim women—the veil, the

odalisque, and the harem— by maintaining the pictorial composition of paintings by Delacroix and Ingres but covering up their naked female bodies and leaving out male figures, thereby disrupting the Orientalist gaze and questioning Westerners' assumptions about Arab women and Islam. Essaydi's art engages with identity, agency and memory—that is the need to preserve, retain, refashion, and create as a response to societal changes. In her photographs which rearrange traditional Moroccan architectural and artistic elements such as calligraphy, henna, mosaics, robes, and tiles, Essaydi offers her own interpretation of female beauty while challenging clichés. In her essay, “Modernité et transgression dans les écrits de Bahaa Trabelsi,” **Naïma Rachdi** offers a close reading of Moroccan novelist and journalist Bahaa Trabelsi's novels *Une vie à trois* (2000) and *Slim les femmes, la mort...* (2004). These are groundbreaking novels, she argues, because they address feminism, LGBT and same-sex relationships head-on, while also criticizing religious fundamentalism, in a society that faces the threat of religious and cultural conservatism. Rachdi points out that Trabelsi is one of few Moroccan writers that address taboo issues such as same-sex relationships and feminism. *Une vie à trois* not only describes sexual practices that are taboo, as do novels by Rachid O. and Abdellah Taïa, but also provocatively downplays alternative lifestyles, which the author portrays as being just as ordinary as heterosexual lifestyles. Rachdi demonstrates how these novels effectively criticize a widespread social hypocrisy that consists in turning a blind eye to societal realities, a situation reminiscent of socio-cultural schizophrenia. Rachdi notes that Trabelsi's often humorous novels use the French language and reference French literature to circumvent censorship.

In conclusion, as these essays demonstrate, Maghrebi women's roles in civic society and their activism—be it through artistic, cinematic, or literary production—continue to be central in the larger struggle for democracy and citizenship. Responding to the social and political changes that have impacted their societies, women artists, filmmakers, painters, writers, and activists from the Maghreb continue to tremendously enrich the corpus of postcolonial representations and scholarship. Still, it is clear that past conflicts continue to haunt the work of these women, in particular the anti-colonial wars and the more recent struggles for democracy. The first section of this special issue—“Rewriting Women Into History”—is understandably dominated by the Algerian War of Independence and its legacies, particularly, but not exclusively, for women from this region. However, in order to move forward, the past needs to be both remembered and “disremembered,” to borrow an expression the African American author Toni Morrison uses in her novel *Beloved* (1987) in the context of slavery and post-slavery America. Therefore, revisiting the past—and this includes traditional culture and the colonial past—in order to exorcise it, constitutes an important task for the writers, artists, and activists studied in this volume. More particularly, it is through the re-writing of traditional narratives of personal and collective liberation that authors go about relocating female subjectivity as a major parameter in their work. It is through this re-interpretation of the past that female creativity appears as a major act of resistance. Another important dimension of the work of women artists and activists from the Maghreb concerns the ways in which it highlights the relationship between sexuality and politics. As Shereen El Feki demonstrates in *Sex and the Citadel: Intimate Life in a Changing Arab World* (2013), her study of sexuality and intimacy in the Arab world today, political change and the exercise of sexual rights as human rights go hand in hand. As she argues, since radical changes are happening in Arab societies at the political level, one would expect transformations to also happen in the realm of gender roles and sexualities. One example is the way in which writers such as Bahaa Trabelsi (studied in Part III of this volume) are writing openly about same-sex relationships. By shifting their political discourse into the realm of personal intimate relationships, the women writers, artists and activists discussed in this issue highlight the significant role of personal life, family, and sexuality

as spaces of resistance. It is evident from this special issue that women artists, filmmakers, painters, writers, and activists from the Maghreb are responding in innovative and creative ways to the social and political changes that have transformed their societies in the past few decades. Whether they are using protest, political activism, life writing, poetry, fiction, filmmaking, or digital art, they continue to interrogate discourses and representations in ways that we hope this special issue will help readers understand and appreciate further.

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