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Rethinking the Maghreb and the post-colonial intellectual in Khatibi's *Les temps modernes* issue in 1977

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ABSTRACT

In 1977, a group of North African intellectuals produced a special volume for the prestigious French journal *Les temps modernes*. Led by Abdelkebir Khatibi, they sought to 'rethink the Maghreb' as a way to counter the poisoned, divided and belligerent climate of the region, and to offer an alternative to the authoritarian models of the nation-state that took hold after political independence. When read through the lens of Rancière's concept of the 'dissensus' concerning the interplay between culture and politics, this collective volume of *Les temps modernes* reveals the plight of a generation of post-independence Maghrebi intellectuals who questioned their own purpose in light of their countries' national projects. This article claims that this group intervened in the public sphere as a way to reconfigure the intellectual's purpose in their respective societies and political systems. Their case highlights an important chapter in the region's social and intellectual history and demonstrates how intellectual actors seek re-integration in the national community after a painful period of exclusion.

KEYWORDS Maghreb; *Les temps modernes*; Khatibi; authoritarianism; nation-state; exclusion; war

Introduction

In 1977, three young francophone thinkers from North Africa coordinated a special volume for the famous French journal *Les temps modernes*, titled simply 'Du Maghreb' [About/Concerning/From the Maghreb]. This was an important achievement for these three editors – the Moroccan sociologist and novelist Abdelkebir Khatibi, the Algerian economist Nourredine Abdi, and the Tunisian novelist and poet Abdelwahab Meddeb. *Les temps modernes*, founded by Jean-Paul Sartre in 1945, was one of the most famous French cultural journals of the time; its editorial board included illustrious intellectuals such as Simone de Beauvoir and Raymond Aron. Coediting this issue meant that the three young Maghrebi intellectuals had the attention of the French

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intelligentsia, a significant political and aesthetic platform, and by extension the esteem of their peers at home. Their volume brought together about thirty contributions from the Maghreb's emerging scholars – organised in thematic sections that address different dimensions of Maghrebi realities, including '[economic] Planification and Dependency', 'The State', '[social] Classes', 'Culture/Writing/Ideology', 'Agrarian studies' and 'Migration'. The resulting issue offers a unique critical reflection into the challenges defining Maghrebi societies nearly two decades after independence.

This special volume has been overlooked by scholars of cultural and regional studies, yet its insights and committed political positions should be studied. Khatibi's central claim was straightforward, yet puzzling: thinking differently about the region would transform its politics. This is an ambitious claim to articulate in an elite journal published in Paris, an unlikely medium to tackle the powerful and authoritarian Maghrebi state. Nevertheless, 'thinking the Maghreb' as he advocated was an important move to link epistemological and cultural frameworks with political developments. This volume should be read as a singular moment in the region's post-independence history, as it marked a rare opportunity for intellectuals from across the Maghreb to reflect together on conditions under the new nation-state.

These conditions – and the situation in which these intellectuals worked – must be understood in light of different forms of violence. First, the volume was produced in a dangerous context under threat of a regional war. The editors preface the volume by referring to 'the fighting taking place in the South' (1977). This refers to conflict between Algeria, Mauritania and Morocco over the future of the (Western) Sahara after Spanish colonisation. This political antagonism between the three newly independent states contrasted sharply with the very idea of a shared Maghreb unity, an idea that had enthralled elites and masses during the anti-colonial struggles in the 1950s (Seddon 2009). The conflict over the Sahara signalled an end to utopic and transformative aspirations. Second, the time was characterised by both the threat and the reality of violence in the post-independence states, where authorities actively persecuted political opposition. This includes the 1963 mass arrests within the socialist party in Morocco and after the 1965 Casablanca riots, the 1968 Tunisian trials against leftist and student groups, and the purge of Marxist sympathisers after the 1965 coup in Algeria and thereafter. In this context of heightened nationalist discourse and under regimes that actively persecuted intellectuals, an initiative like the one carried out by these editors in 1977 came with significant risks.

Little systematic research has been carried out on the sociology of Maghrebi intellectuals after independence, an oversight that should be redressed. By definition, intellectuals' modes of intervention include constructive disagreement and public intervention, and they have often been treated as part of the discussion of political opposition (Desrues and de Larramendi

2009). Intellectuals who refused to align with the new governments, out of principle or ideological disagreement, were sometimes targeted as opponents, and occasionally made to fear for their safety if they were too outspoken. However – as this special volume of *Les temps modernes* reflects – Maghrebi intellectuals also participated in radical and vivid acts of intervention, compelling us to rethink if and how ‘committed writing’ constitutes a form of political statement (Pannewick and Khalil 2015). This *Les temps modernes* volume is an act intellectual resistance as its authors resist and critically reflect on political and ideological closure in an effort to imagine models for their countries not confined to the strictures of the nation-state. Its participants worked together to generate self-critical insight into the epistemological limits of violence, reflecting on the ways in which the region’s upheavals and border closures impacted their own abilities to identify their objects of study and analyse their political and cultural realities.

I mobilise the concept of ‘dissensus’, as theorised by French Philosopher Jacques Rancière, to bring focus to my reading of this neglected intellectual project. The *dissensus* can be understood as a device under which to think the intricate and intertwined cultural or aesthetic sphere with the political sphere (Rancière 2011, 1). This concept has been studied for how it can ‘disrupt the sensible’ by using the aesthetic to challenge meanings or impressions that appear intuitive but that hide relations of power and domination (Rancière 2013, 152). *Dissensus* serves a wider purpose than simply directly evading censorship and repression. *Dissensus* also accounts for ‘[the] conflict about who speaks and who does not speak’ (Rancière 2011, 2). In other words, it conceives of a politics in which a variety of actors have a right to participate in the conversation through the acceptance of the notion of ‘disagreement’. *Dissensus* stands in opposition to the state of ‘consensus’ which is often imposed by what Rancière calls the ‘police’, the forces that decide who is entitled to participate. According to Rancière, the purpose of the *dissensus* is to create a ‘space’ where the both the powerful and the marginalised ‘become one’ and achieve the ‘true essence’ of an inclusive and democratic politics (Rancière 2013, 38).

Karima Laachir drew upon this notion to highlight how contemporary Moroccan cultural productions pursued politically minded objectives by ‘disrupting the sensible’ (2016, 7–11). In this article, I advance a related argument to show that the authors who participated in the intellectual project of this volume sought to disrupt and reconfigure what the idea of ‘the Maghreb’ signified in relation to the nation-state. They contested the consensual idea of the region that relied on separate historical destinies, and challenged the notion of a restrictive and exclusionary ‘imagined community’ contained within strict national borders of the newly independent nation-states. Instead, these intellectuals reiterated the continuities between the societies,

political systems, economies and cultures in order to establish an inclusive representation of the region's political destinies.

The concept of *dissensus* helps to pinpoint what it personally meant to the volume's participants to articulate and define the Maghreb in this way. These intellectuals mobilised critical writing as a form of dissent that countered the authority of violent and exclusionary nation-states. Their interventions challenged the imposed definition on who was authorised to speak on the nation's behalf, and how. By seeking to disrupt and reconfigure the sensible – a time when 'national identity' was used to fuel and justify bellicose feelings among separate nation-states and their respective populations, these authors advocated a more democratic and inclusive politics. It is important to read the texts included in 'Du Maghreb' in light of the sociology and history of the intellectual's condition after independence, as the argument advanced by this volume relied on a claim that they were effectively marginalised, a symbolic violence that made them question their purpose in the national projects.

The structure of my study highlights the crucial interplay between aesthetics and politics as articulated by these writers; in this we can read and learn from a self-reflection by intellectuals on their own condition after their countries' independences. I begin by discussing Khatibi's essay 'Maghreb as a horizon of thought', the centre-piece of the overall intellectual project, followed by analysis of how the co-editors began to show the limits of this collective initiative to redefine the Maghreb. Next, I ask whether the volume's contributors successfully applied this theoretical model of the Maghreb to their discussion of the state and its relation to intellectuals, and then examine their own analyses of the effort to create social and political change. I conclude by contrasting the political transformations of the late seventies with some contributors' readiness to abandon idealistic representations of the intellectual's role and seek national re-integration under different terms.

The epistemological Maghreb as a reconfigured horizon

The editors of this volume made a powerful effort to redefine 'the Maghreb as a horizon of thought', a call for radical rupture with existing modes of thought, especially the pervasiveness of nationalist thinking on academic and literary writing. In the preface, the authors announce their intention to 'speak up' against the common discourses on the Maghreb at a time of exacerbated patriotism (a time in which several contributors felt obliged to write under a pen name). They proposed to imagine 'radical Maghreb' that 'remains unthought' (1977, 5). In order to avoid political retributions, the editors avoided targeting 'national identities' and chose a more careful, epistemological framework of discussion. They do not directly critique regimes but rather

propose ways of thinking otherwise: 'this critical rupture', they write in the preface, 'this different way of thinking or distancing [*écart*] turned toward a thought of difference, we call it Maghreb' (6). This 'thought of difference' called 'Maghreb' acts as a framework for the overall project, and is taken up most directly in Khatibi's essay that discusses the implications of identifying the Maghreb as a 'reconfigured horizon of thought'.

Abdelkebir Khatibi's decolonial epistemologies and use of the Maghreb as metaphor have been studied as part of his project to 'subvert the center from the margins' (De Toro 2009) or to expand the parameters of 'hybrid thought' (De Toro 2008). Previous accounts of Khatibi's work tend to lack historical context, which is necessary to understand the stakes of his project. The Moroccan sociologist was trained in Paris and worked at the humanities faculty in Rabat beginning in 1964. At age of 39, he spent less time in academia and began to write novels, poetry, and critical essays (Khatibi 1971). In 1976, he published a noted essay with *Les Temps Modernes*, attacking Jacques Berque's orientalist representations (Khatibi 1976). Berque did not fit the usual 'orientalist' culprit's profile and was admired in the Maghreb, but Khatibi claimed that Berque contributed to essentialising Arabs and Arab culture. This was part of the first salvo of western-trained and young Maghrebi scholars who formulated scathing epistemological critiques of their French counterparts and western scholarship (Pouillon 2015, 3; Brisson 2008a, 2008b). After this, Khatibi was invited to expand his point by editing a whole volume of the journal, during a period in which *Les temps modernes* was covering discussions on academic epistemology (Davies 1987, 136).

In the essay included in this volume, Khatibi offers an approach to the question of 'identity' that differed from the nationalist approach. His central claim is that people in the region make sense of themselves through one of two frameworks: either an idealised Islamic past, seen as an aspiration for 'conformity' and 'authenticity', or a technologically advanced West, as an aspiration for change and 'modernity'. As a result, '[the Maghreb] is an unthought space, crushed (or split) between the two hegemonic "metaphysics"' (meaning 'modes of thought'; Khatibi 1977, 19). Khatibi adds that this mode of self-understanding induces a difficult relationship with non-conformity. When a Maghrebi is confronted to an inevitable 'difference' between lived and ideal reality, he or she is unable to deal with this difference. Khatibi calls this confrontation the 'différence sauvage' or 'différence intraitable' ('wild' or 'inexplicable' difference) because it often stresses existing insecurities (often inherited from a painful colonial experience or not being 'Arab enough'). This process also leads to frustration and the adoption of rejectionist postures and extremist stances (8, 10).

With this essay, Khatibi aims to change the way discourses about identity are shaped. He invites readers not to start from the 'center' and seek an

'origin' but rather to depart from the 'margins' and accept a reality that is messier, more open and incohesive. We find continuities of this approach with Jacques Derrida's work on 'différance' (1967) because the two thinkers, both connected to the Maghreb and francophones, were in intellectual conversation as seen in Derrida's *Monolingualism of the Other* (1998). As a unit of analysis for Khatibi, the 'Maghreb' allows the visualisation of a cultural unit 'suffering' in between two hegemonic poles (1977). However, Khatibi frequently discusses Morocco instead of the broader Maghreb, which raises questions about whether it is possible to completely detach from nation-state as a frame of reference. On the other hand, Khatibi's theorisation of the 'Maghreb' shifts usefully between the macro, abstract level to the specific actors in charge of perpetuating the Maghreb's sense of cultural inferiority. He names the conservatives, the Salafists and modernists who perpetuate the negative influence of external ideologies on the Maghreb's cultural renewal (12). He also levels sharp criticism against the Moroccan historian Abdallah Laroui for writing a history of the Maghreb that privileges historical continuity by neglecting the essential movement of 'distance, discontinuity, disorder, and asymmetry' (14). Khatibi blames Laroui's Marxist framework for this limitation, pointing out that it reflects an inability to think independently. This epistemological reliance, Khatibi argues, is the root of the Maghreb's stalled cultural and intellectual situation.

Having named the problem, Khatibi calls for radical rupture by way of a 'double-critique [...] of the two metaphysics, of their confrontation' that activates thinking 'Morocco as it is, as the topographical site between the west and the east. Morocco as a horizon of thought cannot yet be named' (20); the task was to start from himself and his colleagues in this volume. In Khatibi's argument, Morocco and the Maghreb remain to be 'rethought, decentred, subverted, hijacked from its dominant motivations' in order for thinkers to work from 'activated margins' in order to 'rip us from our nostalgia of the Father figure and rip him from the metaphysical ground' (20). The Maghreb is a name for the 'unthought' margin, a space of generative pluralism, and an opportunity for a radical subversion of the limits placed by centralising force and metaphysics of the nation-state. The outcome would be a different kind of non-national collectivity: 'thought of "us" ... [located] in its enlightened margins. "Us", this novel space, unthought, beyond tyrannical thought of blind identities' (8).

If we consider Khatibi's intervention as an act of *dissensus*, it becomes clear that this journal volume itself enacts the 'double-critique' and the 'other thought' that its writers hope will 'activate' a decentred Maghreb. This Maghreb – a collectivity constituted outside and across the borders of the nation-states – could function as 'radical margin' capable of subverting the centre's political logic and aesthetic control. Khatibi's co-editors, Meddeb

and Abdi, took up the project of analysing how to carry out Khatibi's inspiring vision as an intellectual, aesthetic and political practice.

The aesthetics and politics of the Maghreb: the first divergence

Abdelwahab Meddeb and Nourredine Abdi differed sharply in both their academic interests and their temperaments. Meddeb was a charismatic Tunisian writer and a cultural and literary specialist who collaborated with publishing houses such as *Le Seuil* or *Actes Sud Sindbad*, for which he translated classical Arabic works and selected new talents from the region. Abdi, an Algerian, was a more reserved researcher, an economist and sociologist who worked between Algeria and Paris where he held a position at the French National Research Centre (CNRS) and built close ties within the academic community.

Despite these differences, they complemented one another's work on different branches of this collective project, while their connections to Parisian cultural and academic institutions attracted a range of collaborators to the volume. Meddeb expands on the Maghreb as an aesthetic experience and a cultural history that needs to be rewritten to emphasise its pluralistic nature (1977, 22–23). Meanwhile, Abdi (1977) tackled the challenges of transitioning from authoritarian nation-states to a democratic regional whole by studying Algeria's economic and political structure. This combined approach meant that each author tackled a different side of Khatibi's call to reconfigure Maghrebi identity. In some ways, this may have undermined the effort to read aesthetics and politics together, but the difference between their approaches is also instructive on the likelihood of materialising the Maghreb as a 'radical margin'.

Meddeb begins by discussing the Maghrebi cultural experience in broad terms to challenge why the region has come to understand itself as 'historically delayed' or 'decadent' (1977). He claims that 'backwardness' was constructed or perpetuated by a certain category of actors, whom he does not specify; these actors advocate for *authenticity* (*aṣāla*) and display a 'love of origins' through persistent calls for Arabisation (Grandguillaume 1983). According to Meddeb this 'theologically constructed' discourse is also prevalent among conservative Maghrebi academics and technocrats pinned to a notion of absolute truth (27–29) – and who, Meddeb explains, do not value what makes Maghrebi culture distinctive. He challenges the temporal sequence of 'classism/archaism/decadence' mobilised by such actors, by highlighting the creative capacities of popular culture: despite successive foreign occupations, he insists, popular culture conserved and renewed cultural 'signs' (symbols and references) (34–37). This is, for Meddeb, a powerful creative resource that represents better the Maghrebi cultural experience.

Abdi, on the other hand, analyses underlying structures of Algerian authoritarianism and the obstacles to regional integration (1977). He contrasts the

Algerian state's ideological commitment to a socialist revolution with the regime's dependence on a hydrocarbon export economy to point out how this economic structure shaped the social and political order (47–48). This prompted regime militarisation until 1968, followed by an alliance between the military and the state bourgeoisie. By 1974, with the 'consecration of the urban-industrial class', the Algerian state was in the hands of a powerful and autonomous economic ruling class, far away from the ideals of a socialist revolution (55–56). Abdi, unlike Khatibi and Meddeb, grounds his analysis in material reality rather than aesthetic discourse. His intervention highlights the specificity of the nation-state and is distinctly *non-utopian* in its viewpoint, an awkward contrast to the work of his co-editors.

This juxtaposition of positions itself forms a kind of 'double critique'. Meddeb frames his text as a 'speech-act', which no longer builds an identity-claim starting from an 'origin' but rather in the 'margins' or 'alterity' (1977, 22). This approach is also aware of the social and cultural positionality of knowledge production, especially when it points to the way orientalist scholars and 'westernized Arab intellectuals' perpetuate oppositions between the 'West' and 'Orient' in order to consolidate their roles as 'passeurs de rives' (river crossers), the orientalist scholar and the 'westernized Arab intellectual'. The positionality of knowledge production illustrates the need for critical awareness of how the unexamined use of such categories can have dangerous impact on culture, such as the adoption dangerous dualities between 'authenticity' and 'modernity' (43–44). Meddeb displays remarkable self-awareness and readiness to confront his positionality, and he concludes with confidence: 'we should congratulate ourselves for having contributed to the migration of such a thought to the dawn of our essence [...] with no hesitation if this is the [available] alternative' (44). Nevertheless, this intervention and optimism registers as fleeting and poetic in light of Abdi's sobering contribution.

Abdi, more pragmatic and more reserved, is in fact openly critical of the idea of a unified Maghreb. His article analyses the obstinate institutional machinery of the newly independent nation. He predicts that national borders would become reinforced as the Maghrebi nation-states increased their hegemony (1977, 58–59). Abdi shows that obstacles to Maghrebi integration are embedded in the incompatibility of the nations' different economic political structures: the 'Eastern' Maghreb (Algeria, Tunisia) had decided on 'production' (industry) while the 'Western' Maghreb (Morocco, Mauritania) were trading economies oriented toward the African continent and the Atlantic (47). These differences would, Abdi argues, prevent political unity of the Maghreb unless the region designed its own specific socialist model (53). His dissenting contribution to the epistemological project of this journal is an obdurate reminder that aesthetic projects cannot effect change without a transformation in political and economic structures and

realities of the region. Abdi nevertheless embraced – even as he challenged – the ambitions of the initiative as he has done in his subsequent writings, closing with the following: ‘Courage was required to make this necessary volume, be it only to ask this question with which a number of my Algerian and Moroccan colleagues have refused to be associated’ (47).

While the editors of this project laid out the broad parameters for an epistemological rupture with the nationalist principles that shaped discourses about the Maghreb’s identity, the way in which they highlight the difficult relationship between aesthetics and politics raises important questions. While their interventions displayed considerable courage, vision, and critical self-awareness, taken together they also highlight the magnitude of the difficulty faced by intellectuals who desire to change structures of power, starting from the volume’s contributors.

The powerless intellectual and the powerful Maghrebi state

The literature on Arab intellectuals and politics tends to focus on the limited options they have faced between being coopted and supporting authoritarian regimes, or choosing independence, marginalisation and persecution (Stein 2014, 4–6; Kandil 2011). Intellectuals have also pursued a third option: subversion of the state. The co-editors and contributors of this special volume investigated this third option explicitly in a section of the issue ‘The State’ (1977). Here they outline a plan to undermine the states’ hegemony from the margins. The three contributors to this section critique the state’s practices of exclusion by analysing and demystifying how these practices operate. First, the Tunisian Mohsen Toumi provides a comparative analysis of the structure of state discourse in the three countries. Second, the Algerian Mohamed Harbi offers a history of the military’s hegemony in Algeria. Finally, Fadela Lamrani focuses on the place of the working and peasant masses in the Algerian National Charter of 1976 and the goal of a socialist revolution. The absence of a contribution on Morocco is notable; this angle may have helped to set the 1975 Green March in a longer time perspective, as does as Abdallah Laroui’s thesis *Les origines sociales et culturelles du nationalisme marocain, 1830–1912* (1977), but such an angle does not appear in the *Les temps modernes* issue. In the section on the state, each of these writers provide crucial and specific insight into its workings, and each advocated for a mode of action to undermine its hegemony, while breaking new ground for debate.

Mohsen Toumi lifts the veil from the Tunisian state’s power mechanisms by analysing public discourse as an instrument of power. While this discourse was important in Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia, Toumi focuses on Tunisian public speech by studying the 40 speeches or interviews that Habib Bourguiba gave each year between 1970 and 1975 (1977, 151). Toumi unpacks the traits of this discourse, pointing out Bourguiba’s repeated insistence

that Tunisia's history was chaotic and its people misguided before his own arrival to power. The leader frames himself as a 'mediating charisma' who leads the nation toward its historical destiny as a modernised society (157, 159). Toumi argues that this discourse was designed to operate as a tool of control, so that the nation could be subjugated in a state of 'monumental hypostasis'. He describes Bourguiba's regime as 'a monolithic state obsessed with its immortality', and not primarily interested in meaningful economic development (155–156).

Mohammed Harbi, a historian and a former political leader, offers a study of the events that shaped Algeria's post-independence political configuration. He argues that those who took power after independence were a new type of officers who had developed a strong corporatist identity, were suspicious of neighbouring interventionism, and who were cut from the pre-1954 Algerian political culture (1977, 177). Although they consciously positioned themselves as speaking 'in the name of the rural masses', Harbi points out, these leaders behaved more like a bourgeoisie who instrumentalised popular narratives and the state apparatus for their own purposes (184).

Lamrani, also focusing on Algeria, highlights the contrast between ideology and political practice during the process leading to the 1976 National Charter. The charter claims to mobilise the urban and rural masses in the political system to achieve the socialist revolution (1977, 187). According to Lamrani, the state apparatus concentrated its own powers and did not mobilise the urban and rural masses as promised in the charter, thereby failing to practice the revolutionary aspirations so central to Algerian national credo (197).

These analyses carved open a space for discussing and criticising the workings of state power, but was such a space enough to drive political change? *Les temps modernes*, the forum for this discussion, was an intellectual publication in Paris and far from the countries' political struggles. Toumi and Lamrani took on this problem by advocating for concrete practices, while Harbi – perhaps because of his own political past and status as a political opponent, which placed him in a different category (Harbi 2001) – did not offer such suggestions.

Both Toumi and Lamrani offer introspective reflection on the role of intellectuals in authoritarian Maghrebi settings, and they argue that intellectuals should play an important role in translating the people's will. In his outline for action, Toumi laments that political opposition in these countries had failed to mount a solid 'counter-discourse' because the radical left's discursive subversion simply reproduced the same totalising frameworks and desire for control. Their members fought in clan-like ritualistic meetings over 'ideological purity' (1977). Toumi points out that instead of organising a united front against the regime, the efforts of the left were divided and a collective paranoid 'psychosis' set in (164–168). In his view, the alternative to the standoff between the state's hegemony and the ineffective counter discourse of the

left is a 'scientific discourse' inspired by 'popular discourse ... deconstructed, outside concepts [...] a majestic immanence'. Toumi suggests that the intellectual avant-garde should 'seek instruction from them [the popular masses]' (171). In an impassioned and lyrical passage, Toumi calls for renewed critical discourse in touch with the 'practice of everyday life', 'this dialectic of suffering and hope which only belongs to the people' (171).

Lamrani also highlights the exclusion of the urban and rural masses from the political process, laying this out as a problem for intellectuals to help solve: '[The peasant] should play a full social and political role and to be a conscious element of the socialist revolution, and one of the drivers of a harmonious development for this country' (1977, 190). Lamrani takes on the failure of Algeria's national project, which had been designed to stand on three pillars: the agrarian, the social and the cultural revolution (Entelis 1986). The latter two pillars required the work of enlightened intellectuals to be involved in the process, but because intellectuals had been repressed and excluded, the national project defected under the hegemony of a materialist bureaucracy. Lamrani points out that the process of discussing and adopting the National Charter in 1976 revealed that the people were dynamic and interested in shaping the country's national direction (1977, 199), and calls on the Algerian state leadership to make sure the masses *and* intellectuals 'feel involved and to enjoy a minimum of freedom of expression' if they wish to have any legitimacy as leaders (200–201).

The three contributors to this section of the special issue highlight the powerlessness of intellectuals and the power of the Maghrebi state, and point out the risks of their exclusion. They shift the terms of debate and action by calling on intellectuals to engage with other classes of people, which marks an important effort to dissent from and undermine the state's hegemony from the margins and allow intellectuals to look back critically at their position and modes of action. This discussion the stage for the issue's focus on aesthetics by raising the question of the intellectual's social location and sources of inspiration.

Disrupting the sensible through critical introspection

The volume's important section on literature and culture shifted the gaze of Maghrebi writers away from critiques of colonialism to focus on themselves as active cultural producers in changed political circumstances. Audiences in Paris were already familiar with the 'francophone writer' by 1977 (Forsdick and Murphy 2009). Writers such as Kateb Yacine, Driss Chraïbi and Albert Memmi had already set the tone by depicting how colonial education systems and repressive social and political contexts had ignited anti-colonial resistance, social rebellion and angst (Kelly 2004). The contributors to the special volume were a different generation of writers whose lives and sensibilities

had been formed in the independent nation-state. Contributors included literary specialists and academics such as Jamal Eddine Bencheikh, Hedi Bouraoui, Abdellah Bounfour, Ben Salem Himmich; emerging writers Tahar Ben Jelloun and Nabile Farès; and the well-established Berberist scholar and poet Mouloud Mammeri. Their contributions to the volume put language and form to Khatibi's idea of activated, dissident, and enlightened 'culture from the margins' (1977).

These cultural and literary specialists had strong opinions about how the Arab-Islamic framework of 'authenticity' had impacted cultural creation, and they moved forcefully beyond the binary opposition between 'tradition' and 'modernity' (Kaye and Zoubir 1990). Bencheikh pointed out that the conservative establishment had steadfastly attacked novelists in French *and* Arabic for failing to uphold a certain representation of 'authentic culture' and argued that this was simply an act of controlling the symbolic field by old, erudite elites (1977, 361). Nabile Farès echoed this conclusion by noting that the Maghrebi literary text had been transformed into a place to play out political representations and visions in a symbolic competition (1977, 405). This literary competition excluded minority perspectives, such as that of Berber oral culture. Mammeri argued that Berber oral literature excluded from official definitions not because of its 'marginality', but rather because of a value distinction drawn between 'literary' culture and 'oral folklore' (1977, 407). As a whole, this section of the volume reveals the aesthetic plurality of Maghrebi culture and argues to break with conservative restraints.

Writers of this section of the volume shared the argument that Arabic had been appropriated by a conservative bourgeoisie class with Islamic reformist credentials, and advocated for by theological and politicised argumentations (Bencheikh 1977, 363; Bounfour 1977, 419–420) to the detriment of innovative literary production. As a framework, 'authenticity' acted as restraint and made it difficult for young authors to write and create. As Bencheikh asked, 'Why does Ahlam Mostaghanemi go to publish her poems with Suhayl Idris in Beirut and not in Algiers?' He advocated for new literature in Arabic that would express the dynamic realities of Algerians:

In the meantime, to the statement: *to be authentic, Algerian literature must be in Arabic*, I would like to respond to the exigency: *to be Arab, Algerian literature must be authentic*, that is to express the modernity chosen by the new man that wishes to be Arab. After all, current history informs us there are several ways of being Arab. (1977, 366)

The writers of this section articulated different visions of how to shape national cultures and transform political realities. Hedi Bouraoui, quoting Frantz Fanon, argued that Maghrebis must overcome colonialism by shaping national cultures from deep roots (Etherington 2014). This painful work would involve 'exorcizing internal demons while denouncing a frozen

society through the use of avatars' – work done by the brutally honest novels of Boudjedra, Khairredine, Bourboune or Chraïbi that exorcised the demons of social and cultural 'backwardness' (Bouraoui 1977, 383). Abdellah Bounfour believed in an 'orphan thought' existing in its virtual space, unafraid to abandon its quest for lineage and filiation and operating a radical double-critique and existing in a double-marginality (1977, 424). These different views reveal divergent ways of thinking about culture: from Bounfour, culture is primarily an experience of aesthetics while for Bouraoui culture has meaning in society.

This opposition was at the basis of debate developed in this section of the journal over the purpose of writing and of the writer's 'responsibility' to society. Bencheikh announced strong views concerning the writer's responsibility to carry out a revolutionary project connected to the experience of the masses. He also attacks the insularity and personal character of post-Independence francophone Maghrebi literature (Kelly 2004, 1–9). He criticises Farès and Boudjedra for succumbing to their 'victimhood desires' and the 'mystique of writing', treating the text as an 'exile without an outcome', or as 'a stream of words that have no other purpose than being a stream of words' (Bencheikh 1977, 370–371, 374). Writers, he argued, should interact with the 'magma' and the 'forces confronting each other' in Algerian life. They should address agrarian reform and its impact on peasants, the daily workers in Algeria's massive factory complex, the 'cancer of bureaucracy' spreading across Algerian society, the struggles of women in patriarchal societies, and of students fighting for socialism, all of which would allow them to perceive how the Algerian people is slowly 'taking shape' (370). In contrast, Ben Jelloun idealised a 'wandering' writer who seeks the self in the act of writing, but whose words also 'interrogate us and put us in a crisis' (1977, 393). Writing, according to Ben Jelloun, should 'disrupt our weariness, [...] worry the calm lake of our certitudes. To say [something], without treason, is to deceive' (393). Ben Jelloun nuanced Bencheikh's perspective, adding that the writer must

touch reality from the tip of the foot or the tip of the heart; not to give oneself to the burden of the events. To avoid lamentation. Not to position oneself as a spokesperson of the people because we feel we have our feet in reality. (394)

This debate over the politics of writing literature did not take place in a vacuum. In Paris, Sartre, Foucault and others had also been updating what they believed about the intellectual's social and political responsibility – a guiding 'prophet', or a more 'specialized' and humble figure (Jennings 1993, 4; Bourton 2004; Foucault and Deleuze 1972, 104; Foucault 1996, 262; Sartre 1972)? But Paris and the Maghreb were different settings, and so the roles for intellectuals in the public sphere were differently articulated in Maghrebi contexts: either as 'civilizing heroes' (Bouziid 1999, 345), disconnected 'recruits' for the authorities (Marzouki 1999, 271), or 'organic'

intellectuals who tackle the question of heritage, language, and authenticity head on (Bouamrane 1999, 217). Ben Jelloun concludes his contribution by asking 'Who are you, a Moroccan writing in French?' His defeatist answer suggests the limited reach of his aesthetics:

Very few things. A really insignificant element. What weight do my word have in Latin syllables (and even if they were in Arabic) on the broken ground of a shanty town, on the fabric of this reality with which I am obsessed, this reality that goes beyond words: injustice, violence, and struggle for survival? (1977, 396)

In all, Bencheikh and Ben Jelloun agreed that the writer has a political function but they disagreed about what this should be. Their disagreement highlights a critical juncture that Maghrebi intellectuals confronted in the late 1970s, one already brought to light by the juxtaposed views of Meddeb and Abdi. That is, the contributors to this volume of *Les temps modernes* were in *dissensus*. Their perspectives conflict, and they did not resolve the complicated questions that they raised, such as how writers might critique or change their post-Independence Maghrebi states.

The violence of national re-integration

It is important that these debates about the political role of intellectuals took place at a historical turning point. By the late 1970s, Algeria, Tunisia, and Morocco had initiated some measure of political transition from a nationalistic model of state and nation-building to something still unknown (Camau 1989, 4), and in 1977 it looked possible that the regimes might be opening in new ways. In June 1975, Algerian President Boumedienne announced the drafting of a National Charter that would evaluate the achievements made since independence and chart a way forward (Ruedy 2005, 209–210). His government enjoyed the fruits of a rapid modernisation, economic redistribution and diplomatic leadership, and envisioned a bright future. On the other hand, Tunisia experienced a less consensual path toward transformation. Under Prime Minister Nour, the liberal economy grew after an agreement with the powerful trade union (UGTT), but when Nour announced a five-year plan in 1977 that did not include the salary increases requested by UGTT, a series of nationwide strikes and violent state repression threatened to plunge the country into violence. The events of 'Black Thursday' spurred a dormant liberal section of society to action, forcing the state to make several political concessions to the media and civil society (Perkins 2004, 167–168). Morocco had been under a state of emergency since the 1965 Casablanca riots. The two failed putsch attempts in 1971 and 1972 induced further repression while economic corruption undermined the regime's legitimacy. In 1975, the King launched the Green March to force a favourable issue in the country's struggle for the recuperation of the Sahara, rallying the usually-divided political class.

When Hassan II announced elections from 1976 to 1978, the marginalised political class temporarily rejoiced (Pennell 2000, 339; Willis 2012, 126).

Just after these political developments, intellectuals saw the prospect that the state regimes might open spaces for participation. The contributors to the *Du Maghreb* volume of *Les temps modernes* contemplated how or whether to participate in these dynamics. Some of the volume's authors began recalibrating the terminology and conceptual framework that would justify their participation without forsaking their ideals as intellectuals (Pascon 1977), a sense of pragmatism and a precursor to what would happen as this generation of intellectuals began to shift their public engagement toward the nascent civil society movement (Rollinde 1999, 309). In Tunisia, for example, members of the radical leftist organisation *Perspectives (Afāq Tunisiyyah)* who were jailed in the late sixties and seventies joined in numbers the nascent Tunisian League for Human Rights upon their release (Waltz 1991, 482). Ahmed Othmani carried out important work with civil society to reform the country's prisons. In Morocco, academics have struggled with the neoliberal logics that permeated all state administrations from the 1980s and devalued the function of the 'professor', which for long was the main provider of public intellectuals (Cohen 2014, 28, 40). Algeria already reeled from an intelligentsia that failed to detach from the state after independence, and then fell under the radar (or went into immigration) as Islamist militants began targeting and assassinating them during the 1990s civil war (Addi 1995). As the modernist intelligentsia downgraded their public ambitions, the mantle of collective utopia was taken up by Islamist political groups, which made it easier for former intellectual figures to justify working with the state.

The late seventies placed before this generation a difficult choice: to remain in the creative and unimpeded margins or to join the centre, shaped by political considerations and the constraint of pragmatism. The contributors who came together to flesh out Khatibi's vision in this volume of *Les temps modernes* in 1977 then made their individual choices separately, a series of aesthetic and political divergences that need to be studied further.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have argued that this collective theoretical effort to 'think the Maghreb' as a pluralistic and democratic post-nationalist alternative should be read as reflecting fundamental misgivings and questions of Maghrebi intellectuals about their place in the national community after independence, at a time when intellectuals had been marginalised by forms of state repression and violence (physical or symbolic). For some contributors, this volume was the opportunity to let go of idealistic representations of the intellectual's responsibility and consolidate a few spaces of 'acceptable margins', such as the emerging civil society in the 1980s; for the others, further research is

needed into the impact of this disillusionment (Belghazi and Moudden 2016, 37) and the relationship between negative emotions and collective mobilisation (Goodwin and Jasper 2001, 1–24; Tilly and Tarrow 2007).

The volume's combined focus on aesthetics and politics permitted its contributors to reflect critically on – and, crucially, to disagree with each other about – their work as knowledge-producers and their responsibilities as intellectuals in their changing societies. By seeking to disrupt and reconfigure the sensible through dissensus and debate, these authors reflect a collective effort to construct a more democratic and inclusive politics that resists the limits imposed by the Maghrebi nation-states. Thus, this volume contributes to a better understanding of 'committed' cultural productions under authoritarian contexts in the region and beyond, and how they highlight the mindsets and aims of authors and cultural actors, inscribed in their own strategies.

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