

---

H-France Review Vol. 17 (July 2017), No. 114

Kathryn A. Kleppinger, *Branding the 'Beur' Author: Minority Writing and the Media in France, 1983-2013*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015. xiii + 271 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$120.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-7813-8196-0.

Review by Kristen Stern, Davidson College.

In *Branding the 'Beur' Author*, Kathryn A. Kleppinger offers a thorough investigation of the reception of French writers of North African heritage and their self-presentation over the past three decades. Through close readings of their appearances on televised culture and literature programming, she sketches a series of portraits of prominent North African French authors, taking into consideration both their agency and outside forces in the literary, cultural, political, and media fields that create their images. Informed by Pierre Bourdieu's understanding of the literary field more broadly and reading through Stuart Hall's encoding/decoding model of communication for television more specifically, Kleppinger puts forth a compelling model for understanding the changes over time in the reception of North African French writers and in their own aesthetic goals. Incorporating both sociology and literary studies, Kleppinger also borrows the methods of media studies to interpret the genre of author interview, performing close "readings" of these televised interactions, which she understands as including body language and dress along with the verbal exchanges. Validating these aspects of authorial presence as legitimate sites of study and interpretation contributes to much-needed newer turns in literary studies. These appearances are not (only) ancillary material to the "true" object of study, the published work; rather author interviews are crucial sites for what they reveal about the aesthetic projects of the writers in question, as well as the mechanisms at work that legitimize or marginalize certain forms, themes, and persons—both for the consumer public at large as well as in the academy. This book also attempts to address forces at play on scholars' choices of what works deserve the time and attention of research and pedagogy, an important issue to be raised regarding canon formation and legitimation of certain themes, subject positions, and genres. One wishes at times this question were more explicitly addressed regarding the authors chosen for Kleppinger's own study.

Organized chronologically, each chapter focuses on what Kleppinger defines as a specific era of identity politics/aesthetics, both in how North African authors were perceived in cultural media in that moment, and in how these authors chose to place themselves vis-à-vis contemporary expectations—resistant, in line with them, or in a position somewhere in between these clearly defined poles. What does the "brand" of the *beur* author—both as a marketing strategy and "as an indelible mark they cannot erase even when they try" (p. 16)—look like in each moment in time?

Mehdi Charef exemplifies the first era beginning in 1983. His *Le thé au harem d'Archy Ahmed* rose to prominence at the same time that the 1983 *Marche des Beurs* was changing debates about minority populations' place within French republicanism. Though a work of fiction, Charef's novel was read as an autobiographical work. This is a phenomenon that, as Kleppinger rightly points out, connects *beur* literature to larger francophone literature debates.[1] Kleppinger connects this mandate to the "native

informant” model as understood by Gayatri Spivak. Kleppinger clearly lays out the limitations on artistic expression that such a frame imposes.

Leïla Sebbar, an author who was already pushing back against certain “identity politics” interpretations of her work, is a counterpoint to Charef here. Sebbar had released *Shérazade, 17 ans, brune, frisée, les yeux verts* (1982) just a year earlier, but her self-framing was very different from that of Charef. Sebbar favored discussions of gender in the work over highlighting her North African heritage. Sebbar was already a published author at that point, and had more “insider status” than Charef—and thus more cultural capital to spend on asserting her own agency in defining herself. This partly explains her ability to shift conversations to other questions besides her ethnic identity (and that of her protagonist). In contrast, Charef chose to find a middle ground between the individual life of his characters and the importance of group identity, which garnered him many interview opportunities and “established a framework for the role played by *beur* authors” in promotional appearances (p. 78). Looking at his longer-term career, “Charef has thus achieved precisely what he claims to have sought to do in 1983: use his credibility and status as a ‘*beur*’ to propel him forward and to provide him with the financial support necessary to define his own artistic agenda in his subsequent work” (p. 79).

In the next chapter, Kleppinger identifies new developments in the late 1980s, and focuses on Azouz Begag and Farida Belghoul as emblematic authors of this moment. Begag, professor of socioeconomics at Lyon II, was less concerned with literary stylistics in these interviews and more with questions of authenticity in representing a given population: “...either the work ‘represents’ a population (and is worthy of praise) or it does not (and therefore does not interest him)” (p. 81). Belghoul, in contrast, refused journalists’ attempts at making any larger connections from her work to social situations. She insisted on her work being judged on its artistic attributes and rejected any duty to represent immigrants’ concerns or other social issues. These writers also had very different “homes” in media—Begag was very present on television programs with a large and broad viewership, whereas Belghoul was more often on the radio. These programs were perhaps more seriously focused on literary concerns, but with a smaller listening audience, Belghoul’s message did not reach as many people as Begag’s.

Several things explain Begag’s relative success in these appearances. We see the autobiography question was still present in this moment, and Begag does not contest that *Le gone du Chaâba* (1986) was a fictionalized version of his own childhood experiences. Kleppinger also judiciously includes stills of television appearances throughout the book, demonstrating here, for example, her point that Begag is skilled in using body language and gesture to connect with his viewers and emphasize his arguments. To summarize the movements of the early and late 1980s, Kleppinger concludes that “[t]he authors who validate journalists’ readings of immigrant identity concerns (Charef and Begag) receive multiple invitations to appear on the most-watched news and variety shows of the era. The authors who refuse facile sociopolitical readings of their work (Sebbar and Belghoul) find themselves marginalized, either to specialized radio programs or to no audiovisual appearances at all. The promotion of these writers and their engagements with the media thus indicates how thoroughly readings of their works are socially constructed” (p. 119).

Chapter four examines the 1990s through the 2000s, and specifically writing by women of North African heritage at that time. Kleppinger focuses on two women authors, Soraya Nini (*Ils disent que je suis une beurette*, 1993) and Samira Bellil (*Dans l’enfer des tournantes*, 2002) who both published texts at the intersection of “eyewitness narratives” and the “*beurette*” label. The publication of these and similar works corresponded with a rise in concern in public discourse about threats posed by North African populations to mainstream French society, and specifically the gendered dimension to these threats. Kleppinger lays out a chronology of flashpoints around the headscarf debates in 1989, 1994, and 2003 to demonstrate this point. *Beurette* and *Tournantes* both align neatly with received ideas about the oppression of women of North African heritage in France, and the French state’s obligation to intervene on their behalf. These women writers were never given the opportunity to challenge the “master

narratives” of suffering and oppression, and neither Nini nor Bellil is concerned with critique or debate about literary style, focusing instead on recounting their lived experiences of gendered violence in their communities. One result is that possibilities for other works labeled as “*beur*” become limited going forward (p.160).

Chapter five turns the focus on Rachid Djaidani and what Kleppinger characterizes as a “[s]hift from *Beur* to *Banlieue* [w]riting” (p. 162). By the time Djaidani’s novel *Boumkoeur* came out in 1999, North African men “had also begun to express their frustration regarding what they saw as unfair stereotyping and ongoing discrimination by police, teachers, and potential employers” (p. 162). Conversations in literature in general were also becoming concerned with the “urban novel” at this time; thus *littérature beur* and *littérature de banlieue* start to fuse together throughout the 1990s. The popularity of Mathieu Kassovitz’s 1995 film *La Haine* also encouraged this kind of critique, “one in which ethnicity remains relevant but is recast as a question of diversity in a population that had come to contain immigrants from across the world” (p. 165). The reception of the  *beurette* works were influenced by the rising profile of events concerning specifically female-gendered perceived threats to traditional mainstream French culture like the headscarf. Similarly, high-profile incidents in France—from the 1995 metro station bombing at Saint-Michel to, more recently, the November 2015 attacks in Paris and Saint-Denis—raised concerns about radicalization among North African men.

Against this cultural backdrop, and compared with the earlier authors included in this study, Djaidani’s agency in moving toward a universalist position for interpreting so-called *beur* literature stands out. Though earlier in his career he was willing to discuss “violence and criminality,” as he became more successful and his career matured, “he has now come to push back” against what he sees as questions that “misunderstand *banlieue* communities [...], arguing in favor of a more universalist understanding of his goals” (p. 167). Djaidani shifted to a universalist position, “call[ing] for recognition as simply an author and filmmaker, with no additional labels” (p. 167). He raised these points from his first interview with Bernard Pivot—an appearance that legitimizes his presence in the literary mainstream in France. Kleppinger describes his persona projected in this interview as “magnetic”; “he is unfailingly engaged, friendly, and polite, and he draws interlocutors to him through his charismatic personality” (pp. 175-76). The author makes clear in this example that Djaidani is proficient in the performance skills required to strike a balance between authenticity and reaching a mainstream viewership—and that these performances can help get his broader message about the place of North African writers in the French literary sphere to large audiences.

Chapter six traces Faïza Guène’s changing strategies through the publications of her first three novels—beginning with *Kiffe kiffe demain* in 2004, followed by *Du rêve pour les oufs* (2006), and *Les gens du Balto* (2008). Guène’s trajectory is less linear than Djaidani’s. As Kleppinger explains, “where in 2004 she mostly expressed her frustration with questions she did not want to answer, by 2006 she acknowledged that most young women of North African heritage never had the opportunity to speak to a large audience [...and that] she had decided to use her platform strategically. In these appearances she first answered the questions journalists asked her but then commented on how and why those questions made her uncomfortable. [...By 2008] her answers had become more theoretical, saying that pigeon-holing questions reflected a lack of respect and of imagination and that her novels deserved to be recognized as works of French literature like any other, just as she and her peers deserved to be recognized as French citizens like any other” (p. 203). From the beginning, she more strongly resisted the frame of autobiography imposed upon her novels, and Guène went further than Djaidani, asserting that the way universalism is defined needs to be re-thought in order to make room for her in that understanding. In a conversation with Michel Drucker, Guène evokes the 1983 *Marche des Beurs*—a cultural moment that framed the beginning of this study—and its organizers’ claim to “le droit à la différence.” By contrast, Guène calls for “le droit à l’indifférence”: she asks to be read, critiqued, and considered as an author *tout court*, without the North African, *beur(ette)*, or *banlieue* labels. Both Guène and Djaidani “seek greater recognition of their place in French society, as full-fledged **insiders** who no

longer need to prove that they belong” (p. 227). Kleppinger credits Guène for going a bit further, having “opened up the space of analytic possibilities for future French authors of North African heritage” (p. 234).

These new spaces for interpretation are the subject of the concluding chapter, in which Kleppinger takes the briefly lived *Qui fait la France?* writers’ collective as an example of developments since 2007 at the convergence of literature and politics. While the group that published a manifesto in the magazine *Les Inrockuptibles* in 2007 no longer exists as a unified voice, there is evidence that these authors have succeeded in enlarging possibilities for interpretation (p. 238). Specifically regarding universalism in the vein of Guène and Djaidani, while the manifesto failed at advancing specific practices for these changes, the signatories did succeed in raising awareness of the problematic assumptions about who the supposedly universal reader might be in mainstream criticism and cultural journalism.

Taking these different cultural moments together, Kleppinger reaches several conclusions. First, as is laid out in Bourdieu’s conception of the field, North African French writers both influence and are influenced by the structures that define and classify them (p. 249). While these forces often constrained artistic production or its subsequent interpretation, the overall development of North African writers’ positions in this field indicates “just how French” they are, and the increasing willingness of mainstream media to listen to their points of view. The power of France’s centralized media for stimulating book sales—a power to which scholars are not immune in their choices of which texts and authors to favor in research and teaching—makes this openness all the more crucial. Finally, we must question the relevance of continuing to use the “tautology” (p. 252) of *beur* or *banlieue* labels for writing, a label eschewed by writers today: the media’s preconceptions about what constitutes a “*beur*” text determines precisely which books get promoted. It is therefore impossible to say that there are certain *beur* themes.

Kleppinger concludes by leaving us with a question similar the one she started with: if *beur* writers of the last three decades have succeeded in making space for a larger understanding of who gets to be (considered) French, scholars and readers alike are still left wondering “how to analyse and interpret writing that incorporates a specific set of socially and politically sensitive themes without reducing it to only those aspects” (p. 253). Certainly a strength of the book is the examples of at least one clear set of methods for answering this question. A study that will be of interest for scholars of performance studies and, in particular, sociology of the author, *Branding the ‘Beur’ Author* gives a model for how to do this kind of close reading and, more significantly, what and how it will add to our toolbox for interpretation and understanding.

## NOTES

[1] Elsewhere, Lia Nicole Brozgal has made similar assertions specifically regarding this mandate imposed upon Maghrebi writers. See Lia Nicole Brozgal, *Against Autobiography: Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2013).

Kristen Stern  
Davidson College  
[krstern@davidson.edu](mailto:krstern@davidson.edu)

Copyright © 2017 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution of individual reviews for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the H-France website. The Society for French Historical Studies reserves the right to withdraw the license for redistribution/republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. Neither bulk redistribution/republication in electronic form of more than five percent of the contents of H-France Review nor re-publication of any amount in print

form will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. The views posted on H-France Review are not necessarily the views of the Society for French Historical Studies.

ISSN 1553-9172