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Branding the 'Beur' author: minority writing and the media in France (Book Review)

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Kathryn Kleppinger analyses the appearances of several of the most frequently-interviewed French writers of North African heritage on audiovisual media between 1983 and 2013, aiming to determine how readings of so-called 'Beur literature' came to focus near-entirely on texts' sociopolitical themes to the detriment of their artistic qualities. Audiovisual media coverage, which both increases sales figures and allows authors and interviewers to suggest reading strategies to viewers, has in Kleppinger's view played a key role in promoting this reductive approach. Writers were, she demonstrates, pre-selected for interview in the 1980s and 1990s based on their willingness to answer sociopolitically-focused questions regarding what their texts could contribute to ongoing media debates surrounding France's North African population. Those who accepted this approach, like Azouz Begag in the 1980s and Soraya Nini in the 1990s, were regularly invited for interview. Other writers like Farida Belghoul, who challenged readings of her work as necessarily politically 'engaged' and instead emphasised its literary qualities, were interviewed significantly less often; as a result of its greater exposure, the sociopolitical approach became predominant among readers and critics. More recently, however, Kleppinger argues that writers have become increasingly able to make arguments like Belghoul's without being frozen out of the audiovisual media. Faïza Guène and Rachid Djaïdani have argued that their work deserves respect as literature *tout court* rather than for its political themes, and Kleppinger claims that Sabri Louatah has gone further by only consenting to speak about his novels in artistic terms. She thus concludes on a hopeful note: that such challenges to dominant reading strategies can now be made in the mainstream media, she hopes, suggests that writers of North African descent may soon be accepted as fully-fledged members of the French literary canon rather than being treated as sociologists first, authors an often-distant second.

Kleppinger's argument is strong and lucidly presented; her focus on audiovisual media seems justified by the continued influence of literary programming in France, particularly early in the period she covers. Some points, however, would benefit from further attention. For example, Kleppinger identifies fears of a rise of radical Islam in the *banlieues* as having played an important role in shaping questions put to writers since the 1990s. However, she pays comparatively little attention to their engagement with interview questions about this beyond noting that Nini and Samira Bellil refused to blame religion for male sexual violence in the *banlieues*. It may have helped to consider how Louatah engages with media coverage of Islam and stigmatisation of Muslims as potential terrorists both in his tetralogy *Les Sauvages*, which she appears to see as entirely apolitical, and in interviews. This points to a second issue: Kleppinger's claim that Louatah refuses to make *any* political comment is exaggerated. He spoke out, for example, in support of *Charlie Hebdo* after the Île-de-France attacks of January 2015, and during the period Kleppinger covers appeared in the audiovisual media to discuss subjects including the putative impact upon French identity of the nation's changing ethnic makeup. This does not, however, seriously undermine her argument; it arguably strengthens it by suggesting that, like Guène, Louatah did not need to abandon sociopolitical comment entirely in order to be respected as a literary author. Such comparatively minor issues notwithstanding, this monograph remains a valuable contribution to scholarship on literature by French writers of North African heritage: it both helps to elucidate how often very different kinds of text came to be grouped together as 'Beur literature' and reminds readers that while such texts can often be approached through a sociopolitical lens this should not lead their artistic qualities to be neglected.