

---

Other Resources

Languages

---

2021

## Review of Writing the Black Decade: Conflict and Criticism in Francophone Algerian Literature (Forde, Joseph)

Aoife Connolly

Technological University Dublin, [Aoife.Connolly@TUDublin.ie](mailto:Aoife.Connolly@TUDublin.ie)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://arrow.tudublin.ie/aaschlanoth>



Part of the [Modern Languages Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Connolly, A. (2021). Review of (Forde, Joseph) writing the black decade: conflict and criticism in francophone Algerian literature. *Irish Journal of French Studies*, vol. 21. doi:10.7173/164913321833983097

This Other is brought to you for free and open access by the Languages at ARROW@TU Dublin. It has been accepted for inclusion in Other Resources by an authorized administrator of ARROW@TU Dublin. For more information, please contact [arrow.admin@tudublin.ie](mailto:arrow.admin@tudublin.ie), [aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie](mailto:aisling.coyne@tudublin.ie), [gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie](mailto:gerard.connolly@tudublin.ie).



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-Share Alike 4.0 License](#)

## BOOK REVIEWS

### **Joseph Ford, *Writing the Black Decade: Conflict and Criticism in Francophone Algerian Literature***

(Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, *After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France*, 2021) viii + 169 pp.

The Algerian Civil War of the 1990s, known to Algerians as the ‘*décennie noire*’ or Black Decade, began in earnest when the Algerian army cancelled the second round of parliamentary elections in January 1992, following the success of the FIS (*Front Islamique du Salut*) in the first round in December 1991. The war, which saw the state and Islamists on opposing sides, was particularly violent, resulting in an estimated 100,000–200,000 deaths. The period has drawn inevitable comparisons with the Algerian War of Independence (1954–62). Indeed, it prompted media references to a ‘Second Algerian War — a comparison that Natalya Vince notes is ‘fundamentally ahistorical’.<sup>1</sup> In *Writing the Black Decade*, Joseph Ford sheds valuable light on the 1990s conflict by examining how literature and its reception have shaped commonly-held perceptions of this complex period in Algeria’s history. Ford’s work complements recent efforts by Crowley et al. to critically examine some of the many ‘Different versions of “Algeria”’ produced by the state and cultural actors, and builds on Benkhaled and Vince’s unpicking of Manichean tropes that have formed part of discourses on Algeria since the late 1980s.<sup>2</sup>

Writers and intellectuals were targeted during the *décennie noire* and, as Ford points out, writing therefore took on a particular significance, especially in the context of a “historical vacuum” on the subject (5). Yet, Ford’s study of Francophone Algerian writers unsettles the notion that such literary engagement is always positively

- 
1. Natalya Vince, *The Algerian War, The Algerian Revolution* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), p. 181.
  2. See Patrick Crowley, ed., *Algeria: Nation, Culture and Transnationalism: 1998-2015* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2017), pp. 1. Within the volume, see in particular, Walid Benkhaled and Natalya Vince, ‘Performing Algerianness: the national and transnational construction of Algeria’s “culture Wars”’, pp. 243–69.

transformational. Indeed, while recognizing that literature can deconstruct stereotypes, he persuasively argues that reductive accounts of the conflict were repeatedly reproduced as the lines between testimonials, literature, journalism, history/political science, literary criticism and writers (along with the demands of their French publishing houses) blurred.

The monograph is composed of five chapters, each of which offers concise, self-contained and insightful analyses of a variety of writing and how it has been received. In addition to providing a fresh focus on writers whose work has been translated into English, the book foregrounds writers who are less well-known in the Anglophone world.

Chapter 1 examines figures who produced testimonial literature during the *décennie noire*. Ford investigates Rachid Mimouni's apparent status as a "porte-parole" for his compatriots and exposes a tendency towards binary narratives in Mimouni's political and literary texts, before offering readings of Assia Djebar's and Maïssa Bey's self-conscious approach to writing. Chapter 2 explores Salim Bachi's attempts to interrogate reductive narratives about the conflict through his novels—attempts which Ford reveals are not always successful. Chapter 3 considers Habib Ayyoub, whose work is not generally known outside of Algeria, and whose later writing reveals 'how writers, citizens, and commentators alike have been complicit in obscuring the multilayered and complex realities of recent Algerian history' (86). Chapter 4 offers original insights on Kamel Daoud, who, Ford argues, critics (with Daoud's complicity) tend to frame in simplistic terms as a progressive intellectual in opposition to regressive forces, in readings that fuse his journalistic and literary writing. In chapter 5, however, Ford illustrates how writer-journalist Mustapha Benfodil uses 'avant-garde practices to move beyond the polarized conflict narrative of the Black Decade' (122) not just through literature but through street performances of his work in "public displays of dissent" (130).

Through this thoughtful and thought-provoking study of the Black Decade, Ford highlights the role writing can play in entrenching

or undermining stereotypes, and underlines the importance of taking an interrogatory approach to texts written in times of crisis.

*Aoife Connolly*

*Technological University Dublin*