

*Research Africa Reviews* Vol. 8 No. 2, August 2024

These reviews may be found on the *RA Reviews* website at:

<https://researchafrica.duke.edu/ra-reviews/volume-8-2024/issue-2-august-2024/>

Paraska Tolan-Szkilnik, *Maghreb Noir: The Militant-Artists of North Africa and the Struggle for a Pan-African, Postcolonial Future*. Stanford University Press, 2023, 272 pages. ISBN: 9781503634824.

Reviewed by: Ayanda Nombila, University of the Western Cape.

*Maghreb Noir* by Palaska Tolan-Szkilnik raises an important question about how we study art as political activism in pan-African thought. This artistic political activism of the Maghreb Generation forms a Pan-Africanism that goes beyond colonial criticism because it engages with the postcolonial state as an agent of oppression in itself. So, at one level, it addresses the ideological struggle against colonialism, while it also addresses the issues of the betrayal of the ideology of pan-African freedom. The state is guilty of eating its own revolutionaries, as artists or as radical critics of both scholarly endeavors and public intellectual-activism. This book suggests that we view art not as a handmaiden of politics but as political action in itself; artists are militants involved in revolutionary politics. Artists are political; they make politics, and they are also made by political movements.

This groundbreaking distinction is important to make as it assists us, those who teach political studies, in taking artists seriously as part of teaching the so-called social science discipline (which usually focuses on issues of state, governance/bureaucracy, political ideologies, sovereignty, and international relations, etc). There is no study of the political work of the artists or poets or musicians, and this book can help in developing this discipline in Africa. A number of issues relating to both the past and present of politics in Africa are dealt with in this book. We see an engagement with contentious issues relating to Arab North Africa and Black Sub-Saharan Africa, and from there, the rest of the globe is revealed as a stage of politics for which freedom can only be consolidated. By making this link between the Arab artists, the North/Arab African part as having been involved in the liberation struggle for the whole continent, we see an opening for a new horizon of comparative political studies. We can now start to compare further: What was North Africa's role in the liberation movements in Africa? To what extent can that comparison assist us in building new solidarities, fractured as they may be because of racial discriminations? To what extent can the theme of pan-African unity and regional integrations be enriched as a result of such comparative studies (and the work of artists)?

The study takes our intellectual eyes away from such well-known geniuses like Kwame Nkrumah, Julius Nyerere, Leopold Senghor, etc., to lesser-known people so that our study of pan-African unity can be broadened. The issues of race and ethnicity, culture and gender, and patriarchy are still ones we grapple with today in Africa. Tolan-Szkilnik maintains that the struggle for freedom by African artists went beyond the immediateness and the shallowness of these issues. This struggle included the broadening of the notion of blackness, through the lived expression of a multi-racial, multi-lingual pan-Africanism. The debate on language is one of the most contentious issues even today, with the idea of 'blackifying' European languages on the one hand, or a total utilization of African indigenous languages on the other hand. This effort by the artists to utilize their own indigenous languages is commendable and is a lesson for today. The South African student movement does not produce a culture of writing in indigenous languages with all its radical subversions of the European legacies.

Regrettably, the study also points out that the structure of patriarchy is one that refused to go away, as male artists still saw their female counterparts as sexual bodies to be conquered and instrumentalized for their own politics. On top of that, the artists suppressed the voices of women. If the artists could not liberate themselves from the counter-emancipatory, counter-revolutionary modern sensibility of patriarchy, then should we not be skeptical of this tradition of artistic activism? Even though the artists attempted to elevate their politics to the pan-African universal emancipation project, they failed a reflective self-critique which could have provided a basis for a more radical liberation against nationalist contradictions.

This study is crucial for those who still wish to pursue the study of pan-Africanism and the artists and politics in the humanities, social sciences, and arts in general. It will also provide proof that Africa has always known the importance of unity, solidarity, cooperation, and the importance of being part of the global political arena to consolidate its global presence.

#### **Research Africa**

Copyright © 2024 by Research Africa, (research\_africa-editor@duke.edu), all rights reserved. RA allows for copy and redistribution of the material in any medium or format, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and the location of the review on the RA website. You may not distribute the modified material. RA reserves the right to withdraw permission for republication of individual reviews at any time and for any specific case. For any other proposed uses, contact RA's Editor-in-Chief. The opinions represented in the reviews and published on the RA Reviews website are not necessarily those held by RA and its Review editorial team.

**ISSN 2575-6990.**