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Coproducing Nostalgia across the Mediterranean: Visions of the Jewish-Muslim Past in French-Tunisian Cinema

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Abstract

In the wake of the Tunisian Revolution that in turn launched the Arab Spring popular uprisings, the previous support of Jews of Tunisian origin living in France for the Ben Ali dictatorship prompted a new level of engagement with Tunisian politics. This article examines the collaboration between Jewish and Muslim writers and filmmakers that created a series of nostalgic films depicting the country's "exceptional" cosmopolitan past. Analyzing Nouri Bouzid's *Homme de cendres* (1986), Férid Boughedir's *Un été à la Goulette* (1996) and *Villa Jasmin* (2007), and Lucie Cariès's *Bon baisers de la Goulette* (2007), these films critique the contemporary discourse depicting Jews and Muslims as eternal enemies. Shifting the burden of conflict away from indigenous Tunisians, they show French colonialism and/or the Israeli-Arab wars as exogenous factors that undermined the inherent harmony of a shared Mediterranean past. Regardless of the veracity of these narratives, the article questions the limits and constraints of such nostalgic discourse to address present Jewish-Muslim dynamics in France and beyond.

Keywords

Diaspora - Tunisia - Nostalgia - Mediterranean Jews - Cinema

The eruption of mass protests in Tunisia in December 2010 toppled the twenty-three-year regime of authoritarian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and launched the Arab Spring revolutions across the region. While the whole of the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean were caught in the wave emanating from Tunisia, which had been seen as an island of stability in a turbulent Arab world, the images of revolution also profoundly touched Tunisia's Jewish diaspora living in France and Israel. In the wake of the revolution, there was a striking shift in France in particular, with some of the most prominent diasporans, including comedian Michel Boujenah, journalist and producer Serge Moati, and writer and radio host Colette Fellous, traveling to Tunisia to publicly

express their support for it and also to document, and in certain sense, "translate" it for French audiences (Fellous, Meddeb, Wolinksi 2012; Moati 2011, 2013)[1]. This sudden taking of sides in contemporary Tunisian politics also included public apologies from Boujenah and Moati along with professions of ignorance about the reach of Ben Ali's kleptocratic dictatorship, as well as the rampant violence he and his wife's family exercised to remain in power, from the late 1980s onward. All this took place in a broader French context of embarrassment, as many from the political and intellectual classes had supported Ben Ali as a rampart against Islamic extremism, overlooking his regime's brutality and corruption.

Tunisian Jewish writers' stance toward the revolution represented a new turn, since during the Ben Ali years they had produced a considerable amount of nostalgic literary and visual representations about the period before independence from France in 1956. Indeed, many had the celebrated the golden days that preceded decolonization, written with the implicit blessing of the regime, which sought to show Tunisia as a tolerant, liberal country in regard to its minorities. This restorative Jewish-Muslim nostalgia is a way of looking at the past that «seeks to rebuild the lost home and patch up the memory gaps» (Boym 2001 41). This collaborative effort allowed Tunisian Muslims and Jews to celebrate their lost childhoods and adolescences while avoiding criticism of the dictatorship that fostered and instrumentalized this nostalgia.

To address the tensions underlying the nostalgic project of representation of intercommunal relations that portray Tunisia as an exemplary and exceptionally Mediterranean society, I will examine a trio of interrelated co-productions which exemplify the triangulation at work in multipolar memories of the Jewish presence in Tunisia. Férid Boughedir's *Summer in La Goulette* (1995) offer portraits of Tunisia before and after departure, while only indirectly addressing the question of why Jews left. Their central focus is to mourn, celebrate, and pay tribute of the Jewish imprint on the country's history. More recently, Boughedir's collaboration with Serge Moati on the telefilm *Villa Jasmin* (2007) and Lucie Cariès's documentary *Bons baisers de la Goulette* (2007) examine the question from the opposite direction, that is Jews of Tunisian origins remembering and returning to their ancestral homeland.

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[1] Fellous devoted two episodes of her radio series "Carnet Nomade" on France Culture to interviewing artists, activists, and writers about the country's transformation, entitled "Journal d'un printemps solidaire" in 2011. She also contributed to a photobook, *Dégage! Une révolution* (2012). Moati wrote a chronicle of the revolution and scathing critique of President Ben Ali and his wife Leïla Trabelsi, *Dernières nouvelles de Tunis* (2011). In 2013, Moati directed a documentary *Artistes de Tunisie*, illustrating the role of art in the movement that overthrew Ben Ali as well as in shaping the democratic transition. Michel Boujenah (Barraud 2011) made repeated emotional TV appearances and trips to show his support for the Revolution. All three figures had regularly visited and stayed in Tunisia during the preceding period, without any expressing any public criticism of the regime.

The films I analyze all feature a mixed lineup in crucial positions of screenwriter, director, and producer, main actors and actresses, constituting a French-Jewish-Tunisian coproduction. Sharing personnel, tropes, and plotlines, these films embody the nostalgia that continues to function on all sides of the Mediterranean, a yearning for a certain cosmopolitan past in which Jews, Muslims, and Christians lived peacefully side by side. Tunisia constitutes a special case because of its own "exceptional" discourse, deftly employed by its political class to define the country for Western governments and publics, and because of the close collaboration of the Jewish diaspora in France.

From Tunisia to France: The Making of a Diaspora

First let us situate the origins of the Jews of Tunisia in the modern period, a particular community within the broader array of Jews in the Arab and Islamic world. In effect, there were two different Jewish communities in Ottoman Tunisia, the *twansa*, or the autochthonous Jews, who could trace their roots back in Tunisia for several centuries, and the *grana*, those who had emigrated from Spain and Portugal to Livorno after expulsion and maintained a European self-image and affinity with Italian language and culture. Though the *grana* constituted a tiny fraction of the Jewish population, they succeeded in parleying their connections to transnational Sephardic trading networks and European status to occupy prominent positions in Tunisian commerce (Tsur 1996).

Beyond the split between Tunisia's Arabized Jews, «Jews who were culturally and/or linguistically Arab yet who did not self-define primarily as Arab» (Behar 2009, 747), and those who identified as Portuguese or Livornese, Jews were also divided among those who manage to adapt to increasing European influence, culminating in the colonization of Tunisia in 1881, and those who remained closely embedded in previous social patterns, where Jews had a secondary legal status defined by Islamic tradition and law. During this radical transformation, the winners in the Jewish community were above all those who obtained a Western-style education and mastered speaking and writing European languages, especially French and Italian, and were thus able to better adapt to the French takeover (Walters 2011).

Legal status also divided the Jews of Tunisia into multiple categories, a product of France leaving the Bey of Tunis as official ruler of the country, in order to avoid the resistance produced by direct colonization in Algeria. This however lead to "divided sovereignty" and attendant jurisdictional tangles that would bedevil the Protectorate throughout its existence (Lewis 2013). As opposed to Algeria, where all Jews had French citizenship as of 1870, only 25% of Tunisia's Jews would ever obtain this status. For this Frenchified bourgeois sector of the population, when independence came in

1956, even if they wished to remain in Tunisia, they were identified with the former colonizer and suffered accordingly.

Jewish Exile in the Post-Colonial Mediterranean

Tunisian Jews born in the final decades of French rule share a great deal with their coreligionists across Maghreb and the Middle East. To varying extents, certain sectors of these Arabized Jewish populations benefited from the European disruption of traditional social and economic hierarchies, which opened up new opportunities for Jews, who could translate between Europe and the Muslim Mediterranean. Yet this dependence on European powers meant that Jewish communities typically remained at arms length from nationalist movements and were sometimes perceived as colonial collaborators. In the turbulent years that followed World War II, the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the fallout from the Suez Crisis of 1956, many Egyptian Jews with family in Israel were harassed or imprisoned and those holding French and British nationality were expelled (Laskier 1995). The devastating Algerian War, in which most Jews attempted to maintain an "impossible neutrality", despite ever-increasing violence from the FLN and OAS, and calls to choose sides (Stora 2004). Colette Fellous, born in 1950, poetically underscores this point in her memories of growing up in a new Tunisian nation, when the two external poles of the Tunisia Jewish community's identity, Europe and Israel, were identified as the enemy of the Arab world. «We were not informed about anything; we were barely discovering the name of the country where we lived. This land [Israel] that burns over there and is at war, we know it even less» (Fellous 2005, 78-9). The confusion a young Jewish girl felt about the identities ascribed to her was shared by many of her middle and upper class coreligionists, who were used to the in-between status they occupied during the colonial period.

> Jewish elites did not need, as did Arab elites, to construct and propose to the country a Tunisian national identity, but rather to affirm a communal identity in partnership with the different communities present in Tunisia, and with the guarantee that a secular and Republican France offered. (Hagège and Zarca 2004)

In the dominant Tunisian nationalist narrative on the other hand, the first decade of independence marks the country's glory days, as the colonized finally shook off the colonial mantle and instituted progressive reforms in education and women's rights, leading to Tunisia's reputation as a positive "exception" to the backwardness of Africa and the Arab world, promoted by President Habib Bourguiba himself as a national mythology (Allagui 2004; Bessis 2004).

For Tunisian Jews in France, Bourguiba's pro-Western stance facilitated a maintenance of contact with their homeland, which remained a destination many would visit in the

summer, both as heritage tourists as well as pilgrims, visiting sites of religious significance, such as the Ghriba synagogue in Djerba. Tunisia's reputation as a unique mediator between between "West and East" continues today as it is often touted as a "model" for the Arab Mediterranean, the only country to have made a successful democratic transition after the Arab Spring. Tunisian President Béji Caïd Essebsi continues to mobilize tropes of his country's exceptional moderation and modernity in asking for support from Europe and the US (Beau and Lagarde 2014; Essebsi 2015).

Triangular Co-Productions: Defining the Franco-Tunisian-Jewish Film

In this article, I will argue that Francophone Tunisian Jewish and Muslim filmmakers deal with these contradictions by a kind of nostalgic co-production that goes beyond mere technical collaboration to encompass a veritable representational pact based on triangulation. By this notion of the triangle, we see that «Jews and Muslims related to one another through their respective relationships to the French state and society and to definitions of French and imperial belonging […] the reverse was also true: Jews and Muslims often appraised their relationship to France through their relations with each other» (Katz 2015, 3). In the post-colonial context, many Jews and Muslims from Tunisia publicly agree to tell a version of history that puts primarily responsibility for the breakdown of centuries-long coexistence onto external forces. Rather, Jews and Muslims looking back *together* cast their grievances onto French colonialism or on the Arab-Israeli conflict in the Middle East. These external "push" factors are held responsible for Jewish migrations, disrupting prior Jewish-Arab relations, which were idealized and celebrated in the Ben Ali era.

In other settings however, especially now that the Tunisian Revolution helped create a relatively free field of expression online, some Tunisian Muslims fault Jews for having sided with France during the colonial period, not participating in the nationalist movement in significant numbers, and abandoning Tunisia to live in an Israeli state that systematically oppresses Palestinians, or having abandoned their homeland for the former colonial power, France. Equally, the vast body of first-person literature written by Tunisian Jews in French includes hundreds of texts, fiction and non-fiction, that offer remarkably nuanced reflections of reasons for departure. Many texts describe Tunisian Jews' sense of alienation in the violently anti-Zionist climate of the 1950s and 1960s, and their inability to adapt to the new state's vision of citizenship. Moreover, many openly state that they had no desire to see Arabic become Tunisia's official language and Islam its official religion, and generally felt that Western and specifically French modernity were the only viable models for nation-building (Tartakowksy 2013).

This nostalgic Mediterranean cinema movement has not been limited to Tunisia, but rather forms part of a movement of rediscovering lost Jewish and European minorities in the Arab-Muslim world. This phenomenon is not new in Egypt, the birthplace of Arab cinema, where a robust tradition of films from the 1930s to the 1950s represented characters of various ethno-religious communities and playfully highlighted the fluidity of their identity (Starr 2011). Nadia Kamel's documentary *Salata Baladi* (2007) sought to reconstruct the multi-confessional "house salad" that was Egypt before the Suez Crisis. In the wake of the Arab spring, a controversial miniseries dramatizing the old Jewish quarter of Cairo, *Haret al-Yahud* (2013), also emphasized Jews' rootedness in Egyptian urban space and society. However, these nostalgic portrayals often to fail to highlight to the radical racist violence that privileged non-Muslims over the indigenous masses, leading to a "grieving" tone that glorifies colonial populations with the erasure of the Egyptian working-class, who are not seen as "cosmopolitan" (Hanley 2008, Massad 2008).

In the Maghrebi context, Karin Albou's *Le chant des mariées* (2008) directly addressed the historical divisions between Jews and Muslims in Tunisia with the story of two girls coming of age during Nazi occupation of 1942-1943. Her film along with Ismaël Ferroukhi's *Les hommes libres* (2011), depicting Algerian Muslims and Jews in occupied Paris, underscored how Jews' adoption of French culture separated them from their Arab neighbors and friends and how the trauma of the brief Nazi occupation of Tunisia momentarily united them as victims of European powers. Closer to the narratives of decolonization addressed by the films we will look at in Tunisia, a series of films by Moroccan Muslim filmmakers reexamine the Jewish departure and are critical of the Moroccan government's collusion with the Zionist project of encouraging Jewish migration. These films sympathetically dramatize the plight of Jews after independence such as Hassan Benjelloun's *Où vas-tu Moshé?* (2007) and Mohamed Ismail's *Adieu mères* (2007), which show Jews reluctantly leaving their friends and neighbors in the face of fear created by Zionist and nationalist agitation. Kamel Hachkar's documentary *Tinghir-Jerusalem: Echoes from the mellah* (2013) retracing Jewish migrants from the testimonies of their neighbors to Israel. They redefine the Maghreb and Middle East as Jewish homelands that were illegitimately supplanted by Israel. Finally, in accordance with the discourse of current regimes, the films revalorize the intermediary position the Jews in the Arab Mediterranean, between colonizer and colonized, «represent[ing] loyal and protected subjects whose devotion to their country withstands the ruptures of postcolonial migration» (Kosansky and Boum 2012, 433).

The pull of multiple state projects and national identities (whether Tunisian, French, or Israeli) emerges in nostalgic cultural production as each community finds subtle ways of asserting its right to tell the story from its perspective even as it must recognize the need for the other. On a practical level, Jews need Muslims in the Maghreb to scout

locations, obtain permission from local governments to shoot, to serve as crew, and to appear in the films as themselves. The progressive Tunisian Muslim filmmaker, on the other hand, needs Tunisian Jews living in France, Canada and elsewhere to help raise funds for shooting, to serve as actors, and to circulate the films at Jewish film festivals.

While the hope has been that films showing coexistence in the past might combat the logic of civilizational clash so prevalent from the 1990s up to today, the problematic triangular structure of the nostalgic co-production means that the recuperation of the past does not address the root causes of the wounds of colonization and decolonization. Regardless of directorial intentions, the "third", whether France or Israel-Palestine often remains just out of the field of vision, literally and metaphorically. The French and Israeli presence stands as a kind of force that shifts attention from memory to history (and vice-versa), and consequently serves a screen onto which Jews and Muslims project past traumas and present disputes. Jews and Muslims are constantly drawn to relate to each other through the French language, both in its spoken and cinematic forms, and more broadly under the sign of French cultural modernity, a legacy of France's longstanding efforts for hegemony in the Mediterranean[2]. Meanwhile, Israel continues to claim to politically and spiritually represent them often and constitutes a liability for Jews wishing to return to visit Tunisia. Thus we might say that Jews and Muslims of Tunisian origins who wish to represent their shared past can only do so through France or the Middle East.

Images of Departure: It's Always Summer in La Goulette

If many recent productions such as *Tinghir-Jerusalem* highlight Maghrebi communities missing their Jewish neighbors, *Summer in La Goulette* nostalgically recalls glory days of Tunisian cosmopolitanism through the story of three families, one Jewish, one Muslim, and one Sicilian in the small port near Tunis. The film features a vibrant world where communities mix and mingle, particularly through exchanges of food, festivals, and shared sociability. While the idyll is strained by the girls in each family flirting with boys of other confessions, demonstrating that boundaries still did exist, the veritable culprit is the outbreak of war in the Middle East. The anti-Jewish riots of June 1967 are never shown in the film, leaving an important rift in Jewish-Muslim coexistence unexplored.

The film was a popular choice for international film festivals (including Jewish film festivals) in the late 1990s and continues to be seen as an excellent pedagogical document of Tunisia's cosmopolitan past, in a recent textbook on Francophone

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[2] Most recently incarnated by Nicolas Sarkozy's proposal of a *Union pour la Méditerranée*. (Daguzan 2009) and by renewed French military action in Mali and Syria under François Hollande.

Cinema (Boudraa and Accilien 2014) and by scholars of Maghrebi history (Clancy-Smith), yet it also provoked lukewarm responses from many critics who considered it a didactic rose-colored nostalgia trip. How then do we address this paradox in which "good sentiments make for 'bad' cinema" (Brozgal 2013)?

I argue that most critics have overlooked a critical dimension of the film and its project to resurrect not so much the cosmopolitanism of the past, though this is certainly a main objective, but rather to pay homage to the "co-produced" history of Tunisian cinema and identity. Boughedir did just this after a special screening in 1994 of Serge Moati's autobiographical film *Les jasmins de la véranda: un retour à la maison natale* (1979) and Nouri Bouzid's *Homme de cendres* (1986) (Boughedir 1994) The filmmaker's remarks clarify the impulse for writing the script of *Summer in La Goulette* with Bouzid and bringing it to the screen. From the outset, Boughedir's use of cinema as a prism for the past is clear, describing himself as «an orphan of this pluralist Tunisia», (Boughedir 1994, 139), echoing Moati's focus on the literal and symbolic children of decolonization.

The filmmaker evokes his former classmates of all ethno-religious groups that attended the premier educational institution of the Protectorate, the Lycée Carnot, and puts them alongside the pioneers of Tunisian cinema such as Jewish innovator Albert Samama Chikly, who directed the first Tunisian feature in 1922. Chikly's daughter, Haydée, is considered the first professional Tunisian actress, having starred in Rex Ingram's *The Arab* (1924). She is one of the many figures from the past to appear in *Summer in La Goulette*. Boughedir deliberately co-produces the Tunisian past to attempt to reestablish links he believes have been severed because of the excesses of nationalism, «which rejects anything that is not strictly and orthodoxly national according to narrow criteria of belonging to the nation» (Boughedir 1994, 140, 142). Refusing the equation of Jews with Zionists often made by journalists and politicians across the region, Boughedir strives to "stich back together these scraps of memory". He takes the films screened exemplary of what can be achieved *only* in Tunisia and is particularly trenchant in his criticism of the Egyptian film industry, which he faults for its poor quality and hostility toward Jews (Boughedir 1994, 143). Thus he reinforces Tunisia's uniqueness by externalizing responsibility.

Summer in La Goulette fully embraces a Tunisian cinematic exception, bringing a veritable panoply of figures into the production, the two most prominent being Michel Boujenah and Claudia Cardinale. Boujenah not only plays the comic role of TSF, a homeless man who wanders the beaches with his wireless radio, listening for news and music from Radio Cairo and Radio Beirut, but also sings the French-language song *La Goulette*, that accompanies the opening credits and praises the place where "Jews, Muslims, and Christians, everyone lives in happiness". In securing Boujenah's

participation, the film thus offers highly visible paratextual Jewish presence for diasporic spectators.

Boughedir does not simply include celebrities in this portrayal of the communities that made La Goulette synonymous with the diversity of the Mediterranean world itself, he also carefully incorporates some of the icons of communal memory, including the itinerant nut vendors, “Oui-oui” and “Je suis là”, know by their proprietary calls for hawking their wares. The sellers of roasted nuts often appear in Tunisian Jewish memoirs about the late colonial period. Last but not least, Bougehdir brings in some of the Muslim actors and actresses that contributed mightily to the New Tunisian Cinema, including Mustapha Adouani and Fatma Ben Saïdane. Another actress in the film, Hélène Catzaras, is of Greek Tunisian origins and continues to direct the Espace Culturel Grec in Tunis. Having reevaluated the extensive and premeditated casting and construction of *Summer in La Goulette* we can better understand Boughedir’s project, not so much to gain the sympathy of Western audiences by trashing Arab nationalism, but rather to re-animate the memory of all Tunisia’s communities, Muslim, Jewish, Sicilian, Greek (but not the French!), and the fractious and fragile utopia he believes they shared. He does this through engaging members of the various communities in a co-production of their imagined past.

Images of Return: Smelling the Jasmine

While *Summer in La Goulette* ultimately implicates the Middle East conflict as the primary force in ending centuries of Jewish-Muslim coexistence in Tunisia, the telefilm *Villa Jasmin* (2007) moves away from Israeli-Arab conflict to offer a striking revision of France’s role in the dissolution of intercommunal relations in North Africa. Adapted by Boughedir from Serge Moati’s two-part autobiography *Villa Jasmin* (2003) and *Du côté des vivants* (2006), the telefilm reconstructs the journalist parents’ relationship and experiences during the Popular Front years and the Second World War. Moati’s father, also named Serge, was a well-known journalist with the Socialist Party and early supporter of Tunisian independence from France. Yet he remained deeply attached to a vision of France as the land of Revolution and the Rights of Man.

The film begins on a ferry taking Serge (Clément Sibony) and Jeanne (Judith Davis), his non-Jewish French wife, across the Mediterranean from Marseille to Tunis. We see the ferry in the beautiful turquoise waters of the bay of Tunis as the camera pans across the coastline, before fixing on the iconic Bou Kournine mountain that stands like a sentinel over Tunis. Boughedir cuts back to the boat where we see Serge with eyes closed, breathing deeply, exclaiming: “Ah, the jasmine. Do you smell the jasmine?”. Immediately, we are thrust into Serge’s nostalgic quest through the olfactory reconnection with “his” country. A male Tunisian passenger standing behind the

couple takes note of this feat: “You smell the jasmine all the way from here? You’re good!” Serge begins to turn back and explain that he is not the average tourist, “in fact, I was born here”, but Jeanne manages to interrupt him first. “You’re not going to tell your life’s story to everybody!”. The French woman thus cuts short a possible encounter between a Jew and Muslim who share a common homeland.

From the opening of the film, we see a shifting triangle, with Tunisian Muslims representing both past and present, France in the form of Jeanne and her baby representing the future, and Serge, like many Tunisian Jews in search of his childhood, caught in between. As soon he and Jeanne get off the boat, they assume the position of European tourists, getting decorated with jasmine garlands as they touch land by eager vendors. The “natural” relation to the country, Serge’s smelling the jasmine, is undermined by the tourist’s relation, buying jasmine for his foreign wife. Here the Tunisian Jew’s complex relation to the country gives way to a less complicated identity of foreign tourist, one that the Ben Ali regime worked hard to attract in the 1990s and 2000s (Hazbun 2008, 37-76).

Throughout the film, Serge depends on Tunisian Muslims, not Jews, not to show him the traces of his family’s past. First, he visits the Borgel cemetery, divided into multiple sections, one for Christians, one for Livornese Jews, and for Tunisian Jews. A young boy approaches him, proposing to lead him to his parents’ tomb. Though dubious about the boy’s knowledge, Serge gives him his family name “Boccara” and follows him. The boy leads Serge toward what seems to be the Catholic section, despite Serge having told him that he is Jewish. Finally, the boy stops and leans up against another tomb. Serge, exasperated with what seems to be a wild goose chase, gives up on the boy: “You don’t know anything, do you? Go on, it’s not a big deal”. He gives the boy some money, only to realize in shock that he is standing in front of his parents’ tomb. Upon touching it, the camera cuts to the first of many flashbacks that will highlight the Jewish presence hidden under the surface of contemporary Tunisia.

After seeing the tomb, he goes in search of the family’s home, the titular “Villa Jasmin”. Black and white photos in hand, he approaches an old cobbler, working on the street, hoping he can give him directions. The man responds that he’s only lived in Tunis since 1957, the year Moati’s parents died and he and his sister left for France. The *rue Courbet*, where the family lived, has now become, significantly, *rue Palestine*. Hence the city has changed in its population, with Tunisians from the countryside moving to the capital, and in the changes in street names, from names that reflect France’s cultural hegemony, to names that reflect Tunisia’s post-independence reorientation toward the Arab world.

The man’s partner leads him to the house, which has now been taken over by a business making electric cables. All of sudden, Serge has a vision of his mother calling

to him from the balcony, telling him to come inside to see his father. When his mother goes back inside the house, Bougehdir cuts to the young cobbler who also enjoins him to come inside and look around. A clearly upset Serge refuses as politely as he can: "I'd rather stay outside." This moment expresses his desire to remain in his fleeting memories of the past, as opposed to being confronted with the present. "Outside" in this case is just as much of a temporal marker as it is spatial; Serge is only willing to experience present-day Tunisia through the lens of his childhood memories.

The hotel restaurant offers another space for Serge and Jeanne to joust over the precise nature of his search for identity. Serge takes a bit of a pasta dish, finding it lacking in *harissa*, the fiery Tunisian chili paste that often serves metonymically to describe the full-flavored nature of life in Tunisia in many diasporic Jews' nostalgic accounts of their past[3]. By comparing the flavors of the sun-drenched Mediterranean shores to the cold, grey climate of Paris and bland French food, they symbolically affirm the past over the present, and the lost homeland over the country of adoption. In this case, Serge accuses the dish of being adulterated for tourists' weak palettes. Jeanne responds that they are tourists in a hotel for tourists, which provokes a burst of anger from Serge: "But I'm not a tourist, I like to have my mouth on fire, it's my country, I remember everything, every street corner, I am at home here". Though the camera has shown that Serge is completely lost, in a literal and metaphorical sense in Tunisia, his claims through taste to a profound sense of belonging express a real crisis that cannot be solved without triangulation, the continual intervention of an "other".

Visiting a dilapidated theater where a Muslim caretaker shows the couple in, the film flashes back to the moment when Serge's parents first met. At the end of this flashback, Serge wakes up in bed, shaken by a terrible nightmare of being alone in a courtyard, feeling responsible for his parents' death. He tells Jeanne: "I have no memories of when I was young, Jeanne. No one told me anything or else I erased everything". When Jeanne protests that he constantly reminisces about his childhood in their daily life in France, he describes his previous declarations as a mixture of "vague memories and things I've dreamt up". His edifice of restorative nostalgia gradually crumbles against that which cannot be recuperated from the past.

Toward the end of the film, Jeanne pointedly asks Serge why he doesn't speak any Arabic. Serge's poetic response avoids admitting that he grew up more French than Tunisian. "I don't know, it's like a music that comes back from far away". Fed up with his fruitless search for traces, Jeanne attacks him for being insensitive to her fragile

[3] Harissa even became the symbol of the Tunisian Jewish community online, www.harissa.com, a place for members of the community to post stories, photos, anecdotes, recipes, and to reconnect with lost friends and loved ones, split up by migration. By choosing a local commodity, Jews emphasize their rootedness.

condition and the well-being of their child, a symbol of the French future. “What you’re looking for doesn’t exist anymore. Aside from one or two old people who maybe vaguely knew your father, you won’t find anything, it’s been too long. You chase after ghosts all day long, you don’t even see the state I’m in”. Serge’s dogged persistence in search of the past allows the viewer to recover part of the unique Jewish contribution to Tunisian history, the debates about Tunisia’s relation to France that marked the 1940s and 1950s, the role of progressive Jews in the struggle for autonomy and independence. On the personal level however, the quest for the past comes at the expense of the present (Jeanne) and future (their French baby).

Serge’s final stop on his quest takes him to his childhood nanny Rachel, played by one of the most well known faces of the “New Tunisian Cinema” of the Ben Ali years, Fatma Ben Saïdane. Serge arrives in a run-down apartment building, whose beautiful Arabesque arches and tiles remain visible. He asks a woman if Rachel stills lives there and she immediately recognizes him, explaining that Rachel often speaks of him and has long waited for his visit. He goes up to the old woman’s apartment and she breaks down in tears. Finally, someone recognizes Serge, reconnecting him to his childhood memories and his homeland. Rachel gives him a locket from his Tsia, his paternal grandmother, an aristocratic Sephardic Jewish woman who despite constantly reminiscing about the grandeurs of Italy, was born in Tunisia and never left it. Rachel’s gift also comes with a blessing for his future child, implicitly recognizing that the Tunisian chapter of the family’s life is over.

Meanwhile, Serge takes the locket to Jeanne and they sit down in the gardens of the Villa Jasmin overlooking the sea. He gives her the locket upon which are inscribed words in Italian that he only half understands. Jeanne, on the other hand, knows they come from the *Divine Comedy*, “L’amore che move il sole e altre stelle” [The Love which moves the sun and the other stars]. Serge places the locket around her neck. The camera cuts to the final scene with the couple once again on the bridge of the ferry, this time taking them “home” across the Mediterranean to France. The final words, significantly, are spoken by Jeanne: “it’s a message from your parents to us”. The couple takes the place of Serge’s parents thanks to this iconic quote from European literary history that also connects with his family’s Italian identity. Here the past is comfortably exorcised and the circle is complete as the boat disappears into the horizon, heading north.

Coproducing Memory in a Mediterranean Market

During the filming of *Villa Jasmin* another member of the Moati family, Lucie Cariès, daughter of Nine Moati, Serge’s older sister and writer, made her own pilgrimage to Tunisia. Cariès’s documentary *Bon baisers de la Goulette* (2007) offers a real-life

dialogue through portraits of Tunisian Jews returning “home”. Serge Moati produced the film through his company and it incorporates footage from the making of *Villa Jasmin*, offering it as proof of the Tunisian exception that features so prominently in nostalgic discourse: “the story of a Jewish family brought to the screen by a Muslim in an Arab country, a singular collaboration, faithful to the tradition of the Tunisian mosaic”. On a more practical level, Cariès’s film also functions as a cast and crew reunion for the decades-long relation between Jews and Muslims in the Franco-Tunisian film sector.

The documentary goes a great deal further in analyzing the endogenous causes of Jewish-Muslim conflict than the previous works discussed here, demonstrating that Jews were well aware of traditional anti-Jewish sentiment in Islamic tradition and of their fragile status as “protected” minority (*dhimma*) before colonization. Some of her Jewish informants even recognize the great error of having devalued and ignored the Arabic language and Tunisian geography and history during the colonial period. Others point out that many Muslims were envious of Jewish prominence in the liberal professions and the economy as a whole after independence and felt this diminutive minority was overrepresented. Yet after interviewing renowned scholars and members of the community such as historians Lucette Valensi and Sonia Fellous who stress the structural ambivalence of the Jewish condition in Muslim majority Tunisia, Cariès ultimately reverts to triangulation, intimating that the ongoing Middle East crisis is all that stands in the way.

The film’s message, hopeful on the surface, but shadowed by the present, is best conveyed in the final scenes in which one of Cariès’s main informants, Ruth Hassan, takes the film crew through the market in La Goulette. Hassan has been shown to be a fierce lover of both her Tunisian and Jewish origins, taking her daughter to see the family’s old apartment and nostalgically evoking her childhood on the shores of the Mediterranean. As she searches for the ripest apricots, speaking a mixture of dialectal Arabic and French, clearly friendly with the local merchants, the presence of the cameras provokes an unexpected spectacle.

Hassan first attempts to explain the film crew, but the oldest of the merchants quickly takes over, telling Lucie Cariès in broken French, “Tunisia is very happy for you. You are welcome here. My President very happy for you, he loves you!”. The repeated mention of Ben Ali and his equivalency with Tunisia itself is significant, demonstrating the extent to which the population understood the regime’s mobilization of the Tunisian exception toward the outside world. Interestingly, Ruth Hassan interrupts to ask a rather pointed question that gets to the heart of post-colonial triangulation: “He loves whom? The French or the Jews?”, to which the man responds evasively: “My President loves everyone”. Hassan attempts to force the man into a specific affirmation, “[h]e

loves the Jews?". The old man finally responds, "and you too!" and squeezes her cheeks, which provokes laughter all around and defuses the tension.

The presence of the camera crew functions as a "third" in this situation, where Jews' desire to affirm their place post-colonial Tunisian nation leads to a rare occurrence of public discord. A younger man approaches the swelling crowd around the camera crew, eager to establish his connection to the film project, and talks about his grandmother who used to work as the masseuse at the *hammam* in the neighborhood. After Hassan fondly remembers her and jokes about her breasts hanging down to her waist, the young man tells the camera, "[t]hat, that's pure Tunisian… that's concentrate!". Yet this moment of communion quickly leads to thornier areas of the past, as the young man explains to Cariès and the crew that La Goulette used to be full of Maltese, Italians, and Jews, fellow Mediterraneans who lived in harmony with indigenous Tunisian Muslims. While Hassan cuts in to mention that she still comes back on a regular basis, the director asks him if this harmony between communities still exists today. After having momentarily partaken in the film's nostalgic voyage into the past, he simply responds: "No, because them, they left". Hassan's response is to move things away from the contentious past to the present, insisting that she is at home in Tunisia now, and only slightly mitigating this false note. This simple assessment of an unexplained Jewish departure, a repeated theme in Muslim Mediterranean memories, cuts against the grain of the film's narrative, and begs the question of why nearly all Jews left. The conversation is conveniently drowned out by a *derbouka* player and a dancer, which draws the crew and onlookers in, and provokes ululations from Ruth Hassan. Though it is difficult to assess whether this display is deliberately staged to attract the film crew, it seems significant that, as at so many moments of the Ben Ali years, the spectacle of a shared Jewish-Muslim culture papers over the conditions of coexistence, namely silence about exile and avoiding recriminations about past injustices.

After Ben Ali: A Future for Judeo-Tunisian Nostalgia?

After having seen how Jews of Tunisian origin construct their homeland imaginary in diaspora through triangular collaborations, it seems appropriate to return to the striking response to the fall of the Ben Ali regime that made these productions possible in the first place. Serge Moati, whose public image has been shaped by his autobiographical work about growing up in the last years of French rule in Tunisia, expressed enthusiastic support for the Tunisian Revolution. Yet he was also quick to admit that he and others had failed to speak up against Ben Ali. He first published his enthusiastic observations on the aftermath of the revolution in *Dernières nouvelles de Tunis* (2011).

However, rumors had spread in the Tunisian press that President Ben Ali himself had given Moati a summer home in the chic coastal suburb of La Marsa, near the journalist's birth home, the "Villa Jasmin" that functions as synecdoche for the Tunisian (Jewish) dream. In multiple interviews, Moati admitted to being solicited to help reorganize Tunisian national television after Ben Ali's rise to power in 1987, but also insisted that he offered his services voluntarily without accepting remuneration (Dedet 2011). Most significantly, Moati justified his cozy relations with the regime through a kind of Tunisian Jewish "duty to memory" that required passing over the abuses of the regime in silence in order to maintain a continuous Jewish presence:

> I blame myself [...] I was the host of a TV show *Ripostes* for 10 years, and not once did I speak about Tunisia. I'll tell you why. I wanted to go back. I didn't want to be harassed upon arriving at the airport, and I'm one of the last representatives of the Jewish community of Tunisia. For me that's important. My parents are buried there. There are 1,200 Jews in Tunisia, there were 600,000 [sic]. I wanted to be there so that there would still be Moatis there (Moati 2011)

So while Moati recognized his failure to speak up effectively, his self-justification in terms of the need for access in order to maintain the idealized notion of a Jewish connection to a Tunisian homeland. His wild exaggeration of the size of population, which only reached about 100.000 at its apogee, reveals the hyperbolic importance of the past. Despite Moati's insistence – «I cannot be far from Tunisia when something important is happening there; it's my country» (Moati 2011) – his patriotism does mean that he considers returning permanently.

Franco-Judeo-Tunisian co-productions thus offer a unique form of nostalgia, one that obsessively returns to the recent colonial and post-colonial past, which it in turn constantly reinvents and displaces. The films critique the decline of Tunisia's cosmopolitanism, the departure of Europeans and Jews in the 1950s and 1960s, yet find it difficult to explain where the responsibility for these traumatic transformations lies. These narratives triangulate, allowing Jews and Muslims to relate through the omnipresent realities of France and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They thus express the substance of the Tunisian exception, the idea that "despite the departures, despite the tensions, despite history, Jews and Muslims can again live side by side" (Cariès 2007).

However, the triangular condition of Tunisia's Jews and the Tunisian Jewish diaspora itself does not seem to be improving as the Mediterranean constitutes an ever deadlier barrier between Europe and its margins. Thus the question remains, how does the focus on the utopian possibility of reconstructing a cosmopolitan Tunisia steer our attention away from those places where Jews of Maghrebi and Middle Eastern origins and Muslims are already living side by side, in Paris, in Montreal, in Jerusalem and

elsewhere? How does focusing on the diversity of the past obscure the structural inequalities that led to anti-colonial conflict and persist today in the Mediterranean basin, for the profit of some and to the detriment of many others? Will focusing on coexistence then and there be able to transform relations in a region in crisis, here and now?

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