

Unpacking her Cultural Baggage: North African, Jewish and French

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*“...les sédiments culturels de mon propre bagage”
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During the second half of the 20th century, Jews from Islamic lands have almost all been forced to emigrate and they have settled in communities as divergent as South America, North America, Canada, Australia, France and Israel. The challenges faced by those who arrived in France from North Africa in the 1950s and 1960s when the majority of Jews left the Maghreb will be the focus here. In order to locate the amplitude of the massive uprooting experienced by these Jews in the postcolonial era, it is important to make a few introductory historical and statistical remarks. The numbers of Jews that left the Maghreb in the years since 1948 are hardly insignificant. By the end of the colonial era, Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco were the home to some 480,000 Jews, and today only between 1-2% of these remain. With the arrival of Jewish North Africans in France, the Jewish population there doubled from the devastated post-WWII number of 235,000 to more than 500,000 between 1957 and 1970, and today Jews from the Maghreb constitute the majority of Jews living in the *Héxagone*. Here they have been largely responsible for the re-Judaization and revitalization of French Jewry, infusing it with an energy and zest for life that the mostly Ashkenazi (of Eastern European origins) post-Holocaust generation found both refreshing and sorely needed. Steeped in Judeo-Arabic culture, the new Jewish arrivals in France transformed the face of French Jewry, and as postcolonial immigrants they shared many experiences, albeit with differences, with the immigrant French Arab population. However, whereas a great deal of attention has been given to the various problematic

issues relating to immigration in France, as the pied-noir, Arab and Beur (second generation Arab immigrant) communities have been greeted with much xenophobia and ambiguous political, social and cultural messages, despite France's official language of integration and tolerance, the mass immigration of the "Arab Jews" from North Africa is all but ignored. One place we find expressed the many challenges of this unique and understudied postcolonial and multicultural experience is in the burgeoning literary contributions of Sephardi women writers, that is, in the autobiographically inspired "autofiction" or "autojudeography," as Thomas Nolden puts it, by Jewish women born in North Africa (79).

Here we shall look at two such novels, that of Jewish-Algerian Annie Cohen's *Le Marabout de Blida* (1996) and Jewish-Tunisian Annie Fitoussie's *La Mémoire Folle de Mouchi Rabbinou* (1985) to shed some light on the often confusing and arduous process of unpacking and taking ownership of the diversity of one's cultural heritage.¹ As shall be explored, this pluri-cultural "unwrapping" can be a very personal, intimate and often painful process for these writers, involving many autobiographical elements which seem to enable them to manage national, social and existential negotiations through the act of writing their new selves into fiction. Only by first establishing a dialogue between the many aspects of the pluri-cultural Self is the protagonist/author able to enter into dialogues between that newly self-defined, self-realized, and self-written "I."

The fiction of recovery in both narratives is embodied in sages from both traditions, a rabbi and a marabout, both symbolically significant characters with a strong spiritual presence in the Maghreb among Jews and Muslims alike. Historically, many rabbis were held in great esteem by Muslims throughout the Islamic world, who sought them out for advice and blessings, and Muslims were also known to be among the many pilgrims making yearly visits to pay homage to the deceased rabbis who had reached saintly status through their righteous lives, and miraculous fulfillment of prayers for healing, prosperity, and fertility.

¹ This paper is partly excerpted from a larger study entitled "*Maghrebian Memories: Exodus and Marginality in Sephardic Women's Writing*." Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2007.

A marabout is seen as having supernatural powers, a Sufi practitioner who is a source of wisdom, medicine, poetry, enlightenment and witticisms. The marabout is more of a personal spiritual leader, rather than the leader of a whole community or congregation, like the rabbi. The marabout is often a scholar of the Qur'an, as the rabbi is a scholar of the Torah, and both can actively guide the lives of their followers.

La Mémoire Folle de Mouchi Rabbinou tells the story of fabric store owner Albert Moché Touitou, his homemaker wife Reinette and their children Simone and Alain, who land in Marseilles and head to Paris, to Belleville, after leaving Bizerte, Tunisia behind. This autobiographically-inspired fiction of the Touitou family's arrival in France in the early 60s is written in a familiar and relaxed oral style, as suggested by the subtitle, which reads like a long breath and gives the text a feeling of an orally transmitted tale: "...the poorest rabbi of the ghetto, the most miserable in Tunisia, stronger than Mussolini and even stronger than death."² Oral traditions of African culture thus evoked, we continue throughout the novel to read the speech of the characters spelled out phonetically, highlighting their North African background, lack of literary knowledge of the French language, and their low level of education. Many words throughout the novel are written in transliteration, allowing the reader to hear the words in the way they are pronounced by the Touitous and their entourage, and words in Judeo-Arabic, the vernacular of North African Jews, are scattered throughout the narrative, emphasizing their Judeo-Arabic heritage, evoking the intimacy, fate and superstitions shared by the Jews of Maghreb.

The story of the Touitous is strangely familiar and not at all unique in the real world of Judeo-Maghrebi fates. We learn of illegal departures, loss of all property, difficult living conditions upon arrival in France, and transitional issues such as isolation, unemployment, racism and alienation. The children become more and more assimilated, and especially the daughter, Simone, tries her best to dress, act and speak in a way

² "Le rabbin le plus pauvre du ghetto le plus misérable de Tunis plus fort que Mussolini bien plus fort encore que la mort."

that will differentiate her from her Tunisian family. A victim of colonialism's dividing forces, Simone is ashamed of her grandmother because she spoke mostly Judeo-Arabic, and although she does not know he is her uncle, Mouchi Rabbinou, the mysterious rabbi who gives his name to the novel's title, will appear at various events in Simone's life to offer her a way out of her amnesia and self-repression. Rebelling against what she sees as her domineering and ignorant family, her level of successful acculturation only distances her more from them as she flaunts her literary knowledge,

Through the character of Simone the author includes more personal autobiographical elements, because Annie Fitoussie too arrived in France from Tunisia with her family as a young girl, and like Simone she studied and now practices law in Strasbourg. Albert's daughter begins to rebel against her father even as a pre-teenage girl in Tunisia, where she was forbidden to play outside in case she would be tempted to spend time with boys. Her father, a traditional Mediterranean patriarch, finds it shocking that his wife and pre-adolescent daughter may indeed have thoughts and fantasies that do not include him, and he acts preemptively by violently prohibiting his adolescent daughter any contact with the outside world. As a young student in France, Simone "learns to lie" as she dates boys and uses her mother as ally. Her avid reading only increases her ammunition: "An inordinate taste for reading contributed to cementing the reasons for her disobedience, to intensifying her disagreeing, to break her fear into revolt" (145).³

We see a young woman learning to rebel against what she sees as her domineering and ignorant family, waiting for the day when she can leave home to pursue her higher studies. Simone's level of successful acculturation in France only distances her more from her family, and eventually it excludes them from her life altogether. She flaunts her literary knowledge and expressions as proof of her erudition, as a reassurance of her feelings of superiority which only reinforce her

³ "Un goût immodéré pour la lecture contribua à cimenter les raisons de sa désobéissance, à fortifier son désaccord, à muer sa peur en révolte."

isolation. They are impressed by her knowledge but she in turn scorns “their” culture and ridicules their ignorance: “They were Arab Jews, had they never had a cultural or artistic heritage? What were the names of their famous musicians, and their writers? Did they have painters, or poets? she asks herself” (148).⁴ Simone sees herself as French and atheist. Divided, rejected, and profoundly humiliated, she dreams of new beginnings: “Leave, leave again...leave and go far away, far away to a place where she would finally be able to accept herself” (151).⁵ So, she goes off to study law in Strasbourg, where the ambiance is “muffled and puritan.” There she tried her best to fit in with the motto of the city: “work and austerity.” She agonizes over her own image that she had thought was tall and blond, but in this northern setting and surrounded by the “Strasbourggeois de souche” [original Strasbourgis], she realizes she is rather short, round with darkish hair and even darker eyes: “Exotic despite herself, cut off from her roots, the daughter of Albert Mouché Toutiou, the son of Chmouel Toutiou...was only an anonymous student, a bit lost, uneasy in her new skin” (170).⁶ Her experience of internal exile is made more painful as she visits her mother and her brother, who accuse her of behaving like a colonialist: “You look at us in silence, you spy on us, you pretend to be surprised by what we eat, by what we say, by what we don’t say...All you need is the colonial hat on your head and the services of an interpreter” (173).⁷ Her younger brother Alain cannot accept her choice to become a judge, for he feels that she has already judged and condemned her own family enough. He expresses the tragic fate that they share; that it is harder for them to live in France than for their parents’ generation: “...you and I, we are from nowhere. You live elsewhere because you reject their world; me, I stay with them without managing to find my

⁴ “Ils étaient des Juifs arabes, n’avaient-ils jamais possédé un patrimoine artistique ou culturel? Quels étaient les noms de leurs musiciens? De leurs écrivains? De leurs poètes?”

⁵ “Partir, partir à nouveau...partir loin, très loin pour un endroit où elle pourrait enfin s’accepter.”

⁶ “Exotique malgré elle, coupée de ses racines, la fille d’Albert Mouché Toutiou, le fils de Chmouel Toutiou...n’était qu’une étudiante anonyme, un peu paumée, mal à l’aise dans sa nouvelle peau.”

⁷ “Tu nous observes en silence, tu épies, tu fais mine de t’étonner de ce qu’on mange, de ce qu’on dit, de ce qu’on dit pas...il ne te manque que le casque colonial sur la tête et les service d’un interprète.”

place” (173).⁸ They are the in-between generation; like the Beur writers, they have one foot in each culture. And although they can manage in both places, they feel marginalized, do not belong fully in either.

When Simone receives four anonymous chain letters directing her to make copies to send out or unlucky events will follow, she is overwhelmed by an unexplainable and irrational fear, fed by archaic childhood superstitions. As this uncontrollable feeling begins to obsess her, she is driven toward deeper fears and questions she cannot answer. The gates of her repressed self are beginning to open. Having rejected her Jewishness, her African-ness, she had also denied her own womanhood. “*Juifemme*” [*I’m-a-Jewish-woman*] she says to herself as she frantically searches for meaning, verbalizing this bottled-up fact: “The need to explain, to speak, to write overcame her...What had she left behind, over there, that was so precious? What had she left of herself? Write in order to find the trace of that which she had forgotten, the sense of the words that she had silenced. Write to pay for what she had wanted to renounce. Write to reconcile herself” (194-195).⁹ And thus Simone begins to write her “self,” her origin, her repressed feelings and shreds of memories, confused by her imagination. As the novel comes to an end, Simone is in court for a hearing, when a tramp enters the courtroom and is quickly dismissed by the president of the courts as not having all his faculties. When asked to give the court his name, profession and address, the stranger can only admit his misfortune, and Simone is the only person in the courtroom giving him the opportunity to explain himself since she does not hear his insanity, but instead, the reverberations of her own marginality and exile as he speaks. The scene seems unreal like a dream, as Simone addresses the bum directly and passionately, both to her own and her colleague’s surprise, since “...such a lack of restraint on behalf of a public prosecutor...had never been seen

⁸ “...toi et moi nous ne sommes de nulle part. Tu vis ailleurs parce que tu récusés leur monde, moi je reste avec eux sans parvenir à trouver ma place.”

⁹ “Le besoin d’expliquer, de parler, d’écrire la submergea...Qu’avait-elle laissé derrière elle, là-bas, de si précieux? Qu’avait-elle laissé d’elle? Écrire pour retrouver la trace de ce qu’elle avait oublié, le sens des mots qu’elle avait tus. Écrire pour expier ce qu’elle avait voulu renier. Écrire pour se réconcilier.”

in Strasbourg” (203).¹⁰ After a long discourse addressing only Simone, the wandering Jew Mouchi Rabbinou says to her: “I am the mad memory of The Book...You have nothing to fear from the past, I guarantee its coherence. Speak” (205).¹¹ Hence Simone receives the permission she needs to write her self, the deep, repressed and forgotten self, made of incoherent streams of consciousness that she had begun to scribble down. This act of writing will eventually help her embrace her past, accept her present, and give her courage to look toward a pluri-cultural future.

The role of the rabbi in Annie Fitoussie’s text as a catalyst to memory becomes more than just a guide showing the young protagonist the way. Aside from appearing at various occasions to preach his “mad and tremendous memory” to the different members of the Tuoitou family and entourage, he becomes the force bringing Simone to self-discovery and self-redemption through writing. As Hélène Cixous explained in her text *Les Réveries de la femme sauvage*, she would wake up at night with a desperate need to write down the intensely vivid images being brought to her from “the gallery of the Forgotten in my memory” (*Les Réveries* 9), feeling an obligation to return to her origins, as will Simone after seeing Mouchi Rabbinou. On each visit throughout the novel he plants thought-provoking seeds that will eventually take root in her (sub)consciousness until she becomes willing to let them bloom into text. The protagonist in Fitoussi’s novel needs the mad rabbi as Cixous needs the ghost appearing to her at night: “...I wrote without turning a light on so as not to make the ghost flee...” (*Les Réveries* 205),¹² says Cixous, where the “*venant*” has the same inspirational but ephemeral role as Mouchi Rabbinou. By drawing from the wealth of memories of her Judeo-Maghrebi heritage, Simone will be able to acknowledge and embrace her Jewish identity firmly and without shame. A writer is thus born, and the

¹⁰ “...un tel manque de retenue de la part d’un magistrat...ne s’était jamais vu à Strasbourg.”

¹¹ “Je suis la mémoire folle du Livre...Tu n’as plus rien à redouter du passé, j’en garantis la cohérence. Raconte.”

¹² “...j’avais écrit sans allumer afin de ne pas risquer de faire fuir le Venant...”

autobiographical elements in *La Mémoire Folle* let us appreciate the often agonizing path to writing, since the story in the narrative is always, inevitably, a manifestation of the obsessions of its creator, a real life, where memory and imagination intertwine to create a textual difference that we choose to call fiction.

Annie Cohen left Algeria for France in 1962 at the age of 18, but returned briefly again in 1967, during the Six Day War in Israel, only to realize that “Algeria no longer belonged to me” (*Le Marabout de Blida* 59).¹³ The country had changed too much, and it was no longer the country without race, open and generous, the “still possible Algeria” (67)¹⁴ that Cohen had known as a child. Now, there was no room for difference; “Independent Algeria made me mute, she blocked the images and the associations...I became a stranger in my land” (66).¹⁵ After this terrible disillusionment her only mode of survival is to distance herself both physically and emotionally, and *Le Marabout de Blida* was written as a testament to the liberating forces of coming to terms with the chaotic memory of her Algerian heritage and its devastating uprooting. In 1996, when the text was published, Annie Cohen received Le Grand Prix Thyde-Monnier de la Société des Gens de Lettres and the Prix Tropiques. This story marks a (re)turn for the writer whose earlier works indicate her will to detach herself from her ancestral roots and her native country. Here again, as with Annie Fitoussi’s *La Mémoire Folle*, the author shares many autobiographical elements with the young independent protagonist of the novel, who has settled in Paris, nestled into her poplar-filled square where she decides to firmly root herself in her new *French* soil. Annie Cohen too had become a true Nordic, pine loving, heat intolerant, rational thinking and cool-

¹³ “L’Algérie n’était plus à moi, mais elle me concernait encore.”

¹⁴ “Algérie encore possible.”

¹⁵ “Algérie de l’indépendance me rendait muette, elle me bloquait les images et les associations... Je devenais étrangère à ma terre...”

headed Parisian: “everything which reminded me, up close or from far away, of the meridional latitudes, made me want to vomit” and “my bones loved the rain, the wind, the gray, the squalls from the west, the storms, and the hurricanes” (15).¹⁶ When a heat-wave strikes in the middle of August, the almost empty Paris seems like a Saharan desert, and the oppressive heat confuses and obsesses the narrator: “The persisting heat was irreconcilable with reason, with the city, with measure, it pushed me...” (16).¹⁷ It is in the midst of this psychosomatic upheaval that the narrator has a chance meeting with a marabout, who appears out of nowhere, barefoot, and wearing traditional Arab clothing. Once he opens his mouth to speak he becomes a personalization of her lost and forgotten land and territory. This man, real or imagined, will evoke moments of her life, events lodged deep in the bottom of her memory, and will eventually authorize her to rediscover her “Southern speech,” guiding her toward a truer sense of who she is. Similar to the rabbi in *La Mémoire Folle* who opened Simone’s eyes, Cohen’s marabout is an emissary from the forgotten past, seeking less to make the young woman restore what was, than show her how to be able to move forward to a life enriched by the ineffable values bestowed by an acknowledged, remembered and incorporated North African Jewish heritage.

The marabout offers droplets of deeply desired and much needed evocations, like eagerly awaited raindrops in the desert. She can feel the seeds taking root, and the need to let the sprouting begin: “the Africa of my language is about to take the word, about to force open the door” (32),¹⁸ the narrator says, referring to the doors of her subconscious, where the repressed language, images, and feelings are protected from oblivion. The marabout brings her back to her true voice, which liberates a hybrid, frank and loud speech, but not overnight and not without

¹⁶ “tout ce qui me rappelait de près ou de loin les latitudes méridionales était à vomir” (12) and “mes os aimaient la pluie, le vent, le gris, les bourrasques venues de l’ouest, les orages, les tempêtes.”

¹⁷ “La chaleur qui persistait était inconciliable avec la raison, la ville, la sagesse, la mesure, elle me poussait...”

¹⁸ “L’Afrique de ma langue est en train de prendre la parole, de forcer la porte...”

pain. The repetitive mantra of the marabout plagues her thoughts: “Drink the wine of your barrel...Which wine and which barrel was he talking about...? Even the inside of my guts had opted for the barrel of another country” (12).¹⁹ As she listens to his accent “making me blush with shame and pleasure” (13),²⁰ she is both intrigued and astounded by the uncanny familiarity: is he from her old neighborhood in Sidi bel-Abbès, a childhood friend? “He spoke to me in a language which was not unknown to me, far from it, that I recognized, that I had spoken formerly with others from my tribe” (19).²¹ His language and mannerisms release a stream of memories and sensations elicited by the landscape, the colors, the fragrances, the sounds and the foods “of a distant Algeria.” The narrator refers to him as “marabout of my nightmares...of my hidden desires...of my questions without answers” (25, 30, 31).²² as she begins her emotional journey of remembering the uprooting of the departure from Algeria, the arrival in the *métropole*, the difficulty of adaptation and the deliberate choice of detachment from her painful past. Striving to become more French than the French, and stoically (nordically) denying everything African in her life, is a way of rejecting, of escaping the mother-source of that life. “I had to become nordic! Learn how to speak the French of France. Cross out old things, accept the cold, the gray, the snow, the mittens and the gloves, change skin, never again look toward the South, for what good is it, forget the North African geographies and the nourishing wombs” (51).²³ But the “nourishing womb” is not easily forgotten and her childhood memories are the first to come up, as she remembers traumatic episodes beginning from even before her birth.

¹⁹ “Bois le vin de ton tonneau”...“de quel vin et de quel tonneau me parlait-il... ? L’intérieur même de mes entrailles avait opté pour un tonneau d’un autre pays...”

²⁰ “à me faire rougir de honte ou de plaisir.”

²¹ “Il me parlait une langue qui ne m’était pas inconnue, loin de là, que je reconnaissais, que j’avais pratiquée jadis avec d’autres de ma tribu.”

²² “marabout de mes cauchemars,...de mes désirs cachés...de mes questions sans réponses.”

²³ “Fallait devenir nordique! Apprendre à parler le français de France. Tirer un trait sur les vieilleries, accepter le froid, le gris, la neige, les moufles et les mitaines, virer de peau, ne plus du tout regarder vers le sud, à quoi bon, oublier les géographies nord-africaines et les ventres nourricières.”

The beginning of this realization is confusing: “The world is upside down, disfigured, unrecognizable, what is going to happen, the interior of my Oranian, Spanish or Biblical land demands to surface. Knock, knock, knock! Who is there? Come in! Come in! The marabout has unlocked my doors...” (33).²⁴ It is as if all her origins are surfacing together and demanding to be told.

In her article entitled “Annie Cohen: pour une algérianité retrouvée” Yvette Bénayoun-Szmidt says that Cohen’s “algérianité retrouvée” becomes a rediscovery that memory helps unearth and liberate. The “algérianité” of childhood has evolved into a new kind of belonging. Earlier in the text, when the narrator asks “How to live on both sides of the bank? How to be inside and outside, in the barrel and out of it?” (58),²⁵ she is overwhelmed by the prospect of being so open and so vulnerable to more than one variety of “barrel of wine.” She feels vulnerable since opening up the heart and the mind to all the parts that make up the whole of her will ultimately offer her a fuller understanding of herself, but it will also make her more exposed to pain and heartbreak, since her sites of belonging and therefore rejection have multiplied. Once she has opened up to her Southern speech she realizes that what she so exclusively held dear no longer is enough: “...the cold, the gray...the imprisonment...the mutism...the cut tongue/ language...Bach, I feel it, I hate my intellectual flesh” (43).²⁶ With the eruption of her “rediscoveries” comes the guilt of having forgotten: “Forgive me, forgive me for not having known how to love the summer, life, movement, disorder, light...Forgive me for living half way, unevenly, in the margins...Forgive me, my first geography, who saw me born, whom I have betrayed, forgotten, relegated, and who has taught me to be ashamed, ashamed of my country, ashamed of our country,

²⁴ “Le monde est sens dessus dessous, défiguré, méconnaissable, que va-t-il arriver, l’intérieur de mes terres oranaises, espagnoles ou bibliques demande à faire surface. Toc toc, toc ! Qui est la ?! Entrez! Le marabout a déverrouillé les portes...”

²⁵ “Comment habiter les deux côtés de la rive? Comment être dedans et dehors, dans le tonneau et hors du tonneau?”

²⁶ “...le froid, le gris...la réclusion...le mutisme...la langue coupée...Bach...je le sens, ma chair intellectuelle me fait horreur...”

the *rachma*...” (48).²⁷ From being one of her nightmares, the marabout becomes “a soul mate.” She recognizes that “...the language and the accent of the marabout had opened up the Mediterranean faucet” (170),²⁸ and as she rambles on in all the words reminiscent of her southern past, many “impossible to find in French dictionaries” (92),²⁹ she experiences the redemptive liberation of memories, and finally a desire to be reconciled with her country of origin, a reconciliation which is more auto-reflexive than reflective of the rejected “elsewhere” of her origin; since her struggle comes from within, she has been, as Julia Kristeva notes, a stranger to herself.

Thus Cohen’s unnamed narrator’s North African and Sephardic heritage takes the shape of a trajectory that has taken her ancestors from Exodus to Exodus, exile after exile, uprooting after uprooting: Jerusalem, Seville, Sidi-bel-Abbès, Paris. Where to next, and how to maintain an identity that allows you to say “I”? The enrichment she speaks of comes from the memories of the roots, from acknowledging and celebrating one’s origin, as painful as it may be to look it in the eye and admit, that no matter how fast or far you run away, it will always be a part of you, like the mother-origin, always already there, never easily but forever possibly a great source of strength to draw from throughout the many challenges of life. This would be like “The beauty of plants that acclimate themselves, species that become richer, beauty of the one who seeks direction, orientation” (57).³⁰

The hybrid identity that our narrator assumes and embraces, after a harrowing summer of soul-searching, is made up of a multitude of voices: “...the polyphonic voices, what are they saying?” (33).³¹ She

²⁷ “Pardon, pardon de ne pas avoir su aimer l’été, la vie, le mouvement, le désordre, la lumière... Pardon de vivre à moitié, de travers, en marge... Pardon à ma géographie première, celle qui m’a vue naître, que j’ai trahie, oubliée, reléguée, et qui m’a appris la honte, la honte de chez moi, la honte de chez nous, la *rachma*...”

²⁸ “...la langue et l’accent du marabout avaient ouvert le robinet méditerranéen.”

²⁹ “Introuvables dans les dictionnaires français.”

³⁰ “Beauté des plantes qui s’acclimentent, des espèces qui s’enrichissent, beauté de celui qui cherche le sens, l’orientation.”

³¹ “...les voix polyphoniques. Que disent-ils ?”

asks herself this as she begins to decipher their messages. The multi-layered, multiple woman emerging is able to let the marabout go on his way as he has helped her realize who she is: “Crooked pied-noir, the marabout says to me, Frenchman on the outside, Algerian across, Jew on the side, African like nothing, Parisian passing through, Algerian in Paris, Jew from North Africa, Frenchman from Algeria! And so! *Why not?* You are what you are. A beautiful child of God...” (156-157).³² Like her newfound taste for the marabout’s way of defining the indefinable, the young woman protagonist has taken up his language and reclaimed it as her own; she can speak her own polyphonic language, and delight in her polyvalent identity.

Through the analysis of *La Mémoire Folle de Mouchi Rabbinou* and *Le Marabout de Blida*, two marginal characters, a crazy wandering Jew disguised as a rabbi and a colorful, odd marabout have functioned as catalysts for memory reclaimed, and for coming to terms with one’s past through writing. It was Hélène Cixous who said that, in order to write, you have to lose everything once, and the loss of the South, as in the ancient Jewish North African “patrimoine,” gave both Annie Cohen and Annie Fitoussi the impetus to write. Svetlana Boym has noted that reflective (vs. restorative) nostalgia dwells in *algia* – the longing, the imperfect process of remembrance...it lingers on ruins, the patina of time and history, in the dreams of another place or another time (*The Future of Nostalgia* 41). The elements of the patina that the exiled Jews long for are the elements of their lost world, such as its music and sounds, its perfumes and spices, its warmth and congeniality. In their lost world, people had time for one another and time for life. In France, the authors/characters/narrators of these

³² “Pied-noir tordue, me dit le marabout, française de l’extérieur, algérienne de travers, juive à côté de la plaque, africaine de rien du tout, parisienne de passage, algérienne de Paris, juive d’Afrique du Nord, Française d’Algérie ! Et alors ! *Why not ?* Tu es ce que tu es. Un bel enfant de Dieu...”

texts find little such comforts in their early pursuits to be more French than the French. Having chosen the rabbi and the marabout as their inspirations and guides, memories of lost origins find expression in writing. Annie Cohen says it succinctly: “The idea of taking up with the destiny of the Hebrew people never left me: we are born here, we die elsewhere...the habit of wandering the earth was not unknown to us” (*Le Marabout* 57).³³ Diaspora, exile, exodus are all realities that continue to be part of Jewish experience, perhaps outlining the need to honor collective memory as the defining principles of Jewish identity, rather than those of national borders. “The tenacity of the seed lets the plant bend in the wind!” (31).³⁴ This truism has become the very image of Jewish survival and continuity.

In his study on Francophone Judeo-Maghrebi literature Guy Dugas points out that although francophone literature by Arabo-Muslim authors from the Maghreb has benefited from a great infatuation in postcolonial studies, francophone Judeo-Maghrebi literature has been left largely in the shadows. We find many texts by Jewish women authors who weave Sephardic traces in their writings steeped in identities formed by childhood memories from North Africa. The texts by these women writers have typically not been included in the discussions on minority or immigrant literatures in France, nor in the syllabi of postcolonial francophone literary studies.

This paper is part of a larger project venturing to (re-)define and (re-)imagine what it means not only to be French and a French writer, but also a French Jewish woman writer of North African origins, deeply rooted in Maghrebi culture and the complex experience of Jews from the Arab world³⁵. A marginalized “other” Jewish experience defining notions of Jewish difference, the narratives of Annie Cohen

³³ “L’idée de renouer avec le destin du peuple hébreu ne me quittait pas: on naît ici, on meurt ailleurs...l’habitude de tourner sur la terre ne nous était pas inconnue.”

³⁴ “La ténacité du germe permet à la plante de plier sous le vent!”

³⁵ Nina B. Lichtenstein, *North African Memories: Sephardic Women’s Texts and Contexts. A historical and literary analysis*. (Manuscript in progress as developed from “Maghrebian Memories: Exodus and Marginality in Sephardic Women’s Writing.” Ph.D. Dissertation, University of Connecticut, 2007.)

and Annie Fitoussie elaborate on the experience of loss, memory and the problematics of identity in exile. By claiming their place in the current discourses on postcolonial, pluri-cultural, migrant experiences, these writers encourage readers to recognize diversity and multiculturalism in a Jewish identity, which, regrettably, is too often perceived as homogenous and essentially white and European.

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