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## **Narrating a Diasporic Childhood around the Mediterranean in Victor Teboul's *La lente découverte de l'étrangeté***

*by Robert Watson*

*My childhood, this part of my life spent in Alexandria, is still alive in me, and not only through memories, but especially through the languages that were spoken in my hometown. I feel I am inhabited by these languages.*

—Victor Teboul, *Revisiting Tolerance*

ALEXANDRIA REPRESENTS one of the most striking manifestations of cosmopolitanism in the colonial Mediterranean. Robert Ilbert's *Alexandrie 1830–1930: histoire d'une communauté citadine* and the collection of essays *Alexandrie, 1860–1960* captured the intermingling of peoples, goods, and ideas that characterized the transformation of the city from a sparsely populated backwater at the end of the eighteenth century into one of the world's most important ports only a century later. These scholarly works attempt to impose a comprehensive linear historical perspective on an extremely chaotic period that defies received notions about the decline of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of European empires, and the formation of an Egyptian nation.

Focusing more specifically on the period between the world wars, one observes the first major triumphs of the Egyptian nationalist movement (1919–23) alongside the zenith of Levantine immigration, through which Jews came to constitute “the fastest growing demographic group in Egypt” (Starr 109). To speak of “Egyptian Jewry” as a singular collective during this period would be imprecise. There were a number of Jewish communities, some of which had been in Egypt since the time of the Arab invasions, while others that had been enticed to come from the Maghreb, Europe, or the Ottoman Empire by the modernization projects initiated by Muhammad Ali (1804–45) and his successors. A number of Jewish merchant and banking families of Spanish and Portuguese descent, long established in the

Ottoman Empire, sought European citizenship and legal protection under the capitulations. This gave them a privileged role in the modernizing of agriculture, finance, and the importing of manufactured goods from Europe. The Jews of Egypt thus embodied the legal incongruities of imperialism; many acquired passports from European countries they had never been to.<sup>1</sup>

Despite the European cultural orientation of Jews and other minorities, it would be wrong to view all non-Muslim communities in Egypt as colonial excrescences without any connection to the Muslim majority. The cultural contributions of Arabic-speaking Jews and Christians in every domain, spanning literature, theater, journalism, and later, cinema, disprove this assertion. Rather, the diversity and fluidity of the colonial order was an extension of Ottoman structures, which facilitated and sometimes compelled migration around the Southern and Eastern Mediterranean (Kasaba). One of the central issues in European nationalism as well as in anti-colonial movements was the unification of the nation through a shared language, and as such Alexandria, with its longstanding connections to communities across the Mediterranean, became a thorn in the side of the Egyptian Revolution. Nationalists and Islamic reformists such as Taha Hussein sought to construct a distinctively "Egyptian" Arabic that would bridge the gap between the classical and colloquial forms as well as Coptic and Muslim dialects (Suleiman 25–38). Meanwhile, many Levantine immigrants made "French punctuated by expressions from the various communal languages" their everyday language (Starr 20).

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, most Jewish men in Alexandria spoke several languages, some reserved for communal settings (such as Judeo-Spanish and Judeo-Arabic), others more mercantile (Greek and dialectal Arabic), and still others associated with colonial powers (French and English foremost, but also Italian). French dominated among the cosmopolitan Jewish middle class as a language of cultural prestige. The multilingual Levantine children born in the 1940s and 50s who felt French to be their "native" language have since contributed to a flourishing Egyptian Jewish memorial literature.

In the works produced in the United States, Egyptian Jewish writers transform French conversations from the past into English dialogue. This is the case with the best known memoirs: André Aciman's *Out of Egypt*, Lucette Lagnado's *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit* and *The Arrogant Years*, and Jean Naggar's *Sipping from the Nile*. As such, their memoirs are not only attempts to recover the past, but to translate it for the American reader, whether Jewish or not. In a remarkable oral history project, Liliane Dammond interviewed twenty-four Jews born in Egypt between 1920 and 1950, some Sephardic from Livorno or the Ottoman cities of Salonika, Istanbul and Smyrna, some Ashkenazi, and some Karaites (a dissenting sect that rejects Talmudic law in favor of strict observation of the Torah). Despite the diverse sub-communities represented, "most of the interviews were conducted in French," the main language they spoke in Egypt (Dammond 2). What, then,



accounts for the particular relationship of Jews in Egypt to French and the other languages that French displaced as it gained preeminence?

I argue that Jews' place at the heart of Alexandrian cultural and linguistic pluralism accounts for the highly reflexive stance toward the narrative language they use to write their life stories. Here, I will focus on Victor Teboul, a journalist of Alexandrian Jewish origins, who for several years was a refugee in France before emigrating to Montréal in 1963. Having resided there for a half century, Teboul offers an interesting case study because of his equal ease writing and speaking in French and English, his profound engagement with French-Canadian literature, his critique of its representations of Jews (*Mythe et images du Juif au Québec*), the development of liberal, secular Francophone identity (*Le jour: émergence du libéralisme moderne au Québec*), his personal friendship and political collaboration with René Lévesque and the sovereignty movement (*René Lévesque et la communauté juive*). Rather than focusing on the internal dynamics of Jewish life in Québec, namely the opposition between Ashkenazi and Sephardi communities, Teboul has devoted his career to making a bridge between the Francophone Québécois majority, the "allophone" immigrants (whose first language is neither French nor English), and Anglophone Quebecers. His most recent novel explores the dynamics of the Jewish elite in Montréal and its problematic relationship to Israel (*Bienvenue chez Monsieur B.!*). As we will see, Teboul's cosmopolitan, stateless background and refugee childhood helps contextualize his political commitments to a freethinking multilingualism and multiculturalism.

I focus on his autobiographical novel *La lente découverte de l'étrangeté*, which traces his family's exile from Egypt and eventual resettlement in Canada. Born to an Arab Jewish father and an Anatolian Greek mother, Teboul and his family were forced to leave Alexandria in the wake of the Suez Crisis of 1956. After the joint Anglo-French-Israeli invasion of the Canal Zone, Nasser's government expelled holders of foreign passports. Those who could not prove their ancestors' presence in Egypt since 1849 could not obtain Egyptian passports. Since many Jews, such as Teboul's father who had Tunisian nationality, were holders of foreign passports and had immigrated to Egypt during the boom years of the late nineteenth century, they were doubly targeted.

In the novel Teboul employs a diachronic narrative frame, documenting the Ben Haïm family's life in Alexandria 1950 until their expulsion in 1956 from Maurice's perspective (the author's alter ego and narrator). After the expulsion, Teboul continues with their fruitless search around the Mediterranean for a permanent home (1956–59). Teboul overlays another level of narration, consisting of conversations in Montréal in 1990, between Maurice, now in his mid-forties, and his father Haïm, an aging but active widower, who has successfully adapted to life in Montréal while retaining his love for Alexandria, smoking, drinking Turkish coffee, and playing backgammon with fellow exiles from the Mediterranean.

While rummaging through souvenirs from the family's years long journey to Canada, Haïm finds the journal Maurice wrote as a boy as the Suez conflict broke out. Maurice rereads the journal and begins to question his father about the taboos that governed inter-communal relations in Alexandria and the circumstances leading to the expulsion of foreign passport holders. As an adult, Maurice accuses his parents and their peers of having lived in Egypt without actually being part of it, hence his desire for French-speaking immigrants to support the sovereignty movement in Québec. Yet he realizes that Jews and other minorities had not necessarily abandoned Egypt in favor of Europe, rather they belonged to a period in which borders and national identity were less important than practical questions of survival and co-existence.

Maurice's patchwork of memories about his family's peregrinations around the Mediterranean and Europe, their search for sanctuary in Tunis, Beirut, Naples, and Paris, gradually leads to an acceptance of an exilic Egyptian Jewish identity. His family's diasporic makeup included deep cultural similarities (Judeo-Arabic language and storytelling) as well as points of friction (over interpretations of religious practice and Europeanization) with other Jews in exile. The family's diverse origins and their indeterminate nationality force Maurice to grapple with roots and exile as two sides of the same coin. Gradually reconciling his community's "Arab" past, their love for cosmopolitan Alexandria, and their dreams of the West, Maurice comes to terms with the history of exile imprinted in his speech.

### *(Meta)Language and Cosmopolitan Childhood*

Among the many literary strategies Sephardic writers such as Teboul use to convey the babel-like linguistic environment of the Mediterranean in the framework of a "French" novel, diachronic narration best expresses the gap between childhood and adulthood, home and exile. The author-narrator will typically begin in the present, writing from France or Canada and move back to their childhood and adolescence in Mediterranean port cities (either colonized by France or featuring French-language schooling). They often use the same tone and perspective to narrate past events, but some attempt to render the temporal and spatial distance with a different narrative point of view. These techniques also account for the distance between the elegant, literary French of the author-narrator's voice (the "je-scripteur") and the raucous Mediterranean lingua franca of childhood, characterized by Hebrew, Arabic, Italian, and Spanish in North Africa (Dugas 171–75). Of course, in Alexandria's heyday one also heard Greek, Armenian, Turkish, Russian, and even Yiddish (from the numerically diminutive but professionally important community of Jewish refugees and merchants from Central and Eastern Europe). While very few people possessed native fluency in



all these languages, no one could survive without basic comprehension and oral proficiency in some of them.

There is a danger in romanticizing the Mediterranean past as with many “evocations of *pied-noirs*’ childhoods [that] allow their innocent protagonists to lament the loss of a preindependence and preterrorist Algerian métissage, where a plurality of languages and cultures existed in the childhood world of play” (Huffer 230). Against a rosy view of Alexandria, Teboul taps into his voice as boy to illustrate the fissures that characterized everyday life in the colonial Mediterranean without transforming these divisions between languages and communities into anachronistic binaries. Teboul focuses on the central paradox of late colonial cosmopolitanism in the southern and eastern Mediterranean: that Levantine Jews, Egyptian Muslims, and Ottoman Greeks (just to name three examples) could have to come to share almost everything including food, music, language, even streets and neighborhoods, but that each community banded together to enforce religious observance and endogamy. The child’s unfamiliarity with the national myths invested in language gives Teboul ample opportunity to show the endlessly elastic polyglossia of the Mediterranean from below.

Maurice observes his parents, grandparents, teachers, housemaids, and religious leaders using different expressions drawn from various languages that do not seem to be the exclusive property of any one group. Rather than using official terms such as “Arabic” or “French,” Maurice (speaking as a boy) identifies different languages with the people that use them. In the first chapter recalling his boyhood, “Alexandrie, 1950,” Maurice speaks of Arabic as “la langue parlée par les domestiques” (15), “langue du marchand” (17), and the “langue du pays” (21). The boy accurately describes Greek as “la langue de ma mère” (14, 18), since his mother comes from the island of Chios, which remained part of the Ottoman Empire until 1912. Greek awakens hunger in him, since he hears it in the kitchen while his mother cooks.

On the other side of the family, Maurice has Arab Jewish roots. Born in the town of Kiryat Arba in Ottoman-ruled Palestine, his illiterate paternal grandmother Nonna moved to Tunisia where she met Maurice’s grandfather, before passing through Libya on her way to Egypt. She mostly speaks Arabic and some French, which Maurice identifies primarily as “la langue de mon père” (14). Her journey from the Levant to the Maghreb and back underscores the mobility that characterized the Ottoman Mediterranean. Maurice wonders why she left: “[N]’y avait-il pas de frontières?” (17). He knows Italian as the “quatrième langue de ma ville, que parlent aussi couramment mes parents” (34). Finally, his friend Zamit “parle à sa mère dans une langue qui ressemble tant à l’arabe,” which is later revealed to be Maltese (34). The reader discovers Alexandria’s cosmopolitanism gradually, in the sense that Maurice lives, studies, plays with people of various

origins and only discovers their “national” identities once the Suez Crisis precipitates a wave of xenophobia.

Meanwhile, his father Haïm reads the young boy stories about the first generations of Zionist pioneers in Israel in Judeo-Arabic, of all languages: “Je remarque dans le livre de mon père des lettres comme celles que j’ai déjà vues au temple. Cette langue s’écrit de droite à gauche. Et je me dis: ‘Non, pas encore une autre langue qui s’écrit de droite à gauche’” (19). For the boy, Judeo-Arabic and biblical Hebrew are of the same family, hinting at the shared Jewish-Muslim past that his generation only became aware of by observing their parents.

To complicate matters further, young Maurice attends an Anglican-run school, introducing English as another prestige language. Though he has relatively little use for the language outside of school, he begins to write his journals in it. His father went to a school run by the *Alliance israélite universelle*, a Jewish organization that promoted French language and culture among Jews in North Africa and the Middle East (Rodrigue). Haïm imports a miracle of modern civilization—cellophane—from France and passes for an expert on all things French. During visits to the shops he supplies, Haïm drinks *mazbout*, small cups of coffee that cement the relationship between the wholesale supplier and his retail clients (23). Along with scrupulous observance of Egyptian social customs, he acts as an unofficial language policeman, correcting signs and displays in faulty French. “Fermer le samedi! Vous vous rendez compte comment vous avez écrit ‘Fermer,’ sur votre affiche s’exclame-t-il, offusqué. Cela s’écrit avec un ‘e’ accent aigu” (24). Haïm’s insistence on proper French shows the language’s importance to Jews as an instrument of upward mobility and cultural prestige.

Maurice’s reflections on his mother’s language (Greek) are associated with her expressions as she bustles about the kitchen, cooking the hybrid dishes characteristic of her Ottoman Greek origins. Teboul extends a particularly poetic metaphor of salivation and hunger to his mother’s tongue (which, ironically, is not Maurice’s “maternal language”): “Je suis nourri de mots que je n’apprendrai jamais à écrire, car je ne les verrai dans les livres et ne saurais reconnaître leur forme de mes yeux. Ils logent dans ma bouche, se roulent dans ma salive” (14). Maurice’s reflection on his childhood ignorance reinforces the nostalgia he feels as an adult. His missing Greek and rudimentary Arabic are not just educational lacunae; they represent repressed truths about his origins. In one Alexandrian episode, Maurice’s maternal grandmother sneaks him into a Greek Orthodox mass and makes him swear never to speak about it with his father.

Maurice’s father on the other hand comes from a solidly Arab-Jewish background. This hybrid heritage manifests itself when a streetcar conductor yells at Maurice in Arabic, judging from his curly hair and dark skin that he must be a poor Muslim child who has hopped on without paying. His father quickly intervenes to explain to the conductor: “Tu te rends compte, dit mon père en



rigolant, il t'a pris pour un d'eux" (25). While at the seaside in the summer of 1952 (just before the Free Officers deposed King Farouk), Maurice walks along the beach to where a group of Bedouins has set up their tents. While drinking sugar cane juice as their guest, Maurice affirms to the head of the clan Abdelkader "que je suis un de ses fils et j'ajoute: -...et donc le frère d'Ahmad, ton fils, qui a la même âge que moi. – *Taghban*, bien sûr, *ebn el balad*, tu es fils du pays. N'es-tu pas de la même couleur de peau que nous?" (29). Maurice's indigeneity seems plain enough for others to see, but given his family and school's emphasis on being European, he indistinctly grasps his relation to Egypt. Here Teboul reveals that Mediterranean Jews' position between languages and cultures was not simply playful, but also reflected the fractures and fault lines of identity in such a cosmopolitan environment.

When faced with the constant "chut!" from his parents and grandparents, Maurice begins to understand "qu'il faut toujours que je taise une partie de moi-même" (20). While the older generations are depicted as more at ease with their mixed origins and identities, Teboul and his peers are all too aware the incompatibility of this diversity with the nationalist fever that swept over Egypt after the Officers' Coup and the Cairo riots of 1952. Maurice's (mis)recognition of events ends up revealing a great deal about the absurdities of assimilation. When on the boat for France, he and the other Jewish children cannot understand why all of sudden their parents are lamenting their fate and debating the departure in Arabic. Why would this unfashionable language accompany them beyond the confines of the country in which it was spoken?

Étrangers, ces gens-là? Des *roumis*? Des Européens? Allons donc! Ils passent de l'arabe au français, ont les expressions et les mimiques des gens d'Égypte. Par quelle magie ces familles juives, détentrices de passeports étrangers, établies au pays depuis une ou deux générations, parfois plus, ont-elles réussi à assimiler les langues et les cultures d'Europe, tout en s'imprégnant de la culture égyptienne? Pourquoi leurs enfants ont-ils été coupés du pays qui leur a donné naissance? (49)

Maurice's difficulty in understanding his parents' identity derives from the contradictions between cosmopolitan and national models of belonging. In the boat taking him away from the only home he has known, Maurice must also confront his ambiguous place.

## Crossing the Post-Colonial Wilderness

While the memory of the Babel of Alexandrian reveals Levantine Jews' non-European provenance, the prospect of departure creates an unsuspected nostalgia



among the exiles. The morning after their embarkation, while the boat remains docked, Arabic reemerges as a primal language among the women in spite of or perhaps because of the sudden rupture: "RéGINE, Betty, Miriam. Tous ces noms des femmes juives d'Égypte. Je les entends: 'Ya hasra!' Que c'est dommage! Aucune autre langue que l'arabe pour exprimer aussi bien l'amertume du regret" (50–51). As with many other exiles crossing the Mediterranean during the period (one might think of Enrico Macias's hit "Adieu mon pays," written on board the *Ville d'Alger* taking the musician into exile in 1961), the ship bound for Europe functions as an incubator of diasporic consciousness. Maurice finds many of school friends on the bridge complaining about their treatment at the hands of the Egyptian government. While excitedly imagining their future homelands, the boys feel a sudden nostalgia for an Alexandria they have yet to leave: "Nous voulions renier l'Égypte, mais nous entendons encore les bruits de nos quartiers. L'excitation du voyage aidant, nous nous laissons lentement pénétrer par le sentiment que nous ne reverrons plus jamais ces endroits où nous avons grandi" (51–52). They evoke their favorite beaches, the eccentric characters on street-corners, the names of neighborhoods and streetcar stops (Rouchdy, Glymenopoulos, Camp César, Ramleh), these *lieux de mémoire* that bind them together and to Egypt. "Qui d'autre peut comprendre ce que ces noms signifient!" (52). Alexandrian place-names are also products of the incredible human flow into and through the city.

Even once they are at sea, the refugees' stops only reinforce the "étrangeté" they share. In the port of Piraeus, Greek authorities question their French and English passports, the documents responsible for their expulsion from Egypt. Customs officials refuse to let a Sudanese man with an Italian passport get off the ship, because of a missing page. The Sudanese man jokingly appeals to the rest of the passengers, who up until now have never regarded the documents themselves as very important: "Perché abbiamo bisogno passaporto? Non sappiamo che siamo?" "Pourquoi avons-nous besoin d'un passeport, ne savons-nous pas qui nous sommes?" (55). This incident makes Maurice wonder about Nonna, his paternal grandmother—"Combien de pays avait-elle traversés sans passeport?" (55)—revealing the strange symmetry between Nonna's travels from Palestine to Tunis, then through Libya across the desert to Alexandria, and the Sudanese man's journey. Whatever their religious or ethnic differences, the two are linked by Mediterranean histories of border crossing.

After a stop-off in Naples, where as Maurice says, "certaines rues me déçoivent. Elles ressemblent trop à des quartiers pauvres d'Alexandrie" (59), the exiles finally arrive in Paris, crammed into cheap apartments near Pigalle. Here Jewish and Muslim migrants from across the Maghreb encounter each other in Arabic. They feel a kinship around common language and culture, even as each group continues to cultivate its regional specificity. Nasreddin Hodja, the Turkish folk hero whose fictitious exploits traveled around the Mediterranean, serves as a common

point of reference, but also a marker of geographic specificity. The Egyptians know the legendary trickster as Goha, because of their distinctive pronunciation letter ɟ (jiim) as a /g/ sound. Exiles from other Arab dialectal regions disagree:

C'est de Ch'ha que vous parlez, remarquent les Tunisiens. –Pas Ch'ha, Jeha, JJe, corrigent les Algériens, qui se sont joints aux conversations. –Vous, les Égyptiens, vous êtes incapables de prononcer correctement les 'GA', déclarent, unanimes les Maghrébins en rigolant, sachant fort bien que ces réfugiés s'expriment dans l'arabe classique, cette même langue que des instituteurs venus d'Égypte s'apprentent à enseigner dans les écoles de leurs pays fraîchement indépendants. (95–96)

By exaggerating the proximity of the Egyptian dialect to literary Arabic, Teboul reveals his own residual attachment to Egypt. In fact, modern media such as radio and film were more responsible for bringing the Egyptian dialect into households around the Arab world than any proximity to pure Koranic Arabic. Beyond the irony of indigenous Jews—whom the Egyptian government expelled as foreign nationals—vaunting their former homeland's language, the scene shows the retroactive nationalization experienced by Jews who left North Africa and the Middle East. Even as they followed their dreams of modernity in Europe and the Americas, they reclaimed a sense of national belonging they never quite possessed in their homeland.

In the summer of 1958, the Ben Haïm family leaves the overcrowded *neuvième arrondissement* to join their daughter who has married and settled in Beirut with her husband. Maurice protests, “combien de fois allons-nous faire le tour de la Méditerranée?” (115). On the ship, an affable Armenian businessman raises their spirits by vaunting the cosmopolitan glories of this Paris of the Middle East: “À Beyrouth, on parle toutes les langues comme à Alexandrie autrefois [...] C'est un pays rêvé où se croisent le Nord et le Sud, l'Orient et l'Occident” (122). This utopian vision of Beirut will turn out, like that of Alexandria, to be accurate in some respects, but unrealistic in its ignorance of local antipathy toward the persistence of foreign domination.

Lebanon proves to strangely familiar, with its mix of Arabic, French, and English, its inhabitants of every religion, and its sensuous Mediterranean lifestyle (smells of spices and cooking, drinking in outdoor cafés, and spending time at the beach): “J'ai l'impression que c'est Alexandrie, tout à coup convertie en une ville moderne nord-américaine tout en conservant sa physionomie de ville arabe et méditerranéenne [...] la langue arabe se mêle à l'arménien, au grec et au français” (122–23). Yet the Ben Haïm family has not escaped the long arm of the Nasserian Revolution. In the summer of 1958, shortly after the family has settled in, sectarian fighting erupts over the desire of some Muslims to join the United Arab Republic,



formed by Egypt and Syria's unification, and United States Marines are sent by President Eisenhower to reestablish order.<sup>2</sup>

Maurice's sister and her husband manage to obtain a visa for Canada, setting the stage for the family's eventual move to Montréal. The Ben Haïm family tries to go back to France, their preferred destination. Due to serious conflict between Bourguiba and de Gaulle over the French bombardment of Sidi Sahkiet Youssef and the continued presence of the French military at Bizerte, the Ben Haïm family cannot reenter France without a visa because of the Tunisian origins inscribed on their French passports.<sup>3</sup> Obligated to "return" to Tunisia (no one has ever been to their ancestral country since Maurice's grandfather came to Alexandria), they attempt to settle into this strange but familiar country that has just become independent from France.

During a visit to a Tunis synagogue, Maurice and his mother are shocked by the "Arabness" of Tunisian Jews, whom they mistake for Muslims because of their dress and lack of Western shoes. Maurice feels as though he has gone back in time, which raises the question of his own relation to these people who seem so different: "Mon grand-père s'habillait-il comme ces vieux?" (144). He later discovers that the younger members of the Jewish community want to leave for Europe, because of the "Tunisification" of the economy that favors Muslims over Jews, who are deemed to be overrepresented in the upper echelons of corporations, the civil service and the liberal professions.<sup>4</sup> Once France and Tunisia momentarily patch up their differences, the visa requirement preventing the family from returning is annulled. The family can finally resettle in Paris. They instead decide to head to Montréal where their daughter has ended up after leaving Beirut. She and other Sephardic Jews report that well-paying jobs and affordable, spacious housing are widely available, and given the Canadian government's favorable policies, immigrants can gain citizenship after five years of residency.

Before *La lente découverte*, Teboul described the complicated linguistic and political environment the family would discover in Québec in *Que Dieu vous garde d'un homme silencieux quand soudain il se met à parler*. This earlier work illustrates the problem of multilingual Egyptian Jewish identity in Québec, where "French" meant Catholic, "English" meant Protestant and "Jewish" meant Ashkenazi and Anglophone. Given the veneration of French culture and language in his home, Maurice feels drawn to the French Canadian side, even as his new friends fail to understand his background (one remarks that he must be "Juif catholique, sans doute, puisque tu parles français" [140]). Egyptian Jews' identity typically included speaking French and English as well as identifying with French and British culture, but in the tense environment of 1960s Montréal, Maurice feels forced to choose between the two.

The new Jewish arrivals from the Arab world were wary of Québécois nationalism, which seemed suspiciously similar to the exclusionary ethno-religious

ideology of Arab nationalism they had fled from. As Maurice notes in 1990, “mon père, lui, voyait se répéter ici ce qui s’était déjà passé là-bas” (*La lente* 41). The Québécois nationalists base their struggle on shared memories of centuries of English Protestant persecution and French Catholic resistance, the famous “Je me souviens,” that new Francophone immigrants, especially Jews and Muslims do not identify with (*Que Dieu* 70). For Maghrebi and Middle Eastern Jews the journey to Europe and North America, the promised lands of modernity, turns out to be much more complicated endeavor than they had previously imagined (and been led to imagine). Indeed, Haïm hopes that his family will find permanent refuge in Canada, because his daughter has promised him: “dans ce pays lointain... on a enterré la question des nationalités pour toujours” (*La lente* 128). Unfortunately the family arrives in the middle of the *Révolution tranquille*, where the national question was definitively brought back to light. No longer in a Mediterranean of porous borders and identities, the Ben Haïm family’s heterogeneous genealogy and multilingual situation does not fit comfortably with any of the national paradigms they are confronted with.

The ongoing debate between Maurice and his father over Canada and Québec’s destiny embodies their different perspectives on what happened in Egypt and the rest of the Mediterranean during decolonization. For Haïm, the polyglot Alexandrian, Canada’s decentralized federalist model corresponds to his identity. Immigrants are allowed to practice their own religion and go about their business in peace. He has little interest in Québec’s grievances left over from previous decades and centuries of Anglophone domination: “les Canadiens, ce sont des gens heureux, ils ne veulent pas d’histoires”; as for Canada’s future, “parler plusieurs langues, c’est ça, l’avenir” (140–41). He implicitly favors Pierre Trudeau’s multiculturalist policy, which sought to defuse French-English tensions, “the two solitudes,” by creating a globally-oriented Canadian identity (Forbes). Maurice’s desire to belong, on the other hand, pushes him toward a people struggling for its French identity. Québec’s Jews must not repeat the mistake of living in a country without aligning themselves with the majority.

The cosmopolitan outlook Haïm passes on to Maurice seems to be a practical adaptation to life in Alexandria but also anticipates the realities of post-colonial migrations. Many immigrants, exiles, refugees, and their descendants now live in the countries of former colonizers, while retaining attachments to other languages and cultures. They are often more invested in survival and economic success than in the foundational myths of national culture in their new host country. Maurice’s narrative leaves off in 1990, and since then Montréal has only become more diverse, with thousands of other displaced peoples, Haitians, Algerians, and Latin Americans, to name only a few, creating “pluri-ethnic” streets and neighborhoods (Leloup et Radice). However disorienting Teboul’s Alexandrian childhood might have been, the experience of geographical displacement, multilingualism, and an



acquired skepticism toward national identity prepared him to thrive alongside the migrants that have redefined Montréal as a post-colonial metropolis in the twenty-first century.

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup>Among the twenty-eight Egyptian Jews interviewed by Dammond, nearly half possessed foreign nationalities, despite having relatively little experience in the countries granting them status. One family, the Benzakein, had somehow obtained Czechoslovakian nationality, despite having lived in Egypt for several generations (22).

<sup>2</sup>Known as Operation Blue Bat, the landing was justified as a means of support for the Christian-led government that retained ties with the West despite the Suez Crisis. The Sunni-led bloc wanted to join Egypt and Syria as part of the United Arab Republic, and the besieged Maronite President Camille Chamoun called for American intervention. The operation became part of President Eisenhower's global strategy of anti-communist containment. See Little for a critical reevaluation of the operation.

<sup>3</sup>See Barei for more on the international fallout of this seemingly minor episode of the Algerian war that contributed to a turn in world opinion against French colonialism.

<sup>4</sup>For more on the Jewish experience of Tunisification, see Nahum. Sibony describes a similar process in Morocco in his novelized memoir. Maghrebi and Levantine Jews' enormous advantage came from their partnership with French colonial power and the benefits they reaped from modern education through the schools of the *Alliance israélite universelle*, where Jewish students followed a curriculum similar to that of the French *Éducation nationale*.

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