Beyond the Sea of Formlessness:
Jacqueline Kahanoff and the Levantine Generation

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ALGERIA
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If I had another daughter
I’d call her Algeria,
and you would doff your colonial hats to me
and call me “Abu Algeria.”
In the morning, when she opened her chocolate eyes
I would say: “Now Africa is waking up,”
and she would caress the blonde on her sister’s head
certain that she had rediscovered gold.
The grains on the seashore would be her sandbox
and in the footprints of the French who fled from there
she would hide the dates that dropped from the trees.
“Algeria,” I would clasp the railing of the balcony and call to her:
“Algeria, come home, and see how I’m painting the eastern wall
with the brush of the Sun.”

Cosmopolitan Ambivalence

Let me start with a personal anecdote. The French school in Jaffa, the Collège des Frères, was a Levantine haven. As a young pupil, I could not always tell the Levantine
teachers from the French ones. The students—a majority of Arabs, a minority of Jews and a handful of African and French sons of diplomats—studied Hebrew and French with Madame Évelyne, math with Monsieur Matalon and English with Mister Kalman among other Arab, Jewish and international teachers. We gradually discovered that a disproportionate number of our teachers were Egyptian Jews with a profound knowledge of the region’s histories and cultures. It was common for Mr. Kalman, an Egyptian-born Askhenazi Jew, to correct the frequent stylistic errors of Arab students frustrated by the complexity of Arabic grammar. I remember asking the Spanish principal, Frère Jaime, whether Monsieur Matalon was an agrégé (a prestigious title in French secondary education), not knowing that he had never set foot in France. Although we students were basically ignorant of the predicament of the last Levantine generation, we shared a collective awe at their vast knowledge and educational authority.

Goel Pinto brings a gloomier account in his recent documentary, “One Of Seven” (2010), which portrays his family history as a troubled journey of immigration and integration spanning Algeria, France and Israel. In French and Hebrew, Pinto’s mother movingly recalls realizing that she could never achieve full membership in the dominant Ashkenazi Israeli society:

I have a wound inside about this. For fifty years I’ve been walking around with this word [Mizrahi]. I came when I was 23 years old and I didn’t know what “Sephardi” meant. I was in Israel for only two or three months and I wanted to talk to them but [I was told], “No, No, they’re Sephardi.” Suddenly I understood. When father came home he explained exactly what “Sephardi” meant. I had no idea. It was very painful for me and so I really started to become Sephardi.

Mme. Pinto had never before identified herself as a Mizrahi Jew. “We were French,” she states in her mother tongue. Her knowledge of Arabic was superficial: nonetheless, she laments the traumatic departure from her native Algiers: “C’est une grande tragédie.” Pinto’s sister, Eva, who was born “there” but never saw herself as part of the Algerian community, sees the irony of the situation: “My son has a Mizrahi identity because he grew up in Holon. Which made me more aware of being Mizrahi (Mizrahiyut)—[my son and his friends] brought it home to me.”

The terms associated with the Mediterranean space and its people have been mobilized in both political struggles and theoretical efforts. The work of Jacqueline Kahanoff (1917-1979) who, like Pinto’s mother, had a soft French accent, unmistakably folding a rolling “R,” voices the generational vicissitudes of Mediterranean Jews and their dilemmas of belonging. Her literary and
Ronny Someck Algeria 2010, ink on paper
autobiographical writings explore the conceptual and historical foundations of a key category which was pushed out of public discourse and collective memory: the Levantine—both as a living person and as an inanimate cultural representation. This essay posits Levantinism as European modernity’s alter ego and proposes a preliminary anthropological theorization of Levantine alterity in an attempt to trace the accommodation of categories of representation to changing historical circumstances. Drawing on Kahanoff’s work, I argue that the Jewish Levantine experience can best be understood as a form of cosmopolitan ambivalence, wavering between belonging and non-belonging, indigenousness and Diaspora. This essay offers a post-colonial reading of Levantine trajectories, and frames the Levantines as both agents of colonial modernity and as victims of territorial nationalism. In the course of the twentieth century, the Levantine went from being a symbol of intercultural mediation to a stereotype of devious dual loyalties and social transgression.

This essay outlines an anthropology of the Jewish Levant organized around four concepts: (non)belonging, bricolage, the stranger and the Arab-Jew. The first section addresses the main feature of the Levantine world—namely, the cosmopolitan ability to maneuver Arab, Jewish and imperial boundaries. Tragically, Levantine liminality was precisely why this way of life was terminated by the national order of things becoming a stereotype of non-belonging. The second section presents Kahanoff’s view of Levantinization as a creative cultural bricolage. Kahanoff dodges any form of historical essentialism and portrays the Levant as a space for “mixing” as well as a “needed cultural mutation.” She criticizes the provincialism of Sabra culture and the shortsightedness of Arab “narrow nationalism.” Expanding the analysis beyond the Levant to include the sociological insights of Georg Simmel in Europe and the memoirs of Albert Memmi in North Africa, the following sections propose to frame the Levantine as a “stranger”—a potential wanderer, who unites nearness and remoteness. Due to their precarious position in the host groups, the Levantine strangers had critical objectivity and relative freedom. Stranger communities, however, were often the first to be marked for expulsion and elimination in Egypt as well as in Germany. Kahanoff often identified parallel patterns in the Levant and in North Africa. Juxtaposing Kahanoff’s line of thought and her insights against Albert Memmi’s writings on the Arab-Jews as the Jewish natives of Arab lands shows the various strategies used to cope with “national purification” projects. Memmi describes his infatuation and subsequent disillusionment with Arab nationalism. In this respect, the predicament of the Arab-Jew reflects the tragedy of Levantine culture. This essay concludes with an extrapolation of Kahanoff’s
notion of unavoidable hybridity, which challenges the illusion of belonging as it historicizes and deconstructs the idea of indigenousness itself. Her work opens up a relational interpretation of the colonial and post-colonial condition in the Levant and beyond.

In Search of Definitions: The Predicament of Belonging

Who is the Levantine? The Levantine, defined by categorical transgression and restless mobility, is a “fishy” type inhabiting the shores of the Mediterranean since the early modern period. The name comes from a geographical region in Europe’s backyard and its frontier with the Muslim world; in popular culture it is first and foremost a stereotype which signifies more than a place. A discursive category of alterity, the Levantine, however, is not reducible to a geo-cultural fixation and a discourse of colonial domination. It does not represent the Oriental Other à la Said,3 but rather Mary Douglas’s4 ambivalent unclassifiable: its French sounds foreign, its Arabic is somewhat different, its Hebrew is from elsewhere. It moves all too easily between the cultural repertoires of East and West, paying due respect to no one in particular, changing loyalties as it sees fit. No wonder then that some official Italian, French and Hebrew dictionaries define the Levantine as cunning, deceitful and double-dealing.5 In Israel and in some European nation-states, the word “Levantine” was used to label immigrants from Mediterranean countries, but was generalized to signify a form of spivvish pretention and dangerous masking: the provincial subject posing as metropolitan and unashamedly using the languages of the center. I use the third neuter pronoun here because the Levantine as such is not a flesh-and-blood person but an objectified cultural category applied by the dominant group to “foreign” ethnic minorities and colonial subjects. It should thus be analyzed as a collective representation, which exposes its own ambivalent motility as well as the quest for purity of national projects of indigenousness such as Zionism and Arab nationalism. From this perspective, the construction of the Levantine becomes a figment of the imperial and national imagination.

Why is the Levantine, as a collective representation, perceived as conniving and dangerous? In Purity and Danger, Douglas notes that cultural forms are created as defensive shields against all that is ambiguous and ill-defined: “pollution dangers strike when form has been attacked.”6 Rigid classification systems of people and things have a regulatory function of normalizing and making sense of the “sea of formlessness.” While the Levantines have been initially regarded as a “well-managed and necessary transition between the native and the European,” the crystallization of
the nation-form in the Middle East at the height of the anti-colonial struggle in the
mid-twentieth century became increasingly linked with the rejection of everything
“foreign.” Against the romanticized peasant, the iconic signifier of “the Land,”
territorial nationalism ostracized the cosmopolitan strangers from overseas: Greeks,
Italians, Turks and above all Jews. In many of these fledging national discourses,
the Mediterranean Sea looms large as a cultural and political border-zone between
imperial Europe and the emancipating (ex-)colonies. The landed territoriality of
political forms such as the nation-state is defined in opposition to the sea, both as
a metaphor and as a concrete space: “The sea of formlessness is made of everything
unclassifiable and unclear, against which form must defend itself.” In this regard
the primordial Zionist fear of being thrown into the sea speaks both to the anxiety
of physical annihilation as well as to death by cultural dissolution.

The Levantines, champions of trans-Mediterranean mobility, were indeed
“out of place” in nationalizing Egypt and in conflict-ridden Israel of the 1950s,
precisely because of their exclusion from the rigid topography of nation-states. The
entire Mediterranean space was their home, and they flourished by manipulating
transnational networks of exchange and by mastering cross-boundary practices of
mediation. In Bein shnei olamot [Between two worlds], Jacqueline Kahanoff provides
a personal account of this ambivalence of belonging:

   The fact that not one member of our household was Egyptian embarrassed me as a
   child. I didn’t know if being Egyptian-born means that I’m Egyptian and whether I
   should want or not want to be Egyptian. Most probably the Egyptian-born Jews of
   my generation felt the same troubling ambivalence of belonging and non-belonging.
   Every year Uncle Clement from Paris and Uncle Fred, my father’s brother, from
   Manchester, would visit us. Relatives dropped by on their way from Iraq or India.
   I thought to myself that Jews move from one country to another as if they were
   traversing the rooms of a big house. But I was filled with concern at the sight of
   groups of youngsters, who flooded the streets, waving green flags and calling “Egypt
   for the Egyptians.”

The troublesome sense of “belonging” and “non-belonging” did not fade away
with the dissolution of such Levantine cosmopolitanism. In “Double Exile,” André
Aciman describes the last Seder his family celebrated in Egypt in 1967:

   After almost three centuries of religious tolerance, we found ourselves celebrating
   Passover the way our Marrano ancestors had done under the Spanish Inquisition: in
   secret, verging on shame, without conviction, in great haste, and certainly without
   a clear notion of what we were celebrating. Was it the first exodus from Egypt? Or
maybe the second from Spain? Or the third from Turkey? Or the fourth, when my family members fled Italy just before the Nazis took over? Or were we celebrating the many exoduses that went unrecorded but that every Jew knows he can remember if he tries hard enough, for each one of us is a dislodged citizen of a country that was never really his but that he has learned to long for and cannot forget. The fault lines of exile and diaspora always run deep, and we are always from elsewhere, and from elsewhere before that.  

Forced into exile, Levantine families settled in Europe, the US or Israel, often clinging to the nostalgic imagination of a lost past, cosmopolitan and glorious. Many chose to visit their childhood homes and relive the difficult departure. In *False Papers*, Aciman describes his visit to his birthplace:

To those who asked, I said I went back to touch and breathe the past again, to walk in shoes I hadn’t worn in years. This, after all, was what everyone said when they returned from Alexandria—the walk down Memory Lane, the visit to the old house, the knocking at doors history had sealed off but might pry open again.... And then of course the tears, the final reckoning, the big themes: the return of the native, the romance of the past, the redemption of time.... There are no Europeans left and the Jews are all gone. Alexandria is Egyptian now.... The Alexandria I knew, that part-Victorian, half-decayed, vestigial nerve center of the British Empire, exists in memory alone, the way Carthage and Rome and Constantinople exist as vanished cities only—a city where the dominant languages were English and French, though everyone spoke in a medley of many more, because the principal languages were really Greek and Italian, and in my immediate world Ladino (the Spanish of the Jews who fled the Inquisition in the sixteenth century), with broken Arabic holding everything more or less together.  

Reflexively trapped between what he calls “nostophobia,” the fear of returning, “nostomania,” the obsession with going back and “nostography,” writing about return, Aciman reformulates the meaning of displacement as a desperate search for a home lost, a quest resulting in “perpetual oscillation”: “The true site of nostalgia is therefore not a land, or two lands, but the loop and interminable traffic between these two lands.... Displacement, as an abstract concept, becomes the tangible home.”

The tragic trajectory of the Levantine category and the predicament of individual Levantines can be traced to a still larger frame of reference: colonial modernity. In *Modernity and Ambivalence*, Zygmunt Bauman locates the counterpart to the
order-seeking project of modernity and the nation-state, not in Hobbesian chaos or sheer disorder, but in ambivalence, a sphere of social action characterized by polysemy, strangeness and contingency. Akin to Derrida’s notion of indeterminacy qua ubiquitous “resistance to closure,” ambivalence or “the possibility of assigning an object or event to more than one category” is inherently dialectic—it is simultaneously the stifling “waste of modernity” and the prerequisite for social change. In postcolonial theory, Homi Bhabha has encouraged a critical rethinking of nationalism and representation that above all identifies ambivalence as the locus of resistance to stereotypical fixation and oppressive domination: “The ambivalence of mimicry—almost but not quite—suggests that the fetishized colonial culture is potentially and strategically an insurgent counter-appeal. What I have called its ‘identity-effects’ are always crucially split.” The process by which ambivalence “does not merely ‘rupture’ the discourse, but becomes transformed into an uncertainty, which fixes the colonial subject as a ‘partial’ presence” is acutely articulated in the history of the Levant as a cross-cultural “contact zone.” This liminal space, betwixt and between dominators and dominated, center and periphery, the Middle East and Europe, thus becomes a strategic site of action and interpretation in which cultural differences are pitted against narratives of national identity. In light of this interpretive paradigm, a revisionist conceptualization of the colonial encounter in the Levant exposes, as Albert Memmi noted, the dialectic “enchaînement” between colonizer and colonized, which produces multiple intentionalities, identifications and alienations. In Alexandria, Cairo, Beirut and Algiers, the fraught confrontation between rival narratives of heritage and their internal contradictions results in persistent representational ambivalence. The Levantine space thus emerges not only as a site of bygone memory and nostalgia but also as a contested breeding ground for new identity-making, history and literature.

Reclaiming the Levant as Cultural Bricolage

Born in Cairo in 1917 to an Iraqi father and a Tunisian mother, and married to a Cairene of Russian origin, Jacqueline Shohet-Kahanoff embodies the rise and fall of the cosmopolitan Levantine generation. She spent twenty-four years in Cairo amidst polyglot Levantines like herself before leaving for New York where she debuted as a writer. After World War II (WWII) she returned to Egypt, only to depart for Paris three years later. She and her second husband, Alexander Kahanoff moved to Israel in 1954, and settled in Bat-Yam. In her work as novelist and essayist, she gave voice to the “Levantine generation,” as Aharon Amir noted in his preface to Kahanoff’s...
Mizrach shemesh [From the east the sun]. At the same time, she relentlessly challenged and expanded the boundaries of Israeli discourse on ethnicity, multiculturalism and the Jewish condition in the region. Although she wrote mostly in English, much of her writing was until recently confined to Hebrew readers. The recently published *Mongrels or Marvels*, a compilation of some of her important writings, will hopefully remedy this lacuna. Although never part of the Israeli literary mainstream, a liminal position reflected in her residential preference of a working-class city south of Jaffa and Tel-Aviv, she is increasingly read as a bold forerunner of a Levantine synthesis that stresses her generation’s “unavoidable hybridity.”

Kahanoff’s essay “What about Levantinization?” and much of her literary work creatively attempts to reclaim the rootedness of an authentic historical legacy which releases the Levant from the stereotypical shackles of what she termed “Levantinism.” While the English original of this essay has never been published, an edited translation was printed in the Israeli military’s weekly magazine *Ba-Mahane* in 1972. Ironically, the Hebrew title of Kahanoff’s essay is posited not in the interrogative as an enigmatic Kantian inquiry but as an assertive Canaanite affirmation: “We Were All Born in the Levant.” The Hebrew title frames the Levant as a cultural space of identity politics *avant la lettre*. Levantinism, the subtitle reads “was made an insult in Israel but it is actually a sign of cultural vitality.”

Echoing Mansel’s observation that “The Levant...put deals before ideals,” Kahanoff endorses a pragmatic reading of Levantine history as a “needed cultural mutation.” She celebrates Levantine cultural “mixing” as a sort of bricolage (perhaps under the influence of Claude Lévi-Strauss whom she met in New York), which challenges derogative notions of fake mimicry: “When people find that their own culture no longer corresponds to their present needs or future expectations, what else can they do—if only to survive—than borrow elements of the foreign, dominant culture.” More than merely a survival strategy, cultural mutation thus becomes a creative intervention of universal import. Conversely however, from the perspective of the dominant Israeli culture as well as for the marginalized Levantines, the uneasy marriage of a “native culture” and “a more advanced, imported one” results in what Homi Bhabha identified as the ambivalence of mimicry splitting the colonial subject—“almost but not quite.” Rejecting this form of bottom-up, mixed bricolage, Israeli culture stigmatized Levantine practices of cultural borrowing as inferior and inappropriate. As Pinto’s mother realized, the aggressive nativism of Sabra culture was deemed the only normative option for Jewish newcomers.

Far from being exceptionally Israeli, Levantinization brings to the fore creative processes of adaptive cultural alteration that render any form of social and cultural
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Kahanoff was not a sociologist and indeed her most profound insights draw on her own life experiences and original reflections. Notwithstanding, her analysis resonates with earlier attempts by Jewish sociologists Georg Simmel and Alfred Schütz to provide a theoretical account of the “stranger” as an ambivalent social type. Comparing the Levantine realities with the concept of the stranger reveals the universal qualities Kahanoff stressed throughout her work. Writing in the early twentieth century, Simmel ascribes a peculiar unity of nearness and remoteness to the stranger:

The stranger is not the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather the person who comes today and stays tomorrow. He is, so to speak, the potential wanderer: although he has not moved on, he has not quite overcome the freedom of coming and going. He is fixed within a particular spatial group, or within a group whose boundaries are similar to spatial boundaries. But his position in this group is determined, essentially, by the fact that he has not belonged to it from the beginning, that he imports qualities into it, which do not and cannot stem from the group itself.31

Due to the transient nature of his attachment to the in-group, the Levantine stranger is additionally endowed with objectivity and critical freedom: “The objective individual is bound by no commitments which could prejudice his perception,
understanding, and evaluation of the given. The freedom, however, which allows the stranger to experience and treat even his close relationships as though from a bird’s-eye view, contains many dangerous possibilities.”

Always at risk, the stranger has to safeguard his fragile position and be ready to leave at short notice. Decades later, Alfred Schütz, an Austrian émigré who settled in New York on the eve of WWII, framed these high stakes in terms of a phenomenological theory of knowledge:

The deeper reason for his [the stranger] objectivity, however, lies in his own bitter experience of the limits of the “thinking as usual,” which has taught him that a man may lose his status, his rules of guidance, and even his history and that the normal way of life is always far less guaranteed than it seems....Therefore the stranger discerns frequently with a grievous clear-sightedness, the rising of a crisis which may menace the whole foundation of the “relatively natural conception of the world” while all those symptoms pass unnoticed by the members of the in-group, who rely on the continuance of their customary way of life.

Dependent on his accurate definition of the situation, the stranger has to be reflexive and critical of the common patterns of “thinking as usual” in order to integrate and operate in the receiving environment: “He cannot stop at an approximate acquaintance with the new pattern, trusting in his vague knowledge about its general style and structure, but needs an explicit knowledge of its elements, inquiring not only into their that but into their why.”

Levantine and European history has shown all too often that the stranger’s pragmatic flexibility, witty moderation and ability to manage different repertoires of action do not come without a price. His critical distance is often interpreted by the dominant group as questionable loyalty and potential betrayal: “The stranger remains a ‘marginal man,’ a cultural hybrid on the verge of two different patterns of group life, not knowing to which of them he belongs. But very frequently the reproach of doubtful loyalty originates in the astonishment of the members of the in-group that the stranger does not accept the total of its cultural pattern as the natural and appropriate way of life.”

A multidimensional stranger, the Levantine reaped both the benefits and detriments of his liminal position vis-à-vis the indigenous majority. In the twentieth century, in a modernizing political landscape where territoriality and identity increasingly overlapped, the Levantines were amongst the first to be sacrificed on the altar of the self-purifying nation. In many cases they collaborated with local elites and were co-opted by colonial powers, often making significant material profits and political gains in the process; at the same time, however, they fell victim
to the indigenous-driven ideology, picturing the peasant as a nationalist signifier. Disrupting the logic of exclusive territorial boundaries, the Levantine minorities’ potential of serving as go-betweens was blocked by the blindness of what Kahanoff calls “narrow nationalism.” She bemoans the loss of these communities in the Levant as in Europe:

The Coptic and Jewish communities in North Africa and Egypt were eliminated, just as their European counterparts had been in Hungary and Germany. In the Orient, too, a narrow nationalism, which excluded all that was not Arab and Moslem, won the day and crushed the new shoots of a Levantine culture that was, or might have been, a bridge between the Western world and that of the Orient, to transform the Levant into a more open and free society that could develop for the benefit of all its people.

The Levantine and the Arab-Jew: Jacqueline Kahanoff and Albert Memmi

The Levant was part of a larger colonial space of connectivity stretching as far as India and North Africa. Living and writing at the same period, Albert Memmi (1920-) and Jacqueline Kahanoff offer two literary and intellectual perspectives on the Jewish predicament in a predominantly Muslim world. While the limited scope of this essay cannot do justice to the full breadth of their oeuvre, two points of comparison and divergence are worth noting: their relation to the Arab nationalist project and their attachment to Israel.

In his essays on decolonization, Memmi proposed a general framework for analyzing the condition of what he termed the “dominated man.” Like the woman, the Jew, the colonized, the proletarian and the racialized subject, the profile of the “Arab-Jew” reflects the peculiar trajectory of Jews living in Muslim societies. Split between Jewish, Arab, and French or British cultures, the Arab-Jew was not only a by-product of the colonial contact zone but was often a political sympathizer with Arab emancipation (Memmi himself was among the founders of the anti-colonial newspaper _Jeune Afrique_, shortly before Tunisian independence in 1956). Memmi describes at length his infatuation and subsequent disillusionment with the idea of Arab nationalism, stressing that the Jews, indigenous to Arab lands, traditions and cultures, were blocked from joining the new postcolonial society: “We were Tunisian citizens and decided in all sincerity to ‘play the game.’ But what did the Tunisians do? Just like the Moroccans and Algerians, they liquidated their Jewish communities cunningly and intelligently.” Kahanoff, on her part, dedicated several articles to Memmi’s work but never shared his dismay and confusion. In her essay, “Derech niftelet el Yisrael: Al sifro shel Albert Memmi” [A tortuous
way to Israel: On Albert Memmi’s new book], she scolds him for allowing “his personal crisis to affect each and every sentence.” Toward the end of her review she writes: “Memmi argues that the internal pressure brought about by his impossible Jewishness prevented him from doing what he wanted most—writing novels.... It is high time that we as adults must come to terms with the full scope of our personal tragedy, instead of trying to run away from it. From this sublimation many works of art are born.”

Memmi’s and Kahanoff’s different emotional and intellectual reactions to the exclusion of Jews from the pan-Arabist project and the practical impossibility of retaining both identities stem from divergent biographies and life experiences. Born in colonial Tunis to a working-class family (his father was an artisan and saddle-maker), Memmi spoke Judeo-Arabic as his native language. The Memmi family lived near Tunis’s Jewish ghetto, known as the Hara (the neighborhood). As a young boy he was sent to Hebrew school and later to a school run by the Alliance Israélite Universelle. Memmi enrolled at the University of Algiers, but his studies were soon interrupted by the onset of WWII. North African Jews were targeted by the Vichy collaborationist regime and consequently Memmi was expelled from the University of Algiers and sent to a forced labor camp in German-occupied, eastern Tunisia. After his release, he returned to the University of Algiers in 1943 and received his degree in philosophy. He moved to Paris in 1946 for further studies, but returned with his French Catholic wife to Tunis in 1951 where he taught at his former lycée. Like many Tunisian Jews who did not see a viable future for themselves in post-independence Tunisia, the Memmis settled in France where Albert pursued a successful career at the Sorbonne as a sociologist and writer. In an interview with Memmi, entitled “Irreconcilable Differences,” Wilder writes: “From the Jewish ghetto of his childhood to the bourgeois Jewish school where he learned he was poor, to the French lycée where he learned he was a ‘native,’ to the Sorbonne where he learned he was a Jew, his personal trajectory exemplifies the geographical displacement, cultural alienation, and juridical ambiguity that have come to characterize the postcolonial condition.”

Memmi’s profound attachment to Arabic-speaking Tunisian society, his family’s modest socioeconomic background and his anti-colonial activism all set him apart from Kahanoff. Of much wealthier means, Kahanoff was born in Egypt but never became truly involved in local politics, language and culture. As she testifies: “I didn’t know if being Egyptian-born means that I’m Egyptian and whether I should want or not want to be Egyptian.” For Memmi, his Tunisian nationalism was self-evident only to be shattered by the harsh realities of the postcolonial state. While
he became a prophet of the anti-colonial struggle, Kahanoff minutely recorded the cosmopolitan condition of Levantine Jews.

Divided along lines of class and politics, Kahanoff and Memmi nevertheless shared a common conviction regarding Jewish self-determination in Israel. Thus Kahanoff writes in 1966, “I agree with Memmi that this is our great historical opportunity.” A self-declared Arab-Jew and a Zionist at the same time, Memmi was forced into exile in France where he chose to remain in a permanent state of “outsider.” In contrast, Kahanoff left Paris in 1954 and settled in Israel, even though she was somewhat estranged from Israeli culture. We can read Memmi’s and Kahanoff’s work as an inventory of possible responses to colonization, racism and anti-Semitism. At the end of the day, both considered nationalism (either Zionism or Arab liberation struggles) a necessary form of collective corrective, which could enable the colonized subjects to eventually find their humanity and natural historical path. Cosmopolitanism and nationalism were not considered to be mutually exclusive aspirations but were complementary possibilities of emancipation.

Conclusions: A Relational Anthropology of the Levant

Akin to politicized categories of ethnic identity such as Mizrahi, Sephardi, Arab-Jew, or ostensibly apolitical geo-cultural constructs such as the Mediterranean, the Levant should be read as a product of local histories and macro-processes alike. This analysis departs from the dialectic of articulation between a local system and its encompassing context, which involves individual actors, national projects and regional agents—and ultimately problematizes the coherence, initially assumed by modern scholars, of such categories. At the intersection of European, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern trans-regional histories, the Levant manifests the persistence of both networks of connectivity and enclaving structures. Due to its position as a colonial contact zone between East and West, it lays bare the dramatic human consequences of transnational mobility, religious distinction and communal survival.

The work of Levantine intellectuals such as Jacqueline Kahanoff and André Aciman encourages us to challenge previously held conceptions regarding the region’s social history: What was the nature of the life-world inhabited by the last generation of Levantines in the twentieth century? French anthropologist Christian Bromberger has proposed three contradictory archetypical images of the Mediterranean: the “polyphonic” one of exchange and cohabitation, the “cacophonic” one of conflict and ethnic cleansing; and the “anthropological”
one of underlying cultural complicities. While Bromberger agrees that the Mediterranean is not a uniform cultural area, he nevertheless suggests that what gives coherence to the Mediterranean world is not so much the evident similarities but the differences that form a system. “These complementary differences,” he concludes, “inscribed in a reciprocal field, allow us to speak of a Mediterranean system.”

This structuralist, anthropological view of the Mediterranean is predicated on a system of mutually exclusive differences, which do not tolerate transgression. For Bromberger, the organizing principle of the region is akin to Freud’s narcissism of small differences. Naturally, he rejects the notion of hybridity on the grounds that it is incompatible “with the logic of the religions of the book” and because the social fluidity implied in this concept is alien to the patterns of group membership in the region. Criticized for resurrecting a “pervasive archaism,” this Mediterraneanism has been duly deconstructed by anti-Mediterraneanist anthropologists, who have even gone as far as to argue for the non-existence of the region as such.

These perspectives of the Mediterranean are markedly different from the lived Levantine experience of writers like Kahanoff. Analytically distinguishing the specific Levantine experience from larger Mediterranean trajectories highlights a unique conception of the Levant that I have argued for and would like to stress in conclusion. The Levant has been a theater for the intermixing patterns, transgressive practices and hybrid imaginings that make the Levantine writers’ work so revealing. A revised conception of the Levant as a space of complementary differences that allows for change and exchange across and within communal boundaries opens up a space for a new anthropology of the Levant. As apparent in Kahanoff’s narrative, the Levant, primarily inflected by colonialism and its aftermath, locked both colonizer and colonized in what Memmi aptly called an “implacable dependence.” Addressing a similar problem in a different colonial context, Ann Stoler calls to “recoup the inconsistencies of these narratives.” For Stoler, such an endeavor must address the following questions: “How do we ethnographically read these stories and write a history that retains the allusive, incomplete nature of colonial knowledge? How do we represent the incoherence rather than write over it with a neater story we wish to tell?” The methodological task that Levantine socialities challenge us to undertake calls for making sense of such political dependencies and cultural reciprocities, without losing sight of the unequal power relations at play between the indigenous and foreigners, majority and minority. Meeting this challenge, I believe, is of the outmost importance for a historically grounded and theoretically oriented interpretation of the Levantine colonial encounter.
In this respect, the Levantine “stranger” is essential to represent the ambivalent subjectivities of women and men along the biographical itineraries that have often taken them away from the Levant. Poised against the iconic “native,” the stranger “who comes today and stays tomorrow” challenges “the relationship of a native Jew to a native space,” but more importantly can serve to historicize and indeed deconstruct the very category of indigenousness. The specific relationship “of the Jew to the Arab within him or herself” can thus be generalized to encompass the fatal embrace between colonizer and colonized or self and other in the Levant and beyond. The case for this theoretical endeavor is best made by Kahanoff’s own words:

We wanted to break out of the narrow minority framework into which we were born, to strive toward something universal.... Our parents were pro-British as a matter of business and security and we were nationalist as a matter of principle.... Revolution and Marxism seemed the only way to reach a future that would include both our European mentors and the Arab masses.... The Arabs and other colonized peoples were cultural hybrids by chance, while we, the Levantines, were unavoidably so, as if by vocation and destiny.

Notes

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10 Jacqueline Kahanoff, *Bein shnei olamot*, 33. All quotations from Hebrew sources are translated by the author, Daniel Monterescu.


13 Ibid., 7.


15 Ibid., 1.

16 Ibid., 15.


18 Ibid.


21 David Ohana, introduction to *Bein shnei olamot* [Between two worlds] by Jacqueline Kahanoff (Jerusalem: Keter, 2005), 9.


24 Carlino; Kahanoff, *Bein shnei olamot*. In addition to her monograph *Me-Mizrach Shemesh*, and her edited volume *Sipurim Afrikaim bnei zmanenu* [Contemporary African Writing] (Tel Aviv: Am Ha-Sefer, 1963), Kahanoff’s long list of publications in Hebrew includes dozens of critical articles and reviews in national newspapers and magazines as well as essays and short stories in literary journals. In 2005, David Ohana published a compilation of her essays entitled *Bein shnei olamot*. *Jacob’s Ladder* appeared in 1951 and *Ramat-Hadassah-Szold: Youth Aliyah Screening and Classification Centre* were published in English in 1960. In addition to publishing literary work, Kahanoff was a plenum member of the Israel Broadcasting Authority until her resignation in 1967. For more biographical information about Kahanoff, see Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to The Garden: New Israeli Writing* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), 18.


27 Kahanoff, "Ba-Levant noladnu kulanu."
28 Ibid.
29 Kahanoff, Between Two Worlds, 23.
30 Kahanoff, "Ba-Levant noladnu kulanu."
32 Ibid.
34 Ibid., 103.
35 Ibid., 105.
36 Swedenburg.
37 Memmi, Who is an Arab-Jew?, 5.
44 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 154.
48 Alcalay, 27.
49 Ibid.