



MUSLIM SPACES, JEWISH PASTS  
ELLA SHOCHAT

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Ella Shohat is Professor of Cultural Studies at New York University. Her books include: *Colonialité et Ruptures: Écrits sur les Figures Juives Arabes*; *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*; *On the Arab-Jew, Palestine, and Other Displacements: Selected Writings*; *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation*; *Talking Visions: Multicultural Feminism in a Transnational Age*; *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation and Postcolonial Perspectives* (co-edited); *Between the Middle East and the Americas: The Cultural Politics of Diaspora* (co-edited); and with Robert Stam: *Unthinking Eurocentrism; Flagging Patriotism: Crises of Narcissism and Anti-Americanism*; *Race in Translation* (translated into German as *Race in Translation: Kulturkämpfe rings um den postkolonialen Atlantik*); and *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality and Transnational Media*. Shohat has also served on the editorial board of several journals, including *Critique*; *Interventions*; and *Social Text*, coediting several special issues: “911 – A Public Emergency?”; “Palestine in a Transnational Context”; and “Edward Said: A Memorial Issue.” Her writings have been translated into various languages, including, Arabic, Hebrew, Turkish, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Polish, Japanese, and German. – Address: Departments of Art & Public Policy, and Middle Eastern & Islamic Studies, New York University, 715 Broadway, New York, NY 10003, USA. E-mail: es100@nyu.edu.

Landing in Grunewald, after leaving the epicenter of Covid-afflicted New York, felt like an immense leap as we took our first steps into our Villa Walther apartment. Our ears were still echoing with the sounds of ambulance sirens screaming day and night, with the city intensely aware of its sick being hastily driven to overflowing hospitals. But as we stood on the veranda and gazed, finally mask-less, at the pond, we began to unwind and exhale.

We soon surrendered to the exhilarating reflections of clouds fused with upside-down trees and houses vibrating as if in an impressionist painting. It wasn't the bustling and artsy metropolis that we had visited in the past, but we nestled easily into our new pastoral habitat. We embraced the acoustically vibrant chorus of birds, relishing their daily-composed percussive call and response music. We came to know a sympathetic and vibrant community of scholars, along with their children, no less animated than our chirping avian neighbors.

The coziness of Grunewald stood in sharp contrast to the scholarly world into which I was about to delve in my writing, the story of a community – my community – dislocated overnight, some seven decades ago, traumatically displaced from Baghdad, from Mesopotamia, which had been home for thousands of years. My Wiko project “Muslim Spaces, Jewish Pasts: Re-Membering Iraq” forms part of a larger book project entitled “The Question of the Arab-Jew,” which investigates issues of home and belonging in light of a series of displacements. Since the 1980s, I have been studying the culture and identity of Arab-Jews, often critiquing a binarist approach that erased the Arab culture of Jews, thus turning the Arab-Jew into an oxymoron. My current project focused on the not-so-long-ago massive demographic and cultural presence of Jews in the Arab/Muslim world and the vacuum left in the wake of their departure in the post-1948 era. I wanted to examine how Muslims and Jews lived together in the same country, city, and even neighborhood, part of a shared coexistence, which was abruptly broken only very recently. Today, it is common to hear suggestions, in everyday conversation and in the media, that imagines Jews and Muslims to be perpetual enemies, locked forever in intractable conflict. The wealth of evidence, which I examined in memoirs as well as in oral and visual cultures, however, suggests that this image of an implacable enmity is a relatively recent invention. My writing has tried to shed light on intertwined Muslim and Jewish pasts and on their complex quotidian spaces of shared belonging. This inter-communal conviviality is often obscured by the grand but simplistic nostrums of present-day political discourse, and especially of ethno-nationalist rhetoric on both sides. Indeed, the topic of shared Muslim and Jewish memories has in recent years become the subject of lively public conversation in various countries, including, obviously, in Israel. The interest in this past suggests that a once-taboo subject has come to form part of an exploration of a multifaceted cultural expression.

Focusing on the case of Iraq, my interdisciplinary project discusses the representation of Arab memory against the backdrop of the dislocation of Jews from cities such as Baghdad, Basra, and Mosul. The history of colonial partitions and the emergence of competing nationalisms generated, in their wake, intricate and conflicted narratives of belonging, where

memory has been mobilized, performed, and staged from diverse, even opposite, perspectives. Foregrounding a postcolonial theoretical framework, the project raises questions about the nature of “home,” “homeland,” “diaspora,” “exile,” “nostalgia,” and “return” within a context in which Arabness and Jewishness, once closely linked, have come to connote enemy identities. The project addresses the complexities of Arab/Jewish intersections as articulated largely in texts written over the past few decades. I have examined the narration of this cross-border movement into a new context where Arabness emerges as a taboo memory for Jews. I also examined the ways in which diverse writers, filmmakers, and artists have represented Arab/Muslim spaces, in ways that challenge the overly combative “Arab-versus-Jew” paradigm that has dominated the discursive landscape. The corpus consists of films and performances in various languages – largely in English, Hebrew, Arabic, and French – that shed light on the contradictions and ambiguities within the Arab-Jewish geographical imaginary. Analyzing the overlapping multiplicities of identities and affiliations, the project has tried to go beyond a sometimes debilitating “nation-state” analytical framework, underscoring instead transnational and cross-regional encounters highlighted through “diasporic readings.”

My Wiko presentation, meanwhile, focused on another chapter that forms part of my book project, particularly the linguistic aspect, entitled “The Question of Judeo-Arabic: Nation, Displacement, and the Linguistic Imaginary.” Over the past few decades, a new field has emerged revolving around “Jewish Languages,” resulting in claims, especially within Jewish Studies, for the existence of a separate “Judeo-Arabic” language. My presentation asked: What is Judeo-Arabic language? What is its status? Is it really a language distinct from Arabic, or just one more variation along a spectrum of Arabic vernaculars? How should we narrate its genealogy? Is the name coterminous with a “natural language” dating back to the Arabic-speaking Jews in pre-Islamic Arabia and subsequently reinforced with the spread of Islam? Or should the term be traced back to the emergence of the post-*Haskala* (Jewish Enlightenment) academic field of Judaic Studies in the West? To put it differently, was the name “Judeo-Arabic” used by Jewish writing/speaking subjects over millennia to differentiate their dialect/language from co-regionist dialects/languages? In other words, is it an autonym, or did the appellation only appear as part of a taxonomy of linguistic communities, as objects of investigation within the academic meeting ground of Semitic/Oriental and Hebraic/Judaic studies? What is the presumed relation to its closely neighboring vernaculars and distant linguistic kin? Is it analogous to the relation between German and Yiddish, a “Jewish language”? Or, is it merely another form of Arabic? What is the role of the script/speech distinction in relation to the definition? What historical and intellectual currents

shaped the emergence of this paradigm? My hope was to inquire into the conceptual, ideational, and epistemic frames undergirding the discourse about “Judeo-Arabic” and the related notion of “the Arab-Jew.” I tried to expose the complex and ambivalent positionality about the conjoining of “the Jewish” and “the Arab,” suggesting that discourses about Judeo-Arabic have come to allegorize the clash between Jewish and Arab national imaginaries.

During this period at Wiko, I especially appreciated having the time to research the work of Jewish Orientalist scholars, such as S.D. Goitein and Joshua Blau, who received their education in German-speaking spaces and who wrote on the subject of Arab Jews. The year away from the U.S. was also a time of intense concern about the state of democracy as co-implicated in the deeply engrained construction of race. I was privileged to participate in the panel that examined this issue in its *longue durée*, facilitated by the Three Cultures Forum and titled: “Systematizing ‘Race’: Practices and Theories in an Emerging Modern World.” Here, I had the opportunity to present another dimension of my work over the years, carried out with my partner and sometimes co-author, Robert Stam: the formation of racial theories in conjunction with Eurocentric epistemology; the linked discourses about the Reconquista and the Conquista, i.e., the connections between the two 1492s as an ideological apparatus hostile to Jews and Muslims that was then extended to the indigenous peoples of the Americas and later to enslaved Africans. In my contribution, I stressed the paradoxes of the Enlightenment as an idea traveling to colonized spaces, thus shaping tensions and dilemmas about negotiating “the universal” and “the particular.” I found it especially important, at this historical conjuncture, to address the subterranean continuities between anti-Semitism and Islamophobia, as constituted in modernity through Orientalist theorization of “the Jew” and “the Arabs.”

Thanks to Wiko I made immense progress, completing most of a draft of the manuscript. Being freed from teaching responsibilities, while also enjoying the weekly Zoom seminars, was an amazing gift. We also took full advantage of the exceptional library services, which, with great serendipity, hunted down key books in English, Arabic, Hebrew, French, Portuguese, and Spanish. The fellowship also allowed me to make the final touches on the preface to a collection of my essays just published in French entitled: *Colonialité et Ruptures: Écrits sur les figures juives arabes* (texts selected and introduced by Joëlle Marelli and Tal Dor and translated by Marelli, Lux, 2021).

My deep gratitude to the Wiko team again for the warm and generous hospitality with which we were welcomed, and for all the visible and invisible labor that went into guaranteeing a superb stay during an exceptionally challenging year.