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Lucille Cairns. *Francophone Jewish Writers: Imagining Israel*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015.

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Abstract

Review of Lucille Cairns. *Francophone Jewish Writers: Imagining Israel*. Liverpool: Liverpool UP, 2015. x + 310 pp.

Keywords

Jewish, Israel, Palestine, Mizrahi, Ashkenazi, Sephardi, French, literature, France, affect

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Francophone Jewish Writers focuses on Jewish authors writing about Israel—as a trope, but also as “affect”—using French either as a mother-tongue or as a second language. Cairns looks at twenty-seven Jewish authors, writing both from France and from within Israel within the period of 1965 to 2012. She offers an inventory-style study that concisely, yet meticulously takes account of how certain themes reappear across the corpus of her study. Cairns’s feat is to take an incredibly delicate and volatile topic and write about it in a superbly objective way. Whereas most studies of Israeli politics focus on Ashkenazi Jewish communities, Cairns is careful to consider what Israel means also to and for Jews of Sephardi and Mizrahi backgrounds, in Israel and in France. Moreover, Cairns identifies the important role that non-Jewish francophone communities and political actors play in shaping the highly emotional landscapes that condition what is meant by “Israel.” Notably, she examines the influence of the Moroccan monarchy, Palestinians in France, and the French left. Cairns brilliantly orchestrates these various components in such a way that both knowledgeable and less informed readers gain insight into the fraught affective forces that undergird how Israelis understand themselves from the inside, on the one hand, and how non-Israelis perceive Israel from the outside. And most importantly—or perhaps most refreshingly—Cairns is to be commended for not taking a side: that is, she presents the reader with an engaging, but scientifically motivated study.

One of the book’s greatest contributions to the fields of contemporary Arab, French, Islamic, Jewish, Mediterranean, and Middle Eastern Studies is to fill in the blank between two diametrically opposite relational situations: on the one hand, the seemingly innocuous complicity between France and Israel in the decades immediately following the Second World War and, on the other, a composite “anti-Israeli bias” in the French media (197), “within one restricted but highly powerful part of the French political class – its diplomatic service” (205), and more generally “in the French left” (206). Cairns’s study also suggests that such anti-Israeli attitudes in France have trickled down to even elementary school “new-style history textbooks,” pulling out citations illustrative of such animosity on the part of the French educational system (214). Illustrating this phenomenon are the experiences of several Israeli fictional protagonists who travel to France for their studies and become surprised and offended by the anti-Israeli sentiment that they perceive in their highschool and university textbooks.

Cairns’s inclusion of writers of various Jewish origins (Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and Sephardi) who write in French is one of the most exciting aspects of the book. Jean-Luc Allouche and Ami Bouganim are two novelists whose work Cairns’s study features. According to Cairns, their novels offer a different story of Israel,

one which presents a more fluid, “boundary-crossing potential of Israeli identities as part of a larger set of Mediterranean positionalities” (105), wherein the Levantism represented by notably Bouganim’s texts might even “be used as a conceptual tool to queer Israeli ‘identity’” (104). Despite Cairns’s enthusiasm for the potential of how a certain Mizrahi-informed Levantism might open up both affective and conceptual mindscapes for imagining Israel, her analysis also reveals two obstacles to such a cosmopolitan aspiration. The first stumbling block is of an intra-Jewish order: Cairns’s study examines the controversial role that compromises unity among Jews of different credences and histories within Israel. Notably, she asks who can lay claim to the experience of the Shoah? How does the Shoah inform identity-making between Ashkenazi Jews (who have experienced it themselves or via immediate circles of intimacy) and Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews (who for the most part have not)? The second major impediment to the realization of Israeli cosmopolitanism is its polemical political relationship to the Occupied Territories. That is, many of the francophone Jewish authors featured in Cairns’s study dream of an Arab-Jewish complicity. Yet as Cairns notes, most such literary representation of Arab-Israeli friendship consists of an unrealistic “fantasized fraternity” (190), as in the case of Olivia Rosenthal’s *Les Fantaisies spéculatives de J.H. le sémite* (‘The Speculative Fantasies of J.H. the Semite,’ 2005).

Having now read Cairns’s categorization of literary production in French by Jews about Israel, I hope, as a scholar interested in theories of cosmopolitanism (i.e. Édouard Glissant, Seloua Luste Boulbina), to read more about some of the concepts Cairns only glossed over: the notion of Levantism as a form of queering Israel; the function of literary aesthetics in the works of authors who dominate her discussions, notably Jean-Luc Allouche, Nathalie Azoulay, and Ami Bouganim; affective theory and how it relates to “bodily activity” (5) (how for example, practices of spirit possession notably in Dybbuk, but also Aslai and Zar traditions might inform Israeli literary aesthetics). Finally, given Cairns’s incisive expertise on literary fiction it would be wonderful to see her further engage with books that came out at the same time or after hers, and which offer interesting points of dialogue: *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* by Ethan B. Katz (Harvard UP, 2015), which identifies actual historical moments of complicity between Arabs and Jews, as opposed to the ones fantasized in the novels that Cairns studied; or, *Being Contemporary: French Literature, Culture, and Politics Today* (Liverpool UP, 2016), edited by Lia Brozgal and Sara Kippur, in which there are quite a few essays (notably by Maurice Samuels and Henry Rousso) that deal with the complex dynamics between, on the one hand, French intellectuals’ reticence to “repent” as regards both Vichy and colonialism and, on the other hand, Israel’s role in such an affective space that wants to deny and/or move on.

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