Seeds of Doubt

Constructing a Sephardi Identity

by Sandra Haar

À partir d'anecdotes, d'événements historiques et de réflexions personnelles, l'auteure examine l'identité sépharade (nord-africaine) dans le contexte arabe, juif et africain. En tant que femme d'origine sépharade et ashkénaze, l'auteure parle des complications de se développer une identité personnelle tout en réfléchissant sur les origines du peuple juif.

A radio show I listen to on Tuesday nights on the community radio station in Toronto is called "There was, there was not." It features "music from Southern Europe, West Asia and North Africa, with a special focus on Arabic music" and occasionally interviews on political issues. The host, Nada el-Yassir, explains her show's title like this: "Stories from the Arab world often begin 'There was, there was not,' planting a seed of doubt in the mind of the listener." Through this form, I call into question my mother's/my own identity.

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Perhaps, it should be enough to say that I am Jewish. On the thin surface layer of reality, my mother would have insisted it so. But even as a girl I could make sense of the other truths, that the surface reality hid and protected. This is my dilemma. One part of my Jewish identity is seen to be definitive of "Jewishness"; the other is ignored or derided. The stories I am about to tell are my attempt to reassert my Sephardic identity, to trace its history, to insist on the place of that history in and among other histories and realities.

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My extended family, in Canada, was my mother's, the Sephardic family. When everyone's schedule coincided, and one of the women could organize it, the families got together. There were three, four, sometimes even five, families. My mother, Yvonne; her cousin Hélène; her other cousin Madeleine. Her cousin (and Hélène's brother) Maurice could not always be counted on to show up, especially after he divorced. The fifth family, not so crucial to the group, was the brother of Hélène's husband Henri. The main coincidence was that we all lived within an hour and a half drive from each other: Toronto, Hamilton, Oakville. Even so, we seemed to always be driving to Oakville or Hamilton. There were various reasons for this: Hélène's parents, *Oncle* Marcel and *Tante* Rose, who didn't like to travel; and Madeleine's bigger house. The gatherings were always on Sundays. Hélène, Rose, and Madeleine baked a lot. The men were assessed by their dedication to this family grouping. Maurice didn't care, causing his parents a lot of grief; Albert (Madeleine's husband) slept in, and more than once came down the stairs of his own house grumpy and in pajamas. Henri was doting, and therefore, perfect. My own father Isaac was dependable, but somewhat less than perfect, because of his difference.

After the meal, we would all sit and talk, with pastries and tea. Everyone talked animatedly. Every so often someone, usually Henri, would stop, noticing that my father wasn't included, and insist that everyone speak in English. They made the effort, for a few minutes, but soon reverted to the language more familial, more intimate, habitual. My father said that it was fine, he could understand a little of the French language anyway, and slipped in and out of listening, always at the outer edge of this circle of talk and family. It would have been out of place for him to enter the conversations completely, and he could not have. Within this family, all of whom were Egyptian Jews, my father was different. Jewish, yes, but Ashkenazic, from Poland.

I was the oldest of the cousins, the third cousins, but we just said "cousins." My mother's mother was one of eight children, but my mother had but one brother, who lived in France since the expulsion from Egypt. Sometimes I played with my cousins; sometimes I talked with the adults. Then there was the time David told his mother, Hélène, that she was an Arab. Probably he said this to be shocking, daring. In her reaction, a swift refutation, and David's glee at provoking her, I could see that Hélène shared the same opinion as my mother on this question.

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My mother and her cousin Hélène came to Canada in 1956 on student visas. Yvonne was 21 years old. The same year, in Egypt, 10,000 Jews were stripped of their citizenship and

expelled. Some Jews were killed or imprisoned. Two years later, my mother's family was expelled. They were dispossessed, given 72 hours to carry their belongings out of Egypt. Valuables were confiscated at the border, so members of my mother's family paid other (non-Jewish) Egyptians to carry these items—necklaces, jewels—out for them. They arranged to meet outside: Italy, France, Switzerland. In certain instances they never saw these carriers again. It was a risk.

The Egyptian government commenced a program of the "Arabization" of Egypt, expelling residents without Egyptian citizenship. My mother was an Egyptian citizen, as was her mother. But Jews were not part of the new program, not Arabs.

From 1948 to 1967, the year of my birth, the Egyptian government carried out a systematic program to eliminate Jews from the state. First the Jews were thrown out of government jobs and positions, then children were not permitted to attend state schools, professionals lost their licenses to practice, then Jews could not own the principal share in any company. Activists and community leaders were imprisoned without trials on the accusation that they were Zionists. The Egyptian government commenced a program of the "Arabization" of Egypt, expelling residents without Egyptian citizenship, for the most part Armenians and Greeks. Before 1958, my mother was an Egyptian citi-zen, as was her mother and her mother before that. But Jews were not part of the new program, not Arabs.

In 1975, when I was eight, I chose to do a school project on Egypt. I learned about the ancient history. On the red cover, I traced in black felt tip marker the outline of the continent of Africa, and placed in position the shape of modern Egypt, a piece of shiny silver tin foil. None of the recent history was part of my school project. Twenty years later I am telling the story that I have only recently learned.

Yvonne had applied for landed immigrant status in Canada. A week before she was due for the hearing, her student visa expired. (It was after 1958.) She went with her cousin to the Egyptian consulate in Canada with a story. She and her cousin had just finished their school term and wanted to take a short vacation to see the United States before returning home. I'm sure Yvonne did the talking. I can see my mother at 23, beautiful, eager, charming the Consul with her tale of two good schoolgirls asking for a short vacation. He agreed. My mother told me the story with the same irrepressible energy I imagine took her to see the Consul. He extended the visas; to do otherwise would be unimaginable. There is no part of the story in which Yvonne says, "And if he hadn't...." I like that. If he hadn't, my mother would have had to go back to Egypt, where she could not return.

The Jewish community of Alexandria in which my mother was born and grew up was an elite community. Her world of private schools, beaches, parties, was demarcated, always with the awareness that it could be encroached upon by the others, the general population of the city and its streets—poor, "dirty," Arabs. The history of the elite in Egypt follows from the history of colonization. As the French colonized North Africa during the nineteenth century, there emerged a class of citizens who began to speak French and who acted as an intermediary class between the Arabs and the French. My mother's family were merchants in the cotton trade between southern Egypt and the fabric industry of France. They dressed, spoke, and behaved as the French did. As in other colonized countries, there was a correlation between class, education, skin colour, and language. Yet the older traditions would sometimes resurface. My mother points out in a family photograph from the 1950s, a man who is still wearing a *tarboush,* in the Arab custom. My mother was educated in schools established by the French and later the British, where the teachers came from Europe and tests were sent to either France or England to be graded (this part always amazed me).

A few years ago, I ran into Maurice at a cafe. At some point, he mentioned the schooling they received in Egypt. He was critical of the fact that they had learned the history of France and nothing of Egypt. Imagine, he said, we were living in this country, and we knew nothing about it! My mother remembered the same, but added, we did learn something of the *geography* of Egypt. Yvonne started reading a book last year about the activities of the British in Egypt. Now I know, she said, why they hated the British so much. She still does not consider herself an Arab. I didn't think to ask Maurice what he thought of that. I was just amazed that he had an interest in Egypt.

For the Jews of North Africa, of the Islamic lands, entrance into the colonial structure provided liberation from the anti-Semitic laws and customs and an avenue to European modernity. These laws and customs included mandatory dress or markers on clothing, public humiliations, and differential civil rights that varied in time and from place to place. Following the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, the Jews of Islamic countries, like those of Christian nations, would be automatically linked (in the minds of nationalists) in allegiance to the Zionist nation. Cultural intermingling existed concurrently with prohibitions, special laws and taxes, and codes of dress that paralleled the situation for Jews in the Christian countries of Europe. In recent centuries, the situation worsened.

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During one of the wars between Israel and the Arab countries (it must have been 1967), my father was work-

ing as a general contractor in Hull. A co-worker who knew Isaac's wife was Egyptian asked if there was conflict between him and his wife. I can see again my father's frustration as he tells the story, why this man couldn't understand that his wife is Jewish and so is he, and therefore, for him, there was no issue whatsoever. He is infuriated at his co-worker's inability to comprehend, even to ask such a question.

My father and mother were married in Montreal in 1964. In arranging the documents for the marriage, the rabbi accepted my father's Jewishness without question, but had serious concerns about my mother's identity. This was an Ashkenazic rabbi in an Ashkenazic synagogue. Montreal's Sephardic community was, at this point, still very small. And, my mother did not have a Hebrew name. What allayed the suspicion of the rabbi was Yvonne's recitation of her parents' names: Esther and Alfred Isaac. The wedding could proceed. I am remin-ded of an Ashkenazic friend whose community would have used the term "mixed marriage" to describe this.

I am the only child. The burden of telling rests on me.

Many years later, I participate in an "alternative *shabbat*" at a conference. Each woman goes to the table where a vase of water rests beside the thick stalks of assorted flowers. We each take one flower and, stating our matrilineage, place it into an ever-growing bouquet. From the beginning, I can feel my apprehension at the revelation of difference. I take my turn: "Sandra Frida Haar, daughter of Yvonne Cori, daughter of Esther Mendoza, daughter of Farha Salama." How can I not notice the quizzical stares of some, the obliviousness of others? With the simple recitation of names, we have collectively formed a colourful bouquet, and within the ritual there is no space for an explanation to the possible question: Who are you, with names like that?

Another story comes from a time my parents took me along to a Jewish group they belonged to. Because I was the only child, I also had the burden of following my parents around to assorted events that changed as their interests did. But all of them were interminable. I sat on hard chairs or dragged my feet and whined about leaving at the antique auctions, the Persian carpet stores, the social groups. One such group raised money for a school for the disabled in Israel; its members also organized speakers and events. I first saw the pictures of piles of shoes and hair when the group invited a man who had taken slides of these in a museum to show them. It was during one of these meetings that a man called my mother an Arab, or maybe he asked if she were, as if teasing her, as if something was wrong with being an Arab. My mother was unable to respond, humiliated by his leering statement. I stood, I listened, and absorbed.

Within Israel, ethnic groups are designated by the state as "European" and "Oriental" (which is sometimes replaced by "African" and "Asian"), placing the groups in political relation to one another. Within the Middle East, to do this is also to draw upon the power relations that are the legacy of colonialism. Ashkenazi Jews have become "the Europeans," Sephardic, "the Orientals." So, the divisions of Europe, Asia, and Africa have been reproduced within the Jewish state, as within the Jewish world of the diaspora. In a Jewish context, my mother becomes the Arab to the Europeanness of the Ashkenazi. However, among Sephardim there is another division: one of class, education, language, and skin colour. My mother's family would not exist in the same conceptual "place" with most Sephardim in Israel.

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Placing Sephardic identity and history within an overall Arab or Middle Eastern history, is an ongoing, but embattled, project into which I catch glimpses through a book, a film....

At the Arabic Book Center in San Francisco, I pick up *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture.* The book seems to be the post-colonial, *cultural* project my mother was not taught in school. I chat with the guy minding the store. He wants to know my interest in the book. I tell him something of it. He calls it a personal quest, a bit dismissively. It's the best kind, I reply, defensively, defiantly. He seems rather pleased and intrigued that my mother is an Egyptian Jew. He is half-Indonesian. I decide against asking him about his interest in Arab politics. Probably I would just disagree with him, given how often political nationalism (both Zionism and Arab nationalism) has superseded an appreciation of the nuances of history.

These nuances take place at the backdrop of, indeed run counter to, an often overwhelming political reality. The difficult position I am placed in with respect to Middle East politics as a Jew with roots in that region causes me apprehension about discussion of Arab/Jewish politics. In these cases, "both"—Arab and Jew—is a contradiction and as such indicates a difference from the "Arab" position (which assumes that you are not also a Jew). I am told, reminded, over and over: regardless of how similar a Jewish culture is to its surround-

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One day, back in my own city, Toronto, I ran in out of the cold rain to buy a falafel just in time to hear the man behind the counter say to some folks in the line before me, "They like our food, but they don't like us." During their ensuing conversation, I pieced the story together. The man was referring to an Ashkenazic Jew with whom he had had a (heated?) discussion just prior. The folks in line, also Arabs, agreed with him, gesturing and verbalizing their assent. I was thinking, *Who is they? us? whose food is our food? who should I identify with?* I said nothing until I am paying for my falafel. Finally, I tell him that I grew up eating "this food"; to him I also say, *My mother is a Jew from Egypt.* I don't know if he understood my intention.

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Sephardic Jews are those Jews that trace their origins to Spain before 1492. This is a standard definition. Following the expulsion of Jews from Spain in 1492, some migrated northward into Holland and later England, while the majority settled in the lands of the Mediterranean. Middle Eastern and North African Jews, generally, have been described as "Sephardic." The origins of Sephardim begin at the point of exile from the Iberian Peninsula, which had been reconquered by Christian forces. Thus began another diaspora within the overall Jewish diaspora (70 AD, from Judea/Palestine).

Moving out from that singular point of exile, that event of expulsion, when along with three million Moors, 300,000 Jews—those who had not converted to Christianity (whether in name or in practice)—took their belongings (what had not already been plundered), and left, by order of Queen Isabella. Also moving out from that historical and geographic point, are Jewish communities scattered throughout the Christian and Islamic world, consisting as well of Jews already living in these regions. Leading up to this point, these Jews were existing in a society that was culturally and politically dominated by the Moors of Africa and the Islamic religion, and marked by the coexistence of Christians, Muslims, and Jews. For the majority of Jews resettling after the Expulsion, this African/Arab/Islamic context remained consistent.

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In tracing the lines of influence, I am led not only to an examination of Arab/Jewish relationships, but to an awareness of the complexities of the Arab/African relationship and where "Jewish" fits into that. As difficult as it is to bring together the strands of "Arab" and "Jewish," the African influence has been even more effectively denied and removed from consideration in popular and academic discourse. I am trying, here, to recover some fragments.

The Expulsion was part of an overall attempt on the part of powerful forces in Christian Europe to remove all traces of African, Islamic, and Jewish influence from society. And while African scholarship would have inestimable importance in the European "Renaissance," its antecedents were denied. Jan Carew notes in "The End of Moorish Enlightenment and the Beginning of the Columbian Era":

> The burning of thousands of books and the expulsion of the Moors and Jews was a terrible loss to the Renaissance, although this is seldom acknowledged by Eurocentric scholars. And the glaring irony of it all is that the Renaissance would not have been possible without the seminal cultural infusions of Moorish and Jewish scholarship. (3)

The Arab, Jewish, African influence on Southern Europe became despised and submerged whether this influence was evident culturally or physically.

The Arab and African influence emerged through our bodies, though not in uniform ways. However, the specificities of our bodies were eclipsed by the stereotype of *the* Jewish body. (A good source on this is *The Jew's Body* by Sander Gilman.) In Europe, Ashkenazim were/are thought to be identifiable by the (Arab and African) signifiers of the "frizzy (Jewish) hair" and the "hooked (Jewish) nose," among other traits. In pseudoscientific circles Ashkenazim were stigmatized, thus, as "carriers" of African blood, and as "impure." Many fictions are created by what we look like, through family and through race. In *Mein Kampf,* Hitler was very clear: *The Jews are responsible for bringing Africans into the Rhineland.* He didn't mean it literally; it was an issue of race, of blood. Still, stories are told to emphasize certain "bloodlines," and others are moved to different locations.

I have pictures of my mother at 17, 18, 21. Even now she appears to me as radiant and glamorous as a '50s Hollywood star. But this was not entirely her perception. I was most affected by the familiarity of my mother's body: in the tub, where I might have been called in to get her a towel; getting dressed, without doors closed, pulling on stockings, buttoning up a blouse, spraying the perfume sent by her sister-in-law from Paris. The parts of her body that received anxious attention, I could not find fault in. It is only recently that I've understood these parts, these sites, as most closely identifiable with an Egyptian/African body type, most divergent from the "European" ideal of appearance. Her hair, still wet, was

pulled straight and taped; lipstick applied narrower than her lipline, most often her mouth kept tight and closed; skirts and pants chosen for their minimizing cut. Nowadays, I do the opposite—out of pride and also to look more like her.

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I didn't grow up with "Sephardic" as a primary self-identity; I had no hesitation identifying as Ashkenazi; the culture, history, and philosophy were mine. This has as much to do with the dominance of Ashkenazim as *the* Jews (in North America) as with the particulars of my family history and dynamics within it. Add to that the virtual absence of Sephardic cultural and political reference points available to me. Also, within popular stereotype, I "look" Jewish, that is to say Ashkenazic. Because I am not seen as "Sephardic" in Jewish circles unless I verbalize that identity, I could ignore that fact in a way that if, say, my skin was a darker colour or I looked more like my mother, I could do less easily. I know which of my features are from which "side," but no one outside my family knows that. After being addressed in Portuguese on the streets of my neighbourhood, then later in Italian, I also know that what I "look like" is dependent on context and the projected fantasies of others. Sometimes I oblige the misperception; other times, I object strenuously. Some days I play with percentages; it's an ongoing joke I have with myself—35 per cent Arab, 30 per cent Italian, 15 per cent African, 100 per cent Jewish (of course).

Mostly, it calls into question for me how an identity is structured. Who is part of it? (Or how is it part of one?) In her essay "Oxala," Ana C. P. dos Santos speaks of defining "the Portuguese" (of whom she is one):

> [D]o I mean people who speak Portuguese, or the inhabitants of Portugal, or people born in that country? Are the Jewish people expelled, killed, or "converted" in the sixteenth century inclu-ded? What about the Africans and Asians from Portuguese ex-colonies who now live in Portugal? What about their children? What about medieval serfs, who were considered part of the landowner's property and inherited along with it? ... and so on. (86)

When I'm asked, Where are you from? I want to answer, How far back do you want to go? Egypt, Poland, Turkey, Italy, Spain ... and beyond that? The "origins" of a diasporic, migratory people necessitates the long answer. Few stay around to listen. In and of ourselves, Jews are a mixed people. As often as not, Jews deny this, and cling to our apocryphal unity, even though it should be clear that though we might have started in the same place, we've adapted, assimilated, and acculturated. As a collectivity and as individuals we embody layers upon layers of "mixing."

I grew up hearing cries of *basta!* and *santa maria!* (and the half-whisper *la polizia!*) from my mother. I revelled in the power of these secret words that formed part of a repressed history, existing below the surface of the everyday. The Spanish words transformed into Judeo-Spanish, Ladino, and carried across Southern Europe, across history, as we went into Turkey. I remember her baking a meatloaf with a cooked egg in the middle of it, and wanting not the ends, but the middle with its concentric circles of yellow, white, and brown, a *polpetone,* that was, like her surname, Cori, evidence of the Italian history. Layered onto that is the French, the most recent and therefore dominant addition. *Comment ça se fait que tu parles le français?* The way a question can be asked in French: "*comment ça se fait que...,*" "how does it happen that..." asks for a story, a history. A history of the interplay of dominant and suppressed cultures. And all of these pieces of culture from different places, and from the same place.

Being mixed, that is, from two people having separate, specific identities, offers a unique perspective. "Ashkenazi" will never be synonymous with "Jewish" for me because I've always had another perspective. It's a perspective that permeates my understanding of what comprises "Jewish": I'm always aware of the often partial, inaccurate use of "Jewish" to refer to Ashkenazim only. Being "mixed" has also prevented me from rushing wholeheartedly, nostalgically into "my past history." Any attempts are cautiously tempered with the knowledge that it is a partial history. It is at these moments of caution, suspicion, doubt as well as insight and perspective that I feel "both"—Sephardi and Ashkenazi—and not (as is more often the case) one or the other. Like others, I seek to transform this tattered fringe of the Jewish community that I hang on to into a place of strength, connecting errant threads from other places, cultures, and traditions as well—those of mine and those of others.

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Recently my mother called me up and this was her message: "I'm reading a very interesting book. I wonder if you've come across it. *The Jews of*

Arab Lands in Modern Times. Well, for me it's fascinating. All the things I didn't know." Some months later, I see the book. It's placed prominently on the coffee table in my mother's and father's living room. Within an hour, Yvonne's cousins have arrived. This time, she is the one who has organized the family. Everyone has come, and as all sit around, conversing in different small groupings, the heavy book gets passed from hand to hand.

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