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North African Jewish Heritage, Interrupted Transmission, and Return

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Abstract:

This article examines contemporary curatorial practices in France as contested sites where North African Sephardic Jewish cultural heritage intersects with broader questions of memory, transmission, and return. It is based on an ethnographic analysis of four case studies: an academic meeting in Cassis in 2019, two exhibitions at the Palais de la Porte Dorée and the Institut du Monde Arabe in 2022, the grassroots Dalâla festival in Paris in 2023, and the 2024–2025 'Revenir' exhibition at the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseille. The article explores how 'interrupted transmission' shapes intergenerational creative memory work among Maghrebi Jewish communities and individuals in France. The study contributes to critical heritage studies by illuminating how minority communities navigate state-sanctioned representations while creating alternative spaces for cultural transmission. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, Marianne Hirsch's theory of post-memory, and David Berliner's work on heritage temporality, the analysis reveals how different curatorial modes – from institutional to grassroots – negotiate the complexities of colonial legacies, displacement trauma, and cultural reclamation. Central to the analysis is the examination of 'return' – both the physical journey to an ancestral homeland and the imaginative process of cultural reconnection – as an agential mode of self-affirmation for French-born Jews of Maghrebi descent. I argue that effective engagement with Maghrebi Jewish memory requires multilayered approaches that balance institutional resources with community agency, moving beyond binary frameworks of assimilation/marginalisation or a Jewish/Arab division.

Key words: Sephardic heritage, post-memory, interrupted transmission, museum curation, Maghrebi Jewish-Muslim interaction

This article takes the space of contemporary curation in France as a contested site where community, regional, national, and supranational representations of specifically North African Sephardic Jewish cultural heritage intersect and sometimes collide, often creating tensions between institutional narratives and lived experiences in the ethnicising, postcolonial context of contemporary France (Amselle 2011). Within academic, museum, and festival contexts of curation I ask, first, how and what components of North African/Maghrebi language and memory are transmitted intergenerationally. Second, I investigate how this pertains to the complexities both of wider geopolitical dynamics of conflict between France and North Africa and in Israel-Palestine and of intra-familial Maghrebi Jewish memory. By 'interrupted transmission' I refer to the disruption of cultural knowledge, practices, and memories across generations due to displacement, trauma, and historical ruptures – processes that have profoundly shaped Maghrebi Jewish experiences through both exogenous discrimination and endogenous interruption. Furthermore, the interrupted transmission of Maghrebi Jewish experiences spotlights the

question of intergenerational return, that is the going 'back' to the Maghreb a generation or two later. Such returns have become increasingly salient as an agential mode of self-affirmation for French-born Jews of Maghrebi descent as the generations that once lived in the Maghreb pass on. My examination draws on three theories. First, Svetlana Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia distinguishes between restorative nostalgia that reinstates past social orders and reflective nostalgia that critically engages with multiple pasts (Boym 2001). Second, Marianna Hirsch's concept of post-memory helps us understand how trauma and displacement are inherited by generations who did not directly experience these events (Hirsch 2012). Third, David Berliner's work on heritage and time explores how the past is actively constructed and negotiated in the present (Berliner 2020). Together, these frameworks illuminate how interrupted transmission operates across generations. I apply them to each case study to identify their distinct approach to curating fragmented histories.

The substantive material of this article takes us through different modes of curation at academic, institutional, and grassroots levels that seek to build and explore narratives of northern African Sephardic Jewish life and migratory trajectories to France, often alongside or in resonance with trajectories of Muslim Maghrebi populations (Silverstein 2018). This is a subject seldom examined in French historiography (Morin 2022) because of how it deals with different French citizenship statuses in the pre-independence and immediate post-independence period. The four case studies build on each other, laying out different curatorial modes of analysing forms of intercommunal Judaeo-Muslim Maghrebi memory space and overlapping interruptions between Jewish and colonial memories and historiographies. First, I analyse the intense debate that took place at an academic and artistic retreat held in Cassis, close to Marseille, in 2019 on the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim interaction in North African (Maghrebi) popular culture. Second, I explore the exhibition 'Juifs d'Orient' (Jews of the Orient) that took place at the Institut du Monde Arabe in central Paris in 2022 and the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration exhibition 'Juifs et musulmans de l'Empire à l'Hexagone' (Jews and Muslims: from Empire to Hexagon [France]). Third, I consider the 2023 Dalâla festival to promote North African Jewish cultures that was marked by intergenerational complexity. Last, I examine the 2025 exhibition 'Revenir' held at the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem) with a focus on the notion of 'return' in relation to mental and physical return to Algeria. By examining these four cases in chronological order, I trace a line between academic discourse, institutional exhibitions and grassroots initiatives, revealing how different curatorial approaches engage with the challenges of interrupted transmission.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate a multiplicity of public representations of Sephardic cultural heritage. In each case I discuss the central

geographical locales of the curatorial mode in question (for example, Algiers, Rabat, Paris) and the forms of heritage-making in operation and their reception, reflecting critically on both academic and curatorial actors and considering how they inspire one another. The analysis draws on my active and publicly engaged work in France. In the last seven years I have organised and taken part in Sephardic cultural productions that often intersect with Maghrebi Muslim productions. My research and involvement include several public engagement-type research projects with Dalâla, particularly in the production of animated films for the Palais de la Porte Dorée. Following Hadj Miliani's practice-based methodology, I proceed as both participant observer and creator, organising and producing while simultaneously analysing (Miliani 2010). Such a method is of vital importance for a diachronic perspective to emerge.

Contested historiographies: Algerian Jewish memory in postcolonial France

In this section, I first provide a broad overview of the contemporary literature pertaining to memory, decolonial/postcolonial theory, and Jewish Studies with particular reference to North African and Sephardic cultures. I then spotlight the notion of 'return' as key to both the burgeoning interest in contemporary Sephardic Studies in its relationship to Middle East Studies and as a way to reclaim histories and historiographies intergenerationally despite the interruptive power of traumatic stories of departure and the broader Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) context of Jewish exile from the Arab and Islamic world.

Algerian Jewish historiography is central to constructions of Sephardic stories in France and to the vexed political and family-level dynamics of postcolonial memory culture in Europe at large. This is because Algeria was long in cultural and legal proximity to France. One hundred and thirty-two years passed from the French invasion of 1830 to Algerian decolonisation in 1962. This period spans French conquest, war, expropriation and settlement, juridical integration, and the extremely bloody war of independence. For nearly a century during that period, the three 'French' administrative regions – Constantine (East), Algiers (Centre), and Oran (West) – of l'Algérie française (French colonial Algeria) were considered an integral, legal part of the 'French metropole' (the imperial term for the present-day national territory of France). Jewish populations, both *megorashim* and *toshavim* (Everett 2026),[1] were present in Algeria long before the French. However, via the Crémieux Decree the French state made all Jewish populations from the

1 *Megorashim* are Jewish populations expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the fourteenth century; *toshavim* are indigenous, often Berber- or Tamazight-speaking, Jewish populations already present in the Algerian territory before the Sephardic expulsions.

most populous urban territories in northern Algeria French citizens in 1870. Jewish historiography in the Algerian territories is therefore entangled in a contemporary politics of precolonial indigeneity as a form of postcolonial minoritised legitimacy and retroactively labelled as one of those European populations from the north-eastern Mediterranean or Alsace-Lorraine that were settled in the Algerian territories by the French state and made French citizens but derogatorily called *pied-noirs* upon 'repatriation' to France. This dual bind marks the salience of Jewish Algerian historiographies in contemporary francophone colonial debates.

These historiographies manifest in museum curation practices as living memory of colonial Algeria fades and younger generations reinterpret them. This generational shift is set against a backdrop of intensive public debate on the decolonisation of public memory (Cooper 2022). Politically, this means the recognition of the crimes that the French empire committed, as in President Chirac's 1996 apology for French complicity in Jewish deportation or in the acknowledgement by Presidents François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron of the massacres and torture of fighters of the Algerian National Liberation Front in Sétif, Algeria, respectively. In France, this process is freighted by multiple ambivalences. At a macro level, these two levels of Orientialist discrimination – representational and ethno-religious – collide with contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics and global capital flows both in relation to ongoing French business interests, particularly in northern and western Africa, and culturally, or through soft power, via the Francophonie and Middle Eastern diplomacy as mediated by key links with the Gulf. At a micro level, these national and global pictures also collide with familial and community dynamics of memory transmission that are equally burdened by the application and revocation of French citizenship laws for Jewish populations.

In contemporary France, the history of Jewish Maghrebi subjugation, frustration, and racialisation (see Everett 2024) is less known than that of French collaborationism and deportation during the Second World War, that is, a deeply traumatic French memory of the Holocaust. The long-standing campaign by Serge Klarsfeld to bring the responsibility of the French state for collaborating with the Nazis into the open only began to bear fruit in 1995. It led to practices of memorialisation with engraved signs being placed at schools from which Jewish students had been deported to be murdered during the Second World War (Klarsfeld 1995). North African cultural heritage and its political complexities have found larger public attention at a much slower pace. And yet the Algerian Jewish story brings together these two dynamics – post-Holocaust and postcolonial memory culture – that profoundly mark the French political landscape today. The narrative of that story is multiple. In the public sphere it is recounted by Benjamin Stora, historian of Algeria and thinker of the postcolony (before this became a term), who held an important advisory role on Algerian matters under the administrations

of Presidents Hollande and Macron. Yet it is also recounted by former television pundit and popular history writer Éric Zemmour, today leader of one of France's most populist right wing political forces. Both men are of Algerian Jewish descent and have mobilised this position to argue for their (significantly different) understandings of French Algerian history. These competing interpretations create fundamental tensions that museum curators must navigate when representing Algerian Jewish experiences.

Benjamin Stora's (1994) understanding of the Algerian Jewish story is fundamentally hopeful in outlook and postcolonial in perspective. It highlights that the conception of a Judaeo-Christian French bulwark standing in Algeria against Islamic violence is a historical construct (see, more recently, Bessis 2025). He argues that though the imperial machine installed in Algeria since 1832 left significant traces on Jewish community life, it could not remove a deep bind these communities had to an indigenous Jewish Maghrebi past, a bind pointing to a strong, ongoing albeit submerged affective relationship (Stora 2006). In a personal conversation on postcolonial scholarship in the United States seeking to excavate Algerian Jewish histories (for example, Schreier 2010), Stora reflected that *his* work on memory and forgetting (Stora 1994) had been an epistemological precursor to that newer scholarship. In work that relates post-Holocaust memory to postcolonial memory, Michael Rothberg (2009) takes a similar approach. Drawing on Delbo and Sartre (Rothberg 2009: 145, 155), Rothberg posits the Holocaust as a moral reference point with which to denounce colonial inhumanity in Algeria. This finds a parallel in how Stora links up Algerian Jewish exile from France with the revocation of rights and citizenship during the Second World War and with an anti-imperialist Judaeo-Arab solidarity that developed in Algeria after that war (Stora 2006: 116–117; see also Le Foll-Luciani 2015 for a detailed account). If Zemmour's vision can be captured by the notion of a clash of civilisations, then Stora's underlines the possibilities of progressive humanism born out of shared (Algerian) suffering.

Theoretical framework: interrupted transmission, post-memory, and reflective nostalgia

Thinking through the prism of a traumatic Jewish diasporic condition in the former Soviet Union, Boym (2001) argues that fractured pasts can be embraced and nurtured productively. The ambiguity of displacement – from Russia for her, from Algeria for Stora and Zemmour – can nurture creative imaginaries (Boym 2001). Her notion of 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym 2001: 18) is not systematically regressive but nevertheless expresses a desire to look backwards in a time of accelerated change. Boyms's notion of reflective nostalgia provides a powerful platform for intergenerational proto- or post-nostalgia in France today. However, unlike Stora's experience of living

in Algeria or Zemmour's witnessing of the fallout of displacement from Algeria in peri-urban Paris, the intergenerational shift around memory and heritage cultures among French-born Jewish populations of Maghrebi descent since the 1980s not only uses memory as a creative resource but constitutes a Hirschian 'post-memory' vantage point, that is, it deals with memories that have been inherited or transmitted, not lived (Hirsch 2012).

Hirsch discusses how subsequent generations give form to reimagined and re-interpreted memory, focusing intangible cultural heritage such as photography, literature, and even graphic novels like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Hirsch 2012). Likewise, anthropologist Berliner (2020) has long explored the complex constructions of heritage through time, nostalgia, and the politics of memory, especially as they relate to objects shaped by colonial histories. He argues that the right to express diverse perspectives – the 'right to difference', as he puts it (Berliner 2020: 96) – is often in tension with forces that promote exclusivity and conservatism. This tension can undermine openness and lead to misunderstanding, anxiety, and a sense of loss. Berliner calls for a continued effort to unsettle fixed categories and to see the anthropologist as both translator and facilitator of meaningful dialogue. He advocates for a nuanced and sensitive approach that negotiates rights to difference in the face of social and political pressure. This process of translation and negotiation is complex. Dialogue – both intergenerational (intra-familial) and intercommunal (Maghrebi Jewish–Muslim) – does not always begin in mutual recognition; it may be preceded by resistance or rejection. Navigating this space often requires careful attention to positional and political complexities. Museum exhibitions, as we see in the cases that follow, become sites where these tensions between fixed categories and nuanced dialogue play out in material form.

The anthropological literature that has directly informed Maghrebi museum curation over the last three decades has problematised the complexities of changing memories, particularly of intangible cultural heritage. They have discussed in detail North African Jewish culinary, mythical, and musical transmission and their intergenerational and intercommunal overlaps. Since the late 1980s, Joëlle Bahloul has adopted the anthropology of food as a connective resource in memory co-construction. She has shown, particularly in her book *The Architecture of Memory* (Bahloul 1996), how transnational co-constructed memory can redefine patterns of conflict in the present; the architecture of her book pertains to her family's former house in Sétif, where an Algerian Muslim family resides today. In a bid to give a clearer understanding of the structures of community narrative, Majid Hannoum (2001), an anthropologist of poetry, nationhood, and discursive historical narratives, demonstrated the myth-making importance of a Maghrebi regional symbol of reconciliation, the eighth-century warrior princess la Kahina, and her elaboration and political appropriation over the centuries by different im-

perial and nationalist powers, Arab, French, and Israeli. Jonathan Glasser, in studies of Andalusi musical revivalism in Algeria (Glasser 2016) and France (Glasser forthcoming), shows similar consonant and dissonant Judaeo-Arab understandings and practices of musical heritage (for a historical perspective, see also Silver 2022). Andalusi music is a quintessentially Sephardic contribution to the Maghreb region's high culture.

In France itself, both as one of the key places of cultural production of Sephardic heritage and as a site of self-reflexive knowledge production, this intergenerational moment highlights Berliner's 'right to difference' and the importance of return to the Maghreb – conceptualised as both the physical journey back to an ancestral homeland and the imaginative process of cultural reclamation – allowing younger generations to engage with their heritage beyond simplistic nationalist frameworks. These journeys, both individual and collective, imagined and physical, function as forms of reflexive nostalgia. Through them processes of post-memory reclaim a plural Maghreb and keep alive the counter-discursive work of Bahloul, Hannoum, and Glasser, away from the historical and ideological binary of assimilation versus marginalisation or roseate versus lachrymose. Self-aware post-memory reclamation shifts over time; it does not attempt to prove nationalist credentials – Algerian, Israeli, or French – but is sensitive to the historical reasons for these inclinations at the level of the lived experience of parents and grandparents. Moreover, this post-memory is permeated with a broader Middle Eastern and North African perspective on memory and heritage in the region or what Michelle Campos et al. (2023) have termed the 'Middle East turn', which looks at the cross-region for a fuller picture.

Having established the theoretical framework of interrupted transmission, reflective nostalgia, and post-memory, I now turn to examine how these concepts manifest in practice through an analysis of four chronologically sequenced case studies. Each case represents a different curatorial mode – academic, institutional, and grassroots – that grapples with the complexities of transmitting fragmented Maghrebi Jewish heritage across generations with specific reference to the Judaeo-Arab cultural sphere (see Levy 2008; Hochberg 2010; Anidjar 2019; Gottreich 2020; Everett 2024). The discursive progression from scholarly debate to museum exhibition to community festival reveals how different approaches to curation either reproduce or challenge the ruptures in cultural transmission that characterise postcolonial minority experiences in France.

Case study 1: academic debate and imperial de-structuring in Cassis

In this first case study, I examine the deliberations at a meeting in Cassis in 2019 on the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim interaction in North African (Maghrebi) popular culture. This meeting was one of many that took place in prepa-

ration of an exhibition staged in 2022 at the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, also known as the Palais da la Porte Dorée, under the name 'Juifs et musulmans de l'Empire à l'Hexagone' (Jews and Muslims: from Empire to Hexagon [France]). These debates represent the academic foundation for curatorial approaches adopted subsequently. The discussions brought together artists, museum professionals, and researchers to navigate complex perspectives on Algerian Jewish memory. Held before the acceleration of conflict in Israel-Palestine but after the 2015 Paris attacks, the two-day gathering in Cassis centred on reconciling diverse historiographical approaches. Many of those whose scholarly work on Maghrebi Jewish dynamics I cite above were present.

Beyond the inclusion of Algeria as a key site for reconciliation and curation, the meeting in Cassis was also strongly angled towards giving voice to a new generation of Jewish artists of Maghrebi descent, including Jerusalemite singer Neta Elkayam, as instrumental to the production of North African Jewish culture at a time when those Jewish voices who had firsthand experience of the Maghreb were passing away. Language, music, and art were at the forefront of the deliberations. The importance of Maghrebi Judaeo-Arabic language (Darija, a North African variant of Arabic) firmly anchored the discussion and served to showcase the indigenous longevity and cultural entanglements of Algerian Jewish populations. Art was noted as a medium capable of expressing sentiments less jarring than words. The late Miliani contributed significantly to the discussion by raising questions about Orientalism within the French imaginary, as refracted through early twentieth-century Jewish musician-performers emerging during the Nahda (Arabic renaissance) movement. The Nahda put forward Arabic cultures as modern and integrative of religious culture, with theatre being a prominent form (Goodman 2013). Jewish artists played a significant role in this cultural shift, especially in local vernacular Arabic productions (Roth 1967).

Miliani's expertise in local Algerian cultural production, particularly Judaeo-Arabic music and theatre, revealed that these cultures were also influenced by Orientalist tropes. Miliani scrutinised a photograph of Edmond Nathan Yafil in Ottoman attire from the Mutrabiyya troupe (Fig. 1). Miliani questioned whether this was Yafil's typical dress given the fact that in newspapers from the same period performers would be wearing suits and hats indistinguishable from the Parisian urban attire of the time. Instead, he proposed, this garb was a form of self-Orientalisation used to market Arabic music to French audiences even in the 1920s, reflecting the performance of cultural identification. This analysis of self-Orientalisation reveals how curatorial representations must go beyond the level of the aesthetic to contend with the complexities of agential performativities for ends that are economic or geared towards prestige and fame.

The Cassis meeting further explored the role of Algerian Jewish historiography as a focal point for understanding French imperial de-structuring and the divide-and-rule strategy employed by the French Empire. Beyond the life cycle of the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition, curator and historian Mathias Dreyfus aimed to reintroduce this historical context through a mobile exhibit that would make a critical engagement in state education through local museums and schools.

Figure 1. Edmond Nathan Yafil in traditional garb. Source: Personal collection of Dr Naïma Yahi. Reprinted with the kind permission of Dr Naïma Yahi.

Central to the discussions on imperial de-structuring of society was the Crémieux Decree, a key legal artefact in the Algerian Jewish story that is fundamental to understanding Algeria's minoritised populations within colonial history. The decree – which was made a centrepiece of the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition – highlights the intricacies and ambiguities of post-memory perspectives. Dorian Bell (2018: 14), a historian and critical scholar, posits that the decree serves as a crucial dividing line in postcolonial French understandings of Jewish solidarity with indigenous movements, as it marked a pivotal shift from Judaeo-Islamic commonality to a Judaeo-Christian imperial legacy. He looks at the extensive debate between political activists and

thinkers such as Alain Finkielkraut and shows that they selectively use the decree as a pivot point from Judaeo-Islamic indigenous commonality to a Judaeo-Christian imperial legacy (Bell 2018: 279).[2] Leaning on Bell, in the meeting we discussed the degree to which antisemitism and antisemitic tropes permeate these perspectives, particularly in understanding as an emissary of French modernity the decree's name-giver, Adolphe Crémieux, a Jewish lawyer from Alsace-Lorraine who had undergone a process of assimilation into the republican model.

Seeing the decree as a salient juncture point holds affective importance in the early twenty-first century because this is not a history that is taught in the French school curriculum. Rather, it is one that is taught at home and among families of North African Jewish and Muslim heritage. It tacks on to histories of migration, minoritisation, and sometimes racialisation in metropolitan France, as well as on to dichotomic forms of thinking about 'Jews' and 'Muslims' from the Maghreb. The decree was an important point for the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition for the importance it holds for the post-memory generation and as a way of bringing this history into the mainstream on the platform of a national museum. After all, the guiding idea of the museum is to allay overriding French concerns about 'welcoming migrants' into the country (even as North African migration is no longer such an important demographic question) and to valorise the contribution of 'migrants' to society. This focus on shared perspectives taps into national-level concerns about decolonial antisemitism, dealt with in the final exhibition film on the peripheral Parisian neighbourhood of Sarcelles (Mréjen 2022), known for having significant Jewish and Muslim populations.

At the meeting, Naïma Yahi discussed at length the degree to which she found strong resistance from various elderly Jewish ladies from Algeria to acknowledge the logic of juxtaposing Jewish and Muslim Maghrebi migratory trajectories in an exhibition. As a young woman from a Kabyle family in northern France, Naïma Yahi had wanted to discuss feelings of nostalgia and the question of immigration with these elderly women, but it seemed that they had a strong sense that the word 'immigration' did not capture their experiences. This is perhaps because immigration in the French imaginary is bound up with stories of North African economic labour after the so-called *trente glorieuses* (30 years of French economic expansion) after the Second World War, in which North African migrant labour played a huge part. This is not a frame that is considered as relevant to an Algerian Jewish story. And yet interpretations of the Crémieux Decree would have us understand otherwise. After all, when the decree came into legal force, town-based Jewish communities in northern Algeria were deeply involved in the urban fabric of material life through occupations important to the economy such as trade,

2 For another take on the same theme, see Segré's reflections on Bouteldja's book (Segré 2016).

the fabrication of artisanal goods, and cultural production. It is easy to forget, too, that there were parallel Ottoman, Arab, and Amazigh (Berber) town-based populations living alongside these Jewish Algerian communities partaking in contingent and connected trades and modes of production (Lorcin 1999).

The tensions revealed in the Cassis discussions illustrate the point made in the introduction to this special issue that minority–state relations involve 'processes of negotiation through which minorities and the state continuously (re)define each other'. The debates over the Crémieux Decree demonstrate how Jewish heritage becomes a site where these negotiations play out. The conflicting interpretations of Yahi and her interlocutors exemplify what Berliner identifies as the active construction of heritage through contemporary political frames. The Crémieux Decree becomes what Berliner (2020: 47) calls a 'heritage tool', an element of the past 'activated, deactivated, and reactivated' according to present needs. Yahi's encounter with elderly Algerian Jewish women reveals what Berliner terms 'heritage dissonance' (Berliner 2020: 96), that is, the tension between stakeholders' interpretations based on their positions in the present.

The issue of Algerian Jewish historiography as a lightning rod for discourse around French imperial de-structuring of Algerian society and the divide-and-rule strategy of French Empire is a very important one. And it is one that curator Mathias Dreyfus, alongside co-curators Benjamin Stora and Karima Dirèche, wanted to bring back into educational focus: Mathias centred not only the decree in the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition but also its critical pledges to state education; and the exhibition is made up of a parallel mobile instantiation that travelled to local museums and schools across the country.

Case study 2: institutional curation and the 'Middle East turn' at the Institut du Monde Arabe

In the second case study, I analyse how institutional curation at the Institut du Monde Arabe attempted to capture the broader Middle Eastern dimensions of Jewish experience through the exhibition 'Juifs d'Orient', revealing both the potential and limitations of national museum frameworks.

The 'Juifs d'Orient' exhibition was all-encompassing of the Jewish Studies Middle Eastern turn proposed by Campos et al. (2023). The exhibition attempted to capture two millennia of Jewish historiography, from the interactions of the prophet Muhammad with the Jewish tribes of Mecca and Medina (Miské 2013) to the sounds of AW-A, a contemporary Yemeni Israeli female hip-hop collective. The Institut du Monde Arabe's purpose is entangled in the soft power politics of France and French presence in the Levant. Some have argued that this entanglement continues a colonial epistemology

through (often static) repertoires of visual culture in the Arabic speaking region (Mihalache 2011). At the same time, the museum has been subject to an intense focus on decolonising curation (see Vergès 2023). The exhibition was marked by three circumstances in particular: it was co-curated by Franco-Israeli scholar Denis Charbit and Benjamin Stora; it borrowed items from Israeli museum collections; and Neta Elkayam performed in a music event parallel to the exhibition. The combination of these raised questions around the boycott of Israeli culture, particularly via the normalisation of Moroccan–Israeli ties – a theme often juxtaposed with colonial legacy and decolonisation. The question of normalisation reveals a continuous, problematic double standard in which Israeli connections (notwithstanding the period of conflict) are subjected to political scrutiny in ways that similar dynamics in local contexts are not. This highlights the complex position of Jewish Maghrebi cultural expressions within broader decolonial politics. The question of normalisation has been treated elsewhere, particularly in the study of international relations (see Salman 2024), but it should be noted that the exhibition, following in the wake of the Abrahamic Accords, was touted as a history of peace, a form of 'bridge-making' (*des paserelles*), behind which Stora, as a scholar of Algeria, and Charbit, as a specialist of Zionism, could coalesce. While the exhibition attempted to present a unified narrative of Jewish-Muslim cultural affinities that transcended conflict, the approach revealed the tensions inherent in institutional curation of interrupted transmission.

Figure 2. Neta Elkayam with bendir (Maghrebi single-headed frame drum) during the "Arabofolies" music festival, Institut du monde arabe (IMA), Paris, 2021, Source: ©IMA/Alice Sidoli — with kind permission to reproduce.

Elodie Druez and Anis Fariji's research on music and intercommunal connection offers an intergenerational corrective to this simplistic narrative of peace/conflict.[3] In their study of Elkayam's concert at the exhibition, for which they asked concert-goers to complete simple questionnaires, they show that there is a mediation of generations across the purported Franco–Maghrebi divide, capable of differentiating between politics and music, between state policy and Israeli art. These generations refract Mizrahi (Eastern) and post-Mizrahi memory, nostalgia, and its relationship to societal violence in Israel-Palestine. In many ways, the great paradox of 'Juifs d'Orient' was that the concert was perhaps what made the biggest splash as regards the performance of Israel-Palestine antagonism in France. And yet, like the exhibition itself, what the concert demonstrated was the degree to which families and French-born Jewish Maghrebi generations found the 'exhibition-event' (*un expo-événement*) empowering and liberating.

This generational shift in perspective away from the roseate versus lachrymose binary view of Jewish histories in the Middle East in fact takes up the least space in the exhibition. Two corners of the last room gave space to music, which enabled visitors to understand forms of contemporary Judaeo-Arab expression. On one side of the room was music by DJ Sharouh, who mixes Judaeo-Arab sounds from the 1940s and onwards with the voice of Dalâla to narrate the histories of these musics. On the other side, video clips by the band A-WA capped the contemporary and interactive final part of the exhibition. The room in which this video was projected allowed space for an alternative intergenerational historiography of seldom heard Mizrahi so-called 'Oriental Jews' to emerge. The video depicts the members of the band living a full life, in Arabic, in a MENA region that includes Israel. The lack of ideological edge in the perspectives of Sharouh and A-WA make them slippier, messier, and less easy to curate into a single story. Music functions as a particularly effective medium for articulating the 'messiness' of Maghrebi Jewish identification precisely because it resists binary categorisation. The sonic elements – whether in A-WA's contemporary reimagining of Yemeni Jewish traditions or DJ Sharouh's mixing of vinyl – convey affective dimensions of heritage that conventional curatorial frameworks struggle to represent (see Crowdus 2024). These musical expressions create embodied experiences that collapse temporal and spatial distances, allowing audiences to engage with cultural memory through sensory rather than merely intellectual channels. The exhibition's music and contemporary expression around it speak to the earlier mentioned point about heritage being 'a combination of tangible and intangible', where objects require 'practices surrounding them' to become meaningful heritage rather than mere artifacts.

3 This research was conducted as part of the ORA funded Muslim-Jewish Encounters project (2020–2023), in which I participated.

The IMA exhibition's success demonstrated a hunger for cultural transmission between generations of Maghrebi Jewish populations. It centred both first-hand memories of North Africa across ages and, though to a lesser extent, their reinterpretation intergenerationally, creating an urgency around memory preservation. The exhibition's limited space for contemporary voices reflects the broader challenge of representing post-memory perspectives within traditional museum frameworks structured around chronological, artifact-based narratives.

Case study 3: grassroots heritage-making at the 2023 Dalâla festival

The 2023 Dalâla festival, held in Paris's nineteenth arrondissement, offered a counterpoint to national museum exhibitions by prioritising embodied, participatory experiences of North African Jewish heritage. Unlike the national museum exhibitions with their institutional framing and their core political agendas, Dalâla – whose name derives from Maimonides' Arabic masterwork *Dalâlat al-Ha'irin* (The Guide for the Perplexed) – offers a participatory approach to Maghrebi Jewish heritage more akin to the Elkayam concert or the musical space that the 'Juifs d'Orient' exhibition created to talk about and heal some of the scars of interrupted memory. Founded in 2019, the Dalâla festival focuses on promoting North African Jewish cultures through language classes, music, cuisine, and artistic workshops. As the introduction to this special issue notes, minoritised groups demonstrate significant 'agential capacity […] in navigating minority–state relations in the arena of cultural representation'. The Dalâla festival exemplifies this agency by creating alternative spaces for heritage-making that resist the 'top-down approach' of authorised heritage discourse, exemplifying a distinctly post-memory curatorial approach. Rather than positioning visitors as spectators of curated narratives, Dalâla deliberately creates spaces where intergenerational transmission becomes an embodied, collective experience. During the festival, Joëlle Bahloul (1983, 1992), the aforementioned anthropologist of food, especially Sephardic, gave a presentation on the artichoke and its tentacular culinary histories. It demonstrated how vernacular food practices carry Rothbergian multidirectional memory across imperial histories from ancient Rome to modern France of the twenty-first century. Her presentation sparked lengthy conversations about the importance of listening to grandparents' stories, highlighting how culinary traditions function as archives in the sensory palimpsestic form of interrupted transmission in which Hélène Cixous (2010) has imagined them (see also Everett 2017). Bahloul's presentation exemplified how the post-memory generation engages differently with heritage than museum exhibitions allow, creating what Hirsch describes as an active reimagining rather than passive reception of predecessors' memories.

The approach of the Dalâla festival eschews rigid chronological frameworks and instead emphasises interactive co-creation. Where museum exhibitions necessarily contain narratives within the constraints of western time, Dalâla creates in-between spaces – for cooking, dancing, singing, and conversation – that allow for more fluid, embodied forms of memory work. This perspective aligns with Hirsch's concept of post-memory, where second and third generations actively engage with, rather than simply receive, the memories of their predecessors. The festival culminated with a cemetery visit to honour Reinette l'Oranaise (see Everett 2024), the celebrated blind Algerian Jewish singer whose Arabic language performances of Arab-Andalusi music represent the complex cultural entanglements of Maghrebi Jewish cultural identification and affective resonances. The visit demonstrated how post-migration memory operates at an affective, embodied level beyond classificatory frameworks. Here music functions not merely as an artifact of the past but as an active medium of intergenerational connection, collapsing temporal and spatial distances as a visceral experience of the past in the present.

For many young Jews in France, as evidenced in conversations and observations at Dalâla events, such as the 'mint tea and pinenuts' breaks between seminars, concerts, screenings, and dance and cuisine workshops, these emerging forms of post-memory curation represent not just a recovery of interrupted transmission but a creative reimagining of what it means to be simultaneously Jewish, Maghrebi, and French. As one participant explained: 'I'm not trying to recreate the Algeria of my grandmother. That's impossible. I'm creating something new that honours that past while making sense of the world in which I live today.' This active articulation of multiple forms of identification contrasts with museum representations that can treat such forms as fixed rather than in constant negotiation. Unlike museum exhibitions that almost necessarily frame narratives through national and institutional lenses, grassroots initiatives like Dalâla allow for more experimental and embodied approaches to memory work that sidestep the binary narratives of assimilation versus marginalisation of Jewish North Africans or roseate versus lachrymose interpretations of Jewish–Muslim relations. What emerges is a form of memory practice that neither disavows the traumatic histories of displacement nor reduces Maghrebi Jewish experience to these traumas. Instead, it creates spaces where interrupted transmission becomes a site of creative possibility rather than merely a wound to be healed, pointing towards new possibilities for reconciling the jarred transmissions that characterise post-memory experience. In this way, Dalâla exemplifies Boym's 'reflective nostalgia' which 'dwells in algia, in longing and loss' (Boym 2001: 41) rather than attempting to reconstruct lost traditions in their entirety. Unlike restorative nostalgia that serves nationalist narratives, the festival's workshops created what Boym (2001: 251) calls 'a home in exile' – a third space where

participants actively engage with cultural memory rather than merely preserving it.

The question of return to the Maghreb emerges as a crucial dimension in this post-memory framework of impressionistically interpreting and recreating memory worlds only partially passed on. Unlike the charged notion of *revenir* ('come back/return') that Ariella Aïsha Azoulay critically examines in her work, and which was heavily featured in an eponymous exhibition at Mucem, intergenerational Jewish return operates on multiple registers simultaneously, be they physical, imaginative, or affective. For Jews of Maghrebi descent born in France after 1980, journeys to ancestral homes in Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia represent not simply tourism or nostalgia but what Boym might call 'reflective nostalgia' – a creative engagement with fractured pasts. The film *Que D-eu te protège* (*Rabbi maak* or G-d protect you) by director and podcast creator Cléo Cohen (2021), which explores her relationship with her North African grandparents and her subsequent lived experience of the everyday in Tunis as a Tunisian Jewish returnee, is exemplary of such active, reflexive, and reconstructive practice. These returns, often undertaken alongside or in conjunction with French Muslim friends of North African descent, challenge the nationalist narratives that frame Jewish exodus from the Maghreb as unidirectional and definitive. Yet while these lachrymose narratives can oversimplify historical complexities, they nonetheless reflect genuine lived experiences of adversity that cannot ethically be erased.

Rather than dismissing these accounts, intergenerational return acknowledges these historical realities while refusing to allow trauma alone to define cultural identification. Thus, in contrast to both the detailed historical accounts of Jewish expulsion from Arab lands and idealised visions of precolonial harmony, intergenerational return acknowledges the complex entanglements of colonial history while refusing to allow these histories to foreclose possibilities for reimagining connections across religious and national boundaries. As younger generations of Maghrebi Jews undertake these returns – documented in films, photography, and social media – they create new archives of memory that sit uncomfortably alongside official narratives, whether French republican, Israeli, or Algerian nationalist. These returns constitute a practical expression of the 'Middle East turn' in Jewish Studies, relocating Maghrebi Jewish identity within its regional context while acknowledging the multilayered postcolonial realities that shape contemporary encounters. The final case study to which we now turn, returns to institutional curation but reveals new tensions in representing return across multiple diasporic communities.

Case study 4: Contested returns and decolonial tensions at the Mucem exhibition 'Revenir'

Building on the tensions between institutional and grassroots approaches seen in the previous cases, the final case study examines the exhibition 'Revenir' (return), which ran from October 2024 to March 2025 in Marseille and attempted to navigate the complex politics of return across multiple Mediterranean diasporas. Staged at Mucem, a space which inherited collections partially derived from the colonial-era ethnographic collection of Musée d'Ethnographie of the Palais de Trocadéro, 'Revenir' grappled with the ambivalence of return. The exhibition channelled localised, binational French Algerian questions while expanding outward into the broader Mediterranean region. Particularly significant was how it juxtaposed Jewish returns to North Africa alongside Armenian, Greek, and Palestinian narratives of displacement and homecoming. However, the exhibition's attempt at inclusive curation was not without profound tensions, particularly evident in Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's installation.

Azoulay (2019), a prominent art theorist, filmmaker, and scholar, whose work explores the political dimensions of visual culture particularly in relation to colonial archives and displacement, contributed a star made of flat-packed balsa wood displaying fragments of poetic text alongside Amazigh-Jewish jewellery under glass, emphasising indigenous Algerian Jewish presence. Inadvertently, however, it reproduced certain colonial-like exclusivist dynamics through its use of English-only text and academic poesis inaccessible to local audiences. The installation, like her recent work *La Résistance des Bijoux* (2023) and *The Jewelers of the Ummah* (2024), emphasised that Jewish presence in North Africa predated even Arab arrival and thus in many ways is as autochthonous as the Amazigh story itself. That story of origin – which Hannoum (2001) and many others have deconstructed as lending a nationalist hue to complex and entangled histories, though, at a normative and moral level, no doubt good to remember for its pluralising potentiality – proves in Azoulay's presentation as disconnected from local Marseille communities and their multiple constructions of origin and exile. Written entirely in untranslated English and employing an at times impenetrable metaphorical language accessible primarily to specialist audiences, as well as presenting an anachronistic discursive framework that elided Palestinian experience with Algerian Jewish history, the installation inadvertently alienated its intended publics. While the installation represented a sophisticated transnational theoretical approach to decolonial memory, eloquently and clearly expressed (and translated) in the exhibition catalogue (Azoulay 2024), its material presentation was locally inaccessible.

The disconnection is particularly fraught given Azoulay's own complex relationship to North Africa. Though descended from an Algerian Jewish family – her father told Israeli authorities upon arrival that he was 'from

Oran in France', with a smile on his face (Azoulay 2023: 22) – Azoulay's approach to her descent also reflects post-memory uncertainties. The Azoulay patronym itself embodies these ambiguities: while some trace it to a Hebrew acronym from Leviticus concerning marriage prohibitions, others suggest Spanish origins (from 'azul' [blue], referring to ceramic tile makers) or Amazigh roots (from 'Izil' [good], as in the ubiquitous salute 'Azul' [hello]). This name, carried across Mediterranean Jewish and, in derivative form, Amazigh (so predominantly Muslim) communities, underscores the complexity of identification that resists binary frameworks. Yet Azoulay equally explains that her inside-out position emanated from the fact that her surname seemed European, perhaps Italian, during her upbringing in a 1970s Israel and that European-Latinate culture was certainly not considered Arabic. Her second-generation Iraqi and Moroccan peers, therefore, did not perceive her familial background as Mizrahi but rather as (at that time) more privileged and Ashkenazic (Azoulay 2023).

The installation's political framing, which aligns indigenous Jewish claims with contemporary Palestinian solidarity, created a profound sense of disconnection from local Sephardic experiences in Marseille. This illustrates a tension that Hirsch (2012: 19) identifies in post-memory work: the risk that theoretical frameworks may 'build on memory's many tracks' but fail to address 'the needs of the multiple constituencies of memory cultures'. While attempting to forge what Rothberg (2009: 9) calls 'analogical solidarities' between different displacement histories, Azoulay's installation inadvertently reproduced some of the ruptures in transmission it sought to confront. As an American-Israeli professor dealing with French colonialism from a self-identified 'Palestinian Jewish' perspective, Azoulay's work seemed to overlook how, for many Maghrebi Jews, the French Republic has been a space of relative post-war comfort, despite its historical colonial contradictions and above and beyond post-Holocaust guilt. Or that the French language, despite its soft power and its use as a tool to 'civilise', has born great music and literature, not least by Algerian writers such as Kateb Yacine and the Marseille-inspired French hip-hop scene. The exhibition thus unintentionally highlighted what Joëlle Bahloul, channelling Yosef Yerushalmi's (1982) concept of *Zakhor*, understood as the communal specificities of memory that resist universal narratives. Azoulay's installation seemed oddly out of kilter with the rest of the wall-mounted scenography – perhaps deliberately so. While the jewels themselves were beautiful and deeply symbolic of Amazigh-Jewish cultural synthesis and precolonial indigenous artistic traditions moving beyond a conventional chronological organisation typical of museum displays, their presentation in a makeshift wooden structure appeared incongruous with their cultural significance – though, again, these representational dynamics may also have had symbolic reasons. This aesthetic tension mirrored the conceptual difficulties in representing interrupted transmission through in-

stitutional curation. Where post-memory initiatives like Dalâla create spaces of embodied reconnection through music, food, and language, museum exhibitions can remain caught between institutional imperatives for coherence and the messier realities of memory work subject to the whims of an at times tense relationship between scholarly depth and curatorial storytelling.

The Mucem itself embodies these tensions. As a relatively new major European institution dedicated to European and Mediterranean civilisations, it inherited problematic colonial collections while simultaneously positioning itself as a decolonial space of encounter. This institutional paradox mirrors the broader difficulties in curating return: how to acknowledge historical ruptures while creating possibilities for reconnection; how to represent trauma without reducing communities to their wounds; and how to navigate the political dimensions of memory without instrumentalising the past. 'Revenir' ultimately revealed that curatorial attempts to reflect on interrupted transmission inevitably confront not merely historical gaps but contemporary political divides. The exhibition, in its strengths and limitations, demonstrated how return functions simultaneously as historical reconciliation, political intervention, and ongoing process of negotiation between generations, geographies, and the unfinished business of decolonisation.

Taken together, the four cases that I have sketched out in this article demonstrate how curatorial practices function as contested sites where theoretical frameworks of memory and heritage meet the lived realities of intergenerational transmission. From the academic tensions in Cassis to the participatory possibilities of Dalâla, we observe how different modes of curation either perpetuate or confront the challenges of interrupted transmission. The progression of the article from the institutional to the embodied reveals a movement towards more inclusive, corporeal approaches that acknowledge the complexities of post-memory while creating spaces for creative reimagining rather than simple preservation.

Conclusion

The four cases outlined in this essay evolve as an ark from institutionalised curatorial approaches to grassroots Maghrebi Jewish memory. They contribute to what the introduction to this special issue identifies as the 'the intersections of anthropology, Jewish Studies, and critical academic scholarship of heritage' in demonstrating how communities negotiate between state-sanctioned representations and community-led heritage practices. Moving from scholarly discussions in the Cassis debate to national museum exhibitions at the Palais de la Porte Dorée and the Institut du Monde Arabe, to grassroots initiatives like the Dalâla festival, and finally to an exploration of return at the Mucem, we observe a shift in inclusive practices from institutional to participatory frameworks that can more flexibly accommodate the complexities

of interrupted transmission. This trajectory demonstrates the insufficiency of binary narratives – whether roseate/lachrymose, assimilation/marginalisation, or Jewish/Arab – to capture the lived experiences of North African Jewish communities and their descendants.

What emerges most clearly from this analysis is that effective engagement with Maghrebi Jewish memory requires a multilayered approach that balances institutional resources with community agency. The Sephardic experience serves as a crucial bridge between Jewish and Middle Eastern studies, challenging both Eurocentric and nationalist historiographies. Algerian Jewish stories illuminate the entanglements of colonial dynamics that continue to shape contemporary French debates around immigration, citizenship, and cultural belonging. Rather than seeking simplistic reconciliation or pursuing a revanchist stance against Ashkenazi-dominated narratives, the most promising curatorial approaches create spaces for embodied, reflective nostalgia while acknowledging the unresolved tensions of postcolonial memory. Through these processes, the intergenerational transmission of Maghrebi Jewish heritage becomes not merely an exercise in preservation but an active site of cultural reimagining and creative possibility.

This study also highlights the productive feedback loops between scholarship and critical heritage practices. The curatorial experiments examined here demonstrate that exhibitions themselves function as forms of knowledge production, not merely as vehicles for displaying existing research. When curators, artists, scholars, and community members collaborate across generational and communal divides, they create new possibilities for understanding the complex legacies of colonial encounter beyond the constraining frameworks of national belonging. The post-memory generation is increasingly engaging with the Middle East turn in Jewish Studies through physical and imaginative returns to ancestral homelands as forms of autoethnography that grapples with the tensions of heritage, as Berliner would have it. Similarly, as I have attempted to demonstrate, curatorial practices are never neutral but always implicated in questions of agency and power. When minority communities gain greater control over the representation of their heritage – as is at least partially the case for the grassroots initiative Dalâla – new possibilities emerge for dealing with the complexities of interrupted transmission that institutional frameworks can struggle to accommodate. But even then, the grassroots initiative cannot speak beyond itself. The future of Maghrebi Jewish heritage thus depends not only on continued scholarly attention but on creating spaces where community agency and valorisation can flourish and generate alternative archives that challenge established historiographies and point towards more nuanced understandings of Jewish, Muslim, and Mediterranean entanglements.

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