The politics of nostalgia and pessimism

Jewish-Muslim relations in Thierry Cohen's *Avant la haine*

Adi Saleem Bharat
University of Michigan

This article provides a sociopolitical and historical analysis of Thierry Cohen's novel *Avant la haine* (2015) in order to ascertain how this novel negotiates Jewish and Muslim identities and the category of 'Jewish-Muslim relations' and broader, more dominant representations of these identities and relations. In doing so, I show how literary interventions into the question of Jewish-Muslim relations and their representations may both challenge and reaffirm polarizing discourses of Jewish-Muslim tension more broadly found in contemporary French society. Most significantly, this novel is steeped in pessimism or at the very least a pessimistic optimism when it comes to perceiving Jewish-Muslim presents and futures. This sense of pessimism suggests the difficulty of articulating counter-narratives in a contemporary context that consistently emphasizes Jewish-Muslim polarization, overdetermined by theories of a new Muslim antisemitism and an importation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This article's conclusions are not meant to apply to all literary productions on Jewish-Muslim (or inter-ethnic/-religious) relations, but rather to be exploratory in nature, i.e. to suggest how literature may mediate and navigate intergroup relations that are presented as polarized and tense in broader media and political discourses.

Keywords: Jewish-Muslim relations, new antisemitism, Israeli-Palestinian conflict in France, Thierry Cohen

Cet article propose une analyse socio-politique et historique du roman *Avant la haine* (2015) de Thierry Cohen. Mon analyse se focalise sur la façon dont le romancier interroge les catégories sociales de « juifs » et de « musulmans » et la catégorie des « relations judéo-musulmanes », ainsi que des représentations dominantes de ces identités et relations. Ce faisant, je montre comment les interventions littéraires sur la question des relations judéo-musulmanes et de leurs représentations peuvent à la fois remettre en cause et réaffirmer les discours polarisants de la tension judéo-musulmane qui sont plus largement présents dans la société française contemporaine. Plus important encore, le roman de Thierry Cohen est imprégné de pessimisme, ou tout au moins d'un optimisme pessimiste, lorsqu'il s'agit de concevoir les présents et les futurs judéo-musulmans. Ce pessimisme suggère la difficulté d'élaborer des contre-discours dans un contexte contemporain qui met constamment en avant la polarisation judéo-musulmane, surdéterminée par les théories d'un nouvel antisémitisme musulman et d'une importation du conflit israélo-palestinien. Les conclusions de cet article ne s'appliquent pas nécessairement à toutes les productions littéraires et culturelles sur les relations judéo-musulmanes (ou

https://doi.org/10.3828/franc.2020.15

interethniques/interreligieuses de façon générale). Au contraire, ces conclusions sont de nature exploratoire, c'est-à-dire que cet article vise à explorer comment la littérature peut (ou non) fournir une vision plus nuancée des relations intergroupes qui sont présentées ailleurs comme polarisées et tendues.

Mots clefs: relations judéo-musulmanes, nouvelle judéophobie, antisémitisme, conflit israélo-palestinien en France, Thierry Cohen

Born in Casablanca, Morocco in 1962, Thierry Cohen is primarily a novelist of romance novels.[1] *Avant la haine*, published in 2015 by Flammarion, is quite unlike his usual work. The title of the novel foregrounds the notion of an interethnic 'hatred' between Jews and Muslims, while also gesturing towards Matthieu Kassovitz's film *La haine* (1995), which allies Jewish and Muslim characters against the French police. In addition, the inclusion of 'avant' in the title highlights the author's desire to excavate an earlier period supposedly untainted by interethnic hatred. In his afterword at the end of the novel, Cohen remarks that he is sure that the novel will surprise his regular readership, but that it represents 'le plus personnel que j'ai jamais écrit [parce qu'il] touche à mon identité, révèle mon trouble et expose les multiples questions qui me hantent'.[2] Cohen goes on to explain that he wrote the novel 'par nécessité' in a contemporary context of polarization between Jews and Muslims in France.[3] In this way, the author presents his novel as a form of sociopolitical commentary and openly displays its activist or 'engagé' nature in promoting a rapprochement of Jews and Muslims in France. Cohen's main characters in the novel also engage in various forms of activism and the novelist himself is the founder of an association called Noël ensemble, which is an initiative of Jews and Muslims who host a Christmas dinner for elderly people without family.

Thierry Cohen's novel consists of the life stories of Raphaël and Mounir, two Moroccans – one Muslim, the other Jewish – who immigrate to France with their families in the 1960s. Cohen carefully describes how the two boys come to be close friends through their shared Moroccan origin in a France that is openly distrusting and hostile to North Africans, before a set of more recent sociopolitical circumstances drive a wrench between them, and contemporary antisemitism leads a fifty-something year old Raphaël to

1 I would like to thank Rebekah Vince and the two anonymous reviewers for their detailed and, ultimately, very helpful comments. I am also grateful to Thierry Cohen for taking the time to discuss, at length, his work.

2 Thierry Cohen, *Avant la haine* (Paris: Flammarion, 2015), p. 661.

3 Cohen, p. 661.

leave France for Israel with his family. From seeing each other primarily as Moroccans and natural allies in the fight against racism in France, Raphaël and Mounir eventually find themselves pitted against each other as 'Jew' and 'Muslim'. The relationship between Raphaël and Mounir can be read as an allegory for Jewish-Muslim relations in France, although, as the author himself points out in the afterword to his novel, it is not necessarily representative of French Muslims and Jews.[4] Indeed, the novel is not representative of the diversity of Jewish and Muslim identities and the entire range of possible interactions between Jews and Muslims in France from the 1960s to the present. However, it charts the broad contours of how a particular vision of Jewish-Muslim *relations* comes to define Jewish-Muslim *interactions* primarily through divergent ethnoreligious and transnational political identifications, when interactions in the past were often defined by other more fluid, complex, and intersecting identifications. In this way, Cohen's novel represents a chronological literary exploration of the shifting dynamics and politics of Jewish and Muslim identities in the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Avant la haine is a novel that is clearly sociopolitically inflected and can be read as a direct intervention in debates over Jewish-Muslim relations, the 'importation' of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and 'new antisemitism' in French society. In addition, the very nature of the literary medium allows it to be a particularly potent vehicle for arguments about inter-ethnic/-religious relations. As Lucille Cairns notes:

> Literature explores and indeed often privileges the emotions. In simultaneously reflecting but also creating new forms of the emotions infusing that relationship, these literary texts offer a valuable aperture for understanding that is absent from most historical, philosophical, political and sociological studies.[5]

Cairns' reflections on literature and affect come in the context of her analysis of the idea of Israel in francophone Jewish literature, but they are also applicable to ideas and ideals of Jewish-Muslim relations. Indeed, just as Israel can be an emotionally charged topic for many, so too can the topic of Jewish-Muslim relations. This is particularly the case as both these issues have become proxy battlegrounds for other interlocutors in broader political debates. Disagreements over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, for

4 Cohen, p. 662.
5 Lucille Cairns, *Francophone Jewish Writers: Imagining Israel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 5.

example, sometimes become a way for rivals from the right and the left to articulate their political differences.[6] Indeed, it is partly because literary texts highlight human and affective aspects of a particular topic that they are particularly well suited to exploring the often emotionally charged topic of relations between Jews and Muslims. Generally, I understand literary and cultural productions to be the products of individuals from specific socio-economic and political backgrounds, with specific sociopolitical opinions and positions, and with specific *individual* histories and experiences, all of which shape, to an extent, the works they produce. Furthermore, these individuals are themselves, to an extent, products of *collective* histories and realities. Thus, my approach in this article consists in connecting *Avant la haine* with other texts in which it is embedded, i.e. the broader sociopolitical, 'real-world', and historical contexts in which the primary 'literary' text is created.

In general, representations of Jewish-Muslim relations in recent French-language literature have received scant attention by academics. The representation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in French-language literature has been relatively better studied.[7] As of 2020, there is little academic literature on contemporary French-language writers who have most significantly engaged with contemporary Jewish-Muslim relations in their work, such as Nadia Hathroubi-Safsaf, Emilie Frèche, Mohammed Aïssaoui, and Thierry Cohen, while only four studies have analysed the works of Éliette Abécassis and Karine Tuil.[8] Sociologist Ewa Tartakowsky remains one of the few scholars to have analysed the theme of Jewish-Muslim relations in twentieth-century French-language literature. Focusing on a set of Maghrebi Jewish writers in the latter half of the twentieth century, Tartakowsky concludes that, when it comes to the theme of Jewish-Muslim relations, the literary production of these writers is structured around two

6 See Dennis Sieffert, *Israël-Palestine: Une passion française* (Paris: La Découverte, 2004).

7 See, for example, Rebekah Vince, *Negotiating Unsettling Memories: Contemporary Franco-Maghrebi Literature on the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, PhD thesis (Coventry: University of Warwick, 2018); Nathalie Debrauwere-Miller, *Israeli-Palestinian Conflict in the Francophone World* (London: Routledge, 2010); Lucille Cairns, *Francophone Jewish Writers: Imagining Israel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Olivia Harrison, *Transcolonial Maghreb: Imagining Palestine in an Era of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2015).

8 See Lucille Cairns, *Post-War Jewish Women's Writing in French* (Oxford: Legenda, 2011); Lucille Cairns, *Francophone Jewish Writers: Imagining Israel* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015); Adi S. Bharat, 'Next Year in Jerusalem? 'La nouvelle judéophobie', Neo-Crypto-Judaism and the Future of French Jews in Éliette Abécassis's *Alyah*', *French Cultural Studies*, 29.3 (2018), 228–43; Nancy Arenberg, 'Silence and Anguish: Muting the Feminine Voice in Éliette Abécassis's *La Répudiée*', *French Cultural Studies*, 29.3 (2018), 244–53.

primary representations of the past: 'Le premier valorise l'image d'une vie harmonieuse et pacifique avec les musulmans […] le second se focalise sur les humiliations découlant de la *dhimma* imposée aux Juifs'.[9] Some authors, Tartakowsky contends, depict 'Edenic visions of Jewish-Muslim coexistence, [while] others insist that there was, in fact, no real exchange or dialogue between the two communities'.[10] Thus, Tartakowsky suggests that, depending on the author, twentieth-century French-language Maghrebi Jewish literature depicts pre-colonial and colonial relations between Jews and Muslims in the Maghreb as either 'Edenic' or non-existent. In this article, I suggest that *Avant la haine*, as a twenty-first-century novel, depicts Jewish-Muslim relations in the past to be Edenic and contemporary relations to be volatile, while rooting the point of rupture in relations in both the foundation of Israel and the context of decolonization. As previously identified in Guy Dugas' *La Littérature judéo-maghrébine d'expression française* (1990), this has been, since the 1980s, the standard paradigm for thinking through Jewish-Muslim relations.[11] Beyond mere nostalgia, this paradigm allows authors to draw on an idealized past in order to critique the present. Yet, this paradigm, as I suggest in this article, is not without its limitations.

Life stories, nostalgia, and the promise of universalism

Avant la haine is based on the notion that the most effective corrective to contemporary polarization lies in meaningful daily interactions. Indeed, by situating the rupture between Raphaël and Mounir at the moment when they gradually cease to interact meaningfully with each other, Cohen is, like anthropologists Aomar Boum and Joëlle Bahloul, suggesting the importance of daily interactions in maintaining positive relations.[12] Suggesting that hatred stems from a lack of understanding due to a lack of sustained

9 Ewa Tartakowsky, 'Deux mythes d'une coexistence judéo-musulmane au Maghreb: la littérature des écrivains juifs du Maghreb au prisme de l'historiographie', *Babel*, 36 (2017), 49–71 (p. 49).

10 Ewa Tartakowsky, 'The Literary Work of Judeo-Maghrebi Authors in Postcolonial France', in *A Literary Diaspora: Perspectives on Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature*, ed. by Dario Miccoli (London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 10–30 (p. 18).

11 Guy Dugas, *La Littérature judéo-maghrébine d'expression française: Entre Djeha et Cagayous* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1990).

12 Aomar Boum, *Memories of Absence: How Muslims Remember Jews in Morocco* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2013), p. 166; Joëlle Bahloul, *La Maison de mémoire: Ethnologie d'une demeure judéo-arabe en Algérie* (1937–1961) (Paris: Editions Métailié, 1992).

interactions ('ne plus se parler'), Cohen's novel seemingly prescribes dialogue as the panacea for ethnic conflict. According to Cohen, this rupture of Jewish-Muslim interactions is what has led to 'le retour de la haine', expressed in, on the one hand, antisemitic acts and attacks and, on the other hand, increasing Jewish alignment with right-wing politics, in the past two decades in France. Insterestingly, Cohen's word choice ('retour') implies a past phenomenon of hatred that is in tension with the first word in the title of his novel ('avant'), which suggests the existence of a period prior to any interethnic hatred. This tension between a tacit acknowledgement of a 'retour' and the desire to return to an idealized period 'avant' persists throughout the novel.

In the afterword to his novel, Cohen specifically contrasts the polarization of contemporary Jewish and Muslim identities with his childhood and adolescent memories, which according to him, reflect a time of meaningful, sustained, and convivial Jewish-Muslim interactions:

> Nous venions des mêmes pays, partagions des traditions, des mots, des doutes et l'ambition commune de devenir français. Plus tard, notre volonté de lutter ensemble contre le racisme d'extrême droite resserra nos liens. Puis il y eut les guerres au Moyen-Orient, et nos relations se distendirent avant… de devenir compliquées.[13]

This passage brings up several key elements that structure the novel's treatment of Jewish-Muslim relations in France. The French Jewish-Muslim story, as told by Thierry Cohen, is a three-part series. First, the story of Jewish-Muslim relations begins with a nostalgic memory of a time when Jews and Muslims shared amicable relations based on shared national origin, traditions, language, and their minority status and outsider position in the metropole. Then, the threat of the far-right further united Jews and Muslims (in the 1980s) as antiracist activists. Finally, however, the Arab–Israeli conflict caused Jewish-Muslim relations to wane and ultimately disintegrate. In telling this three-part story through the eyes of Raphaël and Mounir, Cohen is crafting a narrative that seeks to make sense of the complex personal and collective histories of Jews and Muslims in France. His afterword makes it clear that this is the primary motivation behind the novel and that he chose the narrative form of a novel because it is his preferred mode of communication: 'je ne sais parler de ce qui me touche qu'à travers des personnages'.[14] When we met in Lyon in 2019, Cohen reiterated what he states in his afterword, namely that his memories and

13 Cohen, p. 662.
14 Cohen, p. 662.

lived experience of Jewish-Muslim interactions form part of the basis of this novel. According to him, most of Raphaël's character is built on himself, while Mounir is the personification of a number of Muslim friends and acquaintances and supplemented by recent interviews that he conducted. By consolidating his memories and interviews into two characters whose lives serve as an allegory for Jewish-Muslim relations, Cohen novel aims to place the messiness of lived and felt experience into the coherence of a chronological narrative.

On the topic of chronological, narrative life stories, the cultural theorist Lauren Berlant argues that 'the story of having a "life" itself coasts on a normative notion of human biocontinuity'.[15] Life stories often implicitly position life as the sum of chronological experiences: I am who I am because x, y, and z happened to me in that order. Such stories represent narratives that we construct in order to make sense of a multitude of random, circumstantial, and sometimes inexplicable events and happenings that we experience over a lifetime. In other words, life stories take messy, sometimes random dots, which, if traced together, would form squiggles, and straighten them out in clear, linear trajectories. In the act of straightening these squiggles, we endow particular moments in our lives with deep meaning. Indeed, a life story is not a compendium of everything that ever occurred in our lives, but a linear narrative of what we think are the most important and meaningful events. Such narratives form an essential part of our identity (who we see ourselves to be, who we aspire to be). Crucially, as recent research in developmental psychology has suggested, the identity narratives that we construct are, in part, shaped by broader cultural and national narratives.[16] With this in mind, the division of Cohen's novel into six chronological chapters is revealing. The first and second chapters are simply titled 'L'Enfance' and 'L'Adolescence', while the remaining four are more descriptively titled 'L'Origine de la haine', 'Le Doute', 'Désillusions', and 'La Haine'.[17] Each chapter recounts the experiences of Raphaël and Mounir by decade. The first two chapters cover the 1960s to 1981. The third chapter covers the 1980s, which Cohen categorizes as 'L'Origine de la haine', while the fourth chapter, 'Le Doute', covers the 1990s. The final two chapters cover the 2000s and the 2010s, which are respectively the years of 'Désillusions' and 'Haine'. The experiences of Raphaël and Mounir are thus categorized

15 Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, 'Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant', *Biography*, 34.1 (2011), p. 181.

16 See Dan P. McAdams and Kate C. McLean, 'Narrative Identity', *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 22.3 (2013), pp. 233–38.

17 Cohen, pp. 667–71.

over six decades in such a way that makes sense of their eventual rupture: they go from being childhood and adolescent friends to experiencing doubts, becoming disillusioned, and, finally, succumbing to hatred.

Raphaël and Mounir's childhood in the novel is situated in the 1960s and early 1970s, a period that Ethan Katz describes as 'a moment […] of transition and deep uncertainty [when] […] for many Jews and Muslims, complex and multiple allegiances existed'.[18] Like Katz, who writes that 'Jews and Muslims could understand themselves and one another in myriad ways', Cohen's memories – memories translated into Raphaël and Mounir's life stories – suggest a past diversity of interactions between Jews and Muslims in France.[19] Even if he does not explicitly state this in the passage above, Cohen does not merely consider the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on its own, as the explanation for contemporary tensions, but demonstrates, through the progression of his novel, how 'global dynamics, both in the Middle East and in French North Africa, *came together* with national and even local factors to shape Muslim-Jewish relations in postcolonial France'.[20] Crucially, Cohen's novel clearly brings to the fore the 'triangular' nature of Jewish-Muslim relations, due to the importance the French state played, right from the outset, in defining the terms of interactions between Jews and Muslims.[21]

The novel begins with a prologue situated in the present, alternating between the perspective of Raphaël and Mounir. Both are middle-aged men and are reflecting on Raphaël's impending departure to Israel, following an antisemitic attack on Raphaël's son by a group of Muslim youths. Both men are filled with regret and attempt to understand what went wrong in their friendship and, by extension, Jewish-Muslim relations more broadly. Mounir, in particular, ponders the period when interactions between individuals who happened to be Jewish and Muslim did not always take place as a function of those ethnoreligious labels:

> Alors, que faire maintenant? Tenter de le rattraper, lui parler, le ramener ici? Trop tard. Il doit déjà être dans un avion. Et que lui aurais-je dit? Que je regrettais l'époque où nous étions des enfants, des amis, des étrangers en France avant d'être juifs et musulmans? Que nous pouvions renouer avec cette amitié sur laquelle nous nous étions construits?[22]

18 Ethan Katz, *The Burdens of Brotherhood: Jews and Muslims from North Africa to France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), pp. 2–3.
19 Katz, p. 3.
20 Maud Mandel. *Muslims and Jews in France: History of a Conflict* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 3; emphasis orignal.
21 Katz, pp. 24–25; Claude Hagège and Bernard Zarca, 'Les Juifs et la France en Tunisie. Les bénéfices d'une relation triangulaire', *Le Mouvement social*, 197 (2001), 9–28.
22 Cohen, p. 17.

The proliferation of rhetorical questions indicate internal, intellectual, and emotional conflicts that structure the rest of the novel. In part, Mounir's evocation of a period when 'we' did not interact as Jews and Muslims, but rather on the basis of other identities and affiliations, reflects a broader societal discourse of Jewish-Muslim reconciliation that has emerged precisely in response to the dominant discourse of Jewish-Muslim polarization, premised on a new Muslim antisemitism.

Since the early 2000s, public intellectuals such as Raphaël Draï, Pierre-André Taguieff, Shmuel Trigano, and Alain Finkielkraut have been arguing that there has been an emergence of a distinctly new form of antisemitism that represents a departure from 'traditional' European antisemitism.[23] This new antisemitism is described as a conflagration caused by the convergence of anti-Zionism and an older tradition of Islamic antisemitism. They generally begin their analyses in the 1980s, a time when an entire generation of 'beurs',[24] who had grown up in the shadow of the 1967 Arab-Israeli war, came of age and became politically active. Proponents of the new antisemitism hypothesis tend to make their case in four parts. First, in the new antisemitism, Jews are perceived through an unfairly demonized Israel. Taguieff, for example, states: 'C'est à travers une représentation du « sionisme » comme incarnation du mal absolu que s'est constituée une vision antijuive dans la seconde moitié du XXe siècle'.[25] Second, the new antisemitism is an alliance between the left/far-left and Muslims, sometimes called 'islamo-gauchiste', a term that has been criticized as being based on the same logic underlying the use of term 'judeo-bolshevism' in the 1930s.[26] This is what Trigano has in mind when he denounces 'le clan

23 Raphaël Draï, *Sous le signe de Sion*: *L'Antisémitisme nouveau est arrivé* (Paris: Michalon, 2002); Pierre-André Taguieff, *La Nouvelle Judéophobie* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2002); Shmuel Trigano, *La Démission de la République*: *Juifs et musulmans en France* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2003); Alain Finkielkraut, *Au Nom de l'autre*: *Réflexions sur l'antisémitisme qui vient* (Paris: Gallimard, 2003).

24 'Beur' is a verlan slang term for 'arabe'. In verlan, the syllables of a word are inverted to form a new word, while retaining the original meaning. 'Beur' emerged in *banlieue* youth culture in the 1980s and came to national prominence through the launch of *Radio Beur* in 1982, the Marche for Equality and Against Racism in 1983 (which was dubbed by the press as 'La Marche des Beurs'), and the slogan Black-Blanc-Beur used during the 1998 World Cup to refer to the multiethnic French national team. 'Beur' was initially a way to avoid the term 'arabe', which was sometimes used by non-'Arabs' in a pejorative manner. In the 1990s, however, younger Franco-Maghrebis began to reject the term 'beur', which itself was gradually seen as pejorative or, at the very least outdated, in favour of the term 'rebeu' (an inversion of 'beur').

25 Taguieff, p. 12.

26 Shlomo Sand, 'The "Threat" Now Lies Among Muslim Immigrants', *Verso Blog*, 4 July 2016 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2751-the-threat-now-lies-among-muslim-immigrants> [accessed 15 September 2020].

islamo-progressiste'.[27] Third, and most importantly, the new antisemitism emanates principally from the Muslim population of France. Fourth, the French state has allowed this new antisemitism to fester through governmental inaction due to the fear of offending its Muslim minority.

Soon after Taguieff published *La Nouvelle judéophobie* in 2002, others published accounts of Jewish-Muslim entente and solidarity, often evoking mythologized images of Andalusia or more recent shared histories in North Africa and the Middle East as counterpoints to the framework of new (Muslim) antisemitism. *Avant la haine* certainly falls into this category, as do films like *Les Hommes libres* or edited collections like *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane*.[28] This sometimes nostalgia-driven counter-narrative is often also expressed through a republican language of universal citizenship. A particularly prominent example is the recent work of French senator and public historian Esther Benbassa. Since 2000, a significant proportion of her publications has essentially served to provide a counter-narrative to the claims of proponents of new antisemitism and their representation of Jewish-Muslim conflict. Indeed, from her book *La République face à ses minorités*: *Les Juifs hier*, *les musulmans aujourd'hui* (2004) to her co-edited collection *Juifs et musulmans*: *Retissions les liens*! (2015), Benbassa, a citizen of France, Israel, and Turkey, often challenges narratives of Jewish-Muslim polarization through recourse to republicanism.[29] Introducing the authors in the latter collection, the editors write:

> tous ont un point commun: ils sont citoyens de ce pays, et c'est en citoyens qu'ils entendent poser et contribuer à résoudre le problème d'une coexistence désormais mise à mal, d'une coexistence pourtant attestée, avec ses hauts et ses bas bien sûr, pendant des siècles de présence juive en terre d'Islam.[30]

Similarly, Mounir's reflections in the prologue construct an early period – in this case, France in the 1960s and 1970s – when Jews and Muslims were supposedly not entirely encapsulated by the political meanings with which the contemporary period would infuse the categories of 'Jew' and 'Muslim'. Implicitly, by highlighting that recently arrived North African Jews and Muslims were both foreigners in France, he is also rooting their

27 Trigano, pp. 37–43.
28 *Les Hommes libres*, dir. by Ismaël Ferroukhi (Pyramide Distribution, 2011); Leïla Sebbar (ed.), *Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane* (Paris: Bleu autour, 2012).
29 Esther Benbassa, *La République face à ses minorités*: *Les Juifs hier*, *les musulmans aujourd'hui* (Paris: Mille et une nuits, 2004); Esther Benbassa and Jean-Christophe Attias, *Juifs et musulmans*: *Retissons les liens*! (Paris: CNRS Editions, 2015).
30 Benbassa and Attias, p. 6.

sometimes banal, sometimes solidary lived experiences in both their status as foreigners (even if Algerian Jews often arrived in France as citizens due to the Crémieux Decree) and their aspirations towards citizenship and Frenchness. This is both the most original and important aspect of Cohen's novel *and* the least explored aspect of Jewish-Muslim relations/interactions in contemporary French society.

Falling between two stools

The fact that both Raphaël and Mounir, as Moroccans, do not entirely fit in is the basis on which their friendship will be built. However, even before the two of them meet, it becomes clear that there is a significant distinction in the way that their difference from the white 'universal' norm is lived and experienced in France. Contrasting two early scenes in the novel elucidates how Raphaël and Mounir are differentially assimilable. When Raphaël's mother takes him to buy a new outfit for school, Raphaël chooses not to speak, out of fear that his accent would mark him as North African in the eyes of the salesperson attending to them. His anxiety during this interaction is revealing:

> Elle [his mother] aimerait que j'ouvre la bouche et m'exprime comme l'un de ces enfants vus à la télévision, dans les publicités ou les films. Une phrase bien sentie, prononcée d'un ton de petit génie en herbe. J'aimerais lui faire plaisir, mais je sais que les « r » se mettraient à se battre avec les « p », les « on » avec les « en » et que je finirais par lui faire honte. Alors, comme d'habitude, je souris.[31]

In response to Raphaël's silent smile, the salesperson remarks that he is a 'pétit écolier modèle'.[32] Even if the salesperson's priority is to sell shoes, and thus it is to her advantage to flatter her customers, this exchange suggests that Raphaël's difference is one that can become invisible. With his light complexion, Raphaël is aware that as long as he does not speak and does not let his accent betray his Moroccan origins, he can pass as white and French. Being able to pass as white affords him a privilege that he is aware can be taken away from him if his ethnicity is uncovered. In other words, Raphaël's hesitation to speak in this scene reflects the contingency of his white privilege, which is to say the privilege of being protected from racial

31 Cohen, p. 33.
32 Cohen, p. 33.

discrimination and bias *and* institutional racism. The memory that Mounir chooses to begin his story, however, displays his (and his family's) complete inability to pass as white, which opens them up to the constant possibility of racial discrimination and violence at both an individual and institutional level:

> Nous venons de débarquer à Marseille. […] Un porteur s'approche. […]
> — Tu veux de l'aide?
> On sent qu'il n'aime pas nous poser cette question. C'est pour ça qu'il tutoie mon père. […]
> — Non, merci. C'est très gentil.
> A-t-il compris qu'il s'agit d'un porteur? Qu'il ne propose pas sa gentillesse mais des services tarifés? […]
> — Putain, c'est pas avec des mendiants comme ça qu'on va travailler nous! Sale Arabe![33]

These two early encounters clearly highlight that Raphaël's difference can be of an invisible nature at times, while Mounir is always visibly recognizable as an Arab/Muslim. The incongruity between Mounir's and Raphaël's earliest interactions with white French people serves as a wider metaphor for divergent expectations and perceptions of North African Jews and Muslims in France.

When Raphaël and Mounir first meet, however, they immediately read each other as Moroccan and not as Jew and Muslim. Yet, they are also treated differently at school. For example, Raphaël, unlike Mounir, is relatively quickly welcomed into the fold of a group of French children:

> J'avais facilement intégré un groupe de petits Français. Mounir, lui, en était exclu. […] J'avais pensé que nous étions semblables, deux taches sombres sur un tissu blanc. Mais mon physique presque européen et mon prénom servaient de sauf-conduits. […] Pas lui.[34]

The relative ease at which Raphaël is able to adopt a white mask, constituted of his 'almost' European physique and his European first name, is the result of a century of differential, triangular relations between the French state and Jews and Muslims in French North Africa. For Algerians, this hierarchical dynamic is rooted in the 1870 Crémieux Decree that granted French citizenship to the majority of Jews in French Algeria. The decree created an automatic path to citizenship and Frenchness for Algerian Jews,

33 Cohen, pp. 28–30.
34 Cohen, p. 51.

while excluding Muslims. The impacts of the automatic naturalization of Algerian Jews were far-reaching and long-lasting, in terms of education and socioeconomic class.[35] For Algerian Jews, their ethnoreligious specificity became the basis for their Frenchness. In contrast, for Algerian Muslims, their ethnoreligious specificity was the basis for their non-Frenchness. However, in Morocco – the ancestral land of Cohen and his two main characters – and Tunisia, no equivalent decree was ever passed and, thus, 'Jewishness did not provide an exclusive legal path to [citizenship and] Frenchness in either [colony]'.[36] Still, the ethnoreligious specificity of Jews in Morocco and Tunisia provided them 'access to agents of Frenchification (or Europeanization) [and thus contributed to] the perception of shared European sensibilities'.[37] These agents of Frenchification included the protégé system – that an elite minority of Moroccan and Tunisian Jews benefited from – and the Alliance israélite universelle (AIU) that was 'extremely successful in promoting its vision of Jews as particularly well suited to European civilization and thus as potential colonial allies', in particular through the establishment of AIU schools.[38] In these AIU schools, the curriculum was modelled on those of the Jewish schools in France and, thus, was removed from local contexts; an AIU education was an entirely European ('universal') one, with Ashkenazi inflections.[39] Indeed, Ammiel Alcalay characterizes these schools as important agents of the 'civilizing mission [which sought to] ally certain classes within Middle Eastern Jewish communities to the movement of European expansion and detach them from the concerns of the local populations with and among whom they lived'.[40] While the AIU long pushed for a similar decree in Tunisia and Morocco to the Crémieux Decree, they ultimately failed. Nevertheless, for the Moroccan and Tunisian Jews who chose to immigrate to France following decolonization, the AIU's activities successfully distinguished these Jews from their Muslim compatriots and associated their Jewishness

35 See Gérard Noiriel, *Immigration, antisémitisme et racisme en France (XIXe et XXe siècle): Discours publics, humiliations privées* (Paris: Fayard, 2007), pp. 542–50; and Todd Shepard, *The Invention of Decolonization: The Algerian War and the Remaking of France* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006), pp. 169–73.

36 Kimberly Arkin, *Rhinestones, Religion, and the Republic: Fashioning Jewishness in France* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2014), p. 43.

37 Arkin, p. 43.

38 Arkin, p. 47.

39 See Annie Goldmann, *Les filles de Mardochée: Histoire familiale d'une émancipation* (Paris: Denoël/Gonthier, 1979).

40 Ammiel Alcalay, 'Intellectual Life', in *The Jews of the Middle East and North Africa in Modern Times*, ed. by Reeva Spector Simon, Michael Menachem Laskier, and Sara Reguer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), pp. 85–112 (p. 90).

as the basis for their eventual Frenchness. All of this means that 'Jews had greater opportunities to acculturate to European social and cultural norms than the Muslim populations amidst which they lived' and that they grew increasingly alienated from their non-Jewish counterparts.[41] Additionally, in this context, for non-Jewish North Africans, 'Jewishness became a sign of economic inequality and differential access to the privileges of French citizenship'.[42] Therefore, North African Jews, especially the Algerians among them who were French citizens, were separated from their Muslim counterparts in either politico-legal terms or sociocultural terms by virtue of their Jewishness. Yet, even if their Jewishness was the basis for arguing (as did the AIU) for their proximity to the French, it was also, inherently, a mark of separation from the French.

Thus, the Frenchness of North African Jews was never stable and was always contingent. Raphaël, in his childhood in late 1960s France, recognizes this when he describes his 'physique presque européen', with the adverb 'presque' being the operative word here. Raphaël's specific phrasing calls to mind Homi Bhabha's theoretical exploration of the ambivalence of mimicry, which he defines as 'almost the same, but not quite'.[43] This ambivalence, rooted in the space between the almost and the not quite, produces 'slippage', 'excess', and 'difference'.[44] Bhabha's concept of mimicry refers to the social, cultural, and political imitation of colonizers by the colonized or, in neo-colonial/postcolonial contexts, of former colonizers (and their descendants) by the formerly colonized (and their descendants). On the one hand, the slippage that occurs in the 'almost, but not quite' maintains the difference between colonizer and colonized and is thus crucial to the colonial project. This is a phenomenon that Frantz Fanon broadly examines in *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952) in terms of the collective and individual neuroses that colonization produces in the colonized. Fanon's account of colonial imitation examines the limitations and effects of upward social mobility premised on the ability to wear 'white masks' (by imitating the colonizer's language, dress, culture, manners, etc.). On the other hand, in Bhabha's reading, mimicry is not merely the imperfect, submissive assimilation of the norms of the colonizers. For Bhabha, mimicry is also a form of subversion: 'the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing

41 Mandel, p. 3.
42 Arkin, p. 223.
43 Homi Bhabha, 'Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse', *October*, 28 (1984), p. 127.
44 Bhabha, p. 126.

the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority'.[45] In other words, because mimicry's slippage only produces imitations (or, alternatively, mockeries) of the colonizers, it also subverts their power by magnifying the contradictions inherent in colonial and postcolonial relations. In this sense, the later violently antisemitic encounters that Raphaël experiences illustrate precisely how troubling his mimicry can be to white supremacy. Raphaël's position is precarious. At times, his 'white' mask protects him, but at other times, when the mask starts to drop, his almost-but-not-quite-white condition exposes him to the regulatory violence of whiteness. This liminality, as expressed by one Algerian Jew in mid-twentieth-century France, is like 'sitting between two chairs' or, even more poignantly, to quote Salman Rushdie, like 'fall[ing] between two stools'.[46]

It is this liminal position occupied by North African Jews – regardless of the relative advantages procured by being designated, in colonial discourse, as being more assimilable – that allows for a rapprochement with their Muslim counterparts, as Mounir recognizes at several points in the novel.[47] Like Raphaël who recognizes his liminality with the adverb 'presque', Mounir also recognizes the common liminality of the Jewish and Muslim experience in France in the same way:

> C'est précisément ce « presque » qui les rend proches de nous: il contient toutes les failles culturelles et les habitudes traditionnelles ou religieuses qui ne manquent jamais de les trahir. […] Nous parlons la même langue, écoutons les mêmes musiques, possédons les mêmes traditions culinaires. Nos relations sont donc assez paradoxales, faites d'affection et de crainte, de respect et de défiance.[48]

Cultural similarities are evoked here in order to emphasize the proximity between Maghrebi Jews and Muslims. From Albert Memmi to Colette Fellous, this is a common, longstanding refrain from numerous Maghrebi

45 Bhabha, p. 129.

46 Sarah Beth Sussman, *Changing Lands, Changing Identities: The Migration of Algerian Jewry to France*, 1954–1967, PhD thesis (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2002), p. 87. Salman Rushdie, 'Imaginary Homelands', *London Review of Books*, 7.18 (1982), p. 19.

47 European colonists perceived native Jews and Muslims in this hierarchical manner – based on their perceived proximity to Europeanness – from the very beginning of European dominance in Morocco (and other parts of North Africa). For example, the first secretary of the French Legation in Tangiers wrote the following in 1866 about Moroccan Jews: 'Ce sont des courtiers habiles, des intermédiares indispensables entre Européens et indigènes. […] Instruits, ils ont une supériorité incontestable sur les Maures ignorants'. See Mohammed Kenbib, *Juifs et musulmans au Maroc: Des origines à nos jours* (Paris: Tallandier, 2016), p. 51.

48 Cohen, p. 34.

Jewish literary works in French. For example, Mounir's (or Thierry Cohen's) emphasis on the language, music, and culinary traditions shared by Maghrebi Jews and Muslims is strikingly similar to the Tunisian Jewish writer Hubert Haddad's description of 'les juifs d'Orient' in previous periods sharing 'la même culture, la même cuisine, la même langue que leurs frères musulmans'.[49] Yet, Mounir also describes relations between Jews and Muslims as paradoxical (and affective), alluding to 'affection' and 'crainte', 'respect' and 'défiance'. Indeed, North African Jewish and Muslim immigrants to France, particularly of the first generation, shared a common heritage and culture and, perhaps more importantly, were similarly racialized, often lived in the same spaces, and patronized similar establishments and services, such as halal or kosher butchers.[50] Despite all of this, Mounir's evocation of 'fear' and 'distrust' highlights the 'affective difference' in the way Jews and Muslims relate to memories of 'colonial and wartime Algeria' and later the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.[51] Then and now, declarations of Jewish and Muslim sameness are articulated against the realities of structural differences.

Multidirectional memory and embodied solidarities

However, for Mounir and Raphaël, at the start of the novel, in the France of the mid-to-late 1960s, their shared racialized, 'othered' position is more important than either the differential memories of colonial North Africa and decolonization or the differential attitudes to Israel and Palestine. This is crystalized in their solidarity in the face of Alexandre, a racist bully at school, and a racist school administration that punishes them without punishing Alexandre:

> Nous avons dorénavant un ennemi en commun. Nous en aurons d'autres dans les années à venir. D'autres Alexandre, d'autres cons, d'autres racistes, d'autres idiots, petits frimeurs sans envergure, grandes gueules sans courage.[52]

49 Hubert Haddad qtd. in Rebekah Vince, '"L'humain n'a pas de frontière": An Interview with Hubert Haddad', *Bulletin of Francophone Postcolonial Studies*, 8.1 (2017), 2–10 (p. 6).

50 Paul Silverstein, 'The Fantasy and Violence of Religious Imagination: Islamophobia and Anti-Semitism in France and North Africa', in *Islamophobia/Islamophilia: Beyond the Politics of Enemy and Friend*, ed. by Andrew Shyrock (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2010), 141–72 (pp. 144–45).

51 Silverstein, p. 145.

52 Cohen, p. 76.

For Raphaël and Mounir, the prevalence of an 'enemy in common', which is to say white supremacy, in their day-to-day life overrides any other consideration that might drive a wedge between them. As children, this common enemy is personified by Alexandre and other racist individuals – students and teachers alike. As young adults, their common enemy is racism, expressed by random individuals in random interactions they have, sometimes by 'ordinary' individuals, sometimes by far-right provocateurs, sometimes by the police, and sometimes by political figures. Raphaël and Mounir are joined by other Jews and Muslims:

> Autour de nous gravitait une petite bande dans laquelle musulmans et juifs s'entendaient à merveille. […] Nous, c'étaient les « étrangers », ceux qui possédaient une histoire nourrie d'ailleurs. Juifs et Arabes parlaient la même langue. Un français parsemé d'expressions de là-bas.[53]

In other words, this youthful Jewish-Muslim solidarity is not solely based on a shared history 'nourrie d'ailleurs', but also on a transcultural practice of anti-racism that corresponds to Michael Rothberg's notion of multidirectional memory in which memory is not a zero-sum game and is often in dialogue with other memories and other histories: 'Memories are mobile; histories are implicated in each other [and] understanding political conflict entails understanding the interlacing of memories in the force field of public space'.[54] Rothberg's model suggests that histories of conflict and violence are often entangled with each other and, thus, attempting to understand different histories separately, and not comparatively, will always only produce partial understandings. Within such a model, Rothberg proposes that 'a radically democratic politics of memory needs to include a differentiated empirical history, moral solidarity with victims of diverse injustices, and an ethics of comparison that coordinates the asymmetrical claims of those victims'.[55] Indeed, Raphaël and Mounir express an embodied, differentiated solidarity that does not flatten differences, but emphasizes them as necessary points of convergence. Mounir, after standing up to a teacher's revisionism and denialism, describes how he felt personally affected, even if before this incident he did not think the Shoah as part of 'his' history:

> Les propos de cette prof m'avaient giflé, je m'étais senti concerné. Car sa

53 Cohen, p. 193.
54 Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 312.
55 Michael Rothberg, 'From Gaza to Warsaw: Mapping Multidirectional Memory', *Criticism*, 53 (2011), 523–48 (p. 526).

> bêtise me menaçait également. J'étais devenu juif quelques instants puis citoyen d'un monde dans lequel j'avais mon mot à dire, où je voulais grandir. J'avais découvert ma conscience d'homme.[56]

In the space of several seconds, Mounir goes from 'juif' to 'citoyen' to 'homme', indicating an instinctive negotiation between particular and universal. More importantly, Mounir takes a stand against his teacher as an 'implicated subject', beyond the framework of victim, perpetrator, and bystander.[57] He embodies his solidarity with Jews, which is to say that he is translating his anti-antisemitic conviction into praxis. Raphaël, for his part, in the context of *ratonnades* (widespread extrajudicial, racially motivated assaults and killings by law enforcement officials and white supremacists of North Africans or those perceived as such; the equivalent of Paki-bashings in the United Kingdom), 's'était battu contre des skins casseurs d'Arabes'.[58] Both Raphaël and Mounir feel an obligation to embody their antiracist beliefs by directly and physically combating antisemitism and Islamophobia – as expressions of white supremacy – because they feel similarly marginalized as ethnoreligious, non-white minorities, and immigrants in France.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not significantly affect their interpersonal relations precisely because Raphaël and Mounir maintain an embodied solidarity against white supremacy, in part based on their ongoing comparisons and juxtapositions of the memory of the Shoah and of colonial violence. However, in the 1980s, Mounir and Raphaël begin to feel the effects of conflict in the Middle East. In particular, the 1982 Lebanon War, which began with Israel's invasion of Southern Lebanon, marks the first, lasting dispute between the two friends. They begin to argue with each other, taking oppositional positions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in general and the Lebanon War in particular. Mounir and Raphaël manage, however, to have a reasoned conversation about the conflict. Both of them agree that it is *unsound* ('pas sain') of them to each take the defence of one or the other side based on their ethnoreligious identifications. Mounir notes, 'ce n'est pas la religion qui devrait guider notre engagement. […] Nous devrions réagir en tant que Français'.[59] Mounir is arguing that the duo ought to interact with each other within a republican, universal framework in which they are both French citizens, undistinguished by their particularities. Engaging

56 Cohen, p. 229.
57 Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2019).
58 Cohen, pp. 229–30.
59 Cohen, p. 365.

with each other as universal French citizens would be to act in accordance with reason, while engaging as a function of their particular Jewish and Muslim identifications would be to act in accordance with unreason.

Implicitly, then, despite their shared antiracist values, Mounir positions reason as the preserve of the unmarked, universal French and unreason as the preserve of the ethnoreligiously marked, particular Jew and Muslim. Raphaël agrees in principle, but contends that they became friends not because they were French, but precisely because their Frenchness was always contingent due to their Jewishness and Muslimness. Raphaël is implying that they cannot react 'en tant que Français' because they never truly belonged to the category of 'French'. He is also implying that the reason they became friends in the first place was the similar, marginalized positions occupied by Jews and Muslims in the French imaginary. It is because the duo was unable to entirely pass as universal French citizens – i.e. white French citizens – that they developed bonds of solidarity based on their shared liminality. However, Mounir counters that this was not entirely true and that their shared liminality was not due to their Jewishness and Muslimness, but to their Moroccan heritage: 'Tu réécris l'histoire, Raphaël. Nous sommes devenus amis parce que nous étions marocains. Deux Marocains […] perdus et apeurés au milieu d'une classe de Français'.[60] Thus, on the one hand, Raphaël ascribes the foundation of their friendship to the proximity of Jewish and Muslim experience in French colonial and postcolonial history and present, while Mounir ascribes it to their common experience of discrimination as Moroccans in France, regardless of their ethnoreligious affiliations. Either way, Raphaël reminds Mounir that they were othered because they were Jewish, Muslim, Moroccan, and immigrants. The 'goys', he says, referring to white French people (and not including Muslims),[61] are not only incapable of differentiating Algerians from Moroccans from Iranians, but also Jews from Muslims: 'certains nous disaient que pour eux juifs et arabes, c'était pareil'.[62] Mounir agrees, adding that 'toi et moi le pensions aussi, parfois'.[63] Mounir's remark acknowledges, first, the significant similarities between the figure of the 'Jew' and that of the 'Muslim' in European imaginaries in the past and present[64] – and the convergence of the 'sale arabe' and the 'sale juif' in white supremacy – and, second, the cultural

60 Cohen, p. 365.
61 The term 'goy' commonly designates non-Jews in Yiddish and Modern Hebrew.
62 Cohen, p. 366.
63 Cohen, p. 366.
64 See Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

affinities shared by Maghrebi Jews and Muslims. Mounir ends their conversation with sentiments of complicity and solidarity: 'nous échangeons un regard complice, empli d'images et d'éclats de vie'.[65] Indeed, despite their different views on Middle East conflict, which are implied to reflect those of 'their' respective communities, the similar positions occupied by Jews and Muslims as ethnoreligious and more or less racialized minorities, allows for the designation of a 'common enemy' in the rising Front National. As such, this common enemy and the recognition that 'pour eux juifs et arabes, c'est pareil' allows Raphaël and Mounir to defer any possible conflict over their growing political differences regarding Israel and Palestine.

Disintegration and polarization

In the final third of the novel, Cohen's narrative focuses on the promise and eventual demise of SOS Racisme as an extended metaphor for the eventual disintegration of relations between Jews and Muslims in France. The creation of SOS Racisme, in which the Union des étudiants juifs de France (UEJF) was a key collaborator, following the election of François Mitterrand in 1981 and the March for Equality and Against Racism in 1983, dubbed 'la Marche des beurs' by the French press, represented the peak of solidarity between Jewish and Muslim antiracist activists. This solidarity, however, waned towards the end of the decade due to several factors. First, the electoral breakthrough of the Front National normalized a xenophobic, anti-immigrant platform that was adopted by other more mainstream parties. Second, the outbreak of the First Intifada (1987–1993) further heightened divisions and polarized perspectives between Jews and Muslims in France. Third, the *affaire du foulard* (1989) further stigmatized Muslims as the problematic, unassimilated ethnoreligious minority, par excellence. In this context, the antiracist Jewish-Muslim solidarity that found its peak expression through Jewish and Muslim collaboration within SOS Racisme broke down as Muslim activists increasingly emphasized the particular, structural, and institutional violence and biases faced by Muslims, while Jewish activists increasingly emphasized the long history and assimilated nature of French Jews.

The breakdown of Jewish-Muslim antiracist mobilization, marked by the high-profile disaffiliation of the UEJF from SOS Racisme, is reflected in Cohen's novel by the gradual distance between Mounir and Raphaël

65 Cohen, p. 366.

throughout the 1980s. Eventually, without consciously intending to, the pair cease to have any contact with each other, as Raphaël becomes increasingly active in French Zionist organizations and Mounir in Maghrebi and pro-Palestine movements. At the end of the 1980s, Raphaël marries a Jewish woman named Ghislaine whom he meets at a dinner organized by the Mouvement de l'Alya de France.[66] He quickly falls in love with her, noting his surprise since he had never before dated a Jewish woman. He does not, however, invite Mounir to his wedding, because 'il n'appartenait plus à mon univers'.[67] A year after Raphaël's wedding, Mounir marries Fadila, whom he met a few years prior at the 'Marche des Beurs', and who is active in (and initiates Mounir into) Palestinian solidarity movements. Mounir, similarly, does not invite Raphaël to his wedding, not without some sadness:

> Des connaissances communes m'avaient rapporté qu'il militait dans une organisation sioniste, était devenu pratiquant. Il avait changé et je n'étais pas certain d'apprécier sa nouvelle personnalité. Lycéens, nous avions un jour évoqué nos mariages, et ri en imaginant la scène. « Un juif témoin du mariage de son ami musulman, ça aurait de la gueule, non? » s'était esclaffé Raphaël. C'était il y a longtemps. Et nous étions alors différents.[68]

The disintegration of Mounir and Raphaël's friendship, which was based on their pluralist commitments, is due to their particularist identifications, linked in part to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Raphaël and Mounir come to be absorbed into larger 'Jewish' and 'Muslim' communities where their 'Moroccanness' takes on a secondary importance. Raphaël's activism within Zionist organizations and Mounir's affiliation with pro-Palestinian groups render their interactions impossible. The end of their friendship is a metaphor for the disintegration of the alliance between SOS Racisme and the UEJF. Like the Jewish-Muslim solidarity symbolized by the union between SOS Racisme and the UEJF, Mounir and Raphaël's childhood in the early to mid-1970s, their adolescence in the late 1970s, and young adulthood in the 1980s tell the story of a friendship between two Jewish and Muslim outsiders that is increasingly challenged by domestic and international political developments. In Cohen's narrative, following the disintegration of Mounir and Raphaël's friendship, major domestic and international political events of the 1990s, 2000s, and 2010s further polarize Jewish and Muslim identities. While the pair enjoy relative professional success

66 *Aliyah* is a Hebrew term meaning ascent and refers to the immigration of Jews from the diaspora to Israel.
67 Cohen, p. 387.
68 Cohen, pp. 448–49.

and start families of their own, the decades that follow the end of their friendship are marked by the political and social anxieties they experience. Throughout these decades, Mounir and Raphaël interpret and experience these events – such as the 1990 Gulf War, the 1995 series of terrorist attacks in France, the Second Intifada, 9/11, new antisemitism, Islamophobia, the 2003 Iraq War, Dieudonné, the 2005 Danish Cartoons affair, the 2006 murder of Ilan Halimi, the 2012 Toulouse school shooting, the rise of the Islamic State, and the 2014 Gaza war – in divergent manners, as a function of their ethnoreligious identifications.

While Cohen's narrative presents relations between Jews and Muslims (and Mounir and Raphaël's friendship) as increasingly uncertain throughout the mid to late 1980s and the 1990s, it is the post-2000 period that marks an important, and deadly, turning point. Raphaël, in particular, is strongly affected by the statistical rise of antisemitic attacks since 2000, high-profile murders (Ilan Halimi in 2006) and terrorist attacks (Toulouse in 2012), as well as the antisemitic nature of some anti-Israel protests in France during the 2014 Gaza war. Increasingly worried about the safety of his family in a France that he now understands to be openly and violently antisemitic, Raphaël finally takes the decision to leave France for Israel when a group of Muslim youths attack his son who is wearing a Star of David. When his wife cries out, 'regarde ce qui'ils ont fait à notre fils', it is unclear whether 'ils' refers to the four individuals who attacked their son or to Muslims in general.[69]

When Mounir hears of the attack, he decides that, whatever their differences, he cannot remain indifferent and must offer his sympathy and solidarity to his erstwhile friend.[70] Despite Mounir's good intentions, Raphaël does not take kindly to his former friend's gesture:

> — Tu ne comprends plus quoi? Qu'aujourd'hui les musulmans veulent tuer des juifs? Que les islamistes rêvent de terminer le boulot commencé par les nazis? Demande à ta femme ce qu'elle en pense! Elle milite toujours pour les pauvres Palestiniens qui sont contre les méchants Israéliens? Et toi, tu défiles encore aux côtés de ceux qui soutiennent les terroristes du Hamas? Tu portes peut-être même le drapeau de l'État islamique dans ces manifs qui appellent au meurtre des juifs![71]

In his shock and anger at the attack on his son, Raphaël ceases to see Mounir as Mounir, but as one of 'them'. The aforementioned domestic and

69 Cohen, p. 650.
70 Cohen, p. 652.
71 Cohen, pp. 654–55.

international events of the past three decades and, more importantly, the media frames applied to them have polarized Jewish and Muslims identities as fixed, oppositional categories. In this context, Raphaël no longer sees Mounir, his childhood Moroccan friend and fellow outsider in postcolonial, 'white' Christian-heritage, secularist France, but only Mounir, a Muslim like the youths who attacked his son. In this way, Raphaël comes to adopt the reductive, binary understanding shared by the four young Muslims who attacked his son because they noticed his Star of David. His attackers, who tied their pro-Palestinianism to their Muslimness, treated Raphaël's son's visible Jewishness as a marker of Zionism, support for the Israeli government and military, and Western neo-imperialism. Ironically, when he castigates Mounir, Raphaël adopts a similarly narrow and dangerous definition of ethnoreligious labels.

Conclusion

Thus, Cohen's novel charts the life stories of Mounir and Raphaël against the backdrop of decades of social and political developments affecting understandings of Jewish and Muslim ethnoreligious identifications and relations. As children, they grew close due to their shared otherness as Jewish and Muslim Moroccans in France. As teenagers, they increasingly identified as Jewish and Muslim, respectively, in a France that repeatedly excluded them. They experienced antisemitism and Islamophobia as interrelated expressions of white supremacy against which they based their embodied solidarity. As adults, however, the meanings of their Jewishness and Muslimness hardened and diverged. 'Jew' and 'Muslim' became fixed categories of a set of oppositional stereotypes. Cohen's account of Mounir and Raphaël's eventually doomed friendship is also an account of how the diversity of individual experience and the hybridity of identities can be overshadowed by privileging relations between large groups of people solely through categories of 'Jews' and 'Muslims' that have come to acquire a set of political meanings beyond the purely ethnoreligious.

Cohen's *Avant la haine* highlights past Jewish-Muslim solidarities in the face of white supremacy, while also pointing out the blind spots of universalism in France. Yet, despite this embedded critique of universalism, *Avant la haine* implicitly returns, at various junctures, to the promise of universalism. Lauren Berlant's (2011) concept of cruel optimism helps us make sense of this apparent contradiction. Berlant argues that 'an optimistic attachment is cruel when the object/scene of desire is itself an obstacle to

fulfilling the very wants that bring people to it'.[72] Berlant's understanding of cruel optimism is based on her analysis of the attachment that citizens of contemporary post-industrial societies maintain to the promises of neoliberal capitalism, subsumed, in the United States, by the term 'the American dream'. Berlant's indictment of the weaponization of hope to stifle anti-capitalist consciousness is premised on the observation that, even as citizens of developed nations increasingly understand themselves to be oppressed (economically and politically) by the demands of capitalist production, they still aspire to the increasingly unattainable dreams offered by this politico-economic model. As such, even as it becomes increasingly clear that neoliberal capitalist societies are unable to fulfil these dreams, citizens maintain their aspirations within a structure that continues to disadvantage them. Within the diegetic world of *Avant la haine*, the hope that is being weaponized, in the disinterest of the protagonists, is universalism. The characters in the novel appear to recognize the failure of universalism to universalize non-white minorities, but still continue to return to its illusionary promise. More importantly, at times, Raphaël and Mounir clearly perceive universalism simply to be a way for the dominant majority to ignore racial injustice through the invocation of post-racialism. Yet, they continue to place, at the very least, a modicum of hope in the ideal of universalism. The concept of cruel optimism helps us understand the protagonists' persistent attachment to universalism even as they express a certain level of disillusionment with it. In the novel, there is an alternative to the cruel optimism of universalism that is occasionally explored. This alternative emerges precisely at those moments when certain individuals are most vulnerable and when others reject normative universalism and, instead, engage in a politics of differentiated, embodied solidarity rooted in a perspective of transcultural and multidirectional memory. Yet, the possibility of a contemporary praxis of embodied solidarity ebbs and flows throughout the novel, before eventually being extinguished under the weight of polarized identities.

By placing the protagonists' friendship and its rupture in the context of several decades of the politicization and polarization of Jewish and Muslim identities and relations, *Avant la haine* carefully explores the history of this polarization and thus implicitly argues that the current state of relations is neither an inescapable nor inherent nature. In this way, Cohen provides a detailed portrait of the danger of negating the hybrid nature of interactions between individuals and the complex nature of identity. Yet, the novel does

72 Laura Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), p. 227.

not articulate a counter-narrative in the present, thereby suggesting the futility of contemporary relations. Indeed, the novel begins and ends with a sense of pessimism about the future of Jewish and Muslim interactions and relations. This sense of pessimism, which appears to be representative of the handful of contemporary French novels that depict Jewish-Muslim relations, suggests the difficulty of articulating counter-narratives in a contemporary context that consistently emphasizes Jewish-Muslim polarization, overdetermined by theories of a new Muslim antisemitism and an importation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The brief flickers of optimism in Cohen's novel lie in those past moments when Jewish and Muslim characters engage in embodied solidarity, organizing themselves, and taking direct action against racist discourses and actions.

Important Notice

Liverpool University Press' subscriptions order processing and distribution is now managed by us and not by Turpin Distribution.

This means that all subscriptions related queries should be sent to LUP directly using the contact details below:

Email: subscriptions@liverpool.ac.uk
Tel: 0151 795 1080 (Monday to Friday, 9am-5pm UK time)

We are working hard to ensure that the transition between the systems is as smooth as possible but if you find anything that requires correction or if you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact LUP.