

H-France Salon

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## The Architecture of Home in the Works of Albert Memmi

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“There exists in oral literature,” 96-year-old Albert Memmi told me during an interview in Paris in 2016, “a hero called ‘Juha’ who was an imbecile, naive, and at the same time very cunning.”<sup>1</sup> “My mother who was illiterate and Berber,” he continued, “would invent elaborate stories with the character of Juha when she had a need to say something, to make a point. Juha said *this*, Juha said *that*.” Memmi paused before pulling himself up in his chair, a warm blanket tossed over his legs. And then he slowly began to tell a story about his mother and Juha pronouncing the J in Juha as *šha*, as is common in the Judeo-Arabic spoken by Tunisian Jews:

Let me give you an example. One day, on laundry day, I climbed up to the rooftop. The women in my country do laundry on the rooftop because the rooftops are flat, obviously. My mother was very busy, washing the laundry and suspending it from the line to dry. And so she was busy and a little annoyed at me and then, all of a sudden, one shirt that was attached let go, the chemise flew away. And, at this moment, Juha begins to cry, he moaned ‘Oh la la, this is horrible.’ So my mother said to him, ‘What’s gotten into you? It’s only a shirt that has left, it’s nothing to worry about.’ And Juha responds, ‘Yes, but I could have been inside!’ (translation mine).

My co-director, Mo Scarpelli, and I did not include this scene in our short film, *EL HARA* (2017), but when I returned to the film’s transcripts, I recalled how animated Memmi had become, how he lit up when speaking of his mother, the flat rooftop, and Juha.<sup>2</sup> He enjoyed telling this story. The introduction of a fictional character, Juha, into this childhood memory disturbs the grounds of autobiography; it suggests the extent to which all personhood is fictional.

Over the century of his life, Memmi never shook his attachment to the country of his birth even as he became politically disillusioned with post-independence Tunisia. In a 1976 interview with Victor Malka, he described his childhood neighborhood, the Hara, the historic Jewish quarter in the medina, the old city, as a “kingdom of the poor.” Thirty years later, in 2016, he told me, “That was poetics. I don’t really believe that. The poor don’t have a kingdom, it’s not true. I

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<sup>1</sup> Filmed in Memmi’s apartment in Paris and in the city of Tunis, *EL HARA* weaves the quotidian sights and sounds of the Hara, now known as the Hafsia, with Memmi’s commentaries—written and oral—about his formative years before he and other Tunisian Jews left Tunisia in the wake of colonial and national upheavals.

<sup>2</sup> The character Juha appears in stories across North Africa and the Middle East. During our discussion, Memmi noted that he had collected over 50 stories about Juha, which he hoped to publish someday; he added that the French have a similar folk character, the *renard* (fox).

withdraw that statement.”<sup>3</sup> When I asked him about the Hara, he declared that “the misery, the difficulties, the filth, the bad humors, the diseases” made it an impossible place to live: “Perhaps, perhaps, it was better that they leave.” Yet the impossibility of completely breaking from one’s past—even for those who leave—is a recursive theme in his oeuvre: “Those who passed through the Hara were imbued with the Hara. We do not forget our origins.”

Memmi’s memories of his youth and young adulthood were entangled with his reflections on colonialism. The French settlers “could have cared less about the Hara.” They were much more interested in “planting grapevines.” Highly attuned to how colonial relations were produced in the places settled by the French, Memmi insisted that colonialism was produced dialectically—by the colonizers and the colonized—in the intimacies of the everyday (1973 [1957]). Tuning into the lower frequencies where colonial regimes of truth were imposed, he revealed the fantasies that mobilize our attachments to each other, to abstractions like race, gender, class, and nation, and to the material world we inhabit. The protagonists of his first three novels—*La Statue de sel* (1953), *Agar* (1955), and *Le Scorpion* (1969)—all have difficulty reconciling the “heterogeneous parts” of themselves (2007 [1955], pp. 52), the specificity of their plural identity as Jewish, Tunisian, and French. Memmi described his first novel as a confession rooted in autobiography. A confession that solicited anger not because what he said was not true, but because “One should not air one’s dirty laundry outside the family” (2013 [1953], pp. 1). However, it is precisely this dirty laundry that became the source of his insight into the variations of privilege in a colonial context and that inflect his novels of everyday life with such rich detail. The sights, sounds, and smells of home are the contested terrain where Memmi works through how home—and the self—is mediated by the Other. As he told me, “There is a constant tension, a distance, between *who* we are and *who* we become.” Memmi evokes what Michel Foucault might call an “historical ontology” (1988) of the self.<sup>4</sup> Who am I? How do I know? How did I come to be?

In EL HARA, Mo and I took our visual cues from Memmi himself, who employs architecture to great effect in his novels. Neither inherently liberatory nor oppressive, nor necessarily good or bad, the urban landscape reflects how Memmi’s characters make sense of the world. The walls of an apartment building, the *impasse* (a dead-end street) in which one was raised, or the rooftop of a newly constructed house index their anxieties and desires. The literary scholar Lia Brozgal observes that Memmi’s preoccupation with questions of identity manifest in his dutiful descriptions of “a particular place of origin,” with a “house, street, country, [and its] environs,” which have implications for “genealogy, etymology, and identity” (2013, pp. 49-51). In our

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<sup>3</sup> Memmi’s retraction resonates with a remark made by Marie, the wife in *Agar*. After her Tunisian Jewish husband took her on a tour of his childhood neighborhood, she says, “Oh, tu sais, la misère ce n’est pas très beau...et puis ces odeurs !” (1955 [2007], pp. 61). See Albert Memmi. *Agar*. (Tunis: Cérès Éditions, 1955 [2007]).

<sup>4</sup> In “On the Genealogy of Ethics” (1988), Foucault describes his concept of genealogy as a “historical ontology,” a method and form of analysis that begins in the present. See Michel Foucault. *Politics, Philosophy, Ethics, Culture: Interviews and Other Writings, 1977-1984*. (New York: Routledge, 1988).

interview, Memmi echoed the narrator of *Agar* who insisted that “ces quartiers” were “mon terroir, c’était là que je me sentais le plus à l’aise...” (pp. 61).

Like Memmi himself, the protagonists in several of his novels grow up in an *impasse* in the medina.<sup>5</sup> In *La Statue de Sel*, the *impasse* is marked by its peculiar position on the edge of the Jewish and Arab quarter; in *Le Scorpion* it is described as quiet and calm but surveilled by each and every neighbor. For these characters, the medina’s streets are more akin to a hive than a labyrinth, a place where there is an indefinite number of beginnings and endings, a life marked by a certain illusion of pattern and predictability.<sup>6</sup> However, their affinity for the *impasse* dissipates as they get older, transforming from a source of comfort and conviviality into one of confinement and isolation. The break with the *impasse*, the street they once called home, illustrates their estrangement from their families and upbringing, and marks their assimilation into the French colonial world. The impulse to find a causality between the life Memmi lived and the stories he narrated—as if his biography authenticates his oeuvre—is hard to escape. But the parallels between Memmi’s life and that of his characters, their Tunisian Jewish background and colonial experience, do not override the many instances where they diverge.

*Agar* tells a story of how one’s sense of self shifts when placed in the position of having to defend one’s home, one’s origins.<sup>7</sup> It is an allegory of the colonial relationship famously theorized in Memmi’s seminal anti-colonial text *Portrait du colonisé précédé du Portrait du colonisateur* (Strike 2003) in which he explicitly evokes the mixed couple as a site where the inferiority complex of the colonized manifests itself. The blond woman with her customs, clothes, food, and architecture appears superior and worthy of mimicry simply because she is a

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<sup>5</sup> The medina is often described as a labyrinth or maze by French settlers and middle-class Tunisians who grew up outside its walls. In her memoir, Fatema Mernissi describes the fear the medina of Fes, Morocco invoked in the French. See Fatema Mernissi. *Dreams of Trespass: Tales of a Harem Girlhood*. (Cambridge: Perseus Books, 1994). This was also the case in Algiers as seen in Gillo Pontecorvo. *Battle of Algiers* (1966). Igor Film with the Participation of Casbah Film and in Zeynep Çelik. *Urban Forms and Colonial Confrontations: Algiers Under French Rule* (Berkeley: UC Press. 1997).

<sup>6</sup> *L’impasse* is the title of the first chapter in *La Statue de sel*. See Albert Memmi. *La Statue de Sel*. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, 1955 [1966]). See also Albert Memmi. *Le Scorpion*. Translated by Eleanor Levieux. (Chicago: Viking Press Inc. 1969 [1971]). Lia Brozgal writes about the curious place of the Impasse Tarfoune in Memmi’s oeuvre. She describes it as a liminal space, a “site of mixity and difference,” that belongs to everyone and none (pp. 51). See Lia Nicole Brozgal. *Albert Memmi and the Production of Theory: Against Autobiography*. U. (Lincoln: Nebraska Press, 2013). For a reflection on the Impasse Tronja, the street where Memmi grew up, and Impasse Tarfoune, where several of his characters do, see Margaux Fitoussi. “Metaphor and Memory: Reflections on the Making of EL HARA (2017) featuring Albert Memmi” in Chiara Camarda, Amanda Sharick, Katharine G. Trostel, eds., *The Venice Ghetto: A Memory Space that Travels* (Cambridge: UMass Press, 2021).

<sup>7</sup> The title *Agar* has also been translated into English as *Strangers*. In the Book of Genesis, Agar is the mother of Ishmael from whom all Muslims are said to descend.

“product made by the colonizer” (1973 [1957], pp. 149).<sup>8</sup> Published one year before Tunisian independence and two years before the *Portrait, Agar* explores the long shadow cast by French colonialism on a newly-wed mixed couple: Marie, a blond French Catholic woman from Alsace, and an unnamed French-educated Tunisian Jewish doctor. The fact that Memmi sometimes used the name of his character Marie to refer to his real-life wife Germaine (Brozgal 2013: 53-54) made many readers believe that *Agar* was rooted in autobiography. Life informs Memmi’s oeuvre, but his oeuvre also spills into his life, blurring what we might consider reality.

Marie, who settles with her husband in the city of his birth, Tunis, comes to reject everything that has to do with him, his family, and the customs of his Sephardi Jewish community. Even as the narrator foreshadows the irreconcilability of their mixed marriage, he hopes, in the beginning, that by sharing what makes Tunis home, his French wife will come to love it too:

Je soupçonnais bien, quelquefois, qu’elle n’adhérait pas complètement aux êtres et aux lieux que je croyais faire partie de ma vie.

Je refaisais avec elle des itinéraires tout tracés, le tour rituel du quartier ou notre promenade d’adolescents ; la flânerie le long de l’avenue centrale jusqu’au boulevard, le retour par le trottoir d’en face et la station finale sur la petite place ronde, près des étals de fruits rangés en pyramides et mystérieusement éclairés par les lampes à carbure...

— Décidément, me dit-elle, je ne peux supporter cette odeur, elle me donne mal à la tête.

— Je m’étonnai ; j’avais si souvent dormi, les soirs de fête, du jasmin sur l’oreiller. (pp. 43)

The sensations of the narrator’s home are not only markers of the couple’s cultural and religious differences but the arenas where Marie expresses her distaste for her husband’s home, his country of origin, and where the intimate dimensions of the encounter between colonizer and colonized come powerfully to the fore.

Marie sees Tunisia and her in-laws as *sans goût* (without taste) and expresses *dégoût* (distaste) at their customs, practices, and decor. Doors and windows that do not quite close, the “overly emotional” exuberance of joys and sorrows, the humidity and the bright light all contribute to her general malaise. She can barely conceal her disgust at foggy glasses on a dinner table, the loud sounds of radios, and the smells of hot oil and grilled meats. These objects, especially food, constitute the “very ‘stuff’ of disgust” (Ahmed 2004, pp. 83). When Marie recoils from the table, gingerly picking up a glass with two fingers as if to minimize all contact between her skin and the object’s surface, the boundaries “between subjects and objects are undone in the moment of their making” (Ahmed 2004, pp. 83).<sup>9</sup> Over the course of the novel, Marie puts more and more

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<sup>8</sup> See Albert Memmi. *Portrait du Colonisé précédé du Portrait du Colonisateur*. (Paris: Payot, 1957 [1973]) and Joëlle Tessier Strike. *Albert Memmi: Autobiographie et autographie*. (Paris: L’Harmattan, 2003).

<sup>9</sup> In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed writes that disgust “has its correlates in an affective landscape common to communities of privilege and power throughout the world” (2004, pp. 222). See Sara Ahmed. *The Cultural Politics of Emotions*. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U. Press, 2004) and Ann Laura Stoler, “The Politics of “Gut Feelings”: On Sentiment in Governance and the Law” in Know, *A Journal on the Formation of Knowledge* 2 (2018): 207-228.

distance between herself and these potential sources of contamination. She ascribes to a sensorium that “policés the boundaries of the French middle class” (Stoler 2018, pp. 220), one that is as much racialized as it is classed. Fear of contamination by the Other, by Tunisia, or more specifically by the Tunisian Jew, inflects all of Marie’s interactions with the people, objects, and landscapes that make up her husband’s world.

In an early scene, the narrator proudly but anxiously takes Marie to a popular port town, La Goulette, north of Tunis, where he spent several childhood summers. He is happy to see her tentatively enjoying the view of fishing boats, the Spanish fort of Charles V, and the Mediterranean Sea—picturesque images often depicted in French colonial-era photographs, postcards, and paintings. But her pleasure is only temporary:

— Oh, dommage ! Pourquoi cette promenade en ciment ? Que c’est laid ! Ne pouvait-on laisser le sable nu !

Devant le casino, elle s’indigna :

— Quelle vilaine verrue !

Un instant je songeai à défendre et la promenade et le casino ; puis je dus m’avouer que la construction était, en effet, une monstrueuse excroissance qui agaçait un paysage splendide ; la coulée de ciment figeait, écrasait la légèreté mouvante de la plage. Je découvris avec étonnement que je voyais, dorénavant, le pays comme les gens, avec ses yeux. (1955 [2007], pp. 62-63).

A concrete *blemish* in the urban landscape. Buildings that compel Marie to recoil. The narrator can no longer view Tunis in the same way nor conceal the painful experience of seeing his home through her eyes.<sup>10</sup>

By moving out of his parents’ home and into their own, the narrator hopes to secure the couple’s “new origin,” a fresh start. He takes Marie apartment hunting, “comme si, en en visitant, en en touchant les murs, je risquais par quelque magie de nous les rendre plus accessibles,” but “sans trop s’en rendre compte peut-être, elle commençait à détester ma ville natale” (pp. 77-78). Marie rejects everything to do with the Tunisian urban landscape. Ultimately, she begs him to move to the quiet northern suburbs far from his family and downtown Tunis: “Ici, je serai chez moi, je vivrai à ma manière, je n’aurais même pas besoin de sortir” (pp. 79). They hire a Tunisian architect to construct their house. Though bewildered by some of Marie’s requests such as a slate roof, the architect takes assiduous notes about her likes and dislikes including her emphasis on “les lignes droites,” with “ni crépis sur les murs, ni grillages en arabesques, ni créneaux à la terrasse pas de style néo-mauresque ni de faux italien” (pp. 79). The skin that encases the

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<sup>10</sup> Frantz Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* makes a similar argument about the way personhood is constructed through the gaze of the Other. For colonial subjects, especially Black colonial subjects, this means that one can never truly be free from the judgmental gaze of the White Other. Fanon concludes that the colonized need another kind of gaze, “un regard libérateur,” rooted in love that recognizes colonized people as human beings. See Frantz Fanon. *Peau noire, masques blancs*. (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952)

home—the tiling of one’s roof or the plaster on one’s walls—constitutes a node where ethnic, cultural, class, and confessional classifications of belonging crystallize and are confirmed.<sup>11</sup>

Though Memmi is sensitive to how this mixed-couple negotiates the social categories they subscribe to and are ascribed to them, he writes Marie as an unsympathetic character who does not question the colonial hierarchies that make French values the norm and standard. Bolstered by her position as a French national and her proximity to the “Other” through marriage, Marie claims an undeserved authority to “speak the truth” about the place from which her husband comes from. In one haunting argument, Marie proclaims to her husband that she knows that *he knows* that his friends are not *really* his friends: “Ils n’oublient pas tes origines et tu es trop lourde à porter, tu condamnes tout ce qu’ils sont et tu ne sais même pas le cacher. Devant toi ils se sentent jugés et coupables. Ce ne sont pas tes amis, ce sont seulement des gens *du clan*” (pp. 85, emphasis mine). Marie sees her husband’s “clan” as an albatross hanging from his neck. The tensions of intimacy and proximity, strangeness and familiarity, which run through colonial (and anthropological) discourse are rendered painfully visible in *Agar*.

One can wonder about Memmi’s motivations and what he sought to say, and to whom, but what comes through clearly is the way in which neither member of the couple can move past the desire to approach each other as a text to be deciphered. The desire for transparency leads to an identitarian retrenchment. Yes, the power differential is stark. But the narrator is not portrayed without fault either. When he yells at Marie to stop singing lullabies to their son in German, the language of her Alsatian ancestors, and a language he cannot understand, he is expressing his desire for a predictable and comfortable Otherness in her. Toward the end of *Agar*, the fervent debate between the two main characters over how to name their son becomes one of ontological security. Who are we? Who will our child become?

“Origins” in *Agar* are rooted in places such as the medina’s cobble-stone streets, La Goulette’s promenade, and the Mediterranean Sea as well as in names. It is not unusual for a first-person narrator to remain unnamed; however, this choice in *Agar* feels intentional when considered in relation to Memmi’s other works. Though not dialectically defined in opposition to Marie, the narrator’s lack of a name does raise questions about how he is constituted, defined, and/or mediated through the certainty of his French wife’s name. The Other, the Tunisian Jew, is formally unidentifiable. On the other hand, in *La Statue de sel*, the first-person narrator’s name, Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, plays an important role in elucidating his tripartite identity. Moreover, in *Le Scorpion*, Memmi makes a strong claim about the ties of Tunisian Jews to the land through names. One of the principal characters—named after Memmi himself—goes into great depth about the origins of his surname and comes to the conclusion that “we are originally from the heart of this region, at least as far back into the past as one can go, up to those imprecise limits where collective memory hesitates between myth and fact” (1969 [1971], pp. 17). Half a

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<sup>11</sup> Memmi publicly declared on Canadian television, in a 1967 interview with Fernand Seguin, that *Agar* was a fictional work. When he uttered these words, the camera panned to his wife sitting in the audience. Her face revealed very little. See Interview by Fernand Seguin. *Albert Memmi décortique la condition juive contemporaine*: Radio Canada Internationale. Radio. 21 March 1967. Accessed October 23, 2020.

century later, he cheekily said to me, “Memmi has a meaning in Berber, the little man, so perhaps my ancestors were little.” Adding, “Or it’s also Italian. Currently, in Florence there are quite a few Memmis.” Ultimately, he concluded, “[The Memmis] don’t know from where they came, and that is the fate of Jews, in general, you know.”<sup>12</sup>

Memmi’s writing is specific, granular. Fiction, he stated, in a 1967 interview with Fernand Seguin on Radio Canada International, allowed him to feel out the shifting sands of what made him who he is. “I am what I am,” he resolutely stated. “Je suis persuadé qu’un écrivain se dévoile à chaque ligne qu’il trace, et dévoile le monde par la même occasion” (2007 [1955], pp. 12). Between life lived and life written—between Memmi’s social worlds and Memmi’s fictional worlds—one finds an attachment to home. Ultimately, “the writer,” he said to me, “is someone who tries to escape, to leave their fate, but never succeeds in doing so,” instead returning again and again to “particular cuisines, particular smells.” The “paradox” is that what “arrives at the end of my pen...are the colors...Tunisia was a country in blue, a sparkling blue.”<sup>13</sup> Unlike a chemise hanging to dry on a Tunis rooftop, childhood attachments do not easily float away. As we concluded our interview, he asked me if I had any more questions. “Do you continue to write every day?” I asked. He looked at me incredulously replying, “You eat every day, no?”

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<sup>12</sup> There are also Tunisians named Memmi who do not identify as Jews.

<sup>13</sup> Memmi made a similar claim on RFI. See Albert Memmi. Interview by Sayouba Traoré. *Les Grands voix de l’Afrique - Albert Memmi: cartes sur table*. Radio France internationale. Radio. August 21, 2018. Accessed 15 October, 2020. <https://www.rfi.fr/fr/emission/20180821-memmi-ecrivain-juif-franco-tunisien>