

H-France Forum

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 4, #3

Olivia C. Harrison, *Natives Against Nativism: Antiracism and Indigenous Critique in Postcolonial France*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2023. 284 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$112.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-5179-1059-4; \$28.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-5179-1060-0; \$28.00 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1517910600.

Review Essay by Mehammed Mack, Smith College

In this timely and tragically relevant book, Olivia Harrison flips the conventional script about how white identitarian extremism travels between Europe and the United States. Harrison traces how the nativism we see in “America First” politics actually has a deep prehistory in Europe, and France in particular. She susses out the connections between anti-immigrant nativism in Europe and anti-indigenous racism in the US. What’s more, this prehistory extends back to each region’s colonial period: French colonists of North Africa compared themselves to conquerors of the New World.

Harrison explores the complexities and pitfalls of nativism, a frame of mind that can easily sharpen competitive instincts and lead to simplistic, linear views of history. While more recently, white nativists on the Right have co-opted the slogan “we were here first” from indigenous Americans, Harrison shows how the indigenous American was also a figure of fascination for generations of anti-racists, anti-colonialists, and most interestingly, pro-Palestine activists on the Left. One of this book’s great contributions is to show how the Palestine issue, increasingly erased and censored in current political and cultural discourse, was an integral part of so many genealogies of activism that matter today, whether that’s the struggle for migrant rights or anti-racism.

The book coins several valuable terminologies. Harrison introduces the term “indigenous critique” to refer to the myriad ways that migrant rights and anti-racist activists call out the still colonial production of indigenous subjects in the post-colonial era (p. x). She thus emphasizes the afterlives of such colonial productions beyond the official end of colonialism. Harrison further defines indigenous critique as the “critique of the colonial production of the legal, cultural, religious, and civilizational differences between colonizers and colonized” (p. 7). Such Othering extends into the present day, and not only that, the denigration comes from the intellectual descendants and purveyors of colonialist thinking who ironically call themselves nativists just as they continue to oppress the indigenous. Indigenous critique analyzes how what were once France’s *indigènes* were turned into immigrants. The danger of this process is that it turns persons once familiar to France under colonialism into newly foreign entities. Branching from Mahmood Mamdani, who highlighted how colonialism had politicized indigeneity and fostered internal conflicts in developing countries,[1] Harrison explains how the recourse to indigeneity has suffused identitarian claims in Europe, most notably among white Europeans. Harrison is careful to avoid a contested discussion about who counts as indigenous, and seeks rather to interrogate any claims that might result in nativism, no matter who makes them.

Nativists who claim to be victimized by the encroachment of migrants and their descendants have recently resorted to speaking of themselves as a soon-to-be minority in their own countries. Harrison calls the figure of the “white minority” a fantasy. This term emerges from dominant classes being unable to accept critiques of their power and is connected to other buzzwords like “anti-white racism, counter-colonization, white genocide, great replacement, reciprocal decolonization” (p. 11). My current research project, *Eurabia and The Great Replacement: Reverse-crusades and Counter-colonization in French Culture*, intersects with Harrison’s at this junction. I too am intrigued by how the “white minority” can conceive of itself as a minority while still an overwhelming majority. In particular, I am interested in how it comes to co-opt the traits of the adversary (not necessarily the native) it supposedly despises. This posture of self-minoritization allows offense to be perceived as defense, and immigration to be perceived as colonization, through an intentional obfuscation of roles, hierarchies, and power relations.

What has recently proved especially bothersome to nativists was that post-colonial subjects, including those belonging to groups like the *Indigènes de la République*, were activating a supposedly defunct term of colonial status—*indigène*—to assert a heretofore unacknowledged category of victimhood. That category’s supposed danger is tied to the idea that it could theoretically compete with WWII-era categories of victimhood and trigger moral debt and colonial repentance among Europeans of European origin. For these activists of color, calling themselves *indigène* provided a way to claim native status in France while simultaneously critiquing French nationalism and patriotism. This rhetorical feat comes to mind when Harrison writes: “It turns out that *indigènes* have something to teach us about nativism” (p. xi).

For evidence of the lingering ways that France’s colonial entanglement with the Arab world has not really ended, one needs only to look at emergency declarations in France. Every state of emergency announced in metropolitan France has had something to do with the Arab world or postcolonial Arab subjects (such emergencies were declared during the Algerian War of Independence, uprisings in the multi-ethnic *banlieues* circa 2005-2006, and after the Charlie Hebdo attacks claimed by ISIS). The rise of the far-right also bears this colonial imprint: many of the groups that make up the nativist right came out of the conflict between France and Algeria, most famously, the Front National (now called the Rassemblement National). It should come as no surprise that the nativist right mimics indigenous peoples and their descendants, Harrison says, because “the white minority was born at the colonial frontier” (p. 13).

In taking down national myths, this book does much to undo the lionization of Alexis de Tocqueville. He took lessons learned from the U.S.’s genocide against Native Americans and distilled them for France’s colonial campaign against Algerians. Harrison describes his secretary, Arthur de Gobineau, as France’s most infamous white supremacist. She shows in startling ways how France’s New Right has seized Gobineau’s treatise on *The Inequality of Human Races* and intentionally misread it, so that it becomes not a denigration of other races, but rather a celebration of racial difference, with each race in its own right place, separate and not mixing with others, so as to preserve each race’s so-called authenticity.[2] In this sense, absurd concepts like re-migration, mutual decolonization, and counter-colonization can be given a certain dark logic. New Right advocates feign concern for autonomy movements in migrants’ countries of origin, only because doing so serves their greater interest of isolating Europe from potential

migrants, who, in this scenario, would never consider heading for Europe, autonomously content in their home countries.

Though Harrison set out to write a book about anti-racism from the “perspective of anti-racists” (p. 18), it is as though the nativists’ claims of counter-colonization and all their recuperations of indigeneity threaten to yet again take the spotlight away from the anti-racist people of color who coined anti-colonial terminologies in the first place. This conundrum befalls many books about racism, which is why Harrison emphasizes the need to reclaim anticolonial antiracist rhetoric from white nativism by analyzing and historicizing the indigenizing rhetoric at play, thus revealing the manipulations of indigeneity by nativists.

Harrison also interrogates the uses of indigeneity by ethnic minorities. She uses the term “transindigenous identification” to describe how the indigenous in one location, or those minorities claiming indigeneity, may forge bonds, imaginary or based on substance, with indigenous populations elsewhere (p. 5). This is especially relevant when indigenous Americans and Palestinians mutually invoke each other, commissioning moral outrage over their respective situations to push for ending a still unfinished colonialism. Those who stress the parallel with indigenous Americans aim to inscribe contemporary violence against North Africans and Arabs in a greater history of violence that started in 1492. Harrison is careful to underline that sometimes, such transidentifications can repeat colonialist stereotypes, even if motivated by anti-racist solidarity. Also, some transindigenous identification seems to be more motivated by a rejection of the politics of the settler state than by actual identification with the colonized Other (p. 21), as with Jean Genet in Harrison’s argument. It would have been interesting to consider this attempt at inscription into another’s history using an even longer historical lens, going beyond 1492 and starting in the eighth century, when Muslims settled Iberia over centuries, and even occupied a province in the South of France for decades. While that Arab presence stemmed from more of an offensive rather than defensive position, it did lead to an extended period of Arab rootedness in Europe that would have lengthened the timeframe of Harrison’s compelling notion of Arab indigeneity in Europe.

Harrison does revise the historical record in extensive ways. She shows, in chapter one, how North African migrants who were usually considered passive or victimized actually had a rich history of activism in France in the 1970s. She traces the histories of the first movements for migrant rights in France, which importantly doubled as movements in support of Palestinian rights. Three groups are profiled: the Committees in Support of the Palestinian Revolution (CSR), the Arab Workers’ Movement (MTA), and finally the latter’s performance collective *Al Assifa*. Translated to “The Tempest,” this collective organized educational performances led by activists that instructed audiences in the struggle for workers’ and Palestinian rights. Their oral delivery was partly inspired by Arab storytelling traditions in which a participatory group assembles around a storyteller in chain formation (referred to as *al halqa*). This group found imitators forty years on, when Franco-Moroccan artist Bouchra Khalili made the film *The Tempest Society* (2017), which connects the early migrant rights movement in France with activist movements concerned with the more recent Mediterranean migrations of the mid-2010s.

Harrison excavates and restores the revolutionary character of the vocabulary of decolonization in the 1970s, showing how that vocabulary targeted Europe’s lingering (neo-)colonialism and the

nascent state of Israel in the same breath. These vocabularies have softened over the years as Israel's illegal occupation of and illegal settlements on Palestinian land, as determined by the UN and other international organizations, have been tacitly accepted by some Western countries, if not the international community.[3] The revolutionary critique articulated by these groups was not only directed at former colonizers but also at Arab governments acting as enablers: for example, the MTA criticized how North African governments colluded with France to "thin out" the Maghreb's unemployed and at the same time increase profits for industry bosses in France (p. 42). The CSRP argued that the frame of decolonization made the racial stigmatization in post-colonial France more intelligible. The group engaged in micropolitical actions, like having cells of two or three people meet in cafés, with the tactic of cells borrowed from the Algerian revolution. The CSRP was under intense surveillance pressure, with migrant workers being identified because of their support for Palestine: Israel surveilled them (with the approval of the French police), cognizant of the centrality of the Palestine question to migrant activism in France.

Chapter two centers on the French writer Jean Genet, an obvious choice for this book because he focused on France's role in the Levant, the Palestine question, racism in France, and the Black Panthers in the US. Harrison shows how much Genet's anti-racist activism in France "tracks" with his advocacy for Palestine (p. 56). As a soldier deployed in French colonial campaigns in Syria and Morocco, and as a prisoner in a juvenile penal colony, Genet was well-placed to understand military education. He argued that the root of anti-Arab racism could be found in the way French men were taught history, from the colonial time frame all the way up to the Crusades. This chapter adds to the conversation about how to interpret Genet's activist commitments, to which Kadji Amin made an important contribution in 2017 with *Disturbing Attachments*, a book that brought new scrutiny to Genet's lionization as a queer forefather.[4] With a similar "not-so-fast" entreaty, Harrison shows how Palestine was essentially an important cause for Genet, not because he supported a Palestinian nation-state, but because he was intrigued by Palestine as an antithesis to a settled nation. The revolution continued in Palestine, even after it had ended in Algeria, thus keeping him interested. Genet stayed consistent with his skepticism of identitarian, nativist discourses, even though Palestinians were making powerful claims for their own indigeneity to be respected. For this reader at least, this version of Genet can be problematic: it's as if he liked to see the people he admired suspended in a permanent state of conflict, disavowing his solidarity when their situation improved.

Chapter three focuses on Farida Belghoul's 1986 novel *Georgette!*, in which a young Arab girl identifies as an "Indian Princess" (p. 21).[5] Harrison examines the novel's reception in later years, with new interest generated not from anti-racist but rather from nativist circles. Circa the republication of the novel in 2013, Belghoul's activism turned against "gender theory" and towards an embrace of alt-right ideas. Harrison shows how the rhetoric of indigeneity articulated in Belghoul's work and activism is a double-edged sword, an "easily recuperable token of native identity" that can be redeployed to raise alarm about so-called white victimhood (p. 21). Belghoul had been one of the main critics of the state recuperation of anti-racist movements led by people of color: these movements were subsequently rebranded as universalist and colorblind, diluted in their potency and focus. In this chapter, Harrison studies the media machines of the far- and alt-right, looking in particular at ideologue Alain Soral's engagement with Belghoul's novel and stand-up comic Dieudonné's commissioning of indigenous imagery and righteousness.

The alt-right's misuses of indigeneity are numerous: nativists try to argue for the primacy of origin (we were here first) rather than engage in indigenous critique (we are here because you were there) (p. 81).

Chapter four examines theater workshops in Palestine and the work of Mohamed Rouabhi, a French playwright of Algerian background. Rouabhi wrote several plays about Palestine and organized writing workshops with marginalized communities in the Holy Land: one workshop directive asked students to imagine autobiographies based on images distributed to them. Rouabhi's play *El Menfi* dramatizes a meeting between an indigenous American and a Palestinian. The author's positioning and the play's subject matter allows for a simultaneous critique of French, Israeli, and American "colonial and racial practices" (p. 22). The France-Palestine connection is thus triangulated via the United States. At the center of this chapter is the use of colonial photography of indigenous Americans, which has had problematic applications when used to inform and cement racial categories. In Rouabhi's work, however, this photography can actually "counter racial stereotyping" when mobilized in locales outside the Americas as conversation pieces for marginalized respondents in Palestine and post-colonial France (p. 22). Photos of missing children, mug shots, ID cards, tattoos—all of these are visual iconographies that Rouabhi uses to coordinate what Harrison calls a "subversive remediation of photography" in the service of indigenous critique (p. 100).

In chapter five, Harrison examines the filmography of late French director Jean-Luc Godard, specifically his films *Ici et ailleurs* (*Here and Elsewhere*, 1974) [6], and *Notre Musique* (*Our Music*, 2004) [7]. Godard had developed an interest in the issue of Palestine and visited Jordan and Lebanon with Dziga Vertov Group members Jean-Pierre Groin and Armand Marco and later edited *Ici et ailleurs* with co-director Anne-Marie Miéville. The second film stages a meeting between the Palestinian Poet Mahmoud Darwish, author of "The 'Red Indian's' Penultimate Speech to the White Man,"[8] and three indigenous American characters. Harrison shows how the figure of the Palestinian tracks quite closely with the figure of the indigenous American in Godard's oeuvre. The last film, set in Sarajevo, offers a critique of the uses and misuses of indigeneity in a Europe that falsely defines itself as homogenous, or assumes without questioning a Christian heritage. Harrison boldly shows how Godard's staging of this conversation between Darwish and indigenous Americans, at the site of the former Yugoslavia's civil war and genocide against Muslims, cannot help but recall the ethnic cleansing of Palestinians.

Chapter six looks at three works which all invoke Palestine in some way: the 2014 film *Brûle la mer* ("Burn the Sea") by Maki Berchache and Nathalie Nambot, the 2016 novel *Tropique de la violence* ("Tropic of Violence") by Mauritian writer Nathacha Appanah, and the 2017 documentary *Human Flow* by Chinese artist Ai Weiwei (p. 165).[9] The first film documents an encounter in Paris between a Tunisian migrant and a Palestinian in which they compare their situations. The novel depicts a slum called "Gaza" and its Comorian residents on the island of Mayotte (a French overseas department near Mozambique). And the documentary tracks the mass displacements of various populations in the 2010s. *Human Flow* conceives of Palestine as a current rather than historical migration/expulsion. Harrison argues that the works collectively critique a metaphorical frame that has outlived its relevance, that of the immigrant as guest. Their intrigues dislocate the usual focus on the Mediterranean as the prime setting for migration by looking at peripheral locations.

Natives against Nativism is a bold, persuasive, and well-documented book that is being published at a critical juncture. Palestine’s prehistories of struggle and the intellectual import of its solidarity activism have been severed by mainstream media from current events unfolding in both the Middle East and Europe. This book restores those prehistories and explains their lasting impacts. It should appeal to readerships in French, Middle Eastern, and Ethnic Studies, as well as those interested in the evolution of white supremacist and nativist movements.

NOTES

[1] Mahmood Mamdani. *When Victims Become Killers: Colonialism, Nativism, and the Genocide in Rwanda* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[2] Arthur de Gobineau, “Essai sur l’inégalité des races humaines (1853),” in *Oeuvres I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1983): 133-174. Translated by Adrian Collins as *The Inequality of Human Races* (London: William Heinemann, 1915).

[3] United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, press release, “Commission of Inquiry finds that the Israeli occupation is unlawful under international law,” 20 October 2022, <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/commission-inquiry-finds-israeli-occupation-unlawful-under-international-law>; and, as stated in UN Resolution 2334 on the illegality of settlements (2016), press release, “Israel’s Settlements Have No Legal Validity, Constitute Flagrant Violation of International Law, Security Council Reaffirms,” 23 December 2016, <https://press.un.org/en/2016/sc12657.doc.htm>.

[4] Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017).

[5] Farida Belghoul. *Georgette!* (Saint-Denis: Kontre Kulture, 2013).

[6] *Ici et ailleurs*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Gaumont, 1974).

[7] *Notre Musique*, directed by Jean-Luc Godard (Avventura Films, 2004).

[8] Mahmoud Darwish and Fady Joudah, “The ‘Red Indian’s’ Penultimate Speech to the White Man,” *Harvard Review* 36 (2009): 152–159.

[9] *Brûle la mer*, directed by Maki Berchache and Nathalie Nambot (Les Films du Bilboquet, 2014); Nathacha Appanah, *Tropique de la violence* (Paris: Folio, 2018); and, *Human Flow*, directed by Ai Weiwei (Participant Media, 2017).

Mehammed Mack
Smith College
mmack@smith.edu

Copyright © 2024 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France.

H-France Forum

Volume 19 (2024), Issue 4, #3