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A Bibliography for *After Jews and Arabs*: A Brief Introduction

After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture was completed in 1989 and published in 1993 by the University of Minnesota Press after close to five years of contentious give and take with a number of other academic presses. The book was the first attempt in English, and possibly any other language, to fully recalibrate the relationship between Jews and Arabs within an “old world” geography centered on the Mediterranean, while taking into account a chronology that acknowledged and reached both backwards and forwards, from the pre-Islamic period to the present, a time when the question of Palestine largely came to define the relationship between Jews and Arabs. Embedded within a literary and cultural journey drawn from close to a dozen languages across this time and space, *After Jews and Arabs* also drew on a vast array of other sources: from architectural accounts of the creation of new cities like Fustat and Baghdad, to fragments of early medieval bills of lading and letters written by merchants drawn from the Cairo *genizah*; from covert Judeo-Spanish translations during the Inquisition, to accounts of the destruction of Palestinian villages in 1948; from contemporary acts of resistance to cultural assimilation by Jews writing

in Arabic, to the revolutionary context of the first Palestinian *intifadah*.

The decision to write *After Jews and Arabs* came following several years of work, from the late 1970s to the mid-1980s, with the extraordinary polymath Eduard Roditi (1910–1992) who, unfortunately, died prior to the appearance of my book. Our aim in that project was to create a massive anthology by gathering writing by Jews from the pre-Islamic period to the then present, encompassing an enormous variety of materials, including literary, folkloric, scientific, exegetic, historical, and political works. When a major university press rejected our project on the grounds of not understanding the relationship between Arabic and Spanish aspects of Jewish culture, I realized that much work needed to be done. In some sense, *After Jews and Arabs* can be considered an elaborate introduction, along with a sampler of translated texts, for an anthology that never came to pass. And, in fact, still hasn't come to pass, at least not in the way we conceptualized it. The work closest in spirit, my own 1996 anthology *Keys to the Garden*,¹ presents only the briefest chronological span, from the 1960s to the 1980s, and only literary texts.

At this remove, the most innovative aspects of *After Jews and Arabs*—and those that elicited both the most resistance and the most excitement—have to do with three things. First, the willingness to isolate qualities that seemed to hold true across a drastically variable range of political, economic, and communal conditions within the framework of the geographic and chronological range I had outlined: qualities I defined as mobility, diversity, autonomy, and translatability. Next: the audacity to actually contextualize and test the legitimacy of these qualities through a vast bibliography, some areas of which I could not claim *absolute* expertise in. Finally, and this unquestionably is the aspect that elicited the deepest resistance to the book, the necessity of framing and exploring the past in the context of the

1 Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996).

present relationship of Jews and Arabs as made manifest by the issue of Palestine.

In the course of this work and its afterlife, in addition to making visible the culture it focused on, *After Jews and Arabs* certainly played a key role in helping to decenter the conventional western European canon and chronology. While shifting the medieval focus back to al-Andalus and, back of that, to the Abbasid Caliphate and earlier routes of knowledge transmission, the book also more squarely placed the contemporary period of Jewish history in the Middle East in the settings of colonization and decolonization, as opposed to the conventional nomenclature of the time, with all of its attendant ideological baggage, of “development” and “modernization.” By now several generations of younger scholars have taken up discrete aspects of the larger tableau presented in *After Jews and Arabs* and the subject has actually become a legitimate field of knowledge in which certain prior and prevailing assumptions, often racist and exclusionary at core, no longer have footing, or at least no longer pass uncontested. At the same time, crucial and far-reaching projects involving the translation of Arabic literature, and some medieval Hebrew literature, have come to fruition. In general, both through scholarly texts and works aimed at a more general readership, the kind of apoplectic response elicited by the subject from supposedly well-informed academics and arbiters of permissible knowledge just thirty or thirty-five years ago seems, thankfully, to have become an embarrassment. Yet, at the same time, enormous gaps remain in both general knowledge and the more ready availability of key texts in translation.

While my own work has apparently gone in very different directions, at core the question of historical contextualization has remained central to whatever I’m engaged with. This, it seems to me, is a primary reason for wanting to go back and publish the original bibliography for *After Jews and Arabs*, left out of the 1992 book publication due to space issues. Publication of the bibliography for scholarly and other use, as important as that may be, is not the only reason to bring it out now, over twenty-five years after the fact. The bibliography itself is a pre-digital

creation and, as such, has a lot to say methodologically and otherwise, particularly to younger scholars either born digital or still skirting the textual/digital divide, particularly as our ways of accessing information from the past continue to change.

Mine was a bibliography largely composed through card catalogues; open stacks; smaller, more manageable collections; and used or antiquarian bookshops, as well as through a large network of informants based in different languages, geographical sites, and particular human and political experience. Unquestionably, more than some of that residue remains in the very choice and organization of the items included. While providing a personal journey through some of these methodological issues, my prefatory essay “A Poetics of Bibliography” (see below) also points to the wider nets we, as scholars, need to throw out to our students and readers to provide guidance for how some of this older experience can be assessed and transmitted.

My decision to further contextualize the bibliography with the chapter after this one, “Behind the Scenes: Before *After Jews and Arabs*,” an essay originally written in the late 1990s, and appearing in *Memories of Our Future*,² a book of selected essays that came out in 1999, has to do with a certain discursive impasse we have come to in public expression, particularly in an academic context. As the initiatory rites of academic certification have become more technical, technocratic, and professionalized, issues of authority and judgment have become almost completely occluded. On the one hand, authority and judgment have been relegated to the realm of the “authoritarian” and the “judgmental” but, importantly, without ever exposing and laying bare the still very existent mechanisms under which authority and judgment take place. The general refusal to engage in true differences of position outside a highly circumscribed spectrum and, rarely, if ever, engage in actual debate while continually preaching to the choir, has caused irreparable harm to our

2 Ammiel Alcalay, *Memories of Our Future: Selected Essays, 1982–1999* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1999).

intellectual and human capacities, pulling the reins back just as we get ready to take off.

The genesis of “Behind the Scenes: Before *After Jews and Arabs*” was an attempt to engage detractors of the book in an open debate, in order to try and advance the state of knowledge and scholarship and bring the issues out into the open. After many proposals to magazines, journals, and other venues, no one was willing to even consider hosting a forum in which the kinds of positions staked out in the anonymous reader reports and my response to them could be signed, owned, and openly discussed as genuinely contentious issues with larger structural and political implications both in and out of academia. My decision to, as it were, “go public” without permission and publish the anonymous reader reports, was a move, needless to say, not without certain risk. While it has been hard to calculate the actual fallout, I have never published another book with a university press, even though I am constantly called on as a reader (who, I might add, always waives “anonymity”), or as a writer of blurbs. At the same time, I think my exposure of the process remains a very useful example of how to stake out and hold a position, how to actually make a scholarly argument based on the refutation of misrepresentation, an exercise too rarely available in our highly encoded and separated camps, each with its own assumptions, rhetoric, jargon, and modes of membership.

While “A Poetics of Bibliography” is both speculative and personal, drawing on and marking my own historical experience, “Behind the Scenes: Before *After Jews and Arabs*,” is forensic and analytical, exposing all the contradictions of my detractors in light of the proofs I bring to bear on the argument. As to the bibliography itself, my hope is that some of the residue I mention previously, of the actual individual and collective work involved in everything compiled there, might emerge as a form of world-making, an offering that provides an example of how materials from the past can be arranged to perforate the caul too often obscuring our vision, preventing us from seeing a ground we can actually stand on. My hope also is that the materials gathered in this volume can work as a kind of methodological

tool kit, allowing readers with differing levels of familiarity to find ways to engage with each section for different purposes and towards different ends and thus carry this long dormant burden and lode further afield.