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Main editorial address for manuscripts	Professor Orvar Löfgren Department of European Ethnology Finnigatan 8 SE-223 62 Lund, Sweden Phone +46 46-222 04 58 Fax +46 46-222 42 05 E-mail orvar.lofgren@etn.lu.se Professor Regina Bendix Institut für Kulturanthropologie/Europäische Ethnologie Friedländer Weg 2 D-37085 Göttingen, Germany Phone +49 551-39 53 51 Fax +49 551-39 22 32 E-mail rbendix@gwdg.de
Editorial assistant	Magdalena Tellenbach Uttman, PhD Järnvägsgatan 16 SE-240 30 Marieholm, Sweden E-mail magdalena.tellenbach@uttman.com
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A Colonial Relation Not My Own Coming Home to Morocco and France

By

Deborah Kapchan

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A COLONIAL RELATION NOT MY OWN

Coming Home to Morocco and France

Deborah Kapchan

"I work in New York City," I tell my friends, "but I live in the south of France." Our village is not particularly idyllic. Yes, it has its historic quarter of stone houses (where mine is located), a city hall, a Catholic and a Protestant church. It has a population of North Africans, and a clandestine mosque in the apartment of one of its residents. It has a Sunday market, and a café where the locals watch and bet on televised horse races. It has its *petanque* court whose soft beige dirt floats softly up into the heat of the summer air. But it also has a sprawl of development along its outer edges – concrete villas and walled yards without trees. There are kids who park in the square and blast loud music out of car windows. Just outside town there are strip malls where grape vines used to be; a bit further on, more *grands surfaces*. But I still long to be there when I'm not. It is my home.

I was born in Yonkers, New York – a working class suburb of New York City, a city blanketed with a vast complex of garden apartments. My father's family had been immigrants in New York's lower east side, and then in the Bronx. Yonkers was a step up from the dirty city streets. When I was two I moved to another suburban city. New Rochelle was a little more middle-class, and we lived by the beach of the Long Island Sound, with horseshoe crabs and black-mud mussels along the coast.

As a young adolescent I was marked by a passionate, if idiosyncratic French teacher who had us reading the short stories of Guy de Maupassant in the second year of language study. I began to dream of spending a summer in France. I got a job waiting

tables at a local diner on weekends, and in two years had saved enough for a ticket and a little spending money. Fortuitously, my mother met a French woman in a park while caring for my younger brother. The French woman agreed to write letters home to her little village in the Massif Central. In fact, the mayor of this town himself extended me an invitation to live with his daughter's family for the summer. So when I was seventeen I was finally on my way home.

France didn't feel like home right away. It's true that I felt a new sensation in the layers of my skin, but that could easily be explained by being in a foreign country, operating in a language that I did not yet master, living on the edge of my senses. But by the time my first six weeks in France had ended, I knew that I had come home.

How is it that we know home? Is it by its odor, its warmth? The smell of a madeleine cake brought Marcel Proust back to his childhood. And certainly I have smells and memories that bring me back to my youth. But my true homes were found as an adult. I have two. And they are related as if by a bridge, of history, of climate, of sentiment, sometimes even of violence. But that doesn't explain all.

What brings us back to a place that we have never known? Is it music? Taste? Is it emotion? Where does the sense of recognition come from? The climate? The particular light at dusk? Or is it the conjuncture of all these senses and sensations at a moment of plenitude that marks us indelibly and haunts us, calling us forever back?

I spent my seventeenth summer in France in a village of no more than 3,000 people. It had two bakeries, a tobacco and newspaper store, a grocery store, a post office and a Catholic church with catacombs where resisters had hid during the *résistance*. It had one café owned by “le Kabyle,” an Algerian Berber who had married a French local. There were two practicing doctors in town, and my “family” had one of them. Monsieur Chaubier had an office on the ground-floor of his home (that he had shared with his father-in-law, the mayor, before he retired from medicine and went into local politics). Madame Chaubier was also a doctor, but she didn’t practice, volunteering at local children’s organizations and raising her two children. Dr. Chaubier sometimes took me and his children with him on house-calls, to hamlets in the area where the beds were built into the walls of the living-rooms and the people still wore clogs.

I was to spend the summer with his daughter, Isabelle, though at ten, she had little to say to a seventeen year old. Most often she played with her little brother Pilou and I spent as many hours as possible with her grandfather, the mayor of the town.

I was soaked in my own melancholy that summer, mourning my parents’ divorce and writing bad poetry, at once too old and too inexperienced for my years. The silence and the heat of the village didn’t help the mood. I would write letters home and walk the half-mile to the post-office on the outer dirt road that circled the village. The sun beat down on the dry fields, the cicadas chirped loudly. That walk was one of my only daily activities that summer – other than meals, of course, which I looked forward to more for the conversation than for the food (which was, however, delicious). At lunch-time the grandfather would come over to the main house, Dr. Chaubier would come upstairs from his office, Madame Chaubier would finish supervising the maid and lunch preparations, and we would sit down with the kids for at least 90 minutes to talk about everything from local politics to French art and culture to life in New York. After lunch the grandfather and I would retire to the salon and talk some more. He corrected my French, introduced me to the composers Albino-

ni and Pachelbel, and when he was in a particularly jovial mood, he would play his old 78s with the folk songs of his youth sung in Occitan. He would smoke and sing along.

That summer I was initiated into several *connaissances*: the appreciation of an array of local cheeses, an understanding of French culinary practices (particularly the local peasant food, which this bourgeois family cooked with pride), but most of all, the art of conversation. My French flourished.

Perhaps the most important thing I received that summer, however, was what I was most unaware of: I came to love what the French grandfather loved – North African Culture. This particular grandfather, you see, had had a colorful past. He had fought against the Vichy government in the very neighborhoods in which he grew up, but he also served as a doctor in Tunisia when he finished medical school. He had a picture of himself on a camel in the Tunisian desert, wrapped in an off-white wool burnous. Orientalist, perhaps, yet he was so enamored with Tunisian culture that his parents had to send for him and insist he return to France after his military service. When he did come back he enrolled in Arabic classes at the School of Oriental Languages in Paris. And when he finally married and went back to the Limousin, he furnished his living-room in North African décor. The summer I was there we spent many hours reading Rumi’s poetry out loud to each other – a lesson in French for me (the poetry was in translation), but also an introduction to Sufism.

My relationship with Dr. Aumasson (as I called him, practicing the bourgeois formality that reigned in that family) was unique. He was part mentor, part father, part spiritual guide. He would occasionally take me for drives in the countryside in his two-door Alfa Romeo sports car. He took hairpin turns at speeds far exceeding the safe, and his eyes twinkled as he did. Once he took me to a little chapel in the middle of nowhere. I stood in its stone dampness, dipped my fingers in the holy water and told him that one day I would be married there. He was, truth be told, part lover as well, though ours was a platonic love, it was also a sensual one. He was seventy-one.

I corresponded with Dr. Aumasson for many

years. When I went to live and teach in North Africa six years later, I wrote him all about my experiences. I told him that I had found my second home. When I fell in love with a Moroccan, my lover and I went to France, and, squeezing into the Alfa Romeo, Dr. Aumasson drove us to that little chapel in the French countryside. There, I lit candles for the three of us, a symbolic wedding *à trois*. Dr. Aumasson (or Camille, as I was calling him then) was delighted. We were reunited, and with me was a North African that he could talk to for hours – even in Arabic! *O temps suspendis ton vol*, Camille exclaimed, citing the poet Lamartine. He was seventy-seven by then, in good health. He brought up the best wine from the cave, and we spent hours *à table* enrapt in conversation. When our daughter was born, we went back again.

When I received my Ph.D. and got a job as a professor Camille wrote me, “maintenant tu n’ennuiras jamais,” now you will never be bored. He was right of course. But I sometimes wonder if the conditions of my life would have been different if I hadn’t left France. Would I have divorced the man that Camille loved so dearly? And had I stayed in Marrakech? Untenable. Living at home without a livelihood is impossible; somehow one is always expelled – if for no other reason than to see where one has been. To find one’s home, it is necessary to lose it. Perhaps James Baldwin was right when he said that “home is not a place but simply an irrevocable condition.”

Yet I do have my little stone house in the village in France – my first home. Neither Provence nor the Cote d’Azur, there are few tourists, though more and more Brits are buying there. I strike up conversations with the North Africans in the square. I bicycle in the region, through vineyards that may be sold tomorrow to developers of malls. Oddly enough,

it is the foreigners like myself who are conserving the history here, and the local French developers who are changing the landscape so radically. But no doubt that’s what the French ex-patriots in Marrakech say as well. It is always ‘the other’ responsible for the loss of tradition, after all, which is why we can give ourselves license to rebuild or “preserve” it in our own image.

Be that as it may, I am the caretaker of these stone walls for now. They are centuries old. They hide scorpions in their crevasses, and stories. I am making mine. “If I die in France,” I tell my second husband, “don’t take me back to the U.S. Bury me here. I work in New York, but I live in the south of France. This is my home.”

Camille Aumasson committed suicide more than ten years ago at the age of ninety-four. He jumped out the window of his bedroom on December 21st 1997, thirty years to the day after his wife had done the same. In the end, there were many things I did not know about Camille. But I have come home now. I am ready to assume my place in history.

Deborah Kapchan is currently Associate Professor of Performance Studies at New York University. She has been conducting ethnography on narrative, music and expressive culture in Morocco for more than twenty years. She is the author of *Gender on the Market: Moroccan Women and the Revoicing of Tradition* (U Penn Press, 1996) and *Traveling Spirit Masters: Moroccan Music and Trance in the Global Marketplace* (Wesleyan U Press, 2007). She is currently conducting research on the aesthetics of piety among Qadiri Sufi groups both in Morocco and in southern France. She is also translating an anthology of Moroccan poetry into English.

(deborah.kapchan@nyu.edu)