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Ian Coller, *Arab France: Islam and the Making of Modern Europe, 1798-1831*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011. xi + 288 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$60.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 9780520260641; \$24.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9780520260658; \$20.00 U.S. (e-book). ISBN 9780520947542.

Review essay by Miranda Spieler, University of Arizona

Ian Coller's timely study is concerned with the postrevolutionary fate of the group who collaborated with the French army during Bonaparte's campaign in Egypt as translators, soldiers, financiers, and bureaucrats. Evacuated to France in 1801 with the debris of the Army of Italy, the group did not opt for exile purely out of necessity: some among them expected France to support them in founding an independent Egypt under a visionary leader, General Ya'qub, who died aboard ship during the crossing to France. Soon the emigrants discovered that their revolutionary project had gone the way of the French Republic (and of Ya'qub). Bonaparte sought a rapprochement with the Porte, and the nation builders residing in France failed to receive any kind of political recognition from the minions of their former liberator. Agents of the Napoleonic state, for whom the newcomers were an embarrassment, gave them quite a different status than they had sought. They became *les réfugiés d'Égypte* (or *les réfugiés égyptiens*), a stateless class of asylum seekers living off Napoleonic largesse (p. 52). Coller follows the transformation of this rather hapless group into a self-conscious community through the refugees' experience of the French state or (in his words) through the interplay between "the state's hegemonic role" and "their own negotiations of those conditions" (p. 19). Alongside this tale of becoming, about the making (and unmaking) of a transcultural community, is a history of racial assumptions and anxieties pertaining to Arabs in the years between Napoleon's Egyptian expedition and French colonization in Algeria.

To explore the contradictions besetting Arab identity in nineteenth-century France, Coller tracks the Egyptians through different sorts of spaces (geographical and conceptual) that they inhabited, crossed into, fled, were assigned to, or designed for themselves. When analyzing depictions of Arabs in Restoration-era painting, Coller notes that these figures inhabited "a space marked off from the others...both central and marginal, marked and unmarked" (p. 150). Throughout the book, as in this passage, Coller returns to the double and paradoxical relationship of all Egyptian refugees to the postrevolutionary state. As a group they were abandoned and repudiated, restricted in their movements, kept clear of Paris, and even threatened with deportation and administrative detention in punishment for unruliness. Yet they were also recipients of pensions, sinecures, and free Arabic classes. They were irrelevant, untouchable, and outside the domain of politics and yet they were indulged, even coddled. They lived at the mercy of the sovereign.

In 1798 Bonaparte declared himself a Muslim and democrat with the mission of rescuing Egypt from the Mamluks, slave-soldiers of the Sultan. In 1802, he created *les mamelouks*, a richly upholstered troupe of pseudo-jihadists (some were Christian) who later joined the Imperial Guard. Coller looks to the case of *les mamelouks* in order to illustrate the ambiguous place of the whole Egyptian community in postrevolutionary France. As figures of excess, *les mamelouks* stood for political corruption, cronyism, and the evils of despotism. The people whom Napoleon refused to countenance as political actors became symbols of his regime, even of himself. Their festoonery and pet-like connection to the emperor led royalist enemies of the regime to identify the entire refugee group with the person of Napoleon.

Coller's book brings together Mediterranean history, French domestic history, the artistic and literary history of Orientalism, and concepts of race and slavery that are more commonly associated with the French Atlantic. In this respect he demonstrates the imprudence of studying the history of the French Atlantic in isolation from the broader geopolitics of empire and its representations. He also picks up a story about the entanglement of Orientalism with Atlantic slavery that began in the pre-Revolutionary period. At the popular level, as Ina Baghdiantz McCabe observes, Parisian cafes began as Ottoman theme parks under Armenian management where black people waited tables bedecked in eastern costume; this practice persisted well after Armenians ceased to run the cafes, the Antilles (rather than Yemen) became the source of the coffee, and the wait staff, too, came to Paris by way of French colonial society.[1]

As the French slave trade reached its acme, the hardening of racial attitudes toward African people and the rise of a corresponding ideology of whiteness gave new salience to the racial character of near-eastern peoples. In this respect Volney's *Voyage en Syrie et en Égypte* (1787) challenged contemporary racism when describing modern Copts as mulattoes who combined "the profound genius of the Egyptians with the brilliant minds of the Greeks." Of the ancient Egyptians themselves, he famously ventured that they were "real negroes of the same type as all the natives of Africa... To think that this race of black men who are today our slaves and the objects of our contempt, are the very same to whom we owe our arts, our sciences!"[2]

Decades later, enemies of the New Regime saw the Egyptian refugees as embodying the postrevolutionary state's blackness of soul. As part of Coller's book-length assault on essentialist depictions of Arabs, he explores the association between Egyptians and black Africans in life and in myth with particular attention to racial disquiet aroused by "Egyptian negresses" (p. 61). These were Arabic-speaking African women in Marseille, probably of slave origin, who came to France along with the other Egyptian refugees whom they sometimes served as domestics; they also became kept company with Egyptian soldiers, which inspired the mayor to demand the women's confinement to a special depot at night. As Coller notes, these women were at once highly conspicuous and administratively invisible (uncounted in any census); they were also unauthorized presences on French soil, their land of refuge, because of Napoleon's 1802 decree banning black and colored people from entering France. And yet, the racial identity of the whole category of Egyptian refugees and not merely of the black domestics was in doubt: at the arrival of seventy-four decommissioned *mamelouks* to Marseilles in 1806, the mayor complained to the ministry of the interior about the rising number of racial undesirables (including refugee Jews from Algiers) in the port. It is plain, moreover, that French officials could not tell an Egyptian from an Antillean man of color, as the military service file of the Guadeloupean "Jean-Louis Jérôme" (né Ibrahim Mohammed in Cairo) suggests. The case of this young soldier, which Coller examines in detail, was not the only instance of passing (for black) by an Egyptian in nineteenth-century France. A number of 1823 documents that I came across years ago in the archives of Seine-Maritime concern "Antoine Joachim Rigues, man of color, declaring himself to be born in Cap Français," who was imprisoned at Le Havre for six weeks "faute de papiers" and later routed to Saint-Lô so that he might rejoin his *patrie*. But which *patrie*? "We have some reason to believe that Rigues is the individual called Pierre Rigues, born in Cairo, liberated from the Bagne of Rochefort on 5 April 1818."[3]

Coller's exploration of attitudes toward *les mamelouks* and the "Egyptian negresses" makes it possible to understand the horrific events of 25 June 1815, one week after the battle of Waterloo, when a murderous crowd of royalists devastated the Egyptian quarter in Marseille. Among the many virtues of Coller's book is its thick reading of this apparently irrational explosion of violence that left a dozen or more people dead. When royalist murder gangs rampaged through Marseille's Egyptian quarter, the first killed were the black women. To avoid being massacred, other refugees took to wearing signs marked with the phrase, "Siou pas nègre," which meant, "I am not black" in Provençal (p. 127).

The 1815 rampage draws attention to a key feature of the space that Coller calls "Arab France": this was a structurally fragile and geographically mobile domain of experience that underwent multiple

episodes of demolition and reconstruction in the course of the nineteenth century. Arab France also changed in significance over the period considered. From its beginnings as a foiled nation-building project, it mutated into what Collier calls “repressive cosmopolitanism” under Napoleon (p. 117): sinecured Arabic speakers at the new *Ecole des langues orientales*, founded in 1795, abandoned their hopes of pioneering an Arabic literary renaissance and sang for their supper. The next and most creative phase of Arab France occurred after the fall of the First Empire when the refugees and their descendents lost their official preferment and became poets, linguists, and cultural innovators under the inspiration of the new Egyptian regime of Mehmet Ali.

Collier reads Arab France as a product of mobility—from Egypt and the Levant to and around France—and of constraint, in years when the French state intervened frequently and forcefully in the lives of the refugees. In its concern with the role of displacement in the production of culture, the book brings to mind the debate among anthropologists and historians about whether, and to what degree, Afro-American cultures should be treated as diasporic and retentive of Old World practices or Creole (a product of distinctive New World conditions). Collier is concerned with novel forms of self-expression and group consciousness that arose in the postrevolutionary period among the Egyptians; yet the medium and even the theme of that new culture centered on the Arabic language and hence came from the Old World. As for the new culture’s message, this consisted of a celebration of Arabness, modernity, and cosmopolitanism. (It would be hard to imagine a book more hostile to the idea of a “clash of civilizations” than Collier’s.) Arab France was in a sense both diasporic and Creole in character, since Old World cultural retentions supplied the material for novel concepts and identities.

The “Egyptian refugees” were not originally a community; they were accidental co-occupants of an administrative category that denoted both privilege and marginality. Yet the refugee group eventually developed a type of solidarity that had (in Collier’s telling) nothing to do with ethnicity or religion. Instead, the tension between the group’s existence as a collective entity for official purposes and its inner diversity of class, ethnicity, and religion called Arab France into being. “For many of the ‘Egyptians’ an Arab self-definition was the only one possible when attempting to identify themselves with this impossibly diverse population” (p. 72). Those people who acted as spokespersons for the group applied Arab notions of community involving lineage and hospitality to a decidedly mixed group of former Ottoman subjects that included Copts and other non-Arabs. In their conversations with the state, the elite of the Egyptians (who were typically Syrian Melkite Christians from Beirut or Aleppo) adapted a vocabulary that implied ethnic homogeneity to express identification with a different sort of community, which was linguistically unified but otherwise diverse.

According to Collier, the sense of Arabness that emerged among the exiles “did not exist in *contradistinction* to other identifications such as ‘Egyptian,’ ‘Coptic,’ or ‘Muslim’.” It was, rather a lived mode of commonality, based on shared cultural practices, and a set of common interests and identifications” (p. 72). When listing the various principles of group affiliation that coexisted with “Arab,” Collier does not mention “Christian.” Nonetheless, on the basis of the anecdotes and personal stories collected in this richly documented and subtle work, the chief inhabitants of the “space” that Collier calls Arab France were Arabic-speaking people who tended to be non-Muslim, non-Arab, or both. Copts, Armenians, and different sorts of Syrian Christians (mainly Catholics) were disproportionately represented among the exiles. The Christian identity of the Egypt refugees was conspicuous to their contemporaries in France. When visiting Marseille, the Arab intellectual Rifa’ al Tahtawi, who served as a religious advisor to an 1826 mission of Egyptian students to France, described the French port as a kind of replica or extension of Alexandria, which also happened to be the most culturally diverse, least Arab, and least Muslim city in all of Egypt. Far from seeing Egyptians in France as a diverse bunch, the Arab traveler al Tahtawi noted their relative homogeneity. “In the city of Marseille there are many Christians from Egypt and Syria who accompanied the French during their retreat from Egypt.” The few Muslims among the group who caught his attention were apostates—Christian converts. Arab Muslims, once in France, usually converted, or so it seemed to al Tahtawi: “it is rare to find a Muslim among those who left with the French: some of them have died, whereas others have converted to Christianity” (p. 170). These remarks date from the late 1820s, a phase of crystallization for Arab France. The remarks of Al

Tahtawi suggest that the sense of Arabness which bound together this group was not as inclusive and easily combined with other identifications as Collier suggests.

Collier gestures to E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in formulating Arabness as a form of class consciousness that developed among the refugees to the effect of resolving (or eliding) the group's diversity of social, geographical, and religious origins. Yet this crucial feature of Collier's argument is difficult to square with the apparent rarity with which the exiles called themselves Arabs, together with their apparently marked preference for the term "Egyptian" when describing themselves. Joseph-Élie Agoub, the son of an Armenian jeweler from Cairo and Syrian Melkite Catholic from Damascus, wrote of himself as a person in whom "Egypt had somehow been combined with France," so that "the two nations were confused into one" (p. 152). When he wrote about Orientalist scholars in Paris from the refugee community, Agoub called those people Egyptians. Nowhere does this Levantine Christian refer to himself as an Arab. Yet when writing of Agoub, Collier observes, "Joseph saw himself as a new kind of Arab" (p. 152). Of Agoub's time among the Orientalists in the capital, Collier writes "Agoub acknowledged his belonging to a common Arab milieu in Paris: for convenience, he called these Arabists 'Egyptians' despite the fact that few of them could actually be considered Egyptian in origin" (p. 159). What these people called themselves does seem important, however: if they do not call themselves Arabs, why assume that they thought of themselves as such?

The relationship of Ottoman Christians to the French prior to Napoleon's expedition in 1798 deserved more attention than it received here. The chronological scope of this book (from Egypt to Algeria) makes narrative sense while obscuring the role of French missionaries and consular officials during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in sponsoring the growth of the very group—Syrian Melkite Catholics—who dominate Collier's study as translators, imperial collaborators, sinecured instructors, priests, and refugee spokespersons. According to Robert Haddad, French commerce with Levantine factories helped to create a cosmopolitan bourgeoisie of Syrian merchants while fomenting a religious schism among Melkite Christians. Members of this mercantile and urban community abjured Greek Orthodoxy and opted for Rome in exchange for protection by French consuls, which enabled them to shield their vessels from pillage by corsairs.[4] In this respect, one might argue that "Arab France" predated the Revolution and was as much a creation of the monarchy's evangelical foreign policy as of the New Regime. The strong prerevolutionary ties between Syrian Melkite Catholics and the French monarchy presumably account for the decision of Syrians to collaborate with Napoleon and for the largely Christian character of the émigré group. In general, a more straightforward engagement with the overwhelmingly Christian (and often non-Arab) character of the space "Arab France" might have helped non-specialists to appreciate the often subversive novelty of Collier's study. Finally, since the project for cultural renewal that defined "Arab France" during the Bourbon Restoration closely resembled that of modernizers in Egypt, it is not clear how to read the significance of the Egyptian refugees' exilic experience in France to their evolving political consciousness and creative activities.

Collier's study ends roughly a decade before a royal ordinance of Louis Philippe reorganized Algerian territory as provinces of France. Through the conquest of Algeria, Arab France mutated from a space of creative self-fashioning and literary production by people living inside Europe into an imperial dominion founded on violence. In Collier's reading of the early nineteenth century, this new version of Arab France extinguished the old one. The space that Collier describes as a hybrid country of the mind could not coexist with Arab France as an imperial frontier.

## NOTES

[1] Ina Baghdiantz McCabe, *Orientalism in Early Modern France: Eurasian Trade, Exoticism, and the Ancien Régime* (Oxford: Berg, 2008), 199.

[2] Constantin-François Volney, *Voyage en Syrie et en Egypte pendant les années 1783, 1784 et 1785*, 2 vols (Paris: Dessene, 1787), 1: 76-77.

[3] Archives départementales, Seine-Maritime (Rouen) 1 M 557, Prefet to Sous-Prefet, 31 July 1823.

[4] Robert H. Haddad, *Syrian Christians in Muslim Society: An Interpretation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), esp. 42.

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