***Encounters of undesirability***

*Aomar Boum* and *Nadjib Berber, Undesirables. A Holocaust Journey through North Africa. Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2023, 112 pp. $20.00 (paperback), ISBN 9781503632912*

*Samuel Sami Everett*

*Undesirables* is a story of encounter written in a format, though increasingly popular, still quite unfamiliar in academia: the graphic novel. A genre in which plot and protagonists are broadly fictional while setting, both political and historical, is not. Graphic novel — though quite precise as a description of *Undesirables* since its realistic artwork and research-based text emulates the contemporary docu-novel or what Jean Rouch calls “ethno-fiction” —is not the most familiar frame for author-scholar Aomar Boum and illustrator Nadjib Berber (1952-2023). Rather, together they harness the political postcolonial genre of *bande dessinée* (BD, literally ‘illustrated frames’), a mainstay of French, francophone and post-francophone cultural life.

The central thread of the *Undesirables* tale unfolds through the testimony of Hans Frank, a German Jewish journalist whose mother is from Spain. It spans the rise of antisemitism in Berlin, Germany where Hans studied in 1929 through to Casablanca, Morocco at end of 1942 when the US arrived to liberate North Africa. Boum and Berber’s BD traces Hans’ vicissitudes in Nazi Germany, then France and on to the torture of the internment camps in the Sahara, southern North Africa, first in southern Algeria and then Morocco. The cross-continental travails of fictional protagonist Hans provides a lens with which to view the seldom spoken connections between the Holocaust and North Africa which by necessity tracks Jewish and Muslim experiences, both European and Indigenous Maghrebi (northern Africa). This review does three things. It discusses the background to *Undesirables* in terms of precursory BD and source material. It then explores some of the historical dynamics of the BD, specifically those relating Jewish-Muslim encounters, and finally it considers the BD in cultural and anthropological studies of encounter, its practice, purpose and potentiality.

*Undesirables* illustrator Nadjib Berber was a French-American-Algerian cartoonist and illustrator who worked for Algerian, Tunisian and latterly US presses and contributed to multiple Comix events. Aomar Boum is a professor of Anthropology and public intellectual. Together, through *Undesirables*, they innovate by shifting the dial on postcolonial and Holocaust Studies, moving the focal point from Jew to Muslim and from imperial metropolitan to Maghrebi geographies. This shift underpins Boum’s postcolonial method and knowledge production. *Undesirables,* decentres a history that is globally understood as European. It is Boum’s latest engagement with such dial-shifting in a format that engages well beyond the academic specialist public. This is, what he calls *natawâsal* or public engagement, i.e. reaching as wide an audience as possible.

As stated in the acknowledgements at the end of *Undesirables*, the storyline draws on transnational North Africa-Israel-Palestine-Europe-US multi-archival, multilingual research. Boum has made clear the degree to which the LICA archive located in the International Holocaust Museum was a precious source for telling Hans’ story. The LICA (historical French *Ligue internationale contre l’antisemitisme*) figures in Part I of Undesirables (p.3 and p.33), punctuating Hans’ ordeals in Europe. Of particular interest for Boum in the LICA papers was the work of illustrator Fitrawe who conducted an intellectual critique of *Mein Kampf* for an Arabic speaking public as a way of raising awareness about fascism. This illustrated LICA fragment, resonates with Aomar Boum’s own project of *éducation populaire* (inclusive, cross-class, wide-reaching education that can bring about social change from below) which he is developing through ethno-graphic novels.

Part II of *Undesirables* ‘The Saharan Camps’ centres the specificities of the Algerian colonial situation, which was controlled by the Vichy French Nazi collaborationist regime that formalized antisemitic legislation against the millennia-old Jewish communities of Algeria in October 1940 and was liberated by the US army and its allies in November 1942. This Algerian context allows us to discover the extraordinary yet little known Vichy-era history of the labour camps in Algeria and in the Maghreb region at large. This was, as Boum shows, underpinned by the pre-existing extractivist economic dynamics of the French colonial project.

In the camps, internees encountered each other’s stories. *Undesirables* represents these encounters through those internees who are forced to work alongside Hans in southern Algeria: Mohand, an Indigenous Maghrebi Muslim, fighting for independence (p.60), Jews both from Europe such as Hans and indigenous Maghrebi Jews ostracised from Algerian European and colonial society such as Rabbi Alloush (p.66), Julio, a Spanish Republican dissident at home in the internationalist milieu that the camps engendered on their edges (p.56) and Senegalese infantrymen (*tirailleurs sénégalais*) like Youssou (p.76) who rebelled after the Nazi slaughter of Black soldiers in Lyon. As they write in their edited volume *The Holocaust and North Africa* (Stein and Boum, 2019), interrogating the Second World War and its aftermath from this angle doesn’t just harness the power of circulation as method and episteme, it imposes it since compelling one to look both “forward and backward in time”, enables us to reconsider “the legacy of colonialism” and question “anew the roots of anti- or postcolonialism” (16).

Since the inception of *Undesirables*, Aomar Boum has developed the notion of “Mediterranean Bande dessinée” to focus on multiple intersecting transnational circulations that occurred during the Second World War and its aftermath. Alongside the historical source material fundamental to the historical accuracy of *Undesirables*; there is an artistic genealogy of comic-books (Comix). Boum outlines three directions that undergird “Mediterranean Bande dessinée”. These include B on North African Jewish experiences of the Second World War and parallel stories of Migrant circulation; for example Didier Daeninckx and Asaf Hanuka’s *Carton Jaune* about Tunisian Jewish star footballer Jacques Benzara, and more recent work such as *Les clandestins à la Mer* on the brutal experiences of those who run the migration gauntlet from the Levant to the West. Of additional inspiration for Mediterranean BD are the historically central position of both groundbreaking Holocaust graphic novels like the *Maus* series by Art Spiegelman and Algerian post-revolution BD drawn by bédéistes such as Slim or Mahfoud Aïder.

Cognizant of the BD’s power as a tool of *natawâsal*, Boum is particularly concerned with authorial responsibility. If Hans is a central avatar for Boum’s exploration of a western and often US-focused genre of Holocaust Studies, it is through artistic engagement and simple but detailed and historically accurate storytelling through the graphic mode that his scholarship is making a significant impact. *Undesirables*, which demonstrates the reality of multiple circumstantial encounters, has been translated into English, French and Arabic. Boum has penned multiple attendant publications to *Undesirables* that are likewise beneficial for initiatives both in Higher Education and beyond (Boum and Stein 2019, Boum and Stein 2022). Boum’s full-throttle move into BD is stimulating for cultural studies, as engagement but also in alignment with the multimodal turn which brings together modes of expression, including dramatic, artistic and literary. This turn, of which Boum’s work is a stellar exemplar, allows us to better understand the author through avatar’s such as Hans who represent composites of fieldwork and archival experiences. Significantly, Boum’s postcolonial perspective enables a decentring of the European Second World War experience and bridges Jewish and Muslim Maghrebi experiences of marginalisation and suffering as another site of encounter during that time.

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