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Marc André, *Femmes dévoilées. Des Algériennes en France à l'heure de la décolonisation*. Lyon: ENS Editions, 2016. 378 pp. Illustrations, maps, tables, bibliography, and index. €27.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-8478-8840-9.

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The “*femme musulmane*” is no stranger to French politics. Whether in the context of colonial assimilation or in the more recent dust-up over the “burkini,” she has served as a key object of debate over the limits of Frenchness and the place of North Africans in French society. But does she exist? As Marc André makes clear in the opening pages of his insightful monograph, the “essentializing category of ‘Muslim woman’” has a long and winding history, but one which hardly matches the social realities of the women it has variously claimed to represent (p.10). Building on the important work of Djamila Amrane and more recent authors like Diane Sambron and Neil MacMaster, André aims to set image and reality in dialogue: to understand not only the “imagined and fantasized perception of Algerian women,” but how women themselves deployed, assimilated, or subverted such categories (p. 12). [1]

At its core, *Femmes dévoilées* is a collective biography of Algerian women who arrived in Lyon from North Africa between 1947 and 1962. The choice of Lyon is apt, as the city’s importance as both a major migration center and the site of substantial conflict during the War of Algerian Independence allow André to paint a sociological portrait of women who migrated and explore the nuances of their engagement in the politics of decolonization. André builds much of his analysis around two sources: a database of 135 women (out of a total population of 1300) “sufficiently surveilled” by authorities to reconstruct their trajectories, and an extensive series of nearly seventy oral interviews, thirty-seven of them with Algerian women (p. 14). But André does not simply aim to restore visibility to a demographic rendered “invisible” or “mute” by the literature—particularly, he argues, because Algerian women did not constitute a coherent group bounded by any concrete social ties (p. 332). Rather, André aims to break down how such a “group” was variously constructed by others, and how the lived experiences of individual Algerian women in Lyon intersected with or diverged from these categories. In process, he offers a nuanced corrective to a literature that sometimes deploys colonial categories to define its object of analysis.

André divides his book into four sections which advance thematically, moving from a “history of gazes” targeted at Algerian women through a close reading of individual histories intended to more accurately parse the “shared characteristics linked to migratory trajectory and engagement” in the struggle for Algerian independence (pp. 330, 14). The first section, “Anonymats,” focuses on how representatives of the French state—administrators, judges, and social assistants—variously viewed and reified Algerian women arriving in Lyon through the lens of the *femme musulmane*. André attributes the official *méconnaissance* of Algerian women not only to colonial stereotyping, but also to the vicissitudes of migration. Algerian women were certainly subject to the same exoticizing orientalist tropes as their counterparts in North Africa, but these categories thrived in part because Algerian women remained relatively dispersed, discreet, and small in number. André takes great care to demonstrate that Algerian women were neither concentrated in the *bidonvilles* of Lyon nor necessarily in contact with one another

(p. 58). In fact, many Algerian families found themselves housed in working-class neighborhoods like Croix-Rousse, where the population was much more mixed and social ties often formed with metropolitans, rather than other Algerians (p. 86).

Here, as elsewhere in the book, André very adroitly mines images from the press, *photofilmeurs*, and private archives to demonstrate not only the presence but the diversity of Algerian women in Lyon. What he finds is demystifying: far from conforming to either exoticized stereotypes or administrative narratives of emancipation, most Algerian women simply adopted comportments—sartorial or otherwise—that fit their immediate context, for wholly banal reasons (p. 55). If despite their social and spatial mobility Algerian women seemed invisible in public, it was because they did not always appear distinct from other women in Lyon (p. 48).

Where Algerian women came to feel their distinction in common ways was often in contact with the state, as André illustrates in the second and third sections of the book, “Rencontres” and “Engagements.” Much like other recent works on migrants in the 1950s, the second section examines the array of social welfare programs set in place to integrate Algerian women into metropolitan society.^[2] André notes the propaganda and surveillance functions of the medical and social assistance offered to Algerian migrants, which were deeply imbricated in both the efforts to counter Algerian independence and in a longer-term assimilationist project that sought to erase the supposed “ancestral customs” learned in Algeria (p. 92). But in keeping with his focus on the perspectives of Algerian women, André also exposes the spaces for contestation within such a system. Many Algerian women viewed social assistance as a sort of “domesticated symbolic violence,” and frequently used the system in ways other than intended—or, at the very least, engaged it in functional ways that served their individual survival strategies (p. 122). Social welfare programs also offered a basis for building networks of contacts, whether for friendship or mutual aid.

These networks—and women’s place within them—became increasingly important as the war for Algerian independence developed. Despite nationalist claims and French anxieties to the contrary, Algerian women infrequently engaged in political actions collectively *as women* (p. 222). Most were young and already married when they arrived in the metropole, and many had a limited education; factors which tended to favor more conventional roles in the family. Others were better-educated, socially engaged, or employed. But most, André argues, entered into the politics of independence precisely through their familial ties, as the power struggle between the rival nationalist factions, the FLN and the MNA, intensified (p. 154). They may not have been directly engaged by either movement, but they were often present and participated actively—a choice that was often remained more social or familial than political or ideological (p. 334).

As the book’s third section makes clear, this engagement accelerated and became more explicit as women proved increasingly vital to both the FLN and the MNA’s efforts for independence (and against one another) in Lyon. Actively recruited, many women occupied different, but equally important roles. Some became liaison agents and points of transmission for arms, messages, and even individuals. Others turned their homes into refuges. They aided the families of jailed nationalist activists, and became sources of nationalist pressure within their own families. Sometimes, women participated directly in violence. As André highlights throughout, Algerian women exercised enormous agency, in part because they became a site of particular contestation between the state, the MNA, and the FLN (p. 215). They played on stereotypes of Algerians and of their position as *femmes musulmanes* to gain a degree of autonomy and maintain the mobility that rendered them useful political agents (p. 201).

For André, the importance of parsing this engagement is not only to recover and valorize activities that, by their nature, meant that women’s participation remained invisible in the archival record. He also emphasizes that such participation was transformative. The intimacy of the opposing nationalist camps

and the common pressures to “take a position and become, willingly or not, actors in the conflict” gave Algerian women—for the first time—a set of broadly shared experiences (p. 12).

The book’s fourth and final section, “Les conditions d’une double présence,” traces Algerian women’s experiences in Lyon into the post-independence period. André concludes that women remained “instrumentalized” in a contest for influence that continued not just between the FLN and the French state, but also between the FLN and MNA (p. 273). But while French efforts to assign new national categories to former colonial subjects or nationalist efforts to close ranks after independence often appeared to foreclose women’s political agency, André argues that many women nevertheless largely escaped administrative controls or asserted their own ambiguous identities (p. 294). Despite their choice to remain in the metropole, the war created for many women an enduring sense of Algerianity—but one defined by individual, rather than collective, experience.

In considering the heterogeneity of Algerian women’s experiences in Lyon, André makes an important intervention into the literatures on migration, Algerian nationalism, and decolonization. His extensive use of interviews and personal archives allows him to reconstruct lives which did not fit easily into the categories imposed by official documentation, and he demonstrates convincingly that women adapted, adopted, or deployed the different norms foisted on them for highly pragmatic reasons (p. 331). This strength can also sometimes be the work’s principal weakness: the massive, detail-heavy chapters are lightened by André’s lively prose, but some readers might appreciate more guidance as the narrative flows between the family and the FLN and work, lingering on details and personal accounts. But such minutiae only serve to reinforce André’s arguments that Algerian women often acted for social rather than political reasons, and for highly personal ones at that. In André’s account, the ever-present and ever-vacant *femme musulmane* fades away, ceding her place to real women with much more complicated—and ultimately, much more interesting—stories to tell.

NOTES

[1] Djamila Amrane, *Les femmes algériennes dans la guerre* (Paris: Plon, 1991); Diane Sambron, *Femmes musulmanes, Guerre d’Algérie, 1954-1962* (Paris: Autrement, 2007); Neil MacMaster, *Burning the Veil: The Algerian War and the “Emancipation” of Muslim Women, 1954-1962* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2009); and, more recently, Natalya Vince’s excellent book *Our Fighting Sisters: Nation, Memory, and Gender in Algeria, 1954-2012* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015).

[2] See particularly Amelia H. Lyons, *The Civilizing Mission in the Metropole: Algerian Families and the French Welfare State during Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2013).

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