

THE PETITION

Israel, Palestine, and a tenure battle at Barnard.

BY JANE KRAMER

In 1990, when Nadia Abu El-Haj was a graduate student at Duke, three years into her coursework in anthropology, she started thinking about a field-work project. She was not much moved by the prospect of adding a village study to the school's cartons of dusty monographs. Like other American anthropologists of her generation, she was interested in epistemology; she wanted to examine knowledge as a social construct, strongly connected to time, place, politics, and identity, and she wanted to do it in a culture where the status of common knowledge was being contested, even violently contested. She considered working on Palestine—her father was born there—but she ended up in Israel, learning Hebrew, poring over British-mandate and Israeli archives, and eventually moving into the field to document, and in many ways challenge, the claims and practices of Israeli archeology in the creation of the country's historical imagination and its contemporary self-description. She was not the first anthropologist to do this. Israeli social scientists had been debating the politics of archeology for years. But she was arguably the first with a name like Abu El-Haj.

She received her doctorate in 1995, and turned her dissertation into a book called "Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society," which was published in 2001 by the University of Chicago Press. In 2002, it won a Middle East Studies Association award for scholarship. The book looked at the role of archeology in what was essentially a political project: the Biblical validation for Jewish claims to what is now Israel. Specifically, it traced the history of a persistent "grammar of biblical recovery . . . increasingly recast within the terms of Jewish national revival and return," and the ways in which that grammar had produced a particular "reading" of ancient stones, potsherds, inscriptions,

and even bones by the scientists who unearthed them—or, as one member of the Jewish Palestine Exploration Society put it, in the nineteen-forties, "Pottery is not pottery, it is Eretz Yisrael."

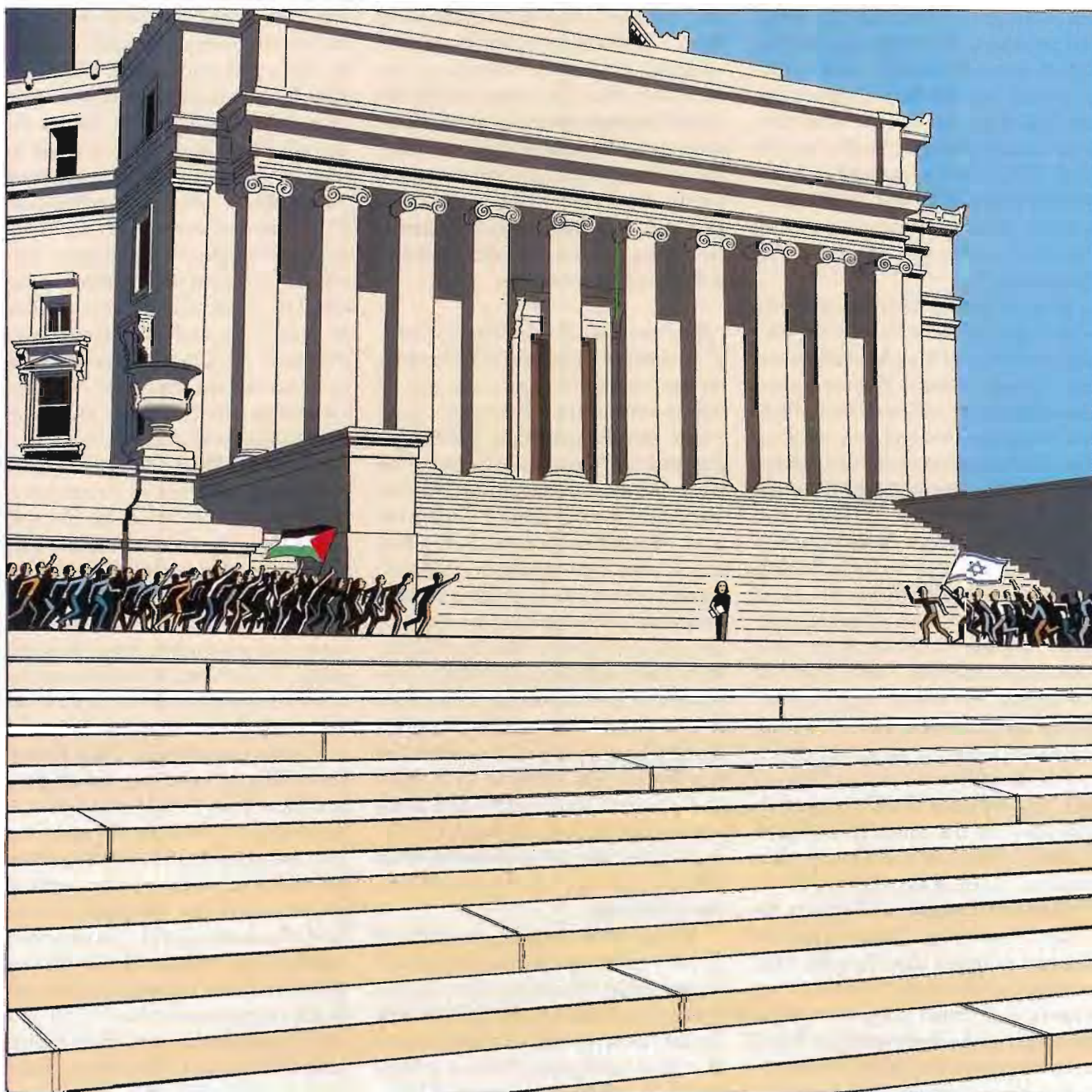
The book was praised by colleagues who responded to the critical tropes that were Abu El-Haj's legacy from scholars like Michel Foucault, Ian Hacking, Bruno Latour, and Edward Said, and dismissed by colleagues with a theoretical or a political or simply a turf interest in dismissing it. She says she expected that. But whatever controversy she imagined then was, at most, an exchange of letters in the kind of scholarly journals no one outside the academy reads. "I had given the book my best shot," she told me, when we started talking last fall. "I had got a lot of support for the project. I had grants, fellowships—I was turning *down* fellowships—so hundreds of people must have reviewed my work and liked it. But I'm not a public intellectual. I'm drawn to archives, to disciplines where the evidence sits for a while. I don't court controversy."

When "Facts on the Ground" appeared, Abu El-Haj had been teaching for four years at the University of Chicago. The anthropologist John Comaroff, her friend and mentor at Chicago, told me, "She was one of our stand-out hires, our youngest member, but at the same time the one everybody trusted. She brought to the place a sense of civility and repose." The book, by all accounts, gave her every chance of tenure, but she didn't stay. Hoping to join her husband, a hedge-fund manager based in New York, and start a family, she applied for a job at Barnard, the women's college at Columbia. In the fall of 2002, after a year at the Institute for Advanced Study, in Princeton, beginning research for a new book, she formally joined the Barnard faculty. In April of 2006, she filed for tenure there.

No one in her department doubted

she would get it. She was known on campus for having an original and scrupulous mind—"a delightful mind," Judith Shapiro, Barnard's president and a fellow-anthropologist, calls it. She was fair-minded and collegial. Her courses were popular: Race and Sex in Scientific and Social Practice; Anthropology of Science; History and Memory. Shapiro described her to me as a "passionate, committed teacher," and the anthropologists across Broadway at Columbia, who had just made her their director of graduate studies, clearly agreed. Over the next year, her tenure file passed the scrutiny of three committees, which read everything written by and about Abu El-Haj, and recommended her for tenure. By the end of the spring semester in 2007, all that remained was the approval of a fourth committee known on campus as "the ad hoc"—five professors appointed case by case by Columbia's provost, Alan Brinkley. The ad hoc received Abu El-Haj's file in May and scheduled it for review last fall.

On August 7, 2007, a petition entitled "Deny Nadia Abu El-Haj Tenure" was posted on petitiononline.com. By the end of the month, it had found its way onto a number of e-mail lists and Web sites and been signed by nearly nineteen hundred people, many of them Barnard and Columbia graduates who in all likelihood had never heard of Abu El-Haj before. The petition described her as a scholar of "demonstrably inferior caliber" who indulges in "knowing misrepresentation of data"; denies Israel's historical claims to the Holy Land; "asserts that the ancient Israelite kingdoms are a 'pure political fabrication'"; "does not speak or read Hebrew"; and is "patently ignorant about the subject of her only book." It said that her "use of evidence . . . fails to meet the standards of scholarship that are expected of Columbia and Barnard undergraduates."



After the first attacks, Nadia Abu El-Haj decided to ignore the campaign. She thought, I'll never survive it if I read this stuff.

The author of the petition was a Barnard alumna (class of '82) named Paula Stern. She owned a small technical-writing business in Israel, and lived in Ma'aleh Adumim, a settlement three miles east of Jerusalem on the West Bank—which, to her mind, was not occupied territory but “Israel for forty years.” (She describes herself as a middle-class Jewish girl from Teaneck, New Jersey, who had an epiphany in junior high school reading Leon Uris’s “Exodus.”) Stern told me that, by the end of a few pages of “Facts on the Ground,” she knew that Abu El-Haj

was “dangerous” and “wrong.” “I was horrified, because what Abu El-Haj was saying in her introduction was just what Ahmadinejad is saying” is how she explained it, though she might have been hard put to cite the Iranian President’s views on, say, First Temple Period archeology. She didn’t think a “Palestinian” like Abu El-Haj could be expected to write objectively about Israelis any more than an Israeli like her could write objectively about Palestinians—that nationality was a “red flag,” and carried the strong likelihood of prejudice. By her own standards, she was right.

Barnard is a small college and its alumnae are close. They e-mail, they keep in touch, they exchange news, and they tend to believe what their friends say. Stern had begun to rally those alumnae in the fall of 2006, six months after Abu El-Haj submitted her file for tenure. By last summer, when the petition went out, many of them were already active in Stern’s campaign, in particular a writer named Diana Muir (class of '75), whose husband, Paul Appelbaum, teaches psychiatry, law, and ethics at Columbia’s school of medicine; and Shulamit Reinhartz (class of '67), a Bran-

deis sociologist and the wife of the Brandeis president, who had boycotted her fortieth reunion because “I could not get an answer to a question I was asking concerning the tenure case of assistant anthropology professor Nadia Abu El-Haj.” (Reinharz had wanted to know whether Abu El-Haj was Palestinian—born “in what some people now call Palestine”—or simply “identifies with Palestinians.”)

Most of Stern’s “facts” about “Facts on the Ground” came through her Barnard network, and from her daily browsings through Listservs that carry news gleaned from the militant Zionist blogs and Web sites that had been tracking Abu El-Haj’s career since her book appeared. They run a gamut from the SPME Faculty Forum, the bulletin of an organization of pro-Israel professors called Scholars for Peace in the Middle East; to Campus Watch, the monitor of Middle East studies on American campuses launched, in 2002, by the neo-conservative historian Daniel Pipes; to *FrontPage*, the online magazine of the David Horowitz Freedom Center (Horowitz being the reborn sixties leftist who last fall sponsored an “Islamofascism Awareness Week” at more than a hundred of the country’s colleges). In 2005, Stern had contributed three columns to *FrontPage*; that same year, it published a review of “Facts on the Ground,” claiming, “There is not the slightest evidence that [Abu El-Haj] has ever seen the work of Israeli archaeologists, ever visited a dig, ever studied the history of the development of Israeli archaeology, ever inquired as to how Israeli archaeologists choose the sites they do choose for digs.”

Stern’s facts were wrong. Within a few months, she was exposed in the progressive Zionist blog *Tikun Olam* and in the Jewish press—most notably, in the *Jewish Week*, where an editor-at-large named Larry Cohler-Esses (who had personally found the book “hostile in fundamental ways to Israel”) compared her references to “Facts on the Ground” with the text itself; he found that they were either inaccurate or, in the case of direct citations, misquoted or quoted misleadingly out of context. (Stern later told Cohler-Esses that, having taken “pieces of criticisms from experts,” she may not have been “a hun-

dred per cent accurate” in transcribing them.) But Stern wasn’t embarrassed or ashamed. She kept her accusations alive on a blog called *PaulaSays*, and by the end of October, barely a month after a story about the petition made headlines in the *Times*, it had garnered more than twenty-five hundred signatures. She predicted that Barnard and Columbia were going to lose a lot of alumni money if Abu El-Haj got tenure.

As many as a third of Barnard’s students and a quarter of Columbia’s undergraduate students are Jewish. “I like to remind people that we are a Jewish-friendly institution,” Judith Shapiro told me. “We are not victims. This is not the most dangerous place in the world for Jews right now.” But for the more sheltered of those students it may also be their first experience of a community where Israel’s policies are discussed and challenged, rather than endorsed de facto; where Muslim students share their classrooms and Muslim professors, or professors they assume are Muslim, teach them. They are often alarmed by the shock of free speech that is not their own. Many of them come to Columbia from small Jewish day schools where, as Jacob Kriegel, a premed senior who went to one of those schools, told me, “the Israeli position was reinforced.”

Kriegel is the outgoing president of LionPAC, a “nonpartisan pro-Israel advocacy group officially under the umbrella of our Hillel chapter.” Hillel is the largest Jewish student organization in the world, and Kriegel, like many of his Jewish friends, joined it as a freshman and looked to it, and to faculty groups like Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, for support. Scholars for Peace draws heavily on medical and law-school faculties for its membership. Its Columbia chapter is led by an epidemiologist at the School of Public Health named Judith Jacobson, who was one of the group’s founders. She described the liberal-arts faculty to me as party to a “leftist-Islamofascist alliance,” complained about the collapse of Columbia’s academic values, and blamed it all on the “undermining of the humanities” that began with Edward Said.

Said, who was in fact a Palestinian-American Protestant, taught English

and Comparative Literature at Columbia from the early sixties until his death, in 2003, and many of the attacks on Abu El-Haj made pointed reference to his influence. For years, he was the school’s best-known, and certainly its most controversial, professor. His book “Orientalism,” which was published in 1978, had transformed the way Western intellectuals read the canonical European writings of the past three centuries. His name and face were familiar to academics and activists all over the world. And, more to the point, his presence on the Palestine National Council gave the Palestinian movement a large measure of whatever credibility it gained in the West. Today, his legacy is as strong as the hatred it provokes in Israel activists like Jacobson. She told me, “I thought, We’re at Columbia, in this very Jewish city, why aren’t we fighting this?”

A million Jews live in New York, more than in any other city in the world except Tel Aviv, and it is safe to say that whenever something involving Jews unsettles the Columbia campus, uptown in Morningside Heights, New Yorkers know. There is, of course, no such thing as a New York Jewish vote. There is an Israel vote. Israel is the cause that can raise a constituency out of an otherwise fractious, and famously skeptical, Jewish population, and push it into a kind of collective panic. The pressure is hardly unique to Columbia, but the university has been a constant target, and today, five years after Said’s death, the thorny gift of what one of his friends calls “Ed’s shoes” has been passed to much of the Middle East faculty—most notably, the historian Rashid Khalidi, who holds the chair established in Said’s name.

Khalidi, a secular Palestinian-American, first came under attack in New York for accepting the chair, which counted among its benefactors the United Arab Emirates, whose late President had funded an Abu Dhabi think tank accused of harboring a Holocaust denier and spreading anti-Semitic propaganda. (The long list of other donors included Richard Debs, the founding president of Morgan Stanley International, and the New York philanthropists Rita Hauser and Jean Stein.) Not much later, Khalidi was fired from a

volunteer outreach program for city high-school teachers when the schools chancellor, Joel Klein, heard about, as Khalidi puts it, “a noted Columbia anti-Semite” loose in the public schools. By now, he says, he has lost count of the mornings he has picked up a paper and seen something terrible about himself. “Sure, the comfort level of these Jewish kids is important,” he told me. “And some have real complaints. But education is about the exchange of ideas, it’s about arguments over ideas, and you can’t have an argument over ideas if you carry the ‘comfort level’ of a kindergarten.”

Lee Bollinger, Columbia’s president, counts Khalidi as a friend, but he makes no secret of the fact that he needs the good will of the constituencies that exert an influence on the city’s politicians and press, and that he intends to keep it. His plans for the school depend in large part on good will, most critically a politically controversial plan to raze seventeen acres of run-down apartments and warehouses, north of Columbia in Harlem, and begin an overdue expansion of the campus; it is worth noting that the City Council approved it in December, less than three months after Bollinger delivered a stinging introduction to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who had come to speak at Columbia at the invitation of its School of International and Public Affairs. Many faculty members were offended by the tone of Bollinger’s remarks: he began by invoking “a critical premise of freedom of speech that we do not honor the dishonorable when we open the public forum to their voices”; went on to present the Iranian President with a detailed chronicle of his gruesome record; and ended by saying that he felt “all the weight of the modern civilized world yearning to express the revulsion at what you stand for.”

By all reports, Bollinger, a First Amendment scholar who came to Columbia in 2002, after five extremely successful years running the University of Michigan, had been under huge pressure to rescind the invitation. (A mock interview between Bollinger and Ahmadinejad, in the *New York Post*, had the Iranian saluting Khalidi and praising Columbia for the helpful influence of professors like Said and Abu El-Haj on his own thinking.) Bollinger told me, “Someone who denies the Holocaust,

who says to wipe Israel off the map? He needs to be confronted. People on the faculty said, ‘The norms of the Middle East are hospitality.’ Well, I say, ‘Our norms are that you’re going to be challenged.’ The important thing is not to fall into the ‘free-speech trap,’ where the response to extreme views is silence. We remove ourselves from public debate by not inviting controversy.”

Nadia Abu El-Haj is a slim, graceful woman in her early forties, with a delicate, fine-boned face, brown eyes, and straight dark hair tied back in a ponytail or a makeshift twist. Her beauty is undeniable—a fact that (along with the assumption that she “comes from money”) has been the subject of some discussion in the more lunatic postings on the anti-Abu El-Haj blogs, as if her good looks were a Scud aimed at the heart of American scholarship. One Columbia student, who had applied to her for a summer babysitting job and was turned down, described her as a transatlantic trophy wife “dripping with diamonds and pearls.” It was the only posting that Abu El-Haj read, and she says that, after the first shock, it cheered her considerably, since she dresses almost entirely in black jeans and a couple of layers of sleeveless scoop-necked T-shirts, and the only

jewelry she wears, apart from her wedding band, are small round onyx earrings and a simple silver chain.

She was born in New York. Her mother, Sandra, was a “Long Island Episcopalian” with a French father and an American mother of Norwegian descent, and her father, Ribhi, was a secular Palestinian Muslim who had left Jerusalem in the nineteen-fifties to study; he received his doctorate in economics from Columbia in the late fifties. They met in New York, working together at the National Bureau of Economic Research—Abu El-Haj calls it “a match made by Milton Friedman”—and produced three daughters. Nadia was the second. She describes her religious education as “church twice a year,” but her sentimental education, she says, came from her father’s big close Palestinian family. It was a cosmopolitan, highly educated clan, and most of the boys and girls of her father’s generation studied in America, as he did, and stayed. (One of his sisters married an American diplomat, and his brother, a well-known Ottoman historian with a Jewish wife, teaches at SUNY Binghamton.) Ribhi Abu El-Haj became a development economist with the United Nations, and when Nadia was a few years old he was loaned to Iran, to work on development models at the Shah’s Ministry of



“Life insurance. You know, just in case—God forbid—something should ever happen to you.”



"Every year it's harder and harder to get their attention."

Industry. The family lived in Tehran until 1975. Nadia learned Farsi from her classmates at the English-Iranian School, and, at twelve, with her father installed in a new job in Lebanon, she started middle school in Beirut, improved her French, and added Arabic to her store of languages. She hadn't really known much about Palestine as a child, and what she did know was "the happy part"—family visits to her grandmother's house in East Jerusalem. "My sense now is that the loss of Palestine was so deep for my dad that he kept us away from it," she once told me. "But a month after we moved to Beirut, in 1975, the civil war in Lebanon started. My political education began then."

In 1980, Abu El-Haj entered Bryn Mawr. She wasn't thinking of being an anthropologist then—she majored in political science—although she knew that she had to be *something*, because "in

my family it was kind of overdetermined that you would get a higher degree." After graduation, she "floated" for a few years, first at a Washington foundation involved in women's issues, and then in New York, where she worked at a Quaker N.G.O. attached to the United Nations. At some point during that year, she sat in on an anthropology class at the New School. The professor, Talal Asad, was a family friend, and she asked his advice about what to do. He told her, Do anthropology. "It happened that fast," she says. "Admittedly, it was not the most well-thought-through decision of my life. Duke, in those days, was a pretty chaotic place for anthropology. But it gave me the freedom to think, it gave me the space I needed."

Her dissertation adviser at Duke, Virginia Dominguez (who now teaches at Illinois and is the president-elect of the American Anthropological Associ-

ation), had done her own field work in Israel. "There was enormous pressure in America in those days for students to study what you'd expect them to," Dominguez told me. "Indians went to India, Koreans to Korea. Nadia kept coming back to the question of Palestine. She wanted to figure out the place, the issues, the sources of nationalism there. But I told her, 'To do that, you need to understand the institutions that have the power—the institutions of *Israeli* nationalism.' And at some point she found the idea compelling."

Abu El-Haj says, "Virginia pushed me away from Palestine for intellectual reasons. I struggled with this for a year. I read the classic Israeli ethnographic literature. So much of it was about the marginals, about Arabs or Mizrahim"—Jews from the Arab world—"but, to me, it pointed up this fundamental contradiction in the idea of Israel. The Mizrahim had to be and could be assimilated into that 'Israel' because they were Jews, whereas the Arabs couldn't, *wouldn't*, be assimilated. The question became: How did it get constructed—this Jewish national 'self' that we take for granted today? So I said to Virginia, 'How about taking a central tradition, a hegemonic tradition? How would you do that?' And there it was—one of those Aha! moments—archeology!" The moment turned into a ten-year project, and included two years in Israel, two years at the Academy for International and Area Studies at Harvard, and another year studying the history of science at the University of Pennsylvania. "The influence was Foucault," she says, "but it was the historians of science who were finally most interesting to me, because they were so specific in their approach to the ways knowledge is produced. Compared to the postmodernists, I'd become the most empirical person in the world."

Archeology, as it is practiced today in nearly every country with an interest in shaping a historical identity, falls somewhere between a hard science—"facts" that can be ascertained by dating, testing, and inscription experts—and an interpretive social science whose "facts" have traditionally derived from ancient texts and their mapping and attribution clues. The British began the Biblical mapping of Palestine in the nineteenth century, with an eye to claiming their Christian

rights to the Holy Land once the Ottoman Empire fell. The early Zionist settlers, with an eye to claiming their Jewish rights, went back to the Old Testament for evidence. With the establishment of the state of Israel, in 1948, the desire for a foundational archeology became a political imperative—a “national-colonial” imperative is how Abu El-Haj put it—sometimes pursued with the help of the Israeli Defense Forces, with a mission to establish and celebrate the Jewishness of the country’s history. It was a mission that at times dismissed, or even destroyed, the evidence of other settlement, including fourteen hundred years of native Islam, and it produced what Abu El-Haj calls “a whole matrix” of assumptions that affected decisions about city planning and definitions of public domain. Israeli scholars tended to understand (if not always condone) the politics of that mission. (Dominguez says that “Facts on the Ground” was received by Israeli social scientists “not as a scathing critique but as right in line with what they were doing there.”) But many of their American colleagues did not.

Abu El-Haj was one of the first Americans to look at the origins of Israel’s archeological project in terms of Zionism, with its nineteenth-century, essentially German Romantic conflation of place, nationhood, and identity. Another was Jonathan Boyarin, an anthropologist who holds the chair in Modern Jewish Thought at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Boyarin is a devout Orthodox Jew with a high regard for Abu El-Haj, whom he has known since they both worked in Israel in the early nineties. “My own project at the time was looking at cultural constructions of territory and history in Zionism and Palestinian nationalism,” he told me. “So I could understand Nadia’s project. And it made a great deal of sense to me: memory and territory, the politics of how they get mapped onto each other. Zionism is the dominant Israeli national narrative, and it’s the job of academics to historicize any narrative. That’s what we do. That’s what Nadia did.”

The Cambridge classicist Mary Beard recently described her own work as stemming from “a conviction that, at its best, the study of ancient history is as much about *how* we know as *what* we

know,” and thus “an engagement with all the processes of selection, constructive blindness, revolutionary reinterpretation, and willful misinterpretation that together produce the ‘facts’ . . . out of the messy, confusing, and contradictory evidence that survives.” For Abu El-Haj, those processes involved an ongoing appeal to Israel’s archeologists to provide knowledge for what one postwar Israeli curator called “a nation in the process of renewing its acquaintance with its own land.” She examined the “terrains” of nationhood established after the British mandate ended, and then the politics of renaming them, the politics of excavating them, and the often fierce debates between young socialist kibbutzniks for whom the land meant farming and archeologists for whom the land meant “history.” In particular, she looked at the period of intense archeological activity in Israel that ran roughly from 1950 through the early nineteen-seventies, especially at the excavations meant to renew a case for sovereignty over East Jerusalem after the Six-Day War, in 1967, ended, and finally at the role of ruins and reconstructions and museums and tours, and even tour guides, in creating a historical narrative that effectively excluded the Palestinians born there. The result was a rich, contentious, meticulously detailed piece of research. And, despite a tendency to reduce the complexities of Zionism to colonial terms, her book turned out to be less a dismissal of Israel’s archeological claims than an investigation into what the political scientist Timothy Mitchell called “the interplay of scientific method, cultural imagination, and political power” that went into making them.

In some cases, she found that the facts for a definitively “Israelite” attribution were not all in, and the examples she gave of this were often cited in the attacks against her. When I asked Boyarin why, he said, “Sometimes, I think that Jews who attack Nadia are really grasping at the idea that Israel is *the* standard of Jewish life and faith—

so, for them, defending Israel, even against scholarly debate, becomes the way to express Jewishness. I haven’t advanced very much in my understanding of this kind of anxiety. But I know that, if you’re looking for a reasoned, progressive scholar who’s on the same side as those guys, you’re not going to find him.”

Three years before Paula Stern wrote her petition, a Boston group known as the David Project Center for Jewish Leadership produced a thirty-minute film called “Columbia Unbecoming.” The film had nothing to do with Nadia Abu El-Haj. Its subject was the alleged intimidation of Jewish students by three Middle Eastern professors in a troubled department called Middle East and Asian Languages and Civilizations, or MEALAC, and Abu El-Haj was not in that department nor was she known ever to have brought politics into the classroom, let alone intimidated anyone. But the film breached whatever firewall still stood between the faculty and the world beyond Morningside Heights, leaving visible, and vulnerable, every scholar who had ever dealt with Israel.

The professors accused in “Columbia Unbecoming” were not interviewed in the film. Ten students and recent graduates—several with their faces pixelated and their voices digitally masked, like witnesses in a protection program—did most of the talking. It is still not clear which of the students had been taking the classes they described and which were self-invited guests. (Elizabeth Povinelli, a Columbia anthropologist and close friend of Abu El-Haj, told me, “Any of us who teach Middle East, race, subjects like that, we have to assume that there will be people planted in the classroom recording what we say.”) But what *was* clear was that some students had tried to complain and felt brushed off by the administration. Their stories had spread, to the Hillel chaplain (who was to figure prominently in the film), and eventually to the David Project and its young “director of campus strategy,” Rachel Fish. Fish agreed to help them make their complaints on camera. She describes her Columbia “mission” as “reaching out.” “When I met with those students, it was simply to get to know their needs,” she told me. “And slowly they began to tell me about



serious, unaddressed problems. There were a handful of professors with a very anti-Israeli platform, and the platform was their classrooms. Their starting point was: Does Israel have a right to exist? And their answer was: No.”

The historian Alan Brinkley was just starting his second year as provost when Fish arrived at his office with a copy of the film and a small contingent of activists that included Charles Jacobs, the president of the David Project, and Ariel Beery, a twenty-five-year-old student from the School of General Studies who had come to Columbia after a stint in the Spokesperson’s Unit of the Israeli Defense Forces. (Beery appears in the film.) Brinkley has a historian’s skepticism of information he has yet to confirm, and he describes the experience as “people I didn’t know talking about people I didn’t know.” He agreed that the accusations were serious and said he would look into them, but this was not the level of outrage Fish demanded. (She says, “He sank further and further into his chair; his body language spoke volumes.”) It wasn’t long before the David Project was “shar-

ing our film,” as Fish put it, and its accusations—screening it on campus and for Jewish groups in the area, and posting the transcript online. The Columbia faculty was outraged, although the reasons differed. Some professors wanted a strong statement from Bollinger in defense of academic freedom. Others wanted the people at MEALAC fired.

No one was satisfied. After a good deal of negotiation, Bollinger, who described his predicament to me as being caught between a commitment to free speech outside the academy and free speech inside it, instructed his new vice-president for arts and sciences and dean of faculty, the anthropologist Nicholas Dirks, to choose a committee to investigate the students’ charges. After sitting for nine weeks, and taking more than a hundred statements, the committee found no credible evidence of harassment or intimidation that would have warranted disciplinary action. (Whatever provocative or intimidating things any of the professors may or may not have said in a public forum outside the classroom were not the university’s af-

fair.) But two professors were cited in the committee’s report for “episodes,” three years earlier, which, on the assumption that they occurred, “challenge in varying degrees our collegium’s widespread normative expectations concerning a civil and tolerant learning environment.” One professor, a well-known historian of Arabic and Islamic science named George Saliba, was tenured, but the other, Joseph Massad, a young assistant professor of modern Arab politics, was not. (Saliba denied that the episode concerning him took place as described; Massad denied that the episodes concerning him took place at all.) Massad was about to publish his second book and was preparing a third, and he was also coming up for his fifth-year academic review. He was, admittedly, an earnest polemicist in the Palestinian cause. I spoke with several students who had studied with him in an introductory course called “Major Topics in Asian Civilizations: The Middle East and India,” including two roommates who had taken it together the year “Columbia Unbecoming” was first shown. One roommate, Frances Kreimer, remembered Massad as devoting “about two weeks, not more” to the question of Palestine. The other, Bari Weiss, said, “It was every week, that’s all we heard.” (Two years later, Massad filed for tenure. He is still waiting for a decision, and politely refused my request for an interview.)

But none of the students I talked to actually liked their time in the department. Hannah Temple, a MEALAC major who graduated last June, told me, “I left Columbia sorry to have had my academic experience in that department. You couldn’t get anything done; it was so bitterly divided. And then there was all the outside instigation, like the film. It didn’t resonate with me, but to some of my friends it did. I think now that it wasn’t really about Columbia, or even Massad. It was about Edward Said. It was as if all those forces had been waiting until he was gone to make a case against him.”

Charles Jacobs, the David Project president, is a thoughtful man. He considers himself a “classic liberal,” and unlike, say, David Horowitz, who calls the left an “enabler and abettor of the ter-



rorist jihad," he can sound like one. He told me that all he had wanted from "Columbia Unbecoming" was "to stop the ideological assault on Israel" that was taking place on campus and "to help students learn to make Israel's case and teach them how to respond" to provocations from people who put "utopian demands on Israel and at the same time apply a double standard" to the Arab world. The impulse was understandable, if the method, arguably, was not. Jacobs is part of what Daniel Pipes describes as "the general effort" to fight bias in the academy, led by three advocacy groups: Pipes's umbrella organization, a Philadelphia think tank called Middle East Forum, does the research; Jacobs's David Project does the interventions; and Horowitz's Freedom Center does the "left-right" issues. Their politics vary, but when it comes to defending Israel they agree.

Pipes (who, when we spoke in November, was a foreign-policy adviser to Rudy Giuliani's Presidential campaign) defended their work by saying, "What do we want? A different perspective in Middle Eastern studies. A balanced discussion of the issues. As someone who's left the academy, meets a payroll, lives pretty much in the here and now, I very much dispute the notion that academics cannot function freely and be accountable at the same time. It doesn't come free, this very special set of privileges they have, and there's nothing to be said for the abstracted position that they can disdain the public, the students, and only engage with each other. They are financed by the public and are thus accountable in some way to the public. They say, No, only we can judge and evaluate each other's work. Well, that's not how things work in this country."

The attacks on Nadia Abu El-Haj's book began in earnest in the summer of 2003, a year and a half after "Facts on the Ground" appeared, when Pipes ran a review by Jacob Lassner, a professor of Jewish civilization at Northwestern, in a quarterly published by his Middle East Forum; Lassner's review accused Abu El-Haj of being part of a conscious political "enterprise" on the part of Palestinian Arabs to reclaim their land. Two years later, a similarly negative review by Pipes's new director at Campus Watch, Alexander Joffe, was



"I had to give up my secret identity—no more phone booths."

published in the well-regarded *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, which was unaware of his position—Joffe had been teaching at SUNY Purchase when the review was submitted—and the conflict of interest it involved. (He now works for the David Project.)

Abu El-Haj told me, "After those first accusations, I knew it was only the beginning. I thought, I'll never survive it if I read this stuff and start replying. She made herself a couple of promises: 'I will ignore this; I will not let these people into my life; I will not start Googling for what they say next.'" She asked her colleagues to stop forwarding the attacks on "Facts on the Ground," and under no circumstances to respond to them; her colleagues reluctantly complied. "Part of our responsibility is not to let them destroy our friends," Elizabeth Povinelli told me. "With Nadia, the strategy was to make it a 'scholarly' issue. Did she speak Hebrew? Did she know a tractor from a backhoe, or the Biblical distinction between 'house' and 'temple'? The answer was always 'Yes, she did.'"

Brian Larkin, the chair of anthropology at Barnard, says that, for him, the most terrifying aspect of the campaign against Abu El-Haj that began then was

"how visible, how exposed the links between the people leading it became. What were their arguments, really? Archeology? There are serious archeologists in Israel, and Nadia goes out of her way to credit them. Zionism? She places Zionism where it belongs, in the European nineteenth-century tradition—and what's strong, for me, is her understanding that the original Zionist attachment was to the *land*, not to the history of the land. She raises the question: How does an attachment 'move' from the land to some maximalist notion of the Bible as a source of historical truth? If you read those reviews, you'd think Nadia was a terrible scholar, that no one takes her seriously. But you would also think, Hey, who *are* these people? What do they want with her?"

By the beginning of last year, with Abu El-Haj's tenure pending, a Barnard professor of Religion and Jewish Studies named Alan Segal had brought the effort to discredit "Facts on the Ground" home to the campus. Segal, at sixty-one, was a respected scholar and an immensely popular teacher. He was used to being consulted on anything at Barnard involving ancient Israel, and while he will neither confirm nor deny that he

was consulted on the subject of Abu El-Haj, he made no secret of his feelings. (Paula Stern acknowledged him as one of the “experts” whose criticisms she relied on in drafting her petition.) On September 10th, he was quoted in the *Times* article on the petition. “There is every reason in the world to want her to have tenure, and only one reason against it—her work,” he said. “I believe it is not good enough.” In academia, the rule is that you never talk out of school about a tenure case, much less a tenure case in somebody else’s department. “A senior faculty member publicly attacking a junior member—it was egregious!” Khalidi told me. Rosalind Rosenberg, a professor of American history at Barnard, said, “I don’t remember anything like this ever happening before. It was beyond the pale—everybody’s very upset with him.” (I met Segal, but he refused to talk to me on the record.)

A few days later, a poster went up on campus announcing the first of a series of “underground lectures” on archeology in Israel. The sponsors were Scholars for Peace in the Middle East and LionPAC, and the speaker was Alan Segal, talking about the First Temple Period. Gil Anidjar, a literature professor from MEALAC, who went to the lecture, told me, “Segal began with his interest in archeology, and then—he didn’t even pause—he said, ‘And then there’s the problem with Nadia,’ and everybody knew why he was there. He had no idea of the difference between historical archeology and the history of science, no understanding of the discipline in which Nadia works. He said that Israel is the only country where you shake a tree and ten archeologists fall and none of them agree on anything—but that was exactly Nadia’s point.” Jacob Kriegel, from LionPAC, had introduced Segal. When I asked him if Scholars for Peace had considered inviting Abu El-Haj, or any of the anthropologists or archeologists supporting her, to lecture in the series, he said no, that the people there had told him Segal was the expert.

On September 21st, Segal published an article called “Some Professional Observations on the Controversy About Nadia Abu El-Haj’s First Book” in the *Spectator*, Columbia’s student newspaper, which had been following the affair with a tabloid interest. He raised the possibil-

ity that “groups of people acting as provocateurs” had controlled faculty elections to the Appointments, Tenure and Promotion Committee at Barnard (a biologist, two historians, and two art historians) that had recommended Abu El-Haj for tenure. He hinted at “undisclosed personal biases” at work, and “confidential letter writers . . . chosen and weighted” in her favor. “The result,” he said, “is that this particular tenure case is just as debatable for incidents and prejudices within our walls as outside it.” A month later, he told the Jewish weekly the *Forward* that Nadia Abu El-Haj “hates Israelis.”

Last fall, alarmed by the number of attacks on scholars like Abu El-Haj, five prominent American professors—including the Columbia sociologist Jonathan Cole, who was provost during the last fourteen years of Edward Said’s life, and the feminist historian Joan Scott, from the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton—put out their own petition, “to defend the university” against the rash of “vociferous campaigns targeting universities and their faculty . . . launched by groups portraying themselves as defenders of Israel.” At around the same time, Victoria de Grazia, the historian who directs Columbia’s Institute for the Study of Europe, invited a group of Columbia and Barnard professors to talk about what was happening on campus. They came with a number of complaints. Some were uncomfortable with what they saw as Lee Bollinger’s high-handedness in not consulting them on plans concerning the university’s future. Others were uncomfortable with the style of Bollinger’s public pronouncements. But they were all uncomfortable with what, to them, was their president’s politic silence on subjects where he might legitimately have spoken for Columbia, including the attempts, both in and out of the university, to derail Nadia Abu El-Haj’s tenure process.

Tenure, for all the problems inherent in any sinecure system, is meant to protect freedom of speech and freedom of thought in the academy, and what de Grazia and her colleagues were contesting was the right of a self-constituted “public” like Paula Stern’s petitioners or Daniel Pipes’s “general effort” to interfere with that freedom. “President Bollinger is a communitarian,” de Grazia

told me the day after the meeting. “That is, he has a communitarian notion of free speech. But our question was: Who is our community? The trustees? The alumni? No, our academic community is us, and we can’t compromise on the freedom that defines us as academics—and that includes protecting even those bally, arrogant Middle East guys at MEALAC. Otherwise, it’s like Brecht said: Why are my books not being burned?”

A month after their meeting, de Grazia and her colleagues circulated an open letter to Bollinger, which was then read at a meeting of Columbia’s arts-and-sciences faculty, on November 13th. The letter charged that Bollinger had “failed to make a vigorous defense of the core principles on which the university is founded” and demanded that he “make it clear that the administration will no longer compromise these principles or tolerate interference with them”—including the “efforts by outside groups over the past few years to vilify members of the faculty and determine how controversial issues are taught on campus.” The morning before that meeting, de Grazia and some of those colleagues, among them the American historian Eric Foner and the literary historian David Damrosch, were invited to breakfast at the president’s house. The visit was friendly. By all reports, including Bollinger’s, he was more surprised and bewildered than mad.

When I saw Bollinger, in December, he told me, “The faculty here have enormous freedom. As a scholar, so do I. I strongly believe that our profession is distinct from the political profession, and the attention span of the normal world is not always suited to the kind of discussions we have here. Especially now, in a period of such heightened sensitivity—you’ve seen the effects here. But you deal with problems like these by enhancing judgment. To me, the First Amendment means a robust marketplace of ideas that will, by definition, marginalize extremism.”

We talked briefly about the attacks on Abu El-Haj. “I think the rules of the road are very clear,” he said. “We are part of a larger world, and we are in conversation all the time. But should outside groups be able to control or influence academic decisions? The answer is no. I’ve had many petitions in my time. I’ve had

intense outside criticism. But I have never to my knowledge read any of the letters trying to reject a candidate. I have simply refused." A year earlier, Judith Shapiro had delivered an exemplary public rebuke to the alumnae rallied by Stern against Abu El-Haj, telling them to beware of campaigns led by people who "may not be in the best position to judge the matter at hand." When I asked Bollinger why he hadn't made a similar defense of Abu El-Haj's right to a fair tenure process, he told me that was "Barnard's responsibility," and Shapiro had done it very nicely.

On the morning of November 1st, Abu El-Haj was on her way to Columbia to pick up a book when her cell phone rang and Brian Larkin told her that she had got tenure. She doesn't remember much else about that day. She had bronchitis, edging into pneumonia, and could barely speak, and mainly she wanted to get back to bed. She says she was "wiped out, exhausted, I wanted to sleep for days." For a while, she couldn't believe that the ordeal was over. And in a way it wasn't. The bloggers stayed busy. Paula Stern posted a screed called "Greatest Victory, Even in Defeat," and the *Spectator* ran it, as did Campus Watch and half a dozen other blogs and Web sites. Alan Segal and Judith Jacobson, along with sixty other faculty, signed a "dissent" to their colleagues' open letter, asserting that "outsiders" who learn about teachers engaged in the "distortion of basic historical or scientific facts" were not only justified in expressing their objections but had a constitutional right to do so. And Bari Weiss, one of the roommates from Massad's class, had looked through "Facts on the Ground" and reported in *Ha'aretz* that Abu El-Haj had condemned "the notion of facts themselves" and that anyone who cared about "veracity" should take "serious notice of her promotion."

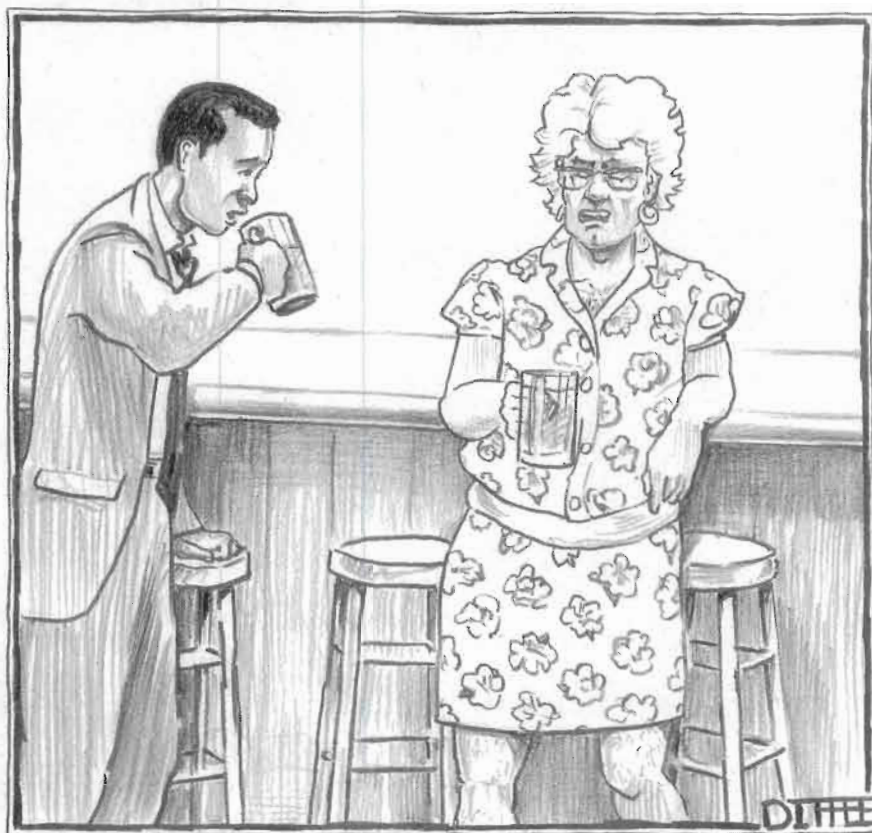
Abu El-Haj, for her part, was trying to get on with her work and her new book, about genetic anthropology and constructions of historical identity, and to recover some semblance of her old life. She wanted to go to the opera, or spend a long weekend in the country, with no troubles to distract her. "It's been a readjustment," she said, dryly. She had been so harassed, and even threatened,

over the past year that she was forced to remove her office number and phone extension from the faculty directory. Worried about her family, she had stopped giving out her address and cell-phone number to anyone but close friends. And though she says she is getting back to "my normal pathological sense of privacy," she has yet to Google "Abu El-Haj" and read what any of the people who hate her are saying now. In fact, she has yet to Google the list of people—more than two thousand—who signed a petition supporting her that was posted in late August by a professor in Canada she had never met. The petition made her "uncomfortable," she says, by supporting her bid for tenure rather than the principle of the tenure process. If he had called to ask, she would have said, "Please, no. I don't want to be anybody's cause."

"Part of the affront for all those people who attacked me was that I was a 'Palestinian' doing the kind of field work I did," she told me. "But make no mistake about this: my ability to do it was that I was an American. I had grants. I had access. How many Arabs

do you think would have that? What happened last year—it wasn't about me. I was a cog in the big wheel of the issue of the Middle East and Israel."

In February, Abu El-Haj went to a Barnard faculty meeting and met Alan Segal for the first time. "There he was, standing up and making a big pitch for academic freedom, saying that all those terrible outside attacks had made it impossible to have a real intellectual conversation about my work," she told me. "He came up to me on his way out, he introduced himself, he actually invited me to speak to his class. I was so mad. I could have killed him. But there we were, in the middle of a meeting, and all I could think of to say was 'This is not the place to be having this conversation.'" She laughed and said that the next thing would be Paula Stern asking her to lunch. Back in October, Judith Shapiro had told me, "Nadia is quite an example of grace under pressure." John Comaroff, at Chicago, had put it this way: "What is remarkable about Nadia is that she has an immense capacity not to stereotype the people who are stereotyping her." ♦



"I'm turning into my father."