In the last few years, the fields of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies have grown significantly, thanks to new publications which take into consideration unexplored aspects of the history, literature and identity of modern Middle Eastern and North African Jews. However, few of these studies abandoned the Diaspora/Israel dichotomy and analysed the Jews who moved to Israel and those that settled elsewhere as part of a new, diverse and interconnected diaspora. 

*Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature* argues that the literary texts produced by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews who migrated from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s and afterwards, should be considered as part of a transnational arena, in which forms of Jewish diasporism and postcolonial displacement interweave. Through an original perspective that focuses on novelists, poets, professional and amateur writers – from the Israeli poets Erez Biton and Shva Salhoov to Francophone authors such as Chochana Boukhobza, Ami Bouganim and Serge Moati – the book explains that these Sephardic and Mizrahi authors are part of a global literary diaspora at the crossroads of past Arab legacies, new national identities and persistent feelings of Jewishness. Some of the chapters emphasise how the Sephardic and Mizrahi past and present identities are narrated, how generational and ethno-national issues are taken into account and which linguistic and stylistic strategies the authors adopted. Other chapters focus more explicitly on how the relations between national societies and different Jewish migrant communities are narrated, both in today’s Israel and in the Diaspora.

The book helps to bridge the gap between Hebrew and postcolonial literature, and opens up new perspectives on Sephardic and Mizrahi literature. It will be a valuable resource for students and scholars of Jewish and Postcolonial Studies and Comparative Literature.

**Dario Miccoli** is Research Fellow and adjunct lecturer in Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. His research and publications deal with the history and memory of the Jews of the Arab world and contemporary Mizrahi literature. He is the author of *Histories of the Jews of Egypt: An Imagined Bourgeoisie*, 1880s-1950s (2015).
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Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature
A Diaspora
*Edited by Dario Miccoli*
Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature
A Diaspora

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‘Aliyah (pl. ‘aliyot, lit. “ascent [to Zion]”) the migration of a Jew to the Land of Israel.

Ashkenazi (Jew) a Jew from Central or Eastern Europe and, more broadly, a Jew of European descent.


Mizrahiyut Easterness, Eastern identity.

Mizug galuyiot “ingathering of exiles”. The term refers to the melting pot ideology upon which the process of migration to the Land of Israel, and the absorption into a new Jewish national culture, was to be based.

Sephardic (Jew) a Jew whose ancestors came from the Iberian Peninsula. More generally and with reference to contemporary times: a diasporic Jew of Middle Eastern or North African descent.

Shlilat ha-golah “the negation of the Diaspora”. This expression refers to the idea that, after migrating to the Land of Israel, the Jews were to abandon and negate their previous diasporic history and memory.

The book follows a simplified version of the scientific transliteration system from Hebrew into English: “‘” stands for ‘ayin, “‘” for ‘alef, “v” for vav, “h” stands both for heh and het, “kh” and “k” for kaf, “q” for qof, “tz” for tzade and the sign “-” between two or more words indicates the construct-case. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from Hebrew and other languages are of the chapter authors.
Contributors

Ktzia Alon is an independent scholar and literary critic. She regularly contributes to the cultural sections of the main Israeli newspapers and magazines. Among her latest publications, all published in Hebrew and dedicated to Mizrahi poetry, art and culture: *A Third Option for Poetry: Study in Mizrahi Poetics* (2011); *Black Rebellion Rose: Reading Mizrahi Poetry* (2014) and *Edut hayofi ve hukat ha-zman: Reading Amira Hess’ Poetry* (2016). She is the editor of *To Dwell in a Word: Thinking about Mizrahi Identity* (2015) and the co-editor of *Ana min al-Maghreb: Reading Erez Biton’s Poetry* (2014).

Omri Ben-Yehuda is Head of the Research Group *Gaza: Towards the Landscape of an Israeli Heterotopia* of the Van Leer Institute, Jerusalem. He lectures at the Sam Spiegel School for Cinema of Jerusalem; the Kibbutzim Seminary College, Tel Aviv and Polis – The Jerusalem Institute of Language and Humanities. An expert of Franz Kafka and Shmuel Yosef Agnon, his research interests include postcolonialism, Mizrahi literature, modern German literature, as well as Trauma and Holocaust Studies and musicology. Aside from his work in the academia, he has published a number of essays and opinion pieces in the Israeli daily *Ha-’Aretz*, the German newspaper *Der Freitag* and the magazines *Odyssey* and *Middle East Eye*.

Susana Brauner is a lecturer and researcher at the Master of Cultural Diversity, Universidad Nacional Tres de Febrero/UNTREF, Buenos Aires and at the UADE University. She holds a PhD in Political Science from Universidad del Salvador, Buenos Aires. A specialist on migration, contemporary religious and political movements and the history and culture of Middle Eastern Jews in Latin America, she is the author of a number of studies published in Spanish, English and Hebrew. Among her books: *Ortodoxia religiosa y pragmatismo político. Los judíos de origen sirio* (2009) and *El mundo después de la Iera guerra* (2014).

Dario Miccoli is Research Fellow and adjunct lecturer in Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. His research and publications deal with the history and memory of the Jews of the Arab world and contemporary Mizrahi literature. He is the author of *La letteratura israeliana*...

Yochai Oppenheimer is Full Professor of Hebrew Literature at Tel Aviv University. He has published extensively in Hebrew and English on Mizrahi prose and poetry, on Israeli political poetry, on Aharon Appelfeld, Avot Yeshurun and other issues. His latest monograph is From Ben-Gurion Street to Shari al-Rashid: On Mizrahi Prose (2014, in Hebrew).

Piera Rossetto holds a PhD in Languages and Civilisation of Asia and North Africa and Social Anthropology from Ca’ Foscari University of Venice/EHESS, Université Toulouse 2 Le Mirail. Her dissertation focused on the Libyan Jewish diaspora (1948–1967) between Italy and Israel. With Emanuela Trevisan Semi she edited an issue of the journal Quest-Issues in Contemporary Jewish History on “Memory and Forgetting Among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries”. She has published articles on Archivio Mediterraneo and on the Annali di Ca’ Foscari on Libyan Jewish culture and memory.

Silvina Schammah Gesser lectures at the Department of Romance and Latin American Studies and is Research Fellow of the Harry S. Truman Institute for the Advancement of Peace, Hebrew University of Jerusalem. A specialist of twentieth-century Spanish cultural history, her areas of interest include also migration to and from the Middle East and questions of otherness, ethnicity and memory in post-dictatorial Spain and Argentina. She has co-edited El otro en la España contemporánea (2011) and published numerous articles in Gender and Society, Ethnic and Racial Studies and The Interdisciplinary Journal of Latin American Studies among others. Her latest book is Madrid’s Forgotten Avant-Garde. Between Essentialism and Modernity (2015).

Ewa Tartakowsky is a lecturer at the Catholic University of Paris and a member of the Centre Max Weber of the Université Lyon 2, where she also completed a PhD in Sociology on French writers of Jewish Maghrebi origin in postcolonial France. She is the author of Les Juifs et le Maghreb. Fonctions sociales d’une littérature d’exil (2016).

Emanuela Trevisan Semi is Professor of Modern Hebrew and Jewish Studies at Ca’ Foscari University of Venice. Her main areas of research concern marginal groups in contemporary Judaism (Karaites, Ethiopian Jews, Judaising movements, Moroccan Jews). Among her publications: with Hanane Sekkat Hatimi, Mémoire et représentations des Juifs au Maroc: les voisins absents de Meknès (2011); Jacques Faillovitch and the Jews of Ethiopia (2007) and, with Tudor Parfitt, Judaising Movements (2002). With Dario Miccoli and Tudor Parfitt she co-edited Memory and Ethnicity: Ethnic Museums in Israel and the Diaspora (2013).
In the last few years, the fields of Sephardic and Mizrahi Studies grew significantly thanks to new publications that took into consideration unexplored aspects of the history, literature and identity of modern Middle Eastern and North African Jews, both before the birth of the State of Israel and after 1948, and the migration of Jews to Israel, Europe, the US and elsewhere.¹ Some of these studies abandoned the Diaspora/Israel dichotomy and analysed, in a comparative manner, the writings of Jews who moved to Israel or settled elsewhere as part of a diverse yet interconnected global diaspora. More generally, literary scholars and theorists showed a growing interest in discussing notions of world literature and questioned the existence of literary spaces that, especially in the case of migrant communities and in postcolonial contexts, extend across different continents and are written in many languages.² Last but certainly not least, the field of Memory Studies – starting with seminal works of Halbwachs, Ricoeur, Nora and others – has by now demonstrated eloquently how the past and the present intermingle and are constantly re-envisioned in multiple ways both at the individual and communal or national level.³

Taking these three points into consideration, Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature argues that the texts produced by Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews migrated from the Middle East and North Africa in the 1950s and afterwards, should be considered as part of a transnational arena, in which forms of Jewish diasporic identity and postcolonial displacement interweave and bring about entangled processes of memorialisation and heritagisation of one’s past and present history. By focusing on the literary works of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish authors in contemporary Israel and in the Diaspora – written in languages such as Hebrew, French, English, Spanish and Italian – the volume discusses crucial issues of Jewish identity and ethnicity. It connects them to contemporary Israeli society, to North African and Middle Eastern (Jewish) legacies and to the memories of a now vanished – yet not forgotten – past. This suggests a new understanding of the Jewish Diaspora as an experience constructed through memory and as an act of perpetual becoming, which translates and is transmitted in the present and, at the same time, as if it were like part of the present itself, based upon “an existing virtual archive of private and public images”.⁴
A few words on definitions are due. First, with the expression “Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews”, this volume refers only to Jews born in Middle Eastern and North African countries and their descendants. The authors of the chapters, depending on the object of their study and the theoretical approach utilised, may categorise them either as Sephardic, Mizrahi or Arab Jews. In any case, here the term “Sephardic” is to be understood as referring not to the whole of the Sephardic diaspora – which existed also outside the Arab Muslim world in places as different as the Netherlands, Italy, Bulgaria and Greece5 – but only to those Jews of Sephardic origin who lived in Arab Muslim countries, nowadays scattered in Israel and throughout the Diaspora.

Mizrahi (Hebrew: “Easterner”), on the other hand, refers to a Jew of Middle Eastern or North African ancestry who lives in Israel. This category gained usage in the State of Israel after the migrations from the East and, whereas it had not been utilised before then, gradually became the prevalent one in order to indicate the ‘edot ha-mizrah (“Eastern ethnicities”). By utilising the term Mizrahi, we do not mean to underscore the internal diversity of Mizrahi Israelis – something which numerous scholars, from Ella Shohat to Yehudah Shenhav and Sami Shalom-Chetrit aptly demonstrated – but to acknowledge the centrality that the term, for better or worse, has acquired over the last decades in Israel and in the academic debate more generally. Lastly, some of the contributors to Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature evoke the notion of an Arab Jew. This term, which was utilised sporadically already in the early twentieth century by Arabic-speaking Jews living in places such as Palestine and Iraq – and which for instance is still in use in its Spanish translation judío arabe in Latin America to indicate the descendants of Jews from the Middle East and North Africa – has now been reassessed as a definition that highlights the historical bonds that existed among Jews, Muslims and Christians of the Ottoman and post-Ottoman world as regards language, culture and in some cases even national identity. Scholars like Shenhav and others further interpret it as a category that can contribute to a rapprochement between Jews and Arabs, Israelis and Palestinians.6

What these definitions have in common is the fact that they end in constructing new identities for different Jewish diasporas whose main and sometimes sole common denominator, prior to the migration, was their being non-Europeans or non-Westerners. In other words, these definitions created contemporary diasporas that slowly substituted – or, better to say, superimposed over – those existing before 1948 and the migratory waves of the 1950s and 1960s. They created new feelings of belonging that did not merely coalesce around previous urban/regional/national labels (e.g., Moroccan Jews, Jews of Alexandria), but also around the new, post-colonial national frameworks and ideologies that the migration imposed on Jews.

Of particular significance are, in this regard, recent works that describe the migration of North African Jews to postcolonial France and their relations with the French Republic. Such works have showed the deep significance that both French colonialism and the migration to the Héxagone had on Jews from countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia.7 Then, one should also look at the case of Israel and at the Zionist conceptions of shlilat ha-golah (“the denial of the
exile”) and mizug galuyiot (“ingathering of exiles”). Shlilat ha-golah relates to the idea that the first Zionist ideologues had of the Diaspora as a space and time that through Zionism and the advent of a Jewish nation-state was to be put aside and rejected. In a Jewish nation-state, Jews from all over the world would forge a new, unified Jewish society: a mizug galuyiot – a term that might be rendered in English as melting pot – that would eliminate the cleavages among the various Jewish communities. While acknowledging the differences that exist among a Moroccan Jew who settled in France, an Egyptian who moved to Israel and a Syrian who instead migrated to Argentina, Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature argues that the gradual disappearance of a Jewish presence from the Arab Muslim world – and the conception of Israel as mizug galuyiot – did not lead to the end of these communities but to their rebirth in new and interconnected forms.

At a methodological level, the volume wishes to bring into dialogue scholars working on the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa from different fields and academic traditions. This can help construct an alternative framework for studying Sephardic and Mizrahi literature as a global corpus of texts, whose boundaries go beyond those of national languages and literary canons. The question of language indeed is crucial, as we are confronted with texts written in many different idioms, which in some cases circulate beyond their place of publication either in translation or because they are written in global languages intelligible to many of these writers’ prospective readers – for example, French and English.

It is true that when one looks back at the history of Western literatures, he is confronted with the emergence, in the nineteenth century, of literary spaces that largely mirrored the national/political framework of the European states. Even though this did not prevent transnational literary exchanges and influences, the national model has very much been the prevalent one in the West and, under the influence of colonialism and colonial culture, also in many non-Western countries. Clearly, it would be naïve to claim that nowadays the nation has disappeared from the (literary) scene. Nonetheless it seems timely to look also through other scales of analysis at the literature produced in an increasingly diasporic world. This means focusing not solely on the nation and its literary traditions but on possible transnational connections and transfers, highlighting shared memories and feelings among people that live in faraway places. In the case of Jews, the national and diasporic dimensions have long been deeply intertwined. Furthermore, Jewish literature – as Dan Miron noted – has in itself the double identity of both a literature written in Hebrew and one that is, more generally and regardless of the language, written by Jews and that deals with explicitly Jewish topics. So as to come to terms with such a complex category, Miron understood Jewish literature as a set of contiguous texts that relate to one another and that configure a different kind of literary canon that goes beyond, yet does not ignore, the nation-state.

Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews are often said to have played a marginal role in the development of Jewish and Hebrew literatures. Even though several studies have demonstrated that this is not true – as more than a few Jewish authors did contribute, for example, to the modern Middle Eastern and North African literary
scene publishing in languages such as Arabic, French and Hebrew — what is true is that we are faced with people whose literary culture and memory still tend to be overlooked in comparison to that of the Jews of Europe. Both in the West and in Israel, the contemporary Jewish discourse has been dominated by the history of Zionism, of European Jews and then by the memory of an event like the Shoah — which, despite its current global significance, originally impacted almost only on the Jews of Europe. Despite the growing number of in-depth studies on the history of the Jews of the Arab world, the general view that many continue to have of Jewish history and memory is still very often connected to the European Jewish paradigm. It is perhaps also for this reason and in order to counter what might be called the hégémonisation du fait juif, that at least since the last three decades a great number of Middle Eastern and North African Jews ended in taking history, with a small ‘h’, in their own hands and started writing novels, poems, autobiographies, memoirs.

So as to take all this into account, Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature opens with a chapter by Ewa Tartakowsky, dedicated to Judeo-Maghrebi authors in postcolonial France — the country that nowadays hosts one of the largest North African Jewish diasporas. Drawing upon a corpus of Francophone writers published in the last thirty years, Tartakowsky explains the roles that Judeo-Maghrebi literature has and analyses it through the tools of sociology of literature. In her view, French Judeo-Maghrebi authors act as guardians of group memory. More importantly, they provide new visions of contemporary France in its capacity as host society for Jewish immigrants coming from the former French colonial empire. Tartakowsky’s chapter introduces heterogeneity as an essential characteristic of the Sephardic and Mizrahi texts that the volume focuses on: for example, whereas some authors are professional writers, others are amateurs who only published one autobiography or a family memoir, still others are playwrights or visual artists who happen to write texts on their life-stories. In other words, we are confronted with a variety of genres that calls for an open definition of Sephardic literature, which — similarly to what happens for postcolonial literature — goes beyond the primacy often ascribed in Western canons to novels and includes a larger range of writings and authorial experiences that, however, also relate to one another as regards themes and memorial trends.

Expanding upon a specific author of the Francophone Jewish world, the second chapter, by Dario Miccoli, illustrates how the Diaspora and the Land of Israel can interconnect. By focusing on two novels published between the 1980s and the mid-1990s by the Tunisian-French writer Chochana Boukhobza, it becomes clearer how the contemporary construction of a Sephardic and Mizrahi literary identity neither replicates the pre-Israeli and pre-migratory diasporic model nor is a wholly new entity that escapes pre-existing Jewish classifications. Rather, it is an interconnected process related, in the case under consideration, to different national and ethnic feelings of belonging at the crossroads of Jewishness, Frenchness and Israeliness.

Issues of displacement and exile and the discussion of how the national context in which one lives influences the process of memorialisation of the past are
Introduction

at the centre of much Sephardic and Mizrahi writing. In addition to the French case, one needs to mention other scenarios, such as Italy, Britain, Latin America. Three Argentinian writers and artists of Arab Jewish descent born between the late 1930s and the late 1940s and having grown up during the Argentinian dictatorship are analysed by Silvina Schammah Gesser and Susana Brauner. Schammah Gesser and Brauner discuss how Argentinian Jewish intellectuals of Middle Eastern origin contributed to the political opposition to the dictatorship, as well as to the country’s literary and artistic avant-garde: from theatre to poetry and painting. By contextualising their works within the Argentinian cultural history and that of the Latin American Sephardic migrants, the authors offer an original picture of the complexity of Arab Jewish identity, as well as its inherently hybrid and unfinished character. The chapter offers the possibility to look at the political dimension that Sephardic literary and artistic production entails, understanding the role of Jewish migrants, or in this case of their sons, as a minority that – due to its long history of interethnic and interreligious cohabitation – can also engage in radical political movements or more generally in the social sphere.¹⁶

To further illustrate this, the chapter by Piera Rossetto discusses Libyan Jewish authors in Italy and Israel, comparing their writings and how the migration to these two countries impacted on the process of memorialisation and diasporisation. Rossetto tries to detect whether and how the post-Qaddafi Libya of today is perceived, showing to what extent writings by Libyan Jews rest on the past but, at the same time, are strongly connected to the present. This is of particular significance when one considers the contemporary Mediterranean scenario, with its interethnic and interreligious tensions, and on the other hand the possibilities of dialogue between Jews and Muslims that a more nuanced vision of the past could open. Similarly to Rossetto but basing her chapter upon a corpus of texts by Moroccan Jews belonging to the “1.5 generation” – that is, writers who left Morocco as children or adolescents and write in French, English and Hebrew – Emanuela Trevisan Semi looks at locations and objects of identity, from the mel-lah (the Jewish quarter) to Moroccan Jewish traditional food. Trevisan Semi finds out that writers who are based in Israel are more nostalgic towards their place of birth, Morocco, compared with those based in France or the US. So, as opposed to what the Zionist concept of shilat ha-golah posits, there seems to be an unexpected correlation between the return to the homeland from the Diaspora and a retaining of the feeling of belonging for the abandoned native land, remembered as a country of exile.

All these chapters are interesting also insofar as they present authors who – as said – can be professionals or amateurs, published by major publishing houses or independently. On the whole, it seems that the Sephardic and Mizrahi literary arena is an inextricable mixture of genres and authors that blurs the boundaries between high and popular culture and between languages and that highlights to what extent the identity of these Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews is largely constructed upon their being witnesses, or heirs, of a world otherwise destined to oblivion. But what does this mean for the Israeli case?
In fact, even though the opposition between Israel and the Diaspora is not as strict as one may think, this does not mean that the national context in which one writes has lost its relevance. So, the second half of the book deals more explicitly with Mizrahi Israeli literature questioning the assumption whether it might or not be considered an independent literary arena. Yochai Oppenheimer sets the tone by contextualising Mizrahi Israeli fiction vis-à-vis postcolonial studies and interprets it as a “minor literature” – in the sense that Deleuze and Guattari gave to the term as a literature that utilises a major language, in this case Hebrew, in a de-territorialised and political manner. In doing so, Oppenheimer not only explains the main characteristics of Mizrahi writing, but also proposes a new and original analytical framework that can be applied beyond the Hebrew literary canon in a larger transnational context. His chapter can be read in parallel to Tartakowsky’s, as the Sephardic and Mizrahi texts that they discuss, despite their differences, share many themes: again exile, displacement, rupture and the confrontation with the Other – be he the Ashkenazi Israeli or the (non-Jewish) French: all are issues which take a cue from the authors’ status as cross-cultural migrants.

Clearly, fiction and autobiographies are not the only means of literary expression utilised by Jewish authors of Middle Eastern and North African origin. Especially in the Israeli case, poetry is a very important genre that relates to a centuries-old tradition of Sephardic *piyut* (“liturgical poetry”) and to music and that has acquired more visibility in the last years thanks to young poets like Almog Behar, the literary collective *'Ars Po'etiqah* and the consecration that authors from previous generations have obtained. The chapter by Omri Ben-Yehuda is dedicated to one of the most renowned Mizrahi poets, Erez Biton. Born in Algeria from a family of Moroccan origin, Biton – who in 2015 was awarded the renowned Israel Prize for Literature – is interpreted as a founding father of Israeli literature at large. Through a close textual reading of some of Biton’s most renowned poems and a transpositional to poetry of Oppenheimer’s interpretation of Mizrahi fiction as minor literature, Ben-Yehuda concentrates on the relations among poetry, gesture, trauma and music as signifiers of identity. He explains that Biton does not negate Hebrew literary hegemonic views but undermines them from within through a recollection of the identity and bodily traumas that the Mizrahim experienced upon arrival in Israel and during the following decades.

The final chapter, by Ktzia Alon, proposes an in-depth study of Shva Salhoov’s poems against the background of Emmanuel Levinas’ philosophy. Born in Israel into a family of Libyan Jews, Salhoov reflects upon the Mizrahi experience and some of its most important elements – from the usage of the Arabic language to the reappropriation of biblical motifs and images – in order to unravel the stakes that Israel is facing. According to Alon, Salhoov’s poetry paints a utopian, liturgical and ethical horizon for a kind of Mizrahi poetry that is firmly planted in the Israeli present, but also evokes a coveted future rooted in the Arab Middle East and its traditions. Alon’s study allows us to get a glimpse of what nowadays is left of Jewish liturgical poetry, adding another dimension – closer to the religious sphere and to mysticism – to the already rich Sephardic and Mizrahi literary panorama. All in all, the Israeli writers seem subject both to the specificities of
the Hebrew literary canon and the Hebrew language as well as to transnational cultural and identity dynamics that relate to the Middle Eastern and North African Jewish worlds and their post-migratory vicissitudes. When looked at from this perspective, Israel becomes the site of another (albeit peculiar) Jewish diaspora that—despite its centrality—is no longer perceived as the main or exclusive point of reference.19

As David Damrosch wrote, much work still needs to be done in order to “link our countercanonical and hypercanonical writers beyond the boundaries of national or imperial spaces”.20 This is true also for this volume, which—despite the fact that it focuses on more prominent authors like Erez Biton and on others who are less known such as Gil Ben Aych and Susana Romano Sued—cannot claim to be exhaustive. For example, for reasons of space and due to the research interests of the contributors, some Middle Eastern and North African diasporas remain out of the picture. Secondly, even though references to Anglophone authors of Middle Eastern and North African origin like the Egyptian André Aciman and the Moroccan Ruth Knafo Setton are present in the book, none of the chapters deals specifically with this subject. The same applies to the case of those Jewish writers, mainly of Iraqi descent, who retained the usage of the Arabic language after the migration and whose intellectual itineraries surely deserve further analysis.21 On the other hand, some of the chapters introduce to an English-speaking audience authors in languages, like Italian and Spanish, who rarely feature in the literary history of contemporary Middle Eastern and North African Jewries.

It is to be noted that the authors here discussed belong to different generations of migrants and of writers: some were born in the Arab world and moved to Europe or Israel as children, others are the sons or even grandsons of the first migrants. Therefore, they can be either direct or indirect witnesses of a past memory, or postmemory,22 which is then mediated by their national and social milieu and by a set of by now global Jewish political and memorial frameworks that include, for example, the Arab-Israeli conflict and feelings of belonging or proximity to Israel or the Shoah. In the end, these novelists and poets construct a kind of historical memory, which is based on both individual and communal experiences. They form a heterogeneous yet visible (literary) diaspora that looks back to a centuries-old past of Jewish-Arab coexistence, and forward to a still uncertain future, whose contours are difficult to decipher but that surely will bear the weight of a twentieth-century history of migration, identity ruptures and spatial as well as cultural/linguistic displacements.

That the historical narration of the past experience of the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa has been often left to fiction or autobiographies leads to the question of how scholars—and particularly historians—should handle this kind of archive. What is the face value of these texts and what history comes out of them? What are the sociological and political questions relating to the writings of these minority groups? What is their contribution to constructing an alternative narrative to that of official historiography? The hope is that Contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Literature will provide answers to these and many other questions, paving the way to further comparative analysis of the literature that Sephardic and
Mizrahi Jews produce in a myriad of languages, as part of a global diaspora at the crossroads between a resilient past and an equally tangible present.

Notes


Here, it is useful to consider what is already argued by Yael Wise-Halevy, *Sephardism. Spanish Jewish History and the Modern Literary Imagination* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2012).


Dan Miron, *From Continuity to Contiguity: Toward a New Jewish Literary Thinking* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).


Consider the contribution that Jews of Iraqi, Egyptian and Moroccan origin gave to the emergence of the Communist and Socialist movements in the Arab world (see for example: Rami Ginat, *A History of Egyptian Communism: Jews and Their Compatriots in Quest of Revolution* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2011); Bashkin, *New Babylonians*, 141–182 and Robert Watson, “Between Liberation(s) and Occupation(s): Reconsidering the Emergence of Maghrebi Jewish Communism, 1942–1945”, *Journal of Modern Jewish Studies*, 13/3 (2014): 381–398) and partly also in Israel: think of the writer Sami Michael, that in the 1950s contributed to Israeli Arab Communist newspapers.


1 The literary work of Jewish Maghrebi authors in postcolonial France

Ewa Tartakowsky
(trans. from French by Clara Leon)

Literature written by authors of Jewish Maghrebi origin has slowly come to take its place within the field of broader French literature. The fruit of over one hundred authors’ contributions, it contains works in all literary genres – fiction, memoir, poetry, theatre – even if novels and prose do make up most of it. Some of its writers are well known, such as Marcel Bénabou, Colette Fellous and Hubert Haddad. Others’ fame came to them in the context of a second career – in any event, a well-paying career – among them Jacques Attali, Serge and Nine Moati, Jean Daniel, Alexandre Arcady and Gisèle Halimi. Still other authors are not truly considered part of the literary establishment but have published numerous works and attracted some media attention, such as Gil Ben Aych, Monique Zerdoun and Pol-Serge Kakon; there are also authors who published one or two well-received works but did not continue with their literary careers, such as Katia Rubinstein, Paule Darmon, Annie Goldmann and Jean-Luc Allouche. Finally, some authors in this field opted for self-publication, like Georges Cohen, Viviane Scemama-Leselbaum and Edmond Zeitoun.

Disregarding the purely aesthetic dimensions of their work and looking at this literary subfield as a whole, it is possible both to categorise these authors within their subfields and to examine the role that exile played in their trajectories.

Social pre-conditions of the emergence of literature by Jewish Maghrebi authors in France

In order to understand how and why this body of work came to be, one must place these authors in the historical and collective context in which they wrote. The primary element of this context was the departure en masse of Jews from the Maghreb.

The cultural impact of this moment is particularly important for this group; understanding it requires some analysis of the social group in question. Three percent of the colonial Maghreb’s population after the Second World War, approximately 500,000 people, the Jewish community – in the majority urban – had largely assimilated into a French cultural environment. One major reason for this was the collective naturalisation of Algerian Jews, extended by the Crémieux Decree in 1870, constituting a symbolic promise of future French acculturation. The impetus for
the transformation of Algeria’s Jews’ legal status came essentially from the Jewish community of metropolitan France, in line with the assimilationist policies of the colonising power, and opened access, for its beneficiaries, to the Republic’s schools and civil service, both channels for social success. The situation was different in the protectorates, where France did not opt for any collective naturalisation of the Jews. This did not keep them from acculturating to French culture, but there it occurred to a lesser degree. The Jewish community in metropolitan France intervened, in fact, to “bring French civilisation” to their co-religionists in order to “reform” them. This work led to the establishment in 1862, only in Morocco at first, of a network of schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) for Jewish girls and boys, providing them essentially with a French education, though it included a few elements of religious instruction as well. A method of linguistic colonisation, this French education also became a path towards real social mobility for these Jews, who not long ago were considered simply part of the indigenous colonial population. It also sparked a “cult”-like devotion – the word is not too strong – to France “the emancipator.” This cult would later become one of the central themes of literature of the Jewish Maghrebi authors in exile.

This historical detour helps us to understand why, when the countries of the Maghreb gained their independence, a great number of Maghrebi Jews chose France as their new home, rather than Israel or Canada, other potential destinations. Their departure was due to multiple factors, but one of the most salient was the rise of Arab Muslim nationalism and the identity its activists promoted, one which denied, out of hand, so-called ethnic minorities any future in their midst. The Jews feared a return to dhimmi status, especially since their experience of emancipation in the colonial period had further alienated the Jewish and Muslim communities from each other.

Their migration radically changed their situation. North African Jews who went to metropolitan France quickly integrated into that country’s socio-economic structure. It should be mentioned here that despite facing problems common to all immigrants, they had fewer difficulties adapting than did those North African Jews who chose to go to Israel. Beyond language difficulties, Israeli society greeted them with ambivalence, and the social divide between so-called “Oriental” (or, in Hebrew, Mizrahi) and “Western” Jews has not since ceased to widen in that country.

Nonetheless, despite their rapid adaptation to their new place of residence, North African Jews in France remained profoundly marked by their experience of exile. The words of the Algerian-born Albert Bensoussan, recorded at a meeting of Mediterranean Jewish authors, attest to this: “I wrote a book called La Bréhaigne which represents exile. It’s a look at the exile faced by Jews who came to France and who suffer, particularly in their old age, from the difficulties of adapting.”

Like nearly all pieds-noirs, North African Jews shared the feeling that France had abandoned its former colonies. They would later explore, albeit implicitly, this point of view in their literature. Given the relative political consensus that colonialism belonged to the past, it became difficult to express this disappointment in France. As if to justify themselves, and to explain the reason that they did not
take the side of the nationalists, some narratives would reconstruct *a posteriori* a harmonious cohabitation between Jews and Arabs, even going so far as to celebrate it in scenes of close friendship and solidarity. This literary output contributed to the construction of a new identification, one primarily based in memory.

One final point: all those who took part in this emigration en masse knew from the start that they would not return. Going back, even in the context of an authorised trip, was for many of them nearly impossible, a fact which made their feelings of homesickness all the stronger. Those who did return discovered a changed world, one where often there was nothing left to signal the former presence of Jews there. Decolonisation, and the Maghreb’s independence, thus engendered the nearly total disappearance of its Jewish communities, despite the fact that Jews had lived there for two thousand years.

Their arrival in France was certainly a culminating point of their acculturation, which had already begun in North Africa, and the metropole, a land already known to some of them (for many North African Jews had completed their studies there), had long symbolised their emancipation. But the Jewish community in metropolitan France was essentially made up of Ashkenazis, whose culture and rite was different from that of North African Jews. All of this led to a need for these Jews to reconstruct their identities and find ways to express their experiences in art and literature. This is why the exile of Jews from North Africa served as a spark in the development of their own literary subgenre.

This does not mean that without their experience of exile, these authors would not have written or published works of literature. But the psychological, historical and social weight of this forced departure, one they shared with many thousands of other individuals, would have been difficult for these authors not to express and explore in artistic or literary form.

As such, the enormous and overwhelming presence of certain themes in their work is striking. All of the work of Jewish Maghrebi authors who experienced this geographic and social rupture, who live – or have lived – in metropolitan France, either frequently or occasionally, and to different degrees, are marked by themes of exile, displacement, rupture and confrontation with their own Otherness, all themes which derive from their situation as cross-cultural migrants. That is not to say that their past always has the same definitive or automatic role – not all Jews from North Africa became authors, for instance. Rather, it is clear that exile, as a powerful and inescapable ordeal, over-determined the subjects of predilection for those who did become writers. In that sense, as a nodal point in their life trajectory, exile was experienced as a collective trauma.

But other experiences also contributed to increasing the likelihood that this literary subgenre would develop. There were favourable, facilitating circumstances as well. Two key factors in the French socio-political context of the era were the way in which Jewish consciousness was crystallising in the wake of the Six Day War and the fact that, in the same period, the memory of the Shoah was beginning to penetrate into and gain recognition in the public sphere.

The Six Day War prompted the crystallisation of trends which had begun to emerge before then but not in any formalised way. Raising the spectre of a new
genocide, this event consolidated and strengthened Jewish solidarity for Israel. Intellectuals who up until that point had not expressed their Jewishness now began to do so openly. This affirmation of Jewish identity also took root in the political arena. All of this served to create a new effervescence around what it meant to be Jewish.

In this new affirmation of Jewish identity within French society in the 1970s, the memory of the Shoah emerged with new force and in a new key. It had an influence on political discourse. This new paradigm of “all the painful memories”\textsuperscript{13} helped in one way to nourish Jewish immigrants from North Africa’s literary imagination. At the same time, however, the predominance of the Shoah in French Jewish historical memory also served to partially erase the painful exile of Maghrebi Jews, marginalising their history. It was in this context, with a view to compensate for the little interest shown in the period to Sephardic Studies, that literature took upon itself the role as carrier of the memory of the Jewish exile from North Africa.

This literary restructuring of “forgotten” memories was also spurred by the paradigm shift in the way the French nation and its peripheries represented and interpreted themselves following May 1968. As a political rupture, it gave new impetus to affirm non-majority identities and gave rise to memorial demands which, in turn, contributed to the development of these groups’ cultural production. Memory – as a subject for study, as a political and social force and within the media – became a central focus of debate starting in the 1980s, and was seen as a central element of identity for groups claiming recognition. For many Jews, this trend took the form of a cultural quest, seeking one’s roots through literary or scholarly pursuits.

This “memory moment”\textsuperscript{14} was further fed and nourished by new epistemological reflections on how one writes about the past,\textsuperscript{15} in short, the linguistic turn occurred, with all that it engendered in terms of debate over to what extent academic history could be considered its own kind of fiction, and inversely, on the validity for history of literature. Finally, the question of “what literature can tell us” (savoirs de la littérature) is particularly interesting given that this is also a form of postcolonial literature, a genre that had become popular, leading publishers to be looking for this type of narrative. The literary emergence of Jewish Maghrebi authors in France thus benefitted from this trend.

**Social characteristics of Jewish Maghrebi authors in France**

To understand these Jewish Maghrebi authors active in France, one must also examine their social dispositions, their life and literary trajectories, and the positions they have taken within the field of literature.

Examining which authors came from which countries sheds light on the specific contribution of each migratory group. Proportionally, the largest percentage of authors were born in Algeria (45 percent). This is because, as we have detailed above, the largest percentage of Jews arriving from North Africa to metropolitan France between 1958 and 1967 came from Algeria. All were French citizens, and
all had grown up speaking French at home and studying in French at school. They were thus potentially quite capable of publishing literature in their native tongue in the metropole. Knowing the language of the country thus aided them in adapting not only socially and economically, but also culturally. This preponderance of Algerian-born authors is only numeric, however, since these writers make up only 0.03 percent of the total of Jews coming from Algeria, the smallest percentage with regard to the larger population among the three groups of immigrants.

In fact, it is authors from Tunisia (42 percent of the writers here studied and 0.07 percent of the total population of Jewish immigrants from Tunisia in France) who make up the highest percentage of authorship per capita. This is particularly due to the fact that fewer Tunisian Jews were French citizens, a fact which made their choice to settle in France a self-selecting one. While nearly all Algerian Jews, a whole community made up of various social classes, left as one for France, from Tunisia it was mostly those Jews who had received a French education and who were middle or upper class – that is to say, they had the means to settle in France. Poorer Jews from Tunisia tended to go to Israel instead, taking advantage of aid offered by the Jewish Agency for their settlement there. As such, one can speak of a specific Tunisian Jewish literary tradition in France, that of the “Tunisian School”.16

Authors from Moroccan background make up a distinct minority (13 percent), but here again it is a question of numeric minority, not a proportional one. A statistic of 0.05 percent of immigrants to France from Morocco published literary works, which situates this group between the Algerians and the Tunisians. This can also be explained by the self-selecting nature of Moroccan Jews’ immigration to France – only about 12 percent of them chose to settle in the metropole.

When one runs the numbers by gender across the board, one statistic common to sociological studies of literary authors sticks out.17 Jewish Maghrebi authors in France are, in the majority, men (64 percent). A primary socialisation at home, in the family, then at school provided a strong literary influence. Many of these authors (74 percent), have completed advanced degrees. In this way, they are similar to most other writers of the literary field in France. One’s studies and professional formation usually determine one’s future choice of profession, but this profession is rarely exclusively literature or creative writing.18 For many of these authors, writing was a second career; their primary career remained the way they made their living. Twenty-eight percent were or are teachers (all education levels combined); 12 percent journalists; 10 percent in the performing arts, television or film; 15 percent in the liberal professions (as doctors, lawyers or translators), and a final 10 percent had other various professions or did or do not work. These statistics are also similar to those for writers in France in general. But while this ideal-type of Jewish Maghrebi author in France does not strongly diverge from the sociological norm, the complex interrelation of their memory of exile and their literary trajectory within their own subfield shows the significant weight of their own specific cultural experience.

One initial statistic confirms this “foundational” role that exile had in these authors’ choices to start writing: 77 percent of them devoted their first work
to that theme, though of course in more or less explicit ways and in different forms. Nonetheless, exile was an over-prominent topic for their narratives. What is more, 68 percent of titles published by these authors have to do with exile, and 73 percent of the authors have at least one work entitled in reference to that theme. While these statistics do not apply to each and every one of these authors, they confirm the central role that the experience of exile had for them as a group, leading them to write and to publish their works. Moreover, almost all of these authors only began to publish once they had arrived in metropolitan France.

In summary, then, Jewish Maghrebi authors in France do generally share the same social characteristics as can be remarked for writers in France overall. For this group, however, exile is something they have in common, a structuring and core element in their life trajectories and in their work. This holds true despite the various different immigration experiences each one had: the degree to which their family was dispersed across the globe, for instance, their socio-economic status upon arrival, whether or not they were French citizens, and many other factors.

Portraying and transforming socialising experiences

After examining this group of authors’ sociological make-up, we need to ask what their work tells us about their lives and trajectories. To what extent does their fiction – or their autobiography – take inspiration from and seek to represent the real world? Do they provide their readers with “samples of the real world” which one could use to evaluate the way the social structure in which they live works and evolves?

Folklore and everyday life

The social world reflected through the prism of literature by Jewish Maghrebi authors is centred on family and everyday life. Like ethnologists, they describe their community’s everyday existence and folklore in great detail. They elaborate on aspects of material culture: folk costumes, talismans and religious objects, as well as events, customs, amusements, music (Arab-Andalusian music, for instance) and religious or life-cycle rituals. They seek to capture, through this dedication to detailed representation, the objects and realities lost to exile.

This attachment, a desire to bear witness to lost folk culture, can already be seen in Albert Memmi’s _La statue de sel_, a work that many other Jewish Maghrebi authors consider foundational to their genre. In it, the narrator recounts, with some fear, his mother’s Jewish Berber ritual dance. In _Les Belles de Tunis_, Nine Moati evokes Jewish superstition: how to protect oneself against the “evil eye”. Haï, one of the novel’s protagonists, expresses his frustration by destroying talismans meant to ensure the birth of a son. Moati’s book is, however, far from the only one to mention such protections against the evil eye. Gil Ben Aych, in his autobiographical narrative _Le Chant des êtres_, describes the _bar mitzvah_ of
Simon, the author’s alter ego. Here, through the narration of the event, the reader is initiated into Jewish Algerian culture, taught as if pedagogically:

The cheddaï, a golden medallion with the Hebrew text on it for “goodwill and protection” has a similar role in Algeria, in the order of worn signals, to that of the fish in Tunisia, the cross in Europe, or of certain feathers for Indians.23

This description serves an adaptive purpose, educating readers from the host society about the new immigrants’ culture. At the same time, it works as a magnet for those immigrants’ collective memory, invoking objects that would bring the past and its nostalgia to mind.

These authors also work to bring alive a sense of place that participates in the memorial reconstructions. Different authors chose to describe different places, from wide-open landscapes to the intimacy of the family home. Writers endeavoured to reconstruct the texture of long-gone environments, evoking the noises and sounds, smells and emotions of the past. Through these socio-topographic descriptions, they seek to create an “anthropological space”, something that Marc Augé defines as a “concrete and symbolic construction in space that becomes a common reference to all those it assigns a place to”.24 Colette Fellous’s work provides a representative example of this kind of geographical emphasis. Many of her works seem almost as if they were written by a cartographer. In Avenue de France, geographical meanderings serve as the shuttle upon the loom where memory is woven:

The gateway to France was always the dividing line between the European city and the Arab one. On one side there was the theatre, the church, the casino, horse-drawn cabs, parasols, hotels, and movie theatres. On the other, there were narrow alleyways, . . . mosques, spices, the Souk el-Attarine library, donkeys, wells, men who played dominos in the cafés chantants, the bare feet of children, women’s faces hidden under their white veils.25

But sometimes the hara, the Jewish quarter, is represented in much the same way as in Orientalist narratives from the beginning of the colonial period. This is the case in the work of Nine Moati and Annie Goldmann. In these (re)constructions, reference is often made to family life. Time is often tied to the religious calendar and to life-cycle events: a child crosses the threshold of his house to play in the building’s courtyard, then goes to school, celebrates his bar mitzvah, etc. These mark the different steps of their socialisation. As Joëlle Bahloul has shown, the family home is frequently an anchor for recollections and for memory.26 Often, this means that the action in the narratives in question centres on the family circle and around the holidays celebrated in the home and community.

The bar mitzvah, referred to in North Africa using the Christian term “communion”, has a central place in this chronology. Gil Ben Aych devotes one of his works, Le Chant des êtres, entirely to this event where a Jewish male becomes,
religiously speaking, an adult. This particular *bar mitzvah* takes place in metropolitan France, allowing a community dispersed by exile to reconnect: “What an incredible and curious historical coincidence that this *bar mitzvah* had become the opportunity for dear ones now durably separated in exile to come together.”

While not all authors devote such direct attention to this ritual, it frequently appears as an important life-cycle event in their narratives.

One of the most important holidays in these narratives is Shabbat. Frequently, it is associated with food. Some authors, such as Pol-Serge Kakon in his novel *Rica la vida*, even transcribe full recipes. This desire to transmit culinary culture appears frequently in the works studied. In describing it, these authors seek to preserve the diversity of their traditions, the great variety that existed in different regions. But this work of memory and reconstruction also, and to a greater extent, serves as an emotional reference, anchored in each author’s individual experiences and socialisation, appealing to the reader’s own senses of smell and taste. Joëlle Balhoul has stressed the importance of culinary socialisation in the construction of one’s sense of self: “Faithful to his old habits, the Algerian Jew who left the Maghreb did not forget to bring his stew-pots with him, in which he had perhaps taken what really counted, and which today helps him glue the pieces of his identity back together.”

These narratives, as “pieces of idealised memory of one’s family’s past which must absolutely be passed on” – transform culinary culture into a veritable ritual of transmission within the family, even when the family in question no longer observes any religious rites. For this sensorial need, expressing a desire to seize a moment gone by and to freeze it, they need to preserve, in the minutest detail, approximate recipes for which any future cannot be guaranteed. These things infuse their accounts of the past, the recalling of a reality that is no more, the evocation of memory.

In these scenes, seeking to recapture a lost essence, a lost manner of being Jewish, these authors portray scene upon archetypical scene of their previous lives, incorporating folklore, cuisine, scents, all elements of the life of a former community now risking to be forgotten. In reconstructing this memory, the authors embellish the past reality, often making use of emotion and of Orientalist tropes. There is a retrospective dimension which reflects temporal rupture and discontinuity: there was a before – and there is an after to exile. But above all, this recourse to Jewish Maghrebi folk memory serves to maintain coherent group identifications, crystallising different cultural references into one fixed set.

**The weight of historical themes**

This literature is also strongly marked by certain historical themes, reflecting its authors’ own experience as part of a community redefining itself in exile, throughout the tumultuous period of decolonisation and settlement and integration in the metropole. This double process, with its brutal shifts in perspective, led these authors, and the community they came from, to a new and ambivalent relationship with France.
Their French acculturation, acquired notably and fundamentally through their education in French, made France a structuring and developed historical topos in their literature. But French history also raises new questions for them, for their work is now produced in the metropole. With a new geographical centre, this literature makes manifest their original fidelity but also casts their old values in a new light born of a new socio-historical context.

To understand this new regard one must first examine the myths and beliefs that had, for so long, fed and structured their vision. One of the most frequently invoked myths in their representations of the precolonial Maghreb is that of the Kahina. Evoking her allowed Maghrebi Jews to metaphorically confront the other facets of their identities with their own “Maghrebiness” (maghrébinité). This reference to a mythological past is rooted, however, in the ruins of another identity myth: that of harmonious coexistence between Jews and Muslims.

In their literary works, this trope often results in depictions of close friendship between members of the two communities. This kind of portrayal of cultural dialogue and exchange can notably be seen in Pol-Serge Kakon’s novel *Rica la Vida*, as he describes the escapades and moments shared between two packs of boys, one Muslim, the other Jewish, in the neighbourhood by the port. While this depiction includes its share of fantasy, it also transmits a truth about their socio-historical reality: neighbours and neighbourliness were of real importance for the community. Other authors further stress a strong sense, on the part of Jews, of identifying with Arabs. Gil Ben Aych expresses this through his character Mémé, who has come from Algeria and is crossing Paris with her grandson, Simon. She exclaims that she prefers Arabs to French people because, “why, Arabs are just like us!”

But even though some authors portray Edenic visions of Jewish-Muslim coexistence, others insist that there was, in fact, no real exchange or dialogue between the two communities. Marcel Bénabou, for instance, remembers Meknès, the city where he was born, as being shaped by colonial realities where “one’s ethnic origins and religious background, criteria more or less conflated for most people, were of utmost importance.”

Through these various reconstructions of peaceful coexistence, whether idealised or realistic or both at once, one can see clearly the authors’ search for their origins. Culturally and geographically displaced, they seek to reinforce the specificities of their own identity, one which – at the risk of binary oversimplification – oscillates between an Arabic or Berber part and a Western-French side. This attachment to “everyday” history also implies their (supposed) side-lining within “great” history, a history which had never included them, given their minority status throughout the many centuries they lived in North Africa. Their literature thus sheds light on their paradoxical situation and provides a new, non-academic view of history.

For this community, France is a lieu de mémoire in itself, the emancipatory ideal incarnate. These writers express this idea through a multitude of political and cultural references. Many of the latter come from the world of literature, seen as a bearer of civilisation, and signal the voracious appetite for reading that these writers – or their narrators – knew as children. Many took as models the
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great classics of French literature. Victor Hugo is cited most frequently; Alexandre Dumas, Émile Zola and Honoré de Balzac are often referenced too. For Jewish Maghrebi authors and their narrators, France is above all the country of the Revolution, with its proclamation of Liberté Égalité Fraternité.

All drawing from this collective consciousness, Jewish Maghrebi authors each present this esteem for France in slightly different ways. Annie Goldmann describes, in her Filles de Mardochée, her great-grandfather’s unconditional love for France. This great-grandfather, the titular Mardochée, is an acculturated Jew, part of the Tunis intelligentsia, the founder and editor of a newspaper of which the title is a political statement: La Justice. In his eyes, France symbolises progress and humanism: “It was the Revolution which consecrated the ideals of Liberty and Equality, which abolished slavery and extended citizenship to Jews.”

For them, France represents the republican ideal, one of equal rights. For Jews from the Maghreb, these values and ideals brought administrative, cultural and social emancipation. Many of these authors take up this theme, always in a familial context. “The pompous expression ‘a certain idea of France’ always reminds me of my father. For him, France was a land of liberty and of civilisation”.

Marco Koskas writes. Serge Moati, who was also born in Tunisia, describes his grandfather, who “dreams of a better world under the protective shade of the tri-color flag”.

These invocations of a “country of civilisation and culture” are also applied to trivial and ironic symbols. Colette Fellous, for instance, jokes – but with a certain tenderness: “We loved the Folies-Bergères, the Chat Noir, the Moulin Rouge, and the Châtelet without knowing them. We adopted everything wholesale: Bruant, Dalida, Trénet, Adamo, Aznavour and Johnny.”

But this France which they loved with such passion, this France that they felt was so close “in the heart of our hearts” (to paraphrase Colette Fellous) revealed itself to be a two-faced homeland. Like the character Josua Aïssa from Edmond El Maleh’s novel, a “Moroccan Jew who was assimilated and westernised to the tips of his fingers”, these writers came to learn that in fact their acculturation process had engendered a double alienation for them – from their Arab Jewish identity and from the Jewish past in this part of the Mediterranean.

Rediscovering the foreignness of French culture to the Maghreb, some of these authors sought to relativise the degree to which they credit France with “bringing civilisation”. Some authors use clothing as a metaphor for this assimilation, one where a new garment becomes conflated with one’s own skin. This metamorphosis is often strongly criticised. In the words of Pol-Serge Kakon:

Just yesterday dressed in their black djellabas which distinguished them from Muslims . . . most of them adopted European costume, brown or grey suits, with stripes, felt hats. They come and go in the streets, still different from the Muslims, but their clothes are not completely French, nor completely other.

In another of his novels, the same author speaks of “France, who will end up putting you, too, in European clothes – a hat and a vest, and trousers too.”
Edmond El Maleh even refers to trousers as “the conqueror’s garment” and Monique Zerdoun stresses the rift that this assimilation to French fashion drove between Jews and their Muslim neighbours.

Memories of education in French schools are also filtered through this critical perspective. Authors of autobiography and narrators of fiction are taught about a whole array of seminal events and figures in the history of France, but in history as in geography lessons, the Maghreb is “strangely” absent. The world they learn about in school is thus in dissonance with the real world which surrounds them. Marcel Bénabou illustrates, through his memories of his Moroccan childhood, this gap in perception which resulted from his French education:

The values which I learned at school and in my reading pursued me, never stopped orienting most of my reactions. Everything I saw before me became surreptitiously devalued, and I had a nearly-permanent feeling of nostalgia mixed with frustration.

This new ambivalence towards acculturation, now seen at once as beneficial but also as a form of cultural domination, is omnipresent in literature by Jewish Maghrebi authors. The fact that these works were written on the other side of the Mediterranean, in metropolitan France, after their colonial experience had come to an end, only reinforces this aspect. Far from the land of their birth, these authors realise their attachment for that land and for their origins. This gives the Judeo-Arabic – even Arabic or Berber – dimension of their identity new weight.

But their literary works also bear witness to the trauma of Maghrebi Jews vis-à-vis France: the trauma of Vichy anti-Semitism and that of decolonisation. For the Jews of Algeria, the Second World War was a rupture. The Crémieux Decree was revoked on 7 October 1940, sixty years after it had been instated, relegating Algerian Jews to the level of indigenous subjects, like Muslims, but with their own specific Jewish status. Such a designation excluded them from public life, and they were immediately expelled from French schools. For the Jews, Pétain and the Vichy regime’s stripping them of their citizenship was a betrayal of the ideals of the Revolution and the Republic. With a stroke of the pen, their integration into the nation, begun with the Revolution, was called into question; with a stroke of the pen, universal values were trampled underfoot, and the Republic – emancipatory, rationalist, secular and meritocratic – was rejected.

The trauma was such that it is reflected not only in the works of Algerian-born authors, but also in the works of writers from Tunisia and Morocco, even though the Crémieux Decree had never applied there. The unimaginable had occurred; later it would be inscribed in collective memory to such an extent that it appears in works not only written by those who lived through that era, but by their children as well. Monique Zerdoun describes the extent of shock that the news of the Crémieux Decree’s revocation brought: “with incredulity or irony in their eyes, the Arabs saw the Jews now relegated from French status to indigenous once again.”

Decolonisation was another turning point in the history of North African Jewry. The same process which led the countries of the Maghreb to independence also
spurred the Jews’ departure en masse. This moment of political and national emancipation, a moment decisively leading to exile for Jews, becomes another central, even structuring, theme in the works here studied.

In *L’Essuie-Main des pieds*, Gil Ben Aych recounts a moment from his childhood: “soldiers occupied Algiers, near the end of the Algerian War, when de Gaulle had taken the reins.”47 Rolland Doukhan, in his novel *Berechit*, revisits the end of that war and the Évian Accords in his attempt to explain why thousands of *pieds-noirs* and Algerians left for the metropole: “Do you remember Évian? Peace, yes, peace after all had given up hope for it, but with it this rupture for thousands of ordinary people.”48

The path towards independence serves two narrative functions in these texts: it grounds them in historical time, tying the protagonists’ lives to wider events, and provides the reader with the background needed to understand the trauma of exile, the central event of most of these works.

When decolonisation came, with all of its tumult, despite the deep psychological wounds that France had inflicted on them during the Second World War, Maghrebi Jews chose massively to go to the metropole. Many of them made their decision in haste, at the “last minute,” once they realised that the newly established republics had no room for religious minorities. The exile of these North African Jews thus became a central and founding element of their collective memory, one of collective suffering, as exile is never easy, particularly at the start.

In *L’Homme de paille* Marco Koskas describes poor living conditions where “nine people lived in two rooms”.49 Gil Ben Aych also focuses on this difficult period in which his whole family had to adapt to new material and psychological realities. He describes this difficult adaptation by underscoring his grandmother’s great distress. His grandmother, Étoile, the heroine of his many novels, is here portrayed as “overtaken. She no longer had all her wits about her, not since she had arrived in France. She took pills now, was all white, she burped frequently.”50

Their new life in metropolitan France brought with it a whole series of other identity-related hardships, as they had to face subtle and casual xenophobia. “I was completely surprised. Transplanted, I now discovered the hostile world of others, when in Isbilia I was everywhere at home,”51 wrote Albert Bensoussan. They discover, through these disappointments, that Westerners – including Ashkenazi Jews – hold hegemonic views of Easterners, and condemn the West’s cultural and social ethnocentrism. This criticism is present even in older works. Katia Rubinstein, born in Tunisia, mourns the general indifference that surrounds her:

Hadin’t they told us again and again that Parisians are the most generous, most open, most cultivated people in the world? Why is the reality so different? . . . People like the exotic, greet it with cheerful humor. “Haha, so you’re Persian? . . .” but they don’t really know how to be interested in faraway places. “Over there” is only interesting at length, a place to dream about, but when those from There are Here, Parisians turn their backs.52
Beyond this new critical appreciation of the haughty positions they now associated with Western civilisation, that which they had so highly praised previously and of the lack of fraternity shown – a far cry from the values of the Revolution – they also manifest their disappointment in the difficulties they experienced, common to all immigrants, in getting settled in France. Beyond that, however, it is frequently their realisation of their own difference in the eyes of others which strikes the new arrivals. In the Maghreb, after all, they really believed in revolutionary equality. They express this critical look at metropolitan society through particular uses of language.

The literature produced by Jewish Maghrebi authors in France is thus inseparable from the historical process to which it bears witness, and the development of their new, bittersweet relationship to their adoptive homeland. Through this relationship with France, a country both beloved and disappointing, their literature deploys – testament to collective experience – its multiple social functions: as historiography, as memory and as a means of adaptation.

Through an examination of the way these authors conceive of their social situation and the interaction of these literary works with the society and time in which they were written, their social objects – that is to say the functions that this literature has beyond the authors’ conscious intentions – become manifest. Some such functions are for the authors themselves – the purposes that writing serves for them; others have to do with their target readership.

**Memorial functions**

It is well known that memory has a central place in the Jewish tradition. Moreover, in France, the period in which this literature really began to develop – quantifiably growing in the 1980s – was also a period when memory gained great significance in general. Independent of this context, however, these Jewish Maghrebi authors’ focus on memory is a particular reaction to their own experience of exile.

They write to remember, to transmit, to contrast the present with the breadth of the past. They want to “reconstruct, via an obsessional reminder of the past, their shattered and uprooted identity”. But the memory must always be constructed; it needs a social framework and concrete means for its expression. It must be tied to a place, materialising out of the past’s remains.

It is thus logical that, faced with this dispersion and dislocation, some would see it as their vocation to record the group’s memory, to crystallise it in literature. Régine Robin describes this type of narrative as a “memorial novel . . . through which an individual, a group or a society thinks through its past, modifying it . . . by reconstructing or resurrecting its events”. There are two memory processes operating in this literature of exile: one is that of remembrance, by which individuals recall their past – the other is a process of memorialisation, which inscribes their various pasts into a collective framework.

The remembrances, evoking a past now gone, allow these works’ authors to return to a “golden age”, one that is now lost forever. The literary process becomes the medium by which they can heal the emotional and psychological pain caused
by losing their homes and having to rebuild their lives in a new place. This process of rooting is organised within the objective of inscribing their personal and family destinies in time, retracing their trajectories, and – in so doing – conferring them with meaning.

But this literature is also rooted in social space, firstly in the process of its creation, in its transformation of socialising experiences, then secondly in its entry into the literary field via publication. Therefore, it is more than a simple question of representing and transforming one’s experiences. “Art [and literature too] is both a simplifier and a revealer; its aim is to communicate within society, to have its message received and shared among the members of the group. Art works as a vector, a transmitter, enabling a group to form a consensus around their emotions and experiences.”

As intersubjective communication, then, literature helps reinforce social links. In effect, “memory work and recognition must allow the community to continue showing and telling. Its intergenerational aspect is central, both for the descendants of immigrants and for the host society as a whole”. The role that literature has played in constructing “imagined communities”, in the words of Benedict Anderson, is well known, reinforcing feelings of belonging in members of a group. Literature of exile, in much the same way, on its own level and by its own means, enables the members of the exiled group to amplify and consolidate their own sociability, allowing them to collectively claim a common heritage.

Memory not only refers to the past but to the future as well. Understood in terms of present needs, it is, by definition, also deployed to achieve political goals, even if Jewish Maghrebi memory is not in opposition with general Jewish memory in the metropole, nor does it seek controversy within the community. The claims that are made rather aim for its inclusion within that discourse. It is not a question of correcting falsified historical details, like the Jewish community has done vis-à-vis the memory of the Shoah, insisting, for example, that France’s role in the deportations be recognised. Nor does North African Jewish memory seek to counter national memory in France. Tied to the lands of its bearers’ origins, it rather seeks to take issue and engage with nationalist political constructions in the new North African states.

To summarise, then, the literature produced by Jewish Maghrebi authors in France serves a dual function of remembrance and memorialisation. It registers the cultural accommodations that were in the process of being made. Writing memory down, however, means formalising it, gelling and monumentalising it. This process conferred this exile literature with another function – as historiography.

**Historiographical functions**

Writing memory down is also a means of anchoring fiction or autofiction into history. As Pierre Nora has stressed, a need for memory is also a need for history. For this particular community, it is important to stress a need to insert their story into the historical narrative of their new environment. Faced with the rich past of
Ashkenazi historiography and of the weight of the Shoah memory in Jewish history, they would like their story to be recorded too.

The first work of Jewish history by an Ashkenazi Jew dates from 1743: *Sheyris Yisroel* by Menahem Man Amilander from the Netherlands. Even though the scholarly standards of that time were not those of today – a fact which holds true for North African Jewish history as well – the writing of European Jewish history in the modern period predates that of Maghrebi Jews by more than a century.

In Europe, this historical production began with the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment, the period in which German Jewry began to secularise in the second half of the eighteenth century. It became a cultural value for Jews to know their history, a field which was now studied via critical scholarly methods. The resulting school of thought came to be known as the *Wissenschaft des Judenthums* (“Science of Judaism”).

North African Jewish historiography emerged later, in the 1860s. From its origins, it was centred on a political project, that of integrating Algerian Jews into the French nation. Jews in metropolitan France wanted to inscribe their co-religionists’ story into capital-H universal History, seeing this as one way to further the attributions of the Revolution’s gains to them, all with the goal of “regenerating” them. It was not until the end of the colonial period that historians looked at North African Jewry in a new, more academic light. This “near-silencing” of North African Jewish history derives from the fact that, despite numerous published articles, reflection on the Jewish past in the Maghreb was too recent and too inflected by colonialism for many years. It was not immediately able to fuel a historiographical school or structured current of its own.

Rather, it was non-academic literature which took up the “responsibility” of narrativising the history of these Jewish communities. With no strong anchor in wider Jewish historiography, Maghrebi Jewish authors wanted to bear witness to a disappearing world. Part of this served therapeutic purposes, helping to heal the pain of exile. But their literary production also pre-dates the development of their formal historiography, and to this day remains a larger body of work.

Given this gap in academic historiography, it seems highly likely that this literature also serves a purpose as extra-scholarly history. Fiction becomes a form of response, written in its own forms and with its own language, to past experience, a process which greatly took off during the 1980s. Fiction writers took it upon themselves – literally – to write history. In this more “supple” form – as a creative and innovative narrative, one which does not need scholarly verification, and one which does not necessarily seek to explain the past, literature nonetheless enables the transformation of the past into history, freezing it and preserving it for the future.

Thus, this literature serves two historiographical functions. At once it inscribes the past in a narrative, one that can be passed down as heritage within the field of literature, and legitimise that history at a time when academic scholars and researchers – and public opinion – marginalised it, or had only just begun to take interest in it. When minorities write their own history, even through the lens of fiction, the nation at large receives it into its cultural patrimony and uses it to understand its own past in a new way, thereby modifying the national narrative.
as a whole. This is not only a dynamic that played out for the Jewish Maghrebi diaspora in France, but one that can frequently be seen when a minority group has to integrate into a nation’s social sphere.

Adaptive functions

Faced with exile, when familial and familiar links have to change or be reconstructed, narration becomes an indispensable means by which a community can mediate a plurality of views of the past and represent the world the way they wish it were. Narratives work through the past according to present needs, and process the present through the lens of the past. Their adaptive functions are those which enable individuals to each attribute their present with new meaning, and those which enable dialogue and accommodation between the group in exile and their new host society. It is a process constructed by trial and error, one in which neither the culture nor the identity of either group is erased.

Their authors thus serve as bearers of culture, as mediators between the past and the present, between the memory required to preserve one’s identity and the forgetting needed to integrate and to take on a new lifestyle. Their action – taking up their pens – does not always imply a conscious goal of claiming their difference (though sometimes it did and does). Nor is it consciously intended as a site of translation and communication for two different groups. Their singular position, that of the participant observer, allows them to develop new perspectives while nonetheless maintaining their attachment to their own minority community.

But direct intentions aside, their literature is always fed by these two realities, rendering them in text so that they can be processed by the two groups in question. As such, these writers in exile and their work develop within “hybrid conceptual frameworks which create new ways of knowing”.65

This mobility, this in-betweenness, or rather this bipolar state, in the words of Sherry Simon, “questions the imaginary of belonging, taking stock of dissonances and of different sorts of interferences”. For Simon, exile literature is “a text where the confrontation of disparate elements produces something new and unpredictable”.66 Works of literature written by exile writers manifestly demonstrate the social and cultural impact of the migration their authors experienced. Due to this fact, and to their double perspective, exile writers not only develop new narrative forms and make linguistic innovations but also provide their readers with new ways of understanding the world.

A writer of exiles’ work is thus to focus on these points of connections, places where perspectives meet or conflict. They do not seek to juxtapose different views of the past or set them in conflict with one another. Rather, they seek – in their style, their topoi, and the narrative forms they use – to transcend the social realities and the different places that made each of them who they are as individuals. It is precisely this work of adapting to the new sociocultural world, appropriating it for themselves and inscribing their own visions upon it, that enables each one of them to rebuild their own life in a new place.
And it is also through this process that the whole community – the exiled group and the national collectivity – benefits from a translation of an imagination born in a different place and is able to incorporate it into new national self-representations. No culture, no matter how dominant, can survive in isolation; all cultures need novelty to reinvent themselves. And in much the same way, minority cultures, like those born of exile, must connect to the dominant group, without completely assimilating, in order to maintain their individuality and their dynamism.

Literature, then, in a singular fashion in these contexts of exile, thanks to its capacity to negotiate and contain within itself both conciliation and conflict, eases the adaptation process between groups and their differences. Postcolonial literature creates spaces for mediation, spaces in-between, where one can learn new, more and less critical ways of thinking about the heritage of the past for both colonised and coloniser.

Conclusion

Literature of North African Jewish authors in France in the postcolonial period sheds light on the various issues at the heart of the literary field. Its process is double: through its memorial construction, it is called to work against forgetting and enables that memory to find a place within the community’s new metropolitan host society. And in its particular uses of language, it serves as a guardian of collective memory and provides a critical lens with which to view that metropolitan society, expressing its authors’ unease with the reality encountered there, so very different from what they had imagined. Expressing “difficulties” in using the coloniser’s language, this literature provides a new view, one without illusions, of France’s “civilising” role – a “civilising” process which brought Judeo-Muslim history and the use of Judeo-Arabic to an end. All the while, this literature also celebrates a form of cultural pluralism in which Jewish Maghrebi authors are mediators. With all the contradictions inherent in the ambivalent status of North African Jews in France, their literature, at once bearing its own specific, localised history – valorises a pluralised national space. This does engender a certain idealisation of Maghrebi reality under French colonial domination, but the authors, with their reservations on France’s role as “civiliser,” measure its limits in light of their own difficulties in integrating into French metropolitan society.

Notes

1 The body of work here studied contains 441 works written by 109 authors, all written and published in France between 1950 and 2010. Their narratives take inspiration from their experiences of rupture, of exile, and from their personal and collective memory. Some authors also wrote more generally on their relationship to Judaism and how it was changed and shaped by their experience of exile: these works have also been inventoried. The works are of all genres (novels, poetry, plays, short stories, autobiography). Some have been officially published on the market; others were self-published by their authors.

2 The novel is, in effect, the most representative type of literature by Jewish Maghrebi authors in France (67 percent of all works.) Moreover, the novel was the most
developed genre in colonial literature and served as a model for the development of Jewish literature in the Maghreb.

3 This naturalisation did not include Jews living in oases and the Algero-Moroccan border areas, which France annexed between 1872 and 1906. These Jews obtained their French nationality in 1961 as part of the decolonisation process. See in particular: Sarah A. Stein, *Saharan Jews and the Fate of French Algeria* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).


8 This Arabic term refers to a legal category of Islamic law, that of the inferior or “dominated,” which was applied to “people of the book” as, among others, Jews and Christians living in the Islamic world. Jews had fewer rights than Muslims who lived in the same lands.

9 In the same years that the Maghreb’s countries began their path towards independence, other events occurred which also pushed the Jews of North Africa towards migration, such as the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 and the ensuing Israeli–Arab conflict, the Suez Campaign, the Sinai War in 1956 and the Bizerte Crisis of July 1961.


18 Lahire, *La condition littéraire*.
20 Till recently, there were no structured collections of this heritage in France. In 2012, the Museum of Art and History of Judaism in Paris organised the first exhibition on the history and culture of Algerian Jews, “Jews from Algeria”. Besides the documents from public collections, the exposition could be realised thanks to a call for private archives and objects. In Israel, four Moroccan Jewish heritage museums have existed since the 1980s. See: Emanuela Trevisan Semi, “Museums of Moroccan Jews in Israel: What Kind of Memory?”, in *Memory and Ethnicity: Ethnic Museums in Israel and the Diaspora*, eds. Emanuela Trevisan Semi, Dario Miccoli and Tudor Parfitt (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2013), 45–76.
46 Monique Zerdoun, *La Danse de Rachel* (Rodez: Rouergue, 2009), 219.
56 The term “memorialisation” has been proposed by Denis Pechanski (ed.), *Mémoire et mémorialisation*, vol. 1 (Paris: Hermann, 2013), 207.
58 Stéphane Bienvenu, “Pour une reconnaissance des mémoires de l’immigration”, in *Mémoire(s) plurielle(s). Cinéma et images: lieux de mémoire?*, ed. Claude Le Bissonnais (Grane: Creaphis, 2007), 35.
61 Nora, *Les Lieux de mémoire*, vol. 1, XXV.

When looking at the development of Hebrew literature in the last two or three decades, its increased heterogeneity and the detachment from some of its founding principles – such as the absolute centrality ascribed to the Hebrew language and to the Land of Israel – one cannot help but think: “Now that the desert has bloomed, the swamps have been drained, and Hebrew itself revived, Israeli writers seem eager, more than ever before, to re-examine the humanizing effects of over two millennia of exile.”\(^1\) At the same time, an attentive gaze on the history of Hebrew literature would reveal that even before the emergence of post-Zionism and the weakening of the idea of Israel as *kibbutz galuyiot* (“ingathering of exiles”), Hebrew and even more so Jewish literature generally speaking “never fully rid itself of the stubborn ghosts of diasporic worlds”.\(^2\) But then, if Jewish diasporas can exist within the so-called Jewish state, how do they relate to those other Jewish diasporas that are located outside Israel and whose modern history was equally shaped by migration from the country of origin and resettlement in a new context? Should these diasporas replicate the pre-Israeli and pre-migratory ones or should they be new entities that escape centuries-old Jewish classifications and divisions?

The case of the Jews of the southern shore of the Mediterranean seems to be particularly enlightening. In fact, it is arguable that the modern Sephardic and Mizrahi diaspora came into existence mainly after the migratory waves of the 1950s and 1960s and the subsequent process of resettlement in Israel, Europe, the US or elsewhere. So, my analysis wishes to interrogate Jewish processes of literary memorialisation at the crossroads of Europe and Israel and to look at how the Jewish migrations from North Africa and the Middle East have been told in narrative form. I unravel how memory travels across the various spaces that the Jews encountered and how this impacts on the process of identity-(re)making. In fact, my argument is that from the 1950s and 1960s not only people but also memory itself migrated at least from the southern to the northern shore of the Mediterranean, in some cases embarking on multiple voyages: for example, from Tunisia to France and then to Israel or from one city to the other. This leads to the conceptualisation of Mediterranean Jewish memory as a set of *noeuds de mémoire*...
(“knots of memory”), with which Michael Rothberg understands “rhizomatic networks of temporality and cultural reference that exceed attempts at territorialisation (whether at the local or national level) and identitarian reduction”, as opposed to Pierre Nora’s strictly national lieux de mémoire (“sites of memory”).

Clearly, literature plays a central role in the memorialisation of the past, even more so for communities and diasporas – like the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa – that long remained at the margins of historical research. This depended on many factors, the most significant one being the greater weight and impact that European/Western paradigms of Jewish identity and history have had, especially but not only in the aftermath of the Shoah, both in Europe and in Israel. As people who in most cases did not experience the Shoah, these Jews did not seem to fit the predominant historical canon and their past has long been downplayed. As Albert Memmi eloquently put in 1974, “so far, Jewish history has been written by Western Jews only [...] as a result, we only know the Western aspects of the malheur juif.” Also within the field of colonial studies, that of the Jews has been a history difficult to handle, since it complicates the opposition between coloniser and colonised and often disrupts the linear understanding of the relations between Europe and the Arab world: think for example of the Jews of Algeria.

With reference to those Jews who settled in Israel, one has inevitably to refer to Mizrahi identity as a tool for social, political and cultural demands, informed by experiences such as the 1970s Ha-panterim ha-shehorim (“Black Panthers”) and – on a different level – the intellectual debates started in the 1980s around notions of Mizrahiyut (“Easternness/Eastern identity”) and Arab Jewishness by scholars such as Ella Shohat, Yehudah Shenhav and Sami Shalom-Chetrit and the activities of social movements like Ha-qeshet ha-demoqratit ha-mizrahit (“Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow”), established in 1996.

For both the Jews who live in the Diaspora and those who live in Israel, literature serves as a personal and collective tool capable of filling the gaps of historiography, of maintaining imaginative links with the past and transmitting an identity and heritage from one generation to the other. Literature therefore entails a historical value, even though it is other from history tout court because, generally speaking, it does not need to attentively distinguish between different temporalities or articulate them in a coherent discourse. It can talk about what is left behind us based upon fragments of memory that “involve a past of loss and a longing for a world that perhaps never was”. Yet, it has a historical value when one recognises its potential in transmitting the past in a very intimate and immediate way, in recording details and stories that rarely feature in institutional archives. Furthermore, as De Certeau among others demonstrated, one should not forget that also historians write and create narratives that are acts of personal creation. What one needs ultimately is a mediated approach that goes beyond both “‘positive’ historical inquiry based on a literal reading of the evidence, on the one hand, and ‘historical narratives’ based on figurative, uncomparable and unrefutable interpretations on the other”.

In this chapter, I focus on three interconnected spaces – Tunisia, France and Israel in the post-migration period – as depicted by a Franco-Tunisian Jewish
novelist, Chochana Boukhobza. By doing so, I wish to understand how this writer envisions her identity in relation to different national and ethnic feelings of belonging and how she discusses ideas of Jewishness, Israeliness and Frenchness. Born in Sfax in 1959, Chochana Boukhobza is a renowned Francophone novelist who often defined herself as an exile: born in in Tunisia and having grown up in Paris, at seventeen years old she moved to Israel but after a few years came back to France, where Boukhobza now lives. Since her debut in 1986, she published a number of novels, among which are Bel Canto (1991), Le troisième jour (2010) and Métal (2013), wrote scripts and co-directed two documentaries. Here, I will discuss Un été à Jérusalem (1986) and Pour l’amour du père (1996), the two novels by Boukhobza that most explicitly discuss her Tunisian Jewish background and the peregrinations of her family across the Mediterranean, from Tunisia to France and Israel.

A summer in Jerusalem

Un été à Jérusalem, which came out in 1986, is the debut novel of Boukhobza. It tells the story of a French-born girl of Tunisian Jewish origin who travels to Jerusalem during the Lebanon War (1982) in order to visit her family, which had moved to Israel from Paris a few years earlier. In actual reality, it was the girl who had pushed for the migration to Israel but she had subsequently changed her mind.
and come back to France on her own. This led to her gradual estrangement from the family, especially from her religious parents, who accused her of misbehaving and dishonouring their good name. Whereas back in Paris the girl has a relationship with a Jew of Ashkenazi origin, in Jerusalem she goes out with a man of Algerian Jewish background. Thus, the father, who wished his daughter would behave according to Tunisian Jewish traditions and religious obligations, harshly reprehends her conduct. On top of all this is the war between Israel and Lebanon and its impact at a familial – the protagonist’s two brothers are both drafted into the army – and national level.

Awarded with the *Prix Méditerranée*, a French literary prize that “celebrates [. . .] the cultural space between different countries of which the Mediterranean is the crucible”,14 *Un été à Jérusalem* is a painful elegy for a Tunisian and Mediterranean world that struggles to continue in Paris and Jerusalem but that seems destined to die in front of the protagonist’s eyes. At the centre of the novel is Jerusalem, a city “out of the limits of my logic. It dances inside me with meaningless and deeply banal details. [. . .] Jerusalem is cumbersome. You think it is frail but it oppresses you.”15 Jerusalem figures as an oppressive space, which is represented neither by the vestiges of the Old City and monuments like the Western Wall nor by the modern cafés of Jaffa Street. It is a no man’s land made of stones “that do not say anything”, of contrasting neighbourhoods that go from the ultra-Orthodox Meah Shearim to the surroundings of Abu Tor with its “Arab children, floating in their djellabas”, up to “the road that, after Talpiot, leads to Bethlehem and then to Hebron”.16 It is under the sky of Jerusalem, which “on certain mornings, becomes a sea”,17 that the protagonist meets strange people like Mavrika, a Maghrebi Jewish prostitute with whose uprooted and cursed existence she likes to identify.18 Boukhobza then guides the reader in a complex Jerusalemite itinerary constellated by silence and oblivion, and by a lack of emotions among the members of the family, who all live in their own little corner without really listening to what the others have to tell.19

In addition to Jerusalem, other places appear in the novel – firstly, the Israeli periphery and the city of Beer-Sheva where the protagonist’s grandmother lives. This is not a coincidence, as since the 1960s many Israelis of Middle Eastern and North African origin settled in those areas, following *ad hoc* policies of urban planning and development.20 Beer-Sheva is “the door to the desert” and a city populated by “doddery elders, gutless and lazy Georgian immigrants, dangerous Moroccans who speak with the knife more than with the mouth”.21 From their *exile* in Beer-Sheva, the migrants transformed the Maghrebi past into “a mythical paradise, a North African *Shangrila [sic!]*, where Jews lived in great happiness”.22 Yet, for the narrator it is not like that: she perceives Tunisian Jewish life as a dead body, just like that of *Safia* (Hebrew *savta*: “grandmother”) Rachel, or as something that survives only in traditional dishes and clothes. Israel is not the end of the Diaspora but, on the contrary, the temporary stop in a diasporic voyage that cannot come to an end: “The voyage has been long [. . .]. First awakening: North Africa. Then the exile to Paris, Lyon, Marseille with sneezings of nostalgia, tinglings of the chest, poisoned *tête-à-têtes* with the ‘paradise’. In front of a crowded compass, they repacked their suitcases, a fantasy. Jerusalem. An expensive caprice.”23
The migration to France and then the 'aliyah to Israel made the protagonist’s entire family feel like victims of history: none of them migrated out of individual will, but as a consequence of historical contingencies or because of a caprice. This is even more evident for the elders of the family, for whom Israel “only represents [. . . ] that most holy land where they came to die and that will bury them under a tombstone”.24 Far is the joyful depiction of Israel as the place where Jews would finally build a state for themselves and where they would forge a new, shared national identity.25 In Un été à Jérusalem, every character is a nomad unable to find a place to stay and for whom the past is irremediably gone and survives only in the objects that were brought from Tunisia.26

The death of the grandmother, which occurs shortly after the beginning of the story, symbolises the beginning of the loss of an entire world that cannot pass to the younger generation: “One by one, our elders are dying, and Tunisia, Morocco, Yemen will die with them.”27 Even those who are not dead are like ghosts coming from an unknown past who suddenly make their appearance in Jerusalem for the funeral of Safta: “they came from the North, from the kibbutz of the coast or from Dimona the White, sensing in this death their imminent disappearance. They still wear the traditional clothes of Gabès or Souss[e], the baggy trousers and the kabouch. [. . .] They are beyond everything. When they walk, their body trembles, imprisoned under their weight.”28

Marianne Hirsch, in her work on the Jews of Czernowitz – in today’s Ukraine – tellingly entitled Ghosts of Home, argued that “objects and places can function as triggers of remembrance that connect us, bodily and thus also emotionally, with the physical world we inhabit”.29 But if this process is quite obvious for those who actually used those objects or lived in those places, what happens with the subsequent generations? How can they relate to objects that only have an indirect connotation for them? In our case, the Tunisian elders wander in a world that is not their own but nonetheless carry with them – or rather on them, by wearing Tunisian traditional clothing – the little that remains of their past. On the other hand, the generation to which the protagonist belongs does not seem to have a past of its own. Upon discovering that the grandmother’s traditional clothes had been given by her aunt Aliza to some ragman in Beer-Sheva, the girl gets very angry, as if the past could only exist in these clothes:

“You are crazy! You destroyed the past because of your jealousy! We already have so few memories because of the exile. How will I explain to my children that I come from North Africa if you throw our history in the dustbin?”

“Invent, embellish, imagine . . . You know enough to fill in the gaps.”30

But does this young girl really know enough? Will she be able to construct her own past and fill in the gaps, or will everything remain ambivalent and uncertain?

The inter-generational conflict that opposes the narrator to the generation of her parents is a cliché that can be found in many other novels by Sephardic and Mizrahi writers. It relates to the traumas that the family had to go through upon leaving North Africa and then France, but also on more general generational divides.
As said, the family of the narrator is a living remnant of the dying Tunisian world to which she feels attached but that she wishes to delete in order to conduct a normal life in France. The trauma of exile is also mirrored in that of the wars that Israel fights, the last being the 1982 Lebanon War. During this conflict, all sorts of misfortunes happen, from the death of Saffa to the death – due to a stray bullet – of the protagonist’s Algerian Jewish lover, who had gone to Beirut as a reporter. The friend who brings the news tries to console her, saying: “Mektoub! C’était son heure . . .”, but the girl angrily accuses him: “It is your fault. You killed him. You! Not the Arab in front [of him]! You! You!” Jerusalem is not a holy city inhabited by God but, as the prostitute Mavrika says: “I think God has cursed you, Jerusalem! Let all your sons die! One day, you will come back to your ruins!”

The setting of the novel in 1982 is obviously due to the timing of the publication, which came out in 1986. However, it also shows the deep impact that the Lebanon War had on Jews in Israel and in the Diaspora. It was a turning point that led to a rethinking of the role of the army in Israeli society and the future meanings of Zionism at a moment when this ideology seemed to enter into crisis. The war and events such as the killing of Palestinians by the Lebanese Christian Phalangistes in the refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila – which, according to many, the Israeli army failed to prevent – also triggered a change in the perception that sectors of European public opinion had of Israel: not anymore a small state that wished to defend itself from enemies, but one that sometimes acted in questionable if not immoral ways.

As if to further elaborate upon this critical moment in Jewish and Israeli history, the other in Un été à Jérusalem is not so much the Arab, but an internal Jewish other that haunts the present and the future: Jewish Tunisia, the migration and rue du Chemin-Vert in Paris, the dead grandmother, the protagonist’s (Ashkenazi and Algerian) lovers. New diasporic spaces cut across and connect the (old) Diaspora and Israel, leading to the erasure of previous feelings of belonging and to the evoking of a Mediterranean fantasy where the characters’ plus beaux jours are lost. If Israel surely is one of these new spaces, another one is France – or, better to say, Paris. It is there that the protagonist of Un été à Jérusalem wishes to go back. And in Paris live the characters of the second novel by Boukhobza that I will now introduce, Pour l’amour du père. As we shall see, the family and its complex memory are present also in this text – at the centre of which, however, is not the absence but the omnipresence of feelings between generations and between a father and his daughter.

For the love of the father

“In that same moment, the Ville de Tunis trembled. On s’en va, we are leaving. . . . As the boat departed from the quay, from the land, from Tunis, those words flew from one group of people to the other. It was over. And so it began.” Pour l’amour du père, a novel published in 1996, narrates the turbulent relationships that, decades after the migration, still characterise the members of a Tunisian Jewish family in Paris. The protagonist, Alice, is a successful lawyer who struggles
to find love and to cope with her father and sisters, one of whom – Sassou – disappeared several years earlier, after the family’s discovery that she intended to marry a non-Jew. Even though the entire novel is set in Paris, the city of Tunis is always in the background. As opposed to the French capital, where “it is always grey, it is always bad [weather]”, Tunis el-hedra (Arabic: “the green”) “looked like a garden, with little houses facing the sea”. Here, the climate becomes a mirror of the feelings that the protagonists, and especially the father, perceive after the migration: “the father cannot be cured from Tunisia, he always compares everything, he compares the taste of the fruit he ate là-bas with those that he buys at the market of Clichy; he says that life was easier under the sun, it had a taste.”

Là-bas, a term that is always found in the writings as well as in the memory of many North African Jews, is a place where everything was better and whose echoes can now only be found in spaces other from Tunis – for example in the Parisian neighbourhood of Belleville.

The Tunisian Jewish quarter par excellence, Belleville has been defined as “a protective universe where the brutality of assimilation [in French society] was alleviated”. It is there that the man goes every Sunday, in order to meet with three other Tunisians: “Là-bas [i.e. in Tunis], he only greeted them nodding his head, he barely said good morning. In Paris, they became like brothers.” During their Sunday gatherings, the men “little by little, . . . made their neighbourhood come back to life in their memory. [. . .] For them, it was like going back to their true and most authentic self. [. . .] They drink mint tea, eat semolina sweets. They never talk about the present”. As Simon and Tapia explain, in the aftermath of the migration, Belleville gave many Tunisian Jews – who in the 1970s formed the absolute majority of the Jewish population of that neighbourhood – the illusion of being closer to their homeland: people lived as if in a village, surrounded by newly established Tunisian-owned cafés and shops that often bore names like La Goulette or Dar Djerba.

Another space that makes Alice’s father remember Tunis is Israel, where he visits his son Gérard: “[In Israel] the father started again with the comparisons with Tunisia [. . .]. He said that the fruits were just as big, the watermelon, the peach, the orange. [. . .] He began to have an idea of Israel that was related to the white light of Tunis.” As also found in novels and memoirs by Jews from Morocco and in Un été à Jérusalem, the Promised Land paradoxically is the place where the Diaspora comes back to life. This also reminds one of the Algerian pieds-noirs of Maltese origin who nowadays embark on memory voyages to the land of their ancestors, Malta, where most of them have never been but which is perceived as another, mediated Algeria. This kind of transference – that is, in Freudian terminology, the reproduction of feelings relating to repressed experiences and the substitution of someone or something for the original object of the repressed impulses – occurs throughout Pour l’amour du père. For example, in another passage of the book, Alice meets a young man of Algerian origin in a bar who eventually kisses her and who symbolically “is like the father when he was young, he is the memory of the father’s body”. Just like the father, the man longs for a bygone epoch when, on the other shore of the Mediterranean, “we [Arabs
The lives of Arabs and Jews were shaped by violence and the trauma of exile and the same also happened to Alice, even though she migrated to France when she was a child. Both Alice and her father manage to resist exile through specific regimes of memory and the creation of unexpected correlations: between Tunisia and Israel, between the memory of the father and that of a young Franco-Algerian.

This said, it is not clear to what extent the protagonist actually believes in the idyllic memory of Tunisia that the father transmits. Alice is very reluctant in thinking about the past and seems to have forgotten many details. In fact, the past for her signifies not only the departure from Tunisia, but also the death of a mother she hardly remembers and last but not least the disappearance of her sister Sassou. Therefore, the past comes back in the shape of haunted memories and barely comprehensible Arabic words. Arabic is transformed into the repository of her traumas and secrets, into a language “whose words stayed with me like embers”,

“Arabic, the forbidden language, the language of before the exile, the language of the father. [...] ‘What is it you mumbled? I did not understand a word . . .’ ‘I was inventing words.’

It is true that pre-1960s Tunisia is often portrayed, as for example happens in the case of pre-Nasserist Egypt, like a cosmopolitan society where Muslims, Jews, Italians, Maltese and others lived together. For example, the Italians feature prominently in the Tunisian case – last but not least, since they were the biggest and most ancient community of Europeans present in the country and, as opposed to the French, remained in an in-between position that made them neither colonised or colonisers. For the Italians as well as for the Jews, the migration ended the world of là-bas in a definitive manner, unveiling ethno-religious and national cleavages that hitherto had been less visible and crucial. So, in France much of Tunisia is forgotten, as if it never existed:

“You sang us this song [of Farid El Atrach], when we were children,” she says [...].

“It is true! Ya Hassra [‘alas’]!” says the father smiling. “Sing!”

“My voice is lost.”

As said above, the only moments when the past reappears are in Belleville, or in the casual encounters with other exiles – for example, a taxi driver accused of having killed his wife and whose family Alice is defending: “This taxi driver,” says Alice’s father, “he is a bit like myself. He wants to find his land . . . his home. And he does not see anymore his wife or his daughter, because he works, he works. That is how it is, la ville.” The city of Paris – as opposed to Tunis – is an alienating location where migrants work and forget about the rest, even about their own families. Despite previous similarities, North African Jews and Muslims are no longer part of a shared milieu: the migration and life in the metropole has in the long run estranged the two communities from each other. This occurred not only because of the societal reactions and the policies that since the 1960s the French state implemented vis-à-vis the two – generally speaking, more inclusive and less othering for the Jewish than the Muslim immigrants – but also as a
consequence of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and its impact on the identity and self-perception of French Jews and Muslims respectively.\(^{51}\) If so, what is left to Alice and her father? How can they continue their lives, despite the difficulties at individual, familial and national levels? Perhaps the answer is to be found in a feeling onto which everyone can cling, love: between the father and his dead wife, between Alice and her companion, love for one’s *pays perdu* and for the noisy streets of Belleville – the only place in the whole of Paris where “there are colours, coloured men, *et c’est beau*.”\(^ {52}\)

**Whither?**

Both *Un été à Jérusalem* and *Pour l’amour du père* present the migration as a traumatic experience whose marks pass from one generation to the other and have a deep impact on family relations. The migration unravels memories that often make the protagonists feel displaced, as if they could never find a place to settle and find solace. Secondly, their diasporic existence does not end upon resettling in Israel, let alone in another country, but instead is born again in new forms after the migration. Even in Paris or Jerusalem, the past and the violence of exile cannot be forgotten.

As I said at the beginning of the chapter, modern Jewish and Hebrew literatures have often been characterised by writers and poets who showed the difficulty of a clear-cut separation between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel, and underlined how these two spaces interact at a literary and cultural level. Think of the early twentieth century writer Yosef Haim Brenner and his uprooted characters who find it hard to adjust to the new life in the Land of Israel, or of the conflicting relation between the Diaspora and the Land of Israel in the novella *Yad vashem* (“The Name”, 1955) by Aharon Megged. In similar yet different ways, the Diaspora is, even for more contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi Jewish writers, not the counterpart of Israel, but an *old-new land* – were one to cite the title of a renowned novel by Theodore Herzl – intimately connected to it. However, what distinguishes these younger writers is the fact that they cannot really be Jews of that Diaspora from where their families come from: often, they only know it through the memories of their childhood or thanks to the mediation of their parents and grandparents. This is something not unique to the Sephardics and Mizrahim, as similar things could be said also for the descendants of Jews of Eastern European or Russian origin – whose families lived in one of the many cities and *shtetls* annihilated in the course of the Second World War. Yet, the case of the Jews of the Middle East and North Africa is more visible, since for many years they represented a group of people whose memories and past have been put aside vis-à-vis the dominant model of identity – whose origins were rooted in European (Jewish) culture and history.

If the places and worlds of the parents and grandparents of contemporary Middle Eastern and North African Jews cannot return, the only solution left is to reinvent them in a fictional manner. The past is transformed into an imaginative and literary diaspora that is related to the Israeli present as well as to “diasporic public spheres” scattered across space and time.\(^ {53}\)
An author like Boukhobza, while willing to assert her individual approach to literature and her specific familiar origin and to go beyond stereotypical views about the Jews of the Muslim world, seems equally eager to share a collective identity that permits her to claim more space and cultural influence within a global Jewish cultural and literary collective. Seen from her perspective, contemporary Sephardic and Mizrahi literature appear as an old-new land that neither replicates the pre-Israeli and pre-migratory diasporic model nor is a completely novel entity that escapes pre-existing Jewish classifications. In it, the Diaspora and Israel blend and give birth to an interconnected space populated by familiar memories and beloved grandparents, traumatic legacies and complex returns, from where it is possible to elaborate original models of identity and express hope for a better future.54

Notes

2 Omer, “Jewish Diasporism”.
4 See the monographic issue of the journal Expression Maghrébines, 11/2 (2014) on “Nouvelles expressions judéo-maghrébines”.
An old-new land


16 Boukhobza, Un été, 135 and 137.

17 Boukhobza, Un été, 21.


21 Boukhobza, Un été, 47.


23 Boukhobza, Un été, 32.

24 Boukhobza, Un été, 192.


27 Boukhobza, Un été, 55.

28 Boukhobza, Un été, 117–118.

29 Marianne Hirsch and Leo Spitzer, Ghosts of Home: the Afterlife of Czernowitz in Jewish Memory (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 293–300.

30 Boukhobza, Un été, 208.

31 Boukhobza, Un été, 253–255.


35 Boukhobza, *Pour*, 86.
38 Boukhobza, *Pour*, 50–51.
40 Boukhobza, *Pour*, 46.
41 See the chapter by Emanuela Trevisan Semi in this volume.
43 Jonathan Lear, *Freud* (London: Routledge, 2005), esp. 122–124. The concept of transference (*Übertragung*) was first introduced by Freud in his 1895 *Studies on Hysteria*.
49 Boukhobza, *Pour*, 147.
50 Boukhobza, *Pour*, 126.
53 Benvenuti and Ceserani, *La letteratura globale*, 147.
3 Aesthetics, politics and the complexities of Arab Jewish identities in authoritarian Argentina

Silvina Schammah Gesser and Susana Brauner

Declassified documents in Argentine archives dating from 1975–1984 include names such as Carlos Alberto Abadi Shammah, a psychology student who was kidnapped in the city of Buenos Aires; David Moaded Laniado, a young Zionist linked to a guerrilla organisation who was killed in a raid; Cesar Alberto Antebi, attorney and advocate for political prisoners, who disappeared together with his wife; Celia Ester Hanono Sacca, political activist in the Juventud Peronista (Peronist Youth Party) and Mónica Masri, a literature and arts student. Their stories and those of many others shed light on the life experiences of young Argentinians of Arab Jewish descent who shared their views, interests and aspirations with their fellow nationals in the conflictive 1960s and 1970s. During these decades, Argentina went through a period of increasing political violence and instability: a series of military authoritarian regimes; the rise of la nueva izquierda (“the new left”); the return of the legendary leader Juan Domingo Perón from exile; democratic elections held in early 1973. A final military coup three years later tore Argentine society apart and the country sank into an unprecedented state terrorism, a nightmare euphemistically known as the “Process of National Reconstruction”.

The path followed by many young members of the second and third generations of Argentinian Jews from the Middle East contradicts deep-rooted assumptions about the so-called “homogeneity” and “religiosity” of the Arab Jews. Such persistent stereotypes have overlooked the transformations undergone by these cohorts in the Argentine soil. Indeed, since the early 1960s, the major cities of Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Rosario proved to be thriving intellectual and ideologically oriented urban environments. Whether in high school, local clubs, study groups or at university, informal meetings, political acts or street protests, the young came across different political programs, ad hoc forms of mobilisation and revolutionary formulas. The novel forms of youth socialisation became a natural scenario where a plethora of meanings and ideals such as “political commitment”, “empowerment” and “a new left” confronted contested notions of Argentineness. Against this background, members of ethnic minorities such as young cohorts of Arab Jewish descent who took part in those forms of socialisation joined their fellow countrymen in their search for a more just and egalitarian society. And, in so doing, they
redefined, intentionally or not, their ethnic, religious and cultural traits. For the most part, these elements did not blend or synthesise. Rather they were re-signified and negotiated according to the various contexts in which these young Argentinians of Arab Jewish descent became active and according to the geopolitical ups and downs that were taking place at national and international levels.

Malka is one of the eighty interviewees on which this study is based. She was born in 1946, the year that inaugurated Juan Domingo Perón’s first government. She belonged to a middle class family of second-generation Jewish immigrants from Aleppo, who lived in Once, a traditional ethnic neighbourhood situated in the heart of the city of Buenos Aires. Her father was a physician from Rosario and her mother was a teacher. Malka attended a secular school. Her connections with Judaism came through observing the Jewish holidays of *Rosh ha-shanah*, *Yom Kippur* and *Pesah* and attending services at one of the neighbourhood’s synagogues, and at family gatherings that were celebrated by eating traditional dishes. Her socialisation turned Jewishness into a natural trait. Malka studied Hebrew with a private tutor on her own initiative, in addition to English, French, ballet and guitar. At home, her parents always discussed national and international politics. They were against Perón, Franco, Salazar, Mussolini and any form of fascism. In 1955, her family joined the people in the streets to celebrate the expulsion from power of General Perón.

In 1964 Malka joined the Faculty of Exact Sciences at the University of Buenos Aires where she heard firsthand the debates that divided the Communist Party. While she never affiliated with its radical offshoot, she kept in close contact with its members, participated in festivals and attended public meetings related to the university reform debate. Together with other students, Malka read the works of Frantz Fanon, Antonio Gramsci and Jean-Paul Sartre and of Argentine authors such as Arturo Jauretche and Che Guevara, then in vogue. The theme was the “Revolution”. Or as she put it, “the Socialist Revolution: what role were the Argentine youth going to play in it? Was the Revolution imminent?” Malka was sure that, in an irresistible historical process of acceleration, the (Argentine) masses were destined to take power. In the years to come, Malka was present in major political events: as a student in the tragically famous *Noche de los Bastones Largos* (July 1966), among the multitudes who rushed to the *Ezeiza* airport to welcome Perón’s return to Argentina (June 1973) and as a professional mathematician at the highly politicised State University of La Plata (March 1976). As the political climate polarised she was forced to flee Buenos Aires, first to Bariloche in Patagonia, later to Montevideo, Uruguay, and finally to Rio de Janeiro, where she still lives.

The story of Malka raises intriguing questions: in what ways are national identities conversant with the ethno-cultural and religious traditions of minority and non-hegemonic groups? How are “ethnic” and “Jewish” components simultaneously intertwined with diverse ideologies, political positions and youthful militancy? Do these components lose legitimation or validity as commitment to national politics increases? Then, the chapter addresses some of these questions by tracing the trajectories of second and third generations of Argentinian Jews of Middle Eastern descent, their ways of socialisation, forms of heterodoxy and
disaffiliation as well as their incorporation into the country’s social and cultural spheres. We focus on those social actors who sought to participate as “equals” in the emerging alternative visions of society. More specifically, we centre on the realms of culture and aesthetics and therefore our major interests lie on their cultural production. To what extent were these social actors’ production – be they plays, works of art or literary texts – pertinent to the historical moment they were living in? How did their national and ethno-Jewish identities converse? Were there echoes of Middle Eastern legacies and memories of an Arab Jewish past?

In what follows we first discuss these minority groups within wider migratory waves of different religious faiths that arrived in the country from the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Second, we trace their forms of disaffiliation and heterodoxy vis-à-vis their ethnic communities as well as the ways in which they place themselves in the host society. Third, we analyse the connections among aesthetics, politics and ethnic identities in the trajectories and work of three major public figures of Arab Jewish descent: the director, filmmaker and playwright Ricardo Halac (b. 1935); the painter Diana Dowek (b. 1942); and the writer and literary critic Susana Romano Sued (b. 1947). A major point of analysis will centre on their becoming part of the local literary and artistic scene.

Recent volumes on contemporary Sephardic identity in the Americas address Sephardic cultural production in Latin America by discussing how the immigrants’ original traditions, customs and autochthonous languages were accommodated in the new continent. They incisively ask whether alternative frameworks other than “nostalgia” for the communities of origin and idyllic constructions of the past can be fruitful for understanding such production. The present study – which intends to enlarge these debates – argues that the production of Halac, Dowek and Romano Sued prioritises their dialogue with local literatures and aesthetic developments in Argentina as much as with other roiling issues in Argentine politics and society, sometimes, though not necessarily, at the expense of their ethnic and religious ascriptions.

**Labelling and its discontents: turcos, Sefardíes and Judíos Árabes versus Mizrahim**

Middle Eastern Jewish immigrants – as well as their fellow countrymen from other religions (mostly Muslims and Christian Maronites) – who arrived in Argentina from the Ottoman Empire in the late nineteenth century, and later from the French and British mandates, were all indistinctively identified as *turcos* by the host society. Despite internal and quite obvious differences, their global identification as “Turks” blurred the fact that this immigration, especially those coming from the Arab world (Syria, Lebanon, North Africa) was complex and heterogeneous. Their identity, defined in religious and regional terms, led to the simultaneous creation of different congregations but also of common networks and solidarity links. Their denomination as “Turks”, so common in Argentinian society, hinted at the fact that these migrants came from cities and regions that had been part of the multi-corporative Ottoman conglomerate, in which autonomous
religious communities coexisted and managed themselves under a supreme Islamic authority. Thus, they presented traits and ways of coexistence that were completely different from the Argentinian host society. The latter cherished the prevailing values of the Western Christian world and looked forward to receiving large flows of immigrants, mostly from Latin, Catholic and European countries. In other words, Argentina’s elites positively valued immigrants from Southern Europe as they became functional to the state policies that sought to consolidate national identity as predominantly white, Catholic and European. Conversely, those coming from the “Orient”, who certainly did not meet the identity models that the Argentinian elites emulated, were openly stigmatised. They were neither Nordic, Anglo-Saxon, French, Italian nor Spanish. Nor were they professionals who could contribute to the country’s modernisation. They did not even intend to work on farms or do manual labour. For the most part they were peddlers, professed religions other than Roman Catholicism and spoke languages of origin that made integration extremely difficult.

The vast majority of the Jews who came from the Middle East were of Syrian descent, from the cities of Damascus and Aleppo, and in lower numbers from Lebanon, Egypt, Turkey and Morocco. They represented a minority within two other minorities: the Jewish population in Argentina and the migratory currents of Arab origin and of different faiths that arrived in the country in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

The strong regionalism that characterised all groups among the Middle East Jewish collective led them to organise independently according to their zone of origin and/or mother tongue, even when they shared similar objectives: providing religious services and traditional Jewish education. The collective was composed of four clearly differentiated groups: Spanish-speaking Moroccans; various Ladino-speaking Jews, including Turks, Greeks and peoples from the Balkans; Syrians of Aleppo, together with others whose mother tongue was Arabic, generally from Egypt and Jerusalem; and the Syrians of Damascus, together with those coming from Lebanon. Each of these four groups created their own institutions in the city of Buenos Aires. And, despite the negative images through which Argentine society perceived the Middle Eastern immigrants, and the local policies the Argentine governments pursued limiting cultural diversity, the Middle Eastern migrants, among them the Jews, nurtured a positive view of Argentina as an “ hospitable” land where they could build a better future. Indeed, in the years to come the Jewish communities in general, and descendants of Middle Eastern Jews in particular, experienced social mobility, taking an active part in the expansion of the economy and in the development and modernisation of the country’s urban life.

The financial well-being that characterised Argentina after the Second World War and that, to a certain extent, was concomitant with the Peronist administration, had a major impact on the self-perception of the always expanding urban sectors. These were very heterogeneous groups, ethnic minorities included, who despite their differences aspired to see themselves as part of the Argentinian middle classes. Certainly a highly encompassing and imprecise notion, the Argentine middle classes were identified with a strong aspiration to social mobility,
individual and collective progress, entrepreneurship, education and change. Historiography attests to the fact that the urban middle classes in Argentina had their golden age between the 1930s and the 1960s.15

Interestingly enough, Perón’s pragmatic leadership (1946–1955) sought to attract ethnic minorities who, even when they had progressed and sought to be part of the rising middle classes, still felt themselves to be at the margins of Argentine society. As opposed to the prior oligarchic policies that fostered the melting pot model, the Peronist government gave legitimacy to their different identities, emphasised the cultural variety of Argentinian society and advanced the integration of the differentiated communities, be they Italians, Japanese, Jews or Arabs. By prioritising “the benefits of a participatory democracy”, enhancing a multicultural society where ethnic identities were no longer a threat to the notion of argentinidad, and by dissipating possible contradictions in “multiple forms of belonging”, Perón sponsored their “political involvement”. In so doing, he instrumentally fostered the integration of ethnic communities in society. Perón’s inclusive policies allowed these groups to deal with negative stereotypes and neutralise their feeling of alienation as non-Latin and non-Christian minorities and to seek ways to capitalise on their prospective support.16 The Peronist government also recognised the validity of transnational ties and encouraged immigrants to continue their relations with their countries of origin. This gave legitimacy to the identification of Spanish immigrants with Spain, of Italian descendants with Italy, of the Arabs with their original nations and in the case of the Jewish community with the State of Israel and Zionism more generally. Under Perón’s rule, dual membership (ethnic and national) was not considered “dual loyalty”. On the contrary, the transnational links and activities on behalf of the ethnic minorities were seen as a vital tool to maintain contacts around the globe. In the case of the Middle East, the character of the ethnic community organisations functioning in Argentina changed according to the political developments in that area. Notwithstanding the ups and downs in the international context, the Peronist policies of integration and the ascending economic status of Jewish migrants eased their increasing openness towards the environment and the hybridisation of their original beliefs and practices. Among the different Sephardic communities, these changes and transformations produced tensions that, in some cases, gave rise to novel forms of religious orthodoxy and re-ethnicisation. Such responses sought to reassure religiosity and internal group cohesion and to counteract any disassociation with the traditionally hegemonic community centres.

Broadly speaking, the term turcos is commonly used in Argentine society, whereas the terms Sephardic and Arab Jews are used among community members and function as emic notions in Clifford Geertz’s terminology. While the term Sephardic in the Argentine context frequently addresses all non-Ashkenazi Jews, academicians who assume a more restrictive definition, such as Zion Zohar, argue that the term should pertain to those Jews who had actually lived in the Iberian Peninsula under Muslim or Christian rules, developed unique cultures from medieval times to their expulsion from Spain in 1492, and later perpetuated themselves in multiple diasporas.
In turn, the term Mizrahim is not used by the Argentinian Sephardic collectivities themselves and therefore, the notion of Mizrahim as interchangeable with that of “Orientals” is non-existent. Indeed, if we follow Ella Shohat’s definition of Mizrahim as an identity marker that emphasises the effects of Zionist/Eurocentric/Ashkenazi discourses on the construction of Oriental and Sephardic Jews in Israel, then the concept of Mizrahim has little heuristic value for analysing Sephardic Jews in general and Arab Jews in particular as far as the Argentinian context is concerned. For Shohat, the Eurocentric understanding of Jewish history as basically that of Ashkenazi Jews, on the one hand, and the Zionist narrative that sees Arabness and Jewishness as mutually exclusive, on the other, have denied Jews coming from Arab countries their Arabness. If we accept that the notion of Mizrahim has a twofold character as both a product of Israel’s assimilationist policies that see Oriental Jews as “liable for improvement and transformation” and, as a resistance to it, then the term Mizrahi, that carries loaded meanings in Hebrew, has no raison d’être in Jewish Argentine society in general and among Argentine Arab Jews in particular. Despite differences, the notions of Mizrahim in Israel and Arab Jews in Argentina share a similar burden – that of “orientalisation”. Academic studies and the general literature about the particulars of Jewish immigration and Jewish life in Argentina have marginalised the study of Sephardic and Arab Jews. Frequently these Jews have been seen through an essentialist lens that emphasises Western apologetic attitudes, persistent Eurocentric prejudices and a noticeable hostility towards Arab peoples and their culture. Paradoxically, Orientalist constructions appearing in academic and popular literature have been fed by the self-representations of sectors strongly linked to the ethnic organisations of those very collectives. In other words, both from outside and from inside, the communities have contributed to “orientalising” the Argentine Jew with origins in the Middle East – the former by describing their ethnic attributes as one-dimensional and easily decipherable; the latter by intending to strengthen their identity as Orthodox, have intentionally rebuilt their history as the “singular” experience of those who managed to maintain their uniqueness and religious orthodoxy in different historical and national contexts. These practices have been especially recurrent among and about Syrian Jews. The resulting stereotypes have ended by depicting these collectives as internally undifferentiated, static and inward-looking, and as totally devoted to Orthodox religious norms and to ancient traditions. This double form of Orientalism, with its respective gatekeepers, sectarian interests and power struggles, has not only silenced obvious changes within those who remained affiliated to the community centres. It has also ignored the experiences of the new generations of descendants whose “heterodox trajectories” have remained at the margins of community or, most frequently, beyond the community frontiers.

**Heterodoxy/disaffiliation: beyond the communities’ frontiers**

In Argentina, the late 1950s and the 1960s can be seen as a period of crisis affecting long-standing traditions and conservative ideas predominant in the family, in education and in social life patterns. Increasing access to state university education
was concomitant with the implosion of new trends. The impact of new forms of thought such as psychoanalysis, existentialism and Marxism; the appearance of women’s liberation movements; the waning of gender taboos and women’s increasing integration into cultural and economic life; the widespread popularity of rock & roll and the hippies’ alternative discourses, along with the technological and communication revolution, brought about a rejection of the status quo and harsh criticism of existing social structures. The Argentine youth, especially in the urban centres of Buenos Aires, La Plata, Rosario and Córdoba, willing to adapt to and to promote change, questioned the traditional power hierarchies and class differences. Demanding a revision of political, economic, social and cultural life, their juvenile perception of Argentine society that crystallised in the early 1960s also echoed ideas that came from abroad. The Cuban Revolution, the decolonisation processes in the Third World, along with the socialist experiences in Eastern Europe and Asia had a great impact on the Argentine young cohorts who now view themselves as decisive and autonomous actors.

At the political level, the semi-democratic governments of Arturo Frondizi (1958–1962) and Arturo Illia (1963–1966) had been conditioned by the proscription of the deposed populist leader Perón, who was then in exile. The promises of these administrations to re-establish freedom and socio-economic development ended in disappointment for the educated middle classes and progressive intellectuals. Civic tensions mounted until the military coup of 1966 initiated a new wave of authoritarianism. The authoritarian rule (1966–1973) that the military intervention initiated soon reached novel forms of restrictions and censorship. These included intervening in the programming of public radio and TV stations; banning and closing down independent publications; purging higher education institutions, repressing dissident groups, persecuting professors, students, teaching authorities and intellectuals; and enforcing strict public morals from above. The political impasse prompted the educated elites and student movements to turn to new revolutionary ideas.

Thus, by late 1966, the Argentine political map was roughly polarised between those who demanded a social revolution and now supported the return of Domingo Perón, and those conservative circles that, fearing imminent destabilisation, sided with the armed forces nationalist agenda. Hope among the young increasingly veered towards the proscribed figure of Perón. Whereas youth radicalisation had a privileged place in the State University, the strengthening of a radical youth culture gave way to a new ethics and aesthetics of revolution and the emergence of a new social type: *el militant*. And with it came the veneration of the romantic image of the activist who struggled for his and her own beliefs and was willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of collective ideals. As has been documented in dozens of autobiographies and testimonies of that period, the young lived the historical moment as a “messianic/revolutionary moment” at the national and even at the continental level.

The politicisation, which expanded to different social sectors also reached Middle Eastern Jewish families, especially the young cohorts who either at the secondary school or at the university became involved in different proposals and trends aimed at building a more fair society “on behalf of the people”.

*Arab Jewish diasporas in Argentina* 49
itinerary of the second and third generations was diverse, ranging from a natural and everyday involvement with the new youth culture, through rebellious practices and demonstrations, all the way to serious commitment toward militancy and political activism.

Access to secular education, an overwhelming youth culture and new forms of political commitment interacted with new liberal religious trends in the Jewish communities. Such was the case of the Conservative movement, led by the American Rabbi Marshal Mayer, who established himself in Buenos Aires in the early 1960s. It was also the heyday of left-wing Zionist youth movements in Argentina that had a strong generational component. It is no surprise, therefore, that young Jews from different origins as well as those of Middle Eastern descent adopted attitudes and practices that differentiated them from their elders, whether the latter were immigrants or had been born on Argentine soil. These latter cohorts also departed from the religious revitalisation processes that were taking place in the traditional communitarian centres.

**Being part of Argentine society, being part of a new aesthetics?**

The urge for rebellion, commitment and renewal that characterised the Sixties and early Seventies prompted the young – among them, Argentinian Jews of Middle Eastern descent – to actively participate in advancing a freer and more egalitarian society. Some of these young social actors, Argentinian Jews of Middle Eastern descent included, responded to the crucial historical moment they believed they were experiencing by merging their stake in politics with equally significant aesthetic concerns. In this respect, digging into the trajectories and oeuvre of the playwright Ricardo Halac, a major spearhead of “reflexive realism” in Argentine theatre; the painter Diana Dowek, an early promoter of committed art; and the writer Susana Romano Sued, who takes up the painstaking task of reconciling post-dictatorial literature and memory allows us to discuss the various ways the work of these Arab Jews converse with national, ethnic and Jewish identities. The discussion that follows considers these issues in relation to the Argentinian theatrical, artistic and literary fields in which these creators and their oeuvre flourished.

**Ricardo Halac: theatre as reflexive realism**

Ricardo Halac was born in Buenos Aires to a middle class family from Damascus. He attended a top state high school, the Carlos Pellegrini, and studied economics at the University of Buenos Aires at his father’s request. At twenty-one he won a scholarship from the Goethe Foundation to study theatre in Berlin. His cosmopolitan education later included journeys to Austria, Yugoslavia, France and Britain, a year at the Macalester College in Minnesota and journalistic activities in New York. Back in Buenos Aires he worked at emblematic newspapers such as El Mundo and La Opinión. He collaborated with writers such as Carlos Ulanovsky, Horacio Verbitsky, Tomás Eloy Martínez and Osvaldo Soriano, became part of
an exclusive milieu under the direction of the (Jewish) poet Juan Gelman and elbowed his way into a new generation of playwrights such as Griselda Gambaro, Osvaldo Dragún, Oscar Viale, Roberto Cossa and Eduardo Pavlovsky, who changed Argentine theatre forever. His first play, *Soledad para Cuatro* (1961) at *La Máscara*, an independent theatre in the competitive theatrical circuit of Buenos Aires, was met with immediate success. Soon afterwards, he was invited to Canal 7, the national TV channel, where he wrote scripts for primetime mini-series (e.g. *Historias de Jóvenes*, *La Noche de los Grandes*, *Compromiso* and *Yo soy testigo*), which won him a central position within the capital’s cultural field.

It has been widely acknowledged that Ricardo Halac’s *Solitude for Four* initiated a paradigmatic shift in the Argentinian theatre. The plot begins with a random encounter between an idle pair of typical young middle class locals, willing to find an easy prey for a Saturday night outing, and two provincial girls. The encounter takes place at a lousy apartment the mother of one of the men rents. The play is just that: the failed meeting of these four people, their confrontations and lack of vitality, modulated by the successive entries of the mother, an actress in soap operas in decline and her lover. While the son is the object of his mother’s noisy complaints, all the protagonists participate in a sad *melánge* of absurd situations where they turn upside down Sartre’s existentialist slogan of freedom of choice, in vogue at the time.

In Halac’s play, the reduction of stage movement, the absence of a closed end and the reliance on a realistic stage set accompany Halac’s anti-heroes, to whom nothing ever happens. And that seems to be their real drama. Halac’s anti-heroes are referential characters. The protagonists’ flawed search for meaning and identity, their solipsism and lack of commitment present no one-to-one correlation with reality. Thus, Halac creates fiction following what Tzvetan Todorov calls the “credibility of common sense” as a mechanism to recreate the world outside. In *Solitude for Four* the protagonists know they are limited and unable to take positive action. Yet, they constantly ask themselves: “What’s wrong with me?” It is by digging into casual, face-to-face interactions that the author presents a mediocre ambiance. Most critics have analysed the play’s dreary and tedious atmosphere as an omen of the fears and censorship that characterised the socio-political climate of the late Fifties and early Sixties in Argentina. In other words, the period following Arturo Frondizi’s rise to power that was marked by rampant disbelief in the capacity of the Argentine middle classes to become a progressive ruling class. Halac’s innovative approach that merges social and aesthetic concerns with a deep understanding of the political conditions in Argentina has been defined by Argentine critics as “reflexive realism”.

Indeed, Halac presents a dramatic effect by handling a deliberate banality that allows the audience to be deceived. At the same time, the play itself unravels crude encounters and harsh social criticism that the spectator faces with no euphemisms or alibis. According to the critics, Halac’s play stands out due to its capacity to merge the realism of Arthur Miller’s plays, the Stanislavski method of stage direction and Bertold Brecht’s notion of “dramaturgical collective” with the teachings of Armando Discépolo. The latter was an Argentinian playwright...
who gave shape to an idiosyncratic “grotesque creole”. Indeed, Halac had been particularly sensitive to Discépolo’s unique genre that had addressed the everyday life of poor immigrants and outcasts in the city of Buenos Aires in the early twentieth century and portrayed their miseries as they tried to make ends meet. Discépolo’s _grotesco criollo_ that so deeply inspired Halac’s early plays rates as one of the first and most authentic expressions of the Argentine national theatre. But Halac’s success as a promising playwright did not take place in a vacuum. In the years to come, his prominence as an intelligent dramatist won him the suspicion of the intolerant extremist right-wing Peronist faction, the Argentine Anticomunist Alliance, known as the Triple A. This paramilitary group was active during Isabel Perón’s administration (1974–1976). Their harassment forced Halac into abrupt exile in Mexico, returning to Argentina one year later.

His next breakthrough was the vaudeville entitled _El destete_, written in 1976. With a teasing title hinting at “the act of weaning a baby from breastfeeding,” _El destete_ centres around the failure of parenthood and parent–child relations. The play tells the story of three dysfunctional middle class families whose parents fail to realise their own ideals and transfer them to their children. In this new play, Halac returns to the genre of the grotesque by playing with exaggeration, sexual taboos, Freudian meanings and coarse language, speaking with humour about “adult children” and “boyish men” trapped in castrating families. His appeal to metaphor and humour, as proposed by Luigi Pirandello in _L’umorismo_, highlights the absurdity of life and the disproportion between ideals and reality. For Halac, exaggeration and artificiality serve aesthetic and ideological purposes. They allow him to portray the feeling of failure of an entire generation which had high expectations with Perón’s return from exile and his rise to power in 1973. The very same generation that later witnessed with awe how their expectations degenerated into a civil war that culminated in the last military coup of 1976. Halac’s plays at the time express the grotesque by blurring the state terror taking place in Argentine society and providing instead the drama of dull and second-rate characters, of a youth with no true ideals or vitality, and of an older generation, that of the grown-ups whose youth was full of commandments they could not keep.

In the years to come, roughly from 1977 to 1982, when he had already achieved considerable prestige, Halac’s activities were strongly censored. Despite the fact that he was out of a job in the mass media and the official theatres, he remained in Argentina. In 1981 he took part in _Teatro Abierto_, which was born as a cultural protest against the military dictatorship – a theatrical activity for reinforcing community ties among the opposition. Given the economic, political and social crisis that the country was experiencing, _Teatro Abierto_ immediately became a collective voice coming from the art world in defence of Argentinian national culture, human rights and freedom of expression. Major playwrights, directors and actors spontaneously joined in the project and many of the texts that resulted from the 1981 _Teatro Abierto_ experience incorporated the teachings of Ricardo Halac. Halac’s major contribution to _Teatro Abierto_ was _Lejana Tierra Prometida_ (Promised Land). Symptomatically, the three protagonists of the play desperately demand a space and a time of their own. Being denied a viable present
and longing for an inevitably idealised past, they look for an unknown place, “a point on the border between Switzerland, France and Italy”. This “promised land”, which becomes an object of glorification, operates as an idyllic place which contrasts with the characters’ unstable “here and now”. The protagonists’ lack of hope reads as a metaphor for Argentina’s gloomy future at the time.

It is with the later decomposition of military power and legitimacy, the fiasco of the Falklands War (1982), the diminishing of censorship and the initiation of democratic transition that Halac is invited to collaborate with the Sociedad Hebraica Argentina, a highly prestigious cultural and social institution which comprised mostly the Ashkenazi communities. Halac’s collaboration with one of the key centres of Jewish cultural activity in the city of Buenos Aires resulted in Mil años, un día (1983), a play that deals with the paradigmatic year 1492.40 Thousand years . . . one day focuses on the impact of the Edict of Expulsion of 1492 on the Jews of Spain. The play, based on the history of the Jewish mass exodus, selects and recreates images that intensify the tragedy that the characters endure, as they are forced to face either conversion, expulsion or death.41 Metaphorical elements as the distorted uses of traditional religious objects such as the shofar, the tallit and the menorah, and the permanent packing and unpacking of the protagonists’ belongings create an atmosphere of loss and disorientation, uncertainty and displacement. These elements could easily echo a more immediate exile: the result of persecutions and state terror policies that haunted Argentinians at large, and the Jewish communities in particular. In the play, the state of despair leads the spiritual leader of the Jewish community, Isaac Levy, who is the private physician and lover of Queen Isabel of Spain, to self-deception and madness as he faces his own inability and that of the Jewish People to have control over their destiny. As the play’s heartbreaking dialogues reveal, it is this very unbearable despair that forces Jews such as Isaac Levy to fall into mysticism, the Qabbalah and supernatural interpretations of reality as their only way out of confronting human cruelty as much as God’s whims and mysteries. It is highly significant that Halac, who had by then made a name for himself in the Argentine theatre, delves into Jewish thought and history and into the works of Maimonides, Baruch Spinoza’s ethics, Gershom Scholem’s Jewish mysticism and Emmanuel Levinas’ Nine Talmudic Lectures. The self-doubts of the Spanish Jews vis-à-vis their God and their own tragic destiny in Halac’s play not only bring to mind the futility and impermanence so characteristic of Beckett’s Waiting for Godot.42 Above all, Halac’s mastery of the Jewish exile paradigm as representative of universal condition sheds light on the recent Argentine exile.

Although the play was presented only once in the Hebraica Theatre, Thousand years . . . one day was staged fifteen years later, in 1994, by the well-known Argentine actress and director Alejandra Boero. Presented at the major San Martin Municipal Theatre, with a room capacity of a thousand spectators, the play had a very significant success. Halac’s attention to Jewish topics and his identification with the larger Sephardic community in general and that of Argentina in particular was evident in September 1991 when he was part of the Sephardic entourage that welcomed the Spanish heir to the throne, the Prince of Asturias,
Felipe of Bourbon, in his first official visit to Buenos Aires. The event, which took place at the Spanish Embassy, had Ricardo Halac, then Director of the Cervantes Theatre, one of Buenos Aires’ most prestigious stages, as one of the public figures who represented the Argentinian Sephardic community. Halac’s involvement with the broader Jewish community life and topics is revealed once more in the play *Aquellos gauchos judíos* (1995), written in collaboration with the Argentine dramaturge of Italian descent Roberto Cossa. The text maintains a dialogue with Alberto Gerchunoff’s paradigmatic work, *Los gauchos judíos* (1910), a play that commemorated the centennial of Argentina’s independence by emphasising the fusion between Ashkenazi Jewishness and Argentine experience. However, *Aquellos gauchos judíos* presents interesting twists that radically differ from Gerchunoff’s idyllic paradigm and reveal both Halac’s and Cossa’s critical reading of the Jewish painstaking migration to the new land.43

A major cornerstone of Argentina’s contemporary theatre then and now, Ricardo Halac keeps on writing, directing, teaching and voicing his opinions on both Argentina’s and the Jewish communities’ affairs.44 In a parallel fashion, the case of the painter Diana Dowek tells us much about the diverse modes of participation of the new generations of Arab Jews in Argentine society.

**Diana Dowek: fine arts as battlefield**

Diana Dowek, as Ricardo Halac, was born in Buenos Aires to a Jewish middle class family from Damascus. Her father, who had arrived in Argentina in 1914, spoke Arabic at home but had a very good command of the Spanish language. Her mother, an outspoken and opinionated woman, questioned the traditional women’s role and insisted on the importance of female education as a form of liberation. Dowek’s family was therefore an open and yet traditionalist Jewish-oriented family, equally influenced by the local branch of the Zionist youth movement *Ha-shomer ha-tzair* in the Barracas neighbourhood as much as by the Damascene community at large. And, at the same time, her early socialisation reveals a clear commitment to the country’s reality.

As a high school student at the well-known national schools of fine arts *Manuel Belgrano* and *Prilidiano Pueyrredón*, Dowek participated in the students’ movement. The latter school demanded educational reforms in the arts courses, promoting active militancy in opposition to the state interventionism enforced by the art institutions in the mid- and late 1950s. During these years she got acquainted with young figures such as Horacio Safons, Rosa Faccaro and Margarita Paska, with whom, together with visual artist Julio Le Parc as spearhead, she later formed an active cohort among Buenos Aires’ artistic avant-gardes.45 On completing her studies in 1964, Dowek travelled to Italy for further training and found a major interest in the cinematic aesthetics proposed by Sergei Eisenstein, Luchino Visconti, Federico Fellini and Pier Paolo Pasolini. In Europe she was strongly affected by the Vietnam War, which by then was being reported by the Italian media. Back in Buenos Aires in 1965, she worked on these war images, which were recreated in the series *Carnicería in Vietnam* (Butchery in Vietnam).46 Soon she took part in the
street demonstrations against official art institutions launched by radical vanguard artists from Buenos Aires and Rosario, endorsing both workers’ and students’ demands. From an early stage in her career, Dowek took on a strong political commitment. She refused to be part of the “popish and extravagant” ambiance that surrounded the famous Torcuato Di Tella Art Institute and its legendary critic Romero Brest, who fostered the autonomy of artistic language. Rather, she kept a distance from what some sectors deemed as Buenos Aires’ snobbish vanguardism.47 Her siding with the Communist Youth Federation and from 1968 her adherence to the Revolutionary Communist Party (PCR) should be seen in this light.48

During the crucial year 1968 as Buenos Aires became an epicentre of the Paris protests during the May days, Dowek’s exhibition entitled The Armchair at the Lirolay Gallery – known for its role in presenting the newest trends in both national and international art – presented a dozen enigmatic figurative watercolours and drawings that subtly made reference to authoritarian power and attributes.49 A year later she modified her work on the armchair theme through the innovative use of mixed materials – real chair frames, plaster and acrylic paint. Her variations were a symbolic reference to the military dictatorship of General Onganía (1966–1970) as an arbitrary and corrupt political power that rested upon repression and violence to surveille civil society.

In her later series Pinturas de la insurrección (1972–1973) (Paintings of the Insurrection), Dowek made overt reference to the riots and demonstrations that constituted the Cordobazo, a paradigmatic rebellion that took place in the city of Córdoba in 1969 when thousands of students, workers and neighbours took to the streets, attesting a serious blow to General Onganía’s authoritarian regime.50 In the Paisajes (Landscapes) and Retrovisores (Windshields) series, created between 1975 and 1976, she blatantly alludes to the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance, or Triple A. The first series of paintings presents bucolic rural landscapes with blurred bodies in motion running away into the forest. The second series, which seemed to be inspired by typical persecution scenes taken from action films, presents a visual field framed by the windshield of a car. In these paintings the viewer gets a simultaneous glimpse of both the internal and the external spaces that are reflected in the images shown in the car’s rear-view mirror. Thus the spectator becomes an unintentional witness of the human presence inside a moving car as well as of the presence of a human body lying on the side of the road. The paintings poetically address the nightmare of persecution and death that haunted urban life in cities such as Buenos Aires, Córdoba and Rosario. For Dowek, the presentation of the paintings in series responded to her intention to recreate complex narratives. As expressed in various interviews, her turning to rural landscapes to portray scenes that actually refer to urban conflicts became for Dowek a privileged strategy that allowed the artist to portray “(civil) war” from an objectifying distance.51 And yet, her series paintings were sequences of those symbolic or metaphoric elements that represented Argentine reality at a particular time and place. Each series had a “here and now”.52

As an artist who has always rejected the ornamental function of art, the documentary character of her aesthetics goes beyond the literal and metaphorical by
presenting a hyper reality through the language of film and photographic seriality.\textsuperscript{53}

Indeed, Dowek’s production during the dictatorship coincided with the tensions between strong realism and figuration in Argentine arts – be it in sculpture, drawing or painting – and the first initiatives related to conceptual art. In that period artists were seeking techniques and ways of representing the feeling of void caused by state terrorism. In so doing they transmitted the absence and silence (and shouting) that overwhelmed the social body. As artists looked for more tacit and subtle ways of expression to describe what was happening, they not only sought to avoid censorship but also responded, as stated by Dowek, to the urgent need of Argentine artists to find symbols that could explain the historical moment they were living.\textsuperscript{54}

In the case of Diana Dowek, her use of metaphors and hyper real techniques to disguise the meaning of her works, and the polysemy of her paintings, left room for overlapping meanings. Those were the cases of the series Atrapados con salida (Trapped with an Escape) and Paisajes cotidianos (Ordinary Landscapes) signalled by a wire fence that either covers the whole canvas or the objects represented in it. By transforming the wire fence into her signature, Dowek provides her paintings with a strong sense of accusation and denouncement.\textsuperscript{55}

In 1979, at the highest moment of repression, Dowek’s participation in the Postfiguración group headed by Jorge Glusberg at the Centro de Arte y Comunicación (CAYC) further proposed the personalisation of everyday objects that denoted acts of violence. In La muñeca (1978) (The Doll), which dates back to that time, Dowek shows a little cloth doll brutally tied with wire fence on a velvet sofa, probably left behind by a little girl. Notwithstanding the repressive climate prevailing in the country, she dared to send a work of art that consisted of a “canvas covered by a broken wire fence” to a contest in Barcelona that awarded her the Joan Miró international prize. Thus, having her work displayed in public places such as museums, galleries and showrooms allowed them to acquire an accusing visibility despite rampant censorship. It was the double character or dialectics of visibility and invisibility that made her paintings equally insidious and enigmatic.

In the 1980s, with the arrival of democracy, Dowek made the series Las heridas del Proceso (The Wounds of the Military Regime) and focused on the harassment and torture of the female body during the dictatorship. The theme, which up to that date was taboo, was the two-fold suffering of women as victims of rapes when they were prisoners and as victims of maltreatment and degradation when they gave birth in prison. Dowek makes reference to this unbearable condition by portraying fragments of naked female bodies with wounds that were covered with pieces of cloth sutured to the skin.

Throughout her trajectory, Diana Dowek has openly recognised herself as an atheist Jew with “Arab roots”. Notwithstanding her atheism and the fact that she has married a non-Jew, she does not reject her Jewishness and assumes her Arabness as a most natural condition without further questioning.\textsuperscript{56} Her critical stance vis-à-vis Israel and Zionism dates, however, from an early stage. Today, she vividly recalls her forty-day visit to Israel in 1962. Her stay at a kibbutz where she and her Argentinian mates met with the wife of Yitzhaq Ben-Tzvi, the second and longest-serving President of Israel, left a long-standing impression on her. Then,
the Israeli authorities were mostly interested to discuss the impact of the Graciela Sirota case (1962) and consider the dangers of Nazi and anti-Semitic groups in Argentina, with the possibility that the Jewish community would create an anti-Nazi movement to fight against the phenomenon of anti-Semitism in the country. Dowek, who did not agree with the proposal, was harshly criticised by the kibbutz members, who saw her and her partners in the group as strongly influenced by the figure of Ernesto Che Guevara. In turn, Dowek remembers being disappointed by the Israeli counsellors who could not respond to her and the group’s criticism, being disgusted by the way in which the madrihim (“guides”) took pride in describing the Arabs’ flight from the country during the 1948 War and, last but not least, perceiving the contradictions in Israel: a clear sectarianism together with a capitalist way of life in the city and an apparent socialist life style in the kibbutz. Presently, her criticism of Israel’s policies runs parallel to the position taken by the internationally famous Argentine-born pianist Daniel Barenboim, known for his outspoken pro-peace campaigns in favour of unmediated Arab-Israeli dialogue.

Throughout her long trajectory, Diana Dowek has maintained a very close relationship with other members of the Syrian-Lebanese community, with whom she nurtures deep family ties, cultural bonds and artistic activities. As a renowned Argentine artist who does not deny her Jewish and Syrian origins, Dowek tends to privilege her strong political involvement with and commitment to Argentina’s reality. Meanwhile her position vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict has severely denounced the Israeli policies in the Occupied Territories after the Six Day War to the point of branding them as genocidal.

Susana Romano Sued: literature or life

Susana Romano Sued was born to a Syrian Jewish family from Córdoba. When she was eleven years old she attended a left-wing, Zionist youth movement (Tnuat Dror of Ha-kibbutz Ha-meuhad) for two years. In her later teens, however, her interests turned to Argentine issues and her more immediate surroundings. The fact that she read widely major Argentinian writers of the nineteenth century, such as Juan Bautista Alberdi and Esteban Echeverría, known as the 1837 generation and considered the founding fathers of the national literary tradition, hints at her degree of socialisation and acquaintance with Argentine culture and customs. In one of her interviews she proudly acknowledged her intellectual maturity in both provincial and national politics, stating that she was attracted by Marxist classics and by romantic-socialist, Trotskyist and anarchist ideas as creative worlds and projects for the transformation of Argentine society. Like many of her generation she had been very much infatuated with political militancy since the mid-1960s. Indeed, she admitted that “her wish of personal emancipation and the need to distance herself from her parents’ generation went hand in hand with the revolutionary energies that were in the air”.

Romano Sued started her militancy at the University of Córdoba, in a youth association, the Trotskyist Workers’ Revolutionary Party, related to the later notorious Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (People’s Revolutionary Army),
better known by the acronym ERP. She then moved to the Corriente de Izquierda Universitaria (Communist University Movement), another faction within the students’ movement that actively participated in the Cordobazo. In 1972, she dropped both her studies and militancy. A few months before the 1976 military coup, she went back to study amidst an extremely tense climate. By then, the extremist right-wing Triple A had started to decimate the university faculties in search of subversive elements. Among their targets was the Communist University Movement. In one of the raids conducted by paramilitary forces after the 1976 coup, her parents’ house was searched. Romano Sued, who at that time lived there with her one-year-old son, was kidnapped and taken to the La Perla clandestine detention centre in the city of Córdoba, where she stayed for two months. On regaining freedom, she sought exile in Germany, where she spent several years. Back in Argentina, Romano Sued devoted herself to an academic career. Having obtained a PhD in philosophy from the German universities of Heidelberg and Mannheim in 1986, she also graduated from the School of Arts and Psychology at the National University of Córdoba in 1988.

In the last decades, the impact of Romano Sued’s oeuvre on the Argentine literary field has been widely acknowledged and discussed among specialists and the general public both at home and abroad. The interest in her work is a response to the fact that Romano Sued raises crucial questions and difficult aspects of the Argentine recent past. In that respect, Romano Sued’s literary project should be seen in the context of the Argentine intellectual sectors and their debates vis-à-vis three major issues. First, an understanding of the country’s history of authoritarianism, state terror and democratic transition, well up to the end of Carlos Menem’s era (1989–1999). Second, the changing meanings of the Peronist phenomenon. Third, the narratives of memory and the role of the intellectual in the public sphere.

Two of her books, Umbrales y catástrofes. Literatura argentina de los 90 (2003) and Los 90: otras indagaciones (2005), edited with Pampa Arán, propose a critical reading of the escapist literary products of Argentina’s frivolous 1990s under the Menem administration that sought to erase the traces of violence, death and terror that have been dragging on since the last military dictatorship. Defying the “pizza with champagne” ambiance fostered by menemismo and embraced by society at large, Romano Sued’s books have raised a penetrating voice against collective participation in “not knowing” and “not remembering”.

Thus, Romano Sued’s harsh criticism against Carlos Menem’s era, with its destructive neoliberal trends and uncontrolled privatisation policies, has expressed, above all, her opposition to the trivialisation of cultural life as much as to the transformation of the figure of the intellectual working in the academy into a technocratic expert. Instead, she elaborates on the ethical mission of the intellectual and his/her commitment to autonomous lines of research and reflection: How does literature affect the social production of memory? What links wounds, scars and literature when writing occurs in a context marked by the proliferation of death, the failure to punish those responsible for these deaths and the apparent need for reconciliation and oblivion?
Throughout her extensive work that includes research and translation, literary criticism and experiments with different forms of poetry and storytelling, Romano Sued proposes possible answers to these questions that address Argentina’s recent past. Her book, *Procedimientos. Memoria de La Perla y La Ribera* (2007), which appeared towards the thirtieth anniversary of the last military coup in Argentina, narrates the experiences of women who disappeared in the province of Córdoba. More specifically, *Procedimientos* traces the experiences of a kidnapped woman imprisoned in the detention centres of Córdoba, El Campo de la Ribera and La Perla.

The case of Campo de la Ribera was exceptional, as it was located next to the provincial cemetery of San Vicente. In the cemetery, the legally dead have names and deserve material and symbolic mourning. Behind the walls – inside the camp – there is a reversal of that reality: the clandestine condition of the disappeared and their deaths have no names and no mourning. Thus, for the narrator, the story told in *Procedimientos* alternates between what happens outside the walls and the dreary plight of the disappeared inside the detention camp. But there is more to it than that. The narrator together with dozens of women who are kept in captivity are subject to countless abuses by military, paramilitary, civil and religious collaborators. As she tries by all means to survive, the narrator records events, situations, historical data, names, dates and places. Recording is a way to protect herself and her memory. As a Jewish detainee, she is a target of further vexations. Therefore, her descriptions maintain a dialogue with the experiences of terror that remind the reader of Nazi Germany – Auschwitz, Treblinka, Dachau. Scattered paragraphs in the narrative refer to Paul Celan’s poems on mutilated, non-identified bodies.

Romano Sued explores the possibilities of language as a medium capable of “narrating hell”. Dismantling chronologies and erasing articles and pronouns mimic the condition of “indeterminacy” of the disappeared. The torturers are named by anagrams. The interpolation of raw abrupt dialogues in the mouths of the executors and the use of technical language that distorts the illegal repression give the narrative in *Procedimientos* a sense of veracity. Undoubtedly, Romano Sued’s intensive readings of and research on authors as different as Primo Levi, Edmond Jabès, Giorgio Agamben, Jean Bollack, Elie Wiesel, Jean Améry and Paul Celan and their thought on the concentration camp experience have had a major impact on the particular way in which she focuses on the female body. For Romano Sued, the representation of the dismembered and suffering bodies, female bodies in particular, responds to a clear design: that of showing a space where time is broken and chronology has no meaning. In Romano Sued’s *Procedimiento*, the story moves through narrative that consists of unsettling descriptions and has no heroes. Instead, the heroism for survivors is just to remain alive and to bear witness. According to Romano Sued, the narrator who speaks throughout the novel not only tells us about her own survival but also reminds us of the survival of writing itself.

However, Romano Sued insists that the novel is not part of her testimonial and biographic legacy. In that respect, she clearly distinguishes between fiction and
biographical data. The first reason for such a distinction is that “being a victim is not an honor and much less can it be a form of symbolic profit.” The second reason is “to avoid morbid displays of violence and horror” which can easily result in a perverse enjoyment liable to be appropriated by the media.70 Hence, she differentiates between her oeuvre and the testimony she presented before the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons, known as CONADEP. Her testimony was one among hundreds provided by other Argentinians during the trials initiated by the democratic state in 1983–1984. Her novel, she insists, is a literary work that, although based on factual sources, documents, personal experiences, literature and testimonies is, above all, “a fiction about the human rights violations” that calls for a specific kind of reading. For Romano Sued, it is the relationship between ethics on the one hand, and the formal and aesthetic aspects of the novel, on the other hand, that matters.71

Along with her commitment to the country’s reality and her presence as an essayist, public intellectual and researcher, Romano Sued celebrates her Syrian Jewish identity. She regrets that her parents did not teach her Arabic, the language that she recalls they used as a secret language. Together with her aesthetic, political, and moral commitment to the Argentine reality, the Sephardic and Arab origins have had an impact on her family life, acquaintances and, above all, memories, since, she makes a point of emphasising, “the customs, the meals, the flavours, the language, the songs and the dances are part of her.”72 In that respect, Romano Sued’s study of the Argentine poet Juan Gelman and his translation of the poetry book *Dibaxu* is enlightening. *Dibaxu* consists of twenty-nine poems written in Ladino by a Sephardic Jew and Ladino speaker, Clarisse Nicoïdski, a Franco-Bosnian poet, seeking asylum in France during the Second World War.

Nicoïdski’s poems return to her parents’ mother tongue, Ladino, as a way to reestablish an enduring emotional and literary bond with her lost Sephardic community devastated by the Nazi occupation. Gelman translated these poems from Ladino into Spanish during his own exile in Paris between 1983 and 1985. Romano Sued’s interest in the Ladino poetry of Clarisse Nicoïdski – as a Sephardic refugee in France – and in its Spanish translation by Juan Gelman – as a left-wing Argentine Ashkenazi Jew who grew up in a Yiddish and Russian speaking environment – become a pre-text to reflect on language and community ties, poetic subjectivity and identity traits. As Romano Sued explains: studying the Spanish translation by Gelman has forced her to further delve into the most aching aspects of de-territorialisation and forced migration, dispersion and the inscriptions left by ancestral mother tongues (be they Yiddish, Ladino or Arabic). For her, ethics and the conservation of memory and traditions are one and the same.73

**Some remarks on the complexities of Arab Jews’ identities**

Despite the ever increasing debates and the innovative lines of interpretation in Argentinian and in the Latin American Jewish historiography on the 1960s and 1970s, the case of the Jewish cohorts from Middle Eastern origin have more or less remained at the margins of academic research. The profusion of studies published
in the last decades focusing on the Jewish experience under the last military regime in Argentina have emphasised the study of the anti-Semitic dimension of the repression, the policies adopted by the Jewish communitarian leadership of the time and the ones implemented by the State of Israel, as well as the political radicalisation of young Jews in the Argentine left and/or their insertion into left-wing Zionist movements. Furthermore, new lines of research have reviewed the categories of analysis based on the Jewish experience, especially representations of the “Jewish disappeared” and the so-called “special treatment” that was given to Jews during the last dictatorship. Notwithstanding these advances, even the most recent studies still assume that the new Jewish cohorts from Middle Eastern origin were not conditioned by the growing social discomfort, activism and political radicalisation that affected many other Argentine youths, especially those from the urban middle classes.

Contrary to these widely held positions, the present study argues that the paths followed by many Argentinians of Middle Eastern descent in the 1960s and 1970s not only provide an unusual lens to delve into the increasing social unrest, activism and political radicalisation that affected young Argentinians under authoritarian regimes. Their stories also reveal how they politically committed themselves to, and had an impact on, the world of art and culture while at the same time being related, in different ways and with different intensities, to their Middle Eastern and Arab Jewish roots. Even more significant, the cases of Ricardo Halac, Diana Dowek and Susana Romano Sued, as citizens deeply involved in the country’s political, cultural, artistic and academic life, render them as highly significant public figures. Ricardo Halac as one of the initiators of reflexive realism proved to be a major exponent of a renewed Argentine theatre since the 1960s. Diana Dowek, as a pioneer of the 1970s artistic vanguard, who has conceived of fine arts as a battlefield, even at the worst times of repression, is one of the most interesting, widely acknowledged and politically involved exponents of Argentine contemporary art. Susana Romano Sued, a survivor from La Perla and La Ribera illegal detention centres and nowadays a renowned poet, writer and scholar, is a highly visible and active referent at home and abroad to approach Argentina’s traumatic past and memories.

Each of these actors has nurtured different types of bonds with their communities of origin. While Halac has a place of his own as a notorious, albeit “conjunctural”, representative of the Jewish community in general and the Sephardic community in particular, Diana Dowek and Susana Romano Sued have certainly distanced themselves from Jewish institutions and networks. Conversely, they have maintained close contacts and cultural affinities with other co-ethnic members. Dowek, who is tuned to and highly critical of the ups and downs of Israeli politics vis-à-vis the Arab-Israeli conflict and actively supports peace talk initiatives, tends to openly express her position in the public sphere. In Dowek’s oeuvre and political alignment, which reflect a coherent social and artistic ideology, her ethnic origins do not particularly stand out. Romano Sued, who celebrates her Syrian Jewish identity, understands the Sephardic and Arab traits as key elements of her identity.
Sociologically speaking, the concept of identity is a complex analytical tool. As discussed in this study, identity gathers together a variety of components and legacies that include religious, ethnic, regional, national, political and cultural traits and traditions in general, as well as the individual’s own language and heritage, gender, class reference, family bonds and personal history in particular. As such, the concept of identity may dangerously impose a fictional linguistic and logical coherence on what is essentially multi-layered, polyphonic and subject to change and transformation. Undoubtedly, discussions about the hybrid nature of collective identities refute the entelechy of essentialist perceptions, which assume the internal coherence and atemporality of identities, whether they are perceived in ethnic, religious, national or regional terms. Conversely, the questioning of clear and single dimensional delimitations among the groups emphasises the ambivalence and contradictions inherent to all forms of collective identities. In this respect, the rich and complex history of the Jewish communities of Middle Eastern origin and their descendants in Argentina still is a pending enterprise.

Notes

3 http://colectivoepprosario.blogspot.co.il/2012/07/desaparecidos-el-23-de-julio-de-1975.html.
5 http://www.desaparecidos.org/arg/victimas/masri/.
6 Many interviewees shared Malka’s view of the revolution as an abrupt seizure of power following the formula of “protracted people’s war” proposed by Ho Chi Minh in Vietnam or the Latin American *foquismo* as posed by Fidel Castro and Ernesto Guevara. Interview of Silvina Schammah Gesser, Israel, 28 January 2009.
9 Studies on Arabs and Jews in Latin America reveal similar patterns of immigration and economic integration between Sephardic Jews from Muslim countries and Syrian-Lebanese immigrants. These included the Arabic language, customs, social norms, types of food and music.


13 There are no official data to quantify the number of Jews from the Arab world that settled in the country. According to the estimations of the Israeli statistician Sergio Della Pergola, in the mid-1980s the Syrian Jews were around 9 percent (20,000 people) of the Jewish population in Argentina. They were the largest group among the Sephardic communities, constituting 60 percent of the Sephardic population and nearly 95 percent of the descendants of immigrants from Arab lands. See also: Diana Epstein, “Aspectos generales de la inmigración judeo-marroquí, 1875–1930”, in *Temas de África y Asia*, Vol. 2 (Buenos Aires: Universidad de Buenos Aires, 1993), 151–170, and Marcos E. Azerrad, “Judios sefardíes. Pioneros de la inmigración en la República Argentina”, *Sefardica*, 19 (2010): 45–62.


15 Broadly speaking, the period 1890–1930 has been described as the incubation of the middle sectors in Argentinian historiography; 1930–1960, the period of apogee of the urban middle classes. Since the end of the 1960s, through the 1970s and 1980s, the middle classes have been associated with conformism, mediocrity and prudery. For an updated and critical discussion: Ezequiel Adamsky, *Historia de la clase media argentina. Apogeo y decadencia de una ilusión, 1919–2003* (Buenos Aires: Planeta, 2015).


17 Broadly speaking, the term “Oriental Jews” makes reference to the Jewish communities that originated as a consequence of the Babylonian exile in the year 586 BCE and which have lived in the Middle East and North Africa up to their mass migration in the 1950s. Oriental Jewish communities experienced many changes and grew in such diverse places as Aswan, Alexandria, Greece, Syria, Asia Minor, Cyprus and Crete. Since the Muslim conquest, Oriental Jews have established themselves in all the Muslim and Arab countries. With the exception of India and the Far East, Oriental Jewry, although older than Islam itself, reached maturity and developed its own particular character under Islamic environments.


20 The notion of Arab Jews here is a translation of the Spanish, árabes judío, as used in the Argentine context, both among members of the communities as well as in the academic literature. The term has been in use long before it became fashionable in the most recent postcolonial studies of Ella Shohat, Yehudah Shenhav and others. In that respect, the critical postcolonial dimension they propose still needs to be considered in the study of Arab Jewish communities in Latin America. The present study is an attempt to fill this lacuna and is much inspired by Christina Civantos’ book, *Between Argentines and Arabs: Argentine Orientalism. Arab Immigrants, and the Writing of Identity* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006).


22 For the sake of analysis, we differentiate between “heterodox” or “disaffiliated” and “Orthodox”. We define the former as those who question the legitimacy of the beliefs and practices of the Orthodox, and therefore search for and redesign alternative ways to conceive their own cultural traditions. We define the latter as those who claim the interpretative monopoly of the religious and ethnic heritage, as in the case of Syrian Jews, and who control the main communal centers. Certainly, the paths of the Heterodox here discussed do not cover the wide range of “disaffiliation” processes and political practices adopted by those who have abandoned the communitarian frameworks. See: Susana Brauner and Silvina Schammah Gesser, “Más allá de las ´fronteras´ comunitarias: los argentinos de origen sirio y judíos en tiempos de rebeldía y autoritarismo”, in *Más allá del Medio Oriente: Las diásporas judía y árabe en América Latina*, ed. Raanan Rein (Granada: Universidad de Granada, 2012), 197–226.


27 His numerous distinctions include the María Guerrero Award, the *Asociación de Críticos de Teatro* Award and the Martín Fierro, Argentina’s top distinction, which he was awarded on two occasions.


29 The play can be read as a mirror of the limitations, shortcomings, myths and taboos of the middle classes and of Argentine society that makes the most to deceive their constituents, especially the youth – a society which demands its members to be somebody, to compete and at the same time immobilises them with its blind egoism and individualism.

30 For an analysis of Halac’s plays in terms of “reflexive realism”, see Osvaldo Pelletieri’s theatre criticism.
31 The Stanislavskĳi method of stage direction that focuses on the characters’ introspection, a search for identity and the concept of scenic truth became Halac’s preferred tools for engaging in stage innovation.

32 Towards 1970, many of Halac’s generation of dramaturges went back to Armando Discépolo and the grotesque genre he cultivated, which gave emphasis to a realist introspection that mixed comedy and tragedy.


36 Thus excessive size of the baby, the trial of the young in the dock, the parents’ kind of police interrogation, and the ineptitude of the middle classes which do not allow the young to grow up. The elders’ authoritarianism make El destete always to be postponed. Moreover, children who are victims of their parents’ oppression will also oppress their offspring and therefore perpetuate tyranny. Hence Halac’s vaudeville turns to frivolity to bear witness to an era. El destete’s symbolic approach to realism—which brings it close to farce—makes the parents function like the military repressive forces: they impose their viewpoints by threats, interrogation and torture. And the son, like a sheep gone astray, cannot find protection in their midst.

37 Despite the grudge against Ricardo Halac as a public persona, Halac himself declared that he never experienced an extremely excessive pressure that could force him to leave the country.


41 Halac’s play makes reference to historically documented characters such as Abraham and Sartángelo, prominent Jews who apparently financed Columbus’ voyage; the Spanish epic of the Reconquest, the end of religious tolerance and economic well-being for Jews and Moors, the fall of the last Moorish stronghold in Granada and the capitulation of Boadvil, the last Islamic sultan in the Peninsula.


44 His involvement with Jewish Argentine community affairs includes the different public petitions Halac signed regarding delicate topics that affected the community’s relations with the last Kirchner administration.

45 Julio Le Pare, a pioneer of kinetic and optical art, had a unique position in the Argentine artistic scene, even though he had been living in France since 1958. See for instance his manifesto “No More Mystifications” (1961), published by the Torcuato Di Tella...
Institute (1964) that had a major impact on the artistic scene. Le Parc protested against the divorce between the public and the artistic act of creation. By drawing the spectator out of his inhibition, he wanted him/her to take action and provoke a revolution in art with the slogans: “it is forbidden not to participate, it is forbidden not to touch, it is forbidden not to break.” The manifesto in Inés Katzenstein, *Listen, Here, Now!: Argentine Art of the 1960s: Writings of the Avant-Garde* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2004), 56–58.


The year 1968 meant a crucial turning point in the capital’s artistic scene. Artists at the Di Tella organised a collective event on 23 May, in protest for the prohibition of the work “The Bathroom” by Roberto Plate that was part of the exhibition, *Experiencia 68*. The act represented a clear break with Di Tella, which, until then, had been the privileged platform of Buenos Aires’ avant-garde. From then onwards artists began to boycott institutions, the Di Tella included, as well as the system of prizes, awards and art galleries, and searched instead for transgressive artistic and political strategies. The collective experience of *Tucumán Arde* presents an extreme case of experimentation and radicalisation of artistic languages and their merge with politics. See: Ana Longoni and Mariano Mestman, *Del Di Tella a “Tucumán Arde. ‘Vanguardia artística y política en el 68 argentino* (Buenos Aires: Eudeba, 2010) and Ana Longoni, *Vanguardia y revolución, Arte e izquierda en la Argentina de los sesenta-setenta* (Buenos Aires: Ariel, 2014).

The PCR was born in January 1968 following the break with the Communist Party of Argentina. Otto Vargas, its general secretary since its founding to the present, opposed the dictatorship of General Onganía (1966–1970) and took an active part in the *Cordobazo*, led by the labor movement in Córdoba in May 1969. By then, the PCR, which supported the struggle of the Vietnamese people and the Cultural Revolution in China, claimed to represent the most lucid sectors of Argentina’s working class.


Dowek told in an interview that her decision to stay in the country during the military dictatorship followed the party’s directives. Dowek had a secret task, which was to collect certain information and send it abroad. Every week, sometimes every fifteen days, she deposited the requested data in different posts in Buenos Aires in order not to cast suspicion. Dowek assumes that she was never discovered precisely because she was a known artist who exhibited in official museums such as the National Museum of Art (MNBA) or the Buenos Aires Museum of Modern Art (MAMBA) – and in known galleries and salons. Interview of Susana Bráuner with Diana Dowek, Buenos Aires, 12 December 2012.

In one of her interviews Dowek states that the series format responds to her urge to present a totalising view, on the one hand, and the impossibility of reaching a sense of closure, on the other. Therefore, the series suggests the syphic task of enunciating all that has happened and the impossibility of comprehension, see: Vanina Agostini, Angélica Enz and María Cecilia Novello, “Retrovisores. Una mirada sobre el pasado reciente desde la obra de Diana Dowek”, *Seminario Internacional, Políticas de la Memoria* (Buenos Aires: Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti, 2010), 7–8. Available at http://conti.derhuman.jus.gov.ar/2010/10/mesa-26/agostini_mesa_26.pdf.

From a 2012 interview of Gabriela Alatsis and Alicia Dios to Diana Dowek, Buenos Aires, 19 March, quoted in Gabriela Alatsis, “Imágenes visibles e invisibles:

55 See the catalogue *Diana Dowek. La pintura*, 62–79.

56 Among her close acquaintances, there is a group of Arab Jewish figures related to the world of art and culture that includes Raquel Bigio, Laura Haber, Flora Sutton, Alicia Dowek, Susana Romano Sued, Luis Fallack, Viviana Hanono, Corine Sacca and the psychoanalyst José Abadi.


58 Interview and email exchanges of Susana Brauner with Diana Dowek, Buenos Aires, 12 December 2013.

59 See the website: *Politicamente correctos*, http://www.pcr.org.ar/nota/internacional/pol%C3%ADticamente-correctos.

60 Interview and email exchanges of Susana Brauner with Susana Sued Romano, Buenos Aires and Córdoba, 22–24 September 2012.

61 Romano Sued twice pointed out her participation in subsequent mass movements. This included the *Viborazo* in March 1971, known as the “second *Cordobazo*”, which she explained, was a massive uprising against the military governor of the province, who was a member of the ruling military dictatorship.

62 The police came in search of the party’s printer. Her sister, a militant at the PCR, was a member of the newspaper’s staff and ran a childcare center where other militants worked and where the printer operated.

63 She has been a professor of Aesthetics and Modern Literary Criticism in the National University of Córdoba since 1990, member of the Argentine Scientific and Technical Research Council (*CONICET*) since 1997, and Senior Researcher from 2004 onwards.


This chapter deals with a number of writings by Jews of Libyan descent published in Italy and Israel, between the second half of the twentieth and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Reflecting the duality of destination which has historically characterised the Jewish diaspora from Libya, I shall identify and discuss, from an anthropological point of view, two corpuses of writings, which I term the “Italian literary corpus” and the “Israeli literary corpus”. A subject remained relatively unexplored until now, this production includes novels and memoirs, as well as biographies and autobiographies. By comparing the two corpuses, the aim of the essay is to identify common traits and/or divergent patterns between the two groups of authors, thus highlighting the constructed nature of a group identity.

In particular, I intend to scrutinise the role played by the country of destination, for authors belonging to the first generation of migrants or the country of birth, for authors belonging to the second generation. More specifically, I shall explore the issues of the past and the questions of the present that influence these authors; the eventual impact of the so-called “Arab spring” in their writings; finally, how the “Mizrahi question” is addressed in both corpuses. The comparison will offer new insights into both what is peculiar and what is shared among authors of the same descent, or presumed so.

Writing “Libyan Jewries”

The reflections I present in this chapter are part of a wider research I have been conducting since 2011, when my interest in the Jewish community from Libya began. Since then, I have collected dozens of interviews with Jews of Libyan origin and descent, along with a number of digital and artistic artefacts (websites, exhibitions, museums, films, books, plays) related to or by Jews born in Libya or their descendants. While I call the former “the private narratives about Jews from Libya,” the latter represent in my analysis “the public narratives about Jews from Libya” characterised by the fact that they are intended for a public audience.

By comparing the private and public narratives about Jews from Libya found in Israel and in Italy, I questioned issues of transmission, public engagement and
representation which are at work in the process of a public mise en récit of what are considered to be the memory and the identity of this group. I will not recall here the immense literature that terms such as “memory” and “identity”, but also “representation”, have inspired in different disciplines. I shall only situate my own position by saying that I consider identity in a constructivist approach: as a process that redeploys itself in different steps; as an individual and collective phenomenon that would better be conveyed by the idea of identités circulatoires, an idea that refers to the notion of territoires circulatoires elaborated by the sociologist of migration Alain Tarrius. In this sense, it would be possible to imagine “identities” as territories of circulation, marked by the capacity of the individual “to bring together different stages and itineraries” of one’s own life. Along this line, I understand writing as one stage in the process of identity construction and representation as it is manifested in the public space of the post-migration time.

Both in Italy and Israel, we assist to considerable cultural activity promoting the heritage of Libyan Jewry. Institutional bodies, such as cultural associations and organisations, forge narratives about the history, the heritage, the identity of the Libyan Jewish community they affirm to represent. In the effort to create a coherent and cohesive account of a group past and identity, the risk is to establish a sort of normative canon of what fits or does not in the collective identity and narrative.

The writings by Jews of Libyan origin and descent are interesting because they are part of a cultural production where different Libyan Jewish identities intertwine and overlap, sometimes coinciding and sometimes diverging. These writings allow us to interrogate what being a Jew from Libya entails, and upon which elements such an identity is built. This is seen from the point of view of the places where the Jews of Libya migrated to (i.e. Italy or Israel), therefore in a comparative perspective. It is precisely the comparative perspective that will highlight the influence exerted by the country of destination on the ongoing process of group identity formation.

This is what I shall try to do by addressing some questions to the corpus of writings I have collected, and in particular by asking: why did the authors decide to write? In what does the heritage they describe consist? Do different waves of migration produce different types of writings and eventually in which sense? How do legacies of the past and issues of the present influence this literary production? Around which points do these corpuses meet and where do they diverge?

Before proceeding further, I shall sketch a short and general overview of both corpuses of writings. In comparison with other Jewish communities from North Africa and the Middle East, the literary production by authors of Libyan origin is rather limited in number both in Israel and in other countries of destination. During my research on Jews from Libya, I have collected fifteen literary works, written between 1970 and 2015. The authors are Jews born in Libya who left the country either during the great ‘aliyah to Israel (1949–1952) or later in 1967. There are also second-generation authors, i.e. born in Israel to families of Libyan descent. Until now, there are no authors of the second generation after the migration in Italy or in other countries of emigration.
The writings include: memoirs and autobiographies, biographies, novels, and one literary work which combines autobiography and novel. The works belonging to the Italian literary corpus are written in Italian, while those of the Israeli literary corpus are in Hebrew. Among the latter, only one book has been translated into French. Often these books are published by small publishing houses, but we also found those published by better-known ones, such as La Giuntina in Italy and Am Oved and Modan in Israel. Since the aim of the present essay is not to trace a history of Libyan-Jewish literature, I choose to explore in more details only some of the literary works listed above and I shall start in the next section with the Italian corpus.

The Italian literary corpus

The Italian corpus includes autobiographies and one book of fiction which, as previously noted, actually combines fiction and autobiography. It is possible to apply different perspectives to the analysis of these literary works. Some of these authors – for instance, Victor Magiar, Arthur Journo and David Gerbi – were presented by the historian of Italian literature Daniele Comberiati in a collective volume that discusses the relationship between literary languages and the oblivion of Italian colonial history, as well as issues of racism and cultural hybridity in contemporary Italy. From the perspective of the history of Italian literature, Comberiati defines the three authors as “Italo-Jewish authors from Tripoli”, thus creating a category of interpretation useful to his investigation of the relationship between writing and representation of the colonial past. This definition underlines “Italianness” and “Jewishness” as the main components of the identity of these authors, but hints also at the centrality of the city of origin, Tripoli, rather than the country, Libya. They are not defined as “Libyan-Jewish authors”, and indeed these writings are not mentioned in recent publications dealing with the history of Libyan literature.

The reason could be that these texts are written in Italian and not in Arabic. In any case, this leaves open the question of what makes a book fit into a national literary canon: the language, the content, the origin of the author or his/her cultural affiliation? Far from being only a literary debate, in the case of authors of Libyan origin (but the discourse could be certainly more largely applied) it unveils the still controversial association of identity components such as being Jewish, Libyan, Arab, Italian.

If we look at the Italian corpus, we notice that half of the works I collected, and precisely four books out of eight, were published between 2003 and 2005. This is also the time when Qaddhafi showed a sort of change in his policy towards Europe and the US. Is there a connection between these political circumstances, these issues arising from the present, and the literary works produced in this particular time? In September 2002, David Gerbi, a Jew born in Libya in 1955 and obliged to leave the country in 1967, obtained permission to go back to Tripoli for the first time in his life. Gerbi, a psychologist and psychotherapist by profession, was given permission to enter the country in order to visit his aunt, Rina...
Debach, and eventually to take her “home”, namely to Rome, where the rest of her family lived since 1967. Debach, aged eighty when the nephew managed to meet her, was the last Jew living in Tripoli in a home for elderly people. Indeed, in October 2003 she was accompanied to Rome with a special flight organised by Qaddhafi’s representatives; she passed away only forty days later and was eventually buried in Israel.

In September 2004, the Libyan leader Qaddhafi officially invited a delegation of Jews from the Libyan Jewish community of Rome to go to Libya. A group of six women and men accepted the invitation, including Shalom Tesciuba, who at the time was the leader of the Libyan community and vice-president of the Jewish Community of Rome. In November 2004, the same invitation was also addressed to a delegation of Italians. It should be remembered that these trips were the first opportunity for both Jews and Italians born in Libya to go back to their country of origin, almost forty years after their forced departure, which occurred between 1967 and 1970.

A first question I would ask is whether this change in Qaddhafi’s policy had an influence on the process of writing of the authors here considered. Actually, only one book, Costruttori di pace (Peace Builders) by David Gerbi, is directly connected to this, since the author devoted a good part of it to give an account of his trip to Libya, his first trip “back home” after thirty-five years in September 2002. And yet, in the first pages of the book, Gerbi points out other reasons that pushed him to write, at the age of forty-six, “the story of my life, of my family and of the Jewish community”. According to the author, the event of September 11 was a decisive one, together with the death of the next-to-last Jewish woman living in Tripoli, Esmeralda Meghnagi (in February 2002). Whereas the first event renewed his own traumatic experience of being eradicated from his country of origin in 1967, the latter made him realise that, while the elderly people of the community were dying, the young ones, like his younger brothers, had no memories of Jewish life in Libya, since they were too little when they left the country.

In the preface to Journo’s memoir Il ribelle (The Rebel), published in 2003, there is no mention of the political climate of those years. Journo was born in Tripoli in 1916. His father came from Tunis, while his mother was also born in Tripoli. The two final chapters seem to convey the intention by the author to ponder his long life experience, admitting his regret for the many mistakes he made. “Having reached almost the age of ninety,” says Journo, “I now ask myself whether my impulsiveness was good or bad: I think that most of the times it was bad.” In the preface to his book Frammenti di ricordi e di memoria (Fragments of Memories) (2005), Ameglio Fargion relates his decision to write a book of memories to the fact of having been solicited and advised to do so by other people, especially by his son. Fargion, born in Benghazi in 1913 to a Sephardic Jewish family, recognises that he has reached a “respectable age” and has “lived, [seen] or heard facts and events for almost a century” from all these fragments of memory the author wishes to collect those that might interest the readers.

The novel E venne la notte. Ebrei in un paese arabo (And the Night Came. Jews in an Arab Country) by Victor Magiar has been indicated by Comberiati
as the “most intriguing and complex work” among the literary production of “Italo-Jewish authors from Tripoli”. Born in Tripoli in 1957 to a Sephardic Jewish family (a heritage he still preserves very proudly), Magiar intertwines elements of his own biography with the story of the characters he creates, such as: Leon Cordoba, shaped by elements of the lives of his uncles and his own father; or Esther Toledano, largely inspired by his mother. During a conversation I had with the author in Rome, Magiar did speak of the “turn”, la svolta, of Qaddafi’s regime but did not mention it as a reason for writing his book. It could be said, then, that none of the quoted books deal overtly with the changing policy of Colonel Qaddafi, occurring in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Rather, time passing by; the ageing and death of the elderly members of the community; the will to testify to the richness of the heritage of one’s own family; a desire to contribute to a sort of “global spiritual reconciliation” much needed after September 11 are the elements put forward, more or less directly, by the authors as the reasons for writing.

From the “turn towards the West” to the revolution: the heritage of silence

The Jews from Libya living in Italy remained rather cautious regarding the supposed “turn” in Qaddafi’s policy. And indeed, the visit of the Jewish delegation in 2004 did not bring any result. A second trip to Libya by David Gerbi in 2007 ended up with his expulsion from the country, notwithstanding the fact that he had been officially invited by the Libyan staff of the psychiatric hospital of Benghazi.

The majority of the Jews from Libya living in Rome kept this attitude even after the beginning of the revolution in February 2011. The Jewish Community of Rome observed with great attention the situation of uncertainty in which the country had fallen but preferred to keep a low profile. On the other hand, the World Organization of Libyan Jews (WOLJ), an international organisation based in Israel, officially expressed its support to the National Transitional Council of Libya in June 2011.

In May 2011, David Gerbi decided to join the revolution in Benghazi, giving his contribution working as a psychotherapist. This first attempt to join the revolution was very brief; Gerbi left the country almost immediately, but he went back in August 2011 and this time he was officially backed by the WOLJ. However, Gerbi was soon obliged to leave the country (in October 2011), since his life was in great danger. Following this dramatic experience, Gerbi wrote a theatre play entitled I love Libya, first performed in Italy in October 2012, and subsequently wrote a book, published in 2013: Refugee Rifugiato. Io ebreo io libico io italiano (Refugee. Me, Jew Me, Libyan Me, Italian). The theatre in particular was for Gerbi the most effective way to convey his personal experience and to create an empathy with the audience.

Trips like those of Gerbi were often criticised in Italy and by other Jews from Libya. Critiques were addressed, for instance, also to Raphael Luzon, a Jew born in Benghazi in 1954 who was invited by Qaddafi to come back to Libya forty
years after his forced departure in 1967. This first trip “back home” to Benghazi, and others which followed until the last one in 2012, are part of a book of memories recently published by Luzon, *Tramonto libico. Storia di un ebreo arabo*. The book combines memories of his youth in Libya, fond accounts of his daily life spent between school, home and the shop of his father in Benghazi. But he also relates the trauma of the violence that erupted against the Jews at the time of the Six Day War in June 1967, and the subsequent forced departure from Libya of almost all the Jews; the poverty in which his well-to-do family in Benghazi found itself once arrived in Rome; the difficulties of integration within the Jewish community of Rome and the depression in which the parents, especially the fathers, had fallen after losing their roles and positions because of the migration. Luzon replied to those who criticised his trips to Libya by affirming the right to go back to his homeland. Moreover, he claimed his political rights in that country, being a Libyan citizen, as well as a man of Arab culture and of Jewish faith. In this sense, Luzon represents a unique case in the panorama of Jewish authors of Libyan descent in the fact that he claims this multiple identity, which includes Arabness and Libyanness.

We could now ask which are the past legacies and the present issues to be found in the writings of Jews from Libya living in Italy. In this corpus of writings, published between 2003 and 2015, the past legacies are mainly the personal memories of one’s own life in Libya and the story of the community. I shall mention as an example the heritage of the family, such as the distinguished Sephardic heritage which appears clearly in Magiar’s novel. A first trait of this heritage lies, according to Magiar, in a particular life-style his family and the other Sephardic families had: more tolerant, European(ised) and less religious in comparison to the rest of the Jewish community in Tripoli. A second element of the Sephardic heritage put forward by Magiar is the Ladino language, of which the author makes a remarkable use throughout the novel. But we found also, as part of the heritage, the deep connections with Italy and Italian culture, such as in the case of Fargion’s family.

From my point of view, in addition to these past legacies, we should address the forced silence imposed on the Jews from Libya out of fear of retaliation during Qaddhafi’s regime. The Jews from Libya who settled in Italy after 1967 felt they could have always been reached by Qaddhafi’s hand, and this put the majority of them in a position of great caution. Indeed, in many interviews I conducted, the experience of 1967 is very often referred to in traumatic terms: as an abrupt eradication from one’s one world, as a rupture not yet completely internalised and which still has influences on the present. As many of my interviewees in Italy maintain, things changed for them only with the assassination of Qaddhafi in October 2011. After the Colonel was executed and after more than forty years from their forced departure, Jews from Libya finally felt free to speak out, with no fear of retaliation against their relatives and family members.

But there is another issue that remains under silence in the Italian corpus: the Mizrahi question. With this expression I refer to the representation of the relationships between Jews of Ashkenazi origin and Jews of Mizrahi origin as still
marked, in contemporary Israeli society, by underrepresentation and marginalisation. The Mizrahi question does not find a place in works of Jews from Libya emigrated to Italy, neither as a cultural, social or literary issue. Journo is the only author to touch upon the experience of being discriminated against in Israel as a Sephardic (he does not use the term Mizrahi) during the time he spent fighting in the 1948 War. Journo speaks of explicit racism by the Ashkenazi military officials against “those coming from Arab countries”, who were treated as “people of an inferior level, and treated worse than the Arabs”. Eventually, this experience of discrimination led Journo to leave Israel very soon and to go back to his town, Tripoli. In an interview I conducted with Magiar, he did mention briefly “the polemics in Israel about the racism against the Mizrahim”, but he moved rapidly to comment on the difference between the term Mizrahi and Sephardic, in a vein of irony: “we are Sephardic, a noble term, because we are the children of Salonika, and the children of Istanbul!” As Magiar puts it, the “Mizrahi question” is entirely an Israeli affair.

Regarding the issues contemporary to the time of the writing of the book, these are mainly concerned with the fact that, with the passage of time, firsthand memories of Jewish life in Libya are fading away and it is a duty to preserve them for the next generations. There are also dynamics which are very deeply embedded in the private sphere of the family: the wish to tell something to one’s own children, such as in Journo’s memoir; or the will to preserve the presence, the image, the voice of one’s own parents after they passed away. The political circumstances seem to have a limited influence on these authors, at least until the feeling of being under threat is the prevalent one. In the next section, I shall question the Israeli literary corpus, asking which are the past legacies and the present issues found in the writings of Israeli authors of Libyan descent. Moreover, I shall consider how the Mizrahi question is addressed in the writings of Jews from Libya, first and second generation, living in Israel.

The Israeli literary corpus

As previously underlined, the aim of this essay is to explore the heritage of the past and the questions of the present that influence the writings of Jews of Libyan origin in the post-migration time and space. Literary writings are here considered as an instrument of transmission and heritagisation, but they could also be analysed in more literary terms. We have seen how the writings of Jews from Libya published in Italy could fit different categories, for instance they could be considered as writings belonging to postcolonial Italian literature, depending on which elements of identity are underlined. Concerning the writings belonging to what I termed the Israeli literary corpus, the same discourse applies. However, here I will not address issues more strictly related to the place that these writings occupy in the construction and evolution of the Israeli literary canon and its understanding. All that has the purpose of contrasting authors from the “same” community of origin but living in two different countries of destination and belonging to different generations of migration.
A different look towards the past: between reconciliation and critique

If we consider the same period of time considered for the Italian corpus, roughly the first decade of the twenty-first century, we can list six works published in Israel by authors of Libyan origin or descent. In 2009, Hana Tweg published Laura, a novel set in a rural village of Tripolitania, at the eve of the Second World War. Tripolitania is also the region where the mother of Tweg comes from, while the father was originally from Egypt. Laura tells the story of a young Jewish girl born to a very poor family. The father is a peddler travelling throughout the desert to reach the villages of the Bedouins, to whom he sells his goods. During one of these trips, he is assassinated and the mother of Laura, left alone, must provide for the whole family: the children and her blind father. She tries to continue her husband’s business, travelling alone through the desert. Besides being extremely dangerous for a woman, the job does not provide enough money, therefore she starts doing the laundry for the Italian soldiers who live in a military camp not far from the village. The novel tells the love story between Laura and Lorenzo, an Italian soldier, who comes regularly to Laura’s house for the laundry. Eventually, he disappears leaving Laura pregnant with a baby. The opening scene, in fact, is the description of Laura’s mother trying to induce abortion in her daughter.

The novel contains plenty of elements of the religious and cultural tradition of Libyan Jewry. The daily life in the village, the relationships with the neighbours, the house and its objects, the uniqueness of the rural landscape: everything is vividly described. And indeed, as the author explained to me in an interview, her aim was to pay homage to the heritage of her family, to reconnect to it, and in a sense also to reconcile with it. Speaking of her family experience, Tweg underlines how she and her siblings, as new Israelis, did not want to listen to stories and traditions from the family past: they were ashamed of it. Laura was intended as a novel in which Tweg described the beauty she did not see: this indeed could be interpreted both as the real beauty of rural Libya that Tweg could not see (she was born in Israel and could never visit her mother’s country of origin) as well as the beauty of the family heritage that Tweg and her siblings did not want to see as “new Israelis”.

A different approach to the experiences of the past is found in the book by Haim Fadlon. The autobiography of Haim Fadlon, Ha-qol shel Ciccio (The Voice of Ciccio) was published in 2009. Born in Tripoli in 1921, Fadlon was one of the organisers of the ‘Aliyah Bet, the illegal immigration to Israel, working for it in Libya as well as in Italy between 1948 and 1949. After migrating to Israel in 1950, he worked in the office for the absorption of new immigrants and was appointed director of several ma’abarat, the immigrant transit camps made up of tents, shacks and other kinds of temporary accommodations. Working in the ma’abarat, he experienced the discrimination to which were exposed the immigrants belonging to what he calls the ‘edot ha-mizrah, the Eastern communities. Several pages of the book are devoted to this issue. Even if Fadlon adopts mainly the term ‘edot ha-mizrah rather than Mizrahim, the experience of discrimination
he describes is part of the same experience narrated by Sucary. As Fadlon admits, it was in Israel that he discovered, for the first time in his life, expressions such as Sfaradim and Ashkenazim, of which he could not make sense: “I did not understand what was the difference between one Jew and another.” Deeply concerned with issues of discrimination, Fadlon presents his personal life story as an example of the alternative stance that was then possible. In fact, he got married to a Jewish woman from Belgium, who worked as a nurse in a ma‘abarah. Fadlon considers their happy mixed marriage as a clear example of how integration was possible and should have been pursued since the foundation of the state. This is part of the heritage he has passed on to his children, and indeed, Fadlon’s book of memories was strongly wanted and supported by the family, as one of his relatives confirmed to me in an interview.

In both books, the Mizrahi question is strongly connected with that of heritage. In Tweg’s case, it is a matter of reconnecting with the past of her family and to bestow it with the legitimisation of which it was deprived under the dominant ideology of the negation of the diasporic past. In this case, literature represents the instrument to operate this reconciliation. To Fadlon, it is a question of transmitting to his children the mistakes of the past as well as the example of integration that his own family represents: both, Fadlon seems to say, are part of the heritage he wants to pass on to them. A similar, deep connection with the past of his family and of himself is found also in another author I shall consider in the next paragraph, Yossi Sucary, whose approach to the Mizrahi question is actually much more politically influenced.

While Qaddhafi was showing a kind of turn towards the West, in 2002 Israel was fully engulfed in the Second Intifada. In the same year, Yossi Sucary published in Israel his third book: Emilia u-melah ha-‘aretz. Vidui (Emilia and the Salt of the Earth. A Confession). In the context of the Second Intifada, Sucary publishes a book whose central character is his grandmother, Emilia, born in Benghazi in the 1920s. Emilia is a Mizrahi woman who, since her immigration to Israel from Libya, has never accepted either her new homeland or its Ashkenazi leadership. The following passage, taken from the first page of the novel, shows how Emilia is introduced in the narration:

It was Independence Day. The eve of the feast, while celebrations were kicking off, the three of us, my mother, Emilia and myself, were watching tv in Emilia’s bare flat in Pardes Katz. Listening to the national anthem, Emilia abruptly sat down on a chair and, with an expression of contempt, she said full of energy: “To Benghazi, I must go to Benghazi. We should be buried where we have lived and not where we die.”

Sucary was born in 1959 in Pardes Katz, a depressed suburb of Tel Aviv, where, according to the author, young people had only two choices: to join either a criminal organisation or a yeshivah. While his father was originally from Syria, Sucary’s mother was born in Benghazi. When Sucary was nine years old, the family moved to a neighbourhood in the north of Tel Aviv, thus improving its social
position. But then, Yossi found himself being the only Mizrahi pupil of the school, experiencing for the first time a feeling of “being a stranger”, a feeling that will accompany him until university, and, I would add, even later on. In fact, when he was accepted to a prestigious Israeli institution to pursue a PhD in philosophy, he was the only Mizrahi student. Sucary described the feeling of uneasiness he felt by using the following comparison: “It was as if you were the only black in a community of white people, or like a woman in a college only with male students.”49 Eventually, he decided to leave the institute as a form of protest against the ruling system.

In *Emilia*, both nephew and grandmother are, in a way, strangers; they both share a dichotomy between the will to belong to one’s own place, be it Benghazi or Israel, and the fact of “being kept away, at the margins or rejected”, again from Benghazi or from Israeli society. In both cases, according to Sucary’s narrative and personal position, the responsibility is to be attributed to the old Ashkenazi elite: *they* prevented Mizrahim from finding their own place in Israel. The heritage Sucary receives from his grandmother and that he sets at the heart of the novel consists of the attitude of resistance she showed against a discriminatory condition. The oppression came from a political elite, the old Ashkenazi elite, who wanted to submit her to a model of assimilation she could not accept. In his latest novel, *Benghazi – Bergen-Belsen*, this confrontation is further represented, but this time in a completely different setting.

The Mizrahi question and the Shoah

The latest book from Sucary, *Benghazi – Bergen-Belsen*, was published in 2013, the same period when Gerbi published in Italy his book *Refugee Rifugiato*. The novel represents the story of the Haggiag family, a Jewish family from Benghazi, which during the Second World War was deported from Cyrenaica to Italy, and from there to Bergen-Belsen.50 The protagonist of the book is Silvana Haggiag, the eldest daughter of Mr Haggiag, who hardly complies with the accepted social norms of the Jewish community and of the time. But it is precisely thanks to her strong and volitional character that Silvana manages to take her family and the whole group of Jews deported from Libya through the journey that will lead them to a detention camp in Italy and then to Bergen-Belsen.

As for Sucary’s previous novel *Emilia*, the book was received with mixed reactions by the Israeli public, ranging from enthusiastic comments to harsh critiques. Indeed, the author was awarded in 2014 the Brenner Prize for Literature and the book was accepted into the Israeli Ministry of Education curriculum. Beside advocating his book as the first novel written in Hebrew dealing with the issue of the Shoah in North Africa,31 Sucary pointed out other important aspects of his work: the will to depict Benghazi not according to a folkloristic and Orientalist view; the will to describe Silvana as the opposite of the current stereotypes attributed to the Mizrahi woman, very often depicted in Ashkenazi and also Mizrahi fiction as a warm and naïve figure; finally, the will to reveal the complexity of the relations that the Jews from Libya experienced in Bergen-Belsen with the Ashkenazi Jews.
from Holland, acknowledging both the good ones (see the character of Rivka Reis in the book), as well as the bad ones. These aspects remind us of some themes already outlined in *Emilia*, notably the Mizrahi versus Ashkenazi question and the reverse of the Orientalist stereotype of Mizrahi women. Moreover, it should be noted that *Emilia* already touched upon the question of the Shoah. In terms of the space assigned to it in the novel, the representation of the Shoah in *Emilia* occupies only a small part; while in *Benghazi – Bergen-Belsen*, it represents the central theme of the narration. And yet, despite this proportional difference, I would argue the perspective on the Holocaust adopted by Sucary in both books is very similar: a representation of the Shoah which is very much connected to present issues of social inequality and discrimination in Israeli society, namely those suffered by Mizrahi Jews at the hands of the Ashkenazi elite.

The issue of marginality suffered by Mizrahi Jews within Israeli society is indirectly referred to in the novel *Benghazi – Bergen-Belsen*. Sucary based his writing upon a research work which implied interviewing a number of Jews from Libya who had experienced the deportation. According to the testimonies collected, Sucary affirms that the North African Jews were already disregarded by European Jews during the dramatic experience of internment. This sort of transposition of the Mizrahi-Ashkenazi contraposition in the context of the Shoah represents undoubtedly the most controversial aspect of the book. For the purpose of the present discussion, I will only notice that on the one hand the “present issues” in Sucary’s writing are very much connected to contemporary Israeli society, rather than the revolutionary events taking place in North Africa and the Middle East. A further direction of inquiry would be to compare Sucary’s works with how the theme of the Shoah in North Africa and the Middle East is re-appropriated in contemporary discourses by institutions dealing with the issue of the “expulsion” of Jews from Arab countries (for instance, the World Organization of Jews from Arab Countries [WOJAC]). On the other hand, the legacies of the past we can identify in his writings are both those of the specific Jewish experience in Libya, as well as those of the traumatic experience of (non-)integration by Jews from North Africa and the Middle East in the State of Israel, in the aftermath of its foundation.

**Final remarks**

The aim of this paper was to explore the past legacies and present issues that influenced the writings of Jews of Libyan origin or descent in the post-migration space and time. Reflecting the duality of destination which has historically characterised the Jewish diaspora from Libya, I selected and compared a number of writings published in Italy and Israel. By comparing the two corpuses, the Italian one and the Israeli one, I tried to identify common traits and/or divergent patterns between them.

The writings do not directly address issues related to the so-called “Arab spring”, which since February 2011 interested also Libya. This event represents
only marginally a “present issue” for the authors. This was also true in the early 2000s, when Qaddafi inaugurated his “turn to the West”. At that time, the Jews from Libya living in Italy were still trapped in a forced silence, a legacy which I ascribe to their specific migratory experience.

Whether assumed or rejected, the term Mizrahi emerged from the analysis of the texts as a peculiar Israeli category, both in social and literary terms. There is no appropriation of the term among the authors of Libyan descent writing in Italy. Finally, the question of the Libyan Jewish heritage is addressed in both corpuses in similar ways, such as the will to pass it on to next generations, or to preserve it as a foundational element of one’s own family. In addition to that, in the case of the Israeli corpus we find also a peculiar element, represented by the need of reconciliation with this heritage: a reconciliation needed because of the long lasting policy of negation of all cultures, other than the one of the “new Israeli”. The writings we analysed are representative of a larger literary production where different Libyan Jewish identities intertwine and overlap, sometimes coinciding and sometimes diverging. Indeed, the comparison between the writings published in Italy and Israel proves to be an interesting and viable perspective through which to reaffirm the constructed nature of group identity, as well as of heritage. Writing about Libyan Jewry is a process that rests on the past but is at the same time strongly connected to the present.

Notes

1 I wish to thank all the persons I interviewed during my research for the purposes of this essay, in particular Hana Tweg and Yossi Sucary.


4 During my PhD research, I collected the life stories, récits de vie, of about 65 Jews, women and men, born in Libya and emigrated either to Israel or to Italy in the second half of the twentieth century.


8 One should also bear in mind that the Jews from Libya represented and still represent a relatively small community in comparison to other Mizrahi communities (‘edot) who emigrated to Israel in the aftermath of the foundation of the State. For a more general approach, see: Ewa Tartakowsky, *Conditions et fonctions sociales de la littérature d’exil. Production littéraire des auteurs d’origine judéo-maghérienne en France* (PhD diss., Université Lyon 2, 2014).

9 This list is certainly not exhaustive. In addition to these, I was informed during interviews with Jews from Libya of four more works which are either manuscripts not yet published or works not yet completed. For a more complete list of general literature about or by Jews of Libyan descent, see Robert Attal, *Yahadut Tzfon Afriqah. Bibliographiah. Les Juifs d’Afrique du Nord. Bibliographie. Supplément à l’édition du 1993* (Jerusalem: Yad Yitzhak Ben-Tzvi, 2010).


15 Two earlier writings, by Nunes Vais and Arbib, are personal memoirs and especially Nunes Vais’s *Reminiscenze tripoline* represents a fond account of life in Libya.
16 In August 2002, for instance, the Italian newspaper Corriere della Sera published an article “Il ‘nuovo’ Gheddafi guarda a Occidente” [“The ‘new’ Qaddhafi is looking at the West”]. The article underlined the supposed change of attitude of the colonel towards the West.
17 In 2002, Giovanna Ortu president of the association of Italian repatriates from Libya was given permission to visit the country.
19 In my research, I interviewed three people who were part of this delegation.
20 Gerbi, Costruttori di pace. Storia di un ebreo profugo dalla Libia, 27.
21 Journo, Il ribelle, 175.
22 Fargion, Frammenti di ricordi e di memoria, 5.
23 Comberiati, “‘Province minori’”, 101.
32 The mass emigration of the 1940s to Israel instead is often referred to by interviewees in terms of a departure towards a new opportunity that opened up to Jews from Libya in Israel: the trauma being often experienced at the moment of arrival, rather than at the moment of departure. This is said without in any case forgetting the trauma of the riots which occurred in 1945 and 1948 against the Jews in different cities of Libya.
33 Journo, Il ribelle, 87–94.
34 Journo, Il ribelle, 89.
35 Journo, Il ribelle, 89. This racist attitude is exemplified in several events that occurred to Journo and his Sephardic comrades.
37 I use the term heritagisation in order to underline the fact that heritage is the result of a socially constructed process. See also: Ahmed Skounti, “The Authentic Illusion. Humanity’s Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Moroccan Experience”, in Intangible Heritage, eds. Laurajane Amith and Natsuko Akagawa (London: Routledge, 2009), 74–92.
38 To further explore this debate one should consider the positions of different scholars, such as for instance Gershon Shaked, Ammiel Alcalay, Hannan Hever, Reuven Snir, Lital Levy and Yochai Oppenheimer, just to quote some references.
39 Sucary, Émilia; Salhoov, Ma yesh lah; Fadlon, Ha-gol; Tweg, Laura; Abramowitz, Mi-Yosef; Sucary, Benghazi – Bergen-Belsen.
40 The house and the sewing machine Singer, for instance, speak and represent real characters in the novel.
41 Interview of the author with Hanna Tweg, Tel Aviv, 5 July 2012.
Writings of Jews from Libya

42 Telephone interview of the author with Hanna Tweg, 9 June 2013.
43 Fadlon, *Ha-qol*, 111–132. Fadlon analyses different examples of discrimination, from the very first years after the foundation of the State of Israel, throughout the 1950s and 1960s, to finally comment on issues of absorption of new immigrants in Israel at the time he is writing his *mémoires* (Fadlon, *Ha-qol*, 129–130).
44 Fadlon underlines especially the fact that immigrants coming from Europe were deliberately given better chances of accommodation by the absorption office, whose staff was mainly of European origin (Fadlon, *Ha-qol*, 125). This meant to be closer to the geographical and socio-economic centre of the country, where job and education opportunities were easier to find. On the contrary, the majority of the immigrants belonging to the edot ha-mizrah, maintains Fadlon, were destined to development towns, and doomed to poverty and social exclusion.
45 Fadlon, *Ha-qol*, 133. Other Jews from Libya I interviewed told me about the same experience.
47 Translated into French by Ziva Avran and published in 2006 by Actes Sud with the title *Emilia et le sel de la terre. Une confession*. The book is actually the story of the relationship between the author and his grandmother, who had an enormous influence in his nephew’s way of thinking and approaching life.
49 Skype interview of the author with Yossi Sucary, 29 May 2013.
50 For a more detailed account on the different destinies and destinations of Jews in Libya during the Second World War, see: Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 28–36. Jews holding foreign passports (such as French or British) were sent to detention, transit or concentration camps in Tunisia, Italy, Austria and Germany. According to a report by a PAI (Polizia dell’Africa Italiana) official, “The total number of those transferred to Tunisia were 2,542 subjects and protected French of which 681 Muslims and 1,861 Jews” (Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 31). About 1,300 Jews holding British passport were sent to camps in Italy, and part of them were subsequently transferred to Bergen-Belsen and Innsbruck-Reichenau. Labour and detention camps were also set up in Libya (http://www.campifascisti.it/). According to Roumani, “the worst experience for Libyan Jews in the war was internment of Cyrenaic Jews in Giado, a concentration camp located 235 kilometres from Tripoli. (. . .) In June 1942, execution of Mussolini’s orders was completed and all Cyrenaic Jews were transferred to Giado. There were 2,584 Jews interned in the camp, 2,537 of whom were Libyan Jews and the remaining 47 Italian Jews” (Roumani, *The Jews of Libya*, 34). The Jews of Tripoli suffered from the sfollamento, and found refuge in villages in rural areas.
51 Interview of the author with Yossi Sucary, 29 May 2013.
52 This was also a theme in the previous novel *Emilia*. According to Sucary, Mizrahi women are often depicted in the cultural Israeli space as sort of warm bodies, able to hug and cook, but unable to speak correct Hebrew or to emancipate themselves from a passive condition of submission: Interview of Yossi Sucary, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlouTeYcA5l (accessed 31 October 2015). See: Piera Rossetto, “Note ai margini di una migrazione: donne ebrese dalla Libia tra Israele e Italia”, in *Il genere nella ricerca storica. Atti del VI Congresso della Società Italiana delle Storiche*, eds. Saveria Chermotti and Maria Cristina La Rocca (Padua: Il Poligrafo, 2015), 190–200. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zsRvv7snQuc, published 27 February 2014. Interview of the author with Yossi Sucary, Tel Aviv, 12 June 2014.
54 Indeed, on 30 November 2014, Israel marked the first-ever national day of remembrance of the Jewish exodus from Muslim lands. See the article by Ofer Aderet, “Israel Marks First-Ever National Day Remembering Jewish Exodus from Muslim Lands”, *Ha-‘Aretz*, 30 November 2014. I thank Dario Miccoli for pointing it out to me.
This chapter intends to analyse those locations and objects of identity that allow for a revisiting of the homeland by the Jews who have left Morocco. To do so, we will utilise the category of “lifewriting”: a term which covers many genres, including autobiography, biography, memoirs, diaries, letters, testimonies, personal essays and, more recently, digital forms such as blogs and emails. In lifewriting, life as it has been lived replaces imaginary intrigue, whereas direct witness substitutes invention.1 Books containing memories add to the building of a collective history by completing missing details, but also and above all lend a personal qualitative touch to the anonymity of the public archive. As Helen Epstein has written, this is what seals the difference between a statistical tally of the Shoah and a witnessed account such as *If This Is a Man* by Primo Levi.2

Our aim here is to focus on the autobiographical narratives written by Moroccan Jewish writers, considering them as true *entrepreneurs de mémoire*, who have figured little in their respective national narratives and whose contribution to the building of a counter-narrative has formed an important aspect of written production over recent decades.

The increased production of lifewriting texts of the Moroccan Jewish diaspora thrusts the return of the homeland into the limelight. The contribution made by the autobiographical narratives of the Moroccan Jewish diaspora, especially by those people who belong to the so-called 1.5 generation – the generation that traumatically left the country of origin during childhood, as described by Susan Rubin Suleiman3 – is very meaningful. It widens our understanding of the history of those Jews who left Morocco as infants or children. These Jews belong to a period of great change and fracture, such as the 1950s and 1960s of the last century, and they are the Jews, to quote Ami Bouganim, who “were raised within the black ink of the rabbinical school and the purple of the Alliance”.4 Here, we are attempting to add to the puzzle those pieces of individual memory that contribute to a collective memory and which can be handed down to the various strata of future generations.

David Elmoznino, one of the authors belonging to this generation, has mentioned the possibility of having a Moroccan Jewish community exist virtually,5 and to be maintained in people’s collective memory:
Today the Moroccan Jewish community is scattered throughout the world and we might be tempted to say that it continues to exist virtually in a memory cultivated and maintained, in the memory of men and women who, in their concern to safeguard this immense wealth and unique and special heritage, try to keep alive this aggregation of life, destinies, habits and customs, traditions and life-styles, in the most diverse of forms and ready to be handed on from one generation to the next.6

We will deal only with those who have written narratives belonging to the field of lifewriting and who knew about Morocco because they left it as children or youngsters, independently of the country chosen for emigration, be it Israel, France, Canada or the US, and independently of the language the narratives are written in (Hebrew, French or English). In some cases these writers have ended up living in a number of different countries, including Morocco. We think that a cross-language and cross-cultural comparison may revisit previous analyses which are based only on national relevance, opening a broader space that permits us to grasp more fully diasporic and transnational discourses.7

All the authors we appraise have returned once or more to Morocco to visit the places of their childhood, in a pilgrimage to family graves or tombs of saints, or for tourism. We have drawn up a corpus of sixteen writers; the list is not exhaustive but is certainly representative of the type of writing under examination. Five of the writers have emigrated to France, eight to Israel, one to Israel and then France, one to Canada and finally the only female writer to the US. That only one of these authors is a woman is due to the fact that writing was unusual for Moroccan women of the 1940s and 1950s. Women, even when they were not illiterate, had greater difficulty narrating their lives in written form. This was due to economic factors, as well as to a lack of personal space, time and self-confidence. It is interesting to note that over the last decade there has been a considerable growth in the number of young female writers of Moroccan origin, producing for the most part fiction. They now live in Israel, were born or bred there and write in Hebrew. Some of them have turned memories and family stories of Morocco, or of the first stages of emigration, into fiction: think of Iris Argeman, Yamit Armbrister, Galit Dahan Carlibach or Malka Inbal.

The authors selected come from different areas and cities of Morocco: Meknès, Mogador/Essaouira, Marrakesh, Sefrou, Tamzerst (in the Atlas Mountains), Tangiers, Tetouan and Casablanca. Those who emigrated to France are Marcel Bénabou (from Meknès), Jacob Cohen (Meknès), Daniel Sibony (Marrakesh), Rolph Toledano (born in Paris, but who lived between Casablanca and Tangiers) and Gilles Zenou (Meknès). Those who emigrated to Israel are Mois Benarroch (Tetouan), Gabriel Bensimhon (Sefrou), Ami Bouganim (Mogador), Shlomoh Elbaz (Marrakesh), David Elmoznino (Mogador), Asher Knafo (Mogador), Uziel Hazan (Tamzerst, Atlas Mountains), Haim Shiran (Meknès). Ruth Knafo Setton (Safi) emigrated to the US, Micael Pariente (Meknès) emigrated to Israel and then
to France, David Ben Soussan (Mogador) emigrated to Canada. In some cases these writers have created narratives which may be considered fiction, or which have been disguised as fiction, and where the boundaries between novel, autobiographical novel and autobiography are blurred.5 All contain, however, sections that evoke events in the author’s life.9

The amount of lifewriting has been growing in recent years and this phenomenon was anticipated by Carlos de Nesry, the writer who in the Jewish press of the 1950s was considered the Albert Memmi of Morocco, although today he is hardly represented in the collective memory. In 1958, Carlos de Nesry witnessed the vast changes which Morocco was undergoing. He described the abandonment of Morocco by the Jews with great perspicacity and foresight, but also with concern and sadness. He commented that “native lands, even those adopted, cannot be dreamed up on the spot” and that “it does not always suit the Moroccan Jew to play the wandering Jew.”10

In the passage I quote, Carlos de Nesry accurately foresees the attitudes, regrets and issues which we will find again in the examples of lifewriting under analysis:

But the uprooting will be no less. Morocco and its traces will follow them for a long time. [. . .] [T]hey will not forget so soon the earth of light, the land of summers, the mild weather, the passing of fulfilling days and nights, labour without haste, unfrenzied effort, fame come easily, generosity offered almost gratuitously, joy and an easy laughter, faces of lasting spring, friendly streets, affinities, the easy flow, communions without promiscuity [. . .]. In the towns with no past, in the adolescent Jewries of the new world, people will feel deprived of what had guaranteed them until then an unconscious equilibrium: tradition, history, hierarchies, old values, the old prayers, the old domestic liturgy, the Sephardic rite in its natural climate, the temple of the forefathers where eternity is mirrored and God is closer. Nostalgia for one’s native land will be in direct proportion to its distance away. It will be sharp and tenacious. It will add to the various factors slowing adaptation to unknown worlds and sub-worlds, to new societies, including fellow believers for whom the emigrant will always be a foreigner. . . .

Native lands, even those of adoption, cannot be improvised. What is more, is it not true that a large number of these occasional Ulysses will come to regret their adventure? [. . .] They will still be overjoyed to see once more the coasts which have never been inhospitable towards them, the horizons made just for them and the testimonies of a time of innocence. They will still be too happy to rediscover the scorned opportunities, the modest home of a short time ago, the sumptuous humility and the kingdom lying in a dead end . . . it does not always suit the Moroccan Jew to play the wandering Jew.11

Shelomo Elbaz, writing fifty years on from Carlos de Nesry about the identity of Israelis of Moroccan Jewish origin, spoke of the awakening of Maghrebi roots
and of the ‘aliyah journey in the opposite direction which the former were about to embark upon, leaving Israel for the colours and scents of the land of their childhood which they had once abandoned. He wrote:

Their new identity, although it has repressed the awareness of their North African origins, has not entirely effaced it. The latter has hidden itself away so to speak, waiting “for better days”. Once this mutation of identity has been achieved, the Moroccan and the Tunisian, having become complete Israelis in all other respects, then feel their Maghreb roots curiously re-awaken. And we have been able to see, those hailing from Fes, Casablanca, Tunis and Sfax travel the road of their ‘aliyah in the opposite direction and re-immerse themselves in the colours and scents of their childhood, rediscovering the warm welcome of those with whom their parents had shared repasts, joys and sorrows. The Israelis of European origin have never known this experience. Nostalgia, where it existed, has been thwarted by their tragic and painful memories. This is like Mogador for my friend Buganim (sic), Meknès for Marcel Benabou or Sefrou for Gabriel Bensimhon and Marrakesh for me. It is above all a panoply of images, sensations and emotions.12

Another thing that emerges is the possibility of having a sense of belonging not only to places which contain the double characteristics of being at once a place of birth and a place of exile,13 but to previous exiles – for instance, the experience of the time spent in Spain, firmly anchored in a sense of identity and collective belonging for Sephardic Jews. The Jews hailing from al-Andalus retained a sense of belonging to and pride in that place which had been first inhabited more than five hundred years before. This feeling continued even when they reached the homeland, further enriched by the Moroccan heritage. Jonathan Schorsch already noted the outpouring of lifewriting that started several years ago in the US and Europe, related to the Sephardic past and to the so-called “golden age” of medieval Spain.14 However, it is quite a new phenomenon to find similar attitudes among Moroccan Jews living in Israel and writing in Hebrew.

Mois Benarroch is a perfect example of this. In Ha-trilogiah ha-Tetuanit (“The Tetouan Trilogy”),15 a novel composed of three parts, he asks himself about this strange feeling of belonging to Spain, the origin of his family before Tetouan. He writes:

How can I be an exile of Spain, not being born there? And since not even my father was born there and not even my grandfather, how can I be an exile in every place? My home is exile. . . . You will forever be an exile because in Spain too we were exiles. There too we felt nostalgia for Jerusalem . . . but here [in Jerusalem] we are full of nostalgia for a place that could be Seville but also Jerusalem and Tetouan at the same time.
The writer probes these feelings inside himself when he writes that perhaps it happens that some people might feel exiled in their own land of Israel, but feel at home in the place of their exile. And later on: “Of all exiles only Spain has been our land. We felt a part only in Spain, four centuries ago.”16

The act of choosing to gather in a single corpus writers who have made different choices surrounding migration allows us to grasp the differences between those who emigrated to Israel – that is, to the country seen as a mythical homeland, invested with multiple symbolic and religious symbols – and those who emigrated to other lands. For example, the “return to one’s roots”, which was not possible for several decades to those who had emigrated to Israel but was possible for the others, has without doubt increased the importance of that journey, even from a symbolic perspective, for the Israelis. To have an accurate memory of the country of origin is also more difficult for those who emigrated to Israel.

Furthermore, the city of birth is not even recalled on the back cover of the book if the book is published in Hebrew. In Israel, it is enough to point out that the author is originally from Morocco without giving any further details on the town or village of birth. In contrast, the back cover of a translation goes into greater detail (as is the case of the novel Armand by Uzziel Hazan, born in Tamzerst in the Atlas Mountains).17 In a previous work on Moroccan museums in Israel, I pointed out that in the Ma’alot Museum, devoted to the history of the migration from a small town in the Atlas, there is no reference to a precise place of origin and no map to indicate it. This attitude was part of the Zionist ideology and relates to the notion of shlilat ha-golah (“the denial of the exile”), which demanded that the Diaspora past be erased.

The Morocco evoked in the texts examined is above all a Jewish Morocco and less the non-Jewish Morocco, although it does often happen that the two merge into one, with the Morocco of childhood corresponding to a familiar, intimate country made up of religious and community celebrations, with a blurring of the distinction between the two. The Morocco being described may also be shared – for instance, the one found in Haim Shiran’s memoirs, where he remembers market day and the inn where Jews and Muslims prayed together, the Jews in unison and the Muslims in silence, each on their own carpet: “The setting was surrealistic: an Arab inn where artisans and merchants prayed alongside Muslim country people and traders.”18

We shall begin by mentioning one of the most frequently remembered places and one that is also very rich in meaning: the Jewish quarter, the mellah. It is significant to see how an area like the mellah, a place of cultural safeguard but also an area of exclusion, may be remembered. The Moroccan Jewish quarter can be represented as a maternal breast, as warm and protective and as an autonomous, independent realm. In any case, it appears to us in a form which is far from what we are accustomed to see as a representation of the European ghettos. Elbaz describes it as a maternal breast: “And first and foremost that warm, familiar enclosure, like a mother’s breast: the mellah! . . . an autonomous kingdom, a bubble cut off from the rest of the town.”19 Thus, the mellah according to Elbaz is a substitute for the holy city of Jerusalem.20
Bensimhon remembers the grey of the *mellah*, the lack of colours which set it apart: “In the *mellah* neither trees or flowers would grow,” but even if the green colour was lacking, this was made up for by imagination. Bensimhon moves back and forth from the present to the past and from the past to the present: the past allows the present to acquire meaning. The search for the colour green, necessary for school, reminds the protagonist of the lack of green in the *mellah* and the power of imagination which made up for that lack. The protagonist recalls comparing himself and a school friend of Polish origin: “While Blosh was asking for charity in Warsaw, he was wandering the little streets of Sefrou looking for the colour green. In the *mellah* there grew neither trees or flowers.”

In the *mellah* colours were missing and everything was grey. However, even if green was missing, imagination made up for that. Also the shopkeeper of a suburban Haifa neighbourhood did not have the colour green to sell him and suggests replying with the following words to his teacher: “‘Tell him that the paint shop has no green and that’s the end of it! Just forget it!’ Everything was grey in Sefrou so we used our imaginations! In Sefrou we needed a lot of imagination to make up for what we lacked.”

For Ami Bouganim, the *mellah* gives the opportunity to reflect on the great new *ghetto-mellah* where he emigrated, which is to say Israel:

We did not barter the dusty, worm-eaten ghettos and mellahs for a supreme *ghetto-mellah* where military justification matters more than reason of state and messianic unreason more than political reason, to the extent that Israel has no more moral lessons to give anyone either in terms of human charity or social justice.

On the other hand, Elmosnino offers us a more familiar vision of the *mellah* in the story *The Day of the Couscous*:

If the Muslims had not had the idea of building the *mellahs*, the local name given to the ghetto, the tradition of the “*day of the couscous*” could not have been born and I wouldn’t have had the chance of learning how to know better the people and their thoughts.

A number of authors dwell on the manner in which the doors of the *mellah* were closed, an element which I believe to be important because it is one thing to imagine a *mellah* closed in the evening by its own inhabitants, but quite another to know that it was closed from the outside by the Muslims. Or to know that not all cities had a *mellah*. For example, Elmosnino recalls that the doors of the Mogador *mellah* were closed by the inhabitants:

The only entry to the *mellah* was defended by a heavy iron portal which was carefully bolted and padlocked at sunset with iron cross bars set into the sides of the double doors, from one Mezouza to the other, with the result that all entry and exit was forbidden.
The memory of the closing of the doors of the Jewish quarter in Casablanca is very different:

At midnight the Rue du Patio doors of rotten wood were padlocked. The Muslim watchman fitted the cross members into their slots and secured a heavy padlock to them. Then he lay down on his flea-ridden straw mattress and fell asleep.27

In the description of the Meknes mellah, seen as the protected and confined citadel, there was mention of the monumental door which was closed every evening in defence against the Aissauas.28 While not all the texts that I have examined contain memories or regrets for an abandoned Morocco in the terms imagined by Carlos de Nesry, or those used by Shelomo Elbaz, they all however concur in remembering an atmosphere of joy typified by the ease with which people laughed together, a kind of lightheartedness lost for ever.

As I have noted above, there are few references to the Moroccan Muslim world except to those of the Court and the servants. More space is instead devoted to a celebration of the glorious Jewish Moroccan past, above all that of the Spanish legacy, which enjoyed a more noble stature, finding perfect expression in the phrases pronounced in Judeo Spanish – the result of a centuries-old wisdom – or else in the refinement of Jewish Moroccan cuisine, as in the splendid descriptions given by Ralph Toledano or in the discourse about exile by Mois Benarroch.

A visit to Morocco, especially if it was a matter of Israelis returning after decades, would often give birth to a new narration. A return to one’s native city could produce a sensation of bewilderment, able to trigger devastating memories. This happened to Ami Bouganim, who feels a laceration between what he defines as native exile, Morocco, and the exile of exile, Israel:

The first time I went back to Mogador I had the impression that strangers had worked their way into the postcard of my memories; from then on I have had the impression of being no more than a belated chronicler of a town which would awaken, transformed, from its devastated memories . . . a life shared between Morocco and Israel, between native exile and the exile of exile, between sobriety and intoxication, tenderness and excitement.29

A return to Morocco forty years on gave Haim Shiran the opportunity to reflect on the Arab part of his own identity when, on meeting the offspring of Hadj Brahim, whom he had worked for as a boy, and whom he thought of almost as a father, he was struck by the words: “You are quite simply an Arab Jew. Arab Jew? Why not? Later on in Israel I would claim this title as my own.”30 Sibony dwells on the theme of exile as a basic feature of Jewish identity in Morocco, a feature which would be lost in Israel among the Moroccan Jews belonging to what he defines as the “far-away-Marrakesh”.31 Sibony warns us against considering Moroccan Jewry, even within a single city, as a uniform entity, in that it was riven by the most profound of contrasts. In Jewish Marrakesh, for example, the distance
of the *mellah* from the world of the notables was so great as to create widely differing identities among the same Marrakesh Jews.

Return to Morocco could also offer the opportunity to retie broken bonds, as occurs in the tale of David Elmosnino. In this case the protagonist of the story during a trip to Morocco finds out that a policeman comes up to him and warmly introduces himself:

“It’s me, Ahmed. I was your neighbour in Safi”. In the end he takes out a photo album and excitedly shows me some snapshots of his children. . . . It was a photo of my own family! “I’ve kept it all these years”, Ahmed told me, “because you were so good to us.”

A vision of the transformation of Casablanca is offered to us by Uzziel Hazan when he returned there for the first time in 1979:

I had come back to my city as a tourist with a camera slung across my shoulder. I would walk by and stare with reverence at forgotten sites, images faded and withered which suddenly appeared to me at the corners of Casablanca’s streets. The town was green and white, the town of white houses and green parks, the Paris of the Maghreb. But she was no longer like that. She had been emptied of her French citizens years before and abandoned by the Jews. That was why she had lost the sweeping perspectives and Western elegance lying in the midst of her Oriental charm.

As one of the protagonists of Benarroch’s book says in the third part of the *Tetouan Trilogy*, the remembered city of origin is in reality and above all made of its own community, that is what gave meaning to the city:

I alone have returned here [to Tetouan] . . . when you come back everything you see here is what is missing, you notice that you yourself have disappeared along with all the community, you realise that without the community Tetouan does not exist. What is a city? It is your community and at the moment it vanished the city too vanished. this is what I felt then and what I feel now.

The journey often leads the traveller to visit those places connected with identity and in this context the Jewish school is one of these. Uziel had sought the synagogue and school and writes:

The synagogue was no longer there. I stood at the threshold of the *Em-Habanim Hebrew* school, where I had studied for several consecutive years. The multi-storeyed building was proud . . . and empty. Its windows were shattered and two old men were sitting in front next to the doorway. They were waiting for a *minyan* for the prayer. . . . I wanted to know if a Jew was obliged to live abroad for him still to believe in the soul of the saints, to have confidence in Man, to await the Messiah every day.
For Haim Shiran too, the journey involves visiting the school where he had studied:

Each of my journeys to Morocco always led me back to my home town and to this Talmud Torah which on each occasion had been put to a different use. It was an age where it served as an old people’s home and synagogue, the last remaining in the mellah.36

Others succeed in grasping the new environment they find themselves immersed in, but only when this new environment contains echoes of the old. The places of the past would seem to function as catalysts, subdividing new times by using the units of measure of the past. André Aciman in *Harvard Square* offers a reading of his Egyptian past which becomes relevant only in the sense that the present echoes his past:

There are enormous parts of New York that do not exist for me: they don’t have Egypt, they have no past, they mean nothing. Unless I can forge an Egyptian fiction around them, if only as a mood I recognize as Egyptian, they are as dead to me, as I am dead to them. Egypt is my catalyst, I break down life in Egyptian units.37

Hence, not only does the present mean something only if it contains and recalls the past, but the present should also recall a past where one dreamt of a future elsewhere. It is only in this act of a continually interlocking present, past and future place that, according to Aciman, we may find the perfume of life:

In Egypt we spent hours and hours aching for happiness beyond Egypt to the extent that, with the benefit of hindsight, a part of that happiness yearned for must have perfumed our lives in Egypt by casting a film of joy over days which we would never wish to experience, preferring rather to die. The Egypt to which I desired to return was not the one I knew or from which I now wished to escape but the one where I had learnt to invent myself as someone else and in some other place.38

Gavriel Bensimhon in his novel *Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah* (“The Young Girl in the Light-Blue Shirt”), set in Haifa, tells the story of Yonatan Marciano, the young Sefrou-born protagonist who recounts tales where the protagonists and characters retain recognisable features of Bensimhon’s story. In the course of the novel, “our” city of Sefrou becomes a place of reference and the fulcrum of the whole narration, the place to make comparison and the root of his new existence. Bensimhon also sees Fes within Jerusalem and Jerusalem echoes Fes: “Jerusalem is like the Fes medina, the same alleys, same voices, same colours, same smells, same music and same children, but it is made up of dreams.”39

In fact Sefrou and the Sefrou Jews remain central to the narration. The many young men native to Sefrou who died in the Israeli wars are mentioned: “Most
of the young men who were with us in Cyprus and from our city (Sefrou) have fallen.” It is believed that the arrival in Israel of public figures with an important status in the Jewish Sefrou community such as Sidi Avraham might also improve the status of the whole community in the new Israeli environment: “In our city of Sefrou he (Sidi Avraham) would help everyone, freeing anyone possessed by demons and freeing men and women from the dibbuq.” In popular imagination there was no doubt that such an influential public figure would be listened to by the new Israeli authorities: “The mayor will certainly listen to him and so will the head of government.” The waiting for the landing of the ships known to be carrying emigrants native of Sefrou “in order to seek those among the new arrivals who belonged to us” is described in vivid pages, rich in colour and emotions, adding value that only narration can lend:

The harbour was packed with those arriving and those waiting. There were those who spent the whole time looking for someone due to arrive but who ended up never doing so. Others asked questions that no one could answer. There was a lot of smoking. They lit matches. Many carrying suitcases were wearing a grey jacket while others had on the jellaba. Here was a peaked cap, there a little cap or a crumpled hat. Men with the Torah, young men carrying the old on their backs, fathers holding their children tight and women with children in arms. No one seems to know where to go and their eyes seemed to be asking, “Where the heck have we ended up? Where have we got to? Is that how Erets Yisrael presents itself?”

Other tales recall the places associated with the suffering of which Jews were victims in Morocco, such as Oufran, in the south of Morocco, a location where Jewish sources indicate a massacre to have occurred. The two authors Ben Sousan and Asher Knafo remark on it. Knafo in particular treats it as a family story: “Not a day passed in our home without us remembering this tragic event. My father talked about his grandfather’s grandfather, Rabbi Makhluf (a protagonist of the Oufran events).”

One quite common referential identity topos is the pilgrimage to the tomb of Lalla Solika in the Fes cemetery. The story of the martyrdom of Lalla Solika, the girl from Tangiers who in 1834 preferred martyrdom to giving up her faith and whose tomb is still today a place of pilgrimage, has been handed down in several versions and treated in different ways. She is present in most lifewriting, independently of the country of emigration. In particular for Ruth Knafo Setton, who emigrated to the US, the story of Lalla Solika becomes the main plot around which the narration is weaved. In Knafo Setton, Lalla Solika is considered to be a trespasser and a figure of transition rather than perseverance:

She crossed from the Jewish world to the Arab world. In those days there was no mellah in Tangier, but still the separation was distinct, an invisible wall. I used to wonder how long it took to cross from the Jewish house to the Arab house. An eternity. Or a second. A breath, and you’re there, in the other world.
Aside from places, both objects and celebrations also seem to function as a ‘bridge to memory’, and are widely recorded in the memoirs of both types of emigrants but above all by those who emigrated to Israel. Pillows or carpets taken along at departure or shipped afterwards are metonymic objects which continue to represent the memory of the country left behind and are an important link with people’s pasts. The strikingly coloured Berber carpets taken from Morocco were used to improve the squalid surroundings created by the furniture assigned to every family by the Sohnut (“Jewish Agency”) in Israel, according to the memory of David Elmosnino: “Coloured Berber carpets shipped in rolls from Morocco introduce a cheerful note of welcome into the bare furniture of the times.” Once sold, they may become a reminder of the laceration of their identity, as occurs in the case of the mother of the protagonist in Bensimhon’s novel: “He noticed straightaway the naked floor and burst into tears. The carpet was the only thing remaining of the dowry and it was no longer there.” Among the items mentioned are silver vases, brass objects, tea services with thermos flasks and silver kettles, decorated cups and teapots. These serve to mark a contrast with the basic items provided by the Jewish Agency as well as to indicate a break with the past:

An iron bed from the Jewish Agency covered by an old military blanket, a blue table and a rickety stool. Old newspapers carpeted the dump’s earthen floor. A few wooden crates from the Tnuva, full of nets and fishing rods . . . [in this particular case the man was a fisherman].

In the meantime, a mysterious item coming from Morocco which turns out to be a kaftan can trigger uncontrollable waves of nostalgia:

I was always happy to have news from this far-off Morocco, which I had left behind when still a child and which I have not seen again since. . . . What matters is that it comes from Morocco. I’m convinced the package will give off one of those special scents which will remind me of the narrow alleys of the souk. . . . I will not throw the wrapping paper away. . . .

I opened the package and on unfolding the purple Kaftan embroidered with gold thread, I was enveloped by the smell of Morocco emanating from the box. Whiffs of perfume which intoxicate the senses and allow memories plunged into oblivion to re-emerge.

Celebrations too are places of identity memory. Uzziel Hazan dedicates many pages in his novel Armand to a minute description of Jewish celebrations. His three-page description of the Mimuna can almost be read as an ethnographic account:

We had supplied ourselves with two very white pillowcases and a resonant tambourine. The doors of the house were open to everyone and they brightly lit the hustle and bustle of the streets. Jews in traditional celebratory clothes exchanged wishes for success and prosperity (trb’hou outsadou) and went
to one another’s houses to eat cakes and enjoy the special decorations of the celebration.

After a rich and accurate description of the pastries which follows this part, he continues:

We splashed milk on anyone coming in – we would soak green leaves of mint or lettuce in a bowl of milk in order to spray the fresh visitors. We would wish them “Dame Mimouna, blessed and successful” (Alala Mimuna ambarka messouda) while beating the tambourine, and our pillowcases swelled from visit to visit.54

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is arguable that a significant difference can be seen between writers who emigrated to Israel and those who ended up in other countries. Among the writers analysed, it is particularly those who emigrated to Israel who indulge in recalling the city or country left behind, showing intense and complex feelings of double or even multiple belonging and identity. On the other hand, the writers who emigrated to other places keep a greater distance from the native country or town: think of Marcel Bénabou, Gilles Zenou or David Ben Soussan. They mention it only fleetingly or write about it in a more detached manner, offering a less rose-tinted memory in comparison to the reality of the surroundings that they found in the new country. In some cases, they only narrate what are essentially family memories. All in all, the detachment from what might be viewed as their identity-giving sense of belonging and their place of origin is greater.

Thus, it is the writers who have emigrated to Israel who more explicitly refer to and describe feelings of double or multiple belonging, which is to say belonging to the city of their birth and childhood, to the country where they emigrated and sometimes even to a previous place of exile, Spain. In the Israeli texts, there seems to be a smaller distance from these spaces and from the past that they represent than in the lifewriting texts of those who did not emigrate to Israel. Strangely enough, it seems like it has turned out easier to keep a distance from the abandoned country for those who have not opted for the mythical-ideological appeal of the return to the Jewish homeland from the Diaspora. Therefore, there would appear to be an unexpected correlation between the mythical-ideological appeal of the return to the homeland from the Diaspora and, on the other hand, a strong retaining of the feeling of belonging to the abandoned native land, forever remembered as a country of exile. This correlation is quite surprising, if one contends – as Zionism does – that the fulfilment of the desire to see the end of the exile should have led to the end of the Diaspora.

What the entrepreneurs de mémoire of the 1.5 generation, that is to say those who left Morocco as infants or youngsters, offer us is a deeply personal reading of the migration through the family domain. This enriches the collective memory of a whole group, which has felt and still feels the need to convey to future
generations more complex memories than national narratives normally allow. In any case, what is striking in the texts of all the writers that we have examined is the multiple identity which marks them out and to which is often added a strong sense of identity rooted in their belonging to a particular city. As I pointed out at the beginning, thanks to an analysis of Moroccan Jewish forms of lifewriting, we can add new and interesting pieces that contribute to the creation of a collective memory of the Moroccan Jewish diaspora, including of those Jews who chose to return to the mythical homeland, Israel. The latter, however, still seems to be in the Diaspora, since the writers who write from there continue to mythologise their country of birth, Morocco.

Notes

1 Helen Epstein, Écrire la vie (Condé-sur-Noireau: La cause des livres, 2009), 47.
2 Epstein, Écrire la vie.
3 Susan Rubin Suleiman, “The 1.5 Generation : Thinking about Child Survivors and the Holocaust”, Imago, 59/3 (2002): 277–295. We use the 1.5 generation concept in a broad sense, since the author was referring to the children of the Holocaust.
4 Ami Bouganim, in Une enfance juive en Méditerranée musulmane, Leila Sebbar, ed. (Saint-Pourçain-sur-Sioule: Bleu Autour, 2012), 78. The Alliance Israélite Universelle is an international Jewish organisation founded in 1860 in France to promote education among Jews, especially those settled in the Arab Muslim world and in Eastern Europe.
8 We do not intend here to enter the debate surrounding greater or lesser adherence to the facts in fiction and autobiography, preferring to use the term lifewriting. For an excellent appraisal of the debate, we can refer to: Philip Roth, The Facts: A Novelist’s Autobiography (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1988), where he demonstrates the greater freedom in recounting facts in fiction compared with autobiography.
9 The following belong to this latter category: Mois Benarrosh, Gavriel Bensimhon, David Ben Soussan, Jacob Cohen, Ruth Knafo Setton, Rolph Toledano, Gilles Zenou and Daniel Sibony.
16 Benarroch, Ha-trilogiyah ha-Tetuanit, 145.
17 This information is given also in the back cover of the French edition, while the
Hebrew one speaks more generically of Morocco.
18 Haim Shiran and Fabienne Bergmann, Le rocher d’origine (Paris: La compagnie lit-
téraire, 2013), 49.
19 Elbaz, Marrakesh-Jérusalem, 221–222.
20 Elbaz, Marrakesh-Jérusalem, 107.
21 Gabriel Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah ("The Young Girl in the Light-Blue
Shirt") (Tel Aviv: Yediot Aharonot Books, 2013), 20.
22 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah.
23 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah., 22.
24 Ami Bouganim, Es-Saouira de Mogador (Louven-la-neuve: Avant-propos, 2013),
224.
25 Elmosnino, Palais et jardins, 14.
26 Elmosnino, Palais et jardins, 15.
27 Uzziel Hazan, Armand (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Po’alim, 1982), 121.
28 Shiran and Bergmann, Le rocher d’origine, 59.
29 Bouganim, Es-Saouira de Mogador, 349.
30 Shiran and Bergmann, Le rocher d’origine, 28.
31 Daniel Sibony, Marrakesh, le depart (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2009), 278.
32 Elmosnino, Palais et Jardins, 197–198.
33 Hazan, Armand, 213.
34 Benarroch, Ha-trilogiyah ha-Tetuanit, 284.
35 Hazan, Armand, 308.
36 Shiran and Bergmann, Le rocher d’origine, 65.
37 André Aciman, Alibis: Essays on Elsewhere (New York: Picador/Farrar, Straus and
Geroux, 2011) 73.
38 Aciman, Alibis, 175.
39 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 148.
40 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 27.
41 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 129.
42 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 12.
43 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah,183.
44 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah,181.
47 See the contribution of Piera Rossetto, “Les grains de safran et du géranium odorant:
mémoire d’objets et objets de mémoire parmi les juifs de Lybie”, lecture given at Tou-
louse University, 14 May 2014.
48 Elmosnino, Palais et jardins, 186.
49 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 61.
50 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 190.
51 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 113.
52 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 159–160.
53 Bensimhon, Ne’arah be-hultzah kehulah, 164.
54 Hazan, Armand, 170.
This chapter traces the contours of the fiction written in Hebrew over the course of the last two decades by men and women who either came to Israel from Arab countries or were born to parents who arrived as part of that migration. This body of work bears, I argue, the imprint of experiences, cultural positions and ideas that, despite many differences and even contradictions, create a common space of writing that may be called Mizrahi fiction. This generalisation does not disregard the various kinds of Mizrahiyut – of being Mizrahi – that can be found in Israel, and the different literary paths that emerged in this period. I maintain, however, that in their work all these writers express, in one way or another, a common culture and awareness of the experience of immigration that they underwent either directly or via their families.

A Mizrahi consciousness that ties together ethnic communities from different Eastern lands permeates the entire range of subjects that these writers address. It impinges on their conception of their individual and collective identity to the same measure that it touches on their relationship with the Hebrew language, their experience of Israeli time and space, their political positions and their gender perceptions. The writers themselves do not display a preoccupation with an ethnic uniqueness that developed before their arrival in Israel and, of course, afterward; rather, their concern is their encounter with Israeli society and culture. Through that encounter, they have established new connections to their communal histories, past languages and ancestral cultures.

Both scholars and the writers themselves have in recent years preferred the term Mizrahi to refer to that part of Israel’s population – a group historically discriminated against and marginalised, despite the fact that it makes up a numerical majority in the country – whose origins lie in the Islamic world (see, for example, the collections of articles Mizrahim be-Israel (“Mizrahi in Israel”) [2002], Hazut mizrahit (“Mizrahi Appearance”) [2004], Qolot mizrahiyim (“Mizrahi Voices”) [2006] and others). Mizrahi has replaced other terms that had previously been in common use, from “Sephardic” (a term that originally designated religious and traditional ethnicity) to the Hebrew term ‘edot ha-mizrah, “the eastern ethnic groups”. This latter phrase was the one used in mainstream Zionist ideological discourse, in which European-born Israelis were representative of the nation, while those
who came from the east were ethnic and sectorial. Mizrahi designates a common experience of marginalisation in Israeli society, a common origin in the Islamic world and a connection to its culture. It confirms the existence of a common identity that has developed among those Israelis who arrived from different lands, and it signifies the desire for a future of renewed interaction and coexistence with the Arab Muslim East.2

An understanding of Mizrahiyut requires first a theoretical introduction to the concept of identity. Traditionally, identity was defined in the context of the common culture shared by people of common historical origin, a kind of collective self concealed within a large range of private “selves”. This approach assumes that identity reflects common historical experiences, collective heritage and common cultural codes that can be acquired and which distinguish the collective from other social groups.3 Against this traditional conception, which is by nature essentialist and static, Stuart Hall has elucidated the connection between identity and the concept of discourse, arguing that identities are the outcomes of the “chaining” of the subject within many possible discourses. Identities, in this sense, are discourse positions that every subject must adopt, creating collective characteristics and shaping the subject to fit those identities. Yet they are always constructed from his place within the collective, and so can never be exhaustive or complete.4

Postmodernists like Stuart Hall and Homi Bhabha do not reject the concept of identity. Rather, they make it a more flexible, multi-faceted entity, since identity is “about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ but rather ‘what we might become’”.5 Identity is not defined as an ensemble of fixed and ahistorical characteristics, but rather as a framework of action, a process of changing, fluid, hybrid identifications. But this flexible view can be problematic for ethnic, national and gender minority groups that wish to make political demands (for example, for instituting anti-discrimination and affirmative action policies) on the basis of a politics of identities (that is, the demand for social rights based on group identities). This critique of the postmodern concept of identity has been voiced for the most part by African-American feminists (bell hooks) and by postcolonial theorists (Gayatri Spivak). These writers declare indefatigably that they accept identity politics as a “strategic imperative”, without which they would be unable to maintain the necessary connection between identity and political activity.6 The reason is that acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of the concept of identity, and of its multiple possibilities, is inconsistent with the possibility of establishing a politics based on the recognition of real differences between groups that are capable of creating solidarity within groups, as well as a common social struggle. Nevertheless, they also assert that challenging the essentialist, static concept of identity in fact contributes to the struggle of oppressed groups. Hooks argues that such challenges enable the acceptance of a multiplicity of black identities and variety in the histories of black people. Recognition of this heterogeneity makes it possible to deconstruct hegemonic, one-dimensional (that is, stereotypical) representations created by white culture, which are meant to perpetuate its
control over blacks. Labelling one particular type of group experience as “authentic” levels the entire range of an oppressed group’s experiences into a standardised, ahistorical model of ethnicity. Rejection of this levelling does not mean that these groups must cease to fashion their own radical identities. Thus, their critique of the essentialist view does not indicate that they sacrifice the concept of identity or the definition (whether in national, class, ethnic, gender, or other terms) of the subject. On the contrary, it validates the “authority of experience” – that is, it recognises that black (or in our case Mizrahi) identity was created through an experience of immigration and through its histories, marked by struggle.

This challenge to the essentialist view of identity on the one hand and to the concept’s fluidity on the other lies behind my reading of the fiction written by Mizrahi writers in Israel. Mizrahi identity is indeed multifarious and changing, yet it also emerged within a system of social, cultural, and political power relationships, and is not simply a product of the free choice of the subjects identified as Mizrahi. From this point of view, Mizrahi writing in Israel may be seen as a collection of varied responses that share certain codes. Clearly, this concept of Mizrahi writing rejects the essentialist, ahistorical view of Mizrahiyt, recognising as it does the role of history, language and culture in constituting subjectivity and identity. It also accepts that every utterance, as personal and discrete as it might be, is positioned and created through the agency of codes that have a history and placement within the spectrum of Israeli culture. That it is possible to read individual works as representative of Mizrahi discourse can be theoretically anchored also in the assumption that the individual text, the individual cultural product, may be seen as a polemical dialogue between different ethnic voices. In this sense, the idea of the autonomy of the individual and the unique text must be restricted; the text must take its place in the dialogic system of relations in which it represents ethnic discourse (controlled and silenced) that grapples with a hegemonic discourse (controlling and silencing) in order to challenge the latter’s status as inevitable.

Many studies have appeared in recent years, which have broadened earlier discussions that focused on understanding the social status of Mizrahim in Israel. They describe how the politics of identity functioned in the settlement of the immigrants, in education, historiography, the division of national resources and especially in the creation of knowledge and the hegemonic discourse about Mizrahim. In her pioneering work on Israeli cinema, and in articles she published during the 1980s, Ella Shohat analysed the mechanisms of this knowledge. She found that Ashkenazi society related to Mizrahim through narratives similar to those which European cultures used to frame their perceptions of their colonial subjects. This “Orientalist” or “Eurocentric” narrative, Shohat argued, still appears in various forms both in Western and, especially, American references to the Third World. Shohat used the term “Mizrahi epistemology” to characterise the cultural stance that rejects and challenges accepted Israeli assumptions and narratives regarding Mizrahim. She dealt principally with the narrative of Zionist modernisation that portrayed the Mizrahim as backward, with the tendency
to refer to Mizrahim in exotic and folkloric terms instead of in political terms of power relationships. The narrative also represented Mizrahim as lacking a past, as having first appeared on the stage of history at the moment they took part in the Zionist enterprise, when they immigrated to Israel. Culturally, she formulated her analysis as a critique of the way in which Mizrahim were positioned as the “other” of western Ashkenazi cultural and aesthetic discourse, and in which the Mizrahi experience was shunted to the margins of Israeli culture. But Shohat’s work – like later studies that discerned changes in the hegemonic discourse regarding Mizrahim, in accordance with changes in Israeli culture – focused on an analysis of the Eurocentric nature of Mizrahi representations in Israeli culture. It did not seek to identify the means by which an independent and alternative Mizrahi epistemology crystallised, one that seeks to and is capable of grappling with these cultural assumptions and breaking out of the space that they mark out. At the same time, Hever, Shenhav and Motzafi-Haller have claimed that representations of Mizrahim in Israel fall on a continuum ranging from portraying them as “problems” and burdens on Israeli society (due to the assumption that they are not modern, meaning not economically productive) and depicting them as passive victims unable to exert control over and modify the circumstances of their lives. This dual construction of Mizrahiyut became established in academic, political, sociological, educational, and cultural discourse by means of practices appropriate to each of these fields of knowledge.

My study, however, for the most part addresses a different political and cultural stage of the term’s history, one in which the term “Mizrahi” has come to connote a proactive relationship with the experience of being shunted off to Israel’s margins. In this stage, it has also become a category of political resistance. In this regard, I do not share the minimalist or negative attitude toward the term “Mizrahiyut”, which refers to the Mizrahim as “others” in relationship to the central Ashkenazi hegemony, or as an Israeli invention irrelevant to the historical-cultural experience of the immigrants from the Arab world. Sami Michael represents this position: “Ashkenazi identity defines itself as ‘we are not Mizrahim.’ . . . Mizrahi identity is one that has been imposed on the Jews who came from those lands considered the lands of the East.” But even if the mental and cultural differences among different ethnic groups covered by the term “Mizrahi” are profound, as Michael argues, the differences between the literary output of a Jew from Iraq and a Jew from Morocco are not particularly notable. The Mizrahiyut that has found expression in Israeli literature from the beginning of the 1990s is a diverse set of ways of coping with the boundaries of Ashkenazi Israeli culture and literature.

**Israeli perspective**

Before turning to the components of Mizrahiyut, I should make it clear that Mizrahi writing is not limited to direct confrontation with Israeli narratives about Mizrahiyut that have had wide currency in Hebrew literature since the 1920s and which were prominent following the mass immigration of the early 1950s. Rather, it has been constructed from within the Mizrahi experience itself, in all
its aspects. To the extent that a confrontation with Israeli hegemonic narratives exists, it relates to what may be called the “Israeli perspective”. This perspective is composed of a series of acts of marking boundaries within Israel’s cultural geography. They determine what may appropriately be represented in the centre and as a norm, and what is to be positioned in the margins. The boundaries are meant to guarantee the distinct nature of the local culture, and thus the uniqueness and force of the Zionist enterprise. In this context, four principal boundary lines are discernible:

1) **The boundaries of language:** Hebrew won the “language war” against Yiddish as Israel’s spoken and, especially, written language. Bilingual writers – a common phenomenon at the beginning of the 1920s – and, it goes without saying, those who came from Arab culture, were obliged to write only in Hebrew (Uri Zvi Greenberg’s reversion to the composition of Yiddish verse in the 1950s was an exception). Yiddish literature in Israel became severely restricted as a result. Likewise, English literature written in Israel remained a very much circumscribed phenomenon, while Russian-language Israeli literature is a phenomenon of the last decade, following the mass immigration from the former Soviet Union. The boundaries of literary Hebrew were marked off by a practice of exclusion, not only with regard to other languages but also with regard to the different strata of Hebrew itself. Registers that were labelled as being too “high” (Hebrew based on the language of the liturgy and the *yeshivah*) and those labelled as too “low” (the colloquial Hebrew of the periphery and ethnic sociolects) were excluded. Spoken Hebrew began to percolate, in tiny amounts, into canonical fiction beginning in the 1970s. Early manifestations of the language of Tel Aviv can be seen, for example, in the stories of Hanoch Levin, such as *Ha-holeh ha-nizhi ve-ha-’ahuva* (“The Eternal Invalid and the Lover,”) and in Ya’aqov Shabtai’s novel *Zihron devarim* (“Past Continuous”). At the end of the 1980s the “Shenkin Hebrew” of Tel Aviv’s young intellectuals and artists began to appear in Orly Castel-Bloom’s first collection of stories, *Lo’ rahoq mi-merkaz ha-’ir* (“Not Far from the Centre of Town”), and the muddled Hebrew of German immigrants in Yoel Hoffman’s collection *Sefer Yosef* (“The Book of Joseph”). In parallel, a growing stream of works make use of Mizrahi Hebrew, liberated from its former exclusion and combining religious strata and street talk – two registers that had previously been delegitimised by the literary hegemony.

2) **The boundaries of space:** Despite the changes in Israel’s borders as a result of its wars with the Arab states, and even though the Israeli political discourse has, since 1967, been focused on borders more than any other subject, the fluidity of the national borders had no impact on the perception of the unity of the Jewish national space or on the distinction between it and the hostile space outside (Palestinian towns and villages that remained within Israel’s boundaries after 1948 were viewed as foreign enclaves). The marginal spaces that took form within the national space (development towns, frontier settlements, poor urban neighbourhoods) remained, to a large extent, invisible, thereby
not blemishing this unity. Furthermore, within these national boundaries, any diasporic option that would allow affiliation with other Jewish geographies (European ones in particular) was also rejected. Only with the appearance of nostalgic writing about the Jewish Europe destroyed in the Shoah, beginning in the 1940s in poetry and in the 1950s in fiction, did interest in other geographies awaken. The geographies, which were specifically European, could not challenge the centrality of the Israeli space, and no other space bore any similar weight as an object of affiliation and identification. Although European-born authors and poets were reluctant to renounce their dual affiliations with the Israeli space and other geographies, one can easily discern the hegemonic ideological boundaries within which this duality could exist without permitting it to reach a state of open, explicit conflict. Most immigrant writers with such dual affiliations adopted the Zionist historiographic perspective, which allowed them to recall European spaces, but only through the mediation of the trauma of the annihilation of European Jewry and of the establishment of the Jewish national home in the Land of Israel. Europe was no longer viewed as a personal, family, and communal space of belonging, but rather as a space lying in the shadow of the degeneration of Jewish life in Europe between the two world wars, of pervasive anti-Semitism, of the annihilation of the Jews and of the impossibility of return. \(^{21}\)

3) **The boundaries of time:** The Zionist concept of the Jewish return to history, involving the deletion of 2,000 years of exile and the adoption of an ideology of modernity and progress, created an effective repression mechanism that operated on the past of the individual, the family and the nation. It presented history teleologically, as leading from a fallen, deficient past to a redeemed, unblemished present and future. This view of history is evident in particular in the narratives of Zionist novels beginning in Eastern Europe and ending in the Land of Israel, and it also appeared in a large swathe of the Hebrew poetry written up until the end of the 1930s. At that time spatial boundaries were breached because of the need to respond to the Shoah, and so were the bounds of time, when writers became aware of the residues of the past. This experience was a kind of trauma that constituted these writers’ adult personalities. But in this case as well, the memory of the past was allowed to appear only within clear-cut boundaries. This was not the kind of memory that could broaden the conception of Zionist time by breaking through into “distant”, personal times disconnected from national historiography. Neither was it an overt or covert confrontation with official memory and the templates of Zionist ideology. The lack of an alternative that goes beyond these boundaries demonstrates the subordination of the private subject to the national narrative.

4) **The boundaries of identity:** In general, the Ashkenazi public assumed that Hebrew or secular Jewish identity would absorb and assimilate immigrant groups, although this was the subject of a heated debate from the time the country was founded. The Ashkenazis feared that massive immigration from North Africa would irreversibly dilute the country’s western character. During the 1950s some veteran Zionist politicians advocated restrictions on
immigration, or a policy of selective immigration.\textsuperscript{22} They doubted whether
Zionist identity could incorporate ethnic diversity, despite their assumption
that this diversity would disappear as the result of a long melting pot process
of education and acculturation. The misgivings about whether it would be
possible to inculcate the Mizrahim with western culture revealed a rejection
of intermediate identities – not only ones that combined different ethnici-
ties (such as Ashkenazi-Mizrahi identity), but also, and principally, ones that
combined different national (Jewish-Arab) and religious (Jewish-Muslim,
Jewish-Christian) affiliations. Such hybridism was simply not an option, and
Zionist writers continually had to reassert an impermeable national and cul-
tural boundary. The Orientalist knowledge they were equipped with deterred
them from being curious about or investigating anything hidden on the murky,
disregarded side of the national and ethnic divider.

\textbf{Beyond hegemony}

\textit{Mizrahi} writing is an attempt to break through the boundaries of the hegemonic
Israeli discourse. These boundaries were not guarded absolutely and strictly.
A hegemony generally exists within a space that is tense, non-uniform and full of
contradictions,\textsuperscript{23} yet it has never faced a significant alternative. Such an alterna-
tive, extending beyond the boundaries noted above, crystallised in Mizrahi fiction,
and most of the writers discussed here, of all generations, participated in it over
an extended period of time.

I will not expound on the way in which the hegemonic discourse is related to
Mizrahim and Mizrahiyut. This has been examined in a number of studies, espe-
cially those of Lev Hakak, Ella Shohat and Dror Mishani. They showed how the
Ashkenazi hegemony controlled representations of Mizrahim according to Zion-
list cultural-social standards. However, I would like to add that once the Mizrahim
began representing themselves, speaking as subjects not subordinated to these
boundaries, they challenged the boundaries from a stance of divided affiliation.
On the one hand, the Mizrahim were part of Israeli culture and used the Hebrew
language (with the exception of the few who, like Samir Naqqash and Yitzhaq Bar-
Moshe, chose to continue to write in Arabic), and their Mizrahiyut was defined
by and signified by the Israeli cultural apparatus. On the other hand, Mizrahiyut
extends beyond the boundaries marked off by that apparatus. It cannot be seen as
a product of the hegemonic culture\textsuperscript{24}; rather it constitutes a different model, mul-
ticultural in character. When placed against the work of well-known Ashkenazi
writers, Mizrahi literature “seems to come from an entirely different imaginative
and experiential realm, one that people are quite unfamiliar with. The language,
conventions, assumptions, characterizations and references are all significantly
different than what people ‘naturally’ assume to be ‘Israeli’.”\textsuperscript{25} Representations
of Mizrahiyut in literature (especially those of the writers of the second genera-
tion\textsuperscript{26}) wrestled with the marginal position allotted to them by Israeli culture and
created new spaces of consciousness and writing that stood opposed to the hegem-
onic literary and cultural space, breaking through boundaries and moving out into
new, unfamiliar spaces. This duality of existing simultaneously within the canon
and outside it meant that the marginal ethnic culture maintained contact with the canonical culture (the contact was largely one-way, however, since the centre took no interest in its margins) as well as with another (in this case, Arab) culture, language, homeland and space from which it was cut off or exiled. The dialectic of writing from this position of marginality (which derived from different forms of oppression—national, ethnic, cultural, economic, gender and religious) met the need to present a consciousness of the self that did not create a separatist value system detached from the cultures of the Middle East as a by-product of grappling with the hegemonic culture. Therefore, this chapter portrays Mizrahiyut not as a stable, unchanging entity (in terms of external experience, mentality, folklore, language, common history, customs, foods, dress, and so on) or as an unambiguous position with regard to the hegemonic culture (adoption or rejection), but rather as a patchwork of ideological, experiential, spatial, linguistic and political characteristics perceived in this culture as poles that produce contradictions. It will be described as a border-crossing process perceived, until two decades ago, as impossible, and certainly illegitimate.

From the time of their immigration in the 1950s, Mizrahim developed a consciousness of belonging to the periphery rather than the centre. They felt foreign to and unidentified with the Zionist enterprise, with its actions and with its social and cultural outcomes. The Mizrahi influx differed from earlier Ashkenazi waves of immigration in its social composition, its historical contexts and the way in which it was absorbed. It elicited a separate consciousness of belonging—of belonging to “the second Israel.” This resulted from the extent of the confrontation with Ashkenazi society’s language and culture, with the loss of the social and economic status enjoyed by many Mizrahim in their lands of origin and in the Orientalist images of Mizrahiyut that became widespread in Israeli society. Therefore it seeks to fashion a memory that does not reject the Mizrahi past, a space that does not negate adjacent spaces, a language that does not reject the other languages with which the Mizrahim were, in the recent past, close and intimate and an identity that does not deny its Arab components.

In speaking of border-crossing and hybridisation, I should make it clear that the margins and the centre, just like Mizrahiyut and its parallel term, Ashkenaziyut, cannot be seen as pure categories that stand opposed to each other. While Edward Said posited a binary division between the West and the Orient—the latter being an imaginary creation of the West—other theoreticians, such as Bhabha and Spivak, have denounced the possibility of pure identities and certainly of pure cultures, because every culture is constructed out of differentiation from and affiliation with proximate cultures. But this doubt about cultural purity does not contradict the assumption that every culture has imagined boundaries, or tries to place such boundaries between what is included and what is excluded—and to institutionalise those boundaries. To understand the dynamics of contact between the Mizrahim and hegemonic culture, one must discern the boundaries of Israeli culture and the attempts to challenge them with the purpose of creating a culture that is, relatively, more open and broader. This mixing of cultures should not, in this context, be seen as a neutral and opportunistic blend that levels and blurs the system of power, but rather as a focused struggle deriving from a specific cultural context in which
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Mizrahiyut has been suppressed in the shadow of the hegemonic culture. In this respect, it is important to heed Ella Shohat’s claim that Mizrahiyut should not be addressed only in the intra-Israeli context – it must also be examined in the Jewish Arab context. In other words, it should be seen as an experience that works against a binary national division, and as a spectrum of practices that create an interim field at the very spot that the hegemonic Israeli culture marks off as impermeable borders. In this engagement in favour of a culture of mixture, the a-national – that is, minor – nature of Mizrahiyut in Israel finds expression.

Mizrahiyut as a “minor literature”

I would like to mention a few components that could suggest a general model for discussing Mizrahi writing. But first of all I will examine the terminology of “minor literature” as a relevant theoretical framework. Deleuze and Guattari defined “minor literature” through three main characteristics: firstly the unconventional “extremist” use of language (on the one hand emptying language of its traditional semantic and stylistic norms – de-territorialisation; on the other hand refilling it with anachronistic outmoded norms – re-territorialisation); secondly the political meaning which is inherent in it; and finally, the collective value of minor literature, which means that social-cultural values are more important than its aesthetic value and its artistic achievement.

Let us begin by examining the minor language of Mizrahi writing. It is true that by immigrating to Israel, Mizrahim also emigrated from Arabic or French and other languages spoken by Jews, into Hebrew. Therefore the attitude of the Mizrahim toward those languages bears upon their attitude toward cultural history. The chronicle of the survival of Arabic, for example, and especially the many constraints that this survival was supposed to have coped with, can be seen clearly in Mizrahi fiction. The presence of Arabic points to non-Hebrew residues that insist on asserting themselves within Hebrew texts. Mizrahi fiction delineates a strategy of opposition to the hegemonic politics of purism that sought to erase Arabic as a legitimate Jewish language.

In addition to the residues of Arabic that interfere with the Hebrew text, Mizrahi writing resists the semantic constraints of Israeli Hebrew by challenging these limits in two additional directions – both into the “low” sociolect that deviates from the rules of literary Hebrew in its grammar, syntax and register (I refer to the books of Kobi Oz, Sara Shilo, Orly Castel-Bloom and others) and into the “high” language of the Bible, prayer, and liturgical poetry (Dan Benaya Seri, Albert Swissa, Herzl Cohen, Almog Behar); those historical layers of the Hebrew language that have by and large been perceived by canonical Israeli literature as anachronistic. This linguistic position, shared – in varying forms and measures – by many Mizrahi writers, broadens the legitimate scope of literary Hebrew much more radically than anything found in Ashkenazi hegemonic writing of recent decades.

The conclusion of my short remarks about linguistic procedures which are typical to Mizrahi writing is that it could be well described by “re-territorialisation”, which means retrieving or reactivating the various histories belonging to the
Hebrew language: its religious legacies on the one hand, and its neighbouring languages which were used by the various Jewish populations in Muslim countries on the other hand. Regaining past Hebrew styles and genres does not mean altogether staying aloof from the present spoken language; on the contrary. Being minor means challenging the limits of the literary language by procedures of inclusion of whatever was excluded: the outmoded religious, the neighbouring non-Jewish languages, the ethnic colloquial language which was considered as deviating from the standard literary Hebrew.

The second trait of minor literature, its political dimension, needs to be reconsidered because the argument that some texts are political does not sufficiently distinguish between minor and major literature. The assumption that minor literature is essentially political seems to belong to an outmoded division between the local, national, limited scope of minor literatures, which is less committed to aesthetic values than to communal politics of identity, on the one hand, and the presumably universal, high literary activity of the major literatures, which is considered not to be bound to any collective interests and not to be involved in any political tasks. Since this division is dubious, I would like to suggest that the relatively political aspect of minor literature will be defined by its subversive relationship toward major hegemonic norms. To be political in this context means to question cultural values and institutions by uncovering and dismantling hidden sectorial interests which are promoted and sustained by those values. So understood, the minor literature is not more oriented toward social-cultural values than the major literatures. What makes the difference is that minor literature is openly subversive, critical, proposing itself as an alternative; whereas major literature is normally blurring and even covers the hegemonic social, racial boundaries, upon which it is based. I would like to suggest a few political-cultural subversive narratives which are typical to Mizrahi writing:

**From a divided Israeli space to a Middle Eastern Jewish geography**

Mizrahi writing is “minor literature” because it refuses to accept the Zionist identity that denied the lasting feeling of belonging to the countries of exile, Diaspora, where the Jews lived for many generations. The Middle Eastern and Mediterranean multi-national space appears in Mizrahi writing as an alternative to the Zionist “Negation of the Diaspora”, and is presented by Mizrahi writers as the diametric opposite of the Zionist view that observed the Land of Israel as a first and last place, a point of origin from which the Jews went into exile, as well as their only possible ultimate destination. Zionist ideology observes the Jewish existence in Europe (and accordingly in Muslim countries) as totally distinct and incongruous with the existence in Israel, while Mizrahi literature suggests a continuity and contiguity between Jewish homelands in Muslim countries and in Israel.

Mizrahi writers are also aware that their location in Israel – the geographical periphery – had hitherto been overlooked in Israeli literature. These peripheries are the poor neighbourhoods in southern Tel Aviv and western Jerusalem, as well as the development towns established during the 1950s and 1960s at the country’s border and in sparsely populated areas, as part of a policy of dispersal.
of the Mizrahi population and distancing it from the country’s centres. The disconnection from the centres arouses a Mizrahi consciousness of belonging to the periphery, and divided the Israeli space, imagined otherwise to be uniform, into ethnic zones. Mizrahi fiction is willing to pay attention to the ethnic splits within Israeli space in a dual perspective: it examines the margins, being aware of the existence of prosperous and attractive centres, while it examines the centre itself as a place that cannot be inhabited by Mizrahim and turned into a home for them. In this sense, the spatial consciousness of Mizrahi authors highlights a lack of belonging – both to the periphery and to the centre – and a constant migratory movement between these two split geographical locations.

**The father and Oedipus complex**

Mizrahi fiction displays a sharp awareness of the family, not just of the individual. Immigration to Israel, like life before and after it, is generally portrayed through the lens of family relationships and the awareness of the parents’ difficulty in adjusting to their new country. These writers experienced immigration as a family story that was partially silenced and yet could not be ignored. In this context of traumatic immigration, expressed in the breaking of the continuity of time and space, in complete disconnection from the homeland, its language, its culture, and from previous components of identity, intergenerational identification was stronger than intergenerational conflict. Socialisation of the younger generation did not come at the expense of its identification with the older generation.

In this context, Mizrahi fiction differs from Israeli hegemonic fiction. It rejects the Oedipal narrative that was dominant in Hebrew Zionist fiction. Instead, it offers a narrative of intergenerational partnership and identification, principally between sons and fathers which may be referred to as a “negative-Oedipus” narrative (according to Freud35).

In the works of Swissa, Sami Berdugo, Yossi Avni, Dudu Busi, Almog Behar and Ronit Matalon, criticism is levelled at the fathers not because of the difficulty they had integrating into modern Israeli society, but rather because of their willingness to collaborate with the melting pot policy and to shed their Arab traits, by imitating either the Israeli national discourse or the return-to-religion discourse that was the foundation of the *Shas* movement’s popularity in the 1980s and 1990s. On the other hand, identification with the fathers is channelled in Mizrahi fiction into a demand for remembrance of the Arab cultural and linguistic markers that were expunged during the process of integration into Israeli culture, even if these markers cannot be fully reinstated.

**Arab music as a central component of Arab Jewish identity**

The concept of “Arab Jews,” which has appeared in Mizrahi discourse over the last decade, resists the framework of Israeli national culture that demands the elimination of Arab identity; it suggests possibilities of remembering and re-presenting these partially oppressed elements. Mizrahi fiction frequently addresses music as
a way of establishing an Arab Jewish identity in Israel that can create connections between the present and the historical-cultural past. The experience of remembering Arab music represents, more than anything else, the diasporic attitude of the Mizrahim. It demonstrates one of their common legacies that Israeli culture is unwilling to accept and understand. Extrication from the boundaries of Israeli culture (which has historically rejected the diasporic past and its cultures, especially the Arab Jewish past) manifests itself, for many Mizrahim, as a reconnection with their Arab musical identity. Ella Shohat defines this position regarding Arab music as a “return to the Diaspora”, which she proposes as the opposite of the “return to Zion.” This is the place in which the immigrant rediscovers his ability to rescue a past endangered by extinction.

*The Shoah: a Mizrahi perspective*

Young Mizrahim reject the Shoah as an Israeli narrative (both national and Ashkenazi) that overshadows their own history and forces them to be integrated into a national hegemonic representation. They also reject the writing of first-generation Mizrahi authors and their emotional identification with the stories of European Jewry, claiming it comes at the expense of their unique Mizrahi perspective. This dual rejection – of hegemonic Ashkenazi fiction and of first-generation Mizrahi writers – is evident in two alternative directions adopted by second-generation Mizrahi writers.

One direction is to negate the national validity of the Shoah. Writers such as Busi, Oz and Castel-Bloom examine both the temptation and the danger threatening Mizrahim who imagine they can become Israelis by adopting the hegemonic (Ashkenazi) model of Israeliness, in which association with the Shoah plays a crucial role. They view the concern with the Shoah of European Jewry as a way of blurring the different Mizrahi historical experience, and direct attention to Mizrahim who lose their own perspective within the national Shoah discourse.

The other direction is ethnic. Writers such as Amira Hess and Leah Eini clarify that using the Shoah as a national Israeli narrative or as a means of cultural control is inadequate, and demand that an additional, ethnic viewpoint should be considered. This complementary stance views the Shoah as a necessary ethnic metaphor for understanding the unique experience of immigration and displacement of Mizrahi Jews, and particularly the trauma that accompanied it for over a generation.36

As a concluding remark, let me say that Israeli literature is the context from which Mizrahi literature emerged, and from which it is nourished. However, the distinctive character of Mizrahi writing should not be overlooked, as it is not only a supplement to the major literary corpus. Mizrahi fiction proves that a group of people who had been subaltern for decades can, in fact, produce a literature that engages in a bold critical dialogue with the hegemonic literature, its language and its forms of discourse. Yet, because we also have to question this too clear-cut dichotomy between major and minor, I would suggest that there are zones of conflict as well as zones of relative similarity between them. In this context one could say that Mizrahi writing is not only an alternative to the major literature in Israel,
but at the same time it is a radical version of some immanent trends within the major literature. To say it more clearly, Mizrahi literature is a radical expression of diasporism\(^7\) (galutiyut in Hebrew), which is present but certainly less prominent in Israeli major literature. Only in this respect can we accept the idea that “the minor no longer designates specific literatures, but the revolutionary conditions for every literature.”\(^38\)

**Notes**

1 Nancy Berg has pointed out the lack of clarity in the use of the term “Sephardic”: “We use it inclusively to refer to Jews who trace their lineage back to the Spanish/Iberian population (sefaridim tehorim), those from Arab and Islamic lands (Mizrahim) and members of the Old Yishuv (the community of Jews living in Palestine before the rise of modern Zionism)”, Nancy Berg, “Sephardi Writing: From the Margins to the Mainstream”, in Alan Mintz, ed., *The Boom in Contemporary Israeli Fiction* (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 1997), 115. But despite her view of the term’s problematic nature and lack of precision, she chooses to use it when she discusses the works of writers such as Sami Michael, Shimon Ballas, Amnon Shamosh and Dan Benaya Seri.


4 “I use ‘identity’ to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to ‘interpellate,’ speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be ‘spoken.’ Identities are thus temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us,” Stuart Hall, “Who Needs ‘Identity?’”, in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Peter D. Gay (London: Sage, 1996), 5–6.


7 hooks, *Yearning*.


Also worthy of attention is Lev Hakak’s study *Inferiors and Superiors*, Lev Hakak, *Yerudim ve-na’alim: dmutam shel yehudei ha-mizrah ba-sippur ha-’ivri ha-qatzar* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1981), which addresses “the image of the Jews of the East” in Hebrew fiction. Hakak examines the negative stereotypes that adhered to Mizrahim in literary representations written by Ashkenazi writers. His work was pioneering because it placed at its center an ethnic reading of canonical Hebrew short stories. But his observations were restricted to inferior and superior representations and to expressions of either disdain or respect for Sephardim. He did not discuss the ideological and poetic mechanisms that direct the politics of representation.

Shohat, “Rupture and Return”.


Hakak’s later work, *Chapters in the Literature of Near Eastern Jews*, Lev Hakak, *Peragim be-sifrut yehudei ha-mizrah be-medinet Isra’el* (Jerusalem: Kiryat Sefer, 1985), is the first attempt to examine the poetry and fiction of the “Jews of the East” up to the beginning of the 1980s, and to mark the fact of its presence. But here, too, the study focused on positive and negative images, detaching the discussion of Mizrahi writing from the rest of contemporary Israeli literature. Hakak surveyed as many texts as he could, one after the other, instead of seeking out significant common denominators that could point to a discrete body of writing with subversive aspects. For an evaluation of his literary research, see also Dror Mishani, *Be-kol ha-’inyan ha-mizrahi yesh ‘eizeh absurd* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006), 172–176. Especially important in this context are the work of Nancy Berg on the fiction of the first generation of Mizrahi writers, Nancy Berg, *Exile from Exile: Israeli Writers from Iraq* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996), and of Batya Shimon, ‘Al saf ha-ge’ulah: sippur ha-na’abarah, *dor rishon ve-sheni* (“On the Threshold of Redemption: The Narrative of the Transit Camp, First and Second Generation”) (Or Yehuda: Dvir, 2008), on the literature of the immigrant transit camp. These are joined by Ammiel Alcalay’s work, which touches on Mizrahi writing in Israel, Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), and the anthology of literary works that he selected and translated into English, Ammiel Alcalay, *Keys to the Garden: New Israeli Writing* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1996), which proposes an alternative representation of translated Israeli fiction and poetry. His selection differed sharply from that seen in previous anthologies, which hardly included any Mizrahi writers. Nevertheless, these seminal studies do not discuss Mizrahi fiction as a whole, nor do they address the wealth of important Mizrahi fiction that has been published since the beginning of the 1990s. On the lack of reasonable scholarly attention to this body of work, see also Alexandra Nocke, “Israel and the Emergence of Mediterranean Identity: Expressions of Locality in Music and Literature”, *Israel Studies*, 2/1 (2006): 161–162.


Such a view can even be found among scholars of Mizrahi literature, such as Nancy Berg. Fearing the ghettoisation of the Mizrahim, she writes: “The assumption is that they have more in common with each other than with Ashkenazim, as if they are more different from Ashkenazim than from each other. Not only is each writer and individual, but as a group they also come from dissimilar backgrounds. In the end, their only real commonality is the way the mainstream readership/establishment responds to them as Sephardim. This is at times inaccurate, misleading, and almost always a misreading” (Berg 1997: 115).


This ambivalent attitude toward the European homeland may be seen, for example, in the works of Leah Goldberg, who coined the term “the pain of the two homelands.” The city of her birth appears in her writing only after its destruction, as “a loss that has no replacement”. But from the point of view of the girl who left the city for the Land
of Israel, it was no more than a gray, faded place: “I left that place and did not return/ Nor did I wish to return./ Nor did I wish to return./ My past which I did not love/ Again became my beloved past/. . . in a tear glow memories/The gray homeland” (Leah Goldberg, “Siyum” (“Conclusion”), Muqdam u-meuhar (“Early and Late”), Tel Aviv: Sifriat Poalim, 1959, 66).

22 Natan Alterman’s poems and articles (Ha-tur Ha-shvi’î (“The Seventh Column”), vol. II, Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 1975, 53–67) that address the calls for selective immigration from North Africa shed light on just how profoundly some Zionists feared the waves of Mizrahi immigration.


24 Ella Shohat, “Post-Fanon and the Colonial: A Situational Diagnosis”, in Taboo Memo- ries, Diasporic Voices (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 306. In her discussion of Franz Fanon’s philosophical legacy, Shohat cites Albert Memmi’s critique of Jean-Paul Sartre’s concept of the Jew, according to which the Jew is he whom others see as a Jew and the anti-Semitic creates the Jew – see: Jean-Paul Sartre, Reflexions sur la ques- tion juive (Paris: Gallimard, 1954). Memmi, a Tunisian Jew, argued that in this view the Jew had no history or culture other than that created by the anti-Semitic through his hostile transformation of the Jew into an “other” (Shohat, “Post-Fanon and the Colo- nial”). The approach that sees Mizrahiyut as solely an Ashkenazi Zionist construct is similar – it deprives the Mizrahi not only of timeless “essence” but also of his history and culture.

25 Amiel Alcalay, Keys to the Garden, IX–X.

26 I am not, in this context, interested in drawing a precise line between the second and third generations in the accepted chronological way (writers born in the 1950s and 1960s are taken to be the second generation, those born in the 1970s and 1980s, the third generation) because the writers of both groups were born into immigrant families, or arrived in Israel as children and, in most cases, were educated in Israeli schools. In this paper I am not concerned with the distinctions between the works of these two generations, if there are indeed any significant differences.

27 “Oppression” denotes the discrimination and injustice suffered by different individuals and groups not because a tyrannical force has victimised them, but because of system- atic, inbuilt restrictions intended to reduce their power in areas such as education, the distribution of resources, access to power centers, and so on; Robert Young, White Mythologies: Writing History and the West (London: Routledge, 1990), 41. Henriette Dahan-Kalev has added that one of the problems that arises in the study of oppression in liberal and democratic societies formally committed to individual rights is that this repression is invisible and generally denied, whereas the oppression (discrimination, disadvantage) is built into relationships between groups and inherent in such societies’ political and social institutions: Henriette Dahan-Kalev, “Feminizm bein mizrahiyut le-’ashkenaziyyut” (“Feminism between Easternness and Westernness”) in Min, Migdar, politiqah (“Sex, Gender and Politics”), eds. Daphna Izraeli, Ariella Friedman, Henriette Dahan Kalev, Manar Hassan, Hanna Herzog, Hannah Nave and Sylvia Fogel-Bejawui (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 1999), 220. Such is the case in Israel. To this day, the question of whether ethnic discrimination exists in Israel is the subject of debate. As early as the 1960s some claimed that the issue was a Mizrahi invention (Kalman Katznelson, Ha-mahapehah ha-’ashkenazit [“The Ashkenazi Revolution”], Tel Aviv: Anach, 1964). Mizrahi (and non-Mizrahi – see Swirsky, Lo’ nehshalim) sociologists and intellectuals continue to point to the social and economic gaps, which have grown larger over the years, between the Mizrahi and Ashkenazi populations, despite the state’s integrative welfare and educational policies. In many areas the depth of the discrimi- nation is apparent: in urban development and land distribution see Oren Yiftachel, “Binui umah ve- haluqat ha-merhav be-’etnoqratziah ha-Isra’el’ît’: ityashvut, qarqa’ot, u-fe’arim ‘adati’im” (“Nation-Building and the Division of Space in the Israeli Eth- nocracy: Settlement, Land and Ethnic Disparities”), Iyyunei mishpat, 21/2 (1998):
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637–663; in government allocations, in public education, in higher education, Yinon Cohen, “Pe’arim sotzio-eqonomi’im beyin-mizrahim le-’ashkenazim 1975–1995” (“Socio-economic Cleavages between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi 1975–1995”), Sotziologiah Isra’elit, 1 (1998): 115–134; in income, in the labor market, in property ownership and in many other fields. The gap between the proximity of Mizrahi and Ashkenazim to power centers can be seen in the cabinet and the Knesset, at high levels in the army and court system, in the media and in academia – only 9 percent of the faculty at Israel’s universities are Mizrahi.

28 It should be stressed that the multi-cultural model of Mizrahiut and the fact that it was late in coming, appearing only at the beginning of the 1990s, is linked to the presence of Israeli mechanisms of suppression and censorship with regard to galutiyut, enforced efficiently and demandingly on immigrants from the East, just as they were imposed on immigrants from Europe and the West (the attitude toward Yiddish, for example). The weakening of these suppression mechanisms in the 1970s and 1980s, and the challenge to the literary canon a decade or so later, made it possible for Mizrahiut to emerge in the second generation as one of the most notable and coherent aspects of post-Zionism.

29 I accept in part Oded Heilbrunner’s theoretical discussion of these terms. On the one hand, he sees the “periphery” (a term he always places inside quotation marks) “as a metaphorical antithesis invented by the center in order to justify its ruling status. The center is real and the ‘periphery’ is an imagined counter-entity” (Oded Heilbrunner, Ha-Riqud ha-Dialeqti (“The Dialectic Dance”), Be’ayin Sderot le-Sderot-Rotshild: yehasei merqaz-periferiah ba-tarbut ha-Israelit (“From Sderot to Rothschild Boulevard: the Relations between Centre and Periphery in Israeli Culture”) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), 27. This problematic claim is the early argument put forward by Edward Said, Orientalism (New York: Vintage Books, 1978), regarding the term “Oriental,” which he viewed as a unilateral Western invention meant to confirm Western rule over the East. On the other hand, Heilbrunner makes another claim that does not doubt the reality of the periphery: “Its relational systems with the center create a cultural space with a territorial dimension that integrates elements created during the provision of the periphery’s needs by the center and during the periphery’s opposition to the center. This cultural space is dynamic, constantly renewing itself in the process of providing for the center’s and the periphery’s needs, which are control (the center), resistance (the periphery) and cooperation between the two spaces while the center remains dominant” (Heilbrunner, Ha-Riqud ha-Dialeqti). According to this second argument, the reality of the periphery is evident in its resistance to the center. I certainly accept this dialectic position, which deviates from Said’s early stance. Moreover, I seek to show that there is not only resistance, as it is expressed in Mizrahi fiction, but also the lack of interest in cooperation with the center – that is, a determined attempt to offer an alternative. Of course, this lack of cooperation is not likely to be found in economic and cultural areas in which the periphery needs government help in the form of funding and economic support.

30 Hannan Hever has pointed out that the story of the immigration as written by Mizrahi writers differs notably from the hegemonic immigration story that prevailed in Zionist Hebrew culture and literature, Hannan Hever, “Lo’ banu min ha-yam: geographiah sifrutit mizrahit” (“We Did Not Come from the Sea: A Mizrahi Literary Geography”), in Mizrahim be-Isra’el: ‘iyun biqorti mehudash (“Orientals in Israel: A New Critical Analysis”), eds. Hannan Hever, Yehudah Shenhav and Pnina Motzafi-Haller (Tel Aviv: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute/Ha-kibbutz ha-mehudah, 2002), 193.

31 Said, Orientalism.


34 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature, translation by Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 16–27.
38 Deleuze and Guattari, Minor Literature, 18.
Two books were published recently outlining Mizrahi poetry in Israel. Both put Erez Biton – born in Oran, Algeria, from Moroccan Jewish parents in 1942, nowadays considered one of the most renowned Israeli poets and the first Mizrahi to be awarded the Israel Prize for Literature in 2015 – at the centre of their historiography, recognising him as a potential father figure in this sphere of Israeli poetry. In a crucial aspect, though, which I find important for understanding this poetry’s politics and expression, these studies do not seem to find a resolution: is this poetry an alternative to the establishment’s Ashkenazi Zionism (thereby also an alternative to Israeli canonical poetry), or is it a pained and subversive part of this establishment? In what follows I will outline Biton’s poetics not as an endeavour to proclaim an alternative, empowered marginal identity, but rather as a struggle to be accepted as part of the mainstream, to have a sense of belonging, and only from this context to destabilise its foundations.

Biton’s poetry is a special manifestation of the aesthetics that comprise life in a multicultural environment. It proclaims identity as an amalgam of style, performance and gesture, which suggest one’s hierarchical position towards cultural capital, i.e. manner of speech, clothing style, music preferences and so on. As this is the only expression of identity – a construction of flavours, tendencies and styles – it not only loses its essentialist meaning, but also implies that the hegemonic identity, too, is nothing more than stylistic gestures. The reading of Mizrahi poetry as resistance by Israeli literary scholars Ktzia Alon and Yochai Oppenheimer is highly accurate, and has special significance in the wider historiography of Zionism. However, in reading some of the contemporary Mizrahi poets, first and foremost Biton, I wish to provoke and raise some objections. In doing so, I will build a wider understanding of Mizrahi poetry and identity in Israel as a traumatic one, a crucial aspect that is being neglected by most scholars.

An example of my critique can be found in the way Oppenheimer reads Biton’s Taqtzir sihah (“A Conversation Summary”), insofar as he understand the question posed by the narrator simply as it is:

[W]hat is it to be authentic? to run in the middle of Dizengoff and shout in Judeo-Arabic/ Ana Min El Magreb, Ana Min El Magreb (I am from the Atlas
Mountains, I am from the Atlas Mountains) what is it to be authentic? to sit in Roval dressed colourfully in Agal and Sarbieh or to declare loudly: my name is not Zohar, I am Zaish.3

Oppenheimer understands this scene as a wish: “the narrator admits to his readers that Tel Aviv is not the place where he can fulfil this authenticity. It is a wish to combine different territories without a possibility to carry that out.”4 I suggest reading the question in the poem ironically, as a protest against any sort of authenticity.5 If being authentic is to be dressed like a Moroccan and shout like a Moroccan, this authenticity is nothing but attributes and stereotypes defined by the hegemony against which the subject shouts in the first place. When asking rhetorically “what is it to be authentic?” the narrator actually answers that there is no such authenticity at all.

Alon’s and Oppenheimer’s readings display some principal assumptions, which create the idea of an alternative Mizrahi poetics, involving a more open propensity toward diverse registers of Hebrew (especially rabbinical Hebrew) and by opposing Zionist-modernism’s inclination towards secularism and immersion in the Bible. Mizrahi poets also apparently exhibited less dichotomy in their ideology, views, mimesis and values, unlike Israeli national literature, which has more of a clear agenda. However, in my mind these properties do not seem to be inherently important in Biton’s poetry. According to the excerpt and understanding above, Eastern or Maghrebi cultural heritage lacks the possibility of proclaiming an alternative or polar understanding. They are suffused with the hegemonic discourse. In addition, it is important to mention that also some Ashkenazi and canonical writers share many of the features found to be especially Mizrahi. These include a critical stance towards the Zionist negation of the Diaspora, the longing for places other than Zion and a general discontent with the life in the Land and State of Israel. In this regard, the scholars’ illuminating and profound readings in the work of poets like Mois Benarroch and Sami Shalom Chetrit could be just as suited to a reading of Shmuel Yosef Agnon or Ya’aqov Shabtay.6 Indeed, any writer, however Zionist, is always aware of the tensions between exile and homeland present in Israeli existence. While national writing had to strive for a unified narrative, Mizrahi literature exhibited different tendencies, but shared them with many other Israeli writers, some of whom were completely immersed in Zionism.7

In the same way it is also possible to read the famous opposition made in the 1970s by Benny Ziffer, between Biton and the long poems in the idyllic genre written by the early Hebrew poet Shaul Tchernichovsky.8 This is Alon’s response to the comparison that alleges Biton’s inferiority: “The previous and normative example of Tchernichovsky’s Idylls does not fit the rough form or the tight narrative that discloses extremely deep emotions.”9 I would argue otherwise. Tchernichovsky’s Idylls are suffused with strong emotions just as Biton’s poems are, and Ziffer was mistaken because he was not able to accept these qualities in the case of a then young and marginal poet.10 There is little doubt that Biton’s poetry is unique in the context of Hebrew poetry, but its special value comes not from being
an alternative, but rather from being an embattled part of hegemony itself. Its provocative quality is epitomised in the Israeli slang reflexive verb *le-hishtaknez* (“to become Ashkenazi”). This also resembles the Anglo-American term “passing”, which relates to black people who seem white by way of their manners. I actually find this verb expressive of the entire drama of Zionist entrepreneurship, since everyone had to become white, as the pure Ashkenaz (or Europe) was nowhere to be found, not even in Europe (in many parts of which the humiliating term *Ostjude* was used). I will also try to express in my reading what separates and distinguishes Mizrahim among themselves, as they lacked a singular identity.

By reading only one strophe in one of Biton’s poems, I wish to show how his poetics move in a single sentence from the neutral, aesthetic, witty and virtuosic literary play (especially in a dense intertextual approach to Hebrew poetry) into a sociological and political performance of identity, construed by particularities that are being unravelled before our eyes as political, that is, consisting of power relations. My own critical approach will move the same way, from purist literary criticism to sociology. This shift, I argue, is at the core of Biton’s political move precisely because his poetry is formed in a context, specifically European and Israeli. Following Pierre Bourdieu’s understanding of the artistic discourse that creates and coerces the norm of its own reception – that is to say, that it proclaims to be essentiality without a purpose, insofar as it wishes to be seen as a pure form and not as material – I will then pay attention to Biton’s materiality, where the subversive act is not in the foreground as a kind of manifesto (which we may find in the work of many other Mizrahi poets) but within his materiality, his sociological inherent position. The territory that this poetry inhabits is part of the common, universalistic and hegemonic voice, while maintaining oppositional and dialogical relations of negotiation with nationality. For that reason, it matches Bhabha’s postcolonial theoretical approach with his concepts of mimicry, fissure and the relations between the pedagogic and the performative, rather than strict oppositional theories of nationality.

Music is at the centre of the strophe I have chosen, and a very prominent component of the collection of gestures and preferences that creates identity. Among Mizrahi poets there are some who express an awareness of an oppositional view through music. Furthermore, as Oppenheimer shows, the Ashkelon-born poet and activist Tikvah Levi has criticised commercial trends in our multicultural era and the mixing of East and West together, which eventually leads to a dominance of Western characteristics. Such approaches with regard to the interpretation of music are very important and are used to eradicate many debates in Israel in recent years. Yet, it is important to explain that such an oppositional position will not be found in Biton and, as I will argue, this might have to do with specific cultural background: whereas Biton was born in Algeria in the early 1940s, Levi was born in Israel in 1960 into an Iraqi Jewish family and belong to a younger generation.

Arguably, the poet that best perpetuates Biton’s heritage is Shimon Buzaglo, an acclaimed Israeli translator of ancient Greek poetry, born in Acre in 1962 into a Moroccan Jewish family. Oppenheimer places him in opposition to Levi, as a poet who took over Western values, voicing and utilising them as his own.
Biton, Buzaglo deals repeatedly with attributes that shape identity as a mixture of power relations within social mobility: he is the poet of passing, of becoming European (as I have argued, Zionism’s greatest endeavour) and his poetics are almost a manual to stereotype apparatus. Buzaglo, like many other Mizrahi poets, inclines to Bach’s music, as in Lo’nora’ (“Not So Bad”), set in a living room of a famous actor:

Once, I well remember, after hearing in his fine stereo the choral Ruht wohlf from St John’s Passion, conducted by the legendary Ramin, and after we waited patiently for our soul to get back from its journey, he told a joke with a punch line in Yiddish. Suddenly he stopped. Something in my face showed him I did not completely understand. Just a moment he said, what is your origin? Moroccan I replied. It was Friday; evening; silence outside; silence also in the house. A time I could not measure stood in the half somber living room. 

In the course of the chapter, I will inquire deeply into the encounter between Bach’s music and many Mizrahi writers and try to elucidate his unique allure by understanding the possible politics to be found behind his music. It is important to mention that what I refer to here as “Western values”, such as the signifier “Bach” itself, do not have any essentialist claim on identities. For that matter, it is well known that many Mizrahi authors – the most obvious example of whom is perhaps the Egyptian-Israeli writer and journalist Jacqueline Kahanoff, born in Cairo in 1917 and died in Tel Aviv in 1979 – came from a colonial heritage that put them far closer to Europe’s main cultural centres and products than the Jews of the Shtetl. Mizrahi Jews in Israel were usually in a different position, deprived of their previous (that was also colonial) heritage, but my study wishes to address this only by way of performance and construction. Without referring to the dramatic conclusion of Buzaglo’s poem, I wish to move to the strophe by Biton, which outlines the exact standpoint of love for poetry and Bach’s music as part of an unsettled identity.

Through Bach into the particular I

In the acclaimed poem Divrei req’a rishonyim (“Some Initial Background”), part of the 2009 volume Timbisrt – Tzipor maroqa’it, Erez Biton outlines some primary details about himself, to explain his position in an intergenerational drama. In the first strophe he deals with his mother, in the second with his father, and then, in the third and last strophe with himself:

I myself
distancing me
far into my heart
used to memorise
when everyone was asleep
The poem shows a withdrawal into oneself, and more than that, into one’s own heart that expresses a vast inner space by means of the repetition of “far”. The end is a foetus-like, nocturnal scene in which the narrator lies on his bed, like the rest of his family, and while dealing with the Jewish act of memorising and repeating (shinun), actually sings the religious songs of the great German composer in the Judeo-Arabic vernacular. A profound sense of spiritual and religious emotion dwells in this strophe encompassed by a single phrase, where the self is positioned at a crossroads of identity belonging: a long heritage in the long history of Hebrew poetry.

The sentence seems at first to unfold completely naturally, in its calm rhythm, as a simple romantic confession of a multicultural persona. But as my analysis will show, this sentence is made out of very dense traces of political questions and trends in modern thought. The narrator shifts his position within that single sentence from confirming the Hebrew hegemonic position of poetry into a very subversive statement of the marginal. He does so by addressing a different father and hegemonic figure, not Eastern European as Bialik and Tchernichovsky, not medieval and Spanish as Yehudah Halevi, but from a completely different territory, out of the scope of Hebrew literature, but very much within the Western musical canon: Johann Sebastian Bach. I will show how the narrator appropriates Bach with all his cultural capital, but at the same time de-territorialises him by destabilising the hegemonic territory. Biton is actually decomposing centre and universalism by way of the very particular and the marginal. By appropriating Bach he also changes the features of this well-established father.

The heart: Hebrew poetry and identity

A recent study in modern Hebrew literature made by Ariel Hirschfeld has dealt thoroughly with the role of the heart in Hebrew poetry and especially in that of the medieval Iberian poet Yehudah Halevi and in that of Haim Nahman Bialik, one of the founders of modern Hebrew literature, both significant anchors of the Israeli national canon. Hirschfeld reads it according to Harold Bloom’s paradigm of the anxiety of influence, by which the history of Western literature is seen as a generational drama where each generation acts out of a destabilising and anxious relation to the preceding one. Hence in Hirschfeld’s reading of that paradigm, the heart in Hebrew poetry is first a means or a motive by which authors signify their identity.

The heart in Hebrew poetics is recognised already as a *topos* in Psalms with the act of lyrics, of poetry itself, which enables orientation towards God. In the *Book of Jonah* the heart is a vast location with relation to the vastness of the sea, as in the famous metaphor, “in the heart of the seas,” which was essential to Halevi’s
masterpiece *Ha-tirdof na’arut?* (“Still Chasing Fun at Fifty”),19 where the self and the heart are intertwined with the poem itself.20 All those values are to be found in the strophe by Biton, but with a recognition of the social context: the self is situated within (and opposite) its concrete environment. The “I” that diverges from its social environment is a clear allusion to Bialik’s 1902 poem *Lo’ zakhit* ba-’or min ha-hefker (“My Spark”):

One spark is hid in the fortress of my heart,  
so small but mine alone;  
I ask it of no man, I stole it not,  
’Tis in me, and my own.21

Here too, as in Biton, there is a resignation from the environment, which in the case of the latter is much more specific, in the context of his family. The anxiety of influence and the intergenerational drama are what usually anchor historiographies of Hebrew literature. These pertain here as well, but as I will show, only to a very limited extent that Biton seems to challenge.

This drama of identity that surrounds the heart evolves primarily around the use of the Hebrew language with its long heritage and theological power. Whereas Halevi’s poetics connect the heart and the Hebrew tongue – therefore succumbing to his identity as a Levi, that is a descendant of the sacred and liturgical tradition of and within Hebrew – the standpoint in Bialik is actually of estrangement. He exploits the theological depth of the sacred tongue, but revolutionises its use by extracting it from its traditional framework and placing it in a new context of secularity.22 Bialik crafts his art in Hebrew but not in tradition, and in “My Spark”, he finds holiness intimately within his heart, thereby creating a terrible loneliness between himself as a Hebrew poet and the tradition of this poetry.23

Language also plays an important role in Biton’s work. Like Halevi, who writes in Hebrew and relates to the richness of Arabic medieval poetry of his time, Biton writes purely in Hebrew (there are no foreign words in his poem), yet relates to Judeo-Arabic and, as I will outline, also to Latin and German. Hebrew is the only material he uses, but in a very condensed way he creates a set of foreign references.

In her observations on Mizrahi poetics, Alon identifies an aspect that distinguishes it from Western tradition. She notes the strong bond it has to tradition itself, embodied in the Hebrew scriptures and in the writings of previous writers: “The inauguration of the poetic self out of the deep core of a previous poet is a powerful act of resistance to the extreme individualism of the west, the remarkable theorization of which is Bloom’s famous book *The Anxiety of Influence.*”24 It seems at first that Biton, like Bialik, proclaims in his strophe a similar oppositional approach to tradition. If he describes an individual who stands out of his familial and general social framing, his creation does not fit with Alon’s observation. However, I argue that Biton’s achievement here is the way he was able to subvert both dichotomies: Biton destabilises here not by means of Bloom and Hirschfeld’s anxiety and rebellion, as part of an intergenerational contestation, and not by means of returning to his origins as it is conceived by Alon. Instead, he is able to
destabilise from within (and hence, also in territory) by means that one can crystallise through two theoretical concepts that were articulated and expounded in the last thirty years: the concepts of writing as put forward by Derrida and that of the colonial mimicry of Bhabha.

The performance of mimicry: Bach, Moroccans and Mizrahi Jews

In fact, in Biton’s early poetry, identity is generally conceived as split, not at all unified or calm as it seems in the equilibrium of his lines. Hannan Hever reads it as an identity that is being consolidated only through struggle and hence is never essentialised. He bases his reading on Bhabha’s notion of colonial mimicry, a performance that exposes ironic gaps in the way the cultural subject behaves. Mimicry functions as approval, it re-approves cultural imperatives that are known and normative, but for the same reason can simultaneously express disapproval and disobedience. It exposes what seems or “should” be taken as natural and fluent in hegemonic values, which are anyway just a sum of actions, of performances, of constructions. The ironic gap can be conceived when a person of black skin passes as white. If white identity is only a sum of gestures that do not have anything to do with colour, then there is no white identity at all, no essential identity. Biton needs Bach and approves of his dominance as a cultural patriarch, but at the same time he also places him in the most particular circle of geography and ethnicity. By appropriating Bach’s Westernness, he also destabilises that Westernness, and the question of whether Bach himself is in a way Arab arises.

The split identity and mimicry go hand in hand, they are part of the same cultural landscape, and they dismantle the possibility of any holistic approach to identity (be it Israeli, Western or Moroccan). I want to elaborate now on the importance of the very particular standpoint of the narrator, who actually proclaims in the original that he memorises Bach’s Masses in Judeo-Moroccan. I want to suggest that this mimicry is a special feature among Moroccan Jews and not necessarily present in the entire scope of Mizrahim. It may well be less evident in the Iraqi immigration, for example, due to that population’s maintenance of the spoken Arabic language and their general awareness of Arab culture and Arabic literature. Even though they belong to different generations, most of the poets I have mentioned above are Moroccans: Biton, Buzaglo, Chetrit and Benarroch, and they somewhat diverge from the politics that a poet of Iraqi origin like Tikvah Levi exhibits. It seems that Mizrahi academic discourse does not pay enough attention to differences among eastern Jewish communities, and by focusing exclusively on the polar forms of Mizrah versus Ashkenaz it partakes in the hegemonic ignorance of the Israeli ethos. Moroccan Jews comprised the largest immigration from the East (somewhat bizarrely, since in the Arab world Moroccans are referred to as “Westerners”, that is, those who come from the west, the Maghreb), and more than any other community, were forcibly dispersed among the different development towns (‘ayarot pituah) in the periphery. Their cultural and historical inclination towards individualism, disobedience and unwillingness to be gathered
into unions have made them the most “problematic” community among the ‘olim (immigrants). The basic antagonism of Moroccan culture (with rebelliousness at its core) to the Israeli establishment can account for the strength of Morocco as such a powerful signifier in Israeli internal politics.28

I dare to raise some other differentiations. Like my critique on the alternative that Alon and Oppenheimer seem to have outlined in their books, other Mizrahi activists in Israel also propose a “new” (with or without quotation marks) identity that seems unified and even harmonious but does not match the unsettling and rebellious Moroccan experience. Another important element is the relation to the colonial culture. Many French values that relate to aspects of France’s popular culture – from leisure to fashion – were conceived wrongfully in the yishuv and then in early Israeli society in the Forties and Fifties, due to a primary influence from (Ashkenazi) Central/East European values. Moreover, the yishuv was bound in its outset to (Protestant-like) values of learning and frugality, which suited the British mandate in Palestine and were to some extent shared by Jews who came from other territories under British rule, like Iraq.

Of course these are all preliminary and provocative outlines that call for much more scrutiny, but they assist us in understanding the standpoint of Biton’s narrator: it wasn’t a Mass by Berlioz or Fauré (or even Mozart for that matter) he chose to sing in his Moroccan dialect, but one by Bach, the composer most associated with Protestantism and Prussia (there is no other composer who contributed more to Luther’s texts than Bach with his famous Chorals). French has a somewhat problematic classification in Israel because of the Jews of its former colonies. For them, Israeli slang made a new term, tzarfoqa’it, which is a mix of tsarfatit (“French”) and maroqa’it (“Moroccan”), which degraded its speakers from the position of being able to speak French properly. The cunningness of the postcolonial mimicry is very complex here: it leaves the French language aside for the sake of Arabic, which in my mind has more cultural capital among the Israeli left (because of its pertinence to academic scholarship of the Jewish past, peace activists and national security personnel).29 These are very fine nuances: if the Moroccan Jew wishes to be accepted, he should undress from his tsarfoqaic manners and make a bridge between Hebrew, Arabic and European “universalism” played here by the Protestant Bach.

Music as such performs a very significant function in cultural and sociological evaluations. As marked by Bourdieu, it is the best means through which a culture shows its universalism, and has a special claim in identifying social classes.30 As I hope my analysis shows, music has special relevance in the paradigm of mimicry and passing, and for the same reason it exposes the ironic gaps in what is “right”, as it is only a matter of behaviour. Bach is widely encountered among Israeli Mizrahi poets who needed him to define their own artistic independence. The Baghdad-born Yoav Hayek, who belongs to Biton’s generation, proclaims identity a standpoint which resembles that of Some Initial Background in a 1979 poem named Kartis Biqur (“Visiting Card“): “I hear Bach/ and my blood is smoking shisha.”31 Whereas in Biton, the German music is being produced simultaneously with what is Arabic (Judeo-Arabic), here too music overlaps the east by way of a
process, the performance of smoking. This is a sort of realisation of metaphor – part A (Bach) faces part B (Arabic, Shisha) by means of the situation itself: smoking, memorising. Another example, more loaded with sociological attributes, one can find in Shira Ohayon’s Tahanah Sofit (“Last Stop”): “in the morning we’ll eat goat cheese/ English tea/ Bach’s Fugue/ and Alkasksho titpuarlo.” In this sort of name-dropping, the Israeli poet and activist of Moroccan origin Shira Ohayon – born in Israel and belonging to the second Mizrahi generation – again creates a montage of multicultural landscape which cannot pass Bach’s glowing appeal.

The sociological aspects of ascetic Protestantism are also reflected in the music itself. The common and not necessarily wrong notion about Bach is that he wrote first and foremost for instruments, and even while composing for the human voice, he used to maintain this mechanical or technical approach. The long melismatic melodies one can so easily find in the Italian and French music of Bach’s time are very rare in his music. The accepted dichotomy in musicology between the Italian music devoted to the human voice, and the German complex and polyphonic composition of instrumental music, is salient for my argument. Those “Fugues by Bach” as mentioned in Ohayon’s poem, relate exactly to this genre of multi-layered voices that is the epitome of both Bach and the entire German baroque era, and it stands explicitly against the beauty of the simple melodic line that is the centre of what is considered to be Mizrahi music in Israel, captured in the beauty of the voices of famous singers such as Zohar Argov and Eyal Golan. The performance of music is a kind of a mirror to the performance of mimicry.

“Small Masses”: writing and différance

The ironic gap or rupture that the colonial mimicry unveils starts from the very basic understanding that a black person (x) can play a white one (y). The irony is blatant, since it is “obvious” that x is not “really” y. The second stage that this understanding entails is that there is no real y at all, for y is just a sum of performances. Therefore, what interests Bhabha most are the places where performance fails, where an unsettled location of differences emerges because these performances are a sum of repetitions, of types, conventions, what is already known: “the desire to emerge as ‘authentic’ through mimicry – through a process of writing and repetition – is the final irony of partial representations.” And this irony is what is presented in Biton’s rhetorical question of “what is it to be [being] authentic”, as by “being”, he captures it as a process of representation.

This notion of writing derives from Derrida in his On Grammatology, and it is also informed by the crucial gap made by de Saussure, between the signifier and its signified, that Derrida took to its most abundant extreme. For Derrida, the lack of “natural attachments” between for example the word “table” and the normally squared object on which we dine or write is the source for writing’s advantages, since if we leave “natural” aside, we are left only with “attachments”. Mimicry, like writing, does not enable “authentic”, for it only conjures up (“goat cheese”, “English tea”, “couscous”, “Bach”). In the same way, Biton’s narrator is not just Moroccan, but in a way also German, and Bach himself is not just German but also
Moroccan, because of the plain possibility to put in writing “Bach” and “Moroccan”, and in this case also from the emergence of singing Bach in Moroccan.

I want to return now to the first part of Biton’s strophe, which deals with the figuration of “far” and “within”. It seems like a simplistic differentiation made by a romantic suffering individual, in this case, within a postcolonial and multicultural context. The narrator differentiates his own complex identity of hearing and singing Bach, from the folkloristic and even inferior identity of his parents, presented in the former strophes as lacking such complex traits. In that regard, the first half of the strophe only approves the egoistic “I” of literature and its theoretic counterparts in the works of Bloom or Hirschfeld. The anxiety of influence is at the core not only of Bialik and Halevi, but also here in Some Initial Background: all narrators manifest a Western universalistic and logocentric standpoint, where the self is at the centre of one hierarchical narrative. Moreover, this first half diverges from what seems to be unique in Mizrahi poetry: it does not address the past as a traditional heritage to be evaluated, but stands as an individual that rebels, in an intergenerational conflict that celebrates his own special traits. The temporal and uneven process of writing and mimicry emerges, I argue, in the second half of the strophe. Here, unlike the inconceivable “far within”, what stands at the centre is a different poetic value, the one of “Small Masses”.

While reflecting on this famous poem by Biton, I recalled those magical lines as “Bach Cantatas in Judeo-Arabic” and I thought of the corpus of pieces Bach wrote for each Sunday, making it one of the greatest achievements Western music has ever known. Bach did not really write Masses, only the great Mass in B Minor, because he was less familiar with this Latin religious ceremony. What marks out Bach’s vocal music above all is the abundance of cantatas he wrote for his Lutheran community in the vernacular German. Thus my association of the cantatas with the Judeo-Arabic dialect was the natural attachment to do. What I have processed in my memory is exactly what Derrida finds in writing, that is, remembering (or “memorising” as in Biton) that is also forgetting: “writing is at once mnemotechnique and the power of forgetting.”

Derrida’s *différance* is his way to articulate a different syntax that diverges from ethnocentrism by means of both difference and deferral, as the course and movement is based only on attachments and detachments, that is, of differences. This is a process of shifting between traces rather than developing from a source into conclusion, reason and outcome, etc. The movement it enables is not confined between x and y for example, but is more of a detour and so between x and s or between x and the roman digit for ten (x), between them and the cross, etc. What comes about in this phrase of Biton is not only the dialect of Judeo-Arabic (in the original, Moroccan), but also German, positioning both languages on the side of Latin (the Catholic Mass) and the Hebrew of the poem.

**The minor move**

Derrida was not concerned with the role of music. On the other hand, the way Bourdieu related to music, as the “purest” of all arts, which, according to him, stands at the far and opposing edge of the politics of the theatre, is salient here.
Music, it seems, can play very little part in the signifying process that the Derridian *différance* suggests. As I have intimated, musical properties can have ideological implications, as in the near dichotomy between polyphonic Germanic music and the Italian melismatic voice, but the writing of music has much less potential to become what Derrida defines as writing, for it does not pertain to the gap between signifiers and signified. That is the reason why Biton juxtaposes music with language and does not allow us to actually *hear* Bach in Arabic (the narrator memorises rather than sings).

The course or process of writing and mimicry in this poem are so convoluted that they preclude any attempt to address it via ethnocentric reading, à la Bloom. Had Biton chosen the common cantatas, it might have been a quite simplistic poem, charming as it is, of evoking colonial complex subjectivity. But not only did he not choose cantatas, Mass or Masses, he explicitly defines them as “small”. And yes, there are, as in a kind of subconscious or the repressed, small Masses written by Bach, four to be exact, that are named for that reason “Missa Brevis” (short Mass). They are actually half-fragmented Masses he composed for Lutheran services and are extremely marginal among Bach’s repertoire, normally based on earlier material he composed for his cantatas. The act of appropriating Bach by an Israeli-Moroccan Jewish author just had to be a struggle, of the right to own, of credibility (of memory) in a very dense process of writing and mimicry.

It does not matter how aware Biton was of his precise decision to describe small masses by Bach, for that matter he might have chosen that unwittingly, almost as a slippery movement between cantatas and Masses. What is important is that these traces make the deferral movements of identities by small contrasts – Grand Mass in B Minor, cantatas, small Masses; (Judeo-)Hebrew, Judeo-Arabic (Moroccan), Catholic Latin, Lutheran Latin, vernacular German – shifting the poetic course or manoeuvre from the individual (“far into my heart”) to the political. This is one of the ways in which Deleuze and Guattari define *minor literature*, one that is being written in major (that is, hegemonic or common) language but not in the environmental territory of hegemonic nationality (and again, unlike many multilingual poems by Biton, this one is purist in his usage of Hebrew):

> In minor literature personal interest becomes much more needed, essential; it is enlarged as if with a microscope because within it lies a totally different story. For that matter the familial triangle is being connected with other triangles – commercial, financial, bureaucratic, law like.³⁶

And, perhaps it should be added, also cultural. This “totally different story” that transforms personal matters is the place where the confident self, which outlines its selfhood by hegemonic language as universalistic, becomes unsettled by the lack of a single unified narrative or syntax. Instead, this positioning is being suffused with signifiers that have political implications. The familial triangle in the poem, which seems so unified, even classic – mother, father, son – is no more private or universal, but instead sociological and political.

According to Deleuze and Guattari, this process of de-territorialising language is the necessary outcome of re-territorialising it. Hence in the
historiographic and centralised composition of father, mother, child, or in the paradigm of Hebrew literature, the patriarchal grandfather (Yehudah Halevi), the father (Bialik) and the possible child (Biton in Some Initial Background) are appropriated and dismantled at the same time. This decentralised historiography of plurality is in fact genealogical: “A network of relations, constantly in tension, in activity, rather than a privilege that one might possess . . . a perpetual battle rather than a contract regulating a transaction or the conquest of a territory”.37

These remarkable words by Foucault can serve as a description of this movement between re- and especially de-territorialisation by means of writing and mimicry. National historiography of the Hebrew language, just like centralising the great Bach and his huge Mass, is disturbed and even shaken by this genealogical system of political values, and what seems natural and indisputable instead is unpacked and questioned. What are the values of Bach, Bialik and Halevi? What do they mean for us nowadays? All those father figures are separated from their “transparency” or “naturalness” and become estranged. Biton’s syntax creates a territory of modifiers only, there is no positioning of subject-predicate-object: Bach, Bialik, Biton, Halevi, cantatas, big Mass, small Masses, Hebrew, German, Latin, French, tzarfoqaic, Judeo-Moroccan are all equal.

The cunningness entailed in this strophe starts with the re-territorialisation of literature vis-à-vis Hebrew:

I myself
distancing me
far into my heart

and then de-territorialises it by deferral movement to territories other than the nation:

used to memorise
far into my heart
small masses by Bach
in Judeo-Arabic.38

What are they like those Masses? This question lingers without a response in the poem. Unlike embarrassing multicultural engagements that unify by mixing, such as in musical albums that bear the titles Mozart in Egypt or Bach in Africa, Biton’s semiotics of writing by difference are characterised only by signifiers that stand aside, alongside and defer.

**The gestures of trauma**

Having read in detail a strophe of Erez Biton’s Some Initial Background, I would like to conclude on another Biton’s classic, Mashehu ‘al ruah tzazit (“Of Agitated Spirit”), unravelling a second aspect that I find crucial to the entire understanding
of Mizrahi identity and poetics in an Israeli context, that is the bodily representation of trauma:

[Y]ou are requesting that we will sigh with hints . . . at the most with a rhymed whistle/ but our sigh is like agitated spirit . . . you stand embarrassed in front of a sigh . . . how is it possible that where the sun burns/ the sigh mourns also in the hearts of the dogs . . . our sigh shall not be alien/ our sigh shall not be wretched . . . please at least leave us to sigh.39

This is a very accurate realisation of the Hebrew proverb la ‘-azov lanahot.40 The poem subverts the normal usage of the proverb in everyday Hebrew that usually makes ’anahot, sighs, a passive description, almost as if it becomes a geographical place. Instead, the poem charges it with the initial active meaning it has by its verb: to sigh. In provoking “leave us to sigh”, the poem calls not for abandonment (leave us alone), as is usually the case with the proverb (abandoned to sigh), but for attention, in sighing. The state of being restrained or constrained is juxtaposed here with genuine expression, seeing through bodily gestures of laughter or sighing that seem only to burst out, and have animalistic features. This poem is usually cited so frequently because of its metaphor “we are shattered rhymes”, but it is this deconstruction of ’anahot that makes it so unique, for the pieces of rhymes are exactly those sighs that can never be proper, and by that establish the body as a sociological site of shame and silence. The rhymes of poetry seem superficial and alien to this poetics of body unarticulated – that is, scattered by sighing.

Elsewhere, I have outlined my view of Israeli Mizrahi poetry as “utter poetry” (shirah meforeshet) that because of its marginality has to be unified with its identity.41 It is poetry that only utterly, explicitly, and without figurative language (what we normally expect from poetry) manifests identity. This is also my understanding of the critique, made by Haviva Pedaya and Hannan Hever, of Israeli poetry of the Sixties and onwards, which was the voice of an individualistic narrator that talked out of a universalistic “I”.42 Opposing that attitude, Mizrahi poetry always uttered a very particular self (we saw a conflictual example of this in Some Initial Background). Following that, I have wished also to read Israeli society as one that is constructed on the grounds of three traumas: the Shoah, the Nakba and what I call Mizrahi trauma. The third refers to specific historical events, such as the selective immigration policy of the State of Israel toward North African Jewish migrants in the 1950s and 1960s or the Yemenite children affair – both still disputed issues in Israel – but also, more generally, to the violence of everyday speech to which Mizrahi subjects have been and are exposed.

Since I view Mizrahi poetry as a manifestation of identity, it may then be read also as a window on the ongoing trauma inherent to that identity. No less important, it serves as testimony for ordeals of the past that are not present anymore. So far, the importance of testimony in composing the historiography of victims has been evident particularly in the case of Holocaust Studies: the Eichmann Trial, where survivors’ testimonies were in the foreground, is the most blatant example.43 Secondly, testimonies are a crucial means by which we can understand the
Palestinian Nakba. I would argue that also Mizrahi poetry, if seen as a testimony, can be interpreted as the continuation of a shared procedure of facing collective catastrophes by means of individual testimony – especially when, as common to the three cases cited, it is difficult to find the witnesses and make their voices heard.

The poet Viky Shiran – born in Cairo in 1947 and migrated to Israel as a child to later become an acclaimed artist and one of the founders of Israeli feminism in general (not just Mizrahi feminism) and a true political activist that today has an allure of a legend – has written interesting lines about the confrontation between herself, as the narrator of the poem, and her father. The two share the terrible assaults that Israeli society stigmatised – that is, in the original and literal sense of the word – on his body, usually by concentrating on, and exposing, the lower bodily strata. This is an excerpt from Shir ’atzuv, mavki (“A Sad, Wailing Poem”):

Come daughter, I will tell you a personal secret, once in seven months I defecate, barely even that, since we came to Israel I feared bursting out with my mouth, hands or teeth, now look what came out of it, it is the stomach that stopped // daddy, I calmly answer, it is all a matter of an enema, he laughs and uses his fingers to count the defects/ the one who become deaf and the one who become mute and the one whose nerves got stiff and the one whose throat muscles seize// his friends become invalid from crying, and those, he opens his fists, those who committed suicide.

Here, the terrible burden of shame is reviled by common daily gestures of bodily behaviour: the fear of bursting out with the mouth, the hands and teeth. Mizrahim are always conceived to be liable to outbursts, in their sexual and social existence in the Israeli public sphere.

In fact, what we are told by the father in Shiran’s poem is being delivered to us by the daughter. It is not surprising that we cannot hear his voice, for Mizrahi poetry functions as a substitute for those first-generation testimonies that are not available anymore. These voices, both of the past and of testimonies from our days, have succumbed to oblivion. Many of those who lived, for example, through the selective immigration policy, who were forced to leave their elderly parents in Morocco or Tunisia (as is mentioned in some of the poet Natan Alterman’s outcries in the 1950s, the only hegemonic voice to ever express disapproval), are not with us anymore. Historians of such events, such as Yaron Tzur and Avi Picard, refer only to what is available in archives and, in a sense, do not base themselves on the voices of the migrants but rather on those of the perpetrators. I find that by means of poetry – in this acute relation of poetry and testimony – Israeli society must strive to speak “in the names of the witnesses”, paraphrasing here Paul Celan’s famous line “no one testifies for the witnesses” (niemand zeugt für den Zeugen). What is important in the poetics of the awareness of trauma through bodily performance, as found in the work of Mizrahi poets like Erez Biton and Viky Shiran, is that it can lead us not just to unravelling what is usually repressed and articulate a future possible polity of coexistence among subaltern identities, but moreover, it can show what unites these contested identities.
For example, there might be points of contact between the gestural identities of Mizrahi Jews in Israel and those of Arabs in Israel and Europe – who face shame and degradation due to a rise in Islamophobia; those of Ashkenazi Jews in Europe, who were sometimes referred to as Ostjuden (German: “Eastern Jews”, in Hebrew: Mizrahim), or even with those of the (Ashkenazi, but also non-Ashkenazi) Jews who – in concentration camps – were named Muselmann (“Muslims”). The latter was clearly based on the bodily and gestural figuration of those who were like living skeletons and between the living and the dead in concentration camps of the Second World War. Despite the differences, in all cases the body implies a trauma that bridges exclusive national narratives and shows resemblance and contiguities among subaltern subjects.

Notes

2 All translations from Hebrew are mine.
3 Dizengoff Street is a central street in Tel Aviv, Roval was a famous café in the Seventies. The translations in parentheses are in the original. See: Erez Biton, Timbisrt-Tzipor maroqa’it (“Timbisrt- Moroccan Bird”) (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2009), 64.
4 Oppenheimer, Mah zeh, 98.
5 It is worth mentioning that one of the first studies on Biton is related to irony. See: Naf-tali Toker, “Ha-‘emdah ha-‘eronit beyin sthey-ha-tarbuyiot” (“Ironic Position Between Two Cultures: On the Poetry of Erez Biton”), Zehut, 3 (1983): 246–237.
6 See for example my reading of Agnon’s first novel, The Bridal Canopy (1931), where I argue that this novel does not allow for novelistic realism that combines together territory, nationalism and the text itself: Omri Ben-Yehuda, “Kaiser of Austria- King of Jerusalem: Genealogy of Identity in Agnon’s The Bridal Canopy”, in From the Industrial Revolution to World War Two in East Central Europe, eds. Maria Wakounig and Karlo Ruzicic-Kessler (Vienna: Lit Verlag, 2011), 125–137.
7 Interestingly it was Oppenheimer’s successive project in which he dealt exactly with reading major Zionist writers such as Tchernichovsky and even Bialik as diasporic. See Yochai Oppenheimer, Sham me-‘ahorai li qorah yabeshet: Zihron ha-galut ba-sifrut ha-‘ivrit (“Diaspora Remembrance in Hebrew Literature”) (Tel Aviv: Mosad Bialik, 2015).
8 In Haaretz, 26 October 1979.
10 It is important to keep in mind that Tchernichovsky himself applied his abilities to this genre, only after establishing himself as a European poet in its “highest” genre.
11 I am using here the Hebrew version of Bourdieu’s Questions de la sociologie. Pierre Bourdieu, She’elot be-sotziologiah (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2005), 136.
12 See: Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Routledge, 1994). For the distinction between the pedagogic and the performative see in particular his “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation” in the same volume.
13 Oppenheimer, Mah zeh, 185.
14 Oppenheimer, Mah zeh, 218.
15 Shimon Buzaglo, 'Ishit lohetzet (“Pressing Defence”) (Tel Aviv: Yediot ’Aharonot, 2004), 52.
16 Biton, Timbisrt, 45.
18 Hirschfeld, Kinor ‘Aruch, 172.
21 Haim Nachman Bialik, Poems from the Hebrew, ed. L. V. Snowman (Hasefer: London, 1924), 42.
22 Hirschfeld, Kinor, 181.
23 It is worth mentioning that it was Chetrit who found in Bialik the most suitable predecessor of Biton, exactly for these identity tensions. See Chetrit’s commentary on Minha maroqa’it, Biton’s first book, in Alon, ‘Efsharat, 16, and in: http://www.kedma.co.il.
26 Bhabha, The Location, 85–86.
27 Sasson Somekh has pointed out many times that the Arab Jew is someone with a strong knowledge and acquaintance with the Arab language and its literature. See for example his interview with Almog Behar in Iton 77, 335 (2008).
28 Eitan Cohen, Ha-maroqa’im – Ha-negativ shel ha-Israelim (“Moroccans – Israelis Negative”) (Tel Aviv: Resling, 2002), 104.
29 See for example Mendel’s discussion of Israel’s need for Mizrahi Jews for its security services, which gave the Arabic language some sort of value. Yonatan Mendel, The Creation of Israeli Arabic (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 125–132. I think it should be added that Arabic in this case was a facilitator of cultural mobility, which can be drawn from Mendel’s account. Of course, as also shown by Mendel, Arabic is usually conceived as a “low capital language”, but what I suggest here, and surely might be contested, is that compared with French – that is to say tsarfoqait – Arabic seemed much more needed and valued.
30 Bourdieu, She’elot, 149.
31 Yoav Hayak, Igul lefanim Igul (“A Circle in Front of a Circle”) (Tel Aviv: Sifriat Po’alim, 1979), 10.
33 Bhabha, The Location, 86.
36 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature. I am using here the Hebrew translation by Ariella Azoulay in Mikan 1, Spring 2000, 134–142.
38 Biton, Timbisrt, 45.
39 Biton, Timbisrt, 93.
40 The obvious meaning of the proverb is “to leave alone”.
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43 See for example the historiography of Shaul Friedlander, or the theoretical work of Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub.

44 See for examples the work of Naqez Nazar, Rosemary Syigh and the Zochrot Testimonies Project.

45 Viky Shiran, Shoveret kir (“A Woman Breaking a Wall”) (Tel Aviv: Am ‘Oved), 2005, 47.

46 See for example the writings of the sociologist Henriette Dahan-Kalev, the poet and essayist Yonit Na’am and Alon’s reading of Mizrahi female sexuality, in Efsharut, 151; see also Orna Sasson-Levi and Avi Shoshana, “Hishtaknezut: ’al performans ’etni ve-kishlono” (“On Passing and its Failure”), Theory and Criticism, 42 (2014): 71–97. It is important to mention a documentary made recently by Meital Abekasis, Father. Land (Israel, 2015; the Hebrew title Shem. ’Av, meaning “family name” means literally in Hebrew “father name”), where the director unravels through the relationship with her father, the terrible burden and silence that are imposed on the people of the town of Dimona, where the majority of the Mizrahi (especially Moroccan) inhabitants are the workers of the Israeli nuclear industries nearby. This film is also a study of gestures and shame.

47 The victimhood of fathers as such, as disorientation of the patriarchal figure may have special prominence in Mizrahi literature in general – a subject that clearly calls for more elaboration. I thank Dario Miccoli for raising this issue.


49 By that I do not pertain to any criticism on their historiography, which is beyond my reach and the scope of this literary query. Clearly, one cannot say that Tzur and Picard are dealing with the history of the perpetrators, but nonetheless they are dealing with subalterns only by means of archival sources which, in this case, is the voice of the perpetrator. It is interesting that lately historians were able to be exposed to archive of North African immigrants who wrote back to their families that were left behind. See for example Shay Hazkani, “The Silenced History of the IDF’s ‘Mizrahi Problem’”, Ha-‘Aretz, 28 August 2005.

Shva Salhoov is a multidisciplinary writer: an essayist, author, critic and poet. Born in 1963 in Kiryat Ekron in family of Libyan origin, she published her first work ‘Onat ha-meshugayim (“Season of the Crazed”), a collection of short stories, in 1996. Her first poetry book, ‘Ir ve-neshiah (“City and Oblivion”), for which she was awarded the Amihai Prize for Poetry, was published in 2003. In 2011 came her second book of poems Torat ha-hitukhim (“Torah of Cutting”). These two books are bounteous, enigmatic and hermetic and call for an erudite study. Furthermore, the second one – as I will explain – shows Salhoov’s reading of poetry as a form of art that challenges our basic intuitions and stretches them to the point of tear, of dissection. So, what we need is a Torah (that is, a wisdom/discipline) about how to cut, what to cut, what not to cut: a Torat ha-hitukhim, understood both as a “discipline of cutting” and a genuine Torah, transcendental and religious, like the Jewish Torah.

In this article, I wish to present my theory that Shva Salhoov’s poetry secretly shrouds a proposal for a different Statism, a different Israeliness: an Israel that acknowledges its spiritual mission, that sees in its allotted piece of land a summon to connect with its Jewish heritage, an Israel tightly bound to its place in the heart of the Arab Middle East, and an Israel that sets its goals up high: new standards of mutual support, of assisting the weak and of honouring of all humanity. Salhoov attempts in a poetic endeavour to create what “the almighty Israel” is obviously unable to do: a Middle Eastern (Mizrahi) collective, an inherent affinity – on a daily basis – to the transcendental, and the utmost attentiveness to social and political injustice. A poetic ritual of the construction of a “self” that sees itself as a minute reflection of an all-state ideal, rather than intimate or private.

Salhoov’s poetry manifests itself as political in her comprehensive intentionality, in the suggestion to abandon the reigning hegemony in favour of a different one, in the very attempt to formulate an alternative political modus vivendi. Hers is a poetry that harbours the idiosyncratic prophecy reprimanding those who will not obey the spiritual dictum of the East – which Salhoov interprets as a form of benevolence, sensitivity and dignity – and who will mindlessly abuse the land, the language, the resources.

On the same model block with which I choose to place Salhoov’s poetry, I can also find Haviva Pedaya’s contemporary poetry. It is poetry that wishes to
generate a political and theological transformation, poetry that bears a sometimes evident, sometimes hidden “we”. Salhoov’s and Pedaya’s poetry books are manifestations of compelling forces in Israeli society today. They embody the rise to power of groups, previously considered marginal, such as women and Mizrahim, and a growing demand for eclectic spirituality called “the New Age” – the *Zeitgeist* of our times (meaning spiritual synergy and an eclectic approach to spiritual practices and objectives). The rise of religiosity that is not afraid to blend together concepts and practices from different religious beliefs coincides with the significant reinforcement of Orthodox Judaism. Therefore, the present religious climate provides the optimal conditions for poetry of this kind to flourish.

In this study I would like to demonstrate how Salhoov’s poetry is affiliated to concepts defined by the French Jewish philosopher Emmanuel Levinas: concepts which are inherently entwined with the divine presence manifested in Being. Such is the famous concept called “the trace”. This concept, as a reversal of “the sign”, applies to something that is not present here and now, asserting an unseen “other”. In addition, I will refer to Levinas’s work on the concept of “creation” (*yetzi-rah*) and will present the different ways in which Salhoov’s poetry adheres to the complex theoretical whole designed by Levinas as top-tier criteria for assessing a work.

Seemingly, a wide range of parameters separates Shva Salhoov from Emmanuel Levinas – country, gender, generation, language. But the persistent intentionality towards the transcendental, towards the “beyond”, towards the presentations of the *numen* (the hidden) together with the solid ground from which they both draw their strength – and the intimate dialogue with their Jewish heritage – create, in my opinion, fascinating meeting points and juxtapositions.

Salhoov’s poetry paints a utopian, liturgical and ethical horizon all at once, firmly planted in the Israeli present but also formulating a coveted future. “Creation, in its full meaning, is a creation that strives for an absolute future, for a future that is not my future, for a time after my death” writes Emmanuel Levinas, then adding that: “This prospect of intentionalizing beyond my own goal is the basic ethical prospect”.

The book *'Ir ve-neshiah* opens with the poem marked [A]:

The lingering reflections/the primal reflections/pressed by pounding temples/footsteps of one final return//in a sheet-bared tent/sprawling decency and passion/shards of presence/bundle trapped/in an oblivion-strewn field.

In this poem we already recognise keywords such as “footsteps”, “tent”, “bundle”, “oblivion”, which create the semantic field that links a sense of the transcendental, of “Easternness” (Mizrahiyut), of ties to Jewish tradition and of a bond with the poor of the land. *Leqet* (“bundle”), *shihehah* (“forgotten/to oblivion”) and *pe’ah* (“corner”) are terms accorded in the Bible to deed of charity: owners of a field are obligated to apportion the corners of the field and the forgotten stacks of wheat to the poor, and the fallen scattered stems are not to be baled. These are designated
solely for the benefit of the poor who follow the reapers and feed on the leftovers. In the context of Salhoov’s poetry, the tent corresponds to the new immigrants’ transit camps (the *ma’abaron*), and the same can be discerned in “Footsteps” – which is also the name of a contemporary periodical dealing with eastern Jewish communities.

So, in covert language, the poem tells the story of the great wave of immigration of Jews from the Arab world to Israel, in the 1950s. The piece is similar in spirit to traditional liturgical poems and the profound longing, expressed throughout the centuries, to return to the Land of Israel – a place that in reality resembles a falling tent. The poem also holds a personal expression of early childhood and its “earliest reflections”.

The opening poem of the book *Torat ha-hitukhim* is called *Shabbat* (Sabbath) and its division into two takes after the familiar decree: the first part is called “Milk” and the second is “Meat”. The piece revolves around the tension between the things that are forbidden on Sabbath, and the “great idleness” that marks Salhoov’s life: her unborn child. The same can be found in the poem ’Em (“Mother”):

The son I never had/a phantom kingdom erected/just like this room/same light/my dead boy beside me, for years and years/this child never changes/malignic shadow suckling a veiled silence/poisoned bloody nights/not one drop/not even one/you must learn to ignore the moving shadows, their horrific muteness/to scorn/Mommy is coming/a child only has faith in his mother’s voice.

It should be noted that the last section of the book is called *Ve-ha-shem hu’ ha-nefesh (yeled)* (“And the Name Is the Soul [Child]”). Apart from the concrete child, flesh and blood, we can deduct that Salhoov is talking about the pains of giving birth to a “child of the spirit”. The birth of our “child of the spirit”, who is our true double, was a theme delved into by the famous Sufi poet Jalal ad-Din Rumi (1207–1273):

When Mary, Jesus’s mother, was in labour, she was coming near the tree of happiness. “Her labour started by a palm tree” (Sura 19). The pain drove her towards the tree, and that dead tree, bore fruit again. We are all like Mary’s story, and a Jesus exists in each and everyone of us, but only through such harsh pain can this Jesus inside us be born. On the other hand, if we don’t experience any pain, our child will return to where he came from in the same mysterious way that he appeared, and will leave us hollow, missing the birth of our true inner self.

The private pothole is also viewed in a wider perspective as the prevailing anguish and distress of Israel. It does not give birth, is unable to fulfil its inner potential: “Sabbath now I am admit/the era of my Aramaic name lost like an wasted tongue harbors in me an entombing womb of life not to be called life by/daylight/not life on/Sabbath/a child’s tongue buried in a dented hole of my womb
a clogged well/the speech of his soul torn the dispersion wells inside me/spirit wrenched/.7

The excerpt from the poem leans upon the well-known passage “Aramaic lost to my father” (Deuteronomy, 26: 5) which relates to Lavan’s wish to kill Jacob and thus annihilate the Jewish People. The same passage appears in the Jewish Passover Haggadah (the story read during the Passover dinner in the family), where Lavan is depicted as the Pharaoh’s predecessor. Thus, the unborn child symbolises loss and destruction of continuity. The link to the metaphorical level is apparent, as suggested by the critic Eli Hirsch: “How do you tie the impasse of an unborn child, to the sense of rootlessness associated with parting with your parents? And how do you turn the bond of these two deep cuts into positive and powerful poetry? Salhoov’s solution [...] is found in the paradoxical knotting of the two: the thread with which she tries to mend the breach, and which offers a tie that does not necessarily lead to destruction, is God.”8

Whereas Hirsch defines the elusive element as “God”, the critic Erez Schweitzer describes him as “godliness”:

Beyond the actual dimension of the fall – the fall of the child, the fall of the mother – another dimension that Salhoov dwells upon is revealed: “Dreading/the death of godliness”, the fear of life with no heights to which the spirit may climb up above the physical existence of the body. It seems that this fear, or aspiration, guides Salhoov’s decision to write, and create poetry. It might even be said that the language of prayer and the Talmud woven into her poems do not necessarily seek being Jewish, but searches for the genetic code of godliness.9

Salhoov tries to sustain this godliness, this religiosity, heeding and connecting with God within a secular society. A close read into Torat ha-hitukhim exposes another strong poetical trait that inhabits her work regularly: the manner of dissecting transcendence in time. Her poetry shows a piercing slash, quick as lightning, which passes through layers of material existence like a very sharp blade through butter. Levinas writes: “the perspective of the work is such that it stretches itself beyond all boundaries, and tunes us in once more to the meaning of transcendence”.10 In Salhoov’s poetry we find the explicit break away from the self and its limits, even when the “self” is the actual theme.

From transcendental to political

The first poem I will now view is called Magevet (“Towel”). I would like to present its full version:

One-two, one-two, one-two, quiet please, / trying to follow the terms of plain listening/abstract, too abstract, and yet barren of history, cause/effect, the thing that is neither a question nor an answer throbs//the water is warmed by a late autumn in Jaffa, Marheshvan/withdrawal of the year/ I dry myself in an old towel stiff with endless/ washing from mindlessly using, let’s say/ an orange towel.11
The poem begins with a pre-performance scene: microphone check. The audience is not present yet, but obviously will be arriving soon. The relative vacancy of the place enables attentive listening detached from the secular coordinates of time and space ("barren of history, cause/eff...et"") and a sudden glimpse of the sound of eternity — "the thing that is not a question nor an answer throbs", meaning, sheer existence throbs, the godliness found in every crumb of being.

The words "quiet please" tap on Rega' ehad ("One Moment", 1974), a poem by the Israeli poet Nathan Zach that opens with the famous line: "One moment please/I want to say something". Zach creates a poetic speech posing as an intimate personal recall of his relationship with his father, spoken in front of an attentive audience. In Salhoov's poem the audience is absent and she is able to abruptly move the poetic picture into an intimate and private situation, with no spectators, drying herself in a towel after a bath. The image of the second verse of the poem, "The water is warmed by a late autumn in Jaffa, Marheshvan/withdrawal of the year/I dry myself in an old towel stiff with endless/washing from mindlessly using, let's say/an orange towel", is seemingly a simple one. The scene harbours a tantalising, razor-sharp revelation: the mindless use of something (in this case, a towel) is sacrilege. The word "stiff", depicting the towel, relates to us too: we too become stiff by using things mindlessly, without the proper attentiveness. The poem demands our long-lost attention to the world, through poetry. Absolute attentiveness gives us release from time.

In another poem Salhoov writes: "A moment unturned/lays stone-heavy/heart". The attempt to discard time as expressed in the first part — the desire to avert time into a moment of transcendent tranquillity, to taste eternity — depends essentially on our ability to rescue ourselves from the automatic absent-mindedness with which we "go about life".

"The authentic trace, disrupts the laws of the universe", says Levinas. Likewise in the poem, the regular flow of activities is broken in the moment when transcendence penetrates everyday life's routine. Apparently, Salhoov achieves a poetic expression of that disruption and finds the trace there. The poetic strength of the piece emanates from Salhoov's unique fusions, her demanding syntax, and the private poetic language she creates.

The second poem that I wish to discuss is called Ha-'ot ha-'aharonah ba-pa'am ha-rishonah ("The Final Letter for the First Time"):

Father, what is it that isn't memory and/since then/you remember? I am a three-years old girl sitting beside you/and the letter Bet and the letter Resh and then rushing/Elohi/-but the square Mem, I don't know/in grandfather's Haim it is the biggest letter/perfectly square/you are laughing/rolling with laughter on the sofa beside me, Mem, Mem, your lips are a crimson thread because no you purse/your/lips/listen, Mem./I feel like not saying again this letter that swells in front of me to the size/of the huge cake mold that mother/baked for Liora's birthday, an ebony cake, you close the book I/lean back on the sofa/I can't stand up/I don't want to either/the book was open and I see Mem/Elohim!/A-ha/you say, nodding, all of a sudden very serious/exactly.
This poem maintains that the letter *mem* (in the Hebrew version it is the letter *mem* in its ending-of-the-word [*sofit*] square form) owns transcendence, and to some extent owns all other letters. The poetic design tries to trace the exact moment when this *mem* is introduced to the child’s spoken language in an act of both godliness and sacrilege. It is an act of severing the letter into the language, severing its godliness and generating its mundane use: “the Torah of Cutting”. But Salhoov insists on preserving the transcendental dimensions of letters and words, and the piece serves to manifest the core of the book: the Torah of Cutting.

Here too, a seemingly uneventful childhood scene of a daughter learning to read the letters of the alphabet with the help of her father, turns abruptly into something entirely different: a statement about beginnings and endings, about an all-encompassing transcendence, about the magical power of letters, and about the bond between language and God. The bond between father and daughter is coated with enchanting intimacy and religiosity, a cursor in Salhoov’s spiritual biography. Whereas, in the previous poem discussed, the moment of godliness (in “enabling” the subject must be active and wish for it to happen) divined itself in the drying with the towel, here it does so through an encounter with the letter *mem*.

“Every sign is a trace”, writes Levinas, and such was the towel in the first poem, and the letter *mem* in this particular childhood memory. “The footprint within a footprint is not only going back in time, but in itself the passage to a distant past far more distant than my own past or future – a past of the ‘other’, where eternity lies – an ultimate past which unifies all time”, writes Levinas. Levinas ties together the present, which holds a hint of a revelation (the trace) with the past and the future. And sure enough, whenever the trace glimmers within the reality, the present and the future disappear, fused into infinity, into eternity. “The footprint is the fusion of space into time, when the universe bends towards past and time”, notes Levinas. The words “fusing space and time” echo Mikhail Bakhtin’s definition of the chronotope. Bakhtin wrote: “The concept describes ‘the fundamental interaction between time and space’ ”. Salhoov’s poetry succeeds in creating a unique chronotope where simple space is expropriated from its boundaries and collapsed into a singular point in time, eternity.

Time bends towards the past and time, father and daughter bend towards each other. The bond between the father and daughter acquires a different aura, one with an intimate and religious charm. Thus, the poem is transformed into a cursor in Salhoov’s spiritual biography. “We, is the most beautiful word in Hebrew”, writes Salhoov in the poem *H’nan*. But who are we talking about when we say “We”? The “We” marks the passage from the theological – the personal – into the political.

“To be in the image of ‘God’ does not mean his physical image, but to be in his footprint. […] He is revealed only in his footprint […] to follow Him is to walk in his footprint, which is not an impression. It means to walk towards the ‘others.’” Salhoov blends the spiritual and personal, the political and public, and “walks” simultaneously towards the others and towards God.
From ethics to politics (of language)

Emmanuel Levinas defines and compares the work of art to “liturgy”: “Art as the absolute directing of the ‘Same’ towards the ‘Other’. [. . . W]e may define this concept using the Greek word Liturgy. [. . .] it is a gratuitous formulation promising no immediate reward to its creator but only to those who can wait for it patiently, a formulation created with absolute control over my time and which will only be realized after my time”. Liturgy is not considered a ritual performed alongside “good deeds” or ethics; it is ethics itself”. To win this position of being like ethics itself, says Levinas, creating should be directed towards a far-off future: “Should creation demand its instant victory [. . .] it will become enslaved by thought. [. . . C]reating is enabled through the virtue of patience that, upon reaching its limits, marks for the creator his ‘giving-up’ on the option of becoming a contemporary of his goal, and the reality of doing the work without arriving to ‘the Promised Land’.”

Levinas symbolically parallels the religious concept of liturgy to the secular concept of creation. Creation is explained in religious terms and is matched with piety. The two layers of the poem Mizrah (“East”), set at the core of the book Torat ha-hitukhim, echo Levinas’ words. On one hand, in the poem we find earthly reality, depicted as ugly as it can be. On the other, we experience the tension between the Jerusalem of Heaven and present-day Jerusalem. The implied readjustment toward a brighter future, the outcry expressed in every line, turns the poem into Levinas’ concept of liturgy. Here is the poem:

There is the expanse of time and the design of time and a middle where/ a whole person genuinely ruptures/every piece pulses a clue/every pulse a chant/doomed/pulse eternally doomed to hush.//A dream:/So happened in the year 1950, the second half of the twentieth century/\my grandmother Sha-
hiba Salhoov to Zion came/newly arrived/came here/but never her eye saw it/ and per chance she happened to walk there/ she would pace an injured asphalt or a filthy sidewalk/disbelieving that it is Jerusalem /waking up from having this nightmare forever demanding in Arabic:/Is this the Land of Israel? Again and again my father replied, oh mother, yes/this is Israel//Weeping Arab deportees bashed against the Wall/their feet in chains, their hands cuffed/a policeman and a policewoman wearing light-blue frisking them in Hebrew, in broad daylight/bent and stooped/they too can bathe in your birthing sun/your womb delivers the new day/and you are different every day and always you/ rising like falling/if I say I have left the road to you such great fear will spear me/if I should forget thee.

Together with contemporary language, the poem adopts biblical semantics (i.e. mizmor [“chant”], va-yehi [“so happened”], “olah ke-nofelet [“rising like falling”], ya’avor ke-pahad [“fear will spear me”]) and Qabalistic expressions (i.e. pshat [“expanse”] and sod [“mystery”]). This rich layering reveals that Salhoov has bonded with the Hebrew language in a most profound manner, that she
Oblivion and cutting

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has mastered those lexical spaces which allow her to reach the exquisite poetic precision that adorns her personal experience. The essence of the poem describes what is labelled “A dream” that Salhoov’s grandmother, Shahiba Salhoov, dreamt. The similar name points to the symbolic tie between the two, to how deeply Salhoov identifies with Shahiba’s dream. It is clear that the line “disbelieving that Jerusalem it is” expresses Salhoov’s own view as well that Jerusalem is a squalid, desecrated place. The title of the poem, “East”, creates a symbolic levelling between Jerusalem and the East as a whole, and implies that the reality of Jerusalem is not confined to a distinctly marked geographical area.

The poem deals with three individual groups: the family of the narrator (her father and grandmother), those labelled “weeping Arabs” and lastly a policeman and policewoman. Apparently, the wish underlying this poem is that the word “We” will embody all three groups, will be voiced (that it will be heard is, on the contrary, questionable) by each and every one as relating to all humankind and not necessarily defining their own particular group. The poem’s disorienting style culminates in the biblical expression “So happened”, which marks the territory of fairytales. Reaching the middle of the poem we are still unsure what mental mode it aims to reflect. The feeling of distress seemingly reigning throughout the poem is actually found in its second part only, where the mental mode becomes significantly more intensive.

The first verse of the poem achieves its meaning only at the end: “There is the expanse of time and the design of time and a middle where/ a whole person flares in one true explosion/every piece pulses a clue/every pulse a chant/doomed/pulse eternally doomed to hush.” Between the expanse of time and its mystery, man smashes into pieces. The dream turns into a nightmare, physical uncleanliness is tied up with moral corruption, and the encounter with reality is devastating. Shahiba, her namesake, exposes the reflexive autobiographical plane, serves to emphasise her extreme disappointment with the Land of Israel and eliminates her position as spectator.

The words “dream”, “nightmare” and “reality” are all identical now, creating both a real and a symbolic space of a vast inescapable prison. The blind grandmother, the weeping Arabs, bent and stooped, and the everything else, paint a picture that to some extent shames its viewers as well as those actually taking part in it. Salhoov portrays what she feels is a destructive and distorted utilisation of the revered symbols of the Jewish nation: the Wailing Wall is used for bashing and deporting people, the light-blue garments of the Temple’s high priest are now a police uniform, Hebrew – the holy language – is used to interrogate the Arabs and Jerusalem is degraded by squalor.

All these are the components of the inner exile which exists in the Promised Land, the Land of Israel. The grandmother’s hope of salvation through the unification of her inner-personal space which yearns for Israel, and the territory itself, has failed. It seems that there is no personal salvation in a defective ailing space, poisoned by occupation. Do we think salvation is possible? We think that the grandmother will not see a different reality in her lifetime. The poem shows a dystopic reality in a downfall, and the notion of this downfall is conducted through
the use of the Arabic language. At the beginning of the piece, Arabic is marked as a language of intimacy between father and grandmother, but then, at the end of the poem, its use stands as an acrimonious symbolic parallel to the disgraced Arabs, the authentic Arabic speakers.

In an essay, originally written about the poetry of Avot Yeshurun, Salhoov talks about the sweet, memory-provoking taste of the Judeo-Arabic language, as opposed to Hebrew: “I, myself, feel that Hebrew is not my mother-tongue, that I failed to suckle its sounds through my mother’s milk, or attend to them through my mother’s lullabies.” In view of these statements, the poem *Sfat ‘immi* (“My Mothertongue”), acquires an additional meaning beside the complicated mother-daughter relationship:

I am trying to understand/for years I am trying/the same speech, the same/and I don’t/in every word an orifice on one end blocked with speech and on the other/hears/in every word a wound opens/and closes/what speaks through you, listens through me/lurking now lurking always loving not wishing to erase but God/mother/what do you say?/What do I understand?/Every word distorts/the slash/of the lash of birth.

Salhoov’s interrelationship with the Judeo-Arabic language is reflected again in the poem *Akir*. Akir is the new immigrants’ camp where her parents lived during their first years in Israel and belongs to Salhoov’s childhood memories. I would like to quote the first verse of this poem:

If I go on walking/without turning right or left/I will reach a point etched by white and black fire/in the abyss of the heart/and there/Akir/the nest to which came back at the end of summer/the cranes that left in the beginning of autumn/flying above the camp’s huts, singing as they go in ancient Arabic, Sabaean/qasida of war and exile.

The camp is the restless heart, the point etched by white and black fire, the emotional abyss. And what language dominates this place? Ancient Arabic, hovering above, ferried on cranes’ wings. The keyword here is “Sabaean”. Salhoov binds her own given name to its historical connotations: Sheba, the ancient African queen. The Arabic spoken at the camp originated in ancient Sheba, and it is the poet’s language too. Salhoov is exhibiting the deep and intimate interplay she has with her Arabic, although she neither speaks the language nor conducts her present life in Arabic. Arabic exists within the “footsteps” of Arabic and does not have a real, overt existence within the Israeli experience. Salhoov traces the footprints of Arabic, preserves them with the juice of poetry and enacts herself through both.

Later in the essay on Yeshurun, Salhoov writes: “A Jew speaks Jewish, with no exclamation mark. Without loading a gun. Loading each sentence with care. ‘Look, do not shoot’. To read the magazine of the barrage of bullets aimed at the heart of the Arabic [=Judeo-Arabic] of my grandmother Sara, of my mother, of myself, firing the command: ‘Speak Hebrew!’ ” Within this prose, dealing
originally with the poetry of Avot Yeshurun, the bolting idea in Salhoov’s poetry is formalised. Jews have become militants, “trigger-happy”, violent and blind, annihilating all chances of speaking Arabic and, as hinted, they are actually annihilating grandmother, mother and daughter.

The mental geography: the experience of alienation and intimacy

An inspiring visit to Venice finds expression in Salhoov’s book *Ir ve-neshiah*, in the poem marked as [XI]. A comparative reading of the poem “East” and of this other poem reveals that the basic components of the chronotope – the feeling of being in a polluted city dimmed by heavy religious fog, a hollow clerical hypocrisy apace with a radiant mystery, the distressed self subjected to all that – are cast upon Venice this time. Even though we assumed that the external chronotope applies solely to Jerusalem and the East, now we find it in an inner mental form:

In this hollow city/beloved/I don’t wish/the secret is out/already hidden and gone/water stands still/time and theft and blood interwoven/the stones, the steps/everything always./Angels stand like ashes/underneath/the confessional in the square harbors a spirit/facing a sealed chest/hammered down/strapped in place//a collection box for the redemption of the soul/for one Lireta/for a thousand/what your heart does not dare wish/lay/down/and around you/cloud dust/the hem of Venice’s robes/like white fog/a heathen deity to abandon unto/your own alienation/the incurable intimacy.29

Venice is labelled “heathen deity”, and the narrator in the poem wishes to find refuge from “incurable intimacy”. It seems that those very same words could have been voiced by Salhoov to describe Jerusalem. But what is this ‘incurable intimacy”? It is part of the subjective stance Salhoov takes in *Torat ha-hitukhim*. It is a subjective stance that often overburdens the individual. “To be ‘me’, therefore, means to be unable to ditch responsibility, as if the full weight of the Creation lies on my shoulders,” writes Levinas.30 In Salhoov’s poetry we find the same elevation of the political sphere to the level of fundamental existentialism.

In her essay about Avot Yeshurun’s poetry, Salhoov writes: “this existential stance in Yeshurun’s poetry involves embracing and re-formulating Jewish thought.”31 The re-formulation of Jewish thought also appears to constitute Salhoov’s primary ideological agenda, but the difference between Yeshurun and Salhoov is Salhoov’s specified geographical directing towards the East. Salhoov wishes to reformulate Jewish thought regarding the East, but apace an incurable intimacy we also have profound alienation.

Salhoov confesses in her essay on Yeshurun: “I sometimes get a glimpse of places that are not Israel and these places tempt my soul in a delicious hidden language, and then I sense that I was not born in Israel, and that it will never inspire in me the same deep fondness that a person feels for his homeland and
the landscapes of his childhood.” The poem “East” treads a harsh emotional
corpus and sketches the torment of intense inner exile. “The father is exiled in the
daughter/and the daughter is exiled in the father/all are exiled/Treatise of Lashes”,
writes Salhoov in the poem “Torah of Cutting”, which awards the book its name.
The poem depicts the metaphorical transformation of a real, flesh-and-blood
woman, into an emblematic city, through the analogy between the grandmother
and Jerusalem. The implied transmutation between a specific geographical place
and something totally different characterises Salhoov’s poetical feat.

One of the prose pieces integrated in the book is called Rashes: “I met Eliyahu
at the Poets Festival in Metula. We spent three festive days in the same hotel in
this shuttered town. A single cobblestone street, old as a bygone Europe forever
banished to the heart of an alien, bizarre East, in the same way poetry is alien and
bizarre.”

Salhoov symbolically parallels mental geography with artistic form through
the phrase “alien and bizarre”. The East is shown to be standing on the same
symbolical plane as poetry, both “dissecting life”, “unnatural”, presenting us
with an enormous challenge, aiming to alter the very concepts of our lives. The
East appears alien and bizarre to those coming from Europe, alien and bizarre
to those who live in the East while clinging to their European mentality. This is
what Israeli scholar and poet Haviva Pedaya wrote about the Israeli space in her
book Merhav u-maqom (“Space and Place”): “The essence of Israel’s expansion
process, i.e. transforming a space perceived as ‘naked’ into places exhibiting a
distinctive identity of some sort – is an act of imposing a Christian order over an
Eastern/Mediterranean space.” Pedaya’s poetry, too, accent the demand for the
collective unification of the Hebrew language, and the eviction of Arabic from its
own home, thus employing the Christian concept of unification and universality
originated in the New Testament and the message of Paul to the gentiles. Below is
Haviva Pedaya’s poem ‘Ish holekh (“A Man Walking”):

Man walking/from Damascus to Paris/passing through a tunnel or slicing
air/I do not know/suddenly I saw the East wandering/missing its axis just
in tremor/I veered years away from Jerusalem to Beer Sheva/no baggage of
exile/like Ezekiel who lies on his side/on a bed in Babylon/365 days/and his
beloved dead and Zion exiled/walking Abraham from Beer Sheva to Moria/
three days/tying and untying his son in his mind/three days slaughtering him
and weeping/[. . .] I walked many a desert/and have not arrived the Moria/
now I feel in my homeland/for suddenly I realise how restless this land is/and
its tremor so unkind/and amongst my kin I am lost/some walk from Iraq to
America/some from Lebanon to Nicosia/some from Israel to Palestine/some
from Israel to Israel to Israel/ to Israel and find nothing for Israel is missing/
you who longed to be complete in your home/prepare a baggage of exile/no
free man can escape exile/am I not a young girl/am I not a woman/distant
from all/no mother no father/am I not bereaved of words/ousted though in
exile/here in my land amongst my people/buried not in the desert/but in the
excess of my casket/exiled not afar/but in this soil choking on/arrested blood
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and tears/a man rises and rises/with crying or vodka/this I do not know/will this forever be the face of the East/either soul? or land/for now I do prefer to dwell within a word/there is no other home yet/maybe there never was/inside my Hebrewness my blindness my Arabianness/a tune simply plays/my lips moving/but my voice inaudible/as it is the language adults used for swearing and loving/and I was banished from it for salvation/for Hebrew duty/anyhow now the East is screaming.35

The thematic connection between Pedaya’s poetry and those by Salhoov is obvious: the muffled cry of the East, the Arabic flung into the abyss, the imminent exile. The poem “A Man Walking” presented a personal and mind-opening moment for Pedaya. “A poem I wrote in 1992 [. . .] led me to research exile as the practice of walking. At first, it was a theme research and inner research at the same time”,36 she writes at the end of her book Halikhah she-me’ever le-traumah.

In Salhoov’s work it seems that the process is reversed. In ‘Ir ve-neshiah, the city of Venice is the protagonist, and only in the second book does Israel materialise and the East become the subject. However, in the first book, ‘Ir ve-neshiah, we already find the poetry of disaster and despair, of the enormous difficulty in achieving transcendency. The poem marked [XXVIII] has one line only: “Opposite and towards now/the slates of water break”.37 Salhoov’s disrupted syntax and strong ellipticalness bring to mind the concept of punctuation, the disciplined breaking of a text, or accentuation. The period, sometimes placed after a single word, denotes the complete sentence draped within. Salhoov’s single line displays an entire emotional universe.

Aided by punctuation, the enigmatic sequence of reference symbols achieves a coherent message and gives the poem meaning, regardless of poetry’s inherent clash between marker and marked. For example, the unique phrase “slates of water” springs a clash between two different mental planes, interwinds semantic fields in a manner which hinders our acuity and burdens us. This is the restless heart of poetry. Exceptional poetry challenges our basic intuition regarding the proverbial order of existence of things and names. It inhabits this very interstice, stretches it to the point of tear, of dissection. Cutting, as we already know, demands a Torah (that is, a wisdom/discipline): how to cut, what to cut, what not to cut, the Torat ha-hitukhim. Whereas in ‘Ir ve-neshiah the rift is forewarned (“break”), in the other it is already imminent.

The name of the book Torat ha-hitukhim exhibits Salhoov’s intention of presenting it as a second Torah. It is not just a “discipline of cutting” but a genuine Torah, transcendent and religious, like the Jewish Torah. The works of art illustrating this book exhibit two highly differing aesthetic expressions. On one hand, we find the well-rounded, liberated pastel paintings by Eli Petel. On the other, the raw analytical squareness of Michael Gordon’s minimalistic drawings. Likewise, Salhoov’s poetry flows in, and between, differing aesthetic modes and makes them her own. ‘Eros asur be-rahatin (“Jailed Eros”), writes Shva Salhoov in the poem ‘Adayin (“Yet”), and the poetic line manifests, in a nutshell, the “throbbing heart” of her poetry.
Notes


3 Shva Salhoov, ‘Ir ve-neshiah (“City and Oblivion”) (Jerusalem: Qeter, 2003), 7. This and all other quotes from Shva Salhoov’s poems are translations from the Hebrew original, done in accordance with the author.

4 The author refers to the biblical prohibition: “You shall not boil a young goat in its mother’s milk” (Exodus 23: 19), which then led to the Jewish dietary requirement of complete separation between meat and dairy products and the forbidding of eating both in the same meal.


7 Salhoov, *Torat*, 12.


10 Levinas, *Humanizm*, 64.


12 Salhoov, *Torat*, 93.


15 The letters *beth* and *resh* that Salhoov mentions are the first two letters of the Bible: Bereshit.

16 Levinas, *Humanizm*, 82.

17 Levinas, *Humanizm*, 84.

18 Levinas, *Humanizm*, 83.

19 Michael Bakhtin, *Tzurot ha-zman ve-ha-hronotop ba-roman* (“Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel”) (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2007), 13.


28 Salhoov, Kibbutz.

29 Salhoov, ‘Ir, 22.


31 Shva Salhoov, Kibbutz.

32 Salhoov, Kibbutz.

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37 Salhoov, *’Ir*, 15.
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