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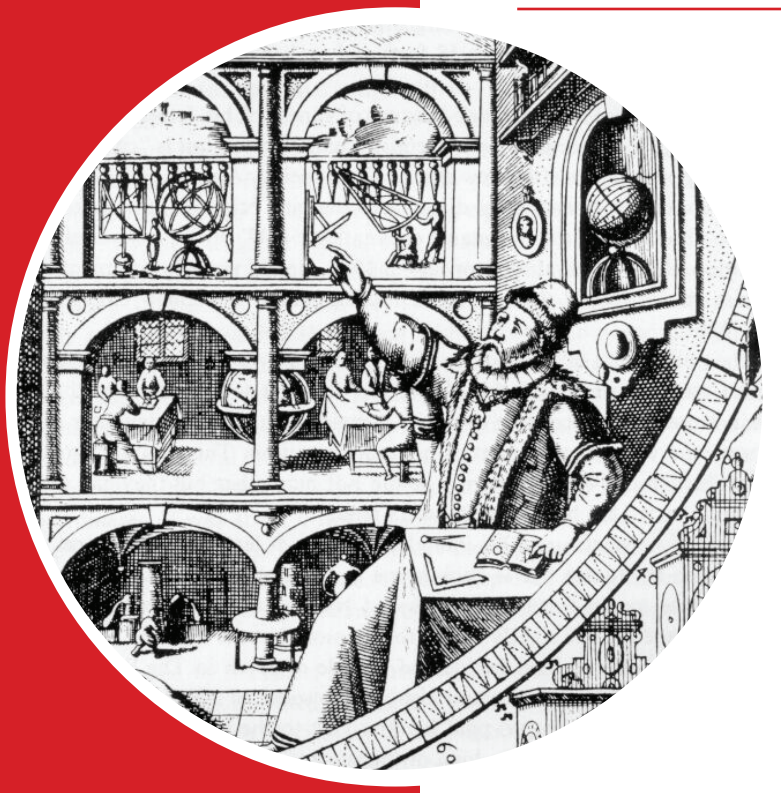

Mother-Tongue and Father-Land: Jewish Perspectives on Language and Identity

Lingua-madre e Terra-patria: prospettive ebraiche su lingua e identità

edited by • a cura di
Libera Pisano

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Contents

Mother-tongue and Father-land: Jewish Perspectives on Language and Identity

MOTHER-TONGUE AND FATHER-LAND:
JEWISH PERSPECTIVES ON LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

edited by Libera Pisano

UNCANNY BELONGINGS:
AN ESSAY ABOUT LANGUAGE, BELONGING AND COLONIALISM IN THE WORK OF JACQUELINE SHOHET KAHANOFF, JACQUES DERRIDA AND ALBERT MEMMI*

Abstract: This essay reflects on three modalities of 'Sephardi subjectivity', that is, three ways of constituting the Sephardi-Jewish self, as they appear in the work of Jacqueline Kahanoff, Jacques Derrida and Albert Memmi. These three authors are approached as instances of a generation of Sephardi writers who witnessed the collapse of the Levantine world of their ancestors. We discuss their position in between cultures and their responses to this historical 'in-betweenness', as well as their experience of language and their sense of belonging against the backdrop of colonialism, cosmopolitanism and decolonization.

* * *

1. *Introduction: The Colonial Reordering of the World*

The modern European myth of the Jew as a 'pariah' has been canonized by countless expressions of European Jewish literature. This is both a myth and a dogma that situates Jews outside of history, as absolute 'others' and permanent foreigners. However, we get a different picture when we turn our gaze away from Christian Europe and back to the culture formed in Al-Andalus, Spain, by the tenth century and follow them in their expansion throughout present-day Portugal, Spain, France, Italy, the Balkans, Greece, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Yemen, Syria, Lebanon, Cyprus, Israel/Palestine, Egypt, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Libya, and also some parts of West Africa and India[1]. What we

* The first version of this paper was a talk we delivered in the context of the 2021 Webinar Series on Sephardi Thought and Modernity.

[1] On the dissemination of the Sephardi world see: A. Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs. Remaking Levantine Culture*, Minneapolis (MN), University of Minnesota Press, 1993; E. Benbassa – A. Rodrigue, *Sephardi Jewry: A History of the Judeo-Spanish Community, 14th-20th Centuries*, Vol. 2., Berkley (CA), University of California Press, 2000; J. Phillips Cohen – S. Abrevaya Stein, *Sephardic Scholarly Worlds: Toward a Novel Geography of Modern Jewish*

find among these Sephardi, Arab, Levantine, Ottoman, and Persian Jewish communities is a different map of Jewish belonging. As Ammiel Alcalay stated in his seminal book *After Jews and Arabs*, this Levantine space is one in which the Jew was once a *native*, «not a stranger, but an absolute inhabitant of time and place»[2]. This is not to be understood as a defense of an essentialist notion of «nativity», «cultural authenticity» or «natural belonging», which are in fact elements of nationalism and orientalism[3]. On the contrary, this is an invitation to dwell in a historical narrative that transcends clear-cut dichotomies and oppositions between Jews and Arabs, secular and religious, East and West, which reordered the world during colonial times. This narrative emerges from the Levantine space[4], characterized by transnationality, multilingualism and cross-ethnicities, in which Jews and Arabs belonged together.

By the 19th century, the north of Africa and the Middle East had been colonized by European empires which deeply transformed these territories and the relations among the communities living in them. As Timothy Mitchell put it, one of the characteristics of European colonialism was their «power of representation» which «worked in terms of this correspondence between the division of the world and the division of the person»[5].

> What difference, then, does colonialism bring? What distinguishes its modern political order? Clearly the answer is not, in itself, the division into selves and others. Rather, it is the effect of seeming to exclude the other absolutely from the self, in a world divided absolutely into two. The establishing of this seemingly absolute difference is in fact an overcoming, or an overlooking, of difference. (…) Identity now appears no longer self-divided, no longer contingent, no longer something arranged out of differences; it appears instead as something self-formed, and original. What is overlooked, in producing this modern effect of order, is the dependence of such identity upon what it excludes. How is such an overlooking, a forgetting, in the colonial order achieved? A first answer might be that modern

History, «The Jewish Quarterly Review», C (2010), 3, pp. 349-384; E. Shohat, *Rethinking Jews and Muslims: Quincentennial Reflections*, «Middle East Report», XXII (1992), pp. 25-29.

[2] Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*, p. 1.

[3] G. Z. Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition. Jews, Arabs and the Limits of Separatist Imagination*, Princeton and Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2007, pp. 71-72.

[4] We borrow this concept from Jacqueline Kahanoff's work which does not respond to a uniform geographical or ethnic framework, but rather spreads across broad geographical and cultural boundaries. On Kahanoff's Levantinism see G. Z. Hochberg, '*Permanent Immigration': Jacqueline Kahanoff, Ronit Matalon, and the Impetus of Levantinism*, «Boundary», XXXI (2004), 2, pp. 219-243. See also the conceptualization of Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*.

[5] T. Mitchell, *Colonising Egypt*, Berkley – Los Angeles – London, University of California Press, 1991, p. 175.

> colonialism was constructed upon a vastly increased power of representation, a power which made possible an unprecedented fixing and policing of boundaries – an unprecedented power of portraying what lay 'outside'[6].

Colonialism involved a process of subjectification, that is, a process of constitution of oneself through the available representations, notions, theories, and practices[7] by which individuals were to adopt a dichotomic representation of the world and society as a natural and self-evident fact, as opposed to having a contingent nature. Difference was to be reordered under a new epistemic and moral framework that would impose itself as having prerogative power of representation of reality. Thus «modernity» was opposed to the cultural traditions of the local communities, the «West» was advanced, liberated and civilized and opposed to the reactionary and primitive East. The representation of history that separates Europe from the Arab world and, also, divorces Jews and Arabs was also imposed throughout colonization[8]. This process of subjectification continues to be relevant to the contemporary European mode of being subjects.

According to Saliha Belmessous, assimilation was a key element of European colonialism whose utopian dimension is often overlooked[9] by the critique of the discourse of domination. In her opinion, it is precisely this utopian aspect of the assimilative project that explains the resilience of this ideology well into the twentieth century. Her argument is that European empires were driven by the project of transforming «colonized peoples not only into Europeans, but more particularly into *improved* Europeans»[10]. Therefore, the idea that human beings had a potential for perfection was intertwined with ideas of progress. The «breathtaking cultural confidence»[11] displayed by colonial policies account for the colonial objective of subsuming foreign societies into European cultures, thus making them improve, advance, and perfect themselves.

This assimilative ideology received different names (civility, *francization*, improvement, tutelage, and even domestication[12], among others) which «em-

[6] *Ibidem*, pp. 167-168.

[7] For a detailed account of processes of subjectification, see M. Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject. Lectures at the College de France, 1981-82*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2001.

[8] On this split and the colonial dimension see Ella Shohat's pioneering works on the Sephardi and Arab-Jewish world such as E. Shohat, *Taboo Memories, Diasporic Voices*, Durham – London, Duke University Press, 2006, pp. 201-232.

[9] S. Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire. Uniformity in French and British Colonies, 1541-1954*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 2.

[10] *Ibidem.*

[11] *Ibidem.*

[12] See J. L. Mateo-Dieste, *La «hermandad» hispano-marroquí. Política y religión bajo el Protectorado español en Marruecos [1912-1956]*, Barcelona, Bellaterra, 2003, p. 29.

phasized different aspects of European culture (such as Christianity, civility, social organization, law, economic development, civic status)»[13]. However, assimilation was not pursued with equal enthusiasm in relation to all local communities and classes. Jews and Europeanized minorities were seen as «intermediary» communities and were thus a preferred target of the assimilative project[14]. The core of this project was a «normative discourse of cultural homogeneity»[15] according to which assimilation included the adoption of European dress, manners, religious belief, ideas about social organization, alleged equality under the law, etc. The existent differences in cultural practice among European colonizers and local colonized communities were responded to by policies of assimilation that enforced uniformity. Colonization transformed both colonizers and colonized, in so far as both adopted new habits, customs, ideas and practices[16]. However, the failure of Europeans to fully assimilate the local populations, who refused to completely let go of their cultural traditions and practices, was further interpreted in racial terms as an «inability» to «improve»[17]. For example, in Algeria, Jewish «insistence» on their own customs and ways of life, and their communal support, despite the widespread adoption of European cultural practices, was perceived by the *colons* – who were in turn always reticent to assimilate Jews and accept them as French citizens – as proof of their «inability to exist outside their community even after having become French. In other words, their collective distinctiveness prevented them from embracing French identity»[18]. The normative dimension of the homogenizing project that colonialism involved continues to be present today in Europe's conception of how to manage a multicultural population.

The assimilative goal of cultural homogeneity during colonial times required the collaboration of local actors who, thanks to their position in between different communities, could be utilized as «intermediaries».

[13] Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire*, p. 1.

[14] For an overview, see *Colonialism and the Jews*, ed. by E. B. Katz – L. M. Leff – M. S. Mandel, Bloomington (IN), Indiana University Press, 2017; for an analysis of the idea of the Jews as «natural mediators» in the Spanish colonial project in Morocco, see M. Ojeda-Mata, *¿Intermediarios 'Naturales'? Los judíos y el colonialismo occidental y español en el Mediterráneo musulmán. El caso de Marruecos*, in: *Intelectuales, Mediadores y antropólogos, la traducción y la reinterpretación de lo global en lo local*, ed. M. Martínez Mauri – E. Rodríguez, Donostia-San Sebastian, Ankulegi Antropologia Elkartea, 2009, pp. 187-206.

[15] Belmessous, *Assimilation and Empire*, p. 2.

[16] *Ibidem*, p. 10.

[17] *Ibidem*.

[18] *Ibidem*, p. 152.

> Competition by the colonial powers for the allegiance of the 'intermediary"communities (particularly the Jews, Greeks, and Armenians (…)), was fierce. At the same time, though, it was directed at those who could be expected to give something in return, either commercially through the old network of trade connections rooted in the *geniza* world or as part of the new administrative structure being built around the Mediterranean in the decades following the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt[19].

The imperial policies directed towards gaining Jewish sympathy, identification and collaboration with the colonial powers were strictly pragmatic and coexisted with European antisemitism[20]. As European powers established themselves throughout North Africa and the Middle East, foreign capital and financial institutions began to dominate, as well as foreign culture[21]. Jews in turn went through a process of foreignization and association with the European powers. French education stepped in along with the colonial endeavor. The network of schools of the Alliance Israelite Universelle established the first school in the city of Tetouan, Morocco, in 1862 and by 1912 there were schools in virtually every city and even in small towns all over the Levant: Baghdad, Jerusalem, Tetouan, Tangier, Istanbul, Beirut, Cairo, Damascus, Salonika, etc. One of the effects of this educational campaign was the weakening of the familiarity of the Jews with their own surroundings and the gradual but steady detachment from Arab culture, accompanied by an ambivalent connection with European culture. This strategy of establishing allies and «mediators» perpetuated ethnic, social, legal and cultural divisions that became more and more stagnant, thus weakening the political system of the colonized society[22].

In this essay, we discuss three modalities of the «Sephardi subject», that is, three ways of constituting the Jewish self under colonialism in three different points of the Sephardi/Levantine world: Tunisia, Algeria and Egypt. Our focus will be on Albert Memmi (1920-2020), Jacques Derrida (1930-2004) and Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff (1917-1979) and their experience of language and belonging against the backdrop of colonialism. We attempt to offer a reflection about the cultural theories and political approaches that emerged from these experiences.

[19] Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*, p. 199.

[20] For an analysis of the coexistence between a pragmatic interest in Jewish sympathy and antisemitism, in the case of the Spanish colonial project, see M. Ojeda-Mata, *Modern Spain and the Sephardim. Legitimizing identities*, Maryland (MD), Lexington Books, 2017.

[21] Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*, p. 200.

[22] Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, p. 35.

2. *In between worlds: Levantine/Sephardi alternatives to monolingualism and cultural homogeneity*

Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff, Derrida and Memmi are in different positions in the colonial universe of the "Europeanized minorities" that were to play this mediating role. These positions were very much determined by social class. Kahanoff came from the Egyptian bourgeoisie with very limited exposure to the Arab majority culture of her country, which made her feel very self-conscious about the fact that she could not speak Arabic or follow up on the developments of Egyptian literature and intellectual life, nor could she understand the conversations between her father and grandfather[23]. Derrida came from a middle-class Algerian family who also did not speak the local Arabic language, but he saw his own story as a Maghrebian one in the sense that he obtained and lost his French nationality by colonial decree, as one more colonized entity of the Maghreb[24]. Memmi came from an underprivileged family who lived in the ghetto in Tunis, he acquired French as part of an education that was not to be expected by someone of his social condition. His mother tongue was the local dialect, and his acquisition of French came not without self-consciousness about his accent. He resented how his accent would give away his background, which he felt he had to conceal in the French educational system[25].

All three authors elaborate, in one way or the other, the motif of being in-between cultural worlds, which is a common theme in 20th century Sephardi literature in general. In fact, this Sephardi position is that of the «Levantine» which is a term that, by definition, «has always designated a state of in-betweenness»[26]. This is a term that, already by the sixteenth century, was used to refer to people who lived in the Mediterranean area who were intermediaries between European merchants and the local Ottoman population[27]. From then on, it acquired a derogatory meaning of being «in between cultures», which was perceived by the British and French colonizers as hybridity and impurity, a mix between East and West in racial and cultural terms, which also involved a connotation of a lack of authenticity. As Gil Z. Hochberg states:

[23] On Kahanoff's biography see D. Starr – S. Somekh, *Editors' Introduction: Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff – A Cosmopolitan Levantine*, in: *Mongrels or Marvels. The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, ed. by D. Starr – S. Somekh, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2020, pp. xi-xxxii.

[24] On Derrida, see B. Peeters, *Derrida: A Biography*, Cambridge (MA), Polity Press, 2013.

[25] On Memmi, see A. Memmi, *The Albert Memmi Reader*, Lincoln (NE), University of Nebraska Press, 2020.

[26] Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*, p. 46.

[27] *Ibidem.*

> the Levantines emerge within the European colonial literature as a dangerous hybrid between East and West or Europe and the Orient. More precisely, the Levantine is the *borderline figure* that marks the slippery lines between West and East and as such is found to be inferior not only to Europe but also to Europe's imagined Other, the Orient. (…) [T]he Levantine represents a *failed* position located between the two poles, a position associated with mimicry, impurity, incoherence, and the lack of coherent cultural/national heritage[28].

While Europe's «breathtaking cultural confidence», as Belmessous put it so precisely, imposed clear genealogical lines and hierarchies that represented their own superiority over the Arab world, Sephardi Jews, as a Levantine people, represented a life of alleged contradictions that did not necessarily demand to be resolved. They embodied the combination of things that had to stay separate in order to maintain the «new order of the world». As Mary Douglas pointed out, ambiguity can be threatening to any distinctive categorization of the world, and it is often confronted by theories of the potential harm caused by the elements categorized as ambiguous[29]. The dichotomic conceptualizations that characterized Europe's most basic epistemic, moral and political framework (religious versus secular, modernity versus tradition, West versus East, etc.) had a prescriptive nature as well. In other words, this was not only a way of conceptualizing an inherently disorganized experience, but an active imposition of these separations and distinctions on a normative level.

However, the «mediating role» of Sephardim was not a colonial invention. Rather, the idea of the Sephardi Jew as an ideal or «natural» mediator and translator goes back to *Al Andalus*, to the Andalusian legacy of transformations and translations, to the movement of people, languages, texts, poetic models and philosophical ideas through time and space. This is the *Andalusian* heritage characterized by the interconnectivity of cultures and languages[30]. This fluidity and mobility between different national, linguistic and literary affiliations shaped the ambiguity of their position, which mutated into ambivalent belonging under colonialism. Old Levantinism as defined by «cosmopolitanism», multiplicity of identity attachments, the intertwinement of cultures and

[28] *Ibidem*, p. 47.

[29] M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger. An Analysis of Concept of Pollution and Taboo*, London and New York, Routledge, 2002.

[30] See Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*; Y. Evri – A. Behar, *Between East and West: Controversies over the Modernization of Hebrew Culture in the Works of Shaul Abdallah Yosef and Ariel Bension*, «Journal of Modern Jewish Studies», XVI (2017), 2, pp. 295-311; Y. Evri, *Ha-Shivah le-Andalus: mahaloket 'al tarbut ve-zehut Yehudit-Sefaradit ben 'Arviyut le-'Ivriyut*, Jerusalem, Magnes, 2020.

multilingualism is the backdrop of this heightened ambiguity bordering with ambivalence in the Jewish position throughout colonial times.

Thus, Jewish life under colonial rule in the north of Africa and the Middle East was charged with an extra element of ambiguity in so far as different and conflicting political projects had Jews as part of their strategies. Jewish life was structurally ambiguous in the sense that it evolved in the tension between the Europeanizing forces of the colonial powers, the cultural specificity pursued by the Jewish community leadership, the impact of Zionism and its subsequent attempts to promote emigration to Eretz Israel/Palestine, the work of the Alliance Israelite Universelle and their project of Jewish emancipation through French culture and the nationalistic anti-colonial movements of the Arab world. Each of these different entities saw Jews in a different light and each had their own input in Jewish life in the Arab world[31]. Kahanoff, Memmi and Derrida's work in one way or the other respond to the tension of these conflicting forces in different ways. They are three instances of this Mediterranean cosmopolitanism, and three expressions of the Jewish experience with European «modernization» under colonial rule which resulted in three different political and intellectual reactions to the loss of references involved in that process.

Deborah Starr notes that foreignization happened to all resident minorities under colonial rule, who came to be viewed as resident aliens and associated with European powers[32]. She also claims that, as much as cosmopolitanism developed out of colonialism and imperial rule, it is neither reducible nor equivalent to colonialism. Starr states the importance of seeing how colonialism and cosmopolitanism are intertwined in order to be able to look at each of them separately and see how cosmopolitanism as a concept gives us tools to understand empire's legacy[33].

3. *Language as Conflict*

Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff's strategy to deal with the above-mentioned ambiguity is to reclaim a borderland identity and culture. Levantinism was the term Kahanoff chose to describe a social model marked by an «antiparochialism inherent in the admixture of multiple cultural influ-

[31] See A. Cohen, *On Belonging and Other Dreams. The Ambiguous Positions of the Jews in «Spanish Morocco»*, «Contemporary Jewry», XL (2020), pp. 547-578.

[32] D. Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt. Literature, Culture and Empire*, London – New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 9.

[33] *Ibidem*, p. 13.

ences»[34], putting forward «Levantinism as a positive social model»[35]. In her essays and literary work, Kahanoff discusses at length the multilingual setting of her childhood and reflects critically on her generation's Eurocentric tendency to favor French or English at the expense of Arabic, the language of the land:

> The Jews were so intoxicated by French culture that they did not pay attention to the advice of the Alliance for the Jews to learn the language of the land in which they lived. In the eyes of the middle-class Egyptian Jews of my generation, speaking in Arabic was considered out-dated and old-fashioned. Only the lower classes, that is to say the Jews of the ghetto, spoke Arabic. With time, they, too, mastered French in the schools offered by the community. The language of instruction was French, and Arabic was taught as a "foreign" language, as was English. A dual French-Arabic educational program was implemented in the schools just before the Arab-Israeli war. Even the Jews who came to Egypt from Central and Eastern Europe learned French and English and didn't bother learning Arabic. There were several positive aspects to acquiring French culture, but after all was said and done, French and English were not local languages in which people could easily or spontaneously express themselves. To a great extent we were a people without a language. There is no doubt that this lack was a barrier to written expression[36].

Kahanoff views the dramatic linguistic changes that took place in the Arab world in the light of the new European imperial presence. She depicts how the linguistic landscape of her childhood in Egypt – which was polyglot in nature – also reflected the new imperial structure of cultural hierarchies and power relations.

The adoption of the colonial *habitus* among the Jewish middle and upper classes in terms of their tastes and cultural references and even their patronizing and supremacist views on Arab culture and Arabic languages, results in an odd process of foreignization that turns them into strangers to themselves, strangers to their own familiar origins, which are seen as old-fashioned and unnecessary. The idea of being a people without a language is equivalent to being a people without collective memory, without any bridge between present and past, which is another recurrent theme among Europeanized Sephardi authors.

This feeling of resentment and attraction to the colonial linguistic situation can also be found in the writings of Jacques Derrida, whose own upbringing

[34] D. A. Starr – S. Somekh, *Editors' Introduction: Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff – A Cosmopolitan Levantine*, in: *Mongrels or Marvels. The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, ed. by D. A. Starr – S. Somekh, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 2011, p. xii.

[35] *Ibidem*.

[36] J. Shohet Kahanoff, *A Culture Stillborn*, in: *Mongrels or Marvels*, p. 124.

reveals similar experiences: «The study of Arabic was restricted to the school, but as an alien language, a strange kind of alien language as the language of the other, but then of course, and this is the strange and troubling part, the other as the nearest neighbor»[37].

In *Monolingualism of the Other*, Derrida reflects on questions of language and identity by looking at the colonial Franco-Maghrebian experience. He describes how this colonial cultural environment «reduce[s] language to the One, that is, to the hegemony of the homogenous»[38], which makes the linguistic question become crucial to the possibility of writing:

> In what language does one write memoirs when there has been no authorized mother tongue? How does one utter a worthwhile 'I recall' when it is necessary to invent both one's language and one's 'I' to invent them at the same time, beyond this surging wave of anamnesia that the double interdict has unleashed?[39]

Derrida repeatedly describes himself as having only one language: «I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling»[40]. As Hédi Abdel-Jaouad shows, monolingualism is for Derrida «a living paradox, an aporia incarnated (…) since whatever he rejects about French he must declare in French, the only language he has, but which he, nevertheless, cannot call his own»[41].

Derrida is describing a situation in which all languages that could have been his – and which at some point in history were in fact his ancestors' languages – are unknown to him: Arabic, whether literary or dialectal, Tamazight, Hebrew, Judeo-Spanish, none of these is his 'origin language', or 'source language'. Derrida builds a theory of language which, to a certain extent, is also a theory of the human subject, in so far as he speaks about the relationship with language and about identity. This theory is based on this experience of colonial dispossession of language, history, origin, and familiarity with one's own cultural references, or at least this is the experience that he generalizes

[37] J. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford (CA), Stanford University Press, 1998, p. 37.

[38] *Ibidem*, p. 40.

[39] *Ibidem*, p. 31.

[40] *Ibidem*, p. 1.

[41] H. Abdel-Jaouad, *Derrida's Algerian Anamnesis; or Autobiography in the Language of the Other*, in: R*emembering Africa*, ed. by E. Mudimbe- Boyi, Portsmouth, Heinemann, 2002, quoted in R. Chow, *Not Like a Native Speaker. On Languaging as a Postcolonial Experience*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2014, p. 24.

as universal[42]. Derrida claims that the relationship with language is always a colonial one, that it is a prosthesis which is imposed on us by another, a law that, as such, always comes from another[43].

In our opinion, Derrida's theory of the colonial structure of language is also a window into one of the processes of constitution of Sephardi modern subjectivity, one in which the possession of a linguistic tradition is intertwined with questions of belonging to a place/nation and a collective identity. What Derrida describes is how, among Algerian Jews, the mother-tongue was removed from all community intimacy and familiarity and replaced by the language of the colonizer, the only language Derrida could call his own, although it was not his. This process of construction of the self is marked by the mediation of colonial rule which undermines the symbolic universe of the colonized (his traditions, his stories, his languages) and replaces it with a new one, just as the material resources were being used for the colonizers benefit while the country was rebuilt with colonial structures and institutions.

Derrida, like Jacqueline Kahanoff, and like other Sephardi intellectuals of the first half of the twentieth century, adopted colonial languages, mainly French and English, yet did not study literary Arabic. However, Albert Memmi, even though he certainly did have a knowledge of the local Arabic language, was similarly tormented by his seemingly linguistic insufficiency:

> My mother tongue is the Tunisan dialect, which I speak with the proper accent of the young Moslem kids of our part of town and of the drivers of horse-trucks who were customers of our shop. The Jews of Tunis are to the Muslims what the Viennese are to the Germans: they drag out their syllables in a sing-song voice and soften and make insipid the guttural speech of their Mohammedan fellow-citizens. The relatively correct intonations of my speech earned me the mockery of all: the Jews disliked my strange speech and suspected me of affectation, while the Moslems thought I was mimicking them[44].

The Pillar of Salt, published in France in 1953, was Memmi's first novel, which turned him – a young immigrant in his early thirties – into a rising star among the Parisian intelligentsia. This confessional novel was a heavily autobiographical testimony from a young writer who felt trapped between two worlds. Besides nostalgic yearning for the Jewish quarter of Tunis in which

[42] We would like to acknowledge Miriam Jerade's generous input in the development of this argument.

[43] M. Jerade, *El monolingüismo del huésped*, «Isegoría. Revista de Filosofía Moral y Política», LIII (2017), pp. 661-677: p. 666.

[44] A. Memmi, *The Pillar of Salt*, Boston (MA), Beacon Press, 1992, p. 30.

Memmi grew up, the novel also expressed a spiritual stifling and a deep craving to escape, to leave behind the crowded intimacy of his childhood neighborhood and join the Left's liberation movements or the nationalist anti-colonial movements, and the conscious decision to make a clean break and not to look back, so as not to turn into a pillar of salt.

Memmi was the first in his family to acquire a Western (French) culture. None of the languages he spoke seemed to give him a *sense* of belonging. There was always something that stood out, something that gave him away as a stranger. As a teenager, he had a noticeable accent in French which he could only tame if he focused on his pronunciation rather than on the content of what he was saying, which was obviously not very practical. This accent stood out among the rest of the middle and upper-class students who had been born into French culture. His character, Alexander Mordekhai Benillouche, says:

> I tried desperately to speak this language which wasn't mine, which perhaps will never be entirely mine, but without which I would never be able to achieve self-realization. Our local dialect was only just able to satisfy the daily needs of eating and drinking. Could I tell my schoolmates that my mother not only spoke no European language at all, but barely managed to carry on in her own dialect?[45]

Memmi's colonial experience with French as a language that was not his own is different from that of Derrida and Kahanoff's. Memmi needs French in order to achieve self-realization, liberation from the religious and traditional world of his family, along with its poverty and immobility. The social class difference among these authors is key to their relationship with language.

The Second World War, which brought the Vichy regime and the Nazi conquest of Tunisia in winter 1942, provided a cruel awakening from that innocent faith in the emancipatory and civilizing powers of European culture. It was in this book, *Pillar of Salt*, where Memmi related his harsh experiences in a Nazi work camp, from which he managed to escape, to end up in France. Derrida was also stripped of his French citizenship due to Vichy's abolition of the Crémieux Decree in 1940. He was expelled from school along with the rest of Jewish students and teachers, and eventually moved to Paris. Kahanoff also ended up emigrating, eventually to Israel, after a journey that started with her studies in the US, then Paris and finally Israel.

[45] *Ibidem*, p. 105.

4. *Detachment from Jewish Tradition as Part of the Colonial Experience*

In Kahanoff's writings, Western imperialism and secularity are the driving factors in the elimination of traditions and languages. We can sense her ambivalence towards the imperial linguistic setting: on the one hand she uncovers how the multilingual and multicultural social setting emerged through the elimination of local languages and traditions; on the other hand, she also acknowledges her privileged status as a product of a colonial upbringing:

> True, I was very young, but I also felt that *none of the languages we spoke could express our thoughts*, because none was our own. *We were a people without a tongue* and could speak only through signs and symbols. Our elders spoke of ordinary, everyday things, or about religion. Their religion was to say *maktub*, *inshallah*, "amen", "Our Father who art in Heaven", and to pray and fast sometimes; but it did not say anything about the things that were so difficult for us in life. Whether, for instance, it was right to want the British to go, and wrong to hate them, right to learn so many things from them and from their schools, but wrong not to want to be like the British and French, or our parents, or the Arabs. We were searching for something within ourselves which we had yet to find. (…) What were we supposed to be when we grew up if we could be neither Europeans nor natives, nor even pious Jews, Moslems, or Christians, as our grandparents had been?[46]

The tension between exposure to new intellectual worlds, cultures, and languages (with the promises and possibilities they entailed) and the simultaneous loss of traditions, identities, and tongues is vivid. Like others of her generation, her exposure to so many languages was also the product of social and cultural divisions and partitions. The partition from the language of the land and the languages of the community left her generation feeling that they were a «people without a tongue», unable to express their identity or sense of belonging.

In one of her essays about Kahanoff, Yafa Benaya says that her writings about identity in colonial contexts are an exception compared to other thinkers of her time such as Frantz Fanon or Albert Memmi, whom she knew personally. Benaya says that the main difference is that, even though Kahanoff writes about her identity processes and experiences without romanticization, she writes from a place of love and appreciation of the human bonds and cultural connections that had shaped who she was[47]. Therefore, says Benaya,

[46] J. Kahanoff, *Childhood in Egypt*, in: Starr and Somekh, *Mongrels or Marvels*, p. 8.

[47] Y. Benaya, *Ribui panea shel halevantiniut*, in: *Kol HaTor. Tsionut Masortit-Spharadit*, ed. by O. Toubul, Tel Aviv, Yediot Acharonot, 2021, pp. 160-161 [our translation].

Kahanoff's approach to the experience of being fragmented, ruptured, and trapped in between and inside those worlds (the colonial and the traditional) is more moderate and balanced than in the case of other authors such as Memmi or Derrida. In Benaya's opinion, Kahanoff's writings show «a kind of pragmatic acceptance that echoes from a distance the traditional worlds that she came from»[48]. Benaya sees this as «the acceptance of what has been passed on to us, with the great historical – and metaphysical – forces that create us and build us as we are more than any of our personal choices»[49].

The following fragment illustrates this appreciation of those historical circumstances that, albeit imperfect, shaped who she was:

> The Arabs and the other colonized peoples were the crossbreeds of many cultures by accident, while we Levantines were inescapably so, by vocation and destiny. Perhaps our ways would part, but together we belonged to the Levantine generation, whose task and privilege it was to translate European thought and action and apply it to our own world. We needed to find the words that would shake the universe out of its torpor and give voice to our confused protests. We were the first generation of Levantines in the contemporary world who sought a truth that was neither in the old religions nor in complete surrender to the West, and this, perhaps, should be recorded[50].

This appreciation of the complexity of identity among minorities in colonial Egypt leads her to turn this experience into a social, cultural, and political (in the widest sense of the word) project for the Mediterranean and, more specifically, for Israel. The experience of being torn, split and inherently conflicted results in a proposal for a society that would have the maturity to deal with contradictions and conflicts, which are inherent to any diverse social context. Levantinism, then, would be not only a category that describes those Europeanized minorities who were in between the colonial Westernizing world and the traditional world of their communities. Levantinism is also a horizon, a social model. As tends to be the case, the way in which we look at our past relates to the way in which we look towards our future. Or, to put it differently, narratives about the past are intertwined with our hopes and visions for the future.

Like Kahanoff, Memmi belonged to the same generation who lived the historical, political, and cultural transition from the colonial world to nationalism and the nation state but also, although in different ways, the transition

[48] *Ibidem*.
[49] *Ibidem*.
[50] Kahanoff, *Childhood in Egypt*, p. 13.

from Jewish traditionalism to modernity and to Jewish nationalism. A portrait essayist, Memmi was one of the first to recognize that, contrary to certain political ideas, slogans, and battle cries, human beings contain many dimensions and layers. They are also strongly inconsistent creatures, torn between their different layers of identity and belonging, their competing yearnings and ideals that struggle to coexist.

> I am ill at ease in my own land and I know of no other. My culture is borrowed and I speak my mother tongue haltingly. I have neither religious beliefs nor tradition, and am ashamed of whatever particle of them has survived deep within me. To try to explain what I am, I would need an intelligent audience and much time: I am a Tunisian but of French culture. (…) I am Tunisian, but Jewish, which means that I am politically and socially an outcast. I speak the language of the country with a particular accent and emotionally I have nothing in common with Moslems. I am a Jew who has broken with the Jewish religion and the ghetto, is ignorant of Jewish culture and detests the middle class because it is phony. I am poor but desperately anxious not to be poor, and at the same time, I refuse to take the necessary steps to avoid poverty[51].

Memmi became an author who expressed more vividly than anyone else the rebellion against simplistic categorizations and labels: someone who was at the same time both Jewish and Arab; Tunisian, Italian, and French; African and European; a son of a poor family and an honored member of the French literary elite; a secular believer; a Zionist who was critical of Israel; a Leftist who warned against violent revolutionism; a cosmopolitan who believed in national liberation, and yet also a harsh critic of the post-colonial regimes that emerged in the Global South. Memmi offered an inventory of contradictions, and constantly tried to make peace between these different elements.

This drive to comprehend human contradictions and complexity is also present it *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, in which Memmi identified the mutual dependency between the colonizer and the colonized. This was an insightful and ground-breaking idea that sought to challenge simplistic views of the colonial condition: Instead of a binary matrix in which colonizer and colonized are separate from each other and locked in opposition, Memmi offered a complex multidimensional model of colonial relations in which both sides are bound in an unbreakable knot, and their identities intertwined.

In the post-war world into which Memmi was forced, self-discovery and exploration of the meanings of independence went hand in hand. The initial,

[51] Memmi, *The Pillar of Salt*, p. 331.

innocent confidence that decolonization would soon reach a 'happy end' in the form of personal freedom coupled with political sovereignty, was discovered to be a rather naïve vision. Israel's independence (1948) and the intensification of the Jewish-Palestinian conflict, on the one hand, and the independence of Tunisia (1956) and the end of French rule, on the other, had a dramatic impact on the Jewish community of Tunis in general and on Memmi in particular. Within about a decade, a combination of government sanctions, incitement, and growing harassment resulted in an influx of Jewish emigration to France and Israel. A community dating back over a millennium became almost entirely extinct.

Memmi's assessment of his past seems to say that the traditional world he came from has very little to offer him today, and that French colonizer turned his family's culture into a burden and a source of suffocation and even shame. Both worlds are there for him to react against them, they have almost nothing to offer but the contradictions from which his thought emerges and thrives and the injustices and flaws against which he responds.

When Derrida reflected about his life as a Franco-Maghrebian Jew and the consequences of French colonization on the Jewish communities of Algeria, he spoke of a Jewish culture that «seemed to succumb to an *asphyxia*»[52], whose memory had suffered a «colonial expropriation»[53]. He lamented «this incapacity, this handicapped memory»[54] that turned Jews into «strangers to Jewish culture»[55], for whom Jewish heritage had been «ossified, necrotized into a ritual component whose meaning was no longer legible»[56]. He describes this as a «bottomless alienation of the soul: a catastrophe»[57] Derrida felt he was dissociated from his origin, that he had been robbed of his starting point, cut from the heritage of languages that could have been 'his' (Amazigh, Arabic, Judeo-Spanish, Hebrew) but were not and, instead, he was monolingual in the language of the other, in this case, the French colonialist other. This monolingualism and the adopted or imposed French culture was as «prosthesis of origin», marking the absence of such an origin. This is the ultimate expression of the colonized experience: the loss of familiarity with one's own languages and heritage. Derrida asked:

[52] Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other*, p. 53.
[53] *Ibidem*.
[54] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[55] *Ibidem*, p. 53.
[56] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[57] *Ibidem*, p. 53.

> Where then are we? Where do we find ourselves? With whom can we still identify in order to affirm our own identity and to tell ourselves our own history? First of all, to whom do we recount it? One would have to construct oneself, one would have to be able to invent oneself without a model and without an assured addressee[58].

Derrida explained that French colonialism brought upon Franco-Maghrebian Jews like himself a prosthesis of origin, that French culture was the culture of the other, a culture they as Maghrebian Jews were historically remote from, which turned them into strangers to themselves. Derrida calls his argument and recollection of these experiences a «lament»[59], a «grievance»[60] for not having a memory to go back to. This is an experience of an impossible belonging that turns the home, the community and the familiar into objects of deconstruction in so far as their appearance as natural as the air we breathe has been interrupted by a process of colonization that has turned the familiar into strange and unknown.

5. *Final Remarks*

The uncanny, according to Freud, is the feeling of unrest and fear that comes from the transformation of the familiar into something unknown and frightening. The uncanny is connected to disorientation and ambivalence, to the oscillation between the familiar and known, and the concealed elements of the foreign[61]. The feeling of the uncanny has to do with one's doubts about the other's nature and it connects us to our most ancestral fears, those we believe to have surmounted. When Freud published his essay on the qualities of the uncanny, he was most probably not thinking about the experiences of Sephardic Jews under colonial rule. However, concepts travel and may be adopted and transformed for purposes other than the original ones, like we have done here. We chose to use the concept of the uncanny to qualify our three authors' experience of belonging under colonialism because of its suggestive connotation of this transformation of the familiar into the foreign and even threatening, a theme that appears, under different forms, in the work of our authors.

[58] *Ibidem*, p. 55.
[59] *Ibidem*, p. 54.
[60] *Ibidem*.
[61] See S. Freud, *The Uncanny*, London, Penguin Classics, 2003.

The 'cultural multitudes' that shaped Sephardi subjectivity since its Andalusian origins became fragmentary and contradictory with each other (educated but traditional, European but north African, etc.) only in the face of the demand to self-identify, to choose a framework, a point of view, a tribe, a group. This demand was imposed by way of colonialism, secularization and nationalism, which infused the ethno-religious differences with extra power dynamics and interrupted the fluidity of belongings. Colonization disrupted the traditional balance of powers and national identities, and it was no longer possible to go back to them. Thus, the postcolonial subject has no choice but «to live with a corrupted image of his/her traditional identity and to accept the corrupting Western influence as part of his/her identity»[62]. This experience was expressed by our three intellectuals, who drew different conclusions from it.

Memmi, Derrida and Kahanoff shared the same dilemma, which dealt with their affiliation to the colonial language and the monolingualism it involved. This dominance of the colonial language came at the expense of erasing the heteroglossic and local cultural and linguistic traditions of the society and communities in which they grew up. The question of the unstable relations between language, writing and belonging is common to all of them; the presence or absence of the local Arabic as the language of the past as well as (through its erasure) the symbol of the colonial situation in the present brings back the legacy of *Al Andalus* as a symbol of a lost world of languages, traditions, and cultures; as a symbol of ends and beginnings.

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[62] A. Campoy-Cubillo, *Memories of the Maghreb. Transnational Identities in Spanish Cultural Production*, New York, Palgrave MacMillan, 2012, p. 136.

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Azimuth is a highly-scientific review headed for an international public, that would be interested in the double orientation of philosophy, as it is conceived by the editors: it is genealogy of problems and themes in the modern Age as well as reinterpretation of them in the present days. This two-dimensional attitude also explains the name chosen, *Azimuth*, that's the english translation from arabic term *as-sûmut* indicating the distance from a point to the plane of reference, which gives the necessary coordinates to determine the position of a celestial body.
The aim is to provide the necessary coordinates to guide human thinking through the elaborate, stratified reality of the present days, which requires an intersection of different knowledges and approaches in order to be understood in its complexity.

Azimuth è una pubblicazione scientifica di carattere internazionale, attenta alla questione filosofica nella sua duplice vettorialità: rivolta da un lato alla genealogia di idee e problemi nel mondo moderno, e dall'altro proiettata sulla riformulazione e applicazione contemporanea di forme e dinamiche del pensiero. Questa vocazione bidimensionale spiega il nome prescelto, *Azimuth*: trascrizione inglese del termine arabo *as-sûmut*, che indica in astronomia la distanza tra un punto e il piano di riferimento, fornendo le coordinate indispensabili per determinare univocamente la posizione di un corpo nella sfera celeste. L'obiettivo è quello di offrire al pensiero, esaminando in numeri monografici i nodi fondamentali della coscienza filosofica e culturale odierna, le coordinate necessarie per un orientamento critico nella società umana, la cui stratificazione rende indispensabile un pensiero a sua volta composito, che non sia solo comprensione ma anche un tentativo di posizionamento nel mondo.

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