10. - BOU-HANIFIA-les-THERMES. - Épicerie GOURION

Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries.

Contested Narratives of a Shared Past

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Piera Rossetto*

Summary

FOCUS

**Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries.
Contested Narratives of a Shared Past**
Introduction
by Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Piera Rossetto
p. 1-14

Sara Cohen Fournier
*Sharing and Unsharing Memories. Life stories of Jews from Muslim-Arab Countries: Fear,
Anger and Discontent within a Silenced Displacement*
p. 15-31

Yolande Cohen and Martin Messika
*Sharing and Unsharing Memories of Jews of Moroccan Origin in Montréal and Paris
Compared*
p. 32-52

Emanuela Trevisan Semi
*Shared Memories and Oblivion: Is Israeli Jews' Nostalgia for Morocco Shared by the
Muslims in Morocco?*
p. 53-66

Aviad Moreno
*De-westernizing Morocco: Pre-Migration Colonial History and the Ethnic-Oriented Self
Representation of Tangier's Natives in Israel*
p. 67-85

Mechtild Gilzmer
The Memory of North African Jews in the Diaspora
p. 86-102

Piera Rossetto
Space of Transit, Place of Memory: Ma'abarah and Literary Landscapes of Arab Jews
p. 103-127

DISCUSSION

REVIEWS

Memory and Forgetting among Jews from the Arab-Muslim Countries.

Contested Narratives of a Shared Past

by *Emanuela Trevisan Semi and Piera Rossetto*

Introduction[1]

"Zouzef Tayayou has left Nedroma *(Algeria)*. He did, however, hold on for a long time, like a child who refuses to be weaned and separated from his mother. In the end, he gave in, following the footsteps of the numerous others that went before him in their exodus. What did he and the others leave behind in the city that sheltered them for centuries? Perhaps they left their homes and their shops; certainly, they left a little of their style of living; but especially, they left, many memories, for these "people of the book" remain a part of the collective memory of this city and the surrounding area."

Belkacem Mebarki, "Zouzef Tayayou (Joseph the Tailor): A Jew from Nedroma, and the Others", in *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*, eds. Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011, 340).

In this issue we examine themes which are linked to memory studies and which have witnessed significant development in recent decades due to the strengthening of multiculturalism in the 1980s. The former, demanding equal respect for the various cultures making up a society and pursuing the aim of promoting and preserving cultural diversity, has contributed to a challenging of mainstream historiography and to a re-evaluation of memories considered "minor." This explains how new spaces have developed to allow a counter-memory to challenge the dominant narrative. In Israeli society this has meant re-appraising the Zionist master narrative and giving expression to the different histories that are a part of the collective memory of the Jews of Arab Islamic countries, those who arrived in Israel[2] from the end of the 1940s, but also to the histories of Palestinian Israelis.[3]

---

[1] Emanuela Trevisan Semi is the author of the "Introduction," Piera Rossetto of the "Overview."

[2] There is a vast literature in this regard. Among the most significant works see Yehouda Shenhav, *Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); Hannan Hever, *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon: Nation Building and Minority Discourse*, (New York-London: New York University Press, 2001); Aziza Khazzoom, *Shifting Boundaries and Inequality in Israel, or how the Polish Peddler became a German Intellectual* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008); Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema: East /West and the Politics of Representation* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1989).

[3] See for example Daniel Bar-Tal and Yona Teichman, *Stereotypes and Prejudice in Conflict: Representations of Arabs in Israeli Jewish Society,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005);

Memory studies have flourished in particular due to the rediscovery of the works of Maurice Halbwachs,[4] to the publications of *Les lieux de mémoire* by Pierre Nora[5] and especially thanks to the re-visiting, debate and further study conducted by Paul Ricoeur on the themes dealt with by Halbwachs and Nora,[6] all authors who will be the principal theoretical points of reference in this issue. In the task of memory re-construction, literary works can function as memory archives and contribute to a deeper and more greatly diversified understanding of the past, especially if there is access to a vast literary corpus, as is that constituted by the Jews originating from the Arab Muslim countries. The use of a literary corpus allows the re-integration into historiography of a memory which the history written by those holding power has marginalized or erased. The *Mizraḥim* protagonists and what they write has had the effect of putting what was once on the margins at the very centre of the writing of history, with a re-appropriation of their own history. Thanks to literary narration, to the novel and to poetry, those who have been marginalized can make an addendum to the official historiography; the voice of the underdogs can be heard and integrated into the master narrative.[7]

Another tool that has showed itself to be useful in re-constructing migratory paths between memory and oblivion is the use of life stories corresponding to a biography in the form of narration, where the subject gives a particular significance to their own life story or conduct.[8]

In this issue we use various terms to define Jews originating from Arab-Islamic countries: *Mizraḥim* (Orientals), *edot ha-mizraḥ* (Oriental communities) and *Sefardim*, but other terms still could be used, such as Arab Jews.[9] We are dealing here with words which have a history and which refer to categories requiring specification. The use of these terms has often sparked off lively debates and they are rarely used in daily life by the ordinary members of these communities, although political and intellectual debate may well lay claim to them.

Two academics in particular, Ella Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav, have used and discussed the term Arab Jews, which the writer Albert Memmi had already employed in the 1970s. Ella Shohat used this term, explaining that by " 'Arab Jew' I refer to people of Jewish faith historically linked to the Arab Muslim world"[10] while Shenhav, who will entitle his own essay precisely *The Arab Jews*, reminds us that the term " 'Arab Jews' (rather than *Mizraḥim*, which literally means "Orientals") challenges the binary opposition between Arab and Jew in Zionist discourse, a dichotomy that renders the linking of Arabs and Jews in

---

Rochelle Davis, *Palestinian Village Histories: Geography of the Displaced,* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010).

[4] Maurice Halbwachs, *La mémoire collective,* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1997, I ed. 1950) and Id., *Les Cadres sociaux de la mémoire,* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1994 , 1 ed. 1925).

[5] *Les lieux de mémoire*, ed. Pierre Nora, (Paris: Gallimard, 1984-1986).

[6] Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli,* (Paris: Seuil, 2000).

[7] See Ktzia Alon, *Oriental Israeli Poetics,* (Tel Aviv: Ha-kibbutz ha-meuhad, 2011) [Hebrew].

[8] See Daniel Bertaux, *Les récits de vie,* (Paris: Nathan, 1997).

[9] See the essay by Yehouda Shenav with this title, see note 2.

[10] Ella Shohat, "The invention of the Mizrahim", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29/1 (1999): 5-20, 5.

this way inconceivable"[11] and notes that such a term, used by Zionist emissaries and state functionaries,[12] is "a splicing together of two categories whose relations are at best ambivalent, given the long history of rupture between them. As a viable option of practice and discourse in Israeli society, 'Arab Jews' was short-lived, and the label was edited out by historical circumstances, particularly the rise of Jewish and Arab nationalism."[13] It is a term therefore with blurred outlines,[14] chosen by Shenhav also to show his criticism of what he defines as the binary opposition between Jews and Arabs and which often inflames debate. Albert Memmi must be cited in these discussions as it was he who publicly made use of the term,[15] only to then deny the possibility of using it.[16]

The term *Sefardi/m* refers to the Jews originally from Spain and the northern Mediterranean, and thus should strictly be used only when referring to the descendants of that population but its use is often improperly widened to the extent of including Jews from Arab countries who have never set eyes on Spain.

The term *Sefardim* has been replaced by *edot ha-mizraḥ* and *Mizraḥim*, usually translated into English as "Oriental Jews" or "Easteners". They stand for those Jewish communities that immigrated into Israel coming from an area stretching from North Africa to India, also including Ethiopia. We are dealing with a grouping that has been invented, as has been amply demonstrated by Ella Shohat. It is a category distinguished above all by a connotation in opposition to Ashkenaziness: "Mizrahim…condenses a number of connotations: it celebrates the Jewish past in the Eastern world; it affirms the pan-Oriental communities developed in Israel itself; and it evokes a future of revived cohabitation with the Arab Muslim East."[17] The term *Mizraḥim* often takes on connotations of claiming identity and of ethnicisation, used as it is by intellectuals and artists to lay claim to a sort of *Mizraḥi* pride. As Arnold Lewis has remarked,[18] basing himself on a field study conducted on a city of 3500 inhabitants with partly North African origins (Kurdistanis, Tripolitans and

---

[11] Shenhav, *The Arab Jews*, XI.

[12] Ibid., *The Arab Jews*, 9.

[13] Ivi.

[14] For a deeper analysis and discussion of this term, see Emily Benichou Gottreich, "Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib", *The Jewish Quarterly Review* 98/4 (2008): 433-451.

[15] Albert Memmi, "What is an Arab-Jew?", in Albert Memmi, *Jews and Arabs,* (Chicago: J. Philip O'Hara, 1975, translated from *Juifs et Arabes*, Paris: Gallimard, 1974).

[16] In a recent conference ("Genre, Ethnicité et Religions: Le cas des migrations maghrébines comparées France-Quebec de 1945 à nos jours", Paris 17-18, April 2012) attended by one of the authors of this introduction (Emanuela Trevisan Semi), Albert Memmi, invited as guest of honour, returned to the use of the term Arab Jews, maintaining that since it is his custom to use concepts pragmatically, he could re-employ such a term.

[17] Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim", 14.

[18] Arnold Lewis, "Phantom Ethnicity: « Oriental Jews » in Israeli Society", in *Perspectives on Israeli Anthropology*, eds. Esther Herzog et al., (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2009), 57-72.

Tunisians), the ethnic category of Oriental Jews held little importance for most of these people. In fact the various groups who consider themselves chiefly Israelis defined themselves on certain occasions as Kurdistanis, Tripolitans and Tunisians but never as *Mizrahim*. In a research that one of the authors of this introduction is presently carrying out on the ethnic Moroccan museums in Israel,[19] the same phenomenon has been observed in the course of interviews conducted with the planners of these museums. These never used the term *Mizrahim* but rather *yozei Morocco* (originating from Morocco), *yozei arzot Arav* (originating from Arab countries), *yozei arzot Islam* (originating from Islamic countries), *yehudei Maghreb* (Jews from the Maghreb) and *yehudei Islam* (Jews of Islam). However in literature and music the term *Mizrahi* have become widely used.

More specifically in this issue we propose to consider the shared and unshared memory of Jews from the Arab-Muslim countries of the Diaspora and of those Jews from the Arab-Muslim countries who have found themselves on the edge of the master narrative of the new State of Israel and the memories that are unshared or contested in the narratives of Jews and Palestinians. In the case of Morocco, the memory that Muslims have of the Jews who lived among them has also been taken into consideration.

Aleida Assman, in her essay[20] where she mentions de-legitimisation, one of the characteristics of the functions of memory, has written that it is easier for the winners to forget history than for those who have been defeated: the winners can afford to forget while on the other hand the defeated – those who are not resigned to their fate and are forced to go back and rethink how it could have been – cannot.

We know how this has been relevant for the Jewish people, characterised by an excess of memory (compared to others who have too little memory), as has been pointed out by Paul Ricoeur. In fact Judaism has developed a system of ritualized memory of its founding events, thanks to the cyclical feasts and celebrations that occur every year and to the use of very elaborate mnemonic techniques that allow Jews to continue to pass down from generation to generation the memory of what they think took place once upon a time and that can be summarized by the very famous sentence "you must remember not to forget what Amalek did to you."

In other words we propose to reconsider the voices of actors who were not winners and the history of the State of Israel and of nation building from the perspective of non-hegemonic groups.

The memory of non-hegemonic groups can be recovered, as stated above, through literary sources, oral histories and images but also from photographs, films and documentaries; it may also be representative of different forms of resistance. Aleida Assman mentions several examples of resistance that are

---

[19] Emanuela Trevisan Semi.
[20] Aleida Assman, *Ricordare*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2002), 154 (*Erinnerungsräume. Formen und des Wandlunger kulturullen Gedächtnisses*, 1999).

carried forward by the defeated and the oppressed performing a function of de-legitimisation against a system which is deemed as oppressive.

It is in the light of the interpretation of memory as a form of resistance to different systems of power in the Middle East that we wish to publish the articles in this issue. It is an issue that will deal both with shared and unshared memory and with selective oblivion, which means the possibility to select memories.

Paul Ricoeur[21] points out that not every track is considered worthy of being followed and then stored away in order to be organised later in the official history and that the oblivion that occurs during this phase of storage may be the subject of memory of second degree, a history of the memory of oblivion.

The forgetting that did not enter into the official history and that gave rise to primary and secondary narratives will become also a matter of particular relevance in this issue.

The memory that is recovered through interviews focused on personal memories enhancing the emotions and tied to memories. We appreciate that the subjectivity of the interviewee could also emerge in the papers of this issue, a subjectivity that will be "re-introduced in the story," propelling the reconstruction not of the history but of a multitude of stories.[22]

Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel[23] argued about the potential that individual memories located between the individual and the collective have in that may maintain and cultivate a sense of the past and each story is fed by subjective emotions.

The emotions that can emerge in both literary texts and in interviews underlie the feature of irrefutability that emotional memories have: "they cannot be correct, we cannot agree, because they are produced and dissolve with the vivacity of impressions connoted affectively."[24]

Collective memory that depends on the ways in which individual memories are kept, transported and stabilized by the social groups to which the individual belongs, generates a current of thought that maintains that the past can still continue to live within the group that holds it. These memories provide the specificity and consistency of the group especially when facing major historical changes. Through the transmission of symbols and places of memory that are felt as shared, the individual participates and maintains its collective memory, a memory that is still alive in the individual memories and is part of a broader set of memories. Knowing that societies have always arranged their own representations of the past on the basis of the present and knowing that today it is primarily through the prism of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that the representations of Jews who lived in Arab countries or Israel / Palestine are formed, we must try also to understand the place this past occupies in the

---

[21] Paul Ricoeur, *Ricordare, dimenticare, perdonare*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2004), 106-7 (*Das Rätsel der Vergangenheit. Erinnern-Vergessen-Verzeihen,* Göttingen, 1998).

[22] Assman, *Ricordare*, 301.

[23] Lucette Valensi and Nathan Wachtel, *Mémoires juives*, (Paris: Gallimard-Julliard, 1986).

[24] Assman, *Ricordare*, 304.

construction of these representations. In fact in this issue we do not intend merely to preserve glimpses of the history of the Jewish communities in Arab-Muslim countries or in Israel or of the Palestinians in Israel through memory, but more to consider the influence of the representations and the self-representations in the discourse that has built up today both in Israel and in the Arab-Muslim countries.

In this issue we will take into account the work of construction and reconstruction of identity such as in moments of great historical changes and in this regard we will consider literary and the historical sources as well as oral testimonies, knowing that the little stories or the individual cases help to form the greater history.

Overview[25]

"And so, little by little, language melted into language, landscape into landscape, and culture into culture. The years brought changes, small and large, and Iraq somehow seemed now close, now faraway. But the stars that flickered over our Baghdad rooftop are the same stars I can still see-on a cloudless night- from my balcony in Tel Aviv."
Sasson Somekh, *Baghdad, Yesterday. The Making of an Arab Jew* (Jerusalem: Ibis Editions, 2007, 186).

The essays presented in this issue have been written by established scholars and young researchers, concentrating on different thematic areas within the broad theoretical framework of memory studies outlined by Trevisan Semi's introduction to the issue. Almost all of them deal with history, memory and (self-) representations of the so-called "*Mizraḥi* Jews," with all the nuances, distinctions, and debates that this term entails.

The author of this overview[26] proposes to analyse and group the essays according to some shared key themes/research methodology, trying to highlight what is shared among them and what links articles that clearly arch over time and space in a truly remarkable way. Being a personal interpretation of the texts, this section presents the author's view on the contributions and does not, of course, intend to replace the contributors' arguments and conclusions. To the reader is left the task – and the pleasure – of scrutinising them by exploring the issue.

A first group of essays by Cohen-Fournier, Cohen and Messika, and Trevisan Semi, deals with memories as recollected by individuals, Jews and non-Jews alike, about Jewish life in North African and Middle Eastern countries, mainly in the second half of the twentieth century. That was the time, starting with the end of the 1940s and carrying on into through the 1950s and 60s, in which the major waves of emigration of Jews from the North Africa and the Middle East drastically reduced and almost put an end to the Jewish presence in these

---

[25] If not indicated with a reference in a footnote, quotation marks will be used to introduce terms or expressions used by the author of the essay considered in that particular section of the overview.

[26] Piera Rossetto.

countries. All three articles are based on interviews and life stories, which means oral sources, collected in different countries, both of origin and of arrival after emigration, such as Morocco, France, Israel and Canada. These sources are particularly valuable since they convey "not just what people did, but what they wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did."[27] They open the floor to subjectivity, in the same way as they provide an example of how "the organization of the narrative (subject to rules which are mostly the result of collective elaboration) reveals a great deal of the speakers' relationship with their own history."[28]

The first two articles mentioned above focus on a limited number of life stories, which are part of the project *Life stories of Montrealers displaced by war, genocide and human rights violation,* CURA-Concordia, 2007-2012.[29] Cohen-Fournier, herself an interviewer in the sub-group *Holocaust and Other Persecutions Against Jews Research Group*,[30] introduces the project by pointing out that "a few hundred interviews were collected in different community groups, using a methodology of oral history to explore the social memories of trauma and displacement through individual experiences."

In her contribution to this issue, Cohen-Fournier tackles the question of how the departures of Jews from their countries of origin, in the context of a post-Shoah and post-colonial migration, have been represented by individual memories within the collective experience of uprooting. In particular, the researcher examines the narratives of four people from different countries: Algeria, Egypt and Iraq. These narratives, the researcher states, "allow for glimpses of personal comprehension in the realm of history" and reveal a paradigm present in certain individuals, where alongside the constant presence of feelings of fear, anger and discontent, an "ability to maintain agency over their own trajectory" is also found. A "sudden sense of agency" is inextricably bonded to the moment of the departure, the need to react to the worsening situation and to act in order to overcome it. Leaving is presented as a personal choice and decision. Indeed, the interviewees do not present themselves as victims but rather they show a strong form of resilience, thus granting their departure a strong sense of legitimisation. This represents a construction of the individual memory that contrasts with the collective one, creating a conflict between shared and unshared memories. Not sharing their personal memories in public might represent "a way of reconstructing their own histories, of coping with a reality only known to themselves, and of ignoring history," affirms the author. If this should be the case, it is at this crossroads of personal and collective memories where the main question proposed by the author also lies, that of whether "this state of denial could help them individually or collectively," or not.

---

[27] Alessandro Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", *History Workshop* 12 (1981): 96-107, 99-100.

[28] Ibid., 100.

[29] See: http://www.lifestoriesmontreal.ca.

[30] See: http://lifestoriesmontreal.ca/en/holocaust-working-group.

In the same framework of a post-Shoah and post-colonial migration, Cohen and Messika investigate the memories hold by Jews about life in their country of birth (mainly Morocco and Tunisia) and the motivations to leave. The aim of the research is to question the constitution of a shared memory and of a group memory. The authors analyse the shared and unshared memories of departures and depictions of colonial society as they are found in different social groups, choosing two peculiar perspectives: the generational perspective and the affiliation to one of the sectors into which colonial Moroccan society was divided, sectors based on ethnic, religious and gender lines, as the authors rightly point out. Articulating questions related to education, culture and language allows Cohen and Messika to consider the different discourses about emigration and departure. Some key elements emerge from the different narratives, delineating a sharing of memories based on age group and social group: those who were influential in the decision of leaving; the issue of children's education; the absence of a future in their countries of birth, a common perception by the westernized sector for instance; the role of French culture in influencing the direction of emigration and its outcome in the receiving country. The difference in narrative is quite striking between those who left Morocco or Tunisia in the immediate aftermath of the foundation of the State of Israel (1948) and those who left in the fifties, mainly after the independence of the countries (1956). In their discourses, the authors claim, the rationalization of their departure seems to stem from an individual or family decision, even though the feeling that "they had to leave" is also conveyed. By way of conclusion to their contribution, Cohen and Messika state their "attempt to better understand the cognitive and commemorative processes of some of the people who have experienced these migrations, mainly from the Westernized sector," as their interviews were conducted in Paris and Montreal. Indeed the authors call for "a vast project (…) to better understand the memories of people of other sectors who have migrated elsewhere to get a more nuanced and complete picture of this moment." The essay by Trevisan Semi also contributes to enlarging this picture by including the point of view of Muslims on Jews' emigration from Morocco in the same period of time considered by the previous articles.

Trevisan Semi's essay takes its cue from research conducted by the author in Meknès with Hanane Sekkat Hatimi (from 2005 through to 2009). The research included nearly three hundred interviewees: mainly people who had met Jews in Morocco, but also university students and Jews from Meknès. As for Cohen and Messika, in this research the generational factor and the affiliation with one sector of the Moroccan society are also relevant perspectives, together with gender, to enquire about the memory of Jewish presence and history in Morocco. Trevisan Semi underlines that one peculiar feature of the country, in comparison to other Arab-Muslim countries, is "the continuity of past Jewish presence both in terms of places and items." This continuity is clearly manifested every year by the presence of thousands of Jews of Moroccan origin from Israel, France and Canada arriving in the

country to attend *hillula*, visit cemeteries or friends still living in Morocco. According to the scholar, this continuity "allows a historical memory to be cultivated" and "to be constantly updated through the streams of memory stemming from and involving these visitors." Nevertheless, Trevisan Semi recognises that Morocco too is not exempt from what Aomar Boum defines as "a post-colonial historiographical silence."[31] As a consequence of this, the researcher proposes to go beyond the silence of official historiography and to engage with some fundamental questions: Are there traces left of the memory of the past in which Jews played a crucial role? Is there a nostalgia for that past? Do we still today perceive the absence of such an important part of Moroccan history as the Jewish one has been? And how is it eventually perceived? What are the points of sharing and of "unsharing" of memories between Jews and Muslims in the Moroccan case? Indeed, memories are not only part of what constitutes one's own personal story, but they also nourish and fuel collective expressions, such as self-representing narrative strategies. These issues might represent the common ground for a second group of essays, which includes articles by Moreno, Gilzmer, and to a certain extent Rossetto.

Moreno's essay opens by recalling some key passages of the academic literature produced in Israel over past decades about the *Mizrahim*: from the "melting pot" harmony-oriented ethos (1970s) to the post-Zionist/post-colonial critique on the subject (1990s), passing through projects of "ethnic restoration" (e.g. the Shas party) aimed at "bringing the silenced *Mizrahi* voice to light." Among such projects, Moreno discusses the history, role and scope of the "Mabat" association, founded in 1979 as "the principal émigré association of Spanish-Moroccans in Israel." According to the researcher, the association follows a parallel process of ethnic restoration among the community of Jews of Tangier in Israel and has since then promoted self-representing narrative strategies aimed at contesting "the general representation of Moroccans as *Mizrahim* with the sense of 'their own' Moroccan ethnic history."

Moreno bases his argumentation on interviews he recently conducted in Israel with Tangier's Jews and on the analysis of the content of circulars and other publications by Mabat. Self-representing narratives by Tangier Jews included stressing the value of their own cultural and historical heritage (e.g. the language used, Hakitia, or their way of celebrating religious feasts such as Mimouna) in contrast with the general representation of Moroccans in Israel, "with which they had dissociated." Indeed, as stated in a publication of the association, "the 'dissatisfaction' with the emerging stereotype of Moroccans, as well as its counter self-representation, invoked the initiative among Mabat's initiators." As a result, while "the celebration of the ritual in pre-migration Morocco had little significance for the majority of local Jews, and even less so

---

[31] Aomar Boum, "Southern Moroccan Jewry between the Colonial Manufacture of Knowledge and the Postcolonial Historiographical Silence", in *Jewish Culture and Society in North Africa*, eds. Emily Benichou Gottreich and Daniel J. Schroeter, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 73-92.

among the westernized sector. In post-migration Israel, such symbols played a new role in shaping migrants' collective identity and became imperative tools in the self-representation of their absolute history." As a conclusion to his contribution, Moreno maintains that the process of Sephardic revival as it is found among Tangier Jews ought to be read in a "context of new identities formation, which was more oriented towards harmonic cohesiveness in the multi-ethnic social context in Israel."

Self-representing narrative strategies are found not only in groups but also on a personal level. The essay by Gilzmer aims to appraise "the construction of memory by North-African Jews in the Diaspora." The author makes her point by presenting the works and comparing the approaches of two Jewish women artists, one living in France and the other living in Quebec, both of North African origin: Eliette Abécassis and Michka Saäl. In so doing, Gilzmer intends "to show how the past is used for identity (de-) construction." This point is preceded by two other well- documented parts: the first is devoted to tracing the history and historiography of Jews in Arab countries; the second explores the concept of "Sefardic Jews." Gilzmer's perceptive scrutiny of Eliette Abécassis's novel "Sépharade" (2009) makes a motivated critique of what appears to be the novelist's concept of "identity": a "stable and persisting" thing, that has been frozen at a certain moment in time and cannot undergo change. This concept stands in sharp contrast to the reality of "a world characterized by migration and cultures intermingling," where "identities are constantly in flux, creating new forms and new identities," as Gilzmer rightly suggests. By contrast, the documentary "L'Arbre qui dort rêve à ses racines" (1992) by Michka Saäl presents "the experience of migration and the relation to the others" through a number of interviews with immigrants, a "kaleidoscope" that, according to Gilzmer, successfully conveys the complexity of issues of identity, integration, assimilation and cultural difference, without neglecting others, such as "the traumatic experience of migration and the loss of evidence and identity." Aware of the fact that her work lies at the "intersection of history and literary studies," the scholar makes it immediately clear that in this essay she does not intend to consider literary and film as historical sources, but rather as "memory archives and subjective representations of the past." As a counterpoint to this, the author of this overview (Rossetto) explores literary works written by *Mizraḥi* authors about the experience of transit camps (*ma'abarot*) in Israel in the 1950's. Rossetto claims that these literary representations can be rightly considered as valuable sources for history. As Aleida Assman has pointed out, through their imaginary literary supplement to historical memory, literary writers might fill the gaps in historical records and archives: gaps that can be considered as "the wounds in the memory itself, the scar of trauma that resisted representation

and can only belatedly, long after the deeply destructive events, become articulated in the framework of a literary text."[32]

After a brief historical introduction on the *ma'abarot*, Rossetto has chosen to analyse a literary corpus in Israeli literature, called "*Sifrut ha-ma'abarah*" (transit camp literature) and to interpret it as a "place of memory" and a "narrative place." The essay is based on existing studies on the topic of the Israeli transit camps, a subject on which there is an increasing scientific literature published both in English and Hebrew. At the same time, Rossetto makes use of long quotations from various novels in order to allow the reader to access the texts immediately and "to be immersed" in the experience of the place. In this sense, the author suggests different "literary declensions" through which *ma'abarah* might be interpreted and in particular as a narrative place of defiance, resistance, and exile.

The combination of historical and literary works on *ma'abarot* has the precise aim of highlighting how the two fields of research might mutually benefit and, in the case of *sifrut ha-ma'abarah*, it means to show how this literature is a valuable source for writing history from the point of view of the non-hegemonic group, the *Mizrahi*, within Israeli society, led by the Ashkenazi elite at the time of mass emigration to Israel from Arab-Muslim countries.

A crucial concept presented in the essay is that of "space/place" as seen from the humanistic geography perspective. This concept has been associated with that of memory, suggesting theoretical elaborations such as Nora's "lieux de mémoire," or Ricoeur's interpretation: "Ces lieux de mémoire fonctionnent principalement à la façon des *reminders*, des indices de rappel, offrant tour à tour un appui à la mémoire défaillante, une lutte dans la lutte contre l'oubli, voire une suppléance muette de la mémoire morte. Les lieux «demeurent» comme des inscriptions, des monuments, potentiellement des documents."[33]

Indeed, "place" represents a concept not only charged with theoretical interpretations, but also fraught with very concrete consequences, as it is demonstrated when from the realm of literature we move to the reality of the land of Israel and Palestine.

Bonds between memory, space and representations constitute the object of study in Esu's essay, which opens with the clear observation that Israel and Palestine, "over the course of their historical conflict, have created a complex patchwork of memory narratives dealing with different representations of the same landscape."

In order to explore the intertwining of memory, landscape, territory and its representations, Esu grounds her argumentation on theoretical concepts such as that of mythscape (Bell), those found in ethnic and nationalism studies (Smith, Anderson, Hobsbawm, Gellner), and memory studies (Halbwachs, Nora, Assman). Aware of the indelible traces left on the ground and on the

---

[32] Aleida Assman, "Canon and Archive", in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 97-107, 106.
[33] Paul Ricoeur, *La mémoire, l'histoire, l'oubli*, 49.

people by the 1948 and 1967 wars, the author expresses her thoughts by tackling the question of how Israel and Palestine "have used space as a temporal-spatial tool to practice the remembering of lost land and to elaborate an imaginative geography?" It is in respect to this question that the different case studies considered in the article should be appraised.

When discussing the topic of "remembering and practicing the rhetoric of return," Esu choses to analyse the relevance of the memories of Kfar Etzion fallen defenders. The author's purpose is to focus "on space-territory meanings and implications deployed in the outcomes of the 1967 war." According to the scholar, in this case the continuity and the evolution of meanings related to space transformation are undoubtedly relevant in order "to understand space as a temporal-spatial tool to elaborate national narrative." On the other hand, the master narration on the Palestinian side is the memory framework of Al-Nakba, the "marker that defines the *before* and the *after* of the tragedy, "a remembrance of the exodus also fluctuates between the difficulty of representing the event oneself, and the exemplarity of one's experience." In this case, projects of oral history preservation, collections of pictures, or virtual space dedicated to host recorded interviews become the tools "to transform the loss in a living locality."

Both narratives find a common space under what the author has termed "imaginative geography," that is to say the reassertion of the "implicate relations" between society and space and between Israelis and Palestinians. Both, Israelis and Palestinians, concludes Esu, "following different paths and historical times, were/are engaged in keeping the land alive. If the 'next year in Jerusalem' is a liturgical memory revoked every year around the Jews Seder table all around the world, the Palestinian oral remembering rises as a secular symbolism."

Esu's essay introduces to the issue the argument of the "contested land," thus granting the readers a "linking-term" – "contested" – that leads us to the last two articles of this focus section. If land can be contested, as we have just seen, in the intertwining of memories and representations, historical narratives can also be contested or at least put into question. This is what the contributions by Wagenhofer and Miccoli highlight by examining two specific study cases: the contemporary debate on Mohammed V and the Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime and the case of Jews and the study of history in Egypt between the wars (1920s-1940s).

Wagenhofer's essay examines "current debates on the fate of Moroccan Jews under the Vichy regime and the attitude of the sultan towards his Jewish subjects" as they are expressed in the new media, such as internet platforms, chat rooms and blogs.[34] According to the author in fact, the web has certainly had an important impact on Arab societies, thanks to its "powerful ability to tackle issues that are considered taboo and to question established points of

---

[34] On the relevance of web platforms see also, Ella Shohat, "By the Bitstream of Babylon. Cyberfrontiers and Diasporic Vistas", in *Home, Exile, Homeland: Film, Media, and the Politics of Place*, ed. Hamid Naficy, (New York and London, 1999), 213-232.

view." It could be argued that virtual sources like the internet lack reliability since the identity of those who take part in the debate is not known or is not known with certainty. Regarding this observation, it might be useful to consider the discussion about "credibility" with reference to oral sources. As rightly suggested by Portelli in discussing the relationship between written and oral sources, "the credibility of oral sources is a different credibility."[35] In this case, what is important to take into account is that "they [written and oral sources] have common characteristics as well as autonomous and specific functions which only either one can fill (or which one set of sources fills better than the other); therefore they require different and specific interpretative instruments."[36]

I propose to interpret the contribution by Wagenhofer in a similar way; rather than sources to "reconstruct" history, debates about Moroccan history on web platforms can be interpreted as useful instruments "to shed light on Moroccan self-image today" and "on tendencies towards liberalisation and political change in Moroccan society." They are sources with specific functions and have the potentiality of addressing specific questions.

In the wider frame of the relationship between modern media and memory, this article shows how "new media technologies (…) allow new forms of remembrance for the individual."[37] Indeed, it contributes to addressing "the question of how societies deal with their past in the media system of the present."[38]

An example of complementarity between sources is prompted by Miccoli's essay, both regarding the methodology and the content of his article.

Miccoli chooses in his essay to put into question the often argued narrative that "Egyptian Jews did not participate much in the cultural and political life of monarchical Egypt," by taking into consideration the development of Egyptian historiography in the 1920s and by analysing the case of Maurice Fargeon, "a journalist and amateur historian, and an active member of the Jewish Community of Cairo."

The first part of the essay, in which Miccoli examines the "involvement of Egyptian Jewish notables in the historiographical revival promoted by King Fu'ad in the 1920s", is a fully-documented analysis of the origin, aims and protagonists of the project of "national history (re-)writing" promoted by King Fu'ad. This project included the development of a royalist historiographical school around the royal palace of 'Abdin.

The second part of the essay is devoted to discussing the two main books by Fargeon on the history of Egyptian Jewry, written at a time when "the so-called Egyptian *liberal age* slowly entered into crisis", because of the "spreading

---

[35] Portelli, "The Peculiarities of Oral History", 100.

[36] Ibid., 97.

[37] Martin Zierold, "Memory and Media Cultures", in *A Companion to Cultural Memory Studies*, eds. Astrid Erll and Ansgar Nünning, (Berlin/New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010), 399-407, 404.

[38] Ibid., 406.

of more radical nationalist and Islamic movements." Miccoli recognises that Fargeon's books are known to and "cited by all scholars who have dealt with the history of Egyptian Jews," but they have not been analysed as historical sources. The aim of the researcher is then "to read[ing] them as an attempt to forge a historical memory which connected Egyptian Jews and non-Jews, combining both historical facts and fictitious elements so as to produce a charming – yet partly *imagined* – past." This element of innovation introduced by Miccoli allows us a fascinating excursus through Fargeon's *oeuvres* and helps us to better unveil the different interpretations they might suggest as well as the limits they carry with them.

As a final remark in this overview, we should underline the inter-disciplinary approach adopted in this issue dedicated to shared and unshared memories among Jews and non-Jews from Arab-Muslim countries in Israel and the Diaspora. This approach means to stress the complex structure of the object of our inquiry both in terms of subjects involved and historical settings considered. The different disciplines to which the contributors to this issue relate as their framework of reference show the multiplicity of voices needed to explore the matter in a setting of plurality, complementarity and mutual inspiration, while aware of the specificity that each discipline and approach brings with it.