

# “I come from a country that is no more” Jewish nostalgia in the postcolonial Mediterranean

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Article abstract

Based upon a corpus of literary texts by Jewish authors born, or descendants of families that lived in North Africa and Egypt and that in the 1950s and 1960s migrated to Israel, France or Italy, the essay looks at nostalgia as a foundational trope in the Mediterranean Jewish historical imagination. Nostalgia is analyzed as a literary chronotope, that allows these writers to come to terms with a complex and ambivalent past while, at the same time, reflecting upon its repercussions on the postcolonial present and future. What comes out is an original archive of memories travelling across the Mediterranean, that while shedding light on the ruptures and continuities between colonial and postcolonial times, reflects on the possibilities of coexistence and reconciliation – or, on the other hand, on the cleavages – that still exist between Jews and Arabs, Europe and North Africa, the Diaspora and Israel.

## “I COME FROM A COUNTRY THAT IS NO MORE”

*Jewish nostalgia in the postcolonial Mediterranean*

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I always carry a suitcase  
[...] and the suitcase is filled with toys  
no child has played with  
filled with memories  
of people without a past

(Benarroch 2005: 17).

This is how Moiz Benarroch, an Israeli poet born in 1959 in the Moroccan city of Tetouan, imagines the *qinat ha-mehager* (“the lament of the immigrant”) that he still feels towards his lost Moroccan homeland. On the other hand, the novelist André Aciman, born in Alexandria in 1951, likes to tell that he, like all exiles, “look[s] for [his] homeland abroad,” so as “to bridge the things here to things there, to rewrite the present so as not to write off the past” (Aciman 1997: 35). In New York – the city where he spent most of his adult life – Aciman almost inadvertently looks for details and places that will make him “remember Alexandria, be it an unreal Alexandria, an Alexandria that does not exist, that I have invented, or learned to cultivate” (Aciman 1997: 37). *Ga’agua* (“Nostalgia”), a poem that Roy Hasan – a grandson of Moroccan Jews born in Hadera, Israel in 1983 – dedicated to his late grandmother, takes yet another direction:

I want to write about you  
nostalgia  
but I still have to learn how to write  
nostalgia.  
Suddenly I forgot how to speak  
now I only  
listen and understand thanks to you  
the Moroccan language.

I will travel to Zagora and cut a handful  
of dates  
to take them to your grave

(Hasan 2014: 98).

These are only some of the dozens of Jewish authors born in the Middle East and North Africa, or whose families come from that region, that utilize nostalgia as a poetic trope: nostalgia for the lost homeland, for a youth ended too soon with the migration to Europe or Israel, for a future that never was. Even though sometimes abused and considered a symptom of elitism (Mabro 2002), nostalgia reflects the precariousness connected to displacement, exile and the socioeconomic and cultural consequences this has on individual lives (see Angé and Berliner 2012 and 2015; Hamid 2017; Margalit 2011). But how can one be nostalgic for a place and time that, while close to the heart, symbolizes loss, a place that is “home in a way but... also hostile territory” (Hoffman cited by Hirsch and Spitzer 2003: 81)? In this essay – based upon Hebrew, French, Italian and English literary texts written mainly in the last two decades by Jews from the southern shore of the Mediterranean (on this see Tartakowsky 2016) – I discuss nostalgia as a category of historical imagination thanks to which the Jews of the Mediterranean come to terms with the past and, based upon this, think about new possibilities of Jewish-Arab coexistence in the present and future. In fact, as we shall see, oftentimes – but not necessarily – literature and self-writing allow for imagining a more shared history of the Mediterranean and one that, following nuanced chronologies and geographies, traverses the early modern, colonial and postcolonial periods. This points to the existence on the one hand of forms of recollecting the past beyond history *stricto sensu*, and on the other of looking at the relations between Jews and Arabs, colonizer and colonized, North Africa and Europe in ways that do not follow today’s ethno-national and religious cleavages. Countering the view of nostalgia as a vehicle of simplistic if not distorted views of the past, in the next pages I then try to reconstruct some of the Jewish itineraries of this “complex passionate ‘state of the soul’” (Greimas 1988: 348), whose echo can still be heard across the shores of the Mediterranean Sea.

### Before, there

It is evident that (literary) expressions of nostalgia are not exclusive of the Sephardic and *Mizrahi* diasporas.<sup>1</sup> Think of the many Jews of

1. In this essay, I define as *Sephardic*, not only a Jew of Middle Eastern or North African descent (in some cases of Iberian ancestry), but also one that, after 1948

Eastern European origin that cherish the memories and *postmemories* of the *Yiddishkeit* vanished during the Second World War and because of the Holocaust (see at least Hirsch 2012), if not – judging from the nostalgic writings of early twentieth century Hebrew authors like Mendele Moher Sefarim and Haim Nahman Bialik – earlier than that (Schachter 2006). At a broader level, nostalgia is a trope to be found in much migrant literature, starting from Homer's *Odyssey* up to the *mémoires* of political exiles and aristocrats in post-Revolutionary France (Cassin 2015). Or think of the so-called *Ostalgie*, that is, the longing for places, objects and aspects of popular culture typical of Eastern Europe and Russia before the fall of Communism (Boym 2002). The case of the Jews of the Arab Muslim countries surely is less known and, when compared to the Ashkenazi world, offers another vision of Jewish memory and its construction through space and time.

From a historical point of view, the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries constituted moments of profound shifting for the Jews that lived on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. The onset of colonialism stimulated new ties between Jews of the two shores of the sea and between Jews and colonizers. Those living in big cities of the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa, and working as tradesmen or entrepreneurs, often acted as mediators between local authorities and foreign powers, and for this reason, some obtained a European nationality (Schroeter 2002; Simon, Laskier and Reguer 2003). A peculiar case is that of the Algerian Jews that in 1870 were granted *en masse* French nationality with the *décret Crémieux* (Charbit 2015). Some Jewries more than others – for example, that of Cairo, Alexandria or Beirut – experienced the passage from a traditional societal model still connected to the Ottoman *millet* to a more flexible and modern one, at the top of which stood a Westernized elite. At the same time, the radicalization of the Middle Eastern political arena in the 1930s led to a marginalization of the Jews and the non-Muslim population more generally. In the 1940s Zionism – as well as other ideologies like Communism – started to attract a greater number of people, especially among the youth. The Second World War and the Holocaust then determined the vanishing of entire communities that dated back to the early modern era, for instance that of Rhodes, and the deportation of a number of Jews from countries like Libya and Tunisia.

So, to portray the atmosphere of colonial Tunis, “where all religions

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or in the 1950s/1960s, migrated to Europe, the US or in any case not to Israel. *Mizrahi* (“Easterner”) instead, refers to a Jew of North African or Middle Eastern origin, and his descendants, that lives in Israel.

are mixed with one another,” Nine Moati in the novel *Les belles de Tunis* tells of a Carnival party where: “‘The Italians and the French were dressed like Arabs and Jews’. ‘And the Arabs? And what about the Jews?’. ‘Well, they were dressed like French and Italians of course’” (Moati 1983: 166-167). The Cairo-born Jean Nagggar – based in New York since the end of the 1950s – instead emphasizes the positive place Egypt has in her family story, recounting how her grandmother came from a line of “survivors of the inquisition in Spain, [that] had fled to Amsterdam, where they flourished and multiplied greatly before seeking and finding a home in Egypt” (Nagggar 2008: 56). The Israeli novelist Orly Castel-Bloom, born near Tel Aviv in the 1950s and also of Egyptian origin, in *Ha-roman ha-mitzri* (“The Egyptian novel”) narrates *Sefarad* in a more defying way, explaining that most of the Castil family escaped Spain and after a long journey across the Mediterranean, arrived no less than in Gaza, while other members of the family became *conversos* and continued to live in the Iberian Peninsula working as pig farmers (Castel-Bloom 2015: 85-86).

It was with the birth of the State of Israel (1948), the rise of pan-Arabism in the 1950s and the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict, that conditions for the Jews really deteriorated (see, for example, Simon, Laskier and Reguer 2003; Abécassis, Dirèche and Aouad 2012; Katz 2015). Nonetheless, when it comes to the description of the final years in Tripoli before the departure for Italy in 1967, the protagonist of Victor Magiar’s semi-autobiographical novel *E venne la notte*, notes that: “‘history is chasing us since generations, but my parents still resist on this shore [i.e. Libya], they do not confront the sea and do not drop the anchor since they are afraid of the storm. But Storm has come after us again, passing by the *corniche*, up inside our home’” (Magiar 2003: 235). These memories – partly rooted in family records and partly a product of the imagination – aim at reinforcing one’s lost identity vis-à-vis the difficulties of the post-migration period and the reintegration in a new social context (Miccoli 2015: 117-120; Schorsch 2007). For both the first and second generation, the past comes back in the shape of personal stories, as well as of fantastic tales that fill the gaps of memory. However, the distinction between history and fiction is more complicated for those, like Castel-Bloom, that did not experience the *before* but only the *after* (Admon 2015; Oppenheimer 2012). In all cases, longing for the past is not the pointless evoking of an epoch that cannot return, but the beginning of a new spatiotemporal itinerary: a *voyage de mémoires* that, following the definition given by Erll, includes different media, narratives and images that altogether transmit repertoires of knowledge (Erll 2011).

It is then also through such a bittersweet feeling of nostalgia that a new Sephardic and *Mizrahi* identity can start to be built, and literature – or rather, writing more generally – become another space for countering exile and “the temptation of losing one’s own self” (Raphaël 1979: 184).

### After, here

This said, when one pauses to consider the literary depiction of what happened after the migration, a sort of third space (Waligórska 2015: 103) – partly constructed along the memory of *là-bas* and partly along the present reality of the country where these writers went on living – seems to emerge. In the novel *Pour l’amour du père*, published in 1996 by Chochana Boukhobza, born in Tunisia in 1956 and migrated to Paris in her youth, the protagonist’s father always longs for his native Tunis. As opposed to the French capital, where “it is always grey, it is always bad [weather],” Tunis *el-hedra* (“the green”) “looked like a garden, with little houses facing the sea” (Boukhobza 1996: 86). The climate becomes a mirror of the feelings that the father perceives after the migration: “[he] cannot be cured from Tunisia, he always compares everything, he compares the taste of the fruit he ate *là-bas* with those that he buys at the market of Clichy; he says that life was easier under the sun, it had a taste...” (Boukhobza 1996: 10). The third-generation Israeli Tehila Hakimi, in her 2014 poem *Melah ha-’aretz* (“The salt of the earth”), instead describes the desolated Israel in which she grew up as:

State of a forgotten  
war  
welfare state  
winds blow towards the yellow desert  
hiding the reactor of Dimonah  
hiding the factories  
hiding the workers.  
Judges  
politicians  
Zionist militants  
owners of pastureland  
salt of the earth  
sprinkled on the cuts of the periphery

(Hakimi 2014: 23).

On the contrary, Morocco remains a magical elsewhere, from where:

on the back of a donkey and on the waves of the sea, my mother arrived  
 hugged to her mother  
 to the shores of the arid Negev.  
 And the white beard of my grandfather  
 was the memory of the snow on the tops of the Atlas Mountains, that  
 I never saw

(Hakimi 2014: 14).

By evoking a bygone past, Boukhobza and Hakimi are not so much remembering a time and space they do not know directly but searching for alternatives to the contingency of the present and to the painful feeling of being a migrant or daughter of migrants (Spitzer 2011: 11). Interestingly, in the case of the Jews that moved to Israel, the idea of being forever a migrant contradicts two of the principles upon which Zionism is based, namely the negation of the Diaspora and the Jewish state as the *kibbutz galuyiot* (“ingathering of exiles”) that would put the Diaspora to an end (Trevisan Semi 2017: 95-96). Furthermore, that feelings of nostalgia pass on to the second and third generation highlights the difficult process of assimilation into Israeli society that the so-called *Mizrahim* faced in the 1950s and 1960s and the consequences it has to the present day (see Shalom-Chetrit 2010; Shenhav 2006; Shohat 1999 and 2003). Nostalgia becomes a category of historical imagination that helps reimagining the present and coming to terms with the trauma of exile, and with the end of that Arab-Jewish symbiosis that had allegedly gone on for centuries (Valensi and Wachtel 1991).

Especially for the second and third generations, the juxtaposition between *ici* and *là-bas* – before and after the migration – signals the desire, not so much for the real ancestral homeland, but for an imagined land that only exists beyond the boundaries of history *stricto sensu* and whither it is impossible to go back. This said, as opposed to what some scholars argued, nostalgia is not necessarily the vector for a distorted history and kitsch morality (Margalit 2011), but perhaps the source of a kind of history based upon principles other than those we are accustomed to: one that focuses on non-linear chronologies and on very individual stories. This is what comes to mind reading the Alexandrian Paolo Terni, who moved to Rome in the 1950s to become a well-known musicologist: “group nostalgias cannot exist [...]: to regret generically the quality of life, the taste, some specific social or society ritual? It does not make sense” (Terni 2008: 69). Nostalgia here is a profoundly personal emotion, connected to a city, Alexandria, where everyone cultivated his own identity and inhabited his own small world.

But then, what could Jews and Arabs have in common? Is the *Arab Jew* (Behar 2009; Levy 2017; Shenhav 2006; Shohat 2003) a pertinent figure to describe that lost world, or is it more of a present-oriented category that says little about the history of the modern Mediterranean? Raphael Luzon in *Tramonto libico* answers vaguely, saying that he and his family in Libya were Arab Jews since they spoke Arabic, ate Arab food and had an Arab mentality (Luzon 2015). Yet, when he narrates the migration or the 1967 riots against the Jews of Benghazi, the category of Arabness comes to refer exclusively to Muslims. Recalling the arrival in Italy, after 1967, of some Libyan Muslims, acquaintances of his family, he writes: "It happened that an *Arab* acquaintance visited us in Italy from Libya, because he felt nostalgia for his *Jewish* friends or out of guilt or only in order to finalize some business that had been left halfway" (Luzon 2015: 50). Arabs and Jews are both neighbours and enemies, rivals and relatives, to quote the title of Goldberg's study on Libyan Jews (Goldberg 1990): they are part of a shared history of daily interactions, exchanges and clashes that came to an end with the outbreak of the Arab-Israeli conflict and the road that the Libyan nation took after the crisis of the Senussi monarchy.

This mirrors a wider North African and Middle Eastern context constructed along "[a] structural, polycentric and horizontal mobility," and characterized by a great ethno-linguistic diversity that – at least until the mid-twentieth century – could not be contained within strict national boundaries (Abravanel 2016: 198). In fact, the idea of Jews and Arabs as intimate strangers also comes out of a memoir by the Algerian-born Benjamin Stora, the renowned historian of the Algerian War, that in *Les clés retrouvées* asks: "in the end, what did we have in common, we Jews and Muslims? The languages, Arabic, French, the same monotonous prayers, similar music and culinary habits; the market, the streets [...]. But I felt as a Frenchman. That was the important. Being and *appearing* like the French" (Stora 2015: 39). Another Algerian Jew – the anthropologist Joëlle Bahloul – confesses: "Who has not encountered that disturbing feeling, when a young French schoolmate came to our house and discovered that even if we were the best ones in grammar and orthography, we still looked like Arabs, *chez nous*, in our intimacy?" (Bahloul 1983: 42). Long before its academic usage, in the 1960s the Tunisian intellectual Albert Memmi as well discussed the category of *Juif arabe*: "Ah! What a nice phrasing! We even have a secret nostalgia for it... yes, for sure we were Arab Jews: for our mores, culture, music and food. [...] but should we remain Arab Jews if this means fearing for our own life and the future of our children?"



(Memmi 1974: 49). It is as if many like to find refuge in a temporal and spatial *Arab Jewish* elsewhere: an imagined motherland where old and new social, ethno-religious and national cleavages did not exist. Books and the written recollection of the past here become almost all that remains of lost (Jewish) homelands they long for with intensity, as the Cairo-born Edmond Jabès beautifully wrote: “And so the land of the Jews is tailored to their universe, since it is a book. [...] The homeland of the Jews is a holy text surrounded by the many commentaries it has produced” (Jabès 1963: 109).

### The nostalgia chronotope

When reading these and other similar lines, nostalgia may be reinterpreted as rooted in a – *realistic*, more than *real* – space and time that do not mirror history *tout court*, but “a personally experienced past” (Davis 1979: 8). For this reason, it might be worth conceiving it as a chronotope: “[a] set of sites and temporal processes that reflect, and manage, *dislocation* – experiences of dissonance, disconnection, separation from past spaces and certainties” (Dames 2001: 12).<sup>2</sup> Such a chronotope would in turn help build a mnemonic framework that, through the past and the ways in which it is experienced in the present, looks onward to a future that never was: a possibility of Jewish-Arab coexistence or at least mutual acknowledgement nowadays forgotten, but not entirely removed or vanished from the Mediterranean historical imaginary (Miccoli 2016: 19-20).

For instance, the Israeli novelist Ronit Matalon, born near Tel Aviv in 1959 in an Egyptian Jewish family, in *Qol tze‘adenu* (“The sound of our steps”, 2008) narrates the story of a Cairo-born woman, Lucette, that migrates to Israel but never entirely feels at home in the country. As she grows old, Lucette decides to stop planting flowers in her garden, leaving the job to Mustafa, a Palestinian that the woman continued to hire despite the fact that all her neighbours, afraid of “the Palestinian bandits,” had stopped doing so. After Lucette has tried in all possible ways to grow flowers and plants, she is now convinced that:

‘This land is filthy, it’s all sand, *mafish faydah* [Arabic: “there is no use”], there is nothing to do with this land’.

[...] ‘Why do you say *mafish faydah*?’ asked Mustafa [...], ‘This land is good, there is nothing wrong with it. It is very good’.

2. The notion of *chronotope* was first elaborated by Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay “Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes towards a Historical Poetics” (see Bakhtin 1981).

But my mother insisted: 'How can you say it is good? How can you say such a thing?'

(Matalon 2008: 423).

Throughout *Qol tze'adenu*, Lucette longs for the good land of Egypt and can begin to love Israel only beyond its actual reality and "the limits of separatist imagination" (Hochberg 2007). In fact, at the end of the novel, Lucette and her son go to visit Mustafa in Ya'bad, a small town in the West Bank where the man lives. As the woman enters Mustafa's house, she discovers that his children had stuck on the walls flowers that Lucette had drawn and given to him: "where in the painting was the orange of the soil, the girls of Mustafa had glued real reddish soil, the green leaves of the gouache had been covered with leaves from real bushes and trees, and on the sparkling blooms of red, yellow, and purple flowers, [they had glued] real petals of red, yellow, and purple flowers, a few still fresh, but most of them already withering" (Matalon 2007: 424). *Qol tze'adenu* therefore ends with the idea that one needs to reinvent his own past and look at it through new eyes before it is too late, instead of transmitting a kind of static nostalgia. Matalon is not (just) looking back at her family's Egypt, "not really [at] a place called home but [at] this sense of intimacy with the world" (Boym 2002: 251), that ultimately reflects a wider, and much-shared, contemporary feeling of diasporicity.

Other authors opt for a less visionary tone. Upon visiting the *'ayarot pituah* ("development towns") of southern Israel where many Moroccan Jews and other *Mizrahim* settled in the 1960s, Daniel Ben Simon, a journalist born in Meknès in 1954, writes that the people there "live in the middle of nostalgia [...]; even though the reality in their first homeland [i.e. Morocco] was not brilliant, nostalgia makes it rosy. Only someone who has not emigrated, is unable to feel nostalgia. The emigrant finds himself hung to memories and dreams." For him, these Moroccan Israelis then are "men without a future" (Ben Simon 2016: 167). Behind nostalgia lays a future that – from the point of view of the migrants – was taken away when they left the Moroccan homeland for Israel, and whose bitter recollection is exacerbated by the socioeconomic marginalization experienced in the country of arrival. None of them is able to imagine a way out, and what remains are the ruined memories of Morocco and the longing for "a phantasmagorical [elsewhere], with its multiple narratives" (Lévy and Olazabal 2012: 151; on ruins and nostalgia, Huyssen 2006).

Nostalgia impacts on the future in painful ways, passing from one generation to the other and creating unexpected short-circuits between the

Diaspora and Israel. “All his life my grandfather longed for Casablanca,” writes the Israeli poet Shay Dotan:

his wife, grandma Esther, said:  
 ‘Haim, perhaps it is enough, in Casablanca  
 you longed day and night for Jerusalem’.  
 [...]
   
 I feel nostalgia for Casablanca,  
 as if the nostalgia of my grandfather passed on to me,  
 against my will, like a merchant ship [sailing] on blood

(Dotan 2011: 40)

This feeling is like a bruise that hurts the poet and whose origin does not reside in something which occurred to him, but in a persistent familial legacy that goes back to his grandfather. Another, and less painful, future can only be born from the acknowledgement of such a legacy and the bittersweet memories it triggers. Casablanca does not (only) symbolize loss, but an alternative possibility that binds the poet and does not permit going forward. Similarly to *al-Andalus* of some Arabic writers, the North African past “signifies less a dialectic of ‘what was’ vs. ‘what is’ than a dialectic of ‘what is’ and ‘what should or shall be’” (Granara 2005: 72): it is a much present landscape from where lessons for the future may be drawn.

Some first-generation authors, however, contend that the pre-migratory past was not as rosy as it seems. For example, the Algerian Didier Nebot, animator of the French association *Morial-Mémoires et traditions des Juifs d’Algérie*, significantly titled one of his books *Mémoire d’un dhimmi* (2012), blending in it the experience of a contemporary Jew leaving Algeria for France with that of one of his ancestors, that five centuries before arrived in Algeria escaping persecution in Spain. The protagonist is not nostalgic about Algeria in general, but about his family and the microcosm of which he was part: “you discover the history of your family, little Gabriel, lost in the sea, but also that of men with their cowardice, their limits and sometimes their beauty. Do not lose hope, be patient, one day your turn will come to take the memory of your people far away.” For him, Algeria cannot be idealized but only presented as the site of “five centuries of suffering, of joy and love” that now “belongs to the past” (Nebot 2012: 122 and 331).

Nebot underlines the category of *dhimmi* as a central one for reconstructing the history of the Jews of the Arab lands, following a line of thought whose principal figure is the Egyptian-born writer and journalist Bat Ye’or, author of *Eurabia* (2005) and recently of an *Autobiographie politique* (2018) (see Krämer 1995; Baussant 2015b). For Bat Ye’or,

“colonization suppressed the memory of the previous state of humiliation [...]. This oblivion explains the Jewish nostalgia for the *temps heureux* in the Arab countries, that only evokes the period of colonization but not the discriminations of the *dhimmitude*” (Chemla 2017). But if it is true that in many cases colonization and its aftermath are the most evoked epochs, this may have to do with a chronological and generational aspect, more than anything else. The nostalgia for the *temps heureux* is triggered not so much by the oblivion of earlier (negative) periods, that actually do come out of some of the texts, but by the fact that, for some, the post-migration period too was negative: think, in the case of the *Mizrahim*, of the unsuccessful – if not openly discriminatory – policies put forward by the State of Israel in the 1960s.<sup>3</sup> Still, in these last citations, what prevails is the idea that no other history would have been and is possible. But is it really so? Is there nothing else left other than conceiving the Sephardic and *Mizrahi* past either as one of innate Muslim anti-Semitism and *dhimmitude*, or on the other hand in the shape of an ever-harmonious Arab-Jewish cohabitation ended by colonialism and Zionism (see Cohen 1991 and Stillman 1991)?

## Conclusion

Arguing against the view of nostalgia as an unproductive or negative feeling, in the previous pages I tried to show that this can be read, following the definition provided by the American novelist of Jewish origin Michael Chabon, as: “the emotional experience – always momentary, always fragile – of having what you lost or never had, of seeing what you missed seeing, of meeting the people you missed knowing. [...] the feeling that overcomes you when some minor vanished beauty of the world is momentarily restored” (Chabon 2017). For sure, nostalgia only forms a chapter in a wider *poetic history* of the Jewish Mediterranean: a real and imaginative entity to be reconstructed by focusing also on other tropes, through which its historical memory is preserved and reinvented. It is equally true that nostalgia sometimes can be a form of malaise and that *mal du pays* the first scholars that coined the word referred to (Prete 1992: 14-17; Fritzsche 2001). But it is much more than that. It is not just the longing for an absence, but the inner wish to transmit and come to terms with this absence, pondering on roads not taken and what might have been if.

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3. For a recent public discussion of this, consider the four-part documentary by David Deri, *Salah, poh zeh Eretz Israel* (“Salah, this is the Land of Israel”), broadcast at the beginning of 2018 on the Israeli television *Reshet 13*: <http://reshet.tv/vod/sallah/>.

“In the end, we could consider ourselves lucky since at least and most of all, we still had a precious asset: *le souvenir*,” writes the Cairo-born Albert Oudiz, who at the same time acknowledges that “the country of which we kept on talking does not exist anymore. And that is the country where I come from” (2005: 12). Nostalgia acts as a most fragile chronotope, based upon “a [paradoxical] tension between the attachment to a paradise lost and the image of a land from which one necessarily needs to depart in order to exist” (Baussant 2015a: 75). In turn, this signals the existence of a complex process of metaterritorial identity-making, common to other communities of Jewish and non-Jewish exiles and repatriates, “dispersed over several geographical and historical territories,” or in other words, over divergent spaces and times (Bahloul 2000: 185). In a more Jewish historical perspective, it reminds us that if the Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the fifteenth century reconceived the *gerush* (“expulsion”) as a second exile after the ancestral one from the Land of Israel (Wacks 2015: 12), today’s North African and Middle Eastern Jews interpret the migration of the 1950s and 1960s not only as the consequence of what occurred after the end of colonialism, but as the most recent episode of a centuries-old narrative that includes the antiquity, Sefarad and the Ottoman times (see Stein 2015 and 2016; Valensi 1986).

Surely, for both the first and second – or even third – generations, the pre-migratory past is never the sole or even the main focus of nostalgia. However, it is especially in the case of younger authors that nostalgia can be read as a most present feeling that speaks in an indirect manner, and based upon family or national *postmemories*, to and about the world in which they live: a world endowed with a “dialectical temporality that is *both* linear and cyclical [...] at once oriented to the future and that constantly dredges up the past, thus allowing for the experience of longing both as loss *and* imaginative recall” (Dodman 2018: 14). For the first generation, nostalgia is instead evoked in relation to memories that, while filtered through the post-migratory context, in the first place refer to a space and time experienced directly. So, literature and the literary imagination may help us in deciphering such ambiguous temporalities, providing with alternative repertoires of historical knowledge that complement those of the institutional archive. It remains to be seen what kind of future all these memories will come to compose, and what kind of nostalgic feeling will prevail when – after the disappearance of the first generation – only *postmemories* will remain. Will it be a transcultural future connected to the reflexive nostalgia that, for Boym, does not aim to merely recreate

the past but that savours the emotions it provokes, looking onward to the uncertainties of the unknown? Will it be a restorative one that rebuilds the past "with paranoid determination," and is close to the nostalgic attitude of contemporary populist movements (Boym 2002: 354; Bauman 2017; on transcultural memory: Bond and Rapson 2014)?

What is undeniable is that in many of the literary texts produced by Mediterranean Jewish *déracinés*, nostalgia does not come out as a unidirectional, past-oriented feeling, but precisely as that "complex passionate 'state of the soul'" which Greimas talked about (1988: 348). In these texts, remembering and longing for the past through the literary imagination may be read as a promise for the emergence of a less *difficult* and more shared kind of heritage (MacDonald 2008), that may pass from one generation to the other in order to be inscribed in new spatial and ethno-national narratives: think of Matalon's *Zeh 'im ha-panim 'eleinu* or Aciman's quest for Alexandria in New York. After all, "if going back is impossible, language is the land where fiction can host the irreversible" of which nostalgia is made, and "that transforms the ashes that once were time into a rhythm, what is lost into a word" (Prete 2018).

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