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Contributi/18

The Rebellion of Memories in The Immigrant's Lament *by Mois Benarroch*

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Mois Benarroch is a Moroccan-Israeli poet who has been very influential on Mizrahi (Eastern/Oriental) poetry in Israel. This article analyzes *The Immigrant's Lament*, Benarroch's first book of poems in Hebrew. It was published in 1994, after years of not remembering his past in the Moroccan city of Tetouan, where the author grew up until the age of thirteen. His integration into Israeli society had required a transformation of himself and his memories that did not match those he needed to have to become a first-class Israeli. *The Immigrant's Lament* is part of his process of recovering his memories alongside his political awareness. The book is a project of remembering and a liberation device, part of an awakening. The poet dares to call himself an immigrant and not only an *oleh*, "one who ascends". In the very title of the book there is a redefinition of himself and his experience as a Moroccan Jew in Israel. It is also a challenge to the Zionist promise of ending exile. Benarroch laments the loss of the promise of redemption, the continuation of exile in the Land of Israel, the place of historical redemption for the Jewish people. This article explores the rebellion against oblivion and the search for recognition and legitimacy that accompanied the poet's recovery of memory and, with it, a political conscience. We will analyze the interaction between identity processes and the politics of recognition.

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History is not the past.
It is the present.
We carry our history with us. We *are* our history.
If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.

I attest to this:
the world is not white;
it never was white,
cannot be white.
White is a metaphor for power,
and that is simply a way of describing
Chase Manhattan Bank

James Baldwin[1]

[1] *I Am Not Your Negro*, R. Peck (comp.), New York 2017.

Introduction

Mois Benarroch is a poet and a writer, and a polemical critic of Israeli society. His literary work has received several awards such as the Prime Minister's Prize for Literature (2008) and the Yehuda Amichai poetry award (2012). His work – thirty books of poetry and prose in Spanish, Hebrew and English and translated to many other languages – covers a wide range of topics, including family, immigration, the possibility of the home, Sephardi[2] modernity, Moroccan Jewish history or the experience of Mizrahi Jews[3] in Israel.

Benarroch was born in Tetouan, Morocco, in 1959. Like most Jews in northern Morocco – Spanish Protectorate between 1912 and 1956 – he grew up speaking Spanish, studied in French at the Alliance Israelite Universelle school and was surrounded by Moroccan Arabic. He emigrated to Israel with his family in 1972. At the age of fifteen he started writing poems in English. The poems that followed were in Hebrew and only later in his life did he go back to his mother tongue, Spanish, to write poetry. His first poems were published in 1979. In the 1980s he joined different literary groups and edited a magazine called *Marot*. In 1994 Benarroch published *The Immigrant's Lament*, his first book in Hebrew, which was received with both appalment and admiration. Afterwards, he published two books of short stories, several books of poetry in Hebrew, English and Spanish, and several novels. Some of his best-known novels are *Keys to Tetouan* (2000), *Lucena* (2005), *Gates to Tangier* (2008) and *Love and Exiles* (2010).

This article analyzes his first book published in Hebrew, *The Immigrant's Lament.* Benarroch wrote this book after decades of not remembering his past in Tetouan. Since his arrival in Israel at age thirteen until he was almost thirty years old, he could not remember anything about his life in Morocco. This book is the result of his process of remembering. We will analyze it as a rebellion device through which the author both expresses and gives shape to memories that he had to put aside and forget as part of his process of integration into Israeli society. We will include in the analysis two interviews with the author – a total of eight hours of conversation – conducted by Angy Cohen in 2014 as part of the fieldwork of her doctoral dissertation about Moroccan immigration in Israel. The interview-conversations[4] with the author are a window into Benarroch's biographical space[5]. Some of the poems that comprise *The Immigrant's Lament*

[2] *Sephardi*: Jews whose origins are in the Iberian Peninsula. After the Expulsion, many settled in the north of Africa, around the Mediterranean and the Middle East.
[3] *Mizrahi*: «Eastern» or «Oriental». *Mizrahim* is the plural. This category is part of the Israeli system of social classification and alludes to Jews from Arab, Muslim and Mediterranean countries as a monolithic entity opposed to the «West», that is, Ashkenazim/Jews of Central or East European descent. It has been reclaimed by activists and intellectuals of north African and Middle Eastern descent in Israel and its use is now generalized within the wider Israeli society.
[4] The interview as a discursive genre close to day-to-day conversation is further developed in L. Arfuch, *La entrevista, una invención dialógica*, Barcelona 1995.
[5] L. Arfuch, *El espacio biográfico. Dilemas de la subjetividad contemporánea*, Buenos Aires 2002.

will be analyzed against the backdrop of these conversations about exile, foreignness, exclusion, and finding/founding a home.

Mois Benarroch grew up speaking Spanish at home, like most Jews who lived in the former Spanish zone in Morocco. Their encounter with Spain in the colonial period (1912-1956) was marked by their adoption of the Spanish language, which replaced Haketia, the Judeo-Spanish language of Morocco, relegating it to the context of the home as a low way of speaking. When Benarroch was born, in 1959, Morocco had been an independent state for three years already. Nevertheless, the Spanish cultural presence was still palpable and Benarroch was greatly influenced by it. Besides, like most Jewish children in Morocco at the time, Benarroch studied at a school that belonged to the Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU), whose mission was to work towards the «emancipation and moral progress» of Jews throughout north Africa and the Middle East[6]. The purpose was to acculturate Jews in the tradition of French secular education, based on concepts of equality, liberty and fraternity. French was the instrument of dissemination of modern civilization. Therefore, Mois Benarroch studied in French but also learned Arabic, English, and Hebrew, arriving in Israel with a high command of the language.

Until the age of thirteen, Benarroch lived in between different worlds that existed next to each other – sometimes in parallel, sometimes intertwined– in Tetouan: the Spanish cultural dominance, the Moroccan Jewish traditions, the French school and the Moroccan Muslim national project that was redefining itself after the country's independence. The colonial reality of Morocco had been characterized by the encounter between all these cultural spheres and ways of life, triggering a variety of identity processes[7] that continued to be developed after the colonial period and in the various places where Moroccan Jews emigrated.

Similar experiences of ambiguous belonging are shared by many other north African and Middle Eastern Jewish authors whose life, thought and work evolved under colonialism and/or post-colonialism. These Sephardi authors who write in European languages have elaborated the ambivalences and contradictions of this liminal position in their literature. For example, the Moroccan writer Ruth Knaffo Setton[8], in her essay *Living Between Question Marks*, writes:

> It makes sense that I exist between languages, roam between countries, write between genres—poetry, fiction and nonfiction—and that in a sense I'm always

[6] For a detailed account of the critically important role played by the Alliance Israélite Universelle in the Westernization and modernization of Moroccan Jews, see M. M. Laskier, *The Alliance Israélite Universelle and the Jewish Communities of Morocco: 1862-1962*, Albany 1983.
[7] For an ethnographic exploration of the contradictions and ambivalences that marked Jewish life under colonial rule in Morocco, see A. Cohen, *On belonging and other dreams. The ambiguous positions of the Jews in Spanish Morocco,* «Contemporary Jewry», [in press].
[8] See, also, R. Knaffo Setton, *The Road to Fez*, Washington D.C. 2001.

writing in translation. Growing up, I heard my parents speak four languages in a single sentence[9].

Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff expressed a similar experience in her *Between Two Worlds*: «It can be said with some certainty that the Egyptian-born Jews of my generation felt deeply ambivalent about belonging or not belonging».[10] The Egyptian writer André Aciman[11] called himself «a provisional, uncertain Jew»[12]. The Algerian author Hélène Cixous described the Franco-north-African Jewish experience as one of «belonging constituted of exclusion and nonbelonging»[13]. Jacques Derrida reflected about the «disorder of identity»[14] that marked Franco-Maghrebian Jews like himself, whose memory had been «voided, transferred, transvoided»[15]by a process he equated to «colonial expropriation»[16]. Derrida mourns the loss of a specifically Jewish language among Franco-Algerian Jews: «we could not even resort to some familiar substitute, to some idiom internal to the Jewish community, to any sort of language of refuge»[17]. Other Sephardi authors who have expressed similar experiences of liminality, loss of a heritage, disconnection from the past, and un-belongingness under colonial rule include Edmond Jabés (Egypt) in his reflections about exile[18], Albert Memmi[19] (Tunisia), Lucette Matalon Lagnado[20] (Egypt) or Claudette E. Sutton[21] (Syria), to cite only a few. These authors, in one way or the other, have told the story of the collapse of the cosmopolitanism of different north African and Middle Eastern countries, and the subsequent departure of Jews. They, like Mois Benarroch, have told the story of leaving. They have told this story in the context of the dissolution of the colonial presence in their countries, the establishment of the State of Israel and/or the gradual radicalization of the nationalistic and religious groups in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, etc. Their stories recreate the gradual straining in the relationship between Jews and the local population and the decision to leave their homes behind, becoming immigrants in countries like France, the US, or Israel. Mois Benarroch's production is part of this Sephardi literature about colonization, cosmopolitanism, estrangement, departure, revisited memories, impossible belonging, and permanent exile. These authors reflect about topics such as the multiplicity of languages they heard and spoke when growing up, the

[9] R. Knaffo Setton, *Living Between Question Marks*, in *Common Boundary: Stories of Immigration*, G. F. Tague (ed.), New York 2010, p. 108.
[10] J. Shohet Kahanoff, *Beyn shney 'olamot*, Jerusalem 2005 [in Hebrew], p. 33.
[11] See, for example, A. Aciman, *Out of Egypt: A Memoir*, New York 1994.
[12] A. Aciman, *Reflections of an uncertain Jew*, «The Threepenny Review», Spring 2000.
[13] H. Cixous, *Portrait of Jacques Derrida as a Young Jewish Saint*, New York 2004, p. 118.
[14] J. Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other or the Prosthetics of Origin*, Stanford 1998, p. 17.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 53.
[16] *Ibid.*
[17] *Ibid.*, p. 54.
[18] See the trilogy of *The Book of Questions*.
[19] See, for example, his *The Colonizer and the Colonized*, or *The Pillar of Salt*.
[20] L. Lagnado, *The Man in the White Sharkskin Suit*, New York 2007.
[21] See C. E. Sutton, *Farewell, Aleppo*, Santa Fe 2014.

contradiction between the cosmopolitanism and conservatism of their childhood and youth, the frustrating exoticism expected of and projected on their literature by the Western reader, or their challenge to the dichotomic conceptions of Western thought.

After Morocco's independence, just as happened in other colonized countries of the north of Africa, the relations between the different cultural spheres (European, local Moroccan-Muslim, and Jewish) became increasingly estranged. In the case of the north of Morocco, the Spanish presence dwindled, although its cultural influence persisted long after the colonial powers were gone. Jewish communities, during the first years of Morocco's independence, felt a great amount of fear and uncertainty. As a matter of fact, in the period between the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948 until Morocco's independence in 1956, Jews left Morocco for Israel at an average rate of 3000 per month[22], despite the Moroccan government's prohibition to emigrate to Israel. Mois Benarroch grew up in independent Morocco, after the dissolution of the Spanish and French Protectorates and after the mass waves of Jewish emigration to Israel. The Jewish community that had undergone a process of modernization was deeply marked by both an ambivalent identification with European culture, as well as a strong Jewish cultural heritage that had been part and parcel of the development of Moroccan culture.

Thus, the material of the memories of Mois Benarroch as a Spanish-Moroccan-Jewish author comes from the post-colonial Moroccan context of his childhood and early teenage years. When he arrived in Israel, he found a society in which there was no representation and no knowledge of the world he came from. In the words of the author:

> Moroccans don't have a history. For Zionism, Moroccans don't have a history. It's forbidden to speak about their history. […] Zionism has the idea that «we saved Jews from Arab countries. Jews from Arab countries were there two thousand years waiting for us». Meaning, they had nothing.

Mizrahi Jews were dispossessed of narrative authority. Their memories and past were not included in the historical account and collective memory of Israel. Rather, their becoming Israeli was tightly connected with a process of identification with a collective past that was not the one they had personally experienced. The immigration of Jews from Arab and Muslim countries to Israel involved a process of self-denial, and identification with the model of citizen represented by the archetype of the *sabra*. In this sense, they were in a subjected position without any influence on the terms of recognition[23].

[22] See, for example, Y. Bin-Nun, *The Disputes Regarding the Jewish Emigration from Morocco (1956-1961)*, in *Jews and Muslims in the Islamic World*, B. D. Cooperman and Z. Zohar (eds.), Bethesda 2013, pp. 51-99.
[23] J. Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, New York 2005.

Identity and memory are mutually dependent processes. Our past is woven as part of the constitution of the self. This is true also for national identities: every national project requires a special relation between national identity and a historical narrative. Zionism established the European Jewish past – exclusion, persecution, Enlightenment, emancipation, and the brutality of the Holocaust – as a collective past for all the Jewish citizens of Israel. The Zionist enterprise to create the modern Israeli was the negation of the (European) Diaspora Jew. The model of citizen of the «native» Israeli identity was that of the Zionist pioneers: Ashkenazi, secular and «modern». The *sabra*[24] was strong, patriotic, collectivist and altruistic. As Rakefet Sela-Sheffy defines it «this icon combines the warrior with the 'son of the land', endowed with physical virtues and moral integrity, in opposition to the frail, cunning, urban figure of the Diaspora Jew»[25].

Zionism established a common past for all: the European Jewish past, with the tragedy of the Holocaust as the prior moment to the establishment of the State of Israel. Finally, the Zionist national project involved rendering Jews and Arabs as two opposite entities, an absolute dichotomy. Jews from Arab and Muslim countries were categorized as *Mizrahi*. This category, completely void of any cultural or historical content, kept «Jews» and «Arabs» as two dichotomic entities while putting all non-Ashkenazi Jews in the Jewish state under one category that would blur if not erase their historical and cultural specificity. Also, the construction of the cultural and economic category *Mizrahi* is part of the Israeli social class system in which the lower positions in the social ladder tend to be occupied by Mizrahim and Palestinians[26]. It is worth noting that Mizrahim comprise around 50 percent of Israel's citizens, with Palestinians around 20 percent and Ashkenazim – originating in Central and Eastern Europe – the remaining 30 percent[27]. Although a demographic minority, Ashkenazim hold the positions of power and privilege in the country. However, this category is rarely used by this group, who refer to themselves as «Israeli»[28]. The Mizrahi-Ashkenazi conflict is based on social class and political power, the Ashkenazi group being the dominant one. The refusal to admit this fact results in the scarce research on the construction of Ashkenazim as a social class dependent on the construction of the Mizrahi social class[29].

The intra-Jewish conflict between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim is wrapped up in the more general conflict between Israel and Arab countries, as well as the

[24] *Sabra*: pre-State «native Israeli». It is named after a cactus that grows in the land of Israel and which has sweet fruits inside.
[25] R. Sela-Sheffy, «*What Makes One an Israeli?*» *Negotiating Identities in Everyday Representations of 'Israeliness'*, «Nations and Nationalism», X(4), 2004, pp. 479–97.
[26] For an analysis of the Mizrahi struggle in terms of class struggle, see S. Shalom-Chetrit, *Intra-Jewish Conflict in Israel. White Jews, Black Jews*, New York 2010.
[27] S. Lavie, *Wrapped in the Flag of Israel. Mizrahi Single Mothers and Bureaucratic Torture*, Lincoln and London 2018.
[28] *Ibid.*
[29] For a critical discussion of the consequences of such refusal, see M. Amor, *The denial of the Ashkenazi Hegemony Turns Research in Israel into a Joke*, «Sikha Mekomit», 6.07.2019 [in Hebrew]

position of Israel as a Middle Eastern country in general. In the words of Meir Amor:

> There is no logical distinction between the political problems within Jewish Israeli society and those between Israel and the Palestinians, the Arab world, and the world in general. The twisted logic of a zero-sum game is applied in both areas by all people. These rules imply endless war and an ahistorical stand by Jews in the Middle East. Thus, we cannot go on conceiving of war as external to the dynamics of Jewish Israeli society. It is an inherent component of its social, political, and cultural structure[30].

The category of «Arab Jews» has been used as a challenge to Zionism's monopoly over social categorization in Israel. For example, Yehuda Shenhav refers to «Arab Jews» to emphasize the relations between Jews and Arabs prior to the establishment of the State of Israel and the erasure of the «Arabness» of Mizrahi Jews by the Jewish State[31]. Also, Ella Shohat speaks of «Arab-Jews» as a way of repairing the split produced by Zionist nationalism which in turn forced Jews from Arab countries in Israel to give up on their «Arabness» in order to have legitimacy in Israeli politics of identity[32]. However, both authors have as their main reference the experience of Iraqi Jews, whose specificities are not shared by other Middle Eastern and north African Jews.

In fact, the figure of the «Arab-Jew» is far removed from the experience of north African-Jews[33]. The model of modernization of Iraqi Jews is not generalizable to the process of modernization of north African Jews, among others. The Arabization of the Jewish intellectual elite in Iraq presents a unique case[34], critical in the process of modernization, together with the influence of the schools of the Alliance Israélite Universelle, within which students learned to speak and write French and English with fluency. Therefore, «Arab Jew» could be an adequate category to describe the experience of modernization and secularization of Iraqi Jews and, to a lesser extent, Egyptian, Lebanese and Syrian Jews[35]. The participation of Jews in the wider Arab culture and the use of standard Arabic – as opposed to just Judeo-Arabic – at home in the 20th century, accounts for a completely different process of modernization from the one experienced by north-African Jews. This latter group did not engage, in

[30] M. Amor, *The Fact of War,* in *Walking the Red Line: Israelis in Search of Justice for Palestine,* ed. by Deena Hurwitz, Philadelphia 1992, p. 72.
[31] Y. Shenhav, *Arab Jews. A Post-colonial reading of Nationalism, Religion and Ethnicity*, Stanford 2006.
[32] E. Shohat, *Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims*, «Social Text» 19/20, 1988, pp. 1-35.
[33] For a study about the political, social, cultural and identity implications of the concept of «Arab Jew», see R. Snir, *Who Needs Arab-Jewish Identity? Interpellation, Exclusion, and Inessential Solidarities*, Leiden and London 2015.
[34] R. Snir, *Arabic in the Service of Regeneration of Jews: The Participation of Jews in Arabic Press and Journalism in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, «Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae», 59 (3), 2006, pp. 283-323.
[35] *Ibid.*

general, in an integration into canonical Arabic culture[36]. Rather, their process of modernization was marked by a close relationship with French culture, along with Spanish, in the case of northern Morocco.

Benarroch has criticized the discourse about the Arab-Jew for creating an alternative hegemonic Israeli identity that would compete with the Ashkenazi hegemony. In his words:

> [Yehuda] Shenhav and [Ella] Shohat's approach […] turns the «Arab-Jew» into an identity that lacks all meaning, maybe just as Ashkenazi identity lacks all meaning. But the question is that this discourse adopts a completely Western approach to identity. If Ashkenazim can identify themselves with the uniform identity of «European Jews», an identity that says very little and hides a lot of specificities, so can we, the «Arab-Jews» do like them. Behind these arguments there is a political struggle, within Mizrahi discourse (and I really hope it will not be successful), to emphasize two political identities: one that is Arab-Jewish and the other one European[37].

Mois Benarroch is a north African Jew who, as such, came from a recent process of colonization and was highly Westernized. Most North African Jews spoke French – or Spanish, in this case – as their mother tongue, studied in the Alliance Israélite Universelle, participated in a European leisure culture, read European literature, watched European cinema, and listened to European music. Even though their identification with France or Spain might have been ambivalent, it was also a deep one. The model of the Arab-Jew challenges hegemonic Eurocentrism and nationalism, since its reference is an Arabic-speaking Jew who is indigenous to the Middle East. But this model does not aim at challenging the exclusive ownership over «Western culture» among Israelis of European descent. It does not challenge their monopoly of the symbolic capital[38] of «Europeanness»[39]. The model of the Arab-Jew establishes an alternative social and political model for Israel as a Middle Eastern country with a majority population that originates in Arab and Muslim countries. However, the north African Jewish experience as represented by Benarroch and many other authors (Derrida, Jabés, Kahanoff, Cixous, Memmi, etc.) speaks about a process of modernization that was essentially marked by colonization, which involved a strong Europeanization of the Jewish populations as part of the colonial project. Each colonial power present in the north of Africa during

[36] *Ibid.*
[37] M. Benarroch and A. Behar, *Conversation with the poet Mois Benarroch about the Arab-Jews*, «Almog Behar» 2008 [in Hebrew, our translation] blog post retrieved from https://almogbehar.wordpress.com/tag/%D7%9E%D7%95%D7%90%D7%99%D7%96-%D7%91%D7%9F-%D7%94%D7%A8%D7%90%D7%A9/ [accessed 10/10/2019].
[38] P. Bourdieu, *The forms of capital*, in *Handbook of theory and research for the sociology of education*, J. G. Richardson (ed.), New York 1986, pp. 241–258.
[39] For Bourdieu, the value of symbolic capital relies on legitimization and recognition. Thus, the value is not inherent in the capital itself. Thus, it is not our intention here to make a claim about Europe's cultural superiority but about the way in which European origin and culture were transformed into symbolic capital in Israel, that is, as having value and legitimacy over other origins and cultures.

the 20th century transformed Jewish life in a different way, but, in all cases, Jews were anything but alien to European culture. This experience was construed and summarized by Jacqueline Kahanoff as the «Levantine», which is the most adequate term to capture the specificities of Sephardi Jews that underwent this process of modernization/colonization. Thus, the figure of the Spanish-Moroccan Jew or the Franco-Algerian Jew, two Levantine examples, challenges the Israeli conception that Mizrahi Jews were alien to the process of (Western) modernization or to European culture. It questions the dispossession of the symbolic capital of «Europeanism» among Mizrahim in Israel while challenging the false dichotomy between Jews and Arabs in a different way. As Kanahoff said, the Levantine «has been derided by the West mostly because he represented both a danger and a challenge»[40]. In the words of Mois Benarroch:

> Jews from Muslim countries spoke many languages, and their mother tongue was not necessarily Arabic. Beyond Arabic, they spoke French, Ladino, Turkish, Greek, Moroccan Judeo-Arabic, Iraqi Judeo-Arabic, English, Italian, Haketia, Aramaic, Berber languages, Kurdish, Farsi… (and surely there are others that I forget). So, to say that they lost their Arabic is quite a reduction. Jews from Muslim countries lost many more languages, and part of them were European languages. […] One may say that I am not Mizrahi because my mother tongue is Spanish (and not only mine; it has been my family's mother tongue for a thousand years) and solve the problem. Whoever does not fit into the definition of the Arab-Jew, should go somewhere else. Maybe this will succeed. But that success is a failure. […] Our problem is how to adopt a truly multi-cultural attitude that has no center. Our problem is […] how to cancel the idea that there is a center. […] The State needs to include on an equal measure all ethnicities and not only one or two[41].

The absence of recognition of the urban and Westernized life of large groups of the so-called Mizrahi Jews is constantly present in the work of Benarroch, who expressed this question in the following terms in an interview with Angy Cohen in 2014:

> What they really took from Moroccan Jews was not the Arabic language. What they wanted to take from them was the French. First, to take away our French. Nobody realizes that. Everybody speaks about the Arabic. They used to tell me «you're just very Europeanized, you think you come from Europe». I come from there! [laughs]. The mother tongue of Moroccan Jews, I think around fifty percent of them, was French. Of those that came here. In general, they were the second generation of French [in Morocco]. And, obviously, for the Spanish-speaking Moroccans it is a whole different question, because they came from the Spanish language. Meaning, it's not the language of any colonialist. And the Spanish-speaking Jews of Morocco are the fifteen percent! That's no exception!

[40] J. Kahanoff, *Israel: Ambivalent Levantine*, in *Mongrels or Marvels. The Levantine Writings of Jacqueline Shohet Kahanoff*, D. A. Starr and S. Somekh (eds.), Stanford 2011, p. 198.
[41] *Ibid.*

As we have already stated, Europeanness was part of the symbolic capital that the Israeli hegemony was not to share with Mizrahim. The historical experience of north African and Middle Eastern Jews, their experience of modernization – which included a special type of Europeanization – and their ways of relating to the «other» – both the European-colonialist «other» and the Muslim «other» of their places of origin – was not to become part of Israel's collective history. In other words, the experiences of Sephardi and Mizrahi Jews found no legitimate representation in Israel. They were portrayed as pre-modern, primitive, ignorant, aggressive, superstitious, fanatic, and patriarchal[42]. Their history, their cultural production, did not become part of the collective history of Israeli society. Gil Eyal has shown how, after the establishment of the State of Israel, Oriental Studies were restricted to Arab culture, leaving aside Judeo-Arab history and culture[43]. The Mizrahi communities were thus studied by social science, the disciplinary spheres that dealt with the «conflicts» and potential «solutions» for the necessary «development» and «education» of the Mizrahi population. The larger Israeli society did not have an interest in these communities in and of themselves, but as a population in a process of integration or «absorption». They were worth studying only in terms of their success or failure in that enterprise.

Mizrahi Jews encountered what Charles W. Mills called «epistemology of ignorance», whose purpose is to maintain the imbalance between the privileged and the handicapped[44]. This concept challenges the tendency, so common in academic circles, to regard *truth* as conservative, essentialist, or spurious. Such a notion of truth can only benefit the power structure and leaves no room for the handicapped to prove the spread of false information and the distribution of error that keeps them in such a handicapped position. Benarroch rebels against the power of those who can regard another's experience as a lie, against those who have the monopoly over truth. In a later poetry book written in Spanish in 2008, *Mar de Sefarad,* he writes about this in the following way:

> They steal your memory
> with good intentions
> then they tell you
> that you don't have a history
> that you are primitive
> they want their past
> to be yours
> so they can impose on you
> a present
> you don't understand

[42] See, for example, E. Shohat, *Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the standpoint of its Jewish victims*, «Social Text» XIX/XX, 1988, pp. 1-35.
[43] G. Eyal, *The Disenchantment of the Orient. Expertise in Arab Affairs and the Israeli State*, Stanford 2006.
[44] C. W. Mills, *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, Albany 2007.

when you start to remember
they try to help you
they tell you you're crazy
and you don't know anymore
if it's memory or imagination
they don't know either
but they're afraid of your memories
which are the proof of their repression[45].

Jan Assmann, in one of his works about the relations between collective memory and cultural identity, states that «remembering is a realization of belonging, even a social obligation»[46]. If one wants to belong in a society, one needs particular memories shared with the members of that society. To this idea, he adds that «assimilation, the transition of one group into another one, is usually accompanied by an imperative to forget the memories connected with the original identity». Assman calls this strategy to belong «assimilatory forgetting». The memories of Mizrahi Jews in Israel challenged both the Arab-Jewish dichotomy and the hegemonic status of Ashkenazi Jews as European, enlightened and advanced. This is how remembering became a rebellion, and memories turned into a resistance in the poetry of Mois Benarroch and in the life of so many Mizrahim.

Benarroch chose the lament as a genre, challenging the epic *pathos* and the *ethos* of the *sabra*. The lament is the language of mourning, a border language, as Gershom Scholem said, between speech, the revealed, and silence. There is no answer to the lament but silence[47]. The lament as the expression of helplessness, of radical loneliness can also constitute a subversive activity, an act of resistance, the affirmation of autonomy, a challenge to submission[48].

This article will approach *The Immigrant's Lament* as an act of resistance and rebellion, a device of freedom and dignity in the more general context of the author's life. We will analyze Benarroch's sense of belonging and his process of remembering the past as an act of rebellion. This work continues the argument of our previous works on what we could call «technologies of freedom»[49], inspired by Foucault's latest works, focused on the idea of autonomy and the reflexive

[45] M. Benarroch, *Mar de Sefarad*, Jerusalem 2008, p. 31 [our translation].
[46] J. Assmann, *Communicative and Cultural Memory*, «Cultural Memory Studies. An International and Interdisciplinary Handbook», ed. A. Erll and A. Nünning, Berlin/New York 2008, pp. 109–18.
[47] L. Barouch, and P. Schwebel, *On Lament and Lamentation Gershom Scholem (1917–1918),* «Jewish Studies Quarterly», XX, 2014, pp. 4–12.
[48] See, for example, V. Madar, *Women's Oral Laments: Corpus and Text – The Body in the Text*, «Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives», Berlin/Boston 2014, pp. 65-86; G. Hasan-Rokem, *Bodies Performing in Ruins: The Lamenting Mother in Ancient Hebrew Texts*, «Lament in Jewish Thought: Philosophical, Theological, and Literary Perspectives», Berlin/Boston 2014, pp. 33-63.
[49] F. Blanco and A. Cohen, *Esclavos de la Libertad. La organización interna de los ejercicios espirituales en el estoicismo clásico*, «Revista de Historia de la Psicología», XXXVI (1), 2015, pp. 13-52.

response to the mechanisms of normalization and governmentality, which the French author called «the art of not being governed quite so much»[50].

1. «Assimilatory forgetting» or becoming Israeli

When telling the story of his life, Mois Benarroch organizes it in different phases that coincide with their characteristic states of consciousness: first, the childhood in Tetouan, marked by innocence, naivety and dreams about what Israel, a country of Jews, would be like. After the arrival in Israel, at the age of thirteen, and a state of disorientation that Mois describes as if «someone had struck him on the head with a stick» and the subsequent forgetting of his past in Tetouan. The youth, until the arrival of his children, a period marked by his attempt to adapt to Israeli society. Finally, maturity, which brought back the memories, his rebellion and resistance. With the memories, a political understanding emerged. That resistance, the recovery of his memories, involved what he calls «his process of being Moroccan again».

Benarroch's process of becoming Israeli involved the decision not to speak Spanish and, eventually, to stop visiting Spain, where a good part of his family settled. Both actions (not speaking Spanish and not visiting Spain) were accompanied by his forgetting his past in Morocco. In his own words:

> In 1975 I went to Spain, and then in 1977 and 1981. I was there for long periods. But that created a tension because I saw the life my cousins lived in Madrid. And it was like a parallel world. Like, what would have happened if I had gone to Madrid.

The contrast between his life as a Moroccan in Israel and the lives of his cousins, equally Moroccan, in Madrid, albeit painful, was also a living proof that things could have been different. The awareness that the conditions of our lives are governed by a normativity that can be contested, is the beginning of moral questioning and, therefore[51], of autonomy. Until approximately the age of thirty, Benarroch did not remember his life in Tetouan. His refusal to speak Spanish and to visit his family in Spain went hand in hand with the apparent disappearance of his memories. He experienced an absence of memories about Morocco in the encounter with a society that lacked a representation of Tetouan that he could recognize as his own. This is an experience of dispossession, of elimination of all known references to relate to oneself. This dispossession is the loss of the authority and legitimacy to define ourselves, to explain who we are to others and be believed. The author explains this as the experience of being uprooted.

[50] M. Foucault, *What is Critique?*, «The Politics of Truth», ed. S. Lotringer, Los Angeles 1997, p. 45.
[51] T. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, ed. Th. Schröder, Stanford 2001.

Years you didn't remember your childhood
and after you
remembered
years
you didn't want to write about it
you didn't want to write
what everyone expects
from a Moroccan poet
you knew every poem
about Tetouan and about the couscous
will be published
and that's why
you didn't write the poems
inside of you

years you walk
with a tree that has no roots
years
the roots
are in the sky[52].

Benarroch refused to write about Morocco under the existing norms that govern recognizability[53] in Israel. These norms established that only folklore (represented in the poem by couscous) was a viable, recognizable and therefore acceptable way of speaking about the Sephardi/Mizrahi past. Not writing what is expected from a Moroccan writer is a practice of resistance and an attempt to look for a different way to govern oneself. This refusal to write under the established conditions of recognizability is the beginning of the author's rebellion against dispossession. Foucault defined this search for a different way to govern as «how not to be governed *like that*, by that, in the name of those principles, with such and such an objective in mind and by means of such procedures, not like that, not for that, not by them». We believe, with Foucault, that this is the definition of the «critical attitude»[54], which is the result of Benarroch's process of comprehension of his own emergence, his own exposure to others under conditions that made recognizability impossible. The refusal to write about his memories involves admitting that he is a foreigner, that he is not at home. The stories we tell of ourselves aspire to be read/listened to and understood, and the recognition that others grant us is the doorway to belonging.

At some point that coincided with the birth of his first son (1986), Benarroch attended a course of guided imagery. Memories started coming back to him and, with them, the conditions that made those memories disappear also started to become visible. Benarroch explained to Angy Cohen this process in an interview:

[52] M. Benarroch, *The Immigrant's Lament*, English version by M. Benarroch, Jerusalem, 2008, pp. 8-9.
[53] J. Butler, *Giving an account of oneself*, cit.
[54] M. Foucault, *What is Critique?*, cit.

Since I arrived in Israel until I was around 30 years old, I didn't remember anything about Tetouan. I didn't remember. My mother would speak about it and I wouldn't remember. Like, they'd ask me «what happened, what would you do, what was it like…» «I can't remember». I wouldn't speak about it, I wouldn't remember. I have no idea why. Maybe the trauma of moving at age 13. Then I went through a treatment, a course called Guided Imagery […]. I did it with my sister and a group. And that's when things started coming back. During that time, I wrote *The Immigrant's Lament*. It was the time when the memories started coming out. Then I started remembering. At first, I remembered things as if it was a picture, not a movie. I didn't manage to see myself in an every-day life process in Tetouan so to say. […] As I age, I remember more and more things and sometimes they ask me «how do you remember that!?» So, when my children were born, I was 26 years old, my oldest son was born and then my daughter and I was right in that moment of recovering my memory.

The Immigrant's Lament is part of this process of remembering which is, also, a process of awakening, of recovering consciousness after the long period that followed his «being struck on the head». The period of forgetting was part of his attempt to submit to the thesis of «identification and adaptation»[55], which dominated the «melting pot» policies of absorption of Mizrahi Jews in Israel. Not remembering is a symbolic action that mimics the absence of all reference to the reality he had lived. Not remembering is a mimetic reaction, an appropriation of the perspective and values by which he was excluded. This involves a temporary loss of one's sense of self. Benarroch's integration in Israel seemed to demand a sort of purification, a renunciation of himself. This was the peak of his process of becoming Israeli.

Benarroch's children were born amid his process of going back to himself. The education of his then young children, his life as a young married man, the recovery of his memory and his relentless writing all go together. He wrote *The Immigrant's Lament* in the middle of a process of recovering a sense of self while he was also becoming a father. The question of «who am I» becomes particularly relevant when faced with the dynamics between responsibility, transmission, and resistance that parenting involves. The parent's story is part of the children's past, part of their belonging in the family. The father will have to make himself understandable and recognizable for them. His children are his responsibility, but they are also subjected to historical conditions over which nobody has control. He will have to prepare them to confront a society that poses threats whose consequences he knows very well. The subtitle of *The Immigrant's Lament* is «self-portrait of the poet in the family mirror». Recovering his memories, coming to terms with himself and refusing all forms of submission occur as part of his response to his family. «Care for the other is inherent to resistance»[56], says Josep María Esquirol. Resistance, more specifically, intimate resistance, is not to relinquish, not to allow others to take away from us that to which we have

[55] S. Shalom-Chetrit, *Mizrahi Politics in Israel: Between Integration and Alternative*, «Journal of Palestine Studies», 2000, XXIX (4), pp. 51-65.
[56] J. M. Esquirol, *La Resistencia Íntima*, Barcelona 2015, p. 90.

carefully hang on[57]. About the relation between transmission, responsibility and resistance, Benarroch said:

> We have continued with the customs, the *kiddush*[58], *shabbat*[59]; I do a very Sephardi *kiddush.* And the festivities. […] They [his children] have heard us speak Spanish, Haketia, and they understand some of it. They've also read what I've written. I have spoken a lot about Tetouan, I speak too much sometimes, they think I'm a bit of a drag [laughs]. I think they do know they are Tetouani. We haven't traveled to Tetouan. We should have. […] Maybe it's my disappointment in my assimilation to Israeli society. It's the process of changing, when I was maturing, the change to writing in Spanish, when I'm forty and they are teenagers. I don't know how they see it. There's something social and political there, right? How to face Israeli society, not to ever relinquish and accept that there is a problem and see it from a perspective of ethnic discrimination and confront it. It is not to say «I can't because this is how Ashkenazim are». Quite the opposite, you should be like «let them say whatever they want. I will just go on». I think I transmitted this to them. I think I passed this on to them because it was my own experience. I never said «I will relinquish».

Writing is a practice and an experience[60]. Writing *The Immigrant's Lament* becomes a «technology of freedom». It is a practice through which the author expresses and creates his experience; a practice that transforms the author. But the book itself is also, so we claim, a mediation device. The book is there for others to use, like a guide. It is there for others to be transformed. The process by which Benarroch recovered his memories was also a process of unveiling the mechanisms of oppression. He gained autonomy in relation to the Israeli cultural grammar and its system of legitimacy and recognition. Benarroch's resistance started to materialize in his recovery of his memories and his going back to his Spanish language, now as a writer. The author called himself an immigrant, in defiance of the nationalist lingo for which a Jewish person moving to Israel is not an immigrant but an *oleh*[61]. One is not immigrating but returning. In Benarroch's words:

> You are a Jew, you are an Israeli Jew, you are a Zionist, you are in Israel, you have nothing to do with what happened before. My first book is called *Kinat Hamehager*, «The Immigrant's Lament». Now, the word «immigrant» doesn't exist in Israeli vocabulary. It's «oleh». Now they do speak about immigration but back then, for years, when they spoke about the book they'd say «how could you write the word «immigrant»? And I'd say that the fact that you're an immigrant doesn't mean that you're not an oleh. But there's no way. They'd say «no, that's anti-Zionist, how can you say you're an immigrant?». To say you're an immigrant is anti-Zionist.

[57] *Ibid.*
[58] *Kiddush*: blessing over wine done on the Sabbath and Jewish holidays.
[59] *Shabbat*: Hebrew word for Sabbath.
[60] See, for example, M. Foucault, *Self writing*, in P. Rabinow (ed.), *Michel Foucault, Ethics, Subjectivity and Truth*, New York 1997.
[61] *Oleh* literally means «one who ascends», a term used to designate Jews who move to Israel. This term is different from the word in Hebrew for an immigrant: *mehager*. Moving to Israel, as a Jew, is not immigrating but ascending.

Calling himself an immigrant and not only an *oleh* demands recognition that his experience is a disrupted one, like that of any immigrant. But it also expresses disappointment, pain and resentment at the deceiving nature of the figure of the *oleh.* One of the poems of *The Immigrant's Lament* accounts for the disappointment with a project that he so intimately believed in:

> May you not have any doubt, dear Ashkenazim
> That I am very angry at you
> Angry, angry, angry
> You can't even imagine
> How angry I am at you
> How angry the child in me is
> That you humiliated me and my parents
> That you broke my dreams of redemption
> That you broke my Temple
> That you humiliated Jews like yourselves
> Dear Jews
> That left Israel for France
> That didn't *ascend* or that stayed here with their frustration
> Many times I've heard that «mistakes were made»
> But I never saw you
> Look down
> And apologize[62].

The author grudges the destruction of an aspiration, of an intimate hope. He grudges the destruction of the dream of redemption, that living in Jerusalem would bring the holiness represented by the Temple, the dream of the country of Jews like himself where freedom and dignity would be found. The destruction of that vision strikes him at a young age upon his arrival in the country. This is also the destruction of the very idea of an absolute home. This destruction leaves him speechless and without memories. The lament is the form of cry in front of a reality that limits the author's power and movement in an unfathomable way. But the lament, as we said before, also refuses acquiescence and submission. The lament is an act of resistance that aims at leading both the author and the reader to a new way of presenting and relating to their experience. The lament of this immigrant hovers over the patriotic and heroic pathos of the *oleh* and the *sabra*.

The project of «becoming Moroccan again» is a memory project that consists of re-establishing a relationship with the past after a long period of oblivion and confusion that he defines with the metaphor of having been «struck on the head with a stick». This process culminated in his decision to recover the name he had as a child, Mois, which he had changed to Moshe, its Hebrew version, when he arrived in Israel.

[62] This poem does not appear in the English version of the book. The translation is ours. For the original Hebrew version, see M. Benarroch, *Kinat HaMehager*, Tel Aviv 1994.

The name is very important because in Morocco they called me «Moisito». I remember that since I was five, I'd get angry and say «I am not Moisito! I am Mois!» and suddenly, right after the Bar Mitzvah, I find myself here [in Israel] and I am Moshe. I mean, where is that Mois? Where was he? Where was he from 1972 until 2005. Now he is a Mois who was Moshe, which is already something different. He is not the Mois that would have come after Moisito, right?

The underlying question is what would have happened had he stayed in Tetouan, a question that relates to the rupture of the immigrant's life and everything that seemed certain until he left. The change of his name to its Hebrew version is a metaphor of the transformation he was expected to undergo as part of his *Aliyah*, «ascension» to Israel. Indeed, he is not the Mois that Moisito would have turned into in Tetouan. The change of names represents for Benarroch his identity process over the years and an attempt to repair a fracture that is nevertheless still there. Bergson said that the entirety of our past is preserved; every small thought, feeling, and desire is there, waiting to become conscious. However,

We think with only a small part of our past, but it is with our entire past, including the original bent of our soul, that we desire, will and act. Our past, then, as a whole, is made manifest to us in its impulse; it is felt in the form of tendency, although a small part of it only is known in the form of idea[63].

The past comes back to our conscience inasmuch as it can help us understand the present and hypothesize a future. Remembering mediates the question of «who am I». In this sense, we said at the beginning of this work that memory and identity are mutually dependent processes. Memory, as Assman claimed, is the condition of belonging, and the credibility of our personal story relates to our own legitimacy. Not being believed, or being mocked or doubted when accounting for our past is a state of illegitimacy. Belonging is connected to credibility, to the very possibility of being recognized. Benarroch, like countless other Mizrahim in Israel, knows very well what it is not to be believed and to remain invisible, unrecognizable and infinitely labeled with categories that place us on a social map whose distribution, limits, centers and peripheries we have not designed.

2. Struggle for recognition

The project of remembering that crystallized in *The Immigrant's Lament* involved the author's affirmation of himself as a Moroccan immigrant – and not just an *oleh* – and a reconnection with the Sephardi *cultural memory*.

I realized that, as a writer, I had to look for myself but the more I searched and the more I got into my past – afterwards I wrote *Lucena* about the conversos, the

[63] H. Bergson, *Henri Bergson, Key Writings*, ed. by K. Ansell Pearson and J. Mullarkey, New York/London 2002, p. 173.

Sephardim, the expellees [from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492] the further I was from Israel, from being Israeli and from Israeli culture. Meaning, there is an impossible dichotomy between being Moroccan and being Israeli.

This is a dichotomy between Israeli and Sephardi cultural memories. The past that is claimed to be «ours» is, in each case, a different past. Benarroch's refusal to accept a past to which he did not belong resulted in the impossibility of assimilating into Israeli society. *The Immigrant's Lament* is a work that, to a good extent, elaborates the conflict between the different layers of the author's experiences as a Sephardi Jew in Israel. One of the most painful conflicts is that between *Eretz Israel,* the land of Israel – as a historical and religious *locus* – and his reality as a citizen of the State of Israel. Benarroch states that the closer he is to *Eretz Israel* – the religious, mythical and historical land – the further he feels from the State, from its national reality.

> you are still here
> with all the oxymoron and all the morons
> possible inside your head
> feeling the most here
> and most there that is possible
> so close to the land of Israel
> and so far away from the State of Israel[64].

Mois Benarroch is a Jewish, Moroccan and Israeli author. His work and life will evolve under the awareness of tension between all these aspects of his self. Part of this awareness is the understanding of the horizons of life that have been lost. For example, the existential disposition of the Maghreb, marked by its being a nuanced world, a way of life with few dichotomies. In that world, it is possible to empathetically compile all the perspectives and assume the contradictions. In the 2014 interview with Angy Cohen, Benarroch reflected on this question:

> There is this specificity of the Maghreb, of Maghrebi thought: the possibility of thinking in a way that includes and does not exclude. Like [Jacques] Derrida. Derrida is Maghrebi thought, opposite to Western thought, which is «or, or». Western thought makes you choose between one option or the other. It has to be «this» or «that». This is very important, and it's very difficult to explain to someone who has a linear way of thinking. It's difficult to explain to them that there is a way of thinking that is parallel, three, four different possibilities. […] They [in the West] always ask you to define yourself. In the Western world you always have to define yourself, you have to be clear, you are this way, or you are this other way, you are a socialist or you're a capitalist. So, what we lost was our way of looking at modernity and its relation to religion. How to be within religious Judaism – because Moroccan Jews were deeply religious – while being able to live, within that religion, with modernism and also with «goyism»[65] [we laugh]. It's possible to live within contradiction, and that possibility of living with contradictions is becoming extinct.

[64] M. Benarroch, *The Immigrant's Lament*, p. 8.
[65] Goy means «non-Jew». «Goyism» is a made-up word that refers to the «non-Jewish world».

Benarroch is speaking about a model of coexistence derived from the historical experience of being in-between worlds, as we mentioned before, that characterized Sephardi modernity[66]. He identifies this with Maghrebi thought, exemplified by the Algerian-Jewish thinker Jacques Derrida. This thought is defined by its radical inclusion, by a total openness that does not demand a clear-cut identification of the other. Derrida asks the following questions about the true reception of the other, the unconditional hospitality that is too often impossible:

> Shouldn't we also submit to a sort of holding back of the temptation to ask the other who he is, what her name is, where he comes from, etc.? Shouldn't we abstain from asking another these questions, which herald so many required conditions, and thus limits, to a hospitality thereby constrained and thereby confined into a law and a duty?[67]

In his quote above, Benarroch reflected about the loss of a way of being with the other that renounces the adscription to identity categories. The Sephardi experience of modernity is one that thrives within contradiction and that challenges the dichotomies of the modernization and secularization thesis, such as tradition versus rationality, religion versus secularism. This attitude towards religious tradition based on the assumption of contradictions has been called *masortiut*, in Israel, which could be translated as traditionalism or *traditionism*[68]. Traditionalism models a specific way of relating to normativity in a general sense. In Israel, the category of «traditionist» applies to those people whose observance of Jewish law is less stringent although they maintain certain practices like going to the synagogue, celebrating shabbat and festivities, but not strictly following all the rules imposed by Jewish law. It is worth noting that the majority of people in Israel who identify as *masorati* or traditionist, are of Sephardi ascent. Meir Buzaglo, in his extraordinary essay *A Language for the Faithful*, unfortunately not translated to English, says that «the position of traditionalism is an active relationship with life, a relationship in which there is a renunciation of stringent criticism and of self-definition»[69]. Tolerance to ambiguity and contradiction is an ethical resource to navigate the tensions and complexities that came along with modernity in the Sephardi world, together with colonial presence. In this sense, ambiguity became a coping practice to deal with the challenges of participating

[66] For a development of this argument in the context of Israeli society, see Y. Yadgar, *Maintaining Ambivalence: Religious Practice and Jewish Identity Among Israeli Traditionists—A Post-Secular Perspective*, «Journal of Modern Jewish Studies», 2010, 9(3), pp. 397-419.
[67] J. Derrida, *Of Hospitality. Anna Dufourmantelle Invites Jacques Derrida to Respond*, Stanford 1997, p. 135.
[68] Yaakov Yadgar has coined the term t*raditionism* to refer to both an attitude and a concept derived from the modern construction of the bipolar/oppositional discourse that separates between religion and secularity. See, for example, Y. Yadgar, *Traditionsm*, «Cogent Social Sciences», 2015, 1(1).
[69] M. Buzaglo, *A Language for the Faithful. Refections on Tradition*, Jerusalem 2008, p. 52 [in Hebrew; our translation].

in Jewish life while also participating in the colonial/European spheres that were far from connected to Jewish law. Benarroch laments the loss of this ethical resource of refraining from categorizing. This is part of an ethical heritage that has taught us how to bear ambivalence and undefinedness.

The possibility of living within contradictions relates to an inclusive ethos that does not demand a definition of the other or of oneself. Derrida's hospitality, Buzaglo's concept of traditionalism and Benarroch's idea about the Sephardi relation to religion, speak about the reception of the other. They are speaking about a recognition that does not demand knowledge and identification of the other on our terms. Thus, tolerance to ambiguity becomes the condition of our relation with the other. Israeli society is split into a multiplicity of groups defined by their nationality, ethnicity, religion, level of observance, political ideology, social class, with numerous subgroups. There is a complex system of social categorization that citizens use to identify and situate both themselves and others on the social map. Accordingly, the obligation to define oneself using the categories provided by this normative system often confirms the confrontation and division assumed by that system. Benarroch reflected about the consequences of identity politics in the following terms:

> As someone who grew up in the borderline between two states and two continents, that was a minority within a minority, I feel a belonging to many and diverse groups. I belong to the group of the Moroccans, the Jews, the Israelis, the Spanish, the Africans, the Europeans, and other groups. I feel a belonging to those groups sometimes, not every day, and there are days that I belong to several groups, other days that I don't belong in any group, not even in the group of the poets. […] I find myself in front of a society that tries with all her might to catalogue me, you are Mizrahi, you are Sephardi, you are Moroccan. […] But then I find out that I don't only belong to the groups that I choose, but that there are groups that choose for me. Here is where fate comes into the picture, the spirit of the time and all sorts of commercial considerations and then I become Mizrahi. What is Mizrahi? I have no idea what that is. But that is why I am Mizrahi, because there are lots of people around me that see me as such. I didn't know I was Mizrahi until I arrived in Israel, and I still don't know how is it possible that a person that was born in the only country in the world whose name is «the West» – that is the meaning of the Maghreb – could be Mizrahi [Eastern]. On the other hand, I also can't but be Mizrahi, because that's how others see me[70].

A significant part of Benarroch's literary production has dealt with the relation between oppression and the withholding of recognition. Benarroch claims that the poetic disposition came to him as a consequence of having left Morocco, that place where contradictions were allowed, where undefinition was tolerated and where he was at the center of all parties, absolutely recognizable. The loss is great and has no solution but to continue to defend that way of life from the poetic corner that has allowed him to become the writer he may have not been in Morocco.

[70] M. Benarroch, *Zehut, zihui, zehe…Identity*, «Midreshet», 2010 [in Hebrew; our translation].

In Morocco I was the center
of all the parties
a social phenomenon
always surrounded by friends
until I came to Israel
and ended up in a corner
the corner of all the parties
I stopped going
always on the outside
the outsider
when
I came
I became a poet[71].

This is the first poem of *The Immigrant's Lament*, in which Mois Benarroch explains that, in order to understand reality and its mechanisms, to identify deception and manipulation, one needs to be outside. Being far from the center accounts for the production of his poetic disposition. His coming to Israel turned him into a poet. The perspective of the poet is from the outside, from the privileged perspective of not being in the center, where everything seems so natural, so real. This «corner of all parties» in which he became a poet is also a symbol of a more general experience of lack of recognition and invisibility that the Mizrahi population in Israel have experienced. However, the feeling of invisibility is the subjective experience of a politics of non-recognition. In Benarroch's words:

> People either don't speak to me or look at me through a filter or something like that. They're looking at you, they're talking to you, but they don't see you. […] When I tell them that my grandfather had an American car in the forties already [in Morocco], with a driver, and that there were roads, they don't believe you. They don't believe you. So how is it possible, you can't be something that is not in the minds of people. Everything that is not in Europe is as if it was outside of the world.

It is a common experience shared by Moroccan Jews in Israel that, when they speak about the abundance, education and culture they had in Morocco, those memories are regarded as a fantasy, an exaggeration or even a lie. When memories have no social recognition, they may also become anti-normative and challenge the whole system of legitimacy and hierarchization. The experience that others do not believe him, shared by many Mizrahi immigrants when they speak about their past, is a living proof of Axel Honneth's thesis of how «the experience of social injustice is always measured in terms of the withholding of some recognition held to be legitimate»[72].

[71] M. Benarroch, *The Immigrant's Lament*, p. 3.
[72] A. Honneth, *Recognition and Justice: Outline of a Plural Theory of Justice*, «Acta Sociologica» XLVII (4), 2004, p. 352.

In some of the poems Mois Benarroch speaks to the child Moshe, «the Moroccan prince», who could not foresee what was going to happen to him in Israel, this «country of Jews» he would dream about.

> What's going to happen to you
> Moroccan prince
> what's going to happen to you
> spoiled child
> who never made his bed
> what's going to happen with you
> in the land of Israel
> when you won't be able to shout
> «Fatima bring me a glass of water»
> «Fatima I am hungry»
> what's going to become of you
> Moroccan prince
> here in the land of Israel
> where everyone has to work[73].

The Tetouani writer Esther Bendahan writes about the aristocratic feeling of Tetouani Jews in a way that is worth quoting to estimate the importance such a feeling in the Moroccan imaginary.

I remember that, in Tetouan, that Sephardi city almost Spanish, almost Moroccan, which was said to be the little Jerusalem, that we were all kings and queens. «Mi rey, mi reina» My king, my queen, was one of the most repeated expressions in the «kingdom of Tetouan», so much that it appeared to be a city of monarchs.

This aristocratic feeling of nobility found no reception, no acknowledgement by Israeli society, whose model of the Diasporic Jew had no place for the «Moroccan prince» nor for that court of «kings» and «queens». The persecuted, scared and oppressed model of the Diaspora Jew held as the counterfigure of the *sabra* was as far removed as it could possibly be from the «Moroccan prince», who was regarded, in the best-case scenario, as a backward illiterate subject.

Many of the poems of *The Immigrant's Lament* are a sort of chain of memories, and each one has its own weight, its own importance. At times they feel as a child's stream of thought. Benarroch gives back those memories to the child who lost his memory. The poet speaks to that child and tells him his own story. He gives him back the understanding, the support, the warmth, the dignity he needed back then, in the past. It is a retroactive act of recognition:

> I see you Moshe
> landing in the Land of Israel
> half-drunk in the airport
> you don't understand what is happening
> but you don't kiss the land

[73] M. Benarroch, *The Immigrant's Lament*, p. 6.

or more precisely the asphalt
I see you
a week in the boarding school
of *Aliyat HaNoar*[74]
a week you cried without stopping
I see the nice tutor
coming from the boy scouts
saying that you are too big to cry
and you cry even more
that it's going to pass
and you cry even more
I see you Moshe
and my heart goes out to you
I love you Moshe
and suffer with you there
in Zichron-Yaacov
when will you forget Moshe
when will you forgive.

The poet repairs the lack of recognition by telling that child he once was «I see you». He provides, from the distance of the time passed, the possibility to be fully, absolutely, and unconditionally accepted. Benarroch gathers all the contradictions, the ambiguities, and the unsettled aspects of himself and of his story. He speaks to Moshe, that boy that arrived in Israel from Morocco, and provides him all the understanding and shelter he did not receive back then.

I love you Moshe
and I enjoy writing it
at last I love you
with all that you did
and all that you failed
and all that you fucked up
and all that you are ridiculous
and with all your running
away from here and escaping again
and again escaping
and still, staying here

I love you
Moroccan, Spanish, Sephardi,
European, looks Ashkenazi,
Western, Eastern, Mediterranean,
Middle-Eastern, Palestinian,
African, French
with all the things you are and aren't
I love you crazy and insane
and most logical

[74] *Aliyat HaNoar* is a Jewish organization founded during Nazi times and whose mission was the resettlement of Jews in the land of Israel.

but then it is you
it is all the you that made me
and I love you[75].

The love Benarroch expresses here replaces the humiliation, the self-hate, and the forgetfulness. He looks at his past and offers the compassion, the respect, and the acceptance that he could not find then. He gathers the categories that organize Israel's society and puts them on, wearing them all, those which define him and those which do not. It is an act of redemption and forgiveness. The encounter with the Moshe he once was is a moral, political and existential encounter. He achieves a poetic closure of his life. The self-writing functions as a laboratory in which he can test all the hypotheses. He meets all the different possibilities of what he could have been.

3. Remembering as resistance

Our story, says Judith Butler, is the story of our exposure to others[76]. Benarroch tells his story by telling what it was like to be exposed in the Israeli public sphere, how he has been categorized, defined, and limited. Those are the conditions of his emergence.

The poems of *The Immigrant's Lament*, like so many others that would come after, are a subversion against each stereotype that the immigrant's memories encountered. Axel Honneth states in his theory of recognition that social injustice can be measured by the participation in the public sphere with credibility and legitimacy of one's history[77]. Both economic and cultural deprivation are aspects of social disrespect and humiliation. When a person's relationship with himself happens in the context of an absence of social recognition, the path to alienation is paved. When memories have no social recognition, one can begin to doubt one's own memories, to doubt oneself and those who share them. One can also rebel, and resist, and continue to remember and to put those memories out in the public sphere. This type of resistance is behind *The Immigrant's Lament*.

Out of four who came to Israel from Tetuan
three left
all the cousins now
in Paris, Madrid and New York
one by one they left
married foreigners
and left
they understood
this was not for them

[75] *Ibid*, pp. 8-9.
[76] See J. Butler, *Giving an account of oneself*, cit.
[77] See A. Honneth, *Recognition and Justice*, cit.

where everyone categorizes them
as something they are not
forced to defend something
they couldn't identify with
when they say
you are a Moroccan
or an Oriental
and you have to defend the Moroccans
to whom you can't feel affiliated
you have no choice but to become arrogant
with the Ashkenazi especially
for their arrogance and their cultural ignorance
to the eastern Jews and their customs
and they always repeat that same sentence
half funny half sad
but you don't look Moroccan!

I once said to someone
after this sentence
«yeah, that's true, I had an operation
I took off the tail
and now I don't look Moroccan»[78].

The Immigrant's Lament is an exercise of resistance against dispossession, and a struggle to gain authority over social recognition. It is a rebellion against those who write our history without us. The lament is the expression of this dispossession. However, it is also a form of rebellion. The lament expresses the tension between the helplessness of the individual and the rebellion against the social norms that govern the recognition.

In a couple of years
I will be the appointed Moroccan Laureate
of Hebrew literature
you will say «there he rose
from garbage thanks to
our phenomenal patronage»
you will compete over the discovery
of this Moroccan
who studied at the university
and speaks four languages
there! He is like us
He really did advance!
Like a Pole even
His Hebrew is Orthodox kosher Israeli Hebrew
What a great writer
A talented Moroccan
A worthy Moroccan
He writes about Morocco

[78] M. Benarroch, *The Immigrant's Lament*, pp. 4-5.

About cous-cous
About the transit camps
And then I tell you, listen very well
Zero is the worth of your fake culture
And I will run away from you patronage
And you will be mad that I do not need you
Where did that Moroccan run away to?
He who we encouraged and helped rise above
Why on earth would he tell us what to think?
We will not allow such thing as a Moroccan
Trying to mold Israeli society
He will sit down and be quiet, he will be
Like us and will be quiet and if he writes so much
About leaving the country, so let him go
To his Frenchmen and he will stop speaking
About his Sephardism and glorifying it
He should be happy that we prepared him for the Western culture
Where in Morocco would he have written
He should be like us and be happy that we allowed him
To publish one book with a known publisher
And I will not be mad at you
Not even that[79].

The Immigrant's Lament is an exploration of the mechanisms by which people are dispossessed of their power, of their ability to change reality and participate in its construction. This experience resembles those dreams in which we cannot scream, our voice taken away by some unfathomable force, and we are left helpless without a voice. However, by the end of the first part of the book, the poet finally manages to scream:

I shout my right
to be different
to be Sephardi
to be traditional
in the Israeli society
not right and not left
I demand my right
to stop feeling
strange and detached
I the Israeli.

Mois Benarroch reclaims the authority to break the limitations imposed by all those categories, which are symptoms of a larger system of social engineering. He is already completely awake in this last poem. He has recovered from the blow that left him disoriented for so long. The poet screams, his voice has been recovered. Part of the recovery is this book that offers tools to identify the mechanisms of oppression. The book helps the reader regain control over his life by giving him the tools to unveil the mechanisms that govern his reality. For this

[79] M. Benarroch, *Kinat HaMehager*, p. 40 [our translation].

reason, we consider this book a *technology of freedom*. By reading it, the reader is invited to participate in the transformation of a way of looking at himself and the world around him.

The lament provides a critical perspective for the reader. Benarroch conjures a sort of disenchantment, he blows up the system of classification. The poet sends little Moshe back to the world after having told him the story of his arrival in Israel, and the story of what had happened before, the story that he had forgotten. Now that he has heard the story, he is ready to go out into the world. Now that he has a past, he can go and have a future:

> I embrace you
> go to the world
> love it
> give it all you have to give
> even what it can't accept
> give the world all your love
> all you have learned
> and your experience
> in all your previous lives
> it won't accept it
> but it needs you
> the world needs you
> it needs your love
> give it
> but don't expect any reward
> go to the world
> go to God
> go
> don't be afraid anymore
> I caress you good-bye
> go your way
> I kiss you good-bye
> go.

The poet sends the child back to history and kisses him goodbye. In the original Hebrew version, Benarroch uses the same imperative sentence (*lekh lekhah,* go!) with which God tells Abraham to leave his home for the Promised Land[80]. Memory has given little Moshe a place in history and a political mission: to repair the world, to change the wrong in it, to love it, and to know he will probably be disappointed.

4. Conclusion

Benarroch's encounter with Israel in the 1970s was marked by an inhospitable demand to transform himself according to the terms already existing in Israeli society. However, hospitality, friendship and justice can only exist if there is respect and acknowledgement of the other's absolute alterity[81]. Benarroch shows the reactionary nature of social classification based on identities and its partition in groups and subgroups. He demonstrates that without memory there is no belonging. Also, Benarroch shows the destructive

[80] *Genesis*, 12: 1.
[81] See, for example, J. Derrida, *Adieu à Emmanuel Lévinas*, Paris 1997.

effects of having an identity instead of a history. He often mentions in his work his encounter with Israeli institutions that demanded from him an identification with a certain heroism and communitarianism. He elaborates on the alienation of having to identify oneself with a collective, and how far identity is from belonging as a concept and a human experience:

> The problem of identity has concerned me for a long time, both personally and in my poetry. One day I stood in front of the word and I saw the word "identical". Identity, identity card, they try to make you not similar, not close to or proximate, but identical to someone else in the street. Also, in all the languages I know the words *identity, identidad, identité,* all of them speak about identity between people. And what can be more frightening than being identical to someone who is a stranger to you? Identification is a word that is hard enough, but identity is already stronger than me or than any artist or person. That is why I prefer the word 'belonging'. Maybe we need a belonging card, a card that bonds you with a country or a people distributed in a few countries or with a people linked by a religion. All sorts of belongings that a person may choose[82].

Identity and belonging also demand very different political responses. Belonging demands reception, recognition, and participation. Identity demands allegiance and the cancelation of difference. Belonging needs memory and history. Benarroch goes back in historical time not only to recover his own memories, but also to reconnect with the Sephardi historical past. The result is a past that is now narrative – a life story – and can therefore offer a sense of continuity with the present. This present is his poetry and his political struggle as an Israeli citizen.

Part of Benarroch's work has been devoted to the analysis of how Mizrahi otherness was cancelled and subdued as a precondition for their integration into Israeli society. However, Israel is not just one more host society for Jewish immigrants. Benarroch had fantasized about Israel as a child, about this «country of Jews like him» where he would find an absolute home. The failure of Israel to become a home that would welcome him – and all Jews – unconditionally, dampens the more general hope to be free of exile, to be at one's home where one is known, accepted and safe.

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[82] M. Benarroch, *Identity... identification, identical, identity*, 2010 [in Hebrew, our translation] blog post retrieved from https://midreshet.org.il/ResourcesView.aspx?id=2064 [accessed 10/10/2019].