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Abstract

This article analyses the problem of identity in the ambiguous coexistence of belonging and alienation found in Albert Memmi's semi-autobiographical *La Statue de Sel* (1953). It demonstrates how the protagonist and his author dwell in a temporary space between these two dimensions. The novel, as the debut of Memmi's literary career, has the peculiarity of initiating tears in the fabric of identity. Through close analysis, three threads are observed and considered: homeland, society and language. These threads are unpicked through the theoretical lens of two European philosophers: Bourdieu in relation to the protagonist's borderline occupation of disparate social fields and the instable detention of capital; and Derrida with regards to the lack of possession of any known languages as a consequence of colonialism. Both thinkers shed light on the identity struggles of the young Memmi who, on the threshold of Tunisian independence, experiences a liminal condition as manifested in each of the three threads, that is, he epitomises the point between the 'no more' and the 'not yet' that animates his identity crisis.

Keywords: Identity; French Colonialism; Liminality

Following the definition given by Guy Dugas (1984), who called him "écrivain de la déchirure" ("writer of the laceration"), the Tunisian-born writer Albert Memmi is a witness of the African colonial break from the French "motherland". His perhaps best-known work, the *Portrait du Colonisé* [*The*

Colonizer and the Colonized] (1957), is dedicated to this issue. Here, a fracture develops around the perpetual discomfort that emerges from the opposition of the colonists to the colonized, but also, as Jean-Paul Sartre states in the preface (1965), internally, around the opposition between colonists who accept themselves and colonists who refuse themselves. If it is true that this laceration dominates the literary output of the Franco-Tunisian writer, *La Statue de Sel* [*The Pillar of Salt*] (1953) is the object of our attention for its peculiarity. As a semi-autobiographical novel published early on in his career, it hints at the rupture's materialization, in the sense that it is precisely in this narrative space that the rupture is hypothesized, weighed at length, and finally chosen. Here, in other words, the laceration is born. The focus of this paper is the identification and analysis of the point at which the tear occurs for Memmi. This point is, so to speak, the contact space between belonging and alienation, since the main argument of this article – namely that Memmi finds himself in a liminal position with respect to his identity – supports a lasting and ambiguous existence and coexistence of both affects.

The protagonist of *La Statue de Sel*, Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche, narrates his experience as an outsider growing up as an Arab Jew in French-ruled Tunisia. In the years around the Second World War, in the alleys and squares of Tunis, Alexandre recalls the main stages of his life, from his childhood in the Tarfoune alley to his experiences in a German labour camp. Ultimately, the story tells of his feelings of alienation and unbelonging, ending with his final departure for Argentina.

The main theme is therefore linked to the problem of Memmi's own identity, which encompasses an uprooting and associated feeling of cultural alienation towards the social groups of Tunis, and which runs from his childhood in the Jewish ghetto to his debut as a young intellectual of French culture. Through his early immersion in the La Hara neighbourhood in Tunis, the protagonist is subject to Western schooling's rationalist approach, resulting in a clash with his family and community. A contrast between the

East and West poles becomes evident, in the middle of which Memmi-Alexandre must make a choice. In the book's preface Albert Camus comments on this choice, also speaking of his own condition of *pied noir*, stating that there is no actual resolution in the novel; that the final escape from Tunisia is only a "novelistic artifice", as

[t]his kind of hero never leaves or, if he does, leaves unchanged. All of us, French and born in North Africa, also remain who we are, faced with contradictions that today bloody our cities, and which we will not overcome by fleeing them, but by living them out"¹ (1972, p.10).

This article deals with these "contradictions"; these spaces that take shape during the reading. We will analyse the degree of habitability of these interstices because, as this seemingly irreconcilable dualism ends with the break from Tunisia/France and the escape to Argentina, the young Memmi's *alter ego* lingers for a long time in the ripening of a choice, dwelling between the dichotomous options of its plural nature. To be concise, this "interstitial space" (Bhabha, 1994) is the only one that gives the feeling of identity habitability. Thus, the article will explore the breaking line of the native land, poised between belonging and alienation, before analysing the relational dynamics that place the protagonist in the midst of different social territories, and finally discussing the actual possession of his languages, Arabic and French.

Living the Land

The most immediate comparison is between geographically distinct territories where, once again, contrasts emerge: Europe and Africa; colonizer France and colonized Tunisia. Where fifteen years earlier the French writer Gabriel

¹ Transl. by Edouard Roditi. We must point out that Camus (1913-1960), in a certain sense, shares Memmi's condition: he was born in Mondovi, in the then French Algeria, in a modest family of *pied noirs*, i.e., settlers of the French North African colonies. A philosophy student at the University of Algiers, he moved to France at the beginning of the Second World War.

Audisio had observed the "Mediterranean similarities"² (1935, p. 15) of the Tunisian coast – later described by Braudel as united by "wheat, olives, and vines" (1992, p. 176) – Memmi has a different approach. While the first author, with a "blood made of several bloods" who "lives a tradition made of several traditions" (Fouchet, 1937, p. 964), proceeds by connections that are the result of systematic analogy, Memmi possesses instead a remarkable narrative coherence.

We see this in his protagonist's progression through concentric circles, from the micro- to the macro-structure. Having experienced a sheltered childhood in the rue Tarfoune, his first 'home', the adolescent accesses a privileged education with respect to his social class, leaving behind him "the narrow street where I lived, the dark and steep staircases, the whole sordid city" (Memmi, 1992, p. 226). The protagonist's movement is, on the one hand, horizontal (towards higher-ranking neighbourhoods), and on the other hand vertical (resulting from the cultural elevation he acquires at school). Physical and metaphorical walls are also recurrent themes, from the narrow Jewish mellah to the sense of a cultural barrier laying between different sectors of the city. Alexandre often feels as in a suffocating abode, "as if walled in" (p. 229), a condition common to Jews "who had been driven behind thick walls by centuries of fear" (p. 266). The bloody pogrom that is treated in the chapter named "Les Autres" highlights the contrast between the Jewish and Muslim parts of the city: Alexandre perceives a climate of mutual suspicion, that still places him between two walls – the opposite, to quote Gastaut (2001), of the overestimated myth of "benevolent cohabitation" in Maghrebian cities.

Practicing Relationships: Bourdieu, Field and Capital

If the homeland constitutes the first dwelling-place of identity, we must also consider how this land is inhabited by its actors and dynamics. Elements of

² "similitudes méditerranéennes" (transl. mine).

Bourdieuian theory³ (1972) prove useful in this respect, as they help with mapping the structure of the novel's social bonds in order to better understand its characters' behaviours.

Pierre Bourdieu argues that the social macrocosm comprises autonomous microcosms; "fields" inhabited by social actors in which rules and status claims are subject to continual contestation. Whoever enters the field's microcosm must know how to adapt to it in such a way that, even if it does not consciously appear as such, the field's norms are tacitly imposed on them, and any transgression would lead to scandal or exclusion. According to Bourdieu, the agents are symbolically fighting each other to acquire recognition and monopoly of power within their field. There are multiple resources available to the social agent, known as "capitals": cultural capital, economic capital and social capital. Since "to exist means to differ" (Bourdieu, 2010, p. 82), a distinctive profile must be maintained in order to gain recognition or symbolic capital.

In Memmi's novel, the social macrocosm is dotted with spaces evocative of Bourdieu's fields; spaces where the narrating ego moves and acts. These spaces are embodied in the text by family and school, between which Alexandre is in a marginal and ambiguous position: "[a]fter school, my classmates scattered throughout the nearby middle-class neighbourhood, and I would find myself alone as soon as I reached the edge of the modern quarters" (p. 114). As far as capital is concerned, the narrative begins with family ties, that is, social capital. Alexandre passively assimilates family habits which keep him safe in the intimacy of the Jewish quarter, but then removes himself from these by entering the bourgeois world of the French high school, where he invests in and embodies the newly available cultural capital.

³ Bourdieu (1930-2002) had a close relationship with the Maghrebian land. A pupil of Claude Lévi-Strauss, the French philosopher arrived in Algeria in 1955, where he was sent to carry out his military service, remaining there until 1959. Here he elaborated his first ethnographic research concerning the Kabyle population: with *Sociologie de l'Algérie* he began works with an Algerian focus, followed by the publication of *Esquisse d'une Théorie de la Pratique, Précédée de Trois Etudes d'Ethnologie Kabyle* (1972).

However, *La statue de Sel* is not a novel of alienation alone, but rather a narrative space where this feeling is perceived, where the possibility of detachment is evaluated, chosen, and finally implemented. Thus, it cannot be said that Alexandre does not belong to the social structures of his time: it is somewhat due to his belonging to too many different realities that the detachment is generated. The break begins with the difficulty in participating in the commonality of everyday life, of which Alexandre despises the "hypocritical and timorous respectability, [...] the stupid and tyrannical family, [...] brutal and unjust authority, [...] primitive dogma that seemed arbitrary and stifling" (p. 141). He laments the hypocrisy of his community and family members, who docilely accept rituality as imposed on them by a hypocritical authority: "[w]hat horrible hypocrisy! [...] their complicity and their resignation, in so many blatant stupidities that stifled me, roused my scorn" (p. 149).

Such authority lends itself to an analysis of Alexandre's social field through the lens of Bourdieu's thought. Without Bourdieu, one might talk about behavioural patterns or customs. With Bourdieu, instead, we can specifically use the term *habitus* which refers to "systems of durable, transposable *dispositions*, structured structures [...] objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them" (2005, p. 72). *Habitus* is thus the central element of social and cultural reproduction; it is capable of generating regular and expected behaviours, which condition the social life of individuals in relation to their social class.

To paraphrase Bourdieu, then, the novel's characters possess certain collective dispositions to act without "a genuine strategic intention" (p. 73) that are indicative of *habitus*. For instance, referring to his mother, Alexandre writes, "[m]arriage, birth, death, any group event made her feverish and enthusiastic in exactly the same way" (p. 130). One of the most symbolically pertinent rituals in the novel is the uncle's funeral, where everyone

ceremonially washes their hands at the sight of the corpse. Another significant moment concerns the meeting organized to help Aunt Maissa, diagnosed with spirit possession. In this meeting, everyone takes for granted what they must do to precipitate the woman's healing, and they move around her composing a "mass of compact flesh" (p. 159). These two examples fit the sociological definition of the rite as a moment of collective effervescence that increases the feeling of belonging to a group (Durkheim, 1912), and even outside the religious sphere as a simple symbolic act (Douglas, 1966). In these same examples, the *habitus* is expressed in the form of actions valid and understandable for the group or class of belonging: it is therefore neither universal nor specific to an individual.

It is only in the chapter entitled "At Home", in which the protagonist disagrees with his father over the observance of Jewish practices, that the rejection of family norms is fully realized. Alexandre, opposing the father-figure, symbolically lashes out against the source of his education in *habitus*. This break is emblematic of Bourdieu's argument that

generational conflicts oppose not age-classes separated by natural properties but habitus which [...] cause one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations that another group finds unthinkable or scandalous (2005, p. 78).

The ritualistic and ideological beliefs of the family and the subordinate social class are affected by *symbolic violence*. This means the ability to impose symbolic prestige on subordinates, or more precisely, the "invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or those who exercise it" (Bourdieu 2003, p. 124). In the words of Massimo Cerulo (2010, p.17),

the relationship of discrimination [is] not due to a sort of generational and cultural transmission of norms, values and behaviours, but rather to the automatic and unconscious incorporation of mental structures

generated by the society to which one belongs, that makes [...] dominating and being dominated appear as natural.

The French sociologist records the presence of numerous forms of symbolic violence, which is not ascribable to the physical exercise of force as the name would suggest; the symbolic violence resides in the “gentle” violence of general compliance, which follows from the social mechanism of “incorporation”. An example of this violence is the episode of the *Au Kouttab* chapter that takes place on the tramway⁴.

Through a Bourdieusian lens, we see Alexandre enter new social fields and take note of patterns different from those of the family, which constitutes the first level of socialization. The second level we are exposed to is the school environment, where the colonial bourgeois class prevails by holding capital of cultural and economic type. The school environment, defined in the novel as a sieve-like selection, is part of the dominant hierarchy because it trains the future elite. By Alexandre’s own assessment, the rules of conduct are better than those within the family: "I thus learned to distinguish more clearly what was right and proper at school from what was right and proper at home, though much to the advantage of school" (p. 65).

Higher education is an unexpected possibility for Alexandre. It is granted to him thanks to a scholarship from the Jewish Alliance, eager to reward one of its ‘deserving’ pupils. This step only further distances Alexandre from subordinate social practices: here, the young man has access to a new aesthetic taste (Bourdieu, 1979), which excludes those who do not belong to the same system of thought. For this reason, his relationship with his high

⁴ The reference concerns a man's advance towards a child who was travelling on the vehicle with his father. The child, subjected to the rules of habitus, tries to rebel against the man's request to have his private parts touched for money, while the bystanders (and the father) welcome it with a knowing smile. The scene presented has the connotations of a familiar moment, and it is not a novelty for anyone. Indeed, the wagon seems to protect this moment of warm humanity among those present ("In this warm and human car, protected as we were against nature's aggressiveness, we were like one happy family" Memmi, 1992, p. 167-8).

school friends is initially difficult, as it requires compliance with new aesthetic interests: "In spite of the friendships that I made at school, I never really managed to penetrate the social life of my schoolmates" (p. 194).

For Bourdieu and Memmi, the third typology of capital, economic capital, is intimately linked to the idea of the gift. The logic of the gift is the basis of Alexandre's privilege to study and binds Alexandre to his benefactor, Mr. Bismuth, the pharmacist. It is established by the Jewish Alliance that Mr. Bismuth will financially support the young man in his studies, as he himself had previously been supported. The functioning of the gift as a social mechanism is argued by Bourdieu (1997) to be underpinned by an implicit and unconscious expectation of reciprocity. At the basis of generous action there is not the conscious intention of an individual, but a disposition of the *habitus*, that is, that attitude which tends towards the conservation and increase of symbolic capital. The donor wants to maintain his prestige, and the gift offers him this possibility. This gift has an ambiguous value because, on the one hand, it involves a rejection of personal interest, since the act is free, while on the other, it imposes a constricting logic: the gift must be reciprocated by means of a counter-gift. This process is unconsciously incorporated into society in the form of a *habitus*, so that there is a sort of game within the social institution, which everyone instinctively knows but does not want to acknowledge. In this way, actors can remain unaware of the logic, because the *habitus* is unconscious.

Through this lens, Memmi's novel can be read as suggesting a chain of gifts made by the characters to increase their social recognition. The Jewish community has invested in Bismuth to increase its symbolic capital, allowing him to become a pharmacist, while he in turn is required to return the favour by funding Alexandre's education. The young man has respect and esteem for his benefactor because his future depends on him. Gratitude is already a return that can increase the pharmacist's personal prestige, but the 'debt' must

be paid with academic successes and a future well-paid job that produces economic capital.

This gift theory also implies a certain symbolic violence directed by the benefactor towards the beneficiary, because the latter is forced to pay off the debt in order not to remain a subordinate for an extended period of time. This also partly explains the 'intellectual bulimia' with which Alexandre is possessed in the race for scholastic success and superiority over his bourgeois schoolmates. In his words, "I brought [...] a kind of passion, an avidity that my schoolmates could not understand, pleasant amateurs that they were" (Memmi, 1992, p.120). The relationship established with Bismuth, who does not even offer a glance at the adept student, is a type of asymmetrical relationship of dependence based on gratitude. Anthropologically speaking, knowledge of this mechanism is available to everyone, but is masked by the 'time interval' between the time the gift is made and its reciprocation.⁵ Moreover, the timelapse ensures that the act of giving is not born out of self-interest because the counter-gift is not immediately reciprocated. In reality, however, there can be no doubt that it is underpinned by an element of self-interest, as the donor uses it to increase his prestige. In addition, the lapse of time in gift reciprocation plays a fundamental role in binding the recipient to the gift giver: in the novel, Alexandre's haste to learn is motivated by the fact that it is precisely this time interval that generates the dominator-dominated state until the debt is paid off.

In Memmi's novel, the importance of economic capital also emerges with certain insistence. This fact can be seen in the figure of the pharmacist who repeats as a motto, "[it] is absolutely necessary to live on Easy Street" (p. 86). Alexandre, on the other hand, is indifferent to this logic of economic calculation and instead decides to base his existence on cultural capital: "I was not going to remain a Jew, an Oriental, a pauper; I belonged neither to my

⁵ See the famous *Essai sur le Don* by Mauss, 1923-4.

family nor to my religious community, I was a new being, utterly transparent, ready to be completely remade into a philosophy instructor” (p. 230). Nevertheless, he finds himself immersed in a reality in which calculation is inevitable. In the novel, symbolic capital is almost entirely convertible into economic, and vice versa. This is the case for Bismuth, who contributes to the community that made him study through the money he earns, placing himself as the character most involved in capitalist logic. Memmi doesn't view the idea of privilege rooted in colonialism through a purely economic lens, but as something that also has social, cultural, and psychological implications, such as linguistic identity, to which we turn now.

Owning Language: Derrida and the Double Interdict

Beyond the relation to the homeland and social dynamics, language also features in the work of Memmi as a site of contestation between belonging and alienation. Memmi, a native speaker of Arabic,⁶ writes in French because he received a Western education. What language does he inhabit, therefore? Can he name one (or both) of the languages he speaks as his? Such questions demand an evaluation of the relationship between the first and second language of the writer and the narrator, and for this we might turn to the thought of the Franco-Algerian Jewish philosopher Jacques Derrida, using *Le Monolinguisme de l'Autre [Monolingualism of the Other]* as a hermeneutic source.

Although there is diversity in the style and tone of the two works – after all, Memmi's text is based on practical and fictional experience whereas Derrida's is an “intellectual anti-memory” (Chaouat, 2006) – there are also numerous points of contact.⁷ Derrida is therefore useful as a lens for analysing

⁶ “My mother tongue is the Tunisian dialect” (p. 30).

⁷ Derrida (1930-2004) was born in Algeria in a French-speaking Sephardic Jewish family. The family's citizenship is French, based on the Crémieux decree, which in 1870 also granted it to Algerian Jews. After the first years of study, he was expelled from public school in the heavy anti-Semitic climate of the Vichy Republic, which temporarily revoked this citizenship, and was forced to move to a Jewish school, where he

Memmi. Both works are written by Arab Jews of French culture, who have had access to a Western education. But equally, neither are without adversity. Indeed, for Derrida, "being Franco-Maghrebian, being 'like me', is not [...] an addition or a richness of identity, attributes or names. It would rather betray, first of all, an identity disorder" (p. 32). The two philosophers belong to the Maghrebian and French culture but, in reality, feel like they belong to neither. Being Jewish, then, contributes to breaking the double belonging, and adds a third way.

It can be said that in his novel, Memmi highlighted the paradoxes and possibilities of this condition, showing the consequences of colonial imposition. Alexandre expresses surprise at having to enrol in a French school without mastering his primary language: "[h]ow shall I manage to understand the instructor? I've never learned French!" (p. 31). Moreover, he is not alone in the condition of colonial bilingualism, for his "position is surely not unique. Millions of men have had to lose their basic unity, no longer recognizing themselves and still seeking in vain their identity" (p. 31). As for these millions of men, the contact with colonial culture has determined for Alexandre a directional loss of identity that he desperately investigates throughout the novel.

This shattering of identity experienced by the young Memmi can be read through a deconstruction of the full name of his protagonist; Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche. This name is representative of three threads of his identity: Alexandre, "in recognition of the wonderful West" (p. 93); Mordekhai, for participation in the Jewish tradition; and finally, Benillouche, "in Berber-Arabic dialect, the son of the lamb" (p. 95). He is most ashamed of the Jewish name, which he considers verbatim as an "old skin" (p. 94) to get rid of, for example by omitting it in his signature. To resolve the conflict inherent in this triadic identity, Memmi eventually reaches some reflective

graduated in 1948. In 1949 he moved to Paris and was admitted to the École Normale Supérieure where he met many of the philosophers who would decisively influence his formation.

conclusions, stating that he will always remain "a native in a colonial country, a Jew in an anti-Semitic universe, an African in a world dominated by Europe" (p. 96).

The central point of the Derridean essay is the statement, further extended to all people, that no one has the natural possession of their language. Language is given to us by the Other, be it Europe or an otherness in general. This assumption is inherent in Derrida's famous statement, "Yes, I only have one language, yet it is not mine" (1998, p. 2). With the first part of this short sentence, the philosopher professes himself monolingual in a permanent, indisputable, and absolute way. The language he refers to is the mother tongue, French, which Silvia Capodivacca (2013, p. 146) stated cannot be refused, for it is as binding as the bond with one's mother: it is "our first *demeure*, dwelling, home, place of meditation and familiarity" or, in the words of Derrida himself, a homeland capable of accompanying foreigners and exiles around the world. Apparently, therefore, or at least at the beginning, homeland and language are maternal elements that offer a high degree of habitability. However, the subclause, "yet it is not mine", puts the assumption of non-possession back into play. Derrida states that this language is not his and never will be, generating an impossible, logical, and performative contradiction.

Given this aporia, we can now consider the French language and the approach that Memmi and Alexandre have towards it in the novel. Despite it being the antagonistic language of the teacher, Alexandre perceives an attraction to French, "without which I would never be able to achieve self-realization" (p. 105). French is a complex language to learn, but it is a *conditio sine qua non* of communication overall, an essential requirement in the social field of the school environment. To adopt Derrida's phrasing, the language that Memmi-Alexandre has chosen as his language of written expression, the one on which he bases cultural capital, is not his own. He does not possess any of his languages: his native local Arabic dialect is defined in the novel as

insufficient, "only just able to satisfy the daily needs of eating and drinking", (p. 105), while French (on which he seeks to base his career as an intellectual) is the adopted language spread by the coloniser.

In Derrida's theoretical treatment, the lack of belonging tied to language occurs due to a double interdict on the actual possession of both Arabic and French. With Arabic, there was no legal prohibition on learning the language at home and school, and the same applied for Berber and Hebrew. However, there were "more subtle, peaceful, silent and liberal ways" (Derrida, 1998, p. 32) that discouraged its study and decreed its regression. More than a rule, therefore, it was an "educational system" (p. 37), accompanied by the exclamation of disappointment, "Arabic, an optional foreign language in Algeria!" (p. 38). In short, the French language came to Derrida for political and colonial reasons, because "[e]very culture institutes itself through the unilateral imposition of some 'politics' of language" (p. 39).

As far as the second interdict is concerned, it is not only Arabic that is denied to Derrida, discouraged in private and at school by means of symbolic violence, but also the colonial language, French. In this case, the ban is expressed in the difference between the provincial French of Algeria and the French of France. The first impression of the "motherland" is the presence of a sea, "symbolically an infinite space for all the students of the French school in Algeria, a chasm, an abyss" (p. 44). On this point, a parallel can be drawn with Memmi's protagonist Alexandre, who complains in the novel about his imperfect pronunciation in the school full of French children.

As Bruno Chaouat (2006) argues, Derrida fights against linguistic-cultural colonialism but is ultimately forced to acknowledge the internalization of the colonial that has succeeded in him through his aversion to 'impure' French, which is too intimate and familiar. *Mutatis mutandis*, Alexandre bitterly perceives the differences between the 'pure' French possessed by his schoolmates and his own: "Ill at ease in their presence, I was furious with them because of the facility with which they rolled the impossible

r that Paris has imposed on the rest of France" (p. 104). Here we perceive the colonial structure of all cultures, for they are ineluctably linked to domination, or Bourdieusian symbolic violence. Israel-Pelletier's (2013) study of identity politics in Memmi insists on this point, connecting domination to the concept of violence: culture, in fact, vehemently imposes linguistic and behavioural codes of conduct. This violence, Derrida's "appropriative madness" (1998, p. 24), is a natural consequence of the difference in systems of thought, the same ones that, in the novel, oppose the indigenous person in a colonized country, the Jew Mordekhai in an anti-Semitic world and the African Benillouche in a Eurocentric reality.

Conclusion

The analysis conducted of *La Statue de Sel* has highlighted the liminal character of its protagonist, who is on the verge of tearing the fabric of his identity and is symbolic of Memmi's own condition: no longer residing in his ancestral 'home' but neither (yet) in the western one. The first tear is tangible. Memmi-Alexandre finds himself on the borderline between East and West, and the Tunisian coast visually acts as a rift between the two realities. Where the writer Audisio aspires to Mediterranean continuity, Memmi perceives a break, even more so when his protagonist Alexandre leaves for Argentina, choosing a fictitious third direction. This is Memmi's first symbolic impasse, a position of physical uncertainty that reflects an inner one.

Memmi's social marginality, fictionalized in the novel, and analysed here through Bourdieu, is more subtle. Firstly, Bourdieu's concept of the field elucidates the multiplicity of environments within which the semi-autobiographical narrator moves, as if they were geographical 'spaces': the social field of the family and that of the school are crossed daily by the long urban road that connects them. Secondly, Bourdieusian capitals stand out for their mutual convertibility, that is, they can transform one into the other, passing on 'value', and in this lies the social liminality of Memmi and his

narrator. If Alexandre's capital is all in the social at the beginning of the novel, where family and community support him in his growth, adolescence leads him to refuse social capital, and this moment is narratively sanctioned by his clash with his father. And yet this abandonment is not rewarded with more social capital since schoolmates are not useful for prestige enhancement.

Economic capital is another problematic aspect since it is lacking in the family, which is accentuated when the young man chooses to study instead of helping his father support his younger siblings. The disposition of the pharmacist Bismuth is markedly different, as he makes economic capital the reason for social recognition. Alexandre finds himself leveraging his cultural capital, thanks to his brilliant achievements at school. Yet this is not only a resource but also a burden, as successes at school attract the backbiting of envious classmates, to the further detriment of social capital. Thus, the intellectual, as Alexandre becomes, finds himself in possession of a cultural resource that is considerable, but that is not always equally valued in every context (including the family or the Jewish work camp that occupies the final chapters of the novel). Bourdieu's theory reflects Memmi's unstable position on the border between capitals, a position that is constantly re-negotiated according to circumstance.

Finally, colonial bilingualism aptly expresses Alexandre Mordekhai Benillouche's existential laceration, partially reconnecting to homeland. In fact, belonging to language and land, that is in the opening chapters something similar to a mother's womb, is later disrupted by the colonial external element which ruins the domestic structure previously thought to be solid. Bilingualism merges the double dimension of coloniser and colonised, to which Albert Memmi dedicates space for reflection in his *Portrait*, naming it "linguistic drama" (1965, p. 108). According to Derrida's theory, biculturalism is the source of the aforementioned identity disorder rather than an advantageous resource. Memmi's narrator speaks Arabic and French, but the boundaries of these two languages cannot meet, as the encounter between his

French teacher and his Berber mother testifies, where silence tends to prevail. Derrida affirms for himself that he is in a precarious position, on the edge of the word (as Alexandre previously was ‘on the outskirts’):

For it is on the shores of the French language, uniquely, and neither inside nor outside it, on the unplaceable line of its coast that, since forever, and lastingly, permanently, I wonder if one can love, enjoy oneself, pray, die from pain or just die, plain and simple, in another language or without telling anyone about it, without even speaking at all (1998, p.2).

This is, again, in line with the Memmian issue of bilingualism, that leads the writer and the protagonist to inhabit the third space, the ‘in-between’ position that is characteristic of each of his identity dimensions.

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