Chapter 4

Sephardic Identity and the Enlightenment’s European Project

The 1992 anniversary of the expulsion of the Sephardic Jews from Spain coincided with the abolition of the European internal frontiers, a process that was set in motion with the signing of the Schengen Agreement in 1985. Steps were also taken to open up national frontiers to transnational trade on the other side of the Atlantic; in December of 1992, the leaders of Mexico, Canada, and the United States met in San Antonio, Texas, to sign the North American Free Trade agreement (NAFTA). Although there is not an obvious connection between both the anniversary of the Sephardic diaspora and the consolidation of transnational markets other than their coincidence in time, I would argue that the resurgence of Sephardic literature from 1992 onwards is, among other things, informed by Western attempts to articulate a new postnational world order. I am not suggesting that the Sephardic communities had ceased to produce literary accounts of their experience prior to 1992, but that their production remained, for the most part, on the fringes of Western centers of cultural production. The year 1992 was marked by a literary phenomenon of sorts: the publication of a considerable number of Sephardic autobiographies. The list includes, but is not limited to Rosa Nissán’s Novia que te vea (1992), Marcel Bénabou’s Jacob, Ménahem et Mimoun, une épopé familiale (1995), Victor Perera’s The Cross and the Pear Tree: A Sephardic Journey (1995), Gini Alhadeff’s The Sun at Midday: Tales of a Mediterranean Family (1997), Teresa Porzekanski’s Sun Inventions ; Perfumes of Carthage : Two Novellas (2000)¹, Aline P’nina Tayar’s How Shall We Sing: A Mediterranean Journey through a Jewish Family (2000), Silvie Courtine-Denamy’s The House of Jacob (2003), Jacobo Sefamí Los dolientes (2004), and Brenda Serotte The

¹. The list is not exhaustive and includes only a selection of works.
Fortune Teller’s Kiss (2006). All of these writers published their novels with prominent commercial or academic presses. It is interesting to notice that both Gini Alhadeff and Victor Perera published with Knopf DoubleDay, not under Schocken (Knopf’s publisher dedicated to Judaica) but with its more mainstream publishers: Perera published with Knopf and Alhadeff with Pantheon.

The relative invisibility of this literary tradition prior to 1992 can be attributed to the progressive dialectalization of Judeo-Spanish during the last 500 years. The integration of Sephardic communities into the different countries that hosted them in their post-1492 diaspora, and the difficulty of articulating an intellectual community or even a publishing network resulted in a gradual regionalization of Sephardic cultural production. This already ongoing process of regionalization was accelerated in the second half of the twentieth century. The advent of colonial independence in North Africa and the Middle East, the subsequent nationalist movements throughout the Sephardic diaspora, and their programmatic cultural and linguistic homogenization resulted in a second Sephardic diaspora toward Israel, Europe, Latin America, and the United States that debilitated the already fragmentary linguistic unity of Sephardic communities. The effects of this second diaspora, as Trigano comments, have proved to be devastating for Sephardic cultural tradition:

Forty years after the disappearance of its places of residence, Sephardic consciousness is today experiencing a pivotal moment. It is now faced with the question of memory and continuity, after having invested itself emotionally, to the point of forgetting itself, in the effort of relocation and survival, following the great upheaval that terminated its centuries-old settlement. (180)

But, the invisibility of Sephardic cultural production and its perspective on modernity is not only attributable to the process of assimilation into oblivion that I have briefly described. At the end of the nineteenth century, while the Sephardic communities were assimilating to their host countries, the Ashkenazic canon gradually became the cultural referent for most Jewish cultural production. Although the amazing variety of indigenous cultures and languages through which the Sephardim expressed themselves made it difficult to reach an agreement on what constitutes Sephardic identity (Roth), the Ashkenazic community had maintained a relatively homogeneous language, Yiddish, and cultural traditions. The articulation of European nationalisms throughout the nineteenth century resonated with the Ashkenazic community whose linguistic and cultural unity comfortably fit the premises of the newfound concept of national