BLOW-UPS IN THE BORDERZONES

THIRD WORLD ISRAELI AUTHORS' GROPINGS FOR HOME

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'I don’t feel grounded anywhere. I’ve come back to the village, but it feels like a hotel, not home.'

We were sitting on Na’im ‘Araidi’s balcony as he spoke into my tape recorder. ‘Araidi is a Druze writer who uses Hebrew as his language of poetic expression. From his book Back to the Village¹ the words of the title poem flashed through my mind.

Back to the village
Where I found how to cry my first cry …
Back in my home, of stones
My fathers hacked from rock
Back to myself —
And that was why I came. …

‘Araidi’s cool house, built as a second story over the roof of his parents’ house, crowned the mountain ridge above the rest of the village, Meghar, clustering down the steep slope. Beyond lay fields, rolling squares of green and yellow shimmering in July heat. The anthropologist’s nostalgia for the essentialized rebellious peasant, that dominant trope of ‘salvage ethnography’,² was rudely interrupted by mundane cinderblocks, so typical of Israeli construction, peeking out from the unfinished stone facade.³

‘I could have felt grounded here,’ ‘Araidi continued. ‘I could be king here and make my own rules like an Arab tribal patriarch. But no. This is not the home of my symbolic geography. Not this house. Here everyone lives on “village time”, and I don’t like it. When I lived in Haifa, I lived on Western time. I didn’t like that either. Now, back in the village, in a paradoxical conflict, I try to live in both times. But my dubious freedom in Israel’s mutation of a Western democracy is better for me than my own stagnant village.’

‘So why don’t I move back to Haifa?’ asked ‘Araidi, meeting the eyes of his wife and two teenage children. ‘Well, I can’t. I owe my children their mother culture. Their mother tongue. I owe them a home. But as for myself, I’m living on a fence – one foot here, one foot there, always trying to close my legs sometimes with the literary establishment’s help, sometimes despite their protest. I know I can never become a real Hebrew author. Never. It’s a matter of pride. They won’t let me be that, but I won’t let myself be that, either.’
As ‘Araidi spoke, I recalled more of his key poem:

Oh, my heavy dream
No sprout from your root will bear! ...
I came back to the village
To flee the city and all its ways
But arrived
as if coming from one exile
To another.⁴

Na’im ‘Araidi, born in Palestine, is a non-Jew (a Druze) bearing the citizenship of Israel, the homeland of the Jews. His first exile was to leave his native village to get a good education in Haifa, a major Israeli city. This education forced him into spatial and cultural exile among the privileged Jewish elite. After that, he perceives his return home to his village as an exile from exile.

The Israeli home is also an exilic Arab home for the majority of Israeli Jews—the Mizrahim, who immigrated to Israel from Third World countries. Albert Swissa, moved to Israel as a child from Casablanca, Morocco, and has published a momentous novel, The Bound.⁵ In it he describes the disintegration of the Moroccan communities after they arrived in Israel:

The elders roused Mr Pazuello’s bitterness. He saw them as plucked fowl, desecrated. ... Shocked ... Innocent to the point of stupefaction. Reversible world. Some are even beaten up by their own sons, who at this very [mid-morning] hour are lying around on their beds. ... A disappearing generation, followed by one destroying itself. Exile! there is no other way, exile in the holy land itself.⁶

For Swissa and his Mizrahi protagonists living in the cinderblock housing projects on the outskirts of Jerusalem, Israel is not home, but their diaspora’s diaspora.⁷

II NEGOTIATING HOME AND BORDER

The modern state of Israel declares itself to be the homeland of a citizenry consisting of three major social groups. Of the 4.3 million Israeli citizens, about 20 per cent belong to the first group, whom the government and popular culture term ‘Arab citizens of Israel’ or ‘Israeli Arabs’, thus avoiding mention of their Palestinian identity. I will refer to them by the name they prefer, ‘Palestinian citizens of Israel’, or ‘Palestinian-Israelis’, who are the remnants of a much larger population of Muslim, Christian, Druze, and Bedouin Palestinians dispersed by the founding of the state of Israel in 1948.⁸

The second group is the Mizrahim (literally meaning ‘Orientals’ – in Hebrew), who constitute 68 per cent of the Jewish population and 54 per cent

⁴ 'Araidi, op. cit., pp7-8.
⁵ Albert Swissa, The Bound, Hakibbutz Hame’uhad, Tel Aviv 1990 (in Hebrew).
⁶ Ibid., p19.
⁷ The analysis of Israel as a diaspora of the Jewish diaspora is developed in Irit Rogoff, ‘Daughters of Sunshine: Diasporic Impulses and Gendered Identities’, in S. Weigel (ed.), Judaism, Femininity, and the Experience of Modernity, Rohwolt Verlag, Hamburg 1992 (in German). In his careful reading of my draft, Jonathan Boyarin writes: ‘The trope of exile at home is also found among Ashkenazi writers, e.g., Dan Pagis.’ Although this is true, the power of the Ashkenazi minority that rules Israel makes this comparison insensitive to the historical/cultural specificities Third World Israelis must endure.
of the total population of Israel. They immigrated to Israel, mainly in the 1950s, mainly from the Arab World. The official government term for them is ‘descendants from Asia-Africa’ (Yotzei Asia-Africa), or in short, ‘Edot Hamizrach, the ‘bands of the Orient’. Below even these, Ethiopian Jews are termed the primordial ‘tribes of Africa’. The second group’s apolitical term for themselves is Sephardim (Jews originating in Sepharad, or Spain in Hebrew), but ‘Mizrahim’ or ‘Arab-Jews’ are the terms they use when advocating their rights before the ruling minority, the 28 per cent of Israeli Jewry called Ashkenazim. This third group originated in Central and Eastern Europe and spoke Yiddish. Some started arriving in Palestine at the turn of the century, though most came after the Holocaust. Official Israeli terminology endowed them with the appellation Kehilot Ashkenaz, or ‘the communities of Central/Eastern Europe’.

Throughout this paper I will follow Ella Shohat’s groundbreaking analysis of Israeli society.9 The traditional analysis uses the dichotomy of Jew/non-Jew. Shohat collapses this distinction based on religious differences between groups. Instead, she uses the categories ‘Third World’ and ‘First World’, which derive from the Middle East’s history of colonization. Thus, Third World Israelis are Palestinians and Mizrahim, who together comprise about 70 per cent of Israel’s population. First World Israelis are the Ashkenazim, the demographic minority that constitutes the Eurocentre of Israeli culture and politics.

Because Israelis have one of the highest per capita rates in the world for readership of literature, it plays a key role in forming Israeli national identity and culture. Hebrew literature, in the revived biblical language, has been central to imagining the new Israeli national identity. Since the beginning of Eastern European Jewish immigration to Palestine in the late nineteenth century, Zionism has been the ideology of Jewish nationalists colonizing the area. To write in Hebrew, instead of Yiddish, German, Russian or Polish, was for them a powerful act of anti-diaspora defiance in the epic struggle to return to a utopian biblical homeland. Writers and poets are therefore honoured among the pantheon of Zionist pioneers. The epic hero these writers imagined was a new Israeli-born Jew, the Sabra. In Arabic, a sabra is the fruit of the prickly pear cactus, and like the fruit, Sabras are said to be prickly on the outside, but sweet on the inside. In defiance of the meekness attributed to diaspora Jews, Sabras are to be frank and direct, even impolite and rude, if necessary. Ironically, the sabra cactus is not native to the region – it was imported from Mexico by the Spaniards. In a further irony of displacement, if you drive around Israel and see rows of these cacti, you know they are traces left in the ground by pre-1948 Palestinian peasants, to separate fields belonging to different clans.

Sabra national identity includes several main tropes. First, the Zionists imported European cultural technology, and to reinforce its superiority, they primitivized the native Palestinians.10 Second was the bold social experiment of pure communalism in the kibbutz. Third was the David-and-Goliath myth to bolster military heroism: the image of the tiny new Jewish state confronting, like David with his slingshot, the Goliath of the combined military might of
fanatic' Arab states who had sworn a holy war to drive Israel into the sea. A fourth main trope was the Holocaust, redeemable only by re-imagining Jewish identity on the model of Massada, a fortress where Jewish rebels chose to kill themselves with honour rather than suffer capture and death at the hands of the Romans. Yet Sabras are determined not to let even a Massada happen ever again.11 All these tropes appear in canonical, that is, Ashkenazi, Israeli literature. These books are a crucial emphasis of the school curriculum, but also a hot commodity in the consumer market.

Many literary authors have daily or weekly opinion columns in Israel's newspapers. Their literary debates transcend intellectual circles as well, permeating Israeli public culture through the print and electronic media. Authors appear among the celebrities in daily newspaper gossip columns. The canonical literature is catalytic in transforming Israel's national ideology into practice - some prime ministers and Knesset members have been known to discuss with journalists what novels and poems they have been reading lately, and even quote them on the Knesset floor.

Most canonical authors, publishers and critics are of Eastern European descent. As part of the Zionist utopian project, many of them had changed their last names to Sabra Hebrew ones - names of biblical rebels, or biblical flowers, bushes and trees, or biblical manly virtues like courage and defiance. To the average Israeli, it is amazing to see people with non-Sabra, Arabic names like Swissa or 'Araidi getting published and widely reviewed in the Israeli press. In the Israel of the mid-1960s, a Swissa might have been a housemaid for the literati, and an 'Araidi, given his peasant-stock background, might have trimmed the garden hedge. But these days, 'Araidi and Swissa are two of the twenty-five or so recently recognized literary figures in Israel whose native tongue is Arabic, but who write in Hebrew. These figures are an influential intellectual minority that has emerged from the marginalized majority, the lower- and lower-middle-class Middle Eastern social groups.

Despite religious differences, Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli authors share an Arab culture and a subaltern historical experience under colonialism.12 Ironically, they grew up in a more cosmopolitan setting than many authors, critics and publishers of Ashkenazi descent did. The Eastern European Jews, most of whom were confined to ghettos, had only irregular and indirect contact with Western European high culture prior to their immigration to Israel. In contrast, Palestinians, and Jews who immigrated to Israel from the Arab World, did have regular, direct contact with Western European culture by being raised and educated in the urban centres of British or French colonies.13 Does the writing of the 'Third World Israeli authors follow in the epic Sabra tradition, or does their non-European origin mean that their Hebrew literature will have a positionality other than Sabra?

III HISTORY OF HOME AS EXILE

Palestinian citizens of Israel now live as exiles in their own homeland. A long
history of land expropriations has transformed them from peasants to the cheapest of blue collar labourers, living under military rule and curfews until 1964. They are still the weakest sector of Israeli society, discriminated against in all aspects of their lives, particularly employment, simply because they are not Jewish.

The fact that around 20 per cent of Israel's citizens are Palestinians should have translated into voting power, but their seven Knesset members control only 6 per cent of the Israeli legislative authority. Even this disproportionate representation is now under threat from the massive immigration of Soviet Jews.

Palestinian-Israeli villages have been transformed from homes into a diaspora at home. Thus 'Araidi's ancestral stone home feels like a hotel to him. At an even greater degree of dislocation, the Mizrahim - Arab-Jews like Swissa, who thought they were at last moving out of their Jewish diaspora in the Arab world, and returning to the mythic homeland of Israel - in fact became another Arab diaspora in the Eurocentric Jewish state. Some came because, after the collapse of British colonialism, the Arab nationalistic regimes were hostile towards the Zionism that had gathered momentum in urban Arab-Jewish communities. Others came because the Mossad (Israel's foreign intelligence agency) and the immigration authorities managed to present Zionism as a millennial movement. In addition, the Mossad activated rings of Iraqi and Egyptian Zionist saboteurs who bombed both Jewish and Arab institutions to create panic in the Jewish communities and spur a mass exodus. If necessary the Israeli government paid ransom to get Jews out.

When these Arab-Jews arrived in Israel, the socialist Labour Party was in power. Based on the advice Ben Gurion received from leading Israeli sociologists, about how to use European cultural technologies to Westernize (Eastern Europeanize?) the Arab-Jews, the government deliberately fractured their extended family structures that affiliate them to larger communities. This was done in order to facilitate their rapid transition to a nuclear-family-based contractual relation with the centralized socialist nation-state. The government trucked small remnants of these families to different border towns, where they would serve Israel as human shields. Since the government provided no long-term employment options, they eventually became blue collar labourers for their idealistic Sabra kibbutnik neighbours. Like the Palestinian-Israelis, the Mizrahi majority has only a small minority of representation in all national political and cultural institutions.

Reparation payments by Germany to survivors of the Holocaust have skewed the class structure of Israeli society by giving Ashkenazim as a group a momentous financial advantage in hard currency. The Mizrahim and the Palestinian-Israelis had no resource to compare with this, so they became the cheap labour that enabled this Ashkenazi capital to be invested quickly. While fully acknowledging the suffering for which these payments are a mere token, one must nevertheless note that it was this money that enabled the Ashkenazim to establish their hegemony in Israel and to appropriate Western Europe's high
culture. Western-educated Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israelis were therefore forced into the lower class only after the founding of Israel in 1948, when they ran up against the institutionalized Ashkenazi discrimination against them that permeates Israeli society. The dominant culture Arabized and primitivized Palestinians and Mizrahi far beyond their actual hybrid colonial Arab identity, accusing them of sharing the 'primitive' culture of the dangerous enemy, and systematically prevented them from accomplishing much that would prove otherwise.\(^{19}\)

In 1977 a great political paradigm shift occurred when the underdog Menachem Begin and his right-wing Likud Party were swept into power on the votes of the underdog Mizrahi majority. The Mizrahi voted for the Right in order to protest against the patronizing Ashkenazi oligarchy of the Labour Left, even though most Likud leaders are Ashkenazim.\(^{20}\) Paradoxically, the Mizrahi Likud voters could sympathize with Begin's anti-Arab ideology because the Labour party, in the process of socializing Mizrahi into the Jewish nation-state, had taught them to hate themselves for originating in the 'primitive' Arab world. The Begin government was so frankly anti-Arab in policy, however, that the Palestinian citizens of Israel seized the rights of civil recourse previously available only to Jews: assembly, demonstrations, marches, strikes, lobbying groups and the publication of privately owned newspapers. They brought these tools in order to articulate an Israeli identity separable from not only Zionism, but Judaism.

A corresponding cultural shift did not soon follow the political one. From 1977 on, however, Ashkenazim have gradually begun to lose their status as the sole arbiters of Israel's fate. Representatives of the Third World Israeli majority are infiltrating the Ashkenazi elite. Given the demographics, if the Mizrahi would combine forces with Palestinian Israelis, then together, as around 70 per cent of the population, they could force the Eurocentre to implode. But the Mizrahi are politically fractured. Most of them buy into the Zionist state ideology based on the religious distinction between Jew and non-Jew. They vote for the Likud not just to oppose the Labour Party and its anti-Mizrahi racism, but because they identify themselves as Jewish (thus setting themselves apart from the Arab enemy), rather than as a Third World culture colonized by a First World Eurocentre.

Palestinian-Israelis, in contrast, have managed to mend some seams in the ruins of their culture, because their Self/Other dualism is as clear to them as it is to other Israelis. They are an almost ultimate Other: they are not Jewish, nor have they immigrated to Israel from anywhere. They are articulating a linear narrative of their oppression vis-à-vis the Zionist nation-state. The citizenship they hold in that state, however, fractures their narrative's linearity, and collapses the Self/Other dualism into multiple subject positions. This fracturing happens when their discourse is juxtaposed with the discourse of other Palestinians even more alienated from and victimized by Israel, such as those of the Occupied Territories, or the Palestinian diaspora in the Arab world, or in the West.\(^{21}\)
The Mizrahim are situated in the gap between the subjective experience of their unruptured pre-immigration communities, and the objectified history of Jewish persecution, a main Sabra trope.\textsuperscript{22} The Mizrahim find it difficult to mend any seams in the ruins of their pre-immigrant cultures because, being both Jewish and immigrants, like the Ashkenazim, they feel, as a group, obliged to consent to the state ideology. They therefore cannot establish a clear Self/Other dichotomy, as the Palestinian-Israelis have. The ambivalence inherent in their multiple subjectivities interferes with their attempt to establish their own linear narrative of oppression vis-à-vis the state – a narrative that could draw them into coalition politics with Palestinian-Israelis to create a Third World opposition. Thus both Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli intellectuals are left with the only alternative of infiltrating the Ashkenazi elite one by one.

This process is occurring gingerly, in spite of the elite’s reluctance to accept Mizrahit and Palestinians. Most of Israel’s subaltern authors started to write and publish during the years that the Labour Party was decaying and the Likud was emerging. Furthermore, some of them spent these crucial years in Western Europe or the United States, observing the power shift from afar. Only outside of Israel did they allow themselves to begin to explore their fractured Arab selves and articulate them in literary forms.

Given the trope of the Sabra (the prototypical literary protagonist is Eliyahu, the Sabra who emerged from the sea, that is, who had no diasporic genealogy),\textsuperscript{23} canonical Israeli literature has a taboo against nostalgia for anything predating Zionism. But the Third World authors, being non-Sabra, need not observe this taboo and therefore are called on by the establishment to produce nostalgic literature, ethnic yet indigenous to the region – a literature that might include absorbing the Zionists into the precolonial history of the Middle East. This is not what they are doing. In fact, they are resisting doing it. In terms of the national canon, their literature is generally dismissed as mere folklore.

In this paper, however, I argue that the Third World Israeli authors’ writings, as well as their private and public lives, are presenting a new literature, counter-hegemonic to the Sabra tropology. I will show how these authors have been trying to negotiate the ‘deteriorization’\textsuperscript{24} of their home in the borderzone – to articulate the locus and the process of the intersections where Arab and European, Palestinian and Israeli, Mizrahi and Ashkenazi, clash and merge.

IV MINORITY/MAJORITY DISCOURSE AND NATION/EMPIRE

Almost all Israeli sociologists and anthropologists are Ashkenazim, and some have built world-class careers studying Palestinians and the various Arab-Jewish diasporas in Israel as ethnicities.\textsuperscript{25} David Lloyd, however, distinguishes between ethnicity and minority as follows: ‘An ethnic culture is transformed into a minority culture only along the lines of its confrontation with a dominant state formation which threatens to destroy it by direct violence
or by assimilation. 26 Zionism has attempted to destroy Palestinian culture by direct violence, and has also violently assimilated the Mizrahim as more Jewish bodies against the Arab threat. Lloyd argues that minority discourse is shaped by its necessity to respond to state oppression by a critique of the dominant culture. The Third World authors under consideration here do produce such discourse, though they go beyond such response-oriented articulation. In fact, they represent the lived experience of the Israeli majority.

Yet Israel itself is the creation of minority nationalism – the Zionist ideology that emerged out of European anti-Semitism. Even though Britain supported the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine as early as 1917, with the Balfour Declaration, Palestine was still a British colony until 1948, and Jewish nationalists resisted British imperialism there. 27 The frontier of the new nation of Israel, however, is the Arab world, and that had to be tamed in the manner of all empires. So the distinction between Nation and Empire blurred, as did that between the Nation’s borders and the Empire’s frontier.

Is this dominant minority Ashkenazi culture Israel – the Jewish Nation, the imagined safe space, the bold last resort for Jewish minorities (European or other) fleeing persecution? Or is it Israel – the Empire, the state apparatus bringing European technologized civilization into the heart of the Arab world, aiming to de-Arabize the Jewish Mizrahim by assimilation, and to primitivize its non-Jewish Arab citizenry; thus transforming its elusive borders with the Arab world into the Empire’s frontier? 28

Benedict Anderson has argued that there is an ‘inner incompatibility’ between Nation and Empire. 29 Israel, however, purposely blurs the boundaries between its cultural nationalism, stemming from the European persecution of the Jews, and the Israeli state’s coercive practices against its own Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli populations. 30 Even though the Ashkenazim are themselves of hybrid ethnicities, from many different Eastern European communities, they can overlook their hybridity thanks to their political and economic power, which translates into influence on both popular and high literary culture in the form of the evoked image of the Sabra, an artificially created essence. The Sabra trope enables the Ashkenazim to collude with the blurring of the boundaries between Nation and Empire: their Jewish nationalism is co-opted as part of the oppressive machinery of the Israeli Empire. 31

The Third World Israeli writers recognize the oppressive consequences of thinking of Israel as simultaneously Nation and Empire. They note that many Ashkenazim deny their own hybridity by invoking the mythical Sabra, the tall, blond, blue-eyed, square-jawed, broad-shouldered neo-Adam, who rose unengendered, unbegat, from the sea. 32 The fact that this Sabra trope already exists as an essence opens up a space for the Third World writers to make conjunctures. Because they can contrast themselves with the trope, it enables them to acknowledge their own complex hybridity: they are already hybridized conjunctures between Arab simulations of the West, and Israeli ones. So they can use this sense of hybridity with powerful agency to create new works of Israeli literature. They set their task as one of deterritorializing the boundaries

of the Sabra Hebrew language, culture, and place.

Decades before Israel was founded, the Zionists had not only staked out a European turf in the heart of the Arab world, but accomplished the seemingly impossible project of reviving ancient written Hebrew as the national spoken language. They created a Sabra Hebrew by ‘de-Semitizing’33 the old language in accent and rhythm. The Third World Israeli authors write so as to make Hebrew a Semitic language again, like Arabic. This deterritorializes the language, by removing it from Zionist claims.

The Third World Israeli authors not only reject their Zionist assignment to produce nostalgic folklore that would legitimize Sabra Israel as a presence in the region, but, again, deterritorialize Zionist claims to be the only legitimate Israeli culture. By writing their own lived experience in new literary forms they articulate alternative worldviews: they write using a flowing narration based on traditional Arab storytelling, but starkly juxtaposed with a spare narration revealing their alienation from the Eurocentric project of Israeli nation-building. Some of the authors syncretize these two narrative worlds. Others let them mirror off each other until they illuminate each other in the blinding flash of specular literature.34 The continual juxtapositions create borders along the contiguities, where images and ideas intersect explosively in the text – deterritorializing the Sabra culture. Because these authors are blowing up both the Sabra language and its culture, they are re-inserting Israel, that Eurocentric island, back into the Arab world.

V BORDER MODELS

Gloria Anzaldúa and Homi Bhabha present two models, polar opposites, concerning the textualization of the hybrid’s lived experience that occurs in the interstitial borderzones between Nation and Empire.35 Both models assert that the hybrid’s ambivalence towards both Nation and Empire catalyzes remappings of the blurred borderzones between them.36 Bhabha argues that the difficulty hybrids face in attempting to authenticate a precolonial dignified past insulted by European representations is the dangerous ease of slipping into essentialized nostalgia.37 So he constructs hybridity as mimicry in the form of hegemonized rewriting of the Eurocentre. This is a response-oriented model of hybridity. It lacks agency, by not empowering the hybrid. The result is a fragmented Otherness in the hybrid. The fragments of the Other, however, can be mended together, forming seams, so that they can be narrated in a Cartesian linear manner.

Anzaldúa argues that when hybrids delve into their past, it need not be either essentialized nostalgia or the salvaging of an ‘uncontaminated’ precolonial past. On the contrary, reworking the past exposes its hybridity, and to recognize and acknowledge this hybrid past in terms of the present empowers the community and gives it agency. Her emphasis on community contrasts sharply with Bhabha’s assumption of the hybrid as a fragmented individual Other. In her model, hybridity is a Self that fractures into multiple subjectivities38 which are
unable to mend by forming seams, so the hybrids refuse a Cartesian linear narration. The hybrids' refusal of individuation empowers them to agency as a group, to resist the hegemony of the Eurocentre, not only by reacting to it but by opening a new creative space in the borderzone. The group's creative action can implode the USA-Eurocentre. Therefore the borderzone is not just a dangerous space, but a festive one, because of the creative energy liberated by the common struggle of resistance.

Even though Bhabha's and Anzaldúa's models of hybridity are the two poles of the theory of hybridity, they can both easily distinguish between Nation and Empire. The Nation is the Third World construct, either 'postcolonial' or minority, and the Empire is US-European. In addition, the cultural movements they describe are comparable. People from Third World nations colonized by USA-Europe cross over to enter their colonizer, take up residence there, and implode the centre of the Empire from within.\textsuperscript{39} The crossover itself moves the borderzone between Nation and Empire into the centre of the Empire.

But in the case of Israel, neither of these models works adequately. As in Bhabha’s model, Third World Israeli authors currently do not act as a cohesive group to challenge the Hebrew literary canon – in fact, some of them started talking to each other for the first time through my fieldwork. But they face a difficult problem not present in the other two models: the Israeli centre keeps usurping, as its own frontier, the borderzones between European and Arab, Israeli and Palestinian, and Ashkenazi and Mizrahi. Not only is it difficult to distinguish the Israeli Nation from the Israeli Empire, but their overlap is not exact and is constantly in flux. Some vestiges of one or the other are always left over. The inner borders where these vestiges meet the larger central area, where Nation and Empire are fused, might be the only zones remaining for exploration by the Third World Israeli writers. Thus, as I will demonstrate in this essay, the case of Israel presents an alternative model of border hybridity.

This paper also involves an inversion of the traditional power relationship in anthropology, in which the privileged ethnographer, situated in the West, primitivizes Third or Fourth World 'informants'. Because my 'field informants' have transcended their anthropologist's authority by publishing widely in prestigious literary journals, I felt obliged to phone Antion Shammas, author of \textit{Arabesques},\textsuperscript{40} and perhaps the most internationally known Palestinian who writes in Hebrew. How does he negotiate his home on the border?

'Even if any one of us wrote the masterpiece of Israeli literature,' Shammas said, 'he still would be on the periphery socially and culturally. We get pushed back into the margins, now along with our texts. But the problem is, how wide are the margins? How porous is the border?'

VI AMBIVALENCES

The Israeli political Left, composed of yuppies who can afford to be progressive, seems to be almost exclusively Ashkenazi. They haven't even discovered cultural relativism or pluralism yet. They say, "What can we do
when we have a bunch of monkey idiots here who came from Africa and Asia?" So said Ben-Dror Yemini, writer and editor for The Hammer, 'The Newspaper that Will Crack Your Head Open,' a Mizrahi leftist weekly.

'The morality of the Left begins where that of the Right leaves off - that is, the Right is concerned with the Jews, and the Left with the Palestinians, mainly in the Occupied Territories.' Yemini stopped, and then sighed, 'No one cares about the Mizrahim.'

Most authors I interviewed see Yemini - with his John Lennon wireframe glasses, so typical of the Ashkenazi intellectual elite - as the epitome of Third World co-optation. But he says, 'I live in a no man's land. It's painful for me to realize now, and tell you, that I've become the fig leaf, representing the southside slums at all those lavishly catered north Tel Aviv parties I travel to. ... I know I'll always be on their leash. But then they say, 'See? There is freedom of speech. Even Ben-Dror Yemini writes for us.'

In the newly gentrified Old Tel Aviv, across the street from Ben-Dror Yemini's office, lives Shim'on Ballas. Born in Baghdad, he immigrated to Israel as a young adult in the early 1950s, and is now a professor of Arabic literature at Haifa University, a prolific author of many novels and scholarly articles, and a political activist on Palestinian human rights issues.

Speaking of his avoidance of nostalgia, he said, 'When my first writing appeared, I was interviewed on the radio by someone who told me, "These are beautiful stories, but it is hard to tell that a Jew wrote them." It's not just the issue of my communism.' Ballas was an active member of the Iraqi and then the Israeli Communist Party until 1961. 'It's that certain things are expected of a Jewish author who comes from the diaspora. Well, they want him to write on the ghetto, but the ghetto experience ended with the Holocaust - the trope most antithetical to the bold Sabra - it's shameful for a Sabra writer to nostalgise about that. But the Mizrahi author can write about the Mizrahi ghetto - that's safer nostalgia. He can write on - I don't really know - on food, or holidays. But you see, that's not me. My nostalgic Judaism and diaspora are different. I don't feel like I have to write on Iraq.'

In his recent novel And He's an Other, the protagonist is an unnamed Iraqi Jew who is a high-powered figure in Saddam Hussein's regime. Through his protagonist, Ballas critiques the way Arab intellectuals in the modern Middle East, when they long for the golden age of medieval Islam, mimic the Western nostalgia for the Orient - such nostalgia as his protagonist, educated in the USA, does not want to feel towards his own Arab origins.

Unlike his protagonist, Ballas did immigrate to Israel. He said, 'My biggest crisis was not the move from Iraq to Israel. It was the transition from Arabic to Hebrew. I felt that, if I had moved from Iraq straight to France, I would have moved from one language to another but maintained my fractured identity. Moving from Arabic to Hebrew, though, I felt forced to un-learn my Arabic and re-fracture my identity.'

He lifted his thin arms and clasped his hands together behind his bald head, then leaned forward, and rested his elbows on his knees.
The evening before my first novel in Hebrew came out, I was working as a typesetter for a newspaper, late at night. And I happened to pick up a book by Taha Hussein.44 I started reading, just like that, I don’t know why. And it felt surreal. I turned off the light. I want to sleep. I can’t sleep. Words. Sentences. Poems I had learned. Attacking me. Buzzing in my head. Arabic. I tried so hard to sleep. I couldn’t. Until morning. Everything came. All at once. Resurrected from the dead. During the years of my move to Hebrew, I imprisoned them in some hidden place. But it all blew up in my face when I read Taha Hussein. From then on, I figured I’d better hybridize. Arabic and Hebrew. Now I write Hebrew. Sometimes when I write Arabic, I enjoy it. As if meeting your first love in the city where you were born.

The epitome of Ballas’ border ambivalence came when he accompanied me to the door.

‘Do you want a ride to your office at Tel Aviv University?’ he asked. ‘I’m going to the Ramat Aviv supermarket to do some shopping for the Sabbath.’

‘Why do you shop in North Tel Aviv? You live right here by the market.’ I recalled snatches of conversation from the Ashkenazi Po-Mo café crowd about their adventures in the Souk.

‘It’s air-conditioned, I suppose.’

Throughout his life and career, Ballas managed to find, as the space where he could live and create, the inner borderzones between the vestigial spaces of Nation or Empire and the central area where they had fused. But the centripetal force of the Eurocentre had sucked in other writers,45 who tried to become Sabra and discovered only later that, even after they had done everything the centre required of them, they were still not allowed to become an integral part of it. That was when their journey back to the margins, and their writing in the borderzones, began.

By experiencing first-hand the Sabra Eurocentre’s power to require, but prevent, their entry into itself, the Third World Israeli authors become acutely aware of how the political and economic power of the state is constituted in their hybridity. In order to maintain their creative force, they have continually to remap their borderzones, so that they can maintain their exile home in the homeland of the Jews. Their creative force and their agency now arise out of their sense that their home is in exile and their exile is their home. The remapping is intended to separate out an independent space in a borderzone, one which cannot be usurped as a frontier by Israel’s Eurocentre. As Juan Flores and George Yudice argue, the borderzone thus emerges ‘as the locus of re-definition and re-signification ... of the conflicting pressures toward both exclusion and forced incorporation.’46

The conflict of these pressures has two outcomes. First, it calls for displacement of nostalgia for a nonborderland home that was.

‘I am lucky I can’t visit Baghdad,’ said Sami Michael, an Iraqi Jewish author of many best-selling novels,47 ‘and I’ll tell you why. I took a strange trip with Yitzhak Gormejano-Goren, to his childhood home in Alexandria. You know that home from his writing – the dance-hall living room and the chandeliers


38. See Renato Rosaldo, Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Analysis, Beacon Press, Boston 1989. Reading his analysis of Anzaldúa (op.cit.) made me aware of her powerful use of the concept of multiple subjectivities.
and all that. But after suffering and searching, we found only a dirty shack, about to collapse. When the home became real, there was no more room for nostalgia. So I’m displacing my nostalgia now, so I don’t crash later. For a Palestinian like Shammas, it’s even worse. He can’t visit the Palestine that was before Israel.

The second outcome of the conflicting pressures – forced incorporation and forced exclusion – is that these authors realize how they must define what Stuart Hall terms their main ‘burden of representation’ to authenticate their past and envision their future without resorting to nostalgia, which must therefore be kept displaced. But when the authors try to enact their agency, and really represent the subordinated majority of Israel from which they made their climb to the middle class, they become acutely aware that the Eurocentre has racialized them, and that the discourse on race has so narrowed their borderzone that they are not able to have a home. They feel they have either to compromise with the centre, or to go on to yet another exile.

VII BORDER AND RACE: THE RACE TO THE VANISHING BORDERZONE

In the spring of 1991, Erez Biton was appointed president of the Hebrew Authors’ Association. He immigrated to Israel from Morocco as a child, and is now a poet and the editor of Apiryon, a literary journal. Its stated aims are to express Mediterranean trends in Israeli culture, and to offer an expressive outlet for Middle Eastern intellectuals. Apiryon is funded by the Centre for Culture and Education of the Histadrout, Israel’s labour union founded and still controlled by the Labour Party. Biton also has a weekly column in the mass-circulation right-wing daily newspaper Ma’ariv, then owned by the late Robert Maxwell. Perhaps because of this contradiction, when Biton came to work on Sukkoth of 1987 he was shocked to find his office door covered with insulting graffiti: ‘Mizrahi sell-out, ass-licker of Ashkenazim – your day will come, maniac, traitor.

Despite these socio-political contradictions, Biton struggles to displace his nostalgia in his attempt to represent the development town of Lod from which he rose to the middle class, and where his brothers’ families still live. Though he enjoys a warm relationship with his extended family, he feels some ambivalence towards his past home. In a poem he describes his nomadism, both actual and symbolic, between Lod’s cinderblock housing projects and Tel Aviv’s literary milieu, typified by the Café Rovaal on Dizengoff Street, frequented by authors, actors, media personalities, models and socialites. He deliberately misspells the street name as one would pronounce it in Moroccan-accented Hebrew.

Shopping on Dizengov Street

I purchased a shop on Dizengov
to strike a root
to buy a root
to find a spot at the Roval
but
that Roval crowd
I ask myself
who is this Roval crowd
what's with this Roval crowd
what goes for the Roval crowd
I don't approach the Roval crowd
when they turn toward me
I fast-draw language
cleaned-up speech
yes sir
please sir
the latest Hebrew
and the flats tall over me here
loom over me here
and the openings here
closed to me here
at the darkish hour
in the shop on Dizengov
I pack stuff
to head back to the slums
to the Other Hebrew.56

Sitting in his large office, Biton spoke of his search for home. 'I am so lonely. I can't combine habitus and family. When I started looking for a home, I searched and searched. Should I live in Tel Aviv? Perhaps Ramat Gan nearby. But Ramat Gan isn't near the sea. Then I caught myself developing relationships with objects, like apartment buildings and the sea, though I was raised to have relationships with people, with neighbours, a community. So I said, I'll live in Lod, near my brothers. But then I said to myself, What?! My children grow up in a run-down place like that, a development town? And living near my brothers, I'd have to give up any intellectual dialogue, like we are having, or I have with my wife. And then it hit me. I've lost my brothers. It's not exactly that I lost them -- we still drink ouzo and have a good time, and try to have some kind of authentic experience together. But it doesn't work.'

He paused. With his good hand, he touched his prosthesis, a replacement for the arm he lost above the elbow when, as a child, he played with a hand grenade he found in the abandoned fields around Lod, formerly Lydda, a thriving Palestinian town. His voice broke as he groped for words.

'I don't think I still have any authentic, concrete cultural expression I can call my own. I always felt that lullabies might be one of the more genuine expressions of a seamless culture. But then when my son was born, I had no


47. See, for example, Sami Michael, Refuge, 'Am'Oved, Tel Aviv 1977 (in Hebrew), and A Trumpet in the Wadi, 'Am'Oved, Tel Aviv 1987 (in Hebrew).


49. Gabriel suggests that imaginary nomadism from the site of displacement might be preferable to an actual visit to the langed-for site of origins, because the actual journey might rupture the umbilical cord forever.' See Gabriel, op.cit., p135.


52. See also Virginia Dominguez, People as Subject, People as Object: Seldhood and Poplehood in Contemporary Israel, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison 1989, pp102-12.

lullaby to sing to him, because I've lost the memory of my mother's lullabies, and the Israeli culture didn't offer me any to replace them. At the tender moment when I put my son to bed, I longed for something organic, and there was nothing. So I read him Lorca instead. By the way,' he said more fluently, 'I'm saying all this for the first time, to you. Maybe because you're from abroad, it's easier to tell you embarrassing things. If I told any of this to an Ashkenazi here, it could be curtains.'

Biton and his family live in Ramat-Hasharon, an upper-middle- to upper-class Tel Aviv suburb, home to many a Tel Aviv University faculty.

'My daughter, she's five-and-a-half years old, came home one day from kindergarten and said, 'Daddy! They told me I'm a koushit [Negro].' In the kindergarten! I said, 'But my God, Shlomit, who's telling you you're a Negro? You're so beautiful!' She is beautiful, everyone says so. So I ask my wife, 'Tell me, is she ... really dark?'"

Biton is blind. The same hand grenade that took his arm took his eyes.

'My wife said, 'I don't know, I don't feel she's black. She's a bit ... uh ... darker than those Ashkenazi kids, but ...' But probably in the daycare place, it was the parents' values speaking through the children's mouths. I'm a blind man. I have vague memories of real colours. For me, race is a cultural construction.'

After three-and-a-half hours of intense conversation, I apologized and told Biton I had to leave, because it was past nursing time for my baby. As I spoke, the anthropologist again felt the awkwardness of this kind of ethnographic fieldwork, 'studying up'.

When Biton opened the door for me, he grasped my wrist and said, 'When I talked to you on the phone and when you first came in and started talking, I pictured you as very tall, thin, and light-skinned - a well-coiffed blonde. But the more we talked, the more you became short, full-figured, and olive-skinned, with a long black braid.'

I was stunned by the accuracy of his intuition.

'I hope I didn't hurt your feelings by saying this. Next time, we'll have you over to our home.'

Biton brought to the surface the fact that there is a struggle between the Eurocentre's notion of the frontier, and the non-canonical minority's notion of the border as a refuge. In this struggle both the Eurocentre and the Third World Israelis are 'racializing' the border. The Israeli Eurocentre, simulating the heritage of all Eurocentres, does it in the stereotypical way, using the idea that race is biologically determined, as when Biton's daughter was called a Negro. They use the dominant group's tropes of race/class formation to explain the subordinate political economy of Mizrahim and Palestinians. But for the subordinate group, race is not a matter of biology. Race is situated in the gap between identity as an essence and identity as a cultural construction.

The idea of racial identity as essence is well understood by Mizrahim who look like Palestinians and are mistaken for them and beaten by angry mobs whenever a homemade bomb blows up in a local Jewish trash can. But the
subordinate group is also acutely aware of racial identity as a cultural construction because they know that some Ashkenazim are darker than some North African Jews, who, despite their light skin colour, will never be mistaken for Ashkenazim because of their non-European past.

Can the Third World Israeli authors use the categorization of race/class attributed to them as a means to mobilize against the Eurocentre? From their middle-class positionality, can they separate race from lower-class and use race not only to represent the subordinated groups, but to protect their shrinking borderzone? This urgent problem impels them to race toward the edges of their borderzones.

VIII THE BURDEN OF THE REPRESENTED

After a long hot bus ride that Friday afternoon from Ballas' home to my mother’s, I settled down in her air-conditioned living room and started to chip away at the thick stack of Sabbath newspapers. A large ad in the classified section of Ha’ir, the Tel Aviv simulation of The Village Voice, caught my eye. ‘Put your shoulder to the ‘Aliya effort!’ it exhorted homeowners. ‘Rental apartments of all sizes needed for the Jewish Agency. What’s in it for you? (a) rent in advance every three months in US dollars; (b) cultured, university-educated tenants; (c) guaranteed tax-free rental income. For details, call,’ and here were three Tel Aviv area code phone numbers. ‘Closed on the Sabbath.’

When the Sabbath was over, I told my mom I was going to do some fieldwork in the Jesse Cohen neighbourhood of my home town, Holon. This neighbourhood, named after a rich Los Angeles Jew, was called in my middle-class childhood Jesse Congo, for its wilderness, its otherness. I’m going to visit these newly homeless Mizrahim who have been living in tents for the past couple of weeks because their landlords raised the rent to what they could get from the government for housing the cultured tenants – Soviet Jews. I’m going to take Shaheen with me. In grad school we learned that babies help a lot for entry into the “field”.

‘Are you out of your mind?!’ shrieked my mom. ‘He’ll bring lice and diseases back here!’

Meanwhile, the anthropologist had been anticipating the relief she would feel when she got back to normal power relations between the Western-trained fieldworker and her drumming and dancing informants in ‘the heart of darkness’. Lost in amazement at this regression on my part, I overheard my mother’s tirade.

‘They’re lazy! Look at these hands!’ she demanded, holding them up as if shaking down the whole Mizrahi burden. ‘With these hands I pulled myself and six brothers and sisters out of those Yemeni slums in Jerusalem!’

‘But what about Dad?’ I asked meekly.

‘It’s true your dad was Ashkenazi, and well-connected. But I put him through school! You know that a third of the Jewish marriages in Israel now

becoming, and in the context of the late twentieth century, becoming articulates an Other who oscillates wildly between essentialism and construction. This oscillation is the cause of both rationalization and racism (cf. also Alarcón, op.cit.).

61. Ha’ir, classified section, 13 July 1990.
are mixed – it's a good road to upward mobility.’

She paused, then asked, baffled, ‘But why tents? The best thing we've got left is the family – why didn’t they go live with their families?’

‘Mom,’ I said gently. ‘Don’t you think it’s resistance?’

‘Okay ... But don’t take the car.’

So I took the bus to California Avenue, a short ride to the Other Israel, the Second Israel – and the tents. I got off schlepping just one heavy stroller, one diaper bag, some rattle toys and a baby boy. The anthropologist was too embarrassed to show up there with her ethnographer gear – notebook, camera and tape recorder. I figured I would write it all down when I got home.

‘Hey! Here’s a lady from Peace Now!’ yelled an excited nine-year-old boy to the families gathered around portable picnic tables.

‘No, Rami,’ a woman shouted back. ‘Peace Now ladies don’t bring babies.’

I was so confused by being mistaken for a Yuppie Ashkenazi leftist that I wasn’t sure what to do next. So I just stopped right where I was and set up camp on the bus stop bench. I put my prop in the stroller and started cooing and rattling toys at him. Four children came wandering over, and another woman called to them, ‘Am I hearing that right? Didn’t she call her kid Shaheen? That’s Arabic!’

‘Traditional’ fieldwork started flowing when Shaheen got hungry. As soon as I held him to the breast, several women dressed in fashionable outfits strolled over, some holding their own babies. An older woman, gap-toothed, said to a young mother, ‘You see? That’s how I nursed your mother when we came here from Tunisia. But a lady from the kibbutz came and told us we didn’t know how to raise children. She said only primitives nurse ten-month-old babies. So your mom nursed you only three months, like they said in that class we had to take on Ashkenazi mothering.’

Then she turned to me and said, ‘What are you? American? We saw on TV that they are into long nursing. Or are you one of us?’

So we clicked.

During the next few days, I learned from personal stories how these people had been abused by the Israeli state system. They could not afford the luxury of the ambivalence I saw in the authors I was studying. They had no choice but to take a stand with the only thing they had – themselves. Yet one of their favourite tapes was Habreirat Hatativ (The Natural Choice), an East-meets-West Mizrahi rock group whose songs included lyrics by Erez Biton.

‘A home is a home is a home,’ Moshe, one of the compound’s leaders, told me. ‘By living in a tent here, I’m going to force them to give me a home in my home town, Holon. They say they have plenty of empty apartments on the West Bank, but I don’t want to go there. I’m even willing to set myself on fire, and my family too, like that guy from Haifa almost did – it was on the radio – if they don’t give me a home here, like they are giving the Russians.’

In her air-conditioned office, the anthropologist word-processed a diary entry:
Perhaps the hegemonized relationship between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim cannot be analyzed in terms of ethnicity. Maybe the analogy between the Ashkenazi and the Mizrahi immigrations to Israel effaced the Third World specificities of the Mizrahim. The tragedy of their uprootedness from the Arab world was trivialized because they did not experience the Holocaust. Such trivialization assumed that the Mizrahi ethnic groups could be incorporated into Israel’s Eurocentre the same way as the Ashkenazi ones were. The racialization of Israel’s Palestinians is much more clear-cut. If, according to Omi and Winant, ‘race is a pre-eminently socio-historical concept ... racial categories and the meanings of race are given concrete expression by the specific social relations and historical context in which they are embedded.’

The racialization of the borderzone forces some Third World Israeli authors to enact their agency, but such individual acts just further contract their political and economic borderzones. The contraction forces each of them individually to leave his or her hybrid space, and effaces the borderzone until only the border itself remains, with its barbed wire, lookout towers, and mine fields.

In November 1990 I received a letter from Moshe. It was postmarked from Ariel, the fastest growing town on the West Bank, or even in Israel.

... Ariel, that’s where we live, among all these right-wing fanatics and all these Other Israelis who couldn’t afford a home in Israel proper. So they used the government incentives to start a decent life here. Winter rains came and the media was distracted by the coming war with Iraq. So we had to fold up our tents and take what we could get. This is Intifada land. This is a war zone. The whole town is surrounded with barbed wire and soldiers in towers. This is not home, it’s just a roof over our heads. How’s your baby? ...

While some Mizrahi homes become tents and then disappear, others, belonging to Palestinian-Israelis, do not even officially exist, but are dynamited by the state. Such were the homes of Ras al-Nabi ‘The Spring on the Cliff Top’ in Arabic, an officially non-existent Palestinian village in the Galilee. Like about forty other villages, it was built in the early 1950s by Palestinians who became internal refugees when their original villages were uprooted so that kibbutzim could be built. The government declared the new settlements illegal and omitted them from the maps.

On 13 August 1991 I visited the Khouri family of Ras al-Nabi. I had heard about them at the Café Tamar, the Old Tel Aviv Po-Mo Mecca. When I parked my rented car near the ruins of their house, I was loaded down with cameras and tape recorders, but childfree, so a bit worried about my ‘entrance’ into the ‘field’.

‘Some woman is here,’ called a little girl to her family in Arabic. ‘Maybe her car broke down.’ From the remaining half of another house emerged a youngish man in

65. Omi and Winant, op.cit., pp60-1.
66. 'A Protest Conference Against Escalation of Running Houses in the Arabic Sector will be Held in July', Haaretz, 17 June 1990, Tel Aviv, PAJ (in Hebrew).
67. The family’s name has been changed by their request.

Blow-ups in the Borderzones 101
jeans and a traditional white headdress.

‘No, she’s a tourist,’ he said, noting the cameras.

‘They’re wrecking our homes because of this little spring here on the cliff,’ he told me later over an orange Coke, ‘so they can declare this place a nature reserve.’

His father, the man whose house was blown up, was wearing the traditional headdress and peasant baggy pants, and a bright yellow T-shirt with ‘Peace Now’ written on it in Hebrew. ‘Since they started dynamiting homes here, the spring has dried up,’ he said. ‘But the Interior Ministry’s Gray Patrol keeps blowing up more of them. We have nowhere to go.’

I was baffled that, though I had spoken to them in fluent colloquial Arabic, and told them I was an Israeli who had lived in the USA for over a decade, they kept addressing me in Hebrew.

‘Come on, let’s go visit the ruins,’ said the old man’s wrinkled wife matter-of-factly. She was garbed in a traditional long dress. You must have come to see them like all the other leftist tourists.’

I suddenly realized where the Peace Now T-shirt had come from.

‘I’ll show you where we lived until last week. Take pictures of us, and when you look at them back home, try to imagine how it was with us.’

So we climbed over the rubble of cinderblocks and Galilean stones, glass shards, and fragments of furniture and toys. A doll’s arm poked out between stones – a mute appeal for help.

‘It was too much.’

‘Don’t cry – it’s all politics,’ the old woman comforted me, as she broke down herself. Her husband, grown children, grandchildren and assorted neighbours were all sniffing and biting their lips.

‘Here was the living room wall,’ she said, rebuilding it with both hands in mime. Walking further, she said, ‘And here was the kitchen, and here the bedroom.’ She walked up and wept and rebuilt the whole house.

This is far beyond Benjamin’s allegorical ruins, the anthropologist was thinking, a material culture decaying into stories connecting stones.68 This was a real explosion.

Finally, when the house stood again in imagination, she lined up the whole family according to age in front of the ruins, and ordered me to take a picture.

‘Wait,’ said the old man. ‘Before you take the picture and go, I want to tell you something I just thought of. After all our talk about borders and homes, I have to tell you that, until this home was blown up, I had lived here all these years mourning my ancestral home, the one they blew up in 1949. I never felt at home in this house. But now that it’s gone, I realize it was home. I don’t know where to go now. When the whole village is blown up, where will we all go? We have no place, even though this is our land – because I’m not from Europe and I’m not a Jew.’

Click.

‘Don’t forget to send us the picture,’ said the son in jeans. ‘If there’s anywhere to send it to …’

Some homes become borderzone tents and then disappear. Other homes do not exist in the first place, as far as the dominant group is concerned. It is precisely because such homes do not exist that the Eurocentre dynamites them. Proof that the racialized physical homes do in fact exist comes only when the dominant group blows them up. For the Third World Israeli authors, this act also blows up (magnifies) the dilemma of locating a home on the border and even the question of the borderzone's very existence into a major issue, one they cannot avoid confronting in their works. The contracting borderzone denies them room to breathe, until they race towards the edges of it looking for a way out. Either they race towards the inner edge, until they have to compromise with the Eurocentre, while still striving to maintain their own Third World positionality, or they race towards the outer edge and move on to yet another exile. If they can do neither of these, they fall into silence.

IX BORDER RACE-D AND ERASED

LAVIE: You know, the whole concept of the border, what Renato Rosaldo calls the zone of difference within and between cultures, where people can maintain 'cultural citizenship' instead of national citizenship, has emerged from the 'hyphenized' ethnic studies – like Asian-American, or Latin-American. The lived experience of the borderzone sparks authorial creativity. It allows people to travel between the Eurocentre and the margins, and from one margin to another. It allows people to redefine the literal and lived canon, through redefining what Rosaldo calls 'culture as a busy intersection of multiple borderzones'.

SHAMMAS: Zionism gave the Jews a territory in the form of language. Hebrew is the only real victory of Zionism. The whole business of the nation-state that came later failed along the way. So the Hebrew is the homeland. It's a paradox. Israel doesn't have internationally agreed-upon official borders – it's a blob of colour floating around without defined edges. The Hebrew that was resurrected was not the Mizrahi Hebrew. And that was the tragedy. For the non-Jewish Arab writer, Ashkenazi Hebrew is not only the homeland of the Jews – it's the language of threat ...

I can't write literature in Arabic any more. I don't want to. The exile you create inside the language is a home. An exile is a home, and Jews are the best proof of this. If my diaspora is the Jewish home, for me writing in Hebrew is like blowing it up from within ...

We are talking here not only about matters between Arabs and Jews, Mizrahim and Ashkenazim – we are talking about the problematics of existence in the postcolonial world. All of us write Ashkenazi Hebrew, even though in Arabesques, I tried to re-Semiticize it. Every other Hebrew that authors have tried as an alternative has failed. I tried to bring about a new version of Israeli identity, but I couldn't make it happen outside the text. I approached the territory and told her, 'Territory, come on – is your

71. Rosaldo, op.cit., pp20, 166.
language Hebrew? Great! I'll write in it. Are you going to give me part of your... 

I was born in the Galilee and my earth talks to me in Arabic and I talk to her in Arabic, but I have to negotiate my Israeli territory in Hebrew. I'm trying, as the man of the margins who writes in the language of the majority – it's as if I blow up the language of the majority from the inside.

As I am writing this now, I suddenly wonder whether the Khouri family had kept addressing me in Hebrew just because, for them, I represented the Israeli centre, both Nation and Empire, or was it because, after the centre had blown up their home, they were using Hebrew in order to blow up the centre from the inside?

In his search for a less constrictive creative space, Shammas raced to Ann Arbor, Michigan to protect his shrinking Israeli borderzone. Muhammad Hamza Ghanayim, on the other hand, did not have that option.

'I used to work in East Jerusalem, Ghanayim said. 'I translated from the Hebrew press for the Palestinian media. But I couldn't be one of them – most of them come from the pre-1948 land-owning class. The hip aristocracy. They're rich. I'm the son of a peasant, and they treated me like one, too. So that was End Number One of my dream of entering the pantheon of Palestinian national authors. I went back to the village, just like in the poem. I felt like, not just a woman, but a dark one, unable to support myself financially using my own language, or to contribute to the struggle of Palestinian nationalism. I joined the Israeli Communist Party, and wrote for them in Arabic. But they had too many restrictions on what and how I should write, so I quit. Then came the End Number Two. I took a cab from Bakka [his village in Israel proper] to Tul-Karm [on the West Bank]. There were cab drivers there who were yelling out, "To Amman! To Amman!" So I thought, maybe I too can go to Amman and from there join the PLO and become a Palestinian national author. And then it hit me – I couldn't go there with an Israeli passport. So I took a special cab and thought, he'll drop me off on the border near the Dead Sea, and I'll just sneak in. Halfway there, the skies wept, and I shared my plan with the cabbie. When he heard that, he slammed on the brakes and told me, 'Kid, I'm not going to drive you to your death. They'll just shoot you. Go home and write in Hebrew.'

In the wake of the intifada, the prestigious Kotzeret Rashit, sent Ghanayim to write a whole issue about life in Gaza, a poetic journey in the style of David Grossman's Yellow Wind. It was the very first time an Israeli publication had given most of its pages to a Palestinian author who writes in Hebrew. Best of all, it was the big, festive Passover issue.

'I thought this was my big break. They had given me plenty of power. After all, Kotzeret Rashit was the publication of the liberal Israeli Left. I hoped it would be reissued as a book, and would be translated into English. But I guess I was closer to the Gaza Palestinian refugees than Grossman was to the West Bank.
ones. Grossman could play anthropologist but I couldn’t. And a Muhammad is not a David. A Land of Fire wasn’t even reviewed, even though they had given me the whole issue. I crashed. I had a heavy episode with hard drugs. Sometimes I feel like suicide. My wife and children keep me going. But I don’t live in a home. It’s a house, a cinderblock house my father built me.’

‘If you want to write Hebrew literature,’ he concluded, ‘there comes a point where you have to aim at the centre, or quit. I don’t write in Hebrew any more.’

SHAMMAS: This border business. The margins. Travelling inside the borderzone – what a luxury! But the price! The more you expand the margins, the more room you have for travelling in the borderzones – but the more diluted everything becomes. The intensity dissipates and disappears. You know, you can spread one pat of butter on one slice of a baguette, or over a whole big pita bread and feed the whole family breakfast. With the baguette you get plenty of butter taste, but are still hungry. The pita feeds everyone but not with much butter each. I’m afraid the minority authors in Israel have precious little bread – but the butter taste is intense. That’s why I’m going back. It’s better to be on the margins there than nowhere here. But I’m afraid that the Israeli [authors of the] margins have caved in to playing their marginal role. And justifiably so, so they won’t go crazy. Under the steamroller of canonical Israeli literature, you have to be a national hero just to survive. That’s how the centre shrank the borderzone into nothing but a line …

LAVIE: So that the borderline can then be tamed as the centre’s frontier.

Border race-d, borderzone erased – right?

How regrettable it is, the anthropologist mused on the plane from Ann Arbor back to Berkeley, that all these writers, who have so much in common, have been trying only individually to break into the Eurocentre. Politically, and in literary politics, they exist as fragments, each orbiting the centre. They have not accelerated into an alternative centre of their own, a school, a movement – a clique like any other Israeli literary clique. If they could all get beyond thinking Jew/non-Jew, as some of them have, and instead think in terms of Third World/First World, their combined mass could not only deterritorialize but implode the centre's colonial constructions of language, culture and place. And it dawned on her that she was exercising her ethnographic authority.4

In spite of this, however, the agency of these writers is transforming the West in Israel from within, as their Eastern, Arab voices rise, speaking and writing in Hebrew. Because they are positioned as interlocutors between Arab and Jew, and East and West, as well as between literature and popular culture, they are forming bridges even as they break boundaries. Through the relationships between the lives of these authors, their literary works, and the hegemonic social structures they rupture, Israel’s Middle Eastern majority is reclaiming its centrality to a genuine Israeli identity.

Three months after I met Shammas, I was invited to a theatre performance

in Palestinian East Jerusalem. An actor of my acquaintance, a Palestinian Israeli who has done most of his acting in Hebrew, told me he was going to act for a change in Arabic. I could have walked the ten minutes from my Israeli West Jerusalem apartment to get there, but being from California and in a hurry, I drove my rented car. I greatly enjoyed the totally surreal performance. Emerging from the theatre, I found my car firebombed—a charred skeleton of buckled metal and soot.

Sympathetic theatregoers gathered around and tried to comfort me. From a lit-up window across the dark street, however, a man poked his head out and called, in English, ‘Yeah, they firebombed your car. They knew from the car that you were the only Israeli here— and if you came to this play, you must be OK. But you crossed the border.’

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