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Lital Levy, *Poetic Trespass: Writing Between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine*, Princeton University Press, 2014, 337 pp., $39.95 US (hbk), ISBN 9780691162485.

The hypervisibility of the crisis in Israel/Palestine is not a new phenomenon. Edward Said wrote in 1986, in *After the Last Sky*: "it is not as if no one speaks about or portrays the Palestinians. The difficulty is that everyone, including the Palestinians themselves, speaks a very great deal. A huge body of literature has grown up…. Yet, for all the writing about them, Palestinians remain virtually unknown."[1] In the three decades since, the literature about Palestinians—and Israelis—has grown exponentially, well beyond what Said might then have imagined, propelled in part by the use of Israel/Palestine as a cipher for a range of global processes including colonization, securitization, and collective resistance.[2] Yet even today much of the work on the region comes from the historical and social sciences, as was also the case when Said made this statement (this was one of the inequities that *After the Last Sky* sought to redress). Scholarship on the region's cultural life remains comparatively limited, especially in English, and scholarship that analyzes both Palestinian and Israeli cultural production is rarer still. There are only a handful of scholars (including this reviewer) who have challenged the institutional divisions that separate Palestinian and Israeli literary and cultural criticism.[3] The aim of such work has often been to show common preoccupations among the region's writers and artists despite their political differences, and to assert a shared, if fraught, creative imagination.

Lital Levy's *Poetic Trespass* is the first book since Ammiel Alcalay's groundbreaking *After Jews and Arabs* (1992) to go further, by offering not only a relational reading of Palestinian and Israeli authors, but also a new literary history of the region. Like Alcalay, whom she cites as an influence, Levy challenges the retrospective projection of the region's current political

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[1] Edward Said, *After the Last Sky*, 2nd ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999 [1986]), 4. For a recent history of the PLO's fight for international visibility after 1967, see Paul Thomas Chamberlin, *The Global Offensive: The United States, the Palestinian Liberation Organization, and the Making of the Post-Cold War Order* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).

[2] The latter point is taken from John Collins, *Global Palestine* (London: Hurst: 2011).

[3] See for example: Anna Bernard, *Rhetorics of Belonging: Nation, Narration, and Israel/Palestine* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013); Rachel Feldhay Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded: Arab and Jewish Writers Re-visioning Culture* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003); Gil Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Rebecca L. Stein and Ted Swedenburg, eds., *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

landscape onto the pre-1948 past and asserts the crucial role of the Arabic language in Jewish literary history and the formation of modern Hebrew literature.[4] The publication of Alcalay's book coincided with the period of the Madrid and Oslo negotiations, a time of heightened interest in cultural interaction between Palestinians and Israelis. Cultural forms of resolution (understood as a form of "dialogue") were seen as a counterpart to political resolution, particularly among metropolitan liberals, though this was not Alcalay's own stance. By contrast, Levy's book appears at a time when the "two-state solution" that the Oslo Accords were supposed to inaugurate seems increasingly remote. This gives the notion of a shared cultural past another kind of resonance, as a potential basis for an urgently needed alternative political future. In this context, *Poetic Trespass* is a welcome recovery of different ways of imagining Jewish-Arab relations in the not very distant past before the founding of the Israeli state, as well as a thoughtful exploration of the ways in which Mizrahi and Palestinian-Israeli writers have challenged the calcification of these relations in the decades that have followed.

Levy is among a small number of contemporary scholars—and, outside of the region, a small number of people—who are fluent in both Hebrew and Arabic. The relative rarity of this kind of bilingualism is the result of the history that *Poetic Trespass* both recounts and challenges, which is the history of the "successful inculcation of nationalist monolingualism" (27) in Israel. Levy's multilingualism makes her a kind of guide for the reader who has only one or neither of these languages, as well as a counterpart to the multilingual writers that she writes about. Her alternative history is, however, very much the story of the role that Arabic—as a language, as a literary heritage, and as a concept—has played in the development of modern Hebrew literature, as I noted above. This means that *Poetic Trespass* excludes writers in Gaza and the West Bank (presumably since they do not, for the most part, make use of Hebrew in their work), and that it does not engage with Arabic literary history beyond the Jewish diaspora and the borders of the Israeli state.[5] This observation may seem churlish, given how extraordinarily rich the book's scope already is: it encompasses Jewish writing in Arabic from the nineteenth century to the present, Palestinian writing in Hebrew well beyond the usual suspects of Anton Shammas and Sayed Kashua, and Mizrahi literature and visual art in Israel across three generations of post-1948 artists. Still, the book's subtitle uses the word "between," which makes it sound (given the assumptions about "balance" in this field) as if Israeli and Palestinian writers will receive equal billing. Instead, the word "between" largely plays a conceptual role in Levy's analysis, as a description of the work of Arabic- and Hebrew-language writers whose texts occupy a "no-man's-land produced through literary bilingualism, translation, and creative manipulations of language" (7). Levy's analysis at times suggests an idealistic role for literature, which she calls, following Barthes, the "'utopia of language': the free zone of projection, of imagination, and of desire" (296). Like some of the other scholars who have previously written about this subject matter, she privileges writers whose work crosses linguistic and other borders—the "poetic trespass" of the title—in a way that is sometimes reminiscent of the strand of postcolonial literary studies associated with Homi Bhabha, which tends to extol the disruption of "binaries" at the expense of a materialist analysis of

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[4] Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs: Remaking Levantine Culture* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 4.

[5] For another recent account of Arabic literary production in Israel, see Simon Williams, "Reading Between the Lines: Arabic Fiction in Israel After 1967," DPhil thesis, Oxford University, 2014.

political antagonisms.[6] However, *Poetic Trespass* is at the same time an admirably sober analysis of Israeli-Palestinian literary relations, markedly more so than some of its predecessors. It tells the story of Hebrew's triumph over Arabic, as both a Jewish diasporic language and the language of Palestine's indigenous Arab population. It thus explains how the region's literary landscape came to be as it is, even as it celebrates the work of the writers who continue to challenge it.

Levy notes at several points that she is less interested in questions of identity than previous scholars who have looked at Palestinian and Israeli writing or Mizrahi writing have been. A symptom of this shift in emphasis, perhaps, is that Levy engages very little with some of the most prominent scholarship on the Mizrahim: Ella Shohat and Yehouda Shenhav appear only briefly, and the latter only in the footnotes.[7] Instead, she is primarily concerned with questions of language, particularly what she calls "the idea of language." The operation of language as an idea is particularly heightened in Israel/Palestine, where "to write in one language means contending with the shadow of the other, while contending with the other language often means reimagining the first" (12). This concern is conveyed through outstanding close readings, among the finest I have read in this field. Levy's readings are dense and scholarly, in ways that significantly enhance existing scholarship on this body of work, but they also make texts in Hebrew, Arabic, and even Aramaic (in the work of the Mizrahi poet Amira Hess) available and accessible to English-language readers. Levy pays particular attention to poetry, which has not been true of any of the previous comparative work on Palestinian and Israeli literature (though it is true of some of the most notable work on Hebrew modernism, such as the work of Chana Kronfeld and Michael Gluzman).[8] Her lively readings of Shammas's little-known poetry, in both Arabic and Hebrew—which she sees an example of "Palestinian midrash," one of the terms from the book that has stayed with me—and her careful exegesis of the Baghdadi Hebrew poet Dahud ben Sleyman Semah's subversive homage to Haim Bialik are worth the cover price alone. But the book does not only consist of close readings. The chapter on Mizrahi responses to Bialik, "the icon of the Ashkenazi cultural establishment" (93), moves from Semah to an exhilarating survey of other poets' and artists' uses of Bialik's work, culminating in a discussion of Ronny Someck's reproductions of Bialik's poems, which he decorates with insolent graffiti. It thus provides both depth and breadth in its portrayal of writers' attempts to "reintroduce Hebrew into the multilingual framework whence it originated and in which it had persisted for millennia" (284). The temptation, once again, is to see such efforts as a form of cultural "dialogue," but Levy is cautious not to attribute conciliatory or redemptive meaning to these acts of "trespass," which in any case remain a decidedly minoritarian effort in the broader expanse of Hebrew literature. She reminds her readers early in the book that "linguistic interference often indicates asymmetrical power relations" (25), and she repeatedly calls attention to the openly oppositional political stance that many of her writers take.

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[6] The landmark critique of this form of postcolonial studies is Benita Parry's *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2004).

[7] See Yehouda Shenhav, *The Arab Jews: A Postcolonial Reading of Nationalism, Religion, and Ethnicity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006) and Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Standpoint of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (1988): 1-35.

[8] Michael Gluzman, *The Politics of Canonicity: Lines of Resistance in Modernist Hebrew Poetry* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); and Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

However, Levy's tendency to avoid modes of analysis that might seem more sociological than literary sometimes means that she doesn't engage with the political and economic dimensions of her argument as fully as she could. Edward Said does not appear in the bibliography or the index, making this book, I suspect, possibly the only example of contemporary English-language cultural criticism on Israel/Palestine not to cite his work. Said had little to say about Hebrew literature, of course, apart from the occasional complaint about Amos Oz, and still less to say about Mizrahi history. Still, his late writings envisioning Israel/Palestine as a state of all its citizens would be relevant here, as would his career-long emphasis on exilic and minority subjectivity as a model for political practice. Colonialism does come into view as a category of analysis, but only in passing, for instance when Levy notes that the Israeli-Palestinian context disrupts postcolonial notions of translation in part because of the previous shared history and culture of Arabs and Jews: "as with the case of Japanese and Korean, the colonial encounter transformed a long-standing historic relationship" (109). She does not discuss in any detail the more critical way in which the region troubles postcolonial studies: as scholars like Gabriel Piterberg and Joseph Massad have pointed out, postcolonial studies tends to assume that colonialism is a past formation, when the settler-colonial relation in Israel/Palestine is still very much present.[9] This is not to say that Levy avoids political questions, but that sometimes her attention to discursive forms of "trespass" risks obscuring the structural conditions of Palestinian-Israeli and Mizrahi dispossession and marginalization.

The book also raises thought-provoking questions about the current status and coherence of comparative literature as a discipline, although it does this by example rather than offering its own commentary. I work in a department of Comparative Literature myself, but I might not have made this connection if it weren't for the endorsement on the book jacket from David Damrosch, who says that *Poetic Trespass* "should be read by anyone interested in pathbreaking work in comparative literary and cultural studies today." (The book also carries praise from Bhabha, who oddly reads Levy's analysis as an example of "translational dialogue in a star-crossed region," though one of the most salutary things about Levy's book is that it refuses to approach the task of reading Palestinian and Israeli texts through the vocabulary of liberal peacemaking.) Damrosch is absolutely right that it should be read beyond the bounds of Jewish studies and Middle East studies, but will it? I mean this not as a criticism of the book, but as a comment on the area studies mindset that continues to divide scholarship in comparative, world, and postcolonial literary studies, to the extent that scholars working in different languages, geographies, or time periods rarely engage with studies that focus on a region beyond their own expertise. There are indications that Levy has a wider audience in mind: she occasionally offers glosses of her material that are unnecessary for readers in Jewish studies, such as her explanation of the four ritual questions of the Passover seder (156), or presents her work as a corrective to wider debates, such as the understanding of majority-minority language relations in postcolonial studies (193-196). But for the most part, the writers she discusses, apart from figures like Shammas and Emil Habiby, do not have the status of "world" writers, and her comparative methodologies for reading these texts together are so particular to their historical contexts that it is hard to imagine extrapolating them to other settings. However, what Damrosch may be getting at is Levy's demonstration of how to write a counternarrative to an established literary history. Any comparative literature scholar would do well to emulate her

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[9] Joseph Massad, *The Persistence of the Palestinian Question* (London: Routledge, 2006); and Gabriel Piterberg, *The Returns of Zionism: Myths, Politics, and Scholarship in Israel* (London: Verso, 2008).

patient exegesis of both canonical and lesser-known texts, which gradually assembles an intricate and compelling portrait of an intellectual and artistic landscape. By this standard, and many others, *Poetic Trespass* is a major achievement.

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