

involve, also have played a role in shaping the music, much as they have done across the Levant at least as far back as Egyptian popular and art music (*ṭarab*) pioneer Sayed Darwish at the turn of the last century. Finally, the way Palestinian musicians have appropriated an instrument like the British bagpipes, brought to Palestine thanks to the Balfour Declaration and the British occupation of the country during World War I, reminds us how cultural and political intersection in a space of colonial contestation over the course of a century has created the tableau on which Palestinian social, cultural, and political history are forged through the various *lahjāt mūsīqiyya* (musical dialects) developed by musicians in the course of their everyday musical and political lives.


One of the most interesting cases of these dialects, or as Brehony calls them, “socio-musical aesthetics” (p. 170), comes from the instrumental work of Gazan musicians like female oudist Reem Anbar or the Arab pop rock group Sol Band, founded in 2012, which the author spends significant time discussing because of its important role in the artistic (*ṭarab*), national (*waṭani*), and cultural (*thaqāfi*) aspects of the larger music scene. What is most noteworthy about Sol Band, aside from its impressive rotating roster of members, is how it has managed to address all three imperatives while also appealing to a wider international audience. This is best evidenced by its superb performances at the 2019 Palestine Music Expo in Ramallah, as well as the deeply anguished recording and video for the song “*Iftah ‘Azā yā lisān*” (Let an Elegy Awake from My Tongue), composed and performed by lead singer Hamadah Nasrallah during Israel’s full-on bombardment of Gaza in late fall 2023.

Perhaps the most powerful contribution of this immensely timely book is its clear demonstration that, regardless of its official or recognized status as a state (or lack thereof), Palestine is a culture whose roots run as deep as they do wide. Its music is not just routinely culturally, aesthetically, and politically avant-garde, but it is at the forefront of change in seemingly the most unlikely places, such as Khan Younis. Whether reengaging tradition or innovating at the front lines of electronica, music across Palestine and in its forced diasporas enables imagination of a liberated future on their land even in the worst of times. For that reason alone, this book will be read by scholars of Palestine and anyone interested in the dynamics of revolutionary artistic praxis for years to come.

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Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile

Talar Chahinian (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2023). Pp. 296.
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Talar Chahinian offers an excellent and timely reassessment of 20th-century Western Armenian literary history along a political axis in *Stateless: The Politics of the Armenian Language in Exile*. She does this by shedding light on two pivotal literary movements that developed out of the wake of different world wars. The first movement, known as Menk (We), was established in Paris by a loose cohort of male novelists who were, in many cases, orphaned literally and figuratively by genocide. These figures, including luminaries such as Shahan Shahnur, Zareh Vorpuni, Hrach Zartarian, and Nigoghos Sarafian, loosely tracked



the modernist call to usher “newness” into literary production by rejecting the aesthetics, subjects, and literary forms of the past. Although this cohort’s efforts as a unified collective were short-lived, beginning formally with the publication of the journal *Menk’* in 1931 and ending after a literary scandal that took place roughly a year later, its afterlives would play an outsized role in discussions on the purpose of Armenian literature—and by extension, the Western Armenian language—during the following two decades. Fittingly, then, the book’s second case study examines a reaction both to *Menk* and to the politics of literary production in Soviet Armenia. This more reactionary literary movement cast post–World War II Beirut as the new center of Western Armenian literary production, advocating for more straightforward narratives about Armenian history, a diasporic politics of “return” to a real or imagined homeland, and finally a new *hayets’i* (productively translated by Chahinian as “Armenian-oriented”) grounding for novels and poetry, which adopted national themes and nationalist concerns. Chahinian’s fundamental contention is that this shift “mandated that literature be produced within a centered ‘national’ category rather than a decentered ‘transnational’ one” (p. 5), hobbling Armenian literary production by subordinating it to a new politics of the diaspora that tended to valorize unity and homogeneity over the previous generation’s insistence on dispersion and, to a limited extent, diversity.

Crucially, as Chahinian posits, this shift heralded not only an aesthetic and political sea change, but also a gradual linguistic transformation as it spurred another wave of standardizing and teaching Western Armenian across the diaspora. It also continued to bind Western Armenian to the expectation that languages should be correlated with nation–states, and thereby further politicized the production of Western Armenian literature within a dialectic of diaspora and homeland. Of course, Western Armenian, which was first standardized (or “modernized,” in Chahinian’s terms) in the Ottoman Empire in the 19th century, has never been the language of any nation–state; therefore, what it is “exiled” from is not a form of statehood but rather a territory and a set of historical circumstances that could be called a way of life. In the most provocative argument of the book, Chahinian argues that the literary and political shift from Paris to Beirut also was limiting for Western Armenian more broadly. Specifically, this shift located the natural resting place of Western Armenian in the nation–form, instead of allowing it to develop in a more decentralized manner, alongside its literature. In this telling, the uses of Western Armenian were gradually constrained and politicized, seemingly for the benefit of a state that did not quite exist.

Stateless is divided into two parts—dedicated to post–World War I Paris and post–World War II Beirut—each comprising three chapters. Within this narrative arc, the book makes a number of localized arguments by engaging with the fields of trauma studies, diaspora studies, and world literature. In the first part, Chahinian situates the generation of the *Menk* novelists against the historical backdrop of other literary movements in early 20th-century Paris, as well as in dialogue with the previous generation of Western Armenian writers. This historicization is accompanied by masterful close readings of various *Menk* novelists, in particular Vorpuni, Zartarian, Sarafian, and Shahnur (whose reception in Beirut also is the focal point of Chapter 4). Contrary to the *hayets’i* literature of post–World War II Beirut, the *Menk* writers chose not to disclose the historical facts of the Armenian genocide directly. Instead, as Chahinian demonstrates, they focused on the experiences of living in France as refugees, frequently adopting themes such as the breakdown of kinship structures, the loss of (and unsuccessful attempts to revive) patriarchy, and incest between siblings. Through these veiled narratives, the *Menk* novelists strove to depict the experience of past traumas indexically, Chahinian writes, and almost never directly in mimetic terms. Paradoxically, as she argues, the space of exile was generative for these male writers, who made room in a limited capacity for the “Other” (frequently, French women, whose bodies became contested sites of desire and loathing in such novels), even while their protagonists suffered from unspoken tragedies that could never be resolved. Perhaps the keenest insight of this

section is that these writers tended most of all to be concerned with ruptures in time, in the aftermath of World War I, rather than ruptures of place as one might expect from a community of basically stateless refugees. In other words, what they attempted to mourn was not the loss of a homeland but rather a historical and genealogical continuity that could give their present meaning. The elusiveness of meaning haunts these novels, thematized through different ambivalent and often disturbing sexual encounters with “Others,” which further serve to disarticulate their protagonists from an Armenian past and conjoin them to the presents and futures of “foreigners.”

The drive to repair historical continuity reasserts itself in the second part of *Stateless*, which focuses on later (mis)readings of Shahnur during a period of aesthetic and political change—that is, another moment of rejecting the aesthetic values of the past, and in this case, those of Menk in particular. These chapters revolve around the 1946 Congress of the Soviet Writers’ Union in Soviet Armenia, which included for the first time representatives from the diaspora, and the 1948 Conference of Middle Eastern Armenian Writers, which was a direct response to Soviet ideology. First, the 1946 Soviet conference sought to account for Western Armenian literature by more or less declaring it dead on arrival, insisting that Western Armenian authors must unify with Soviet Armenia and reorient themselves around the idea of a homeland if they were to have any longevity or existential utility. In contrast, the 1948 Middle Eastern conference countered by proposing a more robust unity across the “diaspora,” now based in a kind of linguistic nationalism that would serve as proxy to an unavailable motherland. Literary production, which now sometimes privileged poetry over the novel, was to become fundamentally “Armenian oriented,” or reconnected to its glorious and distant past through contemporaneous efforts of fashioning a new literary canon and a language pedagogy in Lebanon and Syria. As Chahinian observes, this development led to an emphasis on “language purification and cleansing, rather than on development and dynamism” (p. 183), and therefore coalesced around somewhat reactionary and exclusionary terms. Rather than read this moment in time as another rebirth of the Western Armenian language and cultural production, as is more often done, Chahinian places it instead within a nuanced historical frame, moreover one that tends to consider the ideology of this movement part of a cautionary tale.

In this way, *Stateless* brings a new clarity to the politics of 20th-century Western Armenian literary production. It deserves to stand alongside other significant contributions to the field of modern Armenian literary history in recent decades, including studies by Marc Nichanian, Krikor Beledian, and Kevork Bardakjian. As its title generally implies, this is first and foremost the story of a political struggle over aesthetic uses of language, and as such *Stateless* skews more toward a history of the Western Armenian “literary” language in exile, or at least the Western Armenian novel in exile, than it does of language writ large, although they are certainly intertwined. Chahinian ends the book by gesturing toward a handful of contemporary examples of Western Armenian literary production around the globe, produced by dispersed writers, with different politics, who are not necessarily part of any movement save for being flag-bearers of a collective urgency after UNESCO’s “definitely endangered” classification of Armenian in 2010. These gestures conclude with a call to resist placing this literary history within the “centers” of the nation or the diaspora, as did the 1946 and 1948 conferences, and instead to explore what new political and literary assessments might be awaiting the relatively neglected corpus of Western Armenian literature, just off-map.

Such gestures, like the book itself, serve as a fruitful invitation to reimagine the contours of this story in additional ways, and it is on that invitation that I wish to linger briefly here. One of the secondary but potentially long-lasting contributions of *Stateless* may be to facilitate a reinvigorated conversation in the field on the capaciousness of the category of both the “political” and the “exile” in Western Armenian literature, and how disparate


figures might help us understand this fraught territory in additional pluralistic and decentered ways. One wonders especially about the Western Armenian writers who were seemingly not part of the ideological conversation that emerged between 20th-century Paris and Beirut, or at least were more distant interlocutors within it. For instance, other renowned authors still experimented dynamically with “newness” in literature after World War II—such as, for example, the avant-garde poet Zahrad in Istanbul, whose Western Armenian verses strove to capture a flavor of the idiomatic and quotidian speech of his neighborhood, and yet whose status as a producer of “exilic” literature, to the extent that the category applies, points to radically different orientations of inclusion and exclusion within the Republic of Turkey. How, too, might the field better account for those writers who were never deemed significant enough to be incorporated into the canon of Western Armenian literature in the first place, including amateur and self-published authors in the 1940s and 1950s American Midwest, who did nothing so daring with their literary form, yet still captured diverse aspects of American life in their Western Armenian tongue? These authors also clearly found something generative in their contact with the “non-Armenian,” even though they did not figure otherness in the same way or in the same starkly binary terms as Menk writers in Paris.

This is, perhaps, a good thing: although Chahinian rightly holds up the Menk writers as a counterfactual for the kind of dynamism that Western Armenian literature might have possessed following World War II, and still is in the process of claiming, it seems difficult to recuperate Menk’s own highly gendered politics of figuring “otherness” for any aesthetic project today. *Stateless* ultimately asks us not to return to the politics of past, exactly, but rather to make room for other “little Armenias,” in the phrasing of Menk, wherever we find them. Perhaps unexpectedly, herein lies a message of hope. As Chahinian reminds us, the political life of the Western Armenian language is one whose ending has not yet been foretold, let alone written.

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Arc of the Journeyman: Afghan Migrants in England

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This ethnography invites its readers to participate in a figurative *attan*, an Afghan national dance, something the author witnessed Pashtun taxi drivers perform together repeatedly to mark familial celebrations in Britain. The circular movement of this traditional line dance forms the core metaphor of a book that eschews chronologies and standard narrative practices to illustrate the complex transmigratory arc of Pashtun “journeymen,” so named because of the now obsolete meaning of journey—“day’s work”—who are, by virtue of their migration and their current employment, in a continual state of movement. Readers will likely experience feelings of dizziness and disorientation, which is, according to the author’s introduction and conclusion, intentional. Nichola Khan wants to “disrupt the fixed genealogy of Western cartographies of knowledge about Afghanistan to point to the diversity of