

REVIEW ESSAY

LITAL LEVY. *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014. 360 pages. Cloth US\$39.95 ISBN 9780691162485.

GIL Z. HOCHBERG. *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone.* Durham: Duke Press, 2015. 224 pages. Paper US\$23.95 ISBN 978-0822358879.

YARON SHEMER. *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel.* Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2013. 304 pages, illustrations. Cloth US\$75.00 ISBN 978-0-472-11884-7.

The field of Middle Eastern Studies has seen a recent spate of publications that offer a timely and nuanced look at the intersection of language, ideology, and visual representation in Israel-Palestine. Scholars of cultural studies, comparative literature, history, film studies, and the visual arts will appreciate the breadth of perspective offered by a combined reading of Lital Levy's *Poetic Trespass: Writing between Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine*, Gil Z. Hochberg's *Visual Occupations: Violence and Visibility in a Conflict Zone*, and Yaron Shemer's *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel*. This cluster of studies, taken as a whole, offers a coherent critical intervention into the politics of a literary and visual field marked by silences, lacunas, blind spots, and elisions. *Poetic Trespass* sketches the contours of a Hebrew literary landscape inhabited by a tacit Arabic presence. With a purview that extends to literature, cinema, and the plastic arts, *Visual Occupations* probes the tension between systemic practices of concealment and strategic modes of lending visibility. *Identity, Place, and Subversion*, a powerfully articulated analysis of Mizrahi cinema, interrogates the notion that ethnic difference has become irrelevant in the context of a contemporary Israeli melting pot.

In *Palestine, Israel, and the Politics of Popular Culture* (2005), Ted Swedenburg and Rebecca L. Stein identify a paradigm shift in the field of Middle Eastern studies, namely the attention to popular culture as a vital site of inquiry and a barometer of regional power dynamics. With their detailed attention to the interconnectedness of popular culture, public discourse, and academic

currents of thought in both Israel-Palestine and the United States, *Poetic Trespass*, *Visual Occupations*, and *Identity, Place, and Subversion* collectively constitute a distinct moment in the methodological and conceptual shift outlined by Swedenburg and Stein. The publication of these three works coincides with a flurry of cultural activity centered on the intersectionality between Mizrahi and Palestinian questions of citizenship, statehood, activism, and identity politics. The emergence of artistic collectives anchored in notions of political solidarity and bilingualism—the Mizrahi-Palestinian Collective, *Ruh Jedida*, Cultural Guerrilla, *Ars Poetica*, and *Ithneen*, to name a few—attests to the enduring importance of studies that look beyond the confines of the nation state as a category of analysis. In 1986, the Palestinian Israeli author Anton Shammas published the Hebrew-language novel *Arabesques*. The novel sparked a heated debate about the act of writing from the “no man’s land” between Hebrew and Arabic. The confluence between scholarly publications such as *Poetic Trespass*, *Visual Occupations*, and *Identity, Place, and Subversion* and the aforementioned artistic collectives suggests that some of the most innovative and informative work is happening at the interstices. While *Poetic Trespass* is the only one of the three works to directly engage the debate surrounding the publication of *Arabesques*, all three studies explore the proverbial no man’s land between Hebrew and Arabic, Arab and Jew, Israel and Palestine.

Poetic Trespass constitutes a tour de force of literary and historiographical scholarship. The opening chapter, “From the ‘Hebrew Bedouin’ to ‘Israeli Arabic’” addresses the ambivalence surrounding the role of Arabic in the nineteenth century revival of Modern Hebrew. In “Bialik and the Sephardim,” Levy demonstrates how the national poet of the fledgling Hebrew state came to function as the focal point of a multigenerational Sephardi counter-poetics. The third and fourth chapters of *Poetic Trespass* attend to the notion of bilingual entanglements in Arabic and Hebrew writings by Palestinian and Arab Jewish authors in Israel. “Exchanging Words: Arabic Writing in Israel and the Poetics of Misunderstanding” probes the subversive and creative potential of mistranslation, auto-translation, and false cognates in the works of Emile Habiby and Samir Naqqash. Levy’s chapter, “Palestinian Midrash: Toward a Postnational Poetics of Hebrew Verse,” explores the body of Hebrew poetry written by Palestinian authors in Israel. Her original use of the term “Palestinian Midrash” points to a literary endeavor by a group of minority authors writing from within the language of a Hebrew-speaking majority. *Poetic Trespass* closes with two chapters devoted to the afterlives of Arabic in the writings of contemporary Mizrahi authors. “Along Came the Knife of Hebrew and Cut Us in Two” offers valuable insights into the processes that

underwrite a Mizrahi poetics of loss and re-signification. Levy traces the ways in which first generation Mizrahi immigrants, in making the switch from Arabic to Hebrew, experienced a traumatic break from their cultural and linguistic moorings. Levy's final chapter, "So You Won't Understand a Word: Secret Languages, Pseudo-Languages, and the Presence of Absence" explores the ways in which second and third generation Mizrahi authors dissociate Israeli Hebrew from its ideological substrate. With its sophisticated weave of sociolinguistics, literary theory, and textual analysis, *Poetic Trespass* illuminates a history of entanglements that predate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and continue to shape present circumstances.

Visual Occupations, with its clear concise prose and thorough contextualization of sources, presents the reader with what Gil Hochberg identifies as a series of artistic "countervisual practices" aimed at destabilizing deeply entrenched structures of visibility and invisibility in Israel-Palestine. *Visual Occupations* is organized around three phenomena: concealment, surveillance, and witnessing. Hochberg's inquiry into the uneven allocation of "visual rights" offers a compelling parallel to Levy's reading of a de facto binational collective that asserts its presence in the realm of literature and film. With attention to the historical factors that have shaped a visual field marked by ethnonational separation, Hochberg's study probes the artistic practices of manipulation, subversion, and queering that serve to stage and expose the mechanisms through which such a separation has become naturalized in the public eye. Hochberg opens with a chapter titled "Visible Invisibility" in which she elaborates on the theme of *kfarim netushim*, the "abandoned" Palestinian villages of 1948. Haunting, suggests Hochberg, functions as a means of destabilizing the dominant trope of abandonment by raising the specter of forced depopulation. "From Invisible Spectators to the Spectacle of Terror" looks into the dynamic between actor and spectator in the films of the Palestinian Israeli director Elia Suleiman. This chapter traces Suleiman's shift from a "poetics of invisibility" in *Chronicle of a Disappearance* (1996) to a "poetics of hypervisibility" in *Divine Intervention* (2002). The third and fourth chapters of *Visual Occupations* offer a reading of the military gaze and the conditions of visibility/invisibility at the checkpoint. "The (Soldier's) Gaze and the (Palestinian) Body" explores the themes of violation and vulnerability in Sharif Waked's short film, *Chic Point: Fashion for Israeli Checkpoints* (2003). With "Visual Rights and the Prospect of Exchange," Hochberg places her work in conversation with Ariella Azoulay's notion of the photograph as a "civil contract" and explores the triangulated relationship between spectator, subject, and photographer. The final two chapters of *Visual Occupations* address the creative and subversive

potential of witnessing as one of the most powerful modes of countervisual engagement.

Yaron Shemer's *Identity, Place, and Subversion in Contemporary Mizrahi Cinema in Israel* opens with a discussion of the general consensus, among members of the Israeli film industry and the wider viewing public, that the Sephardi/Mizrahi question has exhausted its relevance. Like *Visual Occupations*, Shemer's work looks at how the naturalization of certain perspectives results in a politics of concealment. Shemer identifies four prevalent attitudes that have contributed to the labeling of the Sephardi/Mizrahi issue as passé. Foremost among these attitudes is the notion that the public discourse around Mizrahi/Sephardi identity politics has been comprehensive enough to render any further discussion moot. The second and third positions represent two alternate perspectives on Israel as a pluralistic society: the "melting pot" model, in which ethnic difference assumes a purely symbolic function; and the "mixed salad" model, in which ethnic difference is celebrated as part of a multicultural social fabric. Finally, Shemer points to a commonly articulated viewpoint that class has superseded ethnicity as the issue at the heart of persistent social inequalities. Against the grain of these four presuppositions, Shemer reads contemporary Mizrahi cinema as an enduring engagement with questions of alterity and the processes through which such questions have been obscured by discourses on ethnic plurality and class disparity. *Identity, Place, and Subversion* begins with an overview of the sociocultural backdrop and cinematic trends behind the emergence of Mizrahi cinema. In his reading of two predominant genres, Bourekas Cinema and New Sensibility Cinema/Personal Cinema, Shemer explores the ambivalent attitude toward Mizrahim as representative of both Oriental otherness and Jewish selfhood. "The Cinematic Construction of Mizrahi Identity" attends to the inadequacies of both the essentialist and the constructivist model in accounting for the development of the Mizrahi persona on the screen. Shemer places a particular emphasis on the Arab-Jewish designation and notes that filmmakers gesture to this fluid and composite identity marker by creating visual and thematic links to the cultural milieu of the Arabic-speaking world. The following chapter explores what Shemer, in reference to both stylized representations of space and the economies of production, has termed "The Mizrahi Space." *Identity, Place, and Subversion* closes with two chapters that respectively explore Mizrahi protest cinema and the intersectionality between Mizrahi identity politics and questions of gender and sexuality on the Israeli screen.

As an Assistant Professor of comparative literature at a liberal arts college, I can attest to the value of these three works in the classroom. In my senior seminar, "Refiguring the Divide: The Arab Jew in Literature and

Film,” I use *Poetic Trespass* as a reader of sorts, pairing relevant chapters with literary or cinematic works that touch on the questions and thematics outlined by Levy. The majority of my students have no working knowledge of Hebrew or Arabic, and many of them enroll in my courses with little or no background in Middle Eastern studies. *Poetic Trespass*, in its clarity and accessibility, constitutes a formidable gateway text for both the larger comparative questions and regionally specific issues that I introduce in my seminar. I have successfully incorporated both *Poetic Trespass* and *Identity, Place, and Subversion* in my “Cinemas of the Middle East,” a junior to senior-level course with a substantial film theory component. In my unit on Mizrahi cinema, I use Ella Shohat’s seminal work *Israeli Cinema: East/West and the Politics of Representation* (1989) as a theoretical foundation. I situate *Identity, Place, and Subversion* as part of a “second wave” of scholarship devoted to the problematics introduced by Shohat. As such, Shemer’s work offers an excellent segue into the most current discussions surrounding Mizrahi cinema. In the fall of 2016, I taught a course titled “Space and Place in Literature and Film,” and I incorporated *Visual Occupations* into the syllabus. With its insightful readings of a field marked by the asymmetrical distribution of visual rights, Hochberg’s work is very much in line with the current pedagogical shift toward visual literacy and thus constitutes a valuable teaching resource.

All three works are ambitious in scope and succeed in presenting complex and politically fraught constellations of artistic practices and counter-practices with great clarity and elegant form. *Poetic Trespass*, *Visual Occupations*, and *Identity, Place, and Subversion*, whether read as a trio or taken as individual scholarly contributions to the field of Middle Eastern Studies, offer a probing and opportune look into critical intersections of language, ideology, and conditions of visibility/invisibility in Israel-Palestine. ✦

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