



## LANGUAGE POLITICS: THE BOUNDARIES OF HOMELAND AND TRANSLINGUAL ISRAELI LITERATURE

MELISSA WEININGER

This year, the Hebrew writer Ruby Namdar was awarded the Sapir Prize for Hebrew literature for his novel *HaBayit Asher Nekhrav* (The Ruined House), making him the first recipient of the award who was not a resident of Israel. While written in rich, resonant Hebrew, Namdar's novel takes place in New York and focuses on an American Jewish professor, making its setting and themes uniquely diasporic. A few months after Namdar was awarded the Sapir, the prize rules were changed to exclude from eligibility writers who reside outside Israel. Although the prevailing argument of the prize committee was that the change was made because of the difficult economic conditions for writers living in Israel, it is hard to see the modification of rules as anything other than a response, even a backlash, to Namdar's win.

The controversy over the Sapir Prize raises old questions about the relationship of language to territory and the relationship of homeland and diaspora in Israeli culture and Zionist mythology, questions that are very much at the fore of current conversations about Israeli literature at a time when there are many prominent Hebrew writers living abroad—in addition to Namdar, there are Maya Arad, Admiel Kosman, and Ola Groisman, among others—and an increasing number of Israeli writers publishing literature written in non-Jewish languages, whether or not they live in Israel.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, at a strained moment in Diaspora-Israel relations, language and literature may have something important to convey about how we understand and negotiate coexistent ideas of homeland and diaspora.

While questions about the suitability and admissibility of contemporary diaspora Hebrew literature into the Israeli canon address one side of this issue, contemporary Israeli writers who use English as their literary language have approached the tension between homeland and diaspora from the other direction. In a recent article on Hebrew writers who live outside of Israel, Beth

Kissileff asks, referring to Cynthia Ozick's claim that only literature that is in some way "centrally Jewish" has survived in the diaspora, "If something is in Hebrew and written in the Diaspora—and of the Diaspora—does that make it 'centrally Jewish' by language alone? Or is a new definition needed?" With regard to Israeli literature written in non-Jewish languages like English, we might modify this question slightly to ask whether language is the only defining factor in literary and cultural identity, and whether this literature itself might contain the answer to a redefinition of the linguistic, literary, and cultural relationship between homeland and exile.

### Translingualism and "Hebrewness"

Israeli literature in English falls into the category of what Steven Kellman calls translingualism; that is, it is authored by writers who have consciously chosen to write in a language other than their native one. As Kellman notes, by "refusing to be constrained by the structures of any single language, translinguals seem both to acknowledge and to defy the claims of linguistic determinism" (24). This linguistic fluidity denies the unitary identification of language with a particular state or territory and rather produces a transcultural model for literary production and consumption (Gilsenan Nordin, Hansen, and Zamorano Llena x). For Israeli writers, this is a particularly fraught movement across boundaries because of the conscious territorializing of Hebrew and its exclusive identification with the land (and later state) of Israel in Zionist ideology and historiography. Motti Regev has pointed to the particular importance of culture, and specifically literature, to the construction of what he calls "Israeliness" and its differentiation from its assumed other, the denigrated (Ashkenazi) Jewish culture of the diaspora. He notes that:

Zionism, as a set of cultural practices, evolved around two interrelated themes: the rejection of diaspora culture (the *galut*) and the invention of a 'new Jew,' the Israeli....From an early stage, the dominant cultural practices among Zionist settlers in Palestine were aimed at inventing a locally specific, 'native' Jewish culture, different from traditional, *galut* Jewish cultures. Initially, in the formative period, this logic resulted in the successful invention and public imposition of a dominant cultural package known as 'Hebrew culture' (*tarbut ivrit*), or *ivriut*—Hebrewism. (Regev 227)

This Hebrewism depended on the use of the Hebrew vernacular and also on the creation of a Hebrew literature that was specifically linked to Israel and Israeliness. In this way, notes Liora Halperin, Zionism was "a fairly typical late-nineteenth-century linguistic nationalist movement, one appealing to cultural and ethnic bonds through the strongly romantic and gendered rhetoric of the mother tongue" (6). In this ideological formulation, Hebrew was the only legitimate national language, privileged because of its association with the land of Israel and in contrast to the devalued languages of the Jewish diaspora.

The linkage of Hebrew with Israel deliberately elided the diaspora history of modern Hebrew and modern Hebrew's inherent "impurity"—that is, its dependence on the vernacular languages of Europe for its development. In addition, the Zionist emphasis on Hebrewism led to an exclusion of other Jewish and non-Jewish languages as authentic expressions of Israeli culture, relegating these to the denigrated realm of the diaspora. According to Halperin, multilingualism in the pre-state period "evoked for denizens of the Yishuv (the pre-state Jewish community in Palestine) a long history of Jewish exile that, despite Zionist rhetoric, was not entirely effaced in the homeland" (24). Translingual Israeli writers, then, recover this history of Jewish multilingualism and in doing so challenge the relationship between Hebrew and national culture and the link between language and homeland. They also recalibrate the opposition between Israel and diaspora, between homeland and exile, on which Zionist Hebrew culture has been dependent. Arianna Dagnino notes that transcultural works of literature not only contribute to a cultural transcendence of "the borders of a single culture and nation, but...also promote and engage with a wider global and literary perspective and, possibly, a new way of imagining and living identity" (2).

### **Language and Homeland**

This new way of imagining Hebrewness and Israeli identity through the creation of translingual culture is evident in the treatment of questions of homeland and diaspora in recent Israeli prose literature written and published in English. This work addresses the link between language and place, and specifically between Hebrew and homeland, through both thematic and formal techniques that denaturalize language and expose the connections and disconnections between language and nation. This article will consider Shani Boianjiu's 2012 novel, *The People of Forever Are Not Afraid*, through the lens of Rela Mazali's 2001 novel-slash-autobiography-slash-manifesto *Maps of Women's Goings and Stayings*. Mazali's early work in English provides a map, if you will, for the relationship between language and nation explored in Israeli literature in English.

*The People of Forever Are Not Afraid*, written and published in English by the young Israeli writer Boianjiu, traces the young adulthood and army service of three female friends: Avishag, Lea, and Yael. The three girls were raised in a small town in northern Israel and come from families whose roots lie in Arab countries, such as Morocco and Iraq. Composed of individual stories that comprise episodes from the girls' time in the Israel Defense Forces and subsequent to their release, the novel addresses some of the central conflicts and tensions in Israeli society through its focus on typically marginal characters and themes: women, Mizrahi Jews (a catch-all term that typically refers to Jews from non-European backgrounds), asylum seekers, and immigrants.

The writer and activist Rela Mazali was perhaps the first to confront the connections between genre, language, and the question of homeland and diaspora. Mazali, who is known primarily as a political activist, is the founder of the Israeli feminist organization New Profile, which works to demilitarize Israeli society, and Gun Free Kitchen Tables, which aims to increase gun control and reduce the number of firearms in Israel and the occupied territories. Her unusual 2001 book *Maps of Women's Goings and Stayings* is a book about movement and travel, about deterritorialization and transcultural exploration. Mazali notes the importance of language to her project from the outset, writing, "All those who come to the talking house understand and speak English. No coincidence; it's the most commonly used world map, almost obligatory for travel" (10). However, Mazali constantly calls attention to the artificiality and choice involved in her language of composition. Even the title reflects a certain awkward English syntax that draws attention to itself as a possible "bad" translation from another language. At the same time, the title's awkward syntax privileges the act of going rather than staying; that is, it expresses no loyalty to the here of the homeland, to nation or national language.

A similar effect is created by the strange and sometimes awkward prose of the book, part of which records verbatim—including, as Mazali writes, "all the stutters, all the tangled sentences sidetracked along the way and left unending, all the uhms, the I means, the you knows" (34)—conversations with actual and fictional women about their travel experiences. This has the effect, she notes, of making the prose foreign and contrived, "a visible veil through which you're aware, on and off, that you're peering, as you piece together a recounted reality, palpably non-real" (34). Thus Mazali preserves a sense even within English of the Hebrew (and other languages) that lies behind her language of composition, and the artificiality of language itself. She calls attention to her translations from Hebrew to English and back again, writing of one of her transcriptions, "This section of the notes is written in my Hebrew. Maria was speaking her excellent Swedish English and I was taking it in and recording it in Hebrew, which I write quicker than English. Now, in the absence of her exact words on tape, I'm translating back into English" (194). Mazali draws back the curtain on the wizard of language, revealing the utilitarian mechanisms behind it and demystifying its connection to identity and home.

Mikhail Bakhtin recognized the power of what he called "linguistic consciousness," the self-consciousness of language that Mazali refers to here, in demystifying the connections between language and nation. In a cultural realm in which this self-consciousness does not yet exist, "the objects and themes are born and grow to maturity in this language, and in the national myth and national tradition that permeate this language" (Bakhtin 61). But through linguistic consciousness, the ability to see language from outside of the monolithic linguistic framework that formed it, "[l]anguage is transformed

from the absolute dogma it had been within the narrow framework of a sealed-off and impermeable monoglossia into a working hypothesis for comprehending and expressing reality” (Bakhtin 61). Crucially, he notes, it is “polyglossia,” the presence of other languages of speech or composition within the culture, that “fully frees consciousness from the tyranny of its own language and its own myth of language” (61). The polyglossia of translingual literature thus has the function of deconstructing monoglossic links between language and national myth.

In the last few years, several works of fiction by Israelis have been written and published in English, and they, too, engage in this demystification of language, challenging the link between Hebrew and Israeliness both by claiming the mantle of Israeli literature in English and by complicating the oppositional relationship between homeland and diaspora as it has been reinforced through language. By writing in an English inflected with Hebrew, these works consciously invert Hebrew’s traditional relationship to the non-Jewish languages of the Jewish diaspora, while at the same time challenging the hegemony of Hebrew and its equation with Israeliness and even Jewishness. Taken together, these works of what I have elsewhere called “Hebrew in English” employ translingual and transcultural techniques to destabilize Zionist national mythologies, chief among them the privileged association between language and homeland (Weininger 18). This destabilization results in a new configuration of homeland to diaspora and calls for a reassessment of our understanding of Israeli, and Jewish, identity as linked to place.

Like Mazali, these works of “Hebrew in English” defamiliarize English to remind us of their consciously translingual character. Boianjiu, for example, often uses awkward constructions that sound like poor translations, even when they do not actually refer back to a Hebrew original. One character explains that for breakfast, “my mother *organizes* a tomato and tea for me,” and another “lives *in* Jerusalem Street 3” (17, 16, emphasis added). This could be a kind of direct translation of a Hebrew idiom—for example, the deliberate choice of a slightly awkward pronoun to translate the Hebrew prefix *be-*, which could mean either “in,” or in more idiomatic English, “on”—or it may simply be an inflection of the English of the novel with a non-specific foreignness. In another story Boianjiu uses the phrase “machine automatic gun,” which seems to be a reference to rules of Hebrew syntax, in which the adjective follows the noun. But in this case it amounts to mere confusion, because it simply reverses the two adjectives modifying “gun,” rather than placing them both after it. At the same time, it is clear that this awkward phrase does not actually refer back to any Hebrew original because in Hebrew “machine gun” is rendered as a single word, *maklea*. In effect, Boianjiu creates her own non-standard English, inflected by a general foreignness that seems both connected to and disconnected from Hebrew at the same time, calling into question the very notion of an authentic original source language.

This challenge to the hegemony of Hebrew is accomplished here by recalling the diaspora history of Hebrew language and literature through the novel's displacement of Hebrew with English. The Hebrew culture that became part of the Zionist rejection of exile was largely built in and on the foundations of Jewish diaspora culture and was inextricably tied to the vernacular languages and literatures of Europe. Hebrew literature itself is built on a framework drawn from European languages. When nineteenth-century Hebrew writers began to create literature in a modern Hebrew idiom, they often relied on syntax and vocabulary from Yiddish, Russian, and German, as well as other European languages. And despite the Zionist emphasis on Hebrewism, vernacular and literary multilingualism was a fundamental feature of pre-state Palestinian Jewish communities as well as Israeli culture. This multilingualism demonstrates the extent to which Israeli culture has always been "intertwined with the cultures of Jews and non-Jews abroad, as well as the non-Jewish and non-Zionist populations of Palestine itself" (Halperin 10). By writing in a Hebrew-inflected English, Boianjiu situates her novel within the context of the multilingual, diasporic history of Hebrew and recovers the complex literary languages overwritten by the cultural dominance of Hebrewism.

Boianjiu's characters also speak a language that is not confined to a monocultural landscape, but rather reflects the translingualism of a contemporary global culture that does not identify a single, monolithic Israeli culture with Hebrew alone or even with the borders of the nation-state. The three main characters—Avishag, Lea, and Yael—speak a globalized lingo of pop cultural references, sometimes made up of direct quotations from primarily English films and song lyrics. And their careers, such as they are, are not only dependent on this global language but also expose the way in which transculturality fundamentally transforms national identity. Perhaps the most salient example of this is Lea's creative output: although she "was living in Tel Aviv and smoking her days away in cafes," she writes "porn books about Nazis fucking the life out of Jews in showers" that are "well received globally" (Boianjiu 284). Rather than depicting the Holocaust as the singular tragedy in the history of the Jewish diaspora and a foundational event in the establishment of the state of Israel, Lea's work universalizes it through genre and participation in a global capitalist culture. The Holocaust in this context, rather than symbolizing the unique specificity of Jewish or Israeli history, is merely the backdrop for a commercially successful, globally popular enterprise. At the same time, Lea's work functions as a parody of Jewish history by transforming a crucial historical event into the low-culture genre of pornography.

This formal deconstruction of national mythology is a feature of Boianjiu's novel, which uses linguistic, formal, and thematic innovations to deconstruct the relationship between language and nation. Similarly, Mazali describes her own work, which combines fiction, interviews, autobiography, and political, cultural, and historical analysis, as "a subversive action, a narrative

underground. A different kind of telling talking burrowing along and back and forth under the wall. A kind of story that doesn't supply *that* kind of action, doesn't comply with that directed, targeted, gun kind of listening that's out to *get* something, thatthing" (189). Like Lea's Holocaust porn, Mazali's and Boianjiu's work subverts cultural and narrative expectations, mirroring the way in which the language of composition attempts to break the monolithic identification of Hebrew with Israeli national culture. Instead, these works go "beyond the spatial boundaries of a given state, emphasizing instead the mixing and collision of languages, cultures, and identities" (Gilsenan Nordin, Hansen, and Zamorano Llena xii).

The structure of Boianjiu's novel subverts narrative expectations in a similar way, using both genre and creative chronology to play with monological historical claims. All of the novel's chapters also function independently as self-contained stories, placing the book in a kind of gray area between genres. The stories both work independently of each other and together form a coherent novelistic narrative, following three main characters in a roughly chronological pattern. This structure interrupts the larger narrative with a series of internal endings, constantly pulling back from novelistic expectations of beginning, middle, and end. It draws the focus of the narrative onto the individual stories rather than the collectivizing, ordering function of the novel, reorienting the story from the general to the particular.

At the same time, although the story-chapters in general move chronologically through time, two significant exceptions to this challenge the notion of the linear historical narrative. There are two unexpected uses of time at the end of the novel: first, the last story-chapter turns back in time, returning in a circular way to the period just before the beginning of the novel. As with the individual chapters, which bring each small story to an internal end within the longer, continuing narrative of the novel, this circular turn denies the resolution of a final ending and questions the possibility of such a linear, chronological resolution.

This denial of resolution is linked to the other chronological anomaly in the novel, which is the extension of time into a speculative future. In the penultimate chapter, "The After War," Boianjiu creates an alternate, future reality in which Israel is at war with Syria, a war whose rationale is never explained and whose outcome seems doomed, as "the foot invasion had achieved nothing and the army was taking down Damascus and Aleppo with aerial strikes instead" (296). Again, note here the awkward syntax of "foot invasion," which is not precisely a translation from Hebrew and yet is not standard English, but calls attention to the language of the novel as something in-between. The war itself is described, as in the chapter's title, as "the after war, but everyone knew about it before it happened" (281). Even the title and this description of the war call attention to the way in which this section of the novel, and thus the novel itself, challenges both military and historical



narratives of progress and victory. Here the war, though classified as “after,” and therefore outside of linear time, is nonetheless predicted and known, even perhaps a recapitulation of previous wars, a reference to the repetitive cycles of violence that characterize Israeli history.

The link to Zionist mythology and historiography is made explicit as the main characters enter the army base where they have been called for reserve duty during the war. Some of the young female soldiers, the text relates, “hummed songs like milk and honey” (282), a reference to biblical descriptions of the land of Israel as flowing with milk and honey, rich, fertile, mythically abundant (Deut. 31:20). And when they are brought to the supply shed where they will stay during their service, there is a sign on the wall that reads, “IF YOU WILL IT, WE DON’T HAVE ANY OF IT” (283), a sarcastic manipulation of Theodor Herzl’s Zionist aphorism, “If you will it, it is no dream.” Here, the biblical land of Israel is refracted through the jaundiced lens of the unfulfilled utopian Zionist dream. Fulfillment requires a linear progression from desire or dream—in this case, the sovereign Jewish nation-state of Herzl’s imagination—to a final, perfect end product—the land flowing with milk and honey. In “The After War,” the manipulation of time, its circularity and open-endedness, mocks the Zionist image of sovereignty, military might, and homeland as an impossible dream, as something of which we “don’t have any of it.”

This parodic treatment of Zionist mythology deconstructs the imbrication of the experience of the land with the dream of the nation. Mazali notes a similar connection in her description of the hiking trips she used to take as a young woman. She writes,

Our youth movement marched out a practical concretization of the Zionist delusion of virgin land to be possessed and gorgeously fertilized....Our paces measured and mapped onto the ground our unfolding, forming beliefs. Our parents’ firm convictions. And in a cyclic, self-perpetuating process, the sensual experience then powerfully reaffirmed our unseeing perceptions. (Mazali 253)

It is this cycle, in which the dream “unfolds,” as she puts it, in linear time, but cyclically reinforces older iterations of the earlier generation’s dream without ever making forward progress, that is modeled by the formal innovations in both her book and Boianjiu’s novel.

### **Exile in the Homeland**

This challenge to nationalist mythology is also reflected in the exposure of the failure, on many levels, of the Zionist dream, the particular ways in which, in the words of the sign, “we don’t have any of it.” Boianjiu’s novel is populated by characters who do not fit into the Zionist image of the place of ingathering of the exiles, either because the ingathering fails or because certain



exiles are excluded from the category of those who deserve to be gathered in. The failure of the ingathering is deftly illustrated through one immigrant character in *The People of Forever*. The main characters of the novel, who all grew up in the same village, have a neighbor whose family immigrated—or made *aliyah*, a term that literally means “going up,” indicating the positive valence associated with Jewish immigration to Israel—from England. The neighbor, Miller, has a troubled relationship with the other members of the town, at least partly because of his own racism—he is Ashkenazi, or of European descent, while many inhabitants of the town are of Mizrahi descent, a catch-all identity that encompasses those whose origins lie in North Africa and the Middle East. Although he himself is technically the foreigner, he calls the protagonists “monkey girls” “because [their] grandparents weren’t from Europe” (209). Miller’s racism and superiority as an Ashkenazi Jew and a European immigrant underline the extent to which certain members of Israeli society, certain native-born citizens, remain marginal. This marginality represents a kind of continuing exile even within the homeland for some of its citizens.

Perhaps paradoxically, though, the girls like this racist epithet and embrace it. Avishag says, “We once really liked thinking we were animals” (209). Although Miller intends it as an insult, the girls’ enthusiastic acceptance of his description indicates their understanding of their outsider status. This embrace of their difference and the knowledge of their exclusion to the margins of Israeli society demonstrates the novel’s challenge to monolithic conceptions of Israeli identity. It also points again to the disconnect between dream and reality, national mythology and individual experience, as it becomes clear that Israel has not been successful at integrating all its citizens into this monolithic national identity.

Miller himself also illustrates the failure of the Zionist dream of integration through his own experience. He, too, does not fit into Israeli society, despite the fact that he has made *aliyah*, an attempt to fulfill the Zionist dream of the ingathering of exiles. Nonetheless, other members of the town view him as an outsider, and Lea’s mother tells the girls, “You have to understand. . . these people are not originally from here, so they don’t understand” (213). Lea’s mother recounts how the Millers had a bar mitzvah party for their son on the communal property of the olive grove, “even though it was not their property and they had no right. They brought in all of their relatives from England and made pita from scratch on an authentic taboon, while marveling over the pastoral and holistic nature of their lives on the Holy Land’s border. In loud voices” (213). The Millers, in culture, social mores, and, crucially, language—in the form of their loud voices—announce their inability to integrate into Israeli society. Their imitation of local customs and consumption of local foods are revealed to be artificial adoptions out of sync with their true identities as foreigners and outsiders.

When she returns from the army, Lea decides that Miller has killed one of the olive trees on this very community property and that she has to punish him. It is not insignificant that Lea accuses Miller of killing an olive tree, and one that was the communal property of the town. The long-lived olive tree is a symbol not just of peace but of the Jewish connection to the land. In Avishag's words, "It is highly against the law to kill an olive tree. You are not even allowed to uproot one" (211). Eric Zakim has written of the way that Zionist ideology created a "synesthetic dialectic of 'to build and be built'—of seeing the fate of the land and the people tied together, of linking the invention of the 'new Jew' to the rejuvenation of this devastated landscape" (183). In contrast, here it is the dead olive tree that represents destruction, and the arrest or interruption of this Zionist dialectic of the land. When Avishag looks out at the dead tree, she sees "[a] dark end. A clear beginning of something that had no middle. Its stem broke off in such an abrupt place, I bet that even if someone never knew there used to be more of it, if someone had never seen an olive tree or even any kind of tree before in his life, he could still tell something was missing" (Boianjiu 213). What is missing here is the connection between land and national culture, a connection that the insufficiently acculturated immigrant Miller is represented as undoing through the destruction of the landscape, through the death of a tree literally connected to and drawing sustenance from the land itself.

However, Miller's family also unravels Israel's claims to be the natural homeland of all Jews through the reversal of their *aliyah*. This, too, is not unexpected within the context of the novel: Avishag notes, "My mom always says that she bets the Miller kids will leave for England without being drafted, and I agree with her" (214). And indeed, when Lea and Avishag go to confront and punish Miller, they find that his wife has taken their children and left the country to return to England. Miller tells them of his wife, "She couldn't take it anymore, wanted to go back to England.... 'We can't have something happen to the little ones,' he added in English, imitating the voice of his wife. 'This was all your crazy idea to move here'" (225). The act of *yeridah*, going down, the ideologically backward motion of leaving Israel for the diaspora, is here mocked through the derisive use of English to imitate Miller's wife. But the joke is a double-edged one because, of course, the entire text of the novel, including Miller's ostensibly Hebrew speech and Avishag and Lea's dialogue, is rendered in English.

The abandonment of the Zionist project is looked on with suspicion by the other characters, despite their own marginality within Israeli society. In the same chapter, Avishag, who is getting ready to take up a position as an airport security officer, muses about travelers at the airport: "It is always suspicious when someone leaves. I'll never leave myself. After my shift is over, I'll take the train to Tel Aviv and sleep alone. Then I'll come back the next day. So that I can do the opposite of leaving again" (220). This endless imaginative cycle of returning to Israel both mimics and mocks, again, the notion of the

ingathering of the exiles. Avishag's claim that she will "never leave" represents the idea of Zionist *aliyah* taken to its extreme: once here, immigrants (like Avishag's parents) are trapped in an ideological conundrum. It is the failure of the ideology of ingathering to predict its consequences—whether entrapment or its opposite, failure to entrap—that is made ridiculous through Miller's mocking imitation of his wife's English and Avishag's endless circle to the airport and back. In both cases, the homeland is represented as oppressive rather than liberating, an imperfect or impossible alternative to diaspora. In this formulation, the homeland becomes a cage or a prison to the freedom of exile.

### **Border Crossings**

The alternative to the trap of the mythology and ideology of homeland is, in Mazali's formulation, travel and impermanence. Her work takes place inside an imaginary space, what she calls a "talking house," which is everywhere and nowhere at once. She writes of the idea of this house: "Itself a traveller, this house is not back home to any of us. We only dwell here in a manner of speaking, discursively, here and gone. Brought by our stories. But it is, to the extent that talking houses can ever be, a site of self, of truth, of no pretensions of affectation. It does try to have that meaning of home" (20-21). Mazali displaces the concept of home, deterritorializing it as an imaginative space constructed solely of language—not one language, but a multiplicity of them. It is a space that is created out of individual authenticity rather than a place superimposed on the ideal of the collective, and it is necessarily translingual. It defies borders, the dichotomization of space into inside and out, of people into us and them, that is demanded by nationalism.

In this way, Mazali's "talking house" forms a kind of third space, what Homi Bhabha calls "the 'in-between' spaces," which "provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself" (1-2). In this sense the talking house is a metaphor for the book itself, a space that is designed to eliminate the boundaries demarcated by language and culture in order to produce the new. Indeed, Mazali tries to visualize the in-between space of the talking house in a series of maps of what she calls "visits," which chart the "goings and comings" of the title.

Mazali's maps are a purposeful challenge to political maps that chart the rigid borders and national-cultural boundaries demanded by nationalism. Rather, they point to the artificiality of such borders, and their danger. As Daniel Boyarin notes, "Borders...are also places where people are strip-searched, detained, imprisoned, and sometimes shot. Borders themselves are not given but constructed by power to mask hybridity, to occlude and disown it. The localization of hybridity in some others, called the hybrids or the heretics, serves that purpose" (15). Through her imaginative maps, Mazali attempts to

unmask the effaced hybridity that is allowed, even encouraged, to emerge in the talking house. Her maps diagram the women who populate the book, the places with which they are associated, and elements of their stories, as well as natural features and a translated medieval manuscript from which Mazali quotes throughout the text (Fig. 1). By drawing maps of their stories, Mazali suggests an alternative mode of organizing space through language and offers a model for permeability and transcultural identity.

In *The People of Forever*, the impermeability of national borders is revealed by the flip side of the ingathering of exiles, exclusion of people who do not meet the state's criteria for acceptance. In particular, two iconic

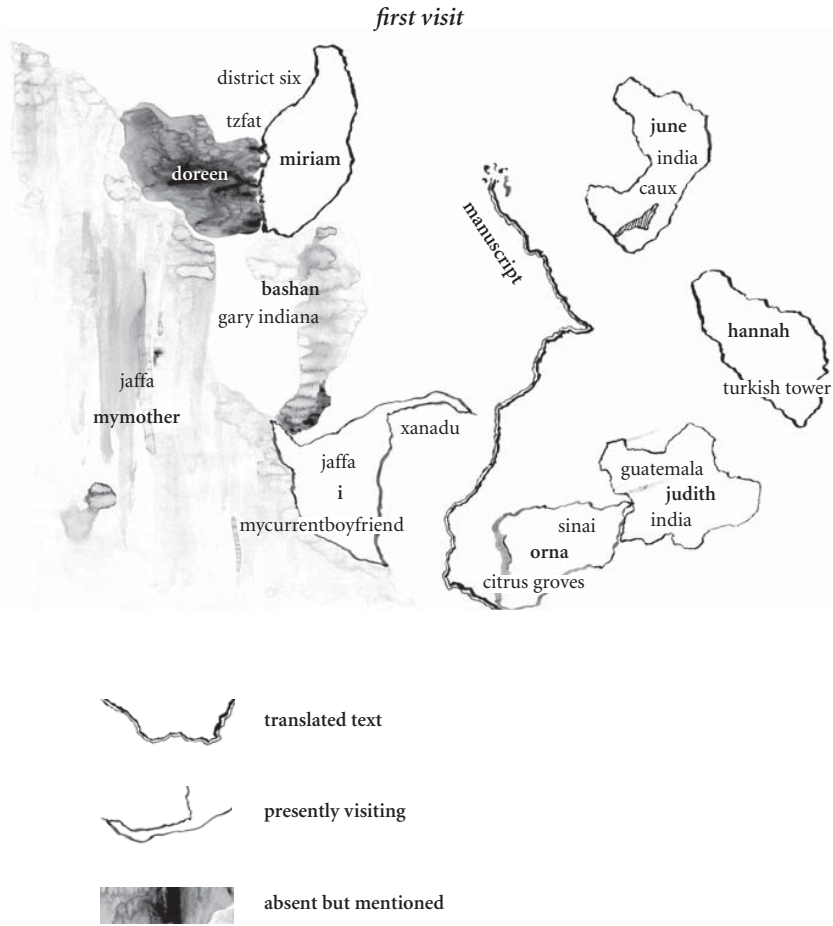


Fig. 1. Map from *Maps of Women's Goings and Stayings*. By Relā Mazali. Copyright © 2001 by the Board of Trustees of the Leland Stanford Jr. University. All rights reserved. By permission of Stanford University Press, sup.org.

characters represent the varieties of exclusion of those whose exile the nation deems irrelevant: one Palestinian and one African refugee. As part of her army service, Lea is assigned to a checkpoint on the border between Israel and the occupied West Bank. Her job is to check the papers of workers passing through the checkpoint each day, Palestinians who live in the occupied territories, citizens of no country, but work inside Israel. Of these workers Lea muses, “We needed them, but we were also a little afraid they’d kill us, or even worse, stay forever” (Boianjiu 60). Here, in the inverse of ingathering, the state wants to ensure the exclusion of Palestinians from the land. Like Mazali’s talking house, this story exposes the dual function of the border: it keeps out as well as keeps in, relying on exclusion in order to establish its own legitimacy. The border, the checkpoint, reveals the limits of the Zionist conception of Israel as homeland.

Mazali notes the way in which language also becomes a kind of checkpoint, a marker of boundaries and exclusions. She writes, “The military checkpoint just north of Gaza has already come to be known as ‘Erez’ in Palestinian as well as Hebrew. For other places, many inside Israel, Palestinians make a point of using the Arabic. But this site, set by Israelis, is pinpointed in their Hebrew name for it as the end limit of that language’s domain” (161). Language becomes part of the barrier between Gaza and Israel, a sign of the limitations of national belonging. Only in English, a third language, neither Hebrew nor Arabic, can Mazali’s work remain outside the boundaries enacted by the conflation of language and nation.

Just as Lea describes Israeli fears about the infiltration of Palestinians from the occupied territories into Israel, Mazali notes the inverse fear of the Israeli activists like her who enter Gaza. She is conscious of the way her crossing into Gaza is dependent on the very people who are the source of the fear: “In fact going into Gaza isn’t my going. I move in the fearzone by leave of Palestinians who live there and consent to have us....South of Erez we *are* by courtesy of our hosts” (168). The boundary, the checkpoint, becomes the site of erasure: of language, of citizenship, of identity. It is as if the border between nation and occupied land, between homeland and no-man’s-land, has the power to actualize and de-actualize the self. On the one hand, it has the mythological power to bring into being the image of a new identity, the “new Jew,” the ingathered exile, while at the same time erasing the very existence of those who remain outside or are excluded.

This erasure is also apparent in Lea’s encounter with a particular Palestinian worker who crosses each day into Israel through her checkpoint. Lea notices him because although he is in many ways indistinguishable from the crowd of men trying to pass through the checkpoint, “he stood with urgency. He did not want to be there. He was almost not there, but he was” (Boianjiu 67). Eventually, Fadi, whose increasing anger and disaffection is described by Lea, kills one of the other soldiers and is taken to prison. At the end of the story, Lea, who has been imagining Fadi’s home life, including a fictional wife

named Nur, begins to imagine what she is doing: “I thought of Nur; I thought that she must have showered and that she was already working on getting Fadi out of the Israeli jail, and that she was a strong woman, and then I remembered that I had created her, had invented her, and that I was a soldier and she was not real” (84). Fadi and Nur, excluded from citizenship and dispossessed of homeland, are themselves not “real” or “almost not there” with regard to the Israeli national narrative.

The chapter about Fadi and Nur is immediately followed by a chapter titled “People That Don’t Exist,” which considers those excluded from the idea of homeland from another angle: the refugee. The title refers directly to a game the bored Avishag, a border guard in the Israeli Army, plays as she watches her computer monitor for illegal crossings. Lonely, she imagines the green pixels are people, the “people who don’t exist,” for company. But of course there are also real people who appear on the monitor, refugees from Africa trying to cross the border into Israel, and the title also indicates the extent to which these refugees are not a part of the conception of homeland on which the state is built. Rather, like Fadi and Nur, they “do not exist” in the context of the Israeli state, which only recognizes as citizens under the Law of Return those with Jewish ancestry.

The story is narrated in alternating first-person sections, labeled “Person A” and “Person B,” underscoring the common humanity of the two speakers, who otherwise have little in common, but also their relative anonymity and powerlessness in the face of state institutions: one, a female soldier in the Israeli Army, another a Sudanese refugee trying to cross the Egyptian border into Israel. In her sections, the Sudanese refugee narrates the story of her escape to Israel. She begins, “You’d want to think I don’t exist, but I do” (90). And indeed, the narrative supports this assertion from the Israeli perspective, when Nadav, Avishag’s superior officer, tells her, “we can’t shoot the Sudanese because that would look bad, but we also don’t want them here because then we would have to give them jobs, and they bring diseases, and they lower the Jewish rates” (98). The narration of the refugee’s story confirms her existence despite the fact that in the eyes of the state she not only does not, but cannot exist, because in her very existence she poses a threat to the Jewishness of the Israeli homeland.

But the novel makes the refugee character visible and gives her a voice, by narrating her story in the first person and alternating it with the first-person story of the soldier Avishag’s chemical abortion. The two women are also mystically connected, sharing an exchange that transcends both real and imagined boundaries and validates their mutual existence. In the course of the story, the Sudanese refugee character finally arrives at the border, but just before the group she is with can get to the border fence, Egyptian soldiers open fire and she is shot. She takes shelter under a tree, where Avishag notices her on the monitor. Looking for her “people who don’t exist,” she sees a real

person this time, the refugee, “curled up like an alien” (102). Avishag reaches out her hand, despite the fact that “we get in trouble if we touch the screen because it gets scratched, but I don’t care. I am thinking about someone who isn’t me. I reach and touch the green monitor—it is cold and far and real. I pretend to touch the child I’ll never meet. I pretend I don’t exist. For that while only, it gets to be only her” (102). Avishag’s self-effacement in acknowledgment of the worth of the refugee’s life appears to forge a magical connection between them, and in the next section, the refugee recounts, “I could feel someone touching me. I felt someone’s hand on my shoulder for a very long time....What happened was that someone was there but then was not, and then I, I got up and I ran to the fence made of little knives and I jumped it. Only me” (102-03). Avishag’s recognition of the reality of the refugee’s existence not only symbolically calls her into being but actually saves her life. In doing so, the refugee does make it across the seemingly impassible border into what she calls “the little country” that means an end to her flight, a refuge if not a homeland.

### **Language as Homeland**

By recovering the story of this person who “does not exist,” and linking it to the story of a citizen-soldier, Boianjiu exposes the way in which homeland is defined as inclusive for some at the expense of the exclusion of others. But in the connection forged between the included and excluded, the visible and invisible, the novel also suggests a different model for thinking about the boundary between homeland and exile. Likewise, Mazali’s talking house is an attempt to create a space, in her work, that eschews the exclusion demanded by the national understanding of Israel as Jewish homeland and diaspora as inferior. Her real and imagined women come to the talking house,

Of and for our talking, our word-made world. Life accommodating, it doesn’t confine us. Its walls are moving, shifted like a pregnancy from secret inner places, imperceptibly growing. Mapping us moving....Use an imaginary “we” where the real we has never met, never ever convened all at once at any one house. Would probably never choose to. And actually couldn’t—not physically—because some of us are fictions. “We,” then, are here, wherever you place this moving “here” for the moment, studying our ability to move. To purposely relocate. (Mazali 128)

As opposed to the strictly limited borders of the nation-state, which bounds identity as well as geographical place, Mazali’s talking house is constantly shifting, as is the “we” that makes up its populace, both real and fictional. Like the metaphysical relationship between Avishag and the Sudanese refugee, Mazali’s talking house is a mode of reimagining the antithetical relationship between homeland and diaspora, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion, through an innovative translanguaging, storytelling in all languages.



Haim Weiss, a professor of Hebrew literature and Ruby Namdar's editor, has written, "The isolation of a language, and the self-isolation of a culture, is a death sentence. Such a culture will wither and become devoid of meaning. Do we want to limit the movements of Hebrew literature and constrain it only to the streets of Tel Aviv or Jerusalem?" Likewise, the question raised now by contemporary Israeli literature in English is whether we want it to, like Avishag, "do the opposite of leaving again." There are subjects that can only be explored through leaving, ideas that can only be expressed in the language of exile. Anton Shammas, the Israeli Palestinian Hebrew writer, once said of his choice to write in Hebrew rather than Arabic, "You cannot write about the people whom you love in a language that they understand" (qtd. in Zusy). More recently, Etgar Keret, who chose to publish his new memoir, *Seven Good Years*, in English and not in Hebrew, said of his decision, "I feel that there are many intimate details in the book that it's easier for me to share overseas. It's kind of like those stories that you feel comfortable to tell somebody in a bar or on a train, but you wouldn't tell your next door neighbor."<sup>2</sup> Sometimes, it is only through the enforced exile of translanguaging that questions of home can be addressed. Like Mazali's talking house, translanguaging Israeli literature forces us to reconsider the boundaries between homeland and exile and the value we place on those concepts. Through language, this literature resets national borders and mythologies, creating a new cultural geography through a multiplicity of stories and self-definitions.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In addition to the two discussed here, the Israeli English-language poets Shirley Kaufman, Karen Alkalay-Gut, and Linda Zisquit are examples of Israelis publishing in non-Jewish languages, as are Russian-language writers in Israel like Dina Rubina. Inversely, perhaps, Palestinian-Israeli writers like Sayed Kashua and Anton Shammas have written acclaimed works of Hebrew fiction, challenging the exclusive identification of Hebrew with Jewish culture.

<sup>2</sup> Although this is a slightly different case, in that the book was originally written in Hebrew and translated into English by someone else, it points to a similar function or phenomenon in translanguaging literature: namely, that by positioning itself outside of its home culture, it allows for a kind of expression that might not be possible on the inside.

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