

Introduction

The No-Man's-Land of Language

Two myths perish simultaneously: the myth of a language that presumes to be the only language, and the myth of a language that presumes to be completely unified.

—MIKHAIL BAKHTIN¹

A language is therefore on the hither side of Literature.

—ROLAND BARTHES²

What does it mean to write when you inhabit the fraught borderline between Hebrew and Arabic? Well, it depends on whom you ask. In a Hebrew poem insisting that strangers can be friends, the Palestinian Israeli poet Salman Masalha infuses the statement “Ani kotev ‘ivrit,” “I write Hebrew,” with myriad shades of wonder and possibility.³ In an opposing poetic maneuver, Sami Shalom Chetrit, a Moroccan-born Jewish Israeli, challenges his readers by declaring (in Hebrew), “Ani kotev la-khem shirim/be-lashon ashdodit/she-lo tavinu mila”: “I write you poems in Ashdodian,” a nonexistent language, “so you won’t understand a word.”⁴ These antithetical gestures, that of the Palestinian Arab who embraces Hebrew and the Moroccan Jew who disavows it, are mirror images of one another, at once equal and opposite. Both are provocative in their unexpected disruption of the norms defining language, identity, and belonging in the State of Israel. More subtly, the two poetic declarations are tempered by the muteness of the other language, *Arabic*—the mother tongue of both poets, concealed but not absent. What is the place of Arabic in these two Hebrew poems, with their crisscrossings

1 Bakhtin, *Dialogic Imagination*, 68.

2 Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, 10.

3 Masalha, *Eḥad mi-kan*, 15–16.

4 *Ashdodit* (the “Ashdodian” language) is Chetrit’s metonym for a nonstandard spoken Hebrew; see chapter 6. See Chetrit, *Shirim be-ashdodit*, 7.

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of language and identity among Palestinian, Israeli, Arab, and Jew? More broadly, in the intensely politicized space of Israel/Palestine, how do Arabic and Hebrew interact, and how does their relationship come into play in literature by Jewish and Palestinian authors?⁵

This book asks and answers those questions in multiple ways, examining the lives and afterlives of Arabic and Hebrew in Israeli literature, culture, and society. Hebrew is the spiritual, historical, and ideological cornerstone of the State of Israel, and Hebrew literature, having accompanied the national project from its inception, is an integral part of Israeli society. Yet in its broader geopolitical context, Hebrew is the language of a small state that views itself as an embattled island in a hostile Arabic-language sea. Powerful social norms in Israel/Palestine assign Hebrew to Jews, Arabic to Arabs; notions of linguistic possession and transgression surround and pervade literary production in both languages. Writing across those borders is not only an aesthetic but also a distinctly political choice. What, then, does it mean for the idea of Hebrew as the eternal language of the Jewish people and as the national language of the Jewish state when Palestinian Arab citizens choose to write in Hebrew and Israeli Jewish citizens choose to write in Arabic? Alternatively, what does it mean for second- and third-generation Mizraḥi Jews, descendants of Arabic-speaking parents and grandparents, to write in a Hebrew that cannot elide the traces of the sticky Arabic-language past?

THE NO-MAN'S-LAND OF LANGUAGE:
ARABIC AND HEBREW IN ISRAEL/PALESTINE

In 1979 Anton Shammas, then a young poet and now the most established Palestinian Israeli writer of Hebrew, titled his second Hebrew collection *Shetaḥ hefker* (*No-Man's-Land*). The volume closes with these lines:

I do not know.
A language beyond this,

5 In speaking of “Palestinians” here, I refer to Palestinian citizens of Israel. In Israel, “Jewish” and “Arab” are seen as “nationalities,” not just ethnic tags. Although my analysis focuses on culture produced in the State of Israel, I use the term “Israel/Palestine” to acknowledge the de facto political, cultural, and linguistic realities of a binational collective, and also because the temporal range of my narrative incorporates the pre-state period. When I write “Israel and Palestine,” I refer to the entire area encompassing the State of Israel, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, which includes Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel as well as Palestinians living under Israeli occupation without citizenship. In that case, my use of the term “Palestine” is meant to acknowledge the reality of this name and all it connotes for millions of Palestinians and others worldwide, not to map it onto any precise political borders; readers of different political persuasions may interpret it geographically as they wish.

And a language beyond this.
And I hallucinate in the no-man's-land.⁶

What is the “no-man's-land” of this hallucinating poet? In Hebrew, the term *shetaḥ hefker* (literally, “a territory of abandonment”)⁷ signified the partition dividing Jerusalem into Arab and Jewish sections before the 1967 war. As Gil Eyal notes, the word *hefker* itself is an intensely loaded term that in the Jewish tradition connotes lawlessness and loss. Linguistically, it is associated with *hitparkut*, becoming a non-Jew, “thus connoting a zone where identity dissolves, where the Jew merges into the Gentile.”⁸ In the literary context in question, the no-man's-land is at once a space *between* Hebrew and Arabic and a space *outside* the ethnocentric domain that equates Hebrew with “Jewish,” Arabic with “Arab.”⁹ It is not a utopia; to the contrary, not knowing a language “beyond this”—beyond the politics of conflict and separation—Shammas is doomed to eternal wandering in the forsaken zone between two alienated languages. In the early 1980s, not long after the publication of his poem, Shammas had prophesized, “This whole thing is a kind of cultural trespassing, and the day may come when I will be punished for it.”¹⁰ Nonetheless, I argue, there is a redemptive side to this act of trespass. Through those very wanderings, we uncover a space of alternative poetic visions and cultural possibilities. This space emerges from the ground up through individual acts of translation and literary imagination; it provides a zone of passage for symbols and ideas to migrate between the two languages. In short, it is a space of poetic trespass, where writers transgress the boundaries of language and identity inscribed in the sociopolitical codes of the state.

Poetic Trespass charts the literary topography of this no-man's-land. It examines the interaction of Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine from the inception of Zionist settlement to the present, and limns the place of Arabic within the modern Hebrew imagination. In Israeli society, Hebrew

6 Shammas, “Yud-gimel drakhim le-histakel be-ze,” *Shetaḥ hefker*, 46. For an analysis of the poem, see Levy, “Borderline Writers,” and idem, “Self-Portraits of the Other”; also Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 123–127.

7 Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, 127.

8 Eyal, *Disenchantment*, 7–8.

9 My concept of the no-man's-land as a zone between languages and outside nationalist-monolingual cultural space is influenced by Anuradha Dingwaney in Dingwaney and Maier, eds., *Between Languages and Cultures*; see chapter 4 in this book. Karen Grumberg observes that Shammas's deployment of the biblical construction *me-’ever mi-ze* (“beyond this”) in the poem connotes the ancient conflicts over territory that defined the Israelite nation; as such, “Shammas's no-man's-land coalesces issues of language, place, and conflict” (*Place and Ideology*, 123–124). I borrow “a space between places” from Grumberg.

10 Shammas, “Diary,” 29.

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and Arabic are extremely potent cultural and political symbols, markers of identity, and repositories of past and future visions.¹¹ As one of the most politically resonant symbols of collective identity, language is not just the raw stuff of literature but can also be a literary topos, an object of representation, in its own right; as Mikhail Bakhtin would have it, language in literature is always both *represented* and *representing*.¹² Expanding upon this premise, the book investigates the multifaceted roles of Arabic within the past and present lives of Modern Hebrew literature and culture. How has Hebrew been invented, interrupted, reimaged, and then rewritten through the voice, the trace, and, at times, the conspicuous absence of Arabic? I closely examine how Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Israeli authors use literature as a space for representing language as a contested site of history, memory, and identity, and how they have reenvisioned both Arabic and Hebrew through a dialogue between the languages. One of the curious aspects of this phenomenon is that authors on both sides have contributed to the Hebrew-Arabic no-man's-land as a dynamic space of literary and cultural interaction even in the absence of a corresponding space of political dialogue, and despite the great incommensurability of resources devoted to Hebrew over Arabic.

As Israel's two official languages, Hebrew and Arabic coexist uneasily within a rigid political and social hierarchy. Israel was created as a Jewish state and a *Hebrew* state; the revival of Hebrew was the heart of the nation-building project. Today, Hebrew is the public language of state and society, while Arabic is largely relegated to private use behind closed doors.¹³ Hebrew literature and culture are valued as spiritual and national assets, while Arabic, the language of the enemy, is viewed as a socially, politically, and culturally inferior tongue, valued mainly for its uses in the military and state security services. Finally, and perhaps most important, Hebrew is still viewed in Israel as a *Jewish* language, a language that may be used by Palestinian Arabs but is nonetheless the exclusive cultural "property" of the Jewish people; Arabic, a marker of Otherness, has been delegitimized as a "non-Jewish" language despite

11 Sociolinguist John Edwards explains that the distinction between the "communicative" and "symbolic" functions of language lies "in a differentiation between language in its ordinarily understood sense as an instrumental tool, and language as an emblem of groupness, a symbol, a psychosocial rallying-point" (*Language and Identity*, 55).

12 Bakhtin, "From the Prehistory of Novelistic Discourse," 45. I apply Bakhtin's insights about the represented and dialogical nature of language in the novel to literary discourse more generally.

13 Even within the Palestinian public sphere, Hebrew interference characterizes spoken Arabic (as detailed in chapter 1). The Israeli public sphere is dominated by Hebrew.

the long history of Jewish life in the Arabic-speaking world.¹⁴ In theory, then, Hebrew and Arabic ought to have separate and clearly demarcated, if adjacent, lives within the State of Israel. Yet nearly 20 percent of Israel's citizens are bilingual Palestinian Arabs,¹⁵ while roughly half of Israeli Jews have roots in Arabic-speaking countries.¹⁶ Moreover, thousands of Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza possess knowledge of Hebrew through labor in Israel or incarceration in Israeli prisons. Thus in reality, Modern Hebrew as a living language in Israel/Palestine has always been shaped through contact with Arabic, particularly colloquial Arabic but also classical (literary) Arabic. Their relationship has informed literature written in Israel/Palestine from the turn of the twentieth century to the present, and it is that little known side of Israeli literature that is this book's central concern.

Following a loosely chronological trajectory, and tying readings of selected literary texts into broader historical and sociological frameworks, *Poetic Trespass* also presents a historical counternarrative: an alternative story of the evolution of language and ideology in the Jewish state. The book takes a long historical perspective, beginning not in 1948 with the foundation of the state but rather at the turn of the century, with the early days of Zionist settlement in Palestine. I demonstrate how Arabic has been both a model and a foil for Modern Hebrew literature and, more broadly, for Hebrew culture, functioning first as a positive, defining presence at a time when Hebrew was mostly absent from the Palestinian landscape and then as the "presence of absence" after Hebrew consolidated its hegemony in Israel. While Arabic was excluded from the edifice, however, it became an important part of the proverbial cracks. As a result, this book tells two distinct, if interrelated, stories about the relationship of Hebrew and Arabic: one is a tale of ambivalent yet intimate entanglements, the other of the imagination that is born of distance. The tension between proximity and distance persists throughout the book and shapes the authors' myriad figurations of language, from Emile Habiby's *faux amis* to Anton Shammas's retreating "self-portrait" to Almog Behar's imminent yet intangible Arabic past.

14 Jews took part in Arabic culture from pre-Islamic times through the twentieth century. The ninth through thirteenth centuries were the apex of Jewish participation in Arabic literature. Small numbers of Jews also participated in the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century *nahda* or revival of Modern Arabic culture in the Levant, and Jews were well integrated into literary and cultural life in mid-twentieth-century Iraq and Egypt (Snir, "Arab-Jewish Culture," and Moreh, "Oriental Literature").

15 Palestinian citizens of Israel, often called "Israeli Arabs," number about 1.3 million.

16 In the 1950s, about half of Israel's Jewish population would have spoken Arabic as a first language.

The protagonists of this study belong to two distinct groups: Palestinian citizens of Israel (often called “Israeli Arabs”; I prefer the term “Palestinian Israelis,” which acknowledges their hybrid identity) and “Mizraḥim,” Israeli Jews with roots in Islamic lands. *Mizraḥi* (plural *mizraḥim*), Hebrew for “Easterner,” refers to a collective identity created in Israel to distinguish the totality of Asian, African, and Southeastern European Jews from the population of Eastern, Western, and Central European Jews, collectively referred to as “Ashkenazim.”¹⁷ When referring to Jews who were born and came of age in the Arab world (not in Israel), I sometimes employ the term “Arab Jews.”¹⁸ I use all these terms with the awareness that they are social constructs; they are not givens, they are not transparent, and they do not imply essentialized or primordial identities.

The book’s juxtaposition of literature written by Palestinian Israelis and Mizraḥim is not an entirely self-evident choice. I bring together writers from the two groups while paying heed to their different positions vis-à-vis the political and cultural centers of power in Israel, and, as follows, their different authorial objectives. Hybridity, it must be noted, does not imply an erasure of power discrepancies; Palestinian and Mizraḥi writing may be productively compared, but that does not mean that their activities take place on a level playing field. Palestinians in Israel enjoy fewer civil rights and less social prestige than do members of any Jewish sector.¹⁹ Furthermore, in everyday life and practice, Palestinians and

17 The newer category “Mizraḥim” has also subsumed “Sephardim.” Although often generalized to include all non-Ashkenazi Jews, “Sephardim” more accurately denotes descendants of Spanish exiles (many of whom settled throughout Greece, Turkey, Italy, and the Balkans and spoke Ladino rather than Arabic), as opposed to indigenous Asian and African Jewish communities. On the creation of “Mizraḥi” identity, see Shohat, “Invention of the Mizraḥim.” For the evolution of “Sephardi” and “Mizraḥi” in contemporary Israeli discourse, see Goldberg, “Sephardi to Mizraḥi.” See also my brief discussions in chapters 1 and 5. Finally, it should be noted that the influx of Ethiopian Jews to Israel beginning in the 1990s presented an additional challenge to the descriptive categories, Ethiopians being neither Ashkenazi, Sephardi, nor (arguably) even Mizraḥi.

18 Historically, Arabic-speaking Jews (with the exception of a small number of intellectuals) did not call themselves “Arabs.” However, in recent years the term “Arab Jew” has acquired currency in academic discourse, thanks largely to the work of Ella Shohat and Sami Shalom Chetrit. The term avoids the anachronism of “Mizraḥim” in a pre-1948 context and retains the sense of a cultural and linguistic association with Arabic. For more on the idea of “Arab Jewish” identity, see Gottreich, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the Maghrib” and Levy, “Historicizing the Concept of Arab Jews in the *Mashriq*”; see also idem, “Mi-hu ha-yehudi ha-‘aravi.”

19 Prior to the large wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Mizraḥim constituted roughly half of Israel’s Jewish population. Yet for all intents and purposes, they were perceived and treated as a minority group. Palestinians in Israel after 1948 became not only an ethnic but also a “national” minority and were placed under martial law until 1966. They are disadvantaged in virtually every aspect of public life in Israel.

Mizraḥim generally have little direct interaction; the common bond of the Arabic language is not strong enough to overcome the strident political and social forces separating “Jews” from “Arabs” in Israeli society, let alone in the occupied West Bank and Gaza. On the political front, although one can find expressions of solidarity and activism linking Mizraḥim and Palestinians from the earliest years of statehood,²⁰ they remained marginal and never developed into a popular movement. A strictly sociological approach to the question of language in the two groups would be comparative rather than integrative; this book argues that the realm of the literary imagination presents us with other possibilities.

In literature, the relationship between Hebrew and Arabic forms a coherent topic of analysis that transcends the Jewish-Arab divide. The “no-man’s-land,” much like the “borderlands” of Chicano literature, is a cultural-political space produced through literary bilingualism, translation, and creative manipulations of language—in this case, through the combined activities of writers from different ethnic, religious, and linguistic backgrounds.²¹ For three generations now, from the 1950s to the present, a small number of authors on both sides of the divide have defied the sociopolitical strictures assigning Arabic to Arabs and Hebrew to Jews. They have done so either by choosing to write in the language of the Other (i.e., Arabs writing Hebrew, Jews writing Arabic), or by finding creative ways to rewrite the Hebrew language from within, often through an actual or imagined dialogue with Arabic. Potent historical and cultural symbols and themes migrate back and forth between writings by Palestinian and Mizraḥi authors, blurring the boundaries of cultural origins and linguistic ownership.²² In a nation-state that places an ideological premium upon its language and literature, these transgressions can be deeply unsettling. What is at stake for Jewish and Palestinian authors in choosing to write in the language of the Other, or, in the case of young Mizraḥi writers, of symbolically reclaiming Arabic as a Jewish language? How have notions of language and identity been disputed through the

20 For examples in the realm of scholarship, see Shohat, “Sephardim in Israel” and Joseph Masad, “Zionism’s Internal Others.”

21 As much as it is a space of division and separation, the borderland is still a metaphor of human presence. As Gloria Anzaldúa and others have shown, even as the border enforces separation and difference, borderlands themselves become a fertile space of hybridity. The border has also been adopted as a metaphor for language and bilingualism in the Israeli/Palestinian context, in which so much of life is about space and control of space. In the work of bilingual Hebrew-Arabic writers, the border often presents itself as an existential condition.

22 Examples of symbols and themes utilized in both languages include *trees* (Bardenstein, “Threads of Memory”), *caves* (Levy, “Nation, Village, Cave”), and *muteness* (Khoury, “Rethinking the *Nakba*”). The “presence of absence” as a shared trope is discussed in part 3.

literary exchanges of Arabic and Hebrew? My exploration of these questions traverses a variety of texts, some of them well known, others virtually unknown, all of which I selected on the basis of their thematic concerns and linguistic strategies.

Although broader literary landscapes are mapped throughout the book, *Poetic Trespass* is not intended to be an inclusive survey of either Mizraḥi or Palestinian-Israeli writing, but rather a study of the questions I have posed, as examined through complementary literary and historical perspectives. Moreover, the book focuses on the multiple roles of Arabic in the imagination of Israeli Hebrew, rather than the question of Hebrew in Palestinian Arabic writing.²³ The preponderance of the book thus deals with literature written in Hebrew although every chapter contains discussion of Arabic, and chapter 3 is devoted entirely to Arabic-language prose. In addition to looking anew at Hebrew literature through the extracanonical perspective of minority writing, *Poetic Trespass* also reexamines the Hebrew literary “center” (represented by the canonical poets Bialik and Tchernichowsky) as read through Mizraḥi and Palestinian eyes. The Arabic language figures to a minor degree within Hebrew literature by some Ashkenazi Israelis, notably the novelist S. Yizhar and the poet Avot Yeshurun, as well as a small group of pre-state writers mentioned in the following chapter.²⁴ This book, however, does not address these writers, inasmuch as my focus is not simply on appearances or representations of Arabic language within Hebrew literature but rather on a sustained literary engagement with the *idea* of language as it is manifested in the Hebrew-Arabic no-man’s-land—a topic I find most salient within the works of the writers I have included.

While *Poetic Trespass* reads these literary works in the context of Israeli society and culture, that is not their only possible point of entry. As will be discussed in chapter 3, it would be misleading to characterize a book such as Emile Habiby’s *The Pessoptimist* as either a “Palestinian” or

23 Have Palestinian writers in Israel also found ways to rewrite the Arabic language from within; has their writing been influenced by Hebrew language, literature, and culture? Aside from my analysis of Habiby in chapter 3 and my brief discussion of Bialik and Palestinians in chapter 2, this important question lies beyond the purview of the book. The answer must incorporate the broader history of Palestinian Arabic literature from inside the 1948 borders, as represented by writers such as Riyad Baydas, Samih al-Qasim, Muhammad Naffa’, Zaki Darwish, Hanna Ibrahim, and Muhammad ‘Ali Taha. For more on this topic, see the numerous studies by Mahmud Ghanayim, and Mahmoud Kayyal. See also Elad-Bouskila, *Modern Palestinian Literature*, and Jayyusi, *Anthology of Modern Palestinian Literature*.

24 Yizhar and Yeshurun have been studied at length. For one study of Yeshurun’s “Passover on Caves,” which incorporates Arabic words alongside Ladino and Yiddish, see Gluzman, *Politics of Canonicity*, 141–180.

“Israeli” novel—or for that matter even solely as an “Arabic” novel, despite its having been published first in Arabic. My reading of texts with multiple linguistic and cultural affinities is, implicitly, a questioning of reductive framings of literary history; my treatment of any given text as “Israeli” or “Palestinian,” “Hebrew” or “Arabic,” is never meant to obscure the text’s multiple cultural, political, and linguistic locations and affiliations.

The project’s core idea of reenvisioning Arabic and Hebrew in Israel/Palestine through readings of Palestinian and Mizraḥi literature is deeply indebted to the groundbreaking work of Ammiel Alcalay, Ella Shohat, and Hannan Hever.²⁵ Collectively, their writings forged new pathways into the study of Israeli culture. They broke down social, cultural, and political barriers, formed alliances between discourse and praxis, and brought the insights of the global postcolonial experience to bear upon literary and cultural analysis in the context of Israel/Palestine. Building on their conceptual foundations of a counternarrative of Israeli literature and film recuperating Middle Eastern perspectives, this book offers a diachronic narrative of the Hebrew-Arabic “no-man’s-land” that penetrates it more deeply on linguistic and historical levels. The first conceptual shift I undertake is to adopt an analytical frame based on ideas of *language*, to broaden the existing discursive preoccupation with questions of Mizraḥi/Sephardi, Arab Jewish, Palestinian, or Levantine identity in Hebrew literature and film. My second intervention entails bringing Arabic-language texts into direct conversation with Modern Hebrew literature and literary history. In Israel/Palestine, there now is a rich and ever-expanding body of print and visual culture oriented toward the history, memory, and contemporary experience of *ha-mizrah* (in Arabic, *al-sharq*), an umbrella term that can stand variously for the East, the Middle East, the Orient, and the Levant—not to mention pre-state Palestine, a time-bound space peopled by native, Arabic-speaking Muslims, Jews, and Christians. By following the interaction of Arabic and Hebrew from the critical period of Modern Hebrew’s gestation into its maturity, and by utilizing that historical lens as a hermeneutic for reading contemporary literature and culture, we can investigate this expansive body of work on multiple levels reaching far beyond questions of identity. Toward these ends, I employ a deliberately eclectic methodology combining close readings with critical theory, sociolinguistics, and intellectual history to offer an interdisciplinary exploration of this cultural terrain.

25 See, in particular, Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*; Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs*; and Hannan Hever’s numerous articles on minority discourse in Israel, culminating in *Producing the Modern Hebrew Canon* and *Ha-Sipur ve-ha-le’om*.

In the historiographical arena, *Poetic Trespass* joins a broader scholarly effort to reclaim the diversity of language and experience within the history of modern Hebrew culture and to recover alternative histories for Israel/Palestine.²⁶ While the historic multilingualism of Modern Hebrew literature is a topic of growing interest, the scholarship has focused closely on Yiddish and European languages, paying scant attention to Ladino and virtually none to Arabic. On the other hand, some recent studies of contemporary Hebrew literature have addressed Palestinian writers of Hebrew and, to a lesser extent, Hebrew's connections to Palestinian literature; but they have not delved into the intricate work of Arabic within the Modern Hebrew literary imagination or the rich bilingual life of Arabic and Hebrew in Israel/Palestine.²⁷ Historically, Arabic was by no means the only Other of Modern Hebrew; as chapter 1 explains, before and during the formative years of Israeli statehood, all other languages spoken by Jewish immigrants were perceived as challengers to Hebrew, and suppressed. But in the current moment, with Hebrew a fully sovereign national language, Arabic has become Modern Hebrew's dialectical Other.

LANGUAGE AND ITS OTHERS: METALINGUISTIC DISCOURSE AND "HYPERLANGUAGE"

If this book serves as a counterhistory, reconstructing a genealogy of Modern Hebrew and Arabic in Israel/Palestine, its theoretical point of departure is literature's capacity to not only represent but *reimagine*—indeed, even recreate—language. To be sure, studies of literary bilingualism or multilingualism, particularly as they intersect with minority discourse, have explored the relationship of language and literature in depth.²⁸ What is perhaps distinct about the case of Hebrew and Arabic is the intensity and specificity of the political-historical context. The anxiety surrounding the relationship between Arabic and Hebrew, present and palpable in everyday life in Israel and Palestine, elicits what I call a "metalinguistic thematics": a hyperawareness of language, of its

26 See, for instance, Berg, *Exile from Exile*; Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism*; Seidman, *A Marriage Made in Heaven*; Gluzman, *Politics of Canonicity*; Chaver, *What Must Be Forgotten*; LeVine, *Overthrowing Geography*; Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination*; Shenhav, *Arab Jews*; Campos, *Ottoman Brothers*; Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*; Shimony, *'Alsafha-ge'ula*; Starr, *Remembering Cosmopolitan Egypt*; Starr and Somekh, *Mongrels or Marvels*; Pinsker, *Literary Passports*; see also note 27 below.

27 See Brenner, *Inextricably Bonded*; Peleg, *Orientalism and the Hebrew Imagination*; Hochberg, *In Spite of Partition*; and Anidjar, *Semites*.

28 See Arteaga, *An Other Tongue*; Dingwaney and Maier, *Between Languages and Cultures*; the work of Doris Sommer, particularly *Bilingual Games* and *Bilingual Aesthetics*; Zabus, *African Palimpsest*; Ch'ien, *Weird English*; Miller, *Accented America*; and Yildiz, *Beyond the Mother Tongue*.

social and cultural meaning, negotiated within poetry, prose, cinema, and visual art. If, as the linguist Louis Hjelmslev proposed, “metalinguage” is a “language which takes another language as its object,” then metalinguistic writing is that which takes its own uses of language as a thematic preoccupation.²⁹ In his 1923 essay “The Task of the Translator,” Walter Benjamin famously contemplates how translation “powerfully affects” the source language and text, creating an “afterlife” of the original. Through an extended metaphor of a shattered vessel whose fragments are reassembled, Benjamin envisions translation as the liberation of “pure language” from its imprisonment in one form, followed by its transposition and reinscription (or, if you will, its reassemblage) into a different linguistic code. This process, Benjamin says, creates a reciprocal relationship between the translation and source text, while also revealing the essential kinship between languages.³⁰

In a similar sense, in their current zone of contact, Arabic and Hebrew have “powerfully affected” one another, creating new forms of meaning on every level from the individual lexeme to the full text. Furthermore, when the very act of writing in one language versus another is a personal and political statement, the language of the text inevitably doubles as a metatextual discussion *about* language. Modern Hebrew literature in general is infused with a heightened awareness of its own language, as historically Modern Hebrew authors were also linguistic innovators. Given the current relations between Hebrew and Arabic, this kind of

29 As Patricia Waugh explains in *Metafiction*, “The linguist L. Hjelmslev developed the term ‘metalinguage’ (Hjelmslev 1961). He defined it as a language which, instead of referring to non-linguistic events, situations or objects in the world, refers to another language: it is a language which takes another language as its object. Saussure’s distinction between the signifier and the signified is relevant here. . . . A metalanguage is a language that functions as a signifier to *another language*, and this other language thus becomes its signified” (4, emphasis in original). Roman Jakobson also uses the term in his 1959 “Linguistic Aspects of Translation”: “A faculty of speaking a given language implies a faculty of talking about this language. Such a ‘metalinguistic’ operation permits revision and redefinition of the vocabulary used” (234).

30 Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 71–74, 78–81, my emphasis. By explaining translation in terms of fragmentation and the signification process, Benjamin took translation theory well beyond the old metaphors of fidelity and equivalence. But by decontextualizing language and consigning it to the realm of the metaphysical, Benjamin seems to assume that all languages enjoy equal status, and that the translator is unaffected by the forces governing relations between source and target language. He writes that the ultimate purpose of translation is “expressing the central reciprocal relationship between languages,” and that languages are “a priori, and *apart from all historical relationships*, interrelated in what they want to express” (72, my emphasis). From the postcolonial perspective, the problem is that authors, readers, and translators cannot think, let alone write, in terms untainted by power relations; see also the related discussion in chapter 3.

creative tension around language is especially pronounced in writing from their no-man's-land. The cultural space of *in-betweenness*, encompassing contact zone and no-man's-land,³¹ is “a fertile space, and disquieting, because . . . it proves to be a sphere (or zone) in which one both abandons and assumes associations”; it is the space of *transculturación*, where “the dominant language and culture is rewritten, inflected, subverted by the ‘subaltern,’ functions as a form of resistance.”³² To write in one language means contending with the shadow of the other, while contending with the other language often means reimagining the first. As with the case of English-Spanish “borderlands” poets, “No matter which language they write in, the ‘other’ language shines through producing, as it were, an effect of refraction.”³³ In the works discussed in this book, both Arabic and Hebrew are employed in this translational mode of thought whereby the act of writing is an implicit negotiation of language itself.

As a result, I argue, in literature of the no-man's-land, Arabic and Hebrew are bound together in a continuous state of creative tension, generating metalinguistic discourses through performative deployments of language. The same negotiation of symbolic power that inevitably accompanies translation between two languages of unequal status is brought into the *original* writing process: a process of writing both *in* and *between* two languages, that links the political and the metaphysical. Hebrew and Arabic are each redefined through the other; in the process, they become dialogized. This is a case not just of linguistic hybridity, but of an aestheticized hyperawareness of the writing language in relation to its dialectical Other, while gesturing toward Benjamin's “pure language”—the essential part of meaning that resists expression in words.³⁴ Literary language of this type is highly performative, calling attention to itself and potentiating the thematic level of the text with another layer of meaning to tell a second story.³⁵ To denote such excessively performative, self-aware literary language, I use my own term, “hyperlanguage.”

31 Mary Louise Pratt identifies “contact zones” as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (*Imperial Eyes*, 4). To be sure, there are other contact zones in the linguistic and cultural history of Israel: Hebrew and Yiddish, Hebrew and Russian, Hebrew and Amharic, to name a few. The contact zone of Hebrew and Arabic is distinct in that it is the cultural meeting ground of Palestinian Israelis and Mizrahi Jews.

32 Dingwaney, “Introduction: Translating ‘Third World’ Cultures,” 8, my emphasis.

33 Savin, “Bilingualism and Dialogism,” 217.

34 See Benjamin, “Task of the Translator,” 79–80.

35 On performative language—language that serves to construct identity or an understanding of social reality—see Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, and idem, *Excitable Speech*. The concept of “performative utterances” was developed by J. L. Austin; see *How to Do Things with Words*. See also Benjamin Lee, *Talking Heads*, for more on performativity and metalinguistics in the philosophy of language.

Deeply immersed in the politics of language, the authors in question must also overcome the political limitations of language as a discursive apparatus. Resisting the external constraints imposed upon language, they attempt to free it, using literature as a space to reinvent, reimagine, and rewrite language from within. This book examines such cogent negotiations of language by authors who create “double-voiced” discourses characterized by an ironic distance between language and meaning.³⁶ Some authors pen bilingual or multilingual texts, incorporating Arabic and other languages into their Hebrew poetry and prose by means of translation and transliteration. As an extreme example, the late Iraqi-Jewish author Samir Naqqash wrote dialogues in a Jewish dialect of Arabic and translated them into standard Arabic in the footnotes, producing margins that competed with the narrative for primacy over the printed page.³⁷ Other writers, while not technically bilingual, demonstrate a bilingual consciousness in their writing, bringing the absent language into their work through creative thematic devices. They may weave elaborate plots around concepts of language and translation, communication and miscommunication, and the loss of language. Some even create “pseudo-languages,” such as Sami Shalom Chetrit’s aforementioned “Ashdodian”; these act as foils to standard Modern Hebrew (“correct Hebrew” or *ivrit tiknit*).

In all cases, what is at stake in these metalinguistic thematics is the hegemony of standard Modern Hebrew within Israeli public life and culture. As we shall see, for historical reasons to be explained in the following chapters, in Israel, “correct” or “grammatical” Hebrew and high Hebrew culture became socially encoded as Ashkenazi (European Jewish), prompting some Mizrahi writers to explore other ways of writing Hebrew or, simply, other kinds of Hebrew. Thus, while this book focuses on representations and manipulations of Arabic and Hebrew within Israeli literature, it also considers other languages that have been strategically deployed in order to reenvision Modern Hebrew as a Middle Eastern language. In so doing, it challenges the predominant view of Israeli Hebrew as an anomalous Semitic-cum-European language severed from its regional history and ties.

Representing language pictorially as *script* introduces a visual dimension to the portrayal of the relationship between the two languages. Although Arabic and Hebrew are closely related Semitic languages with long and deep historical ties, and both are written from right to left,

36 Cf. Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel.” This term is elaborated in chapter 3.

37 In this respect, Yoel Hoffman is an interesting Ashkenazi counterpoint to Naqqash; in both “The Book of Joseph” and “Katschen,” Hoffman translates German and Yiddish (and in “Katschen” even Arabic) into Hebrew in the footnotes (see Hoffman, *Sefer Yosef*). Naqqash’s use of footnotes, however, is much more extensive.

they employ different and easily differentiable scripts. This orthographic variation lends itself well to visual representations of linguistic identity, whether in visual art or in bilingual printed texts. National monolingualism and the suppression of Arabic as a Jewish language have been contested not only by writers but also by visual artists, and we will encounter some of their images alongside related readings of literature.

THE POLITICS OF POETICS

Given the political implications of writing in the Hebrew-Arabic no-man's-land, what is this book's connection to politics more broadly? This is a study of literature and language in which references to history, politics, sociology, and religion play supporting roles. I am interested in offering an analysis of literature and art, through which one might also glean historical, cultural, or sociological insights, rather than a prescription for Middle Eastern peace or a plea for reconciliation between Palestinian Arabs and Israeli Jews. When dealing with incendiary political contexts, it is easy to lose sight of what is unique about literature as a cultural practice. The connection between literature and reality is notoriously complex, and literature does not reflect reality in a direct, transparent manner; nor does social reality exist outside the conventions of language. Some of the literary texts discussed in this book offer critiques of historical and societal issues ranging from the dispossession of Palestinians to Israel's language policies to the exclusion of Mizrahim from the cultural center. They do not offer solutions, suggest alternatives, or even represent these issues in exacting historical detail; that is not their purpose. In Israel, writers command public respect, and their extraliterary (political and social) views are taken very seriously, but they are not public officials or politicians (although a few of Israel's seminal writers, including S. Yizhar and Emile Habiby, did also serve as members of Parliament). Historically and in far many more contexts, authors have stood at the political vanguard of their societies. As such, their stories, novels, and poems are not always representative of mainstream public opinion, and their goals and methods are very different from those of journalists or historians.

That said, literature in both Israel and Palestine is an intensely political affair. Indeed, it is the political importance of language and literature that lends the current study its extraliterary significance. Literature historically played a prominent and important role both in the creation of Modern Hebrew and in the development of a national culture in Israel. Furthermore, while perhaps not as central to Israeli society today as during the early years of statehood, literature in Israel is still a discursive field of cultural negotiation as well as a barometer of social and cultural

change. Even though this study concerns the Palestinian-Israeli conflict only insofar as it relates to literature and the use of language, we should not overlook the related question of literature's role in the conflict. Consider the fiasco that ensued in March 2000 when Yossi Sarid, then the Israeli minister of education and culture, attempted to introduce a few poems by the late Mahmoud Darwish, the Palestinian poet laureate, into the Israeli high school literature curriculum. After right-wing members of the Israeli parliament threatened a vote of no confidence, the then prime minister Ehud Barak (of the center-left Labor Party) concluded that Israel was "not ready" for the globally acclaimed poetry of Darwish. That a few poems were considered threatening enough to justify bringing down an entire government may give the reader some indication of just how sensitive a political matter literature can be in this intensely nationalist context. Nor is the political role of literature in Israel restricted to its placement within the educational system; the literary representation of sensitive historical topics such as the Holocaust, Israel's numerous wars and conflicts, and the Palestinian *nakba* continue to inspire passionate public debate, often around questions of historical accuracy and inclusion.³⁸ In this sense, the so-called republic of letters is not an autonomous realm; in contexts entrenched in nationalism and political conflict, literature is never very far removed from society.

The book is divided into three parts. The first part—Historical Visions and Elisions (chapters 1 and 2)—reframes the discussion of Palestinian and Mizraḥi writing in Israel/Palestine by revisiting the historical narratives surrounding the formation of Modern Hebrew language and literature. Chapter 1 recounts the role of Arabic in the revival of Modern Hebrew, considers the linguistic dilemmas of Palestinian Israelis and Mizraḥim, and closes with a discussion of literary bilingualism and translation between Arabic and Hebrew. This counternarrative elucidates the evolution of Zionist attitudes toward Arabic from the pre-state period to the present, following them from the early stage when Arabic was romanticized as a model of "authenticity" through its transformation into the "language of the enemy" and the instrumental language of military

38 For example, Elias Khoury, author of *Bab al-Shams (Gate of the Sun)*, was publicly criticized by Israeli historian Tom Segev for exceeding the bounds of poetic license in his portrayal of the Israeli destruction of Palestinian villages in 1948. As Khoury notes, "Literature is not and cannot be a historical reference, and all the novels and poems, both Israeli and Palestinian, that relate fragments of the *nakba* can't be treated as documents, but they can be conceived as mirrors of trends in the ideological scene" ("Rethinking the *Nakba*," 252).

intelligence. Chapter 2 continues the historical critique by returning to a formative moment in the development of Modern Hebrew literature to illustrate how Israeli Hebrew was severed from the history and milieu of Arab Jews. The chapter reconstructs the multigenerational, star-crossed romance of Ḥ. N. Bialik, known as the “national poet” of the emerging Hebrew state, and the “Sephardim” (Sephardi, Mizraḥi, and Arab Jews). Its point of departure is a 1933 ode to Bialik by an Iraqi Jewish poet who portrays Modern Hebrew as the outgrowth of the Sephardi poetic tradition. I read the poem contrapuntally with Bialik’s 1927 lecture contending that the “genius” of Hebrew literature had deserted the Sephardim for European Jews; this is followed by a discussion of Sephardi responses, including one in Arabic published by a Jewish newspaper in Cairo. The chapter concludes with contemporary Mizraḥi rereadings and rewritings of Bialik, in which Bialik himself becomes a literary trope: the emblem of the Ashkenazi-dominated Hebrew establishment that would define Mizraḥim as the “other,” the “marginal,” and the “minority.” These two chapters provide the historical basis for my argument about texts that cross boundaries between Hebrew and Arabic. Reading such texts against the Eurocentric narrative of Hebrew modernity dooms them to the eternal status of a “minority literature” responding to a hegemonic cultural discourse, but these same texts can perform a very different kind of logic when read against a historical perspective grounded in their own cultural matrix, one suffused with the languages and historical memory of *ha-mizrah/al-sharq*, the “East.”³⁹

The following chapters in parts 2 and 3 engage the shared question of metalinguistic discourse in the literature of Israel/Palestine. The second part of the book—Bilingual Entanglements (chapters 3 and 4)—focuses on the Arabic and Hebrew work of Palestinian writers in the State of Israel, while drawing out the underappreciated significance of their bilingual and bicultural engagements. Chapter 3 juxtaposes the Arabic prose fiction of the Palestinian Israeli writer Emile Habiby (1922–1996) and the Iraqi Jewish writer Samir Naqqash (1938–2004). Habiby was a major figure in the Israeli political and cultural landscapes as well as in Modern Arabic

39 This argument builds upon Ammiel Alcalay’s *After Jews and Arabs*, which seeks to resituate Hebrew literary production of Sephardi and Arab Jews within the space of the Levant, a space in which the Jew “was native, not a stranger but an absolute inhabitant of time and space” (1). While Alcalay does not make this argument per se in his book (whose temporal range is vast and exposition schematic), he anticipates it through his critique of the elision of Arab Jewish intellectuals from narratives of Jewish modernity (153–154; see also chapter 2 of this book) and of Israeli literature’s characterization as a “European fiction” (252–253). See also Levy, “Reorienting Hebrew Literary History,” for an expanded discussion of Hebrew literary historiography and Arab Jewish/Mizraḥi writers.

literature. Naqqash was the most important contemporary Jewish writer of Arabic, yet remains virtually unknown. As two native speakers of Arabic who wrote Arabic prose fiction in Israel, they offer an illuminating, if unorthodox, point of comparison. The chapter explores the poetics of misunderstanding in their fiction, elucidating how they thematize communicative failure as one means of contesting dominant historical narratives and undermining their faulty logic. It also offers the first comparative study of Habiby's critical reception in both Arabic and Hebrew, based on my bilingual reading of his masterpiece *al-Mutasha'il* (*The Pessimist*).

With chapter 4, we turn to the Hebrew poetics of Palestinian Arab writers. The discourse on this topic was long dominated by a single author and work, Anton Shammas's landmark 1986 novel *'Arabeskot* (*Arabesques*), now complemented by a growing interest in the Hebrew novels, journalism, and television writing of Sayed Kashua.⁴⁰ Yet the scholarship has overlooked the larger body of Hebrew poetry by Palestinian Israeli authors, including two volumes by Shammas. In this chapter I explore how three Palestinian poets engage the Jewish literary corpus and employ biblical allusion within their Hebrew verse—a process I dub “Palestinian midrash.” Their Hebrew poetry self-consciously problematizes its own relationship to both Hebrew and Arabic, once again eliciting the phenomenological qualities of “language and its Others.”

Part 3—Afterlives of Language (chapters 5 and 6)—addresses the question of language in the Hebrew poetry and prose of contemporary Mizraḥi writers, with attention to intersections of recent Mizraḥi and Palestinian Israeli discourses. This part of the book maps out the two main avenues of innovation in Mizraḥi uses of language. It explores Mizraḥi literature as a space of intervention in which writers have repeatedly challenged the hegemony of Modern (Israeli) Hebrew. At the same time, it traces a complementary process: the evolving role of Arabic in the Hebrew work of first-, second-, and third-generation Mizraḥi authors, in which Arabic is gradually transformed from an “instrumental” to a “symbolic” language. Chapter 5 addresses the prose fiction of first- and second-generation Mizraḥim, illustrating how first-generation authors, who were compelled to change their writing language from Arabic to Hebrew, use Hebrew to represent lost Arabic worlds; the second part

40 In the past decade, Sayed Kashua has attracted international attention for his gripping and sardonic novels concerning Palestinian life in Israel, as well as for his weekly satiric column in the Hebrew daily *Haaretz* and his weekly television drama *'Avoda 'aravit* (Arab Labor). The first program to present Palestinian characters speaking Arabic on Israeli prime time, it premiered in 2007. See Grumberg, *Place and Ideology*, chap. 3; Gil Hochberg, “To Be or Not to Be”; and Shimony, “Shaping Israeli-Arab Identity.”

takes up second-generation Mizraḥi writers, who salvage the linguistic residue of the past to dialogize their representations of “immigrant Hebrew” and displace standard Hebrew (*ivrit tiknit*) as the signifier of Israeli identity. Chapter 6 continues the discussion through readings of poetry and a transgeneric short story/prose poem. Focusing on the idea of the “presence of absence,” I explore the imaginative ways second- and third-generation Mizraḥi authors use language not only to rewrite but to *unwrite* the idea of Israeli Hebrew, rejecting it altogether. Their ingenious linguistic prestidigitation entails devising “secret” languages as well as writing in archaic forms of Hebrew and in pseudo-languages, while Arabic eventually becomes a metaphor of sorts, a “place holder” for a sense of fragmented identity and the loss of origins. At the same time, the “presence of absence” informs Palestinian writing and art on the erasure of Arabic and of Palestinian memory. The chapter also incorporates visual representations of the Mizraḥi relationship to language. Collectively, these texts and images reimagine Israeli Hebrew as a language intimately intertwined with Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages.

The conclusion returns to Palestinian Hebrew writing with a poem by Salman Masalha and its intertextual invocation of a sonnet corona by the canonical early twentieth-century Hebrew poet Saul Tchernichowsky. Masalha’s poem, provocatively titled “Ha-tikva” (“The Hope”), appropriates the name of Israel’s national anthem while depicting the aftermath of a violent event, presumably a terror attack. I unravel the layers of meaning ensconced within the poem, which I read as a political and aesthetic intervention, to arrive at the fundamental questions implied by its act of bearing witness: How do we define the political agency of witnessing? How can the outsider, the Other, bear witness to violence and disaster; how can she or he be heard? The book concludes with these broader questions about the epistemological limits of representation in the no-man’s-land of language.

In this book, then, I approach language as a multifaceted prism: language as a medium of communication; language as an object of desire, of possession, of control, and of resistance to control; language as a part of the social world, a subject of representation; and language as a kind of metaphysical excess, uncontainable, unrepresentable, and in some sense unknowable. What does it mean to write between Hebrew and Arabic—or Aramaic, or Judeo-Arabic, or a combination thereof—in Israel/Palestine? Through the explorations that follow, we will illuminate the poetics of the no-man’s-land: a poetics of trespass.