REPRESENTATION OF SPACE IN MIZRAHI FICTION[*]

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Mizrahi writers are aware that their location in Israel—the geographical periphery—had hitherto not been portrayed in Israeli literature. This constitutes a cultural position of alienage and exceptionality and at the same time a new and concrete place—poor neighborhoods in southern Tel Aviv and western Jerusalem and development towns established in the 1950s and 1960s at the country's border and in sparsely populated areas as part of a policy of dispersal of the Mizrahi population and distancing it from the country's center. The disconnection from the centers arouses a Mizrahi consciousness of the periphery which divided the Israeli space, imagined to be uniform, into ethnic zones. Mizrahi fiction gazes into the distances of consciousness that distinguish the geographic center from its margins in a dual perspective: it examines the margins with a gaze that creates awareness of the existence of a prestigious and attractive center and examines the center itself as a place that cannot be penetrated by Mizrahim and turned into a home for them. In this sense, the spatial consciousness of Mizrahi authors highlights a lack of belonging—both to the periphery and to the center—and a constant migratory movement between these two split geographical foci. I argue that, instead of the hegemonic unitary and complete space, Mizrahi fiction of the second generation—texts written during the last two decades—offers an ethnic perception that divides space, thus defining a "diasporic" point of view.

1. NATIONAL SPACE AND ETHNIC SPACE

In recent years, the term "Mizrahi" has been used by Mizrahi writers themselves as well as by scholars to refer to the part of Israel's population whose origins lie in the Islamic world.[1] "Mizrahi" has replaced other terms that had previously been in common use, from "Sephardi" (a term that originally designated religious and traditional ethnicity) to the Hebrew term "עדות המזרח" (oriental communities). This latter phrase was the one used in mainstream Zionist ideological discourse, in which European-born Israelis were representative of the nation, while those who came from the east were "ethnic" and sectorial. "Mizrahi" translates literally as "eastern" or "orien-

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tal," but it bears connotations that explain its broad acceptance. It designates not only a common origin in the Islamic world and a connection to its culture, but also a common experience of marginalization in Israeli society. It confirms the existence of a common identity that has developed among the Israelis who arrived from different Arab countries and signifies the desire for a future of renewed interaction and coexistence with the Muslim-Arab East.[2]

The body of works written in Hebrew by Mizrahi writers bears, I argue, the imprint of experiences, cultural positions, and ideas that, despite many differences and even contradictions, create a common discourse that may be called Mizrahi fiction. This generalization does not disregard the various kinds of מזרחיות (Oriental-ness) that can be found in Israel and the different literary paths that emerged since the 1990s. I maintain, however, that in their work all these writers express, in one way or another, a common awareness of the experience of immigration that they underwent via their families and their marginality in Israeli culture.

This essay intends to examine the way in which Mizrahi fiction of the second and third generation[3]—texts written during the last two decades—represents Israeli space. The Mizrahi point of view is aware of the distinction between national and ethnic spaces and of divisions and enclaves within the ostensibly unitary national space. As such, it differs from the hegemonic Ashkenazi literature, which overlooks these internal divisions of Israeli space.

The theoretical background for my reading of Mizrahi literature is the book of Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Lefebvre argues that ideological values mark out spaces and determine the way they appear in public and private consciousness. He maintains that space is not a physical fact. Rather, it comes into being when values shape physical geography. Generally, the symbolic-political-social nature of a given space overshadows its material nature. But this precedence is asserted covertly, so that the

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[2] E. Shohat, "Rupture and Return: The Shaping of Mizrahi Epistemology," *Hagar, International Social Science Review* 2 (2001): 61–92.

[3] In the historiography of Hebrew literature, the concept of literary generations seems to be very fruitful (to cite just a few examples, the Bialik generation, the generation of 1948, and the second Holocaust generation are periodic divisions that scholars accept as valid). Belonging to a certain generation is defined biologically (age), socially, experientially, and above all poetically and ideologically. One can draw a line between the first, second, and third generations in the accepted chronological way (writers born in the 1930s are first generation, those born in the 1950s and 1960s, the second generation, and those born in the 1970s and 1980s, the third generation), yet the representatives of both younger groups were born into immigrant families or arrived in Israel as children and, in most cases, were educated in Israeli schools. In this context, I am not concerned with the distinctions between the works of second and third generations, if there indeed are any significant differences.

political power relationships and social conditions that produce perceptions of space are not visible.[4]

Lefebvre defined the dynamic that accompanies the process of the production of space by using such concepts as "absolute space" and "differentiated space." Absolute space, which denotes affiliations based on religion, nation, blood, land, and language, makes a given place common and homogeneous by highlighting symbolic spatial locations—holy sites, memorials, and prestigious buildings that represent the unified center, the state. Absolute space disregards the actual layout of the land and alternative perceptions. Differentiated space, in contrast, grows out of the eruption of contradictions and differences in society, highlighting a heterogeneity that calls into question the unity of the common space.

Lefebvre's concepts preceded the growing interest in the tension between the national ideology and its state apparatuses on the one hand and regionalism on the other. In postcolonial discourse, the national was perceived as an artificial layer of economic, political, and cultural interests imposed on the regional cultures and identities.[5] If nationalism is considered an act of geographical violence[6] and concrete geographical identities ought to be restored, regionalism promises a critical framework, which accounts for the diversity and scope of cultural identities. Regionalism aims at setting marginal and vernacular cultures free from national discourse,[7] focusing on what has been marked as a "margin" and what nevertheless survived the instrumental impositions of nationalist politics.[8]

Lefebvre's concepts, alongside the contrast between national and regional perspectives, are useful in reading the Israeli hegemonic policy regarding space in a critical way and discerning its inner ambivalence. On the one hand, depictions of the land of Israel in the culture of the pre-1948 Yishuv period reflect the Zionist discourse about the empty land, which the pioneers would settle and make bloom. Over time, this culture has helped constitute how its Jewish consumers relate to collective spaces—the landscape of the land of Israel, the city, the kibbutz. Adriana Kemp has written about the metaphysics of space fostered by the state via institutionalized activities,

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[4] H. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), p. 51.
[5] Similarly, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (*Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* [Minneapolis: Minneapolis University Press, 1977]) has proposed to distinguish between the unifying and common (which he calls "space") and the particular and distinctive ("place").
[6] E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).
[7] R. M. Dainotto, *Place in Literature: Regions, Cultures, Communities* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000), p. 5.
[8] R. M. Dainotto, *Place in Literature*, p. 9.

such as school field trips, hikes "from sea to sea," pilgrimages to Masada, "homeland studies" classes, geography, and outdoor activities. These produced a connection between territorial borders and national identity.[9] In the minds of the Zionists, the whole land of Israel appeared as an object of spiritual desire. The real place was no more than a means to be used in fashioning a national space: "Whether they went to Mt. A or the B River, to the C Ruin or to Kibbutz D, the Sabras always sought the whole beyond the specific point, the Land."[10]

There were differences between these specific spaces, but clear boundaries and the consciousness of borders were generally limited to what was included and excluded, against the background of the national struggle between the Jews and the Arabs. This was expressed in the distinction between Arab and Jewish communities within the state of Israel and the separation between the state and its neighbors. The boundary marked the extent of the national space, and even more so its imagined internal unity. The border was salient, becoming a "national icon" that served to tie "all members of the nation, both newcomers and old-timers, into a single imagined and indivisible community."[11] The planning of the city of Beersheba is another example of how this ideology worked: decision makers were led to disregard the old town's existing geography, climate, and original Turkish-Arab architecture, thus attempting to impose an ideal of modern Western culture on the desert town.[12]

On the other hand, Israeli policy created internal lines of division, in particular ethnic division. This process can be discerned in spatial planning, for example, in the assignment of land for settlement and the establishment of development towns in frontier regions. The policy in this field aims not only at settling these outlying areas, but also at distancing their (Mizrahi) inhabitants from the foci of economic, cultural, and political power.[13]

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[9] A. Kemp, "הגבול כפני יאנוס, מרחב ותודעה לאומית בישראל" (The Janus-like boundary: Space and national consciousness in Israel), in מרחב, אדמה, בית (Space, land, home; ed. Y. Shenhav; Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute; Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003), pp. 64–66.

[10] Z. Gurevitch and G. Aran, "על המקום (אנתרופולוגיה ישראלית" (On the place [Israeli anthropology]), *Alpayim* 4 (1991): 30.

[11] A. Kemp, "The Janus-Like Boundary," p. 60.

[12] H. Shadar, "מקום של מהגרים" (The immigrants' place), *Alpayim* 30 (2006): 181.

[13] O. Yiftachel and E. Tzfadia, מדיניות וזהות בערי הפתוח: השפעת התכנון והפתוח על יוצאי צפון אפריקה, 1952– 1998 (Policy and identity in development towns: The influence of planning and development upon immigrants from North Africa, 1952–1998; Beersheba: Negev Center for Regional Development); A. Kemp, "'נדידת עמים' או 'הבערה הגדולה' שליטה מדינתית והתנגדות בספר הישראל" ("Migrations of peoples" or "great conflagration"? State control and resistance on Israeli periphery), in מזרחים בישראל (Mizrahim in Israel; ed. H. Hever, Y. Shenhav, and P. Motsafi-Haller; Jerusalem: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2002), pp. 36–67.

Lefebvre's thesis aids in understanding intra-urban spatial divisions, such as that between "white" Ashkenazi prosperous Tel Aviv and its "black" Mizrahi poor sections.[14] Mizrahi periphery, despite the (relatively small) Ashkenazi population presence in these areas,[15] is a margin built into Israeli spatial planning. Development towns create the frontier area where the state seeks to increase the Jewish population. Like their counterparts in most Western countries, major Israeli cities are notable for ethnic polarization between center and periphery, corresponding to socioeconomic polarization.[16] The margins thus appear everywhere—in poor neighborhoods in south Tel Aviv and Beersheba, in western Jerusalem, in the satellite cities around Tel Aviv and Haifa, and in the development towns founded in the 1950s.

If we turn our attention now to Israeli hegemonic literature, we see that it shared the same ambivalence concerning space. Although it was aware of internal divisions between the center and periphery—that is, of ethnic divisions within the national space—it has refrained from giving its full attention and literary expression to intra-national ethnic oppositions and to the experience of marginality. These have always been overshadowed by the Jewish-Arab conflict, which served as a mechanism for creating an imagined unified community.[17]

This paper focuses on the difference between the national perception of space, pertinent to the hegemonic Israeli fiction, and the ethnic Mizrahi per-

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[14] S. Rotbard, עיר לבנה, עיר שחורה (White city, black city; Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2005).

[15] Kalush and Lu-Yon note that it was not just Mizrahi immigrants who were sent to development towns; the same happened in the early 1950s to immigrants from Europe (Romanians were settled in Ofakim, for example). But the great majority of these Ashkenazim managed to move out in the years that followed and to improve their social and economic position. By contrast, the great majority of the Mizrahim were unable to do so (R. Kalush and H. Lu-Yon, "הבית הלאומי והבית האישי: תפקיד השכון הצבורי ביצוב המרחב" [National and personal home: The role of public housing in the consolidation of space], in מרחב, אדמה, בית [Space, land, home; ed. Y. Shenhav; Tel Aviv: Van Leer Institute; Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2003], pp. 166–198). Kalush and Lu-Yon further point out that in recent decades, people have been settling voluntarily on the periphery. These newcomers are for the most part middle-class Ashkenazim who seek to leave urban areas of the country's center in search of larger, detached homes in pastoral locations, with lawns and gardens. For the most part, they move into community settlements—small ex-urban towns—subsidized by the state. The state encourages these settlements by offering them significant incentives, such as top-quality locations and public services, generally at the expense of the land reserves of development towns and Arab population. Seeking class and ethnic homogeneity, the inhabitants of community settlements have segregated themselves from nearby development towns and maintained separate public services. See also O. Yiftachel, "אי שוויון זה עניין של גיאוגרפיה" (The quality is a matter of geography), *Panim* 4 (1998): 32–43.

[16] Y. Omer, "האקולוגיה החברתית של מטרופולין תל אביב והערים שבתחומה" (Social ecology of metropolitan Tel Aviv and surrounding cities), in עיר ישראלית או עיר בישראל? שאלות של זהות, משמעות ויחסי כחות (Israeli city or city in Israel? Questions of identity, meaning, and power relationships; ed. T. Fenster and H. Yacobi; Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute; Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), pp. 166–190.

[17] Disregard of divisions in the national space can be found, for example, in Z. Gurevitch and G. Aran's, "On the Place," which proposes a distinction between actual space, which they call "the little place" (המקום הקטן) and the abstract imagined national space, which they call "the big place" (המקום הגדול).

ception of space, which offers an alternative perspective, from the eyes of those who inhabit the periphery.[18] Although Mizrahi periphery lacks the long local history and culture, which were signified by "regionalism," it still falls into the framework of a marginalized place that has yielded an alternative perspective concerning the peripheral, the central, and the national spaces. Social and geographical marginality creates a stratified and divided view of space. I will examine four aspects of this claim: (1) Mizrahi literature generally stresses the presence of distinct ethnic spaces; (2) the urban central space (Tel Aviv will be my test case) is depicted from a peripheral-marginal point of view; (3) the same is true of the representation of the national space, which loses its accepted Zionist-Israeli meanings: Mizrahi writers describe these spaces as strangers who do not belong; (4) Mizrahi fiction constitutes a "minor literature,"[19] that is, an alternative to Israeli hegemonic literature.

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[18] Only a handful of studies have focused on the spatial perception of the people at the margins. Worthy of note among them is the article by Oren Yiftachel and Erez Tzfadia on the level of satisfaction in development towns. The authors surveyed the inhabitants, asking them to choose between diametrically opposite statements, such as whether their town is friendly or not, moving forward or backward, safe or dangerous. The survey confirmed their claim that development towns produce a sense of community and belonging among their residents (O. Yiftachel and E. Tzfadia, "Between Periphery and 'Third Space': Identity of Mizrahim in Israel's Development Towns," in *Israelis in Conflict* [ed. A. Kemp et al.; Brighton-Portland: Sussex Academic Press, 2004], pp. 212–213). However, this cannot explain the unique nature of consciousness in the periphery. In contrast, the work of Yitzhak Schnell and Ravit Goldhaber, which examines different aspects of the sense of belonging to a place among the inhabitants of five Tel Aviv neighborhoods of different ethnic and socioeconomic characters, reaches the conclusion that rootedness in a neighborhood does not necessarily mean identification with it (Y. Schnell and R. Goldhaber, " הבנייה החברתית של שכונות בתל אביב-יפו" [Social construction of neighborhoods in Tel Aviv-Jaffa], *Ofaqim Begeografia* 53 [2001]: 41–58). The residents of the Ajami neighborhood meet the criteria for being rooted in their community—few ever leave. But they display an utter lack of identification with the neighborhood because of its low symbolic, social, and economic standing and because it is a ghetto that they have no way of leaving. True, these two studies examine different sets of communities, which could perhaps explain their contradictory conclusions. But, more importantly, both are based on opinion surveys and do not examine the more complex and creative possibilities that the marginal culture offers.

One of the few research projects that have offered an initial outline of the ways in which a consciousness of marginality came into being is one that focuses on popular films of the 1990s. Y. Ben-Zvi, "מרכז ופריפריה בקולנוע הישראלי של שנות התשעים" (Center and periphery in Israeli cinema of the 1990s), *Alpayim* 30 (2006): 248–256, identifies two popular cinematic genres that parallel each other. One focuses almost exclusively on Tel Aviv and the country's center, as if it were a bubble without any connection to the larger scope of Israeli experience. The other takes as its subject alternative Mizrahi communities, stressing the connection between peripheral geographic location, ethnicity, and social status. Instead of the integrative "melting pot" picture offered by the hegemonic narrative that originates in the center, this latter genre raises the subversive possibility of a multiplicity of sectorial centers and constructs different, incompatible points of view.

[19] See G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986).

2. THE NEIGHBORHOOD AS A CLOSED PLACE

The Mizrahi public space makes almost no appearance in Ashkenazi Hebrew literature.[20] The periphery, by its very nature and location, is a place that is supposed to remain transparent, absent from Israeli fiction. Sharon Rotbard has called it the "black city," in contrast with the term "white city," an appellation used of the old quarter of Tel Aviv and those of other cities in the country's center. The white city is a focal point of hegemonic Zionist portrayals of the country:

> It is an invisible city: A "black city" is everything that does not belong to the story of the "white city," and everything that the "white city" does not want to see. It is the city that no one talks about, no one writes books about, and no exhibitions are ever mounted about. In the 1930s, it was the city of the manual laborers who built the "white city," and in the 1990s it is the city of those who renovate it.… The explicit lack of value signified by the absence of the "black city" in the story of Tel Aviv produces a situation in which entire sections of the city are not only systematically neglected but are also systematically made worse, because the "black city" is the place where everything NIMBY is sent, everything that people do not want to see in the "white city"—nuisances, metropolitan infrastructure like dumps, high power transformers, junkyards, and central bus stations.[21]

Rotbard does not explicitly address the ethnicity that is today a salient characteristic of black neighborhoods and that also characterized them when they were built in order to house the immigrants of the 1950s. But his political approach makes it possible to see the stamp of disregard and neglect in Tel Aviv's southeastern neighborhoods, to expose the process by which the urban space was created, and to show the way, in which the state creates a white urban identity and, alongside it, a periphery that is meant to remain invisible.

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[20] One of the few references is in Y. Hendel, *Street of Steps* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1955). The voice of an anonymous narrator reveals a hegemonic gaze directed at the Mizrahi space from an ideological distance of rejection and derision at its lack of modernity: "The Street of Steps is not a street but rather a kind of alley made of steps, where the homes lean in toward each other, as if no air separated them. And if the doorways are empty—they seem to be lifeless. In the winter the homes are hardly ever heated, or not at all, and their walls sweat and get moldy." The depiction moves seamlessly from the look of the homes to the look of their inhabitants. Such a portrait of human wretchedness is meant to join together with the depiction of the Mizrahim as spatially and culturally backward: small children "burst out, their bare, frozen purple flesh evident under their myriad rags, their mouths imbibing the mucus from their noses. They always have runny noses and coughs" (Y. Hendel, *Street of Steps*, pp. 9–10).

[21] S. Rotbard, *White City, Black City*, pp. 121–122.

Rachel Kalush and Hubert Lu-Yon have shown that four planning prac-
tices shaped and created the environment of the public housing projects built
on the periphery and outside the large cities.

1. Isolation: Peripheries were planned as segregated spaces without links
   to the larger environment. They provide housing and services to their
   residents, disconnecting them spatially from centers of economic,
   social, and political power.
2. Uniformity: Neighborhoods consisting of standardized, monotonous
   buildings create a residential environment that ignores the specific
   character of each place as well as of its residents. It does not respond
   to their feelings or wishes, fostering anonymity and alienation be-
   tween the inhabitants and the characterless structures they live in.
3. Transience: These neighborhoods were built without sufficient in-
   vestment in development and infrastructure, which were generally of
   low quality. One of the reasons was that the apartments were in many
   cases owned by public or state companies. Since the residents did not
   own their homes (as do inhabitants of the well-off central neighbor-
   hoods), they had little incentive to keep up the buildings or to feel a
   communal sense of belonging.
4. Hierarchy: In the peripheral neighborhoods, the demarcation between
   public and private spaces was sharp rather than graded. The result was
   that homes were well kept-up inside, but the public space immediately
   outside their walls did not belong to anyone, and thus became a no-
   man's land that no one had a reason to keep up.[22]

These practices provide the background for understanding the represen-
tation of peripheral spaces, especially for understanding their inhabitants'
alienation from their places of residence.

This discussion of different representations of Mizrahi spaces in literature
continues and broadens Batya Shimoni's chapter on the ways in which
authors of the second generation related to this space. She sums up her
argument as follows:

> In the neighborhood story, there is a desire to show that the degenerate, destruc-
> tive, castrating liminal state, with its beginnings in the time of "absorption" and
> the transit camp, did not only fail to end with the demolition of the transit
> camps, but was in fact reproduced and perpetuated in the poor neighborhoods,

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[22] R. Kalush and H. Lu-Yon, "National and Personal Home," pp. 179–188.

which were a later incarnation of these camps. The transit camp, which by the early 1950s was identified with destitution, especially among immigrants from Islamic lands, metamorphosed into a neighborhood that was ostensibly part of the big city, but which was actually segregated from it like a malignant tumor, with its residents, the great majority of them Mizrahim, doomed to a life of deprivation in the shadow of the First Israel.[23]

Shimoni's claim discerns the direct progression from the transit camp of the early 1950s to the neighborhoods and other peripheral settlements populated by Mizrahim (and in recent years also by Russians and Ethiopians, who are, like them, subaltern groups) and the way in which the baring of this progression in literary writing is a political act. However, her claim creates a fallacious unity and levels the range of Mizrahi responses to spatial constriction. It is this variety of response that I will stress here. Furthermore, I will argue that the perception of the Mizrahi space, which is not restricted to the subject of the neighborhood—it relates to city centers and to the national spaces as well—offers an alternative to the view of the hegemonic Israeli space.

The representation of the periphery in Mizrahi fiction does not display an explicit political stance. Neither does it juxtapose central and under-privileged areas. It prefers to focus on the inhabitants of the periphery in their own place and distinguishes between the distant or external points of view of those who left the neighborhood or town and moved to the urban center and the proximate or internal point of view of those who learned to turn the neighborhood into an intimate place that elicits identification rather than a desire to move away to the center. The first point of view stresses the neighborhood's unsightliness and lack of a future:

> To his left rose gray apartment blocks, very similar to the blocks in the neigh-borhood where he'd grown up in Ashkelon: clotheslines, clothes that looked as if they would never be clean again, a few children crossed the street, ignoring the traffic, forcing it to slow down.… To his right, ugly stone buildings licked the sky, the sky was lower than in Sderot, an anonymous artist had installed a mosaic on one of the structures, presenting a rough reproduction of a Renoir.… A stretch of lawn covered with brown bare patches, the wires of the screen gate flapped in the slight breeze.[24]

> Everyone reviled this neighborhood, which looked like a ghetto. Its buildings were dilapidated, nearly falling apart. The clotheslines were heavy with cloth

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[23] B. Shimoni, על סף הגאולה (On the threshold of redemption; Or Yehuda: Kineret, 2008), p. 272.
[24] S. Adaf, קילומטר ויומיים לפני השקיעה (One mile and two days before sunset; Jerusalem: Keter, 2004), pp. 197–198.

diapers, some of which had been spread out to dry on shrubs and/or fallen to the ground. The people of Kfar Saba whispered among them about the lousy children from Yoseftal and about the adult murderers who walked around with knives.[25]

These passages describe neighborhoods that are precisely located on the Israeli map. Shimoni has correctly noted that the Mizrahi neighborhood depicted in Zmira Ron's novel does not resemble the Eastern European Jewish ghetto, familiar from stories of Mendele, Berdichevsky, Bialik, and others. It bears a much stronger resemblance to a black ghetto in New York—half-ruined, ramshackle, and home to armed criminals.[26] This observation can, I believe, be broadened to include the socio-cultural affiliation of Mizrahi writing. It does not adopt the Eastern European Hebrew example. On the contrary, it adopts the paradigm of Afro-American protest. In doing this, it contributes to replacement of hegemonic national categories (Jews versus Christians) with post-colonial ethnic ones (blacks versus whites, Mizrahim versus Ashkenazim), which were not previously present in Hebrew culture.

Similarly, the neighborhood could appear both as a nameless place without clear territorial boundaries and as a place whose public spaces, including buildings, lacked any symbolic value expressing neighborhood identity.[27] It has deteriorated from neglect while failing to encourage its inhabitants to address its appearance in any meaningful way:

> Our neighborhood could be any neighborhood. It has no name, it has no boundaries, it only has an approaching end. A scorpion lurks under each stone, ants grind up the concrete, empty the trees, worms prey on the tables, and rust eats the city benches. Our neighborhood is so low that it doesn't even have a name. It is like the collapsing scenery of a play that will never open. There is nothing fashionable, authentic, exotic in our neighborhood, just a neighborhood that someone has forgotten. Our clubhouse looks like a low concrete cube with a cardboard sign that says "The Wasted Gang." A pile of school chair cadavers stands next to the clubhouse, along with a poplar tree, a failed attempt at a lawn, and the remains of a fence. A huge metal electric Hanukah menorah stands on the roof, donated by the city in a moment of generosity, but I've never seen it work. Apparently, another failed project.[28]

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[25] Z. Ron, את הירח של חיי (You're the moonshine of my life; Tel Aviv: Bimat Kedem Lesifrut, 2000), p. 71.

[26] B. Shimoni, *On the Threshold of Redemption*, p. 268.

[27] Y. Schnell and R. Goldhaber, "Social Construction of Neighborhoods," pp. 41–58.

[28] K. Oz, עבריין צעצוע (Petty hoodlum; Tel Aviv: Keshet, 2002), pp. 102–103.

The humorous tone does not detract from the reliability of the depiction or the sharpness of its critique—first and foremost of the neighborhood's residents and their backwardness. The urge to leave the neighborhood, to "get out" and move to the city in order to begin life anew is a dream shared by many residents of the periphery.[29] A few of them actually succeed in making a provisional move to the center (in Adaf, Sucary, Avni, Rabinyan, and Oz) and to produce a narrative of escaping from the space they see as closed-off, violent, and intolerable.

This craving to leave the neighborhood appears in the writing of the first generation as well. It depicted the transit camp as a temporary location (a kind of non-place that elicits alienation rather than belonging), which the residents will leave for permanent homes in an undefined future. This is generally accompanied by a sense of anger and that of being discriminated against by government authorities and the absorbing society. However, Mizrahi writers have also internalized, to a certain extent, the hegemonic attitude that pinned Mizrahi backwardness on their own lack of modernity.[30] In their works, they even note the steps required for modernization: learning Hebrew, gaining an education, enlisting in the army, and adopting Western mores, all of which are perceived as keys to social mobility. In his first novel, Shimon Ballas describes how the camp's inhabitants deal with the absorption authorities.[31] He stresses over and over again that, despite their preconceptions and social struggle against injustice, their campaign fails because of their inability to organize effectively and to overcome personal rivalries—including the male chauvinism that plagued Mizrahi society. For Ballas, modernization was the key not only to future integration into Israeli society, but also to success in dealing with the state's mechanisms of exclusion of the Mizrahi immigrants. The need to acquire a (Western) education and to shake off markers of social and cultural (and even mental) backwardness in order to improve their social and economic position is a goal, on which Ballas's protagonists (like Sami Michael's in *All Men Are Equal, But Some Are More* and Amir's in *Scapegoat*) set their sights.

These writers, who in their early works depicted life in the camps, did not persist in addressing in their later works the Mizrahi periphery that formed

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[29] S. Shilo, שום גמדים לא יבואו (No elves will come; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2006), p. 168.

[30] Much has been written about the modernism thesis. The anthology *Mizrahim in Israel* is devoted to grappling with it critically. We may presume that the modernity ideal not only was adopted after immigration to Israel, but also characterized the cultural position of Sami Michael, Shimon Ballas, and other writers who moved in Communist and intellectual circles in Baghdad.

[31] S. Ballas, המעברה (The transit camp; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 1964).

after the camps were dismantled. They chose to disregard the authorities' responsibility for the backwardness built into the periphery, as well as the inhabitants' own responsibility for its ongoing deterioration. In contrast, the writers of the second and third generations, who grappled with the plight of the now well-ensconced periphery, could no longer use the modernization discourse. The society they wrote about was no longer one of new immigrants that had to overcome its initial culture shock and internalize the concepts of the absorbing society—which was still the case in the 1960s and 1970s.

These younger writers addressed an established immigrant society where backwardness had become, from its own point of view, a way of life; its spatial marginality seemed to be an incontrovertible and inalterable fact. In this context, modernization turned out to be a vulgar parody of the educational ideal that promised integration into the Israeli melting pot. Kobi Oz provides one example, recounting the story of a worker in the municipality's sewer department who comes up with the idea of launching, in his neighborhood, a "hygienic" *shawarma* restaurant. To house it, he chooses a structure that has cardboard Christmas trees and plastic flowers hanging on its walls. His waiters are required to shave their hair (because it symbolizes the dirty and the primitive), and the dessert offered on the menu is Bavarian Cream ("You suddenly find yourself on the peaks of green Bavaria, next to snow-topped wooden houses, sheep, bells, yodeling singers and a full-figured blonde in a pinafore").[32] This ironic story shows how easy it is to buy into borrowed, external markers of modernization (which fail—no patrons show up at the restaurant, and the entrepreneur returns to his job in the sewer department) and to disregard the need to rectify the systems of social and cultural repression that are characteristic of the periphery.[33] In the absence of confidence in the possibility of rectifying the periphery from within or in the relevance of the imported ideas of modernization, the disconnection from the Mizrahi space and migration to the center becomes the most common story. It allows personal but not collective repair.

One might read Yosi Sucary's *Emilia* as a response. Its protagonist grows up in Pardes Katz, a poor and crime-ridden neighborhood of Bnei Brak, just east of Tel Aviv. After his army service he moves to Tel Aviv and even tries to get admitted to college in the United States as a way of leaving Israel. In the end, he returns to the neighborhood of his youth. His dream of escaping

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[32] K. Oz, משה חוואטו והעורב (Moshe Chuwato and the raven; Tel Aviv: Keshet, 1997), pp. 29–32.

[33] D. Busi, הירח ירוק בוואדי (The moon goes green in the wadi; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2000) and S. Shilo (*No Elves will Come*) offer similar stories.

from the backward town and from a country that he sees as being infected with prejudice against the Mizrahim is transformed by a dream of repair. His aim now is to destroy the drug den and the Sephardi synagogue, which served as teenage refuges during his boyhood. In their place, he plans to build a science college, in the hope that this will challenge the passivity, a characteristic of the inhabitants of the periphery ("that life was fated to take place somewhere else").[34] Ultimately, he fails to implement his educational program, but at the conclusion of the story, he opens a science summer camp as a partial and short-term realization of his dream. Sucary's story does not seriously examine the protagonist's inner grappling with these issues and his ability to translate the sharp political discernment displayed by the narrator into the language of narrative and experience, but it certainly signifies how much such translation is needed.

The two latter examples sharpen the connection between life on the geographical margins and an additional concept that generally characterizes the periphery—provincialism. The term describes people living in a place far removed from the center, with the distance expressed in cultural inferiority. Provincialism denotes both the center's disdain for the periphery and its culture and the awareness of the periphery's inhabitants that the center sets the proper cultural standards. Maoz Azaryahu has stressed that the consciousness of provincialism is not a dissenting, active, political point of view, but rather a position of reconciliation with inbuilt exclusion:

> Provincialism is built on a feeling of disparity and inferiority that, instead of being formulated in terms of discrimination, are constructed on a sense of inferiority. As a marker of inferiority, provincialism is a byproduct of the consciousness of being on the margins.[35]

Mizrahi fiction gives sharp expression to the feeling of provincialism that emerges on the periphery and seeks to present it in all its ludicrousness. It does so despite its lack of confidence in the possibility of changing not only the socioeconomic reality but also the way the inhabitants perceive themselves.

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[34] Y. Sucary, וידוי ,אמליה ומלח הארץ (Emilia and the salt of the earth: A confession; Tel Aviv: Bavel, 2002), p. 63.

[35] M. Azaryahu, "תל אביב: בין מרכז לפריפריה" (Tel Aviv: Between center and periphery), in בין שדרות ושדרות רוטשילד. יחסי מרכז-פריפריה בתרבות הישראלית (Between Sderot and Sderot Rothschild: Center-periphery relations in Israeli culture; ed. O. Helbruner and M. Levin; Tel Aviv: Resling, 2007), p. 170.

3. THE NEIGHBORHOOD AS AN OPEN PLACE

In some cases, the neighborhood is a place of abandonment and disengagement or, alternatively, of social activism that seeks to rectify those flaws. But other depictions view the neighborhood, with all its backwardness and cultural insularity, as a universal (not just ethnic and local) arena inhabited by complex human beings who display both weaknesses and strengths. It is no coincidence that the narrator who offers us this perspective is, in some works, a young boy whose well-developed sense of reality does not impinge on his potent imagination. Once we get beyond grotesque depictions and politics, we find rich human experience alien to all stereotypes.

This point of view can be found only in a very preliminary way in the works of Busi and Adaf. Toward the end of the former's *The Moon Goes Green in the Wadi*, the book's protagonist, a boy, sees his reflection in the bathroom tiles. The reflection grows a pair of angel wings and flies out the window in order to soar "over the jammed main street, over the roofs of the poor houses and old shacks, over the sewage-flooded meat market, over the smoky poker lairs," over the drug dens, the synagogues, the soccer field, the stinking wadi, even "over the depression and despair of the dying neighborhood," until it returns to its place on the bathroom wall as "a tired and frightened reflection with a long, deep crease in its forehead."[36] The neighborhood is depicted as a collection of concrete places, each of which appears over the course of the story as the site of an act of local violence. But this imaginary, one-time flight reveals the protagonist's—and the author's—need to maintain a physical and perceptual distance from the concrete. In Adaf's *One Mile and Two Days before Sunset*, a similar movement grapples with the feeling of insularity. Influenced by a televised version (not the original!) of Lewis Carol's Alice books, which depicts how it is possible to enter a mirror in one place and exit through another mirror elsewhere, the protagonist fantasizes:

> All mirrors turned into doors and secret passageways. We would dream that we went through one of the mirrors in one of our homes into a Sderot that was identical to the Sderot we knew, except that there were no people there. Dalia would say, "Now we will enter through the mirror in the bathroom and come out through the mirror in the corner grocery store and we'll eat all the chocolate there."[37]

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[36] D. Busi, *The Moon Goes Green*, p. 214.
[37] S. Adaf, *One Mile and Two Days*, p. 241.

The game of imagination makes it possible to cross boundaries and attenuate the closed-off nature of the development town, but the improvisation is not depicted as an acceptable approach or as a position to be taken seriously by the narrator, beyond its being a children's pastime.

In *Bound*, Suissa is the first Mizrahi writer to empower this internal point of view and to create a place that is simultaneously real and imaginary, suffocating yet infinitely ruptured. His subject is the neighborhood of Ir Ganim in western Jerusalem, a collection of asbestos shacks, multi-story public housing projects, and prefab houses. At its center is steep Costa Rica Street. The area around it stretches from the Katamonim neighborhoods via

> Malha hill, crowned with cypresses and the minaret of a mosque, via the valley where the train track runs, to the Arab villages of Ein Hanya and Batir, surrounded by grape arbors, to the orchards of the Yemenite farming villages of Ora and Aminadav, and the road descends into Christian Ein Kerem with its groves and church steeples.[38]

Note what is absent from this topography, which runs through public housing projects, Arab villages, and a "Christian" area, including peripheral farming villages. We do not see the familiar Jerusalem, with its downtown and well-off neighborhoods, the backdrop to so much of Hebrew fiction from S. Y. Agnon to Amos Oz and David Shahar; they do not exist in the consciousness of this narrator and his fellows. Suissa does not limit himself to the official place names since the landscape is redefined by its inhabitants; so we encounter Sewer Bay, the Fields of Destruction, Sardine Cave, Dick Mountain, and Ass Mountain. Street names and numbers hardly ever appear; the buildings of the public housing project are still identified according to their numbers rather than their street addresses. Yet, beyond this painstaking description of the neighborhood's geography, the novel includes depictions that run in opposite directions. One stresses spatial closure, the second the infinite space that breaks through into the confines of the neighborhood.

Within the ostensibly stable picture of a neighborhood that seems to be imprisoned within itself, we find a modern street where Ayush lives to be a terrifying riddle; the fact that he has never managed to get to the end of his street creates a sense of an abyss that lies in wait under the crowded concrete buildings. At the end of the novel, this discomfort erupts into a series of topographical ruminations:

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[38] A. Suissa, עקוד (Bound; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1990), pp. 96–97.

> Just as his parents' apartment abutted the end of prefab number 416, together
> with all the apartments that hung above the abyss around the axis of the stair-
> well, which was planted deep, deep in the ground over the bomb shelter—so
> could the prefab buildings that stood beside the abyss of Costa Rica descend
> to infinity around the axis at the head of which rose Ir Ganim Gimmel, as long
> as that infinity had some sort of base, because otherwise what would it stand
> on?[39]

In accordance with this duality, the story offers a fantasy that integrates the neighborhood's concrete, stable elements of the housing project and the endless chasm:

> Here was his father, leaning on his cane above the stairway that was hanging by
> a hair, chuckling at him and descending slowly between the iron beams,
> serenely but also as if making a joke, toward the abyss that yawned under them.
> And suddenly, just when he placed his foot into the abyss, a frighteningly
> narrow sidewalk appeared, like a line drawn by a scribe's quill pen, so narrow
> that he placed one foot in front of the other and swayed like a novice acrobat,
> and then he tipped and plunged, slowly, slowly, playing a trick, into the infinite
> space to its side, where a concrete fence suddenly appeared for him to lean on.[40]

The boy's imagination creates a twofold perspective that turns his neighborhood into a hermetically sealed place that is breached in every direction, physical to the point of pain but also infinite and abstract. Realism and fantasy appear side by side as part of the same continuum. This is seen most dramatically when the novel strikes its final chord. Ayush, longing for the infinite, volunteers to ride a brakeless wooden go-cart down the steep street.[41] The narrower the neighborhood turns out to be, the more it demonstrates that it must be broken through, whether via fantasy or through a real act that ends the story with a terrifying suicide.

In the midst of this depiction of the neighborhood's polarization as a "concrete colony" and an infinite abyss, a middle ground appears, with elements of both in attenuated form—the cinema. The movie theater is, on the one hand, a suffocating, filthy place with the mildewy odor of a cave, the deafening sound of cracking sunflower seeds, glass bottles careening down the aisles, slamming chairs, and the whistles and catcalls of the excited audience.[42] On the other hand, the cinema is likened to the "doubtful, sweet

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[39] A. Suissa, *Bound*, p. 268.
[40] A. Suissa, *Bound*, p. 111.
[41] A. Suissa, *Bound*, p. 262.
[42] A. Suissa, *Bound*, p. 88.

temple that was his entire world" and to "a desolate church in the desert."[43] The cinema serves as a significant arena, the place where the protagonist meets the heroes of the Westerns that he craves to see, so that he can use their speech and thought in reality, shaping it according to the model of a foreign world. The bridging of the open and closed space, the imaginary and the real, is thus accomplished through the space of the cinema, which is a lone, and unique, place of refuge in the neighborhood.

Ronit Matalon's *The Sound of Our Steps* offers a similarly complex picture, which combines the open and closed space, the imaginary and the real. On the one hand, it describes an outlying community—unnamed, referred to simply as "there," somewhere between Petah Tikva and Savyon—as a run-down, ugly place. Fields of thistles stretch between one-story structures and it is traversed by a single road connecting earthen paths. The village's town hall and clinic stand on a hill, and there is a park where an old, smelly pool had been. On the other hand, this detailed external description is an expression of a human presence, actively involved in shaping the landscape, making it "open":

> The neighborhood may have been as flat as a palm. It may have been level and even, and perhaps its curves, folds, slopes, gullies, and hills were the products of our imaginations, topographical features that never were or, more accurately, we consent to imposing a mental topography on the physical one, to distortions and exaggerations of scale, to concepts coined in relation to places that fossilized in language and consciousness without being connected to anything.[44]

However, the imposition of a mental world beyond the physical world is not meant to cast doubt on the latter's existence. Instead, it empowers the physical, creating an impression that the landscape is not just a set of independent data; rather it is actively created and constituted and thus subject to constant change. Matalon's physical topography, as concrete and clear as it might be, is no more than a projection of the mental topography of those who live in the landscape. This observation applies to nearly every detail in the novel:

> There was the big "up." Sami said: "I'm going up." In the great "up," a ten-minute walk from the shed, via the asphalt road or the field of thistles, was a bare patch with worn wooden benches, two snack stands, a small grocery store, and a movie theater. But these places were just the framework of the

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[43] A. Suissa, *Bound*, pp. 88, 153.
[44] R. Matalon, קול צעדינו (The sound of our steps; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008), p. 137.

> "up," not its features, the framework that was entirely molded by the loafing of "everyone" waiting for "everyone," the self-immersion, the stories that people told themselves and each other, stories that did not go anywhere.… They loafed on the un-lawn or on the benches, Sami and his friends, engrossed in that gibberish late into the early morning hours, sustaining each other. Afterward they went together to urinate in the field, again and again putting off their departure from the place, from that thing that was themselves, the best of them themselves. That's what the up was: the place where the best of them was put out to air again and again.[45]

As with Suissa, language and linguistic production create the world by giving it a name, populating it with speech and with human presence. Not for a moment do language and linguistic production leave the physical to itself, the "framework" without the "features" of human presence that turn the space into a place in which the I, the personality of the individual, family, and social group is revealed. Just as the personal home space is an integration of physical and mental topography, so the neighborhood space integrates the external (derelict periphery, no more than that) with the internal. The neighborhood does not appear as a limiting force, an obstacle that elicits an aspiration to move out of it and to the center. Neither does it arouse nostalgia. It appears as an open place that invites an individual to make a place for oneself, a place in which human beings live, for which they are responsible, and, principally, a place in which they find a home where they can actualize the best of their humanity and intimacy. The external spatial privation is a background that requires placing a human face in the center, with great confidence in the person's ability to constitute herself from and against the materials of her environment.

4. THE CENTER, SEEN FROM THE MARGINS

Images of the neighborhood are not produced in isolation from images of the city, the center. Even characters that live serenely in their home and neighborhood spaces (as do those of Berdugo, for example) are never weaned from making distinctions between the center and periphery. The city is always perceived as being on the other side of the boundary that separates it from the neighborhood; it is always beyond the reach of the periphery's inhabitants. Tel Aviv could be a trenchant example of the subversive

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[45] R. Matalon, *The Sound of Our Steps*, pp. 137–138.

Mizrahi perspective. This exemplary Jewish space, the "first Hebrew city"[46] that grew into the paradigmatic modern Israeli "city that never stops," is observed in Mizrahi fiction from a marginal point of view.

When Mizrahi characters visit the distant central urban center, it is a special event, a journey to a foreign clime. The heroine of Orly Castel-Bloom's *Human Parts* calls Tel Aviv long distance from the nearby city of Lod and visits well-off North Tel Aviv for the first time. Yosi Avni relates that the first and only time that his entire family traveled together outside of their neighborhood was on a trip to Tel Aviv. They walked half an hour through fallow fields to the next town where they crammed themselves into a cab along with baskets full of sandwiches and drinks for the trip.[47] Berdugo offers an account of brothers traveling to a wedding in Tel Aviv. They have a great time driving down the city's streets staring at the traffic lights, the tall buildings and the display windows.[48] The one-time trip to the center reconfirms the distance between it and the periphery, as well as their existence as separate worlds: "Life seems so different in a place that is not ours."[49] Suissa's Ayush ends up by chance in one of Jerusalem's affluent neighborhoods and has an anxiety attack:

> His heart pounded loudly, as if he had infiltrated across the border into a place where a different language was spoken and people had odd names.… It's too quiet here, he thought, half a minute after you cast your black shadow in one of the entranceways, someone will suddenly drag you in by the ear and ask what you are doing here. And I really don't have anything to do here.[50]

Sarah Shilo's Kobi, who lives in a development town in the northern Galilee, saves up for years to purchase the "model apartment" he saw on a construction site in Rishon Lezion, just south of Tel Aviv. He imagines

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[46] Several scholars have written about the mythical Zionist as well as post-Zionist meanings of Tel Aviv: J. Schlör, *Tel Aviv: From Dream to City* (London: Reaktion Books, 1999); B. E. Mann, *A Place in History: Modernism, Tel Aviv and the Creation of Jewish Urban Space* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006); M. Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv: Mythography of a City* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2007). Mann and Azaryahu focus mainly on the changing Ashkenazi hegemonic narratives of the city; the latter, although he refers in his last chapter to "the real Tel Aviv" (M. Azaryahu, *Tel Aviv*, pp. 247–258), does not relate to the peripheral, southern areas of the city, thus overlooking any ethnic reality that is incongruent with its mythical representations. Mann, while referring to the fact that Tel Aviv is located on the ruins of five former Arab villages that vanished from Israeli-Jewish memory, does not refer to later ethnic differences that turned Tel Aviv into a multi-cultural city. Only Schlör is aware of these, emphasizing the "ethnic conflict that is such a prominent feature of Israeli society [that] literally takes the form of a 'North-South conflict' in the configuration of Tel Aviv" (J. Schlör, *Tel Aviv*, p. 23).

[47] Y. Avni, כנגד ארבעה בנים (Against four sons; Tel Aviv: Zmora Bitan, 1998), pp. 47–48.

[48] S. Berdugo, ילדה שחורה (A black girl; Tel Aviv: Bavel, 1999).

[49] S. Berdugo, *A Black Girl*, p. 43.

[50] A. Suissa, *Bound*, p. 55.

himself in the center: "It's like you are in a different world, the soil isn't soil, the air isn't our air, and the sun, when it looks over there, it's not the sun that looks at the town."[51]

But the imagined city is nothing at all like the real city, and the fortuitous or ongoing experience of the city that inhabitants of the periphery have in the center inevitably subverts the accepted stereotypes. The mythologization of the imagined center collapses the moment the real center becomes known. Castel-Bloom's protagonist has a difficult time accepting the disparity between her preconception of north Tel Aviv, and especially of the homes of its wealthy residents, and the shabbiness she sees on her visits there: "As a girl in the transit camp, she did not imagine that this was the way a home in north Tel Aviv would look: stifling and stinking of cigarettes, each wall painted a different color."[52] In fact, the buildings in her own neighborhood look nicer and newer.[53] When Tel Aviv manifests itself as a place where one lives day to day, it ceases to be a symbol of an unattainable, wealthy, Ashkenazi "north." People who move to the city from the periphery find themselves immersed in the unfamiliar beat of the southern part of the city with its open-air markets, workshops, noise, foreign languages, brothels, Russian groans and curses, and the roar of Herzl and Levinsky Streets. All these make up "an entirely new Tel Avivian urban sound."[54] The Mizrahi wants to experience Tel Aviv as a vocal space devoid of all historical past and all social and cultural meaning—that is, without any markers of ethnic exclusion:

> To lie in the dark and listen to Tel Aviv. Elish thought that he could fritter away years of his life that way, thinking about how the city goes by, how every car horn excavates its way in the dark, tearing off pieces of time, the din of engines that perforates Tel Aviv.… If he tried hard, he could draw from the depths of the Tel Aviv night the sounds, of which it was composed, the tapping of high heels on the sidewalk, laughter, a cry. The range of his hearing expanded, encompassing Dizengoff on one side, King George to the east, ceaselessly ablaze with movement, and then to the west, until it took in the sea.[55]

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[51] S. Shilo, *No Elves will Come*, p. 170.
[52] O. Castel-Bloom, חלקים אנושיים (Human parts; Tel Aviv: Kinneret, 2002), p. 166.
[53] O. Castel-Bloom, *Human Parts*, p. 162. K. Grumberg, *The Poetics of Place: Unraveling Home and Exile in Jewish Literature from Israel and the United States* (Los Angeles: University of California, 2004), refers to the racial and spatial fragmentation of the Israeli society reflected in this novel but not explicitly to the representation of those different spaces, especially not to the Mizrahi neighborhood.
[54] S. Adaf, *One Mile and Two Days*, p. 17.
[55] S. Adaf, *One Mile and Two Days*, p. 325.

But this esthetic position, which focuses on the city's sound and motion, bears witness to the existence of the center's margins. They can be found not only in the city's south, but in its north as well. Oz, for example, depicts the Tel Aviv experience of Zoey Amsalem of Kiryat Malachi as an exodus from the spatial-cultural insularity that characterizes the periphery and its patriarchal society into a life of open spaces and free movement:[56] "In Tel Aviv I feel like my own mistress, managing my own life, melding, flowing."[57] Nevertheless, her social position in the city remains marginal—among punks, freaks, and anarchists. Her self-positioning among the marginal types of the city's north is evidence that Mizrahi immigrants to Tel Aviv manage, at most, to find a place on its margins, to drift from one interim location to another and from one job to another. The flight from the periphery and the family that is not "modern" continually reinforces the unattainable desire to clutch at the center. They live for a short time in the illusion that that the gates are open, but for the most part, they experience, time and again, exclusion. Those who come to Tel Aviv remain visitors and never become natives.

Sucary, in contrast, tells the stories of people for whom Tel Aviv was a runway, from which they took off to another place. He also writes of places in the city that gave him the feeling that he "shed his 'Oriental-ness' without casting it off."[58] The place he sought in Tel Aviv is drawn out of his imaginings about the train station, which blends into a single sound of people speaking Arabic (the language of his Mizrahi grandmother), German (the language of the philosophy he reads), and English (the language of the large world he intends to emigrate to)—with no Hebrew at all. He finds such a place near the old opera house:

> I suddenly grasped that this was the place I was looking for. My brain photographed it from every possible angle. I told myself that even if it did not look this way tomorrow, at least I'd be able to draw a piece of it out of my memory, a piece of the real Tel Aviv that could serve as a foundation on which I could build my imaginary additions. The next day the place really did seem different. It no longer had the necessary mixture of Western European and North African appearance. I did what I had to do. I drew out of my head my initial impression and built a complete picture from it. I created a stage, on

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[56] The education offered by schools on the periphery is also described using spatial metaphors of insularity. The school is likened to a monastery; it produces princesses imprisoned in a tower of boredom, waiting for a prince to rescue them from captivity and take them into the confinement of married life: S. Adaf, *One Mile and Two Days*, p. 325.
[57] K. Oz, *Petty Hoodlum*, p. 41.
[58] Y. Sucary, *Emilia*, p. 37.

which all my unchallenged heroes appeared—Sartre, Camus, Algiers and Paris. The headwaiter at the café under the Tel Aviv opera was a precise copy of the Parisian waiter that Sartre mentions in *Being and Nothingness*. The wooden shack, part of which leaned against boulders at the water's edge, was for me Masson's shack on the Algerian beach, the one visited by Marceau, the hero of Camus's *The Stranger*.

    I felt at home. But this time I didn't feel so much at home. I taught myself to bear this home on my back wherever I went.[59]

Sucary seeks in Tel Aviv the place closest to his imagination, a place that brings together and mixes West and East. It is not about the sounds of the city's streets or the intoxication of liberation felt by the suburbanite in the city. Tel Aviv still symbolizes the oppressive Ashkenazi center. But Tel Aviv is also the "other space," removed from the Israeli and Hebrew urban space by the force of the narrator's intellectual independence and his belonging to an anti-colonial literary tradition. He has learned to use this as a means of survival in real Tel Aviv.

Nir Damti, protagonist of Oz's *Petty Hoodlum*, has no interest in Sartre, Camus, or Tel Aviv. He has never screwed a girl from Tel Aviv's fashionable Shenkin Street, and he enjoys doing just that with Zoey (whom he sees as a Shenkin girl) on the grave of Israel's national poet, Haim Nahman Bialik, in the cemetery on Trumpeldor Street in Tel Aviv.[60] The narrator arrives in old Tel Aviv with a sad memory connected to its cultural symbol—Bialik's home:

> They took us there in school. Old Tel Aviv. The house of the national poet. All that bull. I don't know from what date to what date Mr. Bialik lived, but my grandfather must have worked across from his house with a squeaky wagon full of watermelons, and every time the poet tried to write something, my father would shout: "Watermelon! Watermelon!" Trying to get some attention.… But it didn't bother Bialik in the least. For him, my father was empty air. A piece of the landscape. How did they use to put it, just a *frenk*, a Sephardi.… My grandfather and his entire neighborhood worked by the houses of the nation's great men and women in Tel Aviv. And they all pissed on them with no hands. I'm sure that back then they also thought they were Arabs.[61]

Israel's national education system instilled Bialik's poetry in the national memory, but the narrator knows that the national culture also includes the

[59] Y. Sucary, *Emilia*, pp. 24–25.
[60] K. Oz, *Petty Hoodlum*, p. 55.
[61] K. Oz, *Petty Hoodlum*, pp. 48–49.

disregard by the people of the center for the inhabitants of the periphery. The Ashkenazi leadership ignored the Mizrahi public; the creators of the hegemonic culture ignored its passive consumers. The bawdy metaphor of pissing with no hands to convey this disregard also sheds light on the narrator's stance of resistance. He returns to Bialik's grave in order to do something "rude," revealing that, in the mind of his Mizrahi protagonist, there is still a historical score to be settled. Bialik's connection to Tel Aviv involves a history of repression of Orientalness that overshadows, for the moment, its official place in Zionist history. Nir Damti wanders near Bialik's house with a backpack that should make him suspicious as a possible terrorist and thus threatening to the residents of Tel Aviv. Mizrahiyyut was and remains transparent to this urban environment, and Mizrahi protest is apparent only when it takes on Arab traits and succeeds in rousing fear.

The infiltration of Arab elements into Tel Aviv is portrayed here as a threat, even though the text is humorous and light. In the passage, Oz also portrays a possible Mizrahi takeover of Tel Aviv's cultural symbols. Nir Damti's dream is about penetrating national Hebrew cultural institutions of the center and recasting them as Mizrahi-Arab:

> With the money I make I will buy, as if it was nothing, a copy of *Maariv* [a daily newspaper] and change its name to *Ma'aruf*, so that it'll be a little more down-to-earth. I'll take in so much money from journalism that I'll put up a huge Arab palace across from Heykhal Hatarbut [the Palace of Culture, home of the Israel Philharmonic Orchestra] and call it Heykhal Hatarbush [the Tarbush Palace]. It'll cost 200 shekels just to get in, and you have to take your shoes off like in a mosque because you have to respect the place.[62]

The construction of a mosque or Arab palace in Tel Aviv is an act of protest. It is representative of periphery's culture, including foreign Arab elements, penetrating the white Hebrew city that, more than anything else, stands for the Zionist presence. Such "blacking" of Tel Aviv, via replacing Hebrew Zionist norms with Arab ones, marks the radicalism of the confrontation between the margins and the center. Oz's humor and lightness are just an esthetic cover for that.

The ambivalence that Mizrahi writers manifest with regard to relations between inhabitants of the periphery and Tel Aviv, the city of the center, runs from the fantasy of settling in the center to the realization that this is impossible, to finding out that the ethnic boundary is solid. Even when

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[62] K. Oz, *Petty Hoodlum*, p. 152.

Adaf's protagonist tries to settle in Tel Aviv to join the music scene, he is unable to find a home in the big city and returns to the periphery just a few years later. In Sucary's book, the protagonist flees to foreign Tel Aviv in order to escape his suffocating Mizrahi neighborhood. But he only finds, at most, a fleeting feeling of home. Similarly, in Oz the craving to penetrate the alienating Tel Aviv can turn into a bawdy act or a dream of taking over its financial and cultural assets and aggressively inserting an Arab mosque into the urban arena. This dramatic whole reconfirms the stable presence of the boundary that isolates the periphery from the center and the Mizrahim in the periphery from the Ashkenazim in Tel Aviv. It is this same boundary that remains invisible and absent in hegemonic Israeli literature. Mizrahi writing's handling of divided spaces can thus be seen as a subversive act that opposes the national concept of space. In ignoring the sectorial nature of the space and the presence of other spaces and peripheral points of view, that concept seeks to reinforce the marginal status of the Mizrahim in Israel.

5. FROM "THE VALLEY OF JEZREEL" TO MT. HOREB

Like the urban space, perceived as alien and not regarded as a home, the Israeli space as a whole is a place that the Mizrahim reach only in field trips organized by labor unions and Naamat, women's organization of the Histadrut labor federation.[63] Alternatively, they may get out into the country on school trips[64] or during army service.[65] The "land" always remains unfamiliar and nameless. This spatial experience has a primal sensuality that rises above any ideological, symbolic connection. A depiction of a site in Sinai is an example:

> We reached a place that looks like God's own acre. That's how unreal it was.… The place made me forget the presence of my school friends … I attended only to the experience itself. Two days after we arrived, when I sat on a lonely, rocky cliff and gazed out through the crisp air between the water and the sea, longing to become one with it, I even succeeded for a short time.[66]

Such spatial experiences are not common to the Israeli culture that relates to the landscape through the mediation of national historical knowledge.[67]

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[63] Y. Avni, *Against Four Sons*, p. 164.
[64] Y. Sucary, *Emilia*, p. 20; S. Shilo, *No Elves will Come*, p. 228.
[65] S. Berdugo, יתומים (Orphans; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2006), p. 24.
[66] Y. Sucary, *Emilia*, p. 20.
[67] Z. Gurevitch and G. Aran, "On The Place."

The field trip and individual hike were, in Zionist culture, a ritual act that actualized the connection between the people and the land, marked out a territory, and applied ownership to it, by conquering it through hiking or by placing it on the map of the ancient Hebrew nation or the new Zionist nation.[68] For the Mizrahim, however, the Israeli space was not an object to be conquered actively. Furthermore, the geographic concepts of "north" and "south" turned into entirely private images detached from the store of Zionist knowledge and collective cultural experience. The south, as one of Berdugo characters claims, is brown, "a distant, forsaken place, in which not a single person lives, only lizards and snakes that creep about and lurk in their burrows in the sand and crumbling boulders."[69] The north, by contrast, is a cold, green region[70] that "always sat in her head like a picture of a place you can never get to."[71] Similarly, the names of the destinations, to which the narrator of Berdugo's *And Say to the Wind* travels in search of her son, such as Afula and "the valley of Jezreel," are discrete and unconnected to each other. Even when the meanings she assigns to the spaces she sees come from the standard lexicon of Israeli connotations, she does not perceive the landscape through their mediation. Instead, she gives free rein to her sensual impressions. Here is one example of how she detaches what she sees from Israeli convention and attaches her own Mizrahi perceptions:

> She no longer heard the voices of laughter from the people who told her how small this country is, and how the tip at the bottom is close to the tip in the north on top, and how you cannot know all the places that are squeezed into this small area that we have in this country. In the meantime, she did not see that this land was small, along this road there are so many open areas that don't end as far as the eye can see. And the road to Afula hadn't come to an end yet, and the long road had a few bends that broke its straight line. She paid attention to the road, waiting to see when they would turn in a new direction. Alongside the colorful land they began to see big factories and long buildings with advertisements on them.[72]

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[68] On the field trip or hike and its national, ritual meaning see O. Ben-David, "Tiyul (Hike) as an Act of Consecration of Space," in *Grasping Land: Space and Place in Contemporary Israeli Discourse and Experience* (ed. E. Ben-Ari and Y. Bilu; Albany: SUNY Press, 1997), pp. 129–146. The importance to Israelis of being able to locate a place on a map can be seen, for example, in S. Yizhar's *The Days of Ziklag* that provides the precise name of the hill on which the war takes place. And in his "Hirbet Hizeh," see the importance of the name of the Arab village that the soldiers conquer. S. Yizhar, ימי צקלג (The Days of Ziklag; Tel Aviv; Am Oved, 1958); S. Yizhar, "חרבת חזעה" (Hirbet Hizeh) in *Seven Stories* (Ramat Gan: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 1971).

[69] S. Berdugo, ככה אני מדברת עם הרוח (And say to the wind; Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2002), p. 157.

[70] S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, p. 84.

[71] S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, p. 89.

[72] S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, p. 89.

The Mizrahi character does not know places by their common names, and it is alien to the presence of the state and its national ideology as expressed in the names assigned to settlements. Such names make Jewish and Israeli history manifest and constitute part of the "conquest of the desert." But the Mizrahi eye does not have to accept the image of "our little land."[73] It can, however, distinguish between different places according to the color of the soil and the twists in the road and identify the sensual presence of a space that, with great vitality, bursts free of the bounds of its Israeli demarcations. That attention is directed at the sounds of the place names rather than at their meanings points to the Otherness of the Mizrahi spatial experience. It is a primal, unmediated contact with the landscape, divested of its ideological signs.[74] But this momentary, unmediated contact does not create a sense of home or of belonging to the homeland, because the Mizrahim only pass through as tourists. They are unable to detach themselves from the periphery—that is, from the consciousness of being shut up within an ethnic enclave.[75]

In his novel *Sunburnt Faces*, Shimon Adaf tells of a field trip made by a seventh-grade class from the development town of Netivot into the scorching desert. The students hike along a dry riverbed, hear a talk about the arbutus tree, and spend the night in a Bedouin encampment. This typical outdoors program holds no interest for the book's protagonist, Ori Alihiani. Her goal on this trip is to get to Mt. Horeb, the mountain to which the prophet Elijah flees (as told in 1 Kings 19) and to find the cave where the prophet dwelt. She leaves the camp in the middle of the night to search for the biblical site, as "a hidden sense [shows] her the way."[76] Like Elijah, who walked for forty days without eating or drinking to reach the mountain, she abstains from eating and drinking the entire day. After a few hours, she reaches her destination:

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[73] The text refers to the popular song ארצנו הקטנטונת (Our tiny country), originally performed by Yaffa Yarkoni. Its tango-like melody is congruent with the love proclamation of the Israeli national speaker to his small feminine country.

[74] From this point of view, the points of contrast between an Arab village in "the north of the country" and a neighborhood in Ramla-Lod, in "the heart of the country," can be blurred: "The road entered an area of shattered homes. Everything here was built on low hills, spread over the moist ground that had stones in it. There's a big jumble of cars and messy stores with big Arabic signs.… Maybe Susan, who works with her in the hospital archive, lives in a place that maybe resembles what they had just gone through" (S. Berdugo, *And Say to the Wind*, pp. 94–95).

[75] Suissa also treats the Land of Israel's open spaces as inaccessible to people shut up within their neighborhoods: "He wondered whether it was possible to reach, just behind those mountains, a point among the trees and hills on which he could always gaze on his own pine hill. They are so close to you, and yet you will never go to them" (A. Suissa, *Bound*, p. 249).

[76] S. Adaf, פנים צרובי חמה (Sunburnt faces; Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008), p. 209.

> The mountain rose before her. Its shape was that of a jagged, imperfect blade, and its point threatened to gash the heavens. A sword that fell from the hand of an angel during a heavenly battle and was buried up to its hilt in the ground.… She scaled the mountain … a quarter of the way up she saw the opening of a cave, a crevice in the rock more than a cave.[77]

Later, it turns out that "Mt. Horeb" is just a sand dune, not a very tall one, and that the cave emits an intolerable stench.[78]

The confrontation that the story builds between the class trip and Ori's trek through the desert in the imaginary footsteps of Elijah, including the allusion to another site of divine revelation in the desert (cf. Exod 33:22 where Moses hides in a "crevice in the rock"), illustrates the disparity between two topographies. There is a Zionist topography represented by the public school system, and there is the Jewish topography, according to which biblical stories are not tales of an ancient world but rather spiritual and spatial possibilities of surprising, anarchistic power. The Mizrahi eye's defamiliarization of the national space in Berdugo's book and his emptying of the protagonist's mind of Israeli knowledge, to be replaced by primal sensory impressions that mark off an alternative space, are completed, contrarily, in Adaf's novel. Instead of emptying, the mind of the latter's protagonist is filled with additional, excess knowledge of the desert as a place laden with sites of divine revelation. Here the desert appears not just as a bare, desolate place, not just as a Bedouin camp or pioneering settlement (of which Sde Boker, the kibbutz to which David Ben-Gurion retired, is the official symbol). It is also the site of ancient prophecy, which Adaf's heroine is not willing to give up even if she is not strong enough to reach it. These two different movements, of emptying and filling (Deleuze and Guatari's deterritorialization and reterritorialization) in relation to the normative marking of space, place Mizrahi writing in what they call a "minor" position relative to the national culture and its perception of space.[79]

6. CONCLUSION

In Israeli fiction, the Jewish national space is perceived as uniform so long as the emphasis is on the contrast between it and the external space be-

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[77] S. Adaf, *Sunburnt Faces*, p. 210.
[78] S. Adaf, *Sunburnt Faces*, p. 210.
[79] G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Kafka*.

yond the border.[80] Ethnic spaces came into being over the years within the national space, dividing it into centers and peripheries. Focusing on the unity of the national space largely rendered these ethnic spaces invisible.[81]

Portrayals of marginal spaces appear occasionally in hegemonic fiction that addresses the absorption of Mizrahi immigrants and their settlement in permanent locations.[82] But the representation of the ethnic space has been based principally on the Ashkenazi and Zionist-national point of view. The neighborhood experience of the Mizrahim, as well as their fashioning of a Mizrahi view of the center or the common national space, are phenomena of Mizrahi consciousness that did not interest Ashkenazi writers. Similarly, most of these writers had reservations about portraying an Otherness that could not be simplified into "backwardness" and "primitiveness."

Mizrahi fiction offers an alternative to hegemonic literature in several respects:

1. Mizrahi literature focuses on what the hegemonic literature normally ignores or observes from a remote perspective: the presence of the peripheries and their own life.

2. The distinct ethnic spaces, the urban space (the center), as well as the national space, are all depicted in Mizrahi literature from the viewpoint of the periphery's inhabitants.[83] This challenges the hegemonic Zionist significance of space and instead offers meanings determined by the marginal perspective of a minority. Deleuze and Guattari term the use of language from such a perspective "minor." It is a form of usage that divests language of its semantic assets, empties it of its symbols, archetypes, metaphors, everyday idioms, and standards of correctness, removing it from its history, from the footholds and fields of meaning that it develops. In Deleuze and Guattari's vocabulary, this constitutes "deterritorialization." Additionally, they attend

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[80] Palestinian villages situated within the state of Israel after 1948 were perceived as enclaves of "Elsewhere" within the national space (Y. Oppenheimer, *Barriers: The Representation of the Arab in Hebrew Fiction, 1906–2005* [Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2008]).

[81] Of course, the national space was organized according to a series of ideological dichotomies—city versus farming village, settled spaces versus nature, public versus private, etc. (Y. Schwartz, *Did You Know the Land Where the Lemons Bloom* [Tel Aviv: Dvir, 2007]). But there was no doubt that all these belonged to the unitary national space.

[82] Hegemonic fiction is produced by Ashkenazim, yet certainly not all fiction written by Ashkenazim is hegemonic (Appelfeld is one exception). For that reason, "Ashkenazi" is a broader and more variegated term than "hegemonic."

[83] In Hebrew culture, the city was not always considered the site of privileged social status; in fact, historically it was often derided as the place where pure Zionist ideals were corrupted. The veneration of rural, agricultural topoi as breeding grounds of the Zionist and Israeli elite was consistently confronted with a different view praising Tel Aviv, the first Hebrew city, and its modern lifestyle. This reflects the fact that any differentiation between center and periphery belongs to ever changing contexts and is ideologically and historically conditioned.

to the other use of "minor" language, that is, its artificial enrichment through input of an anachronistic content, which was already rejected and voided of hegemonic status. They call such process "reterritorialization."

This spatial terminology is appropriate not only for the use of language but also for the representation of the urban experience of space. Hegemonic connotations and meanings relating to Tel Aviv emphasize that it was the first Hebrew-Zionist metropolis, a "white city" of European architecture, Israel's urban, cultural, and economic center. The deterritorialization of this center by the Mizrahim has to do not only with the viewpoint of alienated immigrants in the new land of Israel. It is mainly related to the perspective of the Mizrahi inhabitants of the suburbs, for whom Tel Aviv will always retain a foreign cast, to be henceforth compensated by neither culture nor myth. Tel Aviv is represented in a way that challenges seeing it as a uniform entity and opposes hegemonic myths. Its deterritorialization confronts the real with the imaginary in order to free the real from the imaginary, the mythic, and the ideological. Nevertheless, a process of reterritorialization also takes place. It describes the city either as a "mixture of Western European and North African appearance" or as a conflict site between Israeli and Mizrahi-Arab cultures. These distinct usages in spatial representation place Mizrahi writing about Tel Aviv in a position of "minor" literature that examines, from an external and critical position, one of the salient symbols of the "major" one.

The same is true of the representation of the national space, which on the one hand loses its accepted Zionist-Israeli meanings and on the other is imbued with universal meanings (as with Berdugo) or anachronistic Jewish meanings (as with Adaf).

3. The "minor" Mizrahi point of view is characterized by a unique ambivalence that derives from its marginal place in Israeli culture. On the one hand, the Mizrahi periphery is represented as homelessness, a place that cannot be identified with. On the other, the periphery is depicted as an opportunity for autonomous and self-confident shaping of Mizrahi subjectivity. This leads to a distinction between closed and open space. A similar ambivalence appears in the depiction of the central city in the writings of Mizrahi authors. On the one hand, there is an effort to migrate from the periphery to the center while creating networks of Israeli affiliation; on the other hand, when belonging to the center proves impossible, it leads to a threatening, alienated point of view within the center, revealing it to be divided, heterogeneous, and based on long-term ethnic exclusion.

These claims propose that Mizrahi writers as a group replace spaces defined by national criteria with those perceived from an ethnic viewpoint. Non-Mizrahi literature arguably does acknowledge ethnic spaces and boundaries, but it renders these spaces nearly unrecognizable (Amos Oz's desert development town in *Don't Call It Night* comes to mind). It perceives spaces through an ambivalent national perspective: despite its goals of erasing difference and homogenizing Israeli society, it contains mechanisms for the perpetuation of ethnic divisions, spatial and cultural. Mizrahi writers, on the contrary, pay attention to the place of the Mizrahim in space and challenge the accepted hegemonic national perspective while offering instead an alternative view of space. The appearance of different spatial representations and images constituted an ethnic-class-cultural act of protest.[84] It showed a common effort not only to break free of negative Orientalist images, which the absorbing society attached to the Mizrahim, but also to offer, first and foremost, an alternative to Israeli hegemonic literature.

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[84] For example, the treatment of the Arab land of origin in a way that is different from that of the Zionist hegemony. See Y. Oppenheimer, "I Have a Different Map," forthcoming, which completes this picture.