

Constructing and Transcending Boundaries, Questioning Identities in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael

Guest Editors' Note

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This issue of *Journal of Levantine Studies* presents papers from the 2015 workshop “Boundaries and Crossing Boundaries between Communities in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries,” conducted at the Gottlieb Schumacher Institute for Research of the Christian Presence in Palestine in the Modern Era, under the auspices of the University of Haifa. The workshop’s starting point was that borders, physical as well as symbolic, should be regarded as spaces for negotiating identities. Drawn by elites and other powerful agents, borders are aimed at constructing a homogeneous, stable, and consistent identity. Simultaneously, borders constitute a liminal space in which identities are consolidated, negotiated, and transformed. Hence, border areas, by definition, reflect the duality of the social world: they are stable and constantly transforming, pre-given and constructed, and they separate and connect categories and actors.¹

Negotiating identities and their boundaries often involves the use of force and coercion. Efforts to preserve separation in border areas include explicit means, such as prohibitions and sanctions, and implicit means, such as justifying cultural hierarchies of “us” and “them.” Maintaining the separation between social and cultural identities often serves as a mechanism for preserving a social hierarchy.² Hence, challenging rigid identities and blurring border areas can be seen as a form of resisting hierarchies and undermining power structures. Whereas the construction of social boundaries is usually controlled by elites or by those with the power to do so, the blurring and crossing of these borders may very well reflect the agency of more marginalized actors, who—by their very actions and interactions in and across communal borders—challenge well-defined identities and social categorizations.³

The articles collected in this themed issue of *Journal of Levantine Studies* focus on this latter form of agency. They examine individuals or groups who questioned national, ethnic, and social separations in their daily life in 20th-century Palestine/Eretz Yisrael. The last two decades have seen a rise in scholarly interest in the history of mixed urban spaces, blurred cultural categories, and personal interactions that transcended ethnic and national divisions in Palestine/Eretz Yisrael. In his pioneering study Zachary Lockman criticizes national historiography that tends to focus on either the Zionist or Palestinian collective and to portray conflict as the only mode of interaction between the two communities. He implements an alternative, relational history, while observing the history of labor unions in Palestine from the late Ottoman period to the end of the Mandate.⁴ Deborah Bernstein's work on Jewish and Arab workers in Mandatory Haifa examines the national boundaries that were created despite common class interests.⁵ Bernstein and Tami Razi examine the connections between nationalism and patriarchy by combining the categories of nation and gender.⁶ The writings of Boaz Lev Tov, Michelle Campos, Menachem Klein, Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor, and others show that belonging to a particular community, mainly a religious or ethnic one, did not invalidate other affiliations until the 1948 war and the establishment of the State of Israel.⁷

With this issue we wish to contribute to this discourse and emphasize the important role played by individuals and local communities, usually marginalized, in negotiating identities by crossing the boundaries of their times.

Dotan Halevy presents the agonies of a Zionist teacher sent by the Hebrew Teachers Union to Gaza in the early twentieth century. The teacher's writing reveals the intricate relations between the Zionist institutions in late Ottoman Palestine, the Sephardi Jews in Palestine and elsewhere, and the indigenous Jews of Palestine, as well as the Palestinian Jews' relations with their Arab neighbors. Halevy contends that prior to World War I, relations between these groups were still in flux.

Tensions between communal identities, national activity, and the Zionist institutions also concern **Anat Kidron**. She suggests that the hardships of World War I generated new coalitions within the Jewish urban communities. Their cooperation, in organizing mutual help and the distribution of foreign aid, blurred the prewar categories of Sephardim versus Ashkenazim and Orthodox versus Zionists.

Yair Seltenreich observes the distress of an individual teacher dealing with the pressures issuing from the Zionist cultural hegemony. Based on a careful reading of the diaries of a high school teacher in Haifa written during the years 1938–1940,

Seltenreich presents a subtle mechanism of rewards and sanctions used to mobilize all employees of a prestigious educational institute for the national cause. He highlights the inner conflict of an individual struggling to adapt to collective social and national boundaries.

Na'ama Ben Ze'ev is concerned with the undermining of social and cultural differences between rural and urban Palestinian Arabs during the Mandate. She observes rural migration to towns, stressing the migrants' role as agents of change through their frequent return visits and the material and leisure cultures they brought with them. Their lives combined urbanization, as part of the transition to modernity, with continuity of the patriarchal social order. Hence, rural migrants problematize the national historiography that portrays villagers as impeding modernity.

The last article focuses on symbolic and concrete mechanisms of boundary construction between Jews and Palestinians in the State of Israel. **Amer Dahamshe** explores an initiative of official street naming and signage in Tur'an, an Arab town in the Lower Galilee, during the years 2008–2013. This initiative of the appointed Jewish mayor serves to illustrate how state control over local space is justified by the discourse of modernity. Dahamshe uncovers the national subtext of this specific discourse and points out local forms of resistance to the municipal project.

The *document* section features an act of an ongoing translation, as explained in Nathalie Alyon's introduction. *Holekh al ha-ruah* (**Walking on winds**), translated by Yonatan Mendel, is the Hebrew title of Salman Natour's *Safar 'ala safar*, originally published in Arabic in 2008. Mendel's Hebrew translation of the book was published as part of the Maktoub series in 2016. Following the publication in Hebrew, we have chosen to publish in the *document* section a selection of the first chapter, and to name it "The Journey Without."

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Notes

- 1 See, for example, Arjun Appadurai, "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy," *Public Culture* 2, no. 2 (1990), 1–24; Dennis Day, "Being Ascribed, and Resisting, Membership of an Ethnic Group," in *Identities in Talk*, ed. Charles Antaki and Sue Widdicombe (London: Sage, 1998), 151–170; Charles Tilly, *Identities, Boundaries and Social Ties* (Boulder: Paradigm Publishers, 2005), chaps. 9–11.
- 2 Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper, "Beyond 'Identity,'" *Theory and Society* 29, no. 1 (2000): 1–47; Michèle Lamont, *The Dignity of Working Men: Morality and the Boundaries of Race, Class, and Immigration* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press and Russell Sage Foundation, 2000); Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, "The Study of Boundaries in the Social Sciences," *Annual Review of Sociology* 28 (2002): 167–195.
- 3 Zeev Shavit, Orna Sasson-Levi and Guy Ben-Porat, eds., *Marei makom: Zebuyot mishtanot u-mikumim hevratiyim be-Yisrael* (Jerusalem: Van Leer Jerusalem Institute and Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2013).
- 4 Zachary Lockman, *Comrades and Enemies: Arab and Jewish Workers in Palestine, 1906–1948* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- 5 Deborah Bernstein, *Constructing Boundaries: Jewish and Arab Workers in Mandatory Palestine*, (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000).
- 6 Deborah Bernstein, *Nashim ba-shulayim: Migdar u-leumiyyut be-Tel Aviv ha-Mandatorit* (Jerusalem: Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, 2008); Tami Razi, *Yaldei ha-hefker: Ha-hatser ha-aborit shel Tel Aviv ha-Mandatorit* (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2009).
- 7 Boaz Lev Tov, "Shkhenim nokhahim: Kesharim tarbutiyim bein Yehudim ve-Aravim be-Eretz Yisrael be-shilhei ha-tekufa ha-Otomanit," *Zmanim* 110 (2010): 42–54; Michelle U. Campos, *Ottoman Brothers: Muslims, Christians, and Jews in Early 20th Century Palestine* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011); Menachem Klein, *Lives in Common: Arabs and Jews in Jerusalem, Jaffa and Hebron* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014); Abigail Jacobson and Moshe Naor, *Oriental Neighbors: Middle Eastern Jews and Arabs in Mandatory Palestine* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2016).