

Dissected identity: The poetic anatomies of Mizrahi women (Part II)¹

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ABSTRACT

The poetic construction of ethnic anatomies is based on references to the internal and external body in the work of Mizrahi poets, including Erez Bitton, Roni Someck, Eli Bachar, Peretz Dror-Banai, Shelly Elkayam and Miri Ben Simhon. The imaginary composite body that emerges piecemeal from this poetry constitutes a map that locates the contested zones of ethnicity and gender and the terrain on which cultural differences are played out. Such a composite portrait accentuates the fragmentary, isolated, dismembered and colonized situation of the Israeli ethnic and gendered body. Shelly Elkayam, for example, situates the female body in a time and place free from the overdetermined influence of the canon, ideology and intertextuality, thereby creating a female ontological presence that manifests an autonomous gendered identity. By plotting a local woman's face with pockmarks and scars, Miri Ben Simhon turns it into a topographical palimpsest of contested experiential and geographical histories.

Introduction

In my article “‘The Body that Crumbled’: Mizrahi Men Writing Poetic Anatomy, Part I” (Tsoffar, 2003),² I established how Mizrahi poetry relies on the body as a document for identity and identification and even as an alibi through which to claim legitimacy. At the same time, the body constantly refracts the problematic cultural

1 I would like to thank Gil Anidjar, Karyn Berger, Jennifer Robertson and Ella Shohat for having read and discussed versions of this article.

2 The two articles are methodologically and thematically connected and were initially conceived together.

location and situation of Mizrahim within a multi-ethnic, immigrant society that asymmetrically privileges European and Ashkenazi culture. Several scholars have explored the rhetorical and ideological operations of the ethnic and/or colonized body in Israeli national and popular culture (Boyarin, 1997; Dahan Kalev, 2001; Gluzman, 1997; Lubin, 2003; Raz, 2004; Rogoff, 2000; Shohat, 1992; Weiss, 2002). Ella Shohat, for example, articulates a broad historical and geographical perspective in exposing the contradictions, tensions and ruptures that characterize the encounter between nationality and gender in Israel and in post-Third World cultures in general. She explores alternative, feminist modes of history-writing that provide counter-narratives to the hegemonic, masculinist, Eurocentric (Zionist) meta-narrative. Issues of the esthetics and representation of the body—and female and ethnic bodies in particular—are central to Shohat's theoretical conceptualization of an emergent feminist multiculturalism in the context of film and visual culture. My approach in this article is to conceptualize the ethnic female body as an anthropological site in the work of female Mizrahi poets. More specifically, my tightly focused "ethnography" of poetry describes the ways in which the body figures as an ethnic, sexualized, gendered and locally situated category in their work. Like these poets, I aim to dive into the flux of everyday life shaped by the play of local colors, smells, accents and sounds, in an attempt to capture the complex and contradictory esthetic sensibilities and performances shaped by the politics of ethnicity and racism in Israel, past and present.

My poetic construction of ethnic anatomies is based on a quantitative analysis of references to the internal and external body in the work of Mizrahi poets. The body as a situation (Butler, 1987) registers the cultural symptoms of Israeli ethnic interactions and is an internal reference of immense cultural importance. Through poetry, the anatomical body can reveal a person's or group's well-being and self-perception, a literary convention maximized—whether consciously or unconsciously—by minority writers. In my article "'The Body that Crumbled': Mizrahi Men Writing Poetic Anatomy, Part I," I focused exclusively on the male poets Erez Bitton, Roni Someck, Eli Bachar and Peretz Dror-Banai (Tsoffar, 2003); in this article, I consider the "poetic anatomy" of the female poets, Shelly Elkayam and Miri Ben Simhon. There are several compelling reasons for the selection of these two women poets within the discourse of Mizrahi identity today and, more specifically, in the discussion of Mizrahi poetic anatomy. Both poets were educated and socialized within the Zionist system, and, like the male poets in my previous article, as well as myself, can be considered the first generation of "children of the state," a generation whose formative experience is inseparable from the grand national narrative and the newly crystallized Israeli collective consciousness. To a certain extent, these poets have drawn explicitly from this experience in conceiving and shaping their work. They are sensitive to the political cultural climate not only on the local level, but on the national level as well. However, far from celebrated Sabras, they were subjected to the differentiating

experience of the Zionist ethnic hierarchy, which effectively positioned them as a cultural minority.

Admittedly, there are many more women poets that define themselves as Mizrahi, and their writing evokes and takes as its subject the human body. These poets include Tikva Levi, Amira Hess, Haviva Pedaya, Tzipi Shakhmuradov and Bracha Serri, among others. The degree to which these poets identify with Mizrahi-ness varies, contingent upon their personal predilections as much as upon the internal hierarchy of ethnicity within the category of "Mizrahi." Shelly Elkayam's Mizrahi identity is part and parcel of her conscious political activism, which manifests itself in her poetry in a subtle and sophisticated way. In some of her poems, Miri Ben Simhon is blunt and direct about ethnicity, while in others, she appears as a young intellectual, engaged in philosophical and existential ideas about womanhood and male-female relationships. I will have more to say about each of them in the paragraphs that follow. Indeed, factors such as ancestry, country of origin, socioeconomic status, demography, education, physical appearance and so forth locate one along different points on the scale of Israeli ethnicity. Rather than lumping different Mizrahi writers into a singular ethnic category, it is more useful, and even more accurate, to perceive these poets, as they do themselves, as constantly negotiating alternative cultural and ethnic locations.

The profile of the imaginary composite body that emerges piecemeal from the poetry of Elkayam and Ben Simhon—whether literally, linguistically or figuratively—constitutes a map that locates the contested zones of ethnicity and the terrain on which differences, conveyed by accents, posture, self-image, internalized inferiority and stereotypes, are played out. Such a profile accentuates the fragmentary, isolated, dismembered and colonized situation of the Israeli ethnic body. Its poetic anatomies point not only to the disintegration of the body as a whole, but to more specific symptoms, such as an emphasis on the local and particular—that is, on the physical and visceral responses to a situation of social alienation, depersonalization and distancing.

Different grammatical, metaphoric and syntactical devices are deployed to augment this reliance on body parts and references to the body. In the work of the aforementioned male poets, the "criminal body," as I have termed it, becomes an alibi for writing a new subjective ethnic account of social experience through the trope of self-identification: whereas the male body tends to be identified through images associated with criminology—fingerprints, scars, mug shots, lineups—the female body is often dissected and reassembled according to a newly elaborated visceral semiotics. Like their male counterparts, female Mizrahi poets treat the body as a pivotal site of cultural knowledge and legitimacy. However, they differ in alluding to different bodily features and corporeal esthetics, and by raising specific questions about language and its role in writing about sexual and gendered subjectivity.

In addition to applying the model of body parts, I have chosen to highlight other characteristics in the poetry of Elkayam and Ben Simhon that illuminate their

approach to the body. I elaborate on the way they construct identity, for the sake of both participating in the discursive practices of the Hebrew language and developing a critique of hegemonic culture that reveals practices of resistance and subversion. What follows is my exploration of the anatomical poetry of Elkayam, specifically *Mi-tokh Shirat Ha-'Architekt*, מתוך שירת הארכיטקט (*From [Within] the Architect's Poetry/Singing*), and of Ben Simhon, *Me'unyenet Lo' Me'unyenet*, לא מעונינת, לא מעונינת (*Interested, Not Interested*), and their generative contexts and broader social implications.

By the circumstances of the body: Shelly Elkayam

The poet Shelly Elkayam is a seventh-generation native of Haifa on one side of her family, and from Salonica on the other. Born in Haifa, in 1955, she now makes her home in Jerusalem. The former head of the Israeli Authors' Association, she is currently the president of the Women's Federation for World Peace. Elkayam was one of the founders of East for Peace, as well as a delegate to the international women's conferences in Nairobi and China, and she was organizer of the grass roots Alternative Jerusalem Women's Poetry Festival (Summer 1995).³ Presently, she is actively involved in Green Mothers, an eco-feminist organization (Cohen-Panner, 2000). Elkayam's first collection, *Nitsat Ha-Limon*, ניצח הלימון (*The Lemon-Bud's Light*), was published in 1983 and the second, *Mi-tokh Shirat Ha-'Architekt*, מתוך שירת הארכיטקט (*From [Within] the Architect's Poetry/Singing*), in 1987. She also writes children books (see Alcalay, 1993:262-263). Her work is rapidly gaining international recognition and is being translated into many languages. She is an articulate, eloquent speaker with an impressive demeanor.

Elkayam's attention to the minute details of the body is an essential aspect of her poetry. A cursory overview of the list of body parts appearing in Elkayam's poetry in Appendix 1 suggests that the female poetic body, like that of the male, draws on a taxonomy positioned within Israeli culture and society that is unique to the female experience. It juxtaposes physical details and wider language constructs of bodily origin.⁴ Elkayam "draws" wrinkles on the face and pupils in the eyes; along with the mouth, she adds a tongue, lips and dimples. Other details, such as flesh, skin color—and more specifically olive-skinned—a braid, soul, bone marrow and nerves, provide equally explicit features that map the ethnic female body. In addition, in her attempt to

3 This festival was a counter-response to the annual Israeli poets' festival that excluded "feminist, ethnic and local representation, with an especially high entrance fee" (Rivlin, 1995).

4 In the 63 poems I examined, I found 169 references to the body—83 references in the first collection and 86 in the second. See Appendix 1 for a table that details the specific division of body parts.

set a position from which to articulate her emotional and ethnic difference, Elkayam elaborates on her anatomic physique. To fill the space around the female body, she employs nouns such as corpse, scar, baldness and voice; adjectives like mute, naked, hungry and husky; and verbs such as smiling, speaking, screaming, seeing, crying, being born, sleeping, breathing, touching, dancing and stepping.

Through her poetry, Elkayam constructs a space-time manifold in which bodies “appear” in three dimensions. She situates the body in a time and place free from the overloaded past and preordained future, ideology and history thereby creating a female ontological presence able to assert an autonomous gendered identity. The body placed at the center of a poem is the structural foundation for her poetry. In that sense, nature, and especially vegetation, such as trees, plants, fruits, and roots, constitutes an ensemble of organic living entities that touch, hold, nourish, limit and open cultural spaces. The poem, *Nitsat Ha-Limon*, ניצת הלימון (“The Lemon Bud’s Light”), in Elkayam’s first collection (1983:6), is a good example of how she frames time and chronology. Its opening lines read:

Half her face (<i>panim</i>) is an old man.	חצי פנים שלה אדם זקן.
Now I will tell her.	עכשיו אומר לה.
Now the lemon is a bud of yellow flame.	עכשיו הלימון ניצת להבה צהובה.
Half his face (<i>panim</i>) an old man	חצי פנים שלו אדם זקן
Half his face (<i>panehu</i>) a child.	חצי פניהו ילד.

An alternative cut through the face—the lemon bud—provokes the observation of age: old and young. But the question is not only, “What in this dynamic topography formed by the intersection of nature and culture is preserved and what is erased?” but also, “How does it move from the facial surface to the interior?” Interestingly, Elkayam’s use of the expression, “half a face” (of a woman, a lemon, an old man or a child), alludes to both depth and surface of the body. *Panim*, פנים, the Hebrew word for face, exposes more than a visible surface: the very interior of things is also addressed as evident in the related Hebrew term *pnim*, פנים inside, deep down, within. In another poem in this collection, Elkayam specifies a location as, ‘*al panai, bi-fnimi*, על פני, בפנימי (on my face, inside me).⁵ For Elkayam, the interior of a female body is a source of inner solace and warmth, as expressed in her poem, *Be-Kaoch ha-Kav ha-Dak*, בכח, הקו הדק (“In the Power of the Thin Line”) (1987:24):

5 Compare with Erez Bitton’s expression, ‘*ani pnei panai*, אני, פני פני (“I, the face of my face”) (Bitton, 1976:16), in which the speaker’s identity is buried in three levels of distance, moving from the “I” to the “face,” and from the “face” to its other mirrored “face,” in a synthesis quite characteristic of Hebrew (Tsoffar, 2003:99). In her poem ‘*Achar kakh, ulai Yavo ha-Piyus*, אח”כ, אולי, יבוא הפיוס (“Later, Maybe, Will Come Reconciliation”), Elkayam explicitly plays with the different contours of *panim*, פנים and *pnim*, פנים, interweaving the external face and its interior, saying (1983:31):

Her interior (<i>pnimah</i>) will soften the crystals of sadness	פנימה ירכך את גבשושי העצב
Her interior (<i>pnimah</i>) will warm her joints. ...	פנימה יחמם את הפרקים...
Inside (<i>pnim</i>) is	פנים הוא
an ethereal power	כוח עדינים
Happening	קורה
like the wind.	כמו רוח.

Elkayam's divided face, therefore, allows her to observe several halves, as she combines tenses, positions and prepositions in launching her dive into the revealing depth of her cut—the death of her love—which she describes as “like a razor blade on me” (1983:7).

Elkayam's need to go beyond the surface of language is instrumental in her desire to expose identities; her poetic cut provides access to deeper ambiguities and arbitrary conventions. While building on existing details, Elkayam also constructs new models, edifices and narratives. Her three-dimensional construct of body parts and references yields levels of intertextuality supplied by the polysemic Hebrew language. Alcalay has rightly observed that, “Instead of looking for obscure words, [Elkayam] chooses precisely those counters with the widest semantic space, the textual black holes of the biblical world, always patiently waiting to again be accommodated to new realities” (Alcalay, 1993:262). Elkayam manipulates and unleashes the richly layered potential of the Hebrew vocabulary through her “body work.” In this way, she binds the body to other tangible, concrete entities. Language helps to ground and legitimate her corporeal structures; it is always dialogic, responding to the canonic meanings and their textual authority. In this sense, Elkayam's poetry appears to be engaged with a long historical tradition of Hebrew textuality and intertextuality: the interplay between language and its signifying possibilities. The question remains, in what way does she incorporate all those historical layers and in what direction does she aim her poetic message?

For Elkayam, the attempt to position oneself through the construction of reliable systems is not limited to the body. Poetry itself is both a construction and a means of construction; in Hebrew, *bayit*, בית is both a stanza in a poem and a house and home. Her second collection, *Mi-tokh Shirat Ha-'Architekt*, מתוך שירת הארכיטקט (*From [Within] the Architect's Poetry/Singing*) (1987), specifically composes a confined location, be

Soft light I want inside me, it will sustain
soft silhouettes on the wall, on my face,
Inside me, murky stains,
without a name, without a home,
hollow, dragged, without
boundaries. Sometimes,

אור רך אני רוצה אצלי, שיפרנס
צלליות רכות על הקיר, על פני,
בפנימי, כתמים עמומים,
בלי שם, בלי בית,
חלולים, מטולטלים, חסרי
גבולות. לפעמים,

it a garden, a body, a home or a mirror. She uses the concept of architecture to create a powerful poetic edifice or habitat. Her poetry effectively directs the reader's gaze to an imagined spectacle or landscape. She is well aware of the spatial, constructive power of words; like poetry, physical structures can also encompass a type of rhythm. Is it possible that, for Elkayam, architectural components actually sing a song or recite a poem? The Hebrew word, *shirah*, שירה, denotes both poetry and singing.

In '*Idan Ha-Gan Be-'Or Ha-Mar'ot*, עידן הגן באור המראות ("In the Time of the Garden in the Mirrors' Light"), Elkayam invokes the Garden of 'Eden in creating her own garden; she moves from the mythical '*eden*, עדן ('Eden) to '*idan*, עידן (time, period, era, age), a divine site whose temporality is contained within the reflection of mirrors. But in this newly invented garden, the mirrors do not simply reflect images; they also transform the visual into the acoustic. For Elkayam, poetry is a craft through which she articulates a feminist ontological position. Reading poetry is an act of singing and recitation, and taps the generative quality of sounds and rhythms; it is a vocal and acoustic production that involves different body parts—the mouth, the ear and the eyes. Kaja Silverman's theory of female subjectivity, developed in her book *Acoustic Mirror*, echoes Elkayam's attempts to reconcile the claims of the body with those of language. Silverman approaches textual intersections as "an anatomy of female subjectivity as a study of the female voice" (1988:x). Voice, she explains, is "a site of perhaps the most radical of all subjective divisions—the division between meaning and materiality," or between language and biological body (1988:44). Here Silverman departs from Julia Kristeva, according to whom the Mother, lacking subjectivity and relegated to the semiotic interior of the *chora*/womb, is reduced to silence.⁶ As such, the Mother's voice constitutes a *part* of the body that talks.

Elkayam brings voices into the most silent reaches of the body. She animates her verses with sound and movement, populating them with different body parts. The poem, "In the Time of the Garden in the Mirrors' Light," sings out, maximizing its performative affect (1987:11):

And the mirrors sing	והמראות שרות
Nostalgic for beauty	מתוך נוסטלגיה ליופי
Longing for beauty the mirrors sing:	משום כמיהה ליופי המראות שרות:
"May the light of	"הלוואי שאור
The Place [God] be reflected on the planet.	המקום ישתקף על פני הארץ.
May the planet turn into a	הלוואי שארץ תיהפך
Place."	למקום."
And in the time of the garden	ובעידן הגן

6 The *chora* is associated with Julia Kristeva's semiotics. It is a signifier from the pre-symbolic stage, prior to the mirror stage of the mother-and-child relationship (Kristeva 1986: 93).

The earth is red	ארמת החמרה אדומה
Like fire	כאש
And the tree top is high.	ואמירת העץ גבוהה.
Come morning, the pistil unfurls like the "little man in the eye."	והעלי נפקח כמו אישון לעין היום.
And the uvula dances echoing the divine	והענבל רוקד כמו בת-קול
And the youngest in the garden understand	והכי קטנים בגן מבינים
It all.	הכל.

The sublime atmosphere of the divine garden, through vision and voice, is compelling. Elkayam's secular, feminine and ethnic divinity is an interesting alternative to God's masculine voice in Genesis. Reflected in this garden is the *'inbal*, ענבל (the uvula), a body part that has an elaborated usage within the poetic body. Although *'inbal*, ענבל may seem like a little-noticed protrusion in the back of the mouth, it is, as an extension of the soft palate, "a very reliable landmark." It plays an important role in the production of the sound of certain consonants produced by languages such as French, Arabic and Hebrew. It functions in tandem with the back of the throat, the palate, and air coming up from the lungs to create a number of guttural and other sounds. This is a key body part for Elkayam in her reference to the inter-ethnic politics of Hebrew pronunciation and accent, for guttural sounds are recognized as a distinct marker of Israelis of Middle Eastern origin. She also consciously strives to texture her poetry (and songs) with a distinctive Mizrahi accent.⁷

A brief digression on the politics of pronunciation is helpful at this juncture. As a result of their historical isolation, Jews of Yemenite origin have preserved what is considered in Israeli public discourse the "authentic, original" pronunciation of Hebrew, going back to biblical consonants that correspond more fully and accurately with the Hebrew sound system.⁸ In fact, from the early years of Zionism, the history of the Yemenite diaspora was represented under a colonial, Orientalist gaze. Yemenites were exotically depicted as a lost, forgotten tribe of Israel. Their distinct accent, along with their appearance, was appropriated by Zionists as a concrete, readily accessible link between the distant biblical past and the present. Precisely because of their accurate pronunciation of the guttural sounds *'ayin* (ע), *chet* (ח), *'alef* (א) and *resh* (ר), Yemenites are often hired as news broadcasters, the Israeli mass media being fanatically purist in their attitude toward Hebrew and its pronunciation. Even prior to Israel's establishment, singers of Yemenite ancestry, such as Bracha Zefira, Esther Gamlielit and Shoshana Damari, were celebrated in popular music culture.

7 The concern with accent is evident in Elkayam's own efforts to retain an authentic Middle Eastern pronunciation in her own speech.

8 The Hebrew sound system has been reduced from twenty-four consonants (including the *vet* and the *sin*) to eighteen, eliminating six sounds.

That a small, tiny body part can represent and account for the cultural and social history of ethnicity becomes obvious in the popular signification of the name *'Inbal* in the native Israeli landscape, and especially in the context of sheep herding. The word *'inbal* refers to a bell clapper, as evoked in a series of nostalgic Israeli songs from the early years of prestatehood about biblically inspired scenes of shepherds, pastures and love. Significantly, it is the name of Israel's oldest dance troupe, *'Inbal*, founded in 1949 by Sara Levi-Tanai, who was committed to expressing authentic, local-native dances based on biblical themes. Levi-Tanai (1910-2005)—a poet, composer, choreographer, the artistic director of *'Inbal* and the recipient of the Israel prize for dance in 1973—built *'Inbal*'s reputation on what has become known as a unique “‘Inbalic dance” or “‘Inbalic language” (Toledano, 2005).⁹ More recently, the multicultural performance center named “‘Inbal” in Neve Tzedek, Tel Aviv, has dedicated itself to highlighting Middle Eastern and North African art and culture, incorporating the accumulated historical association of the name with the dance company, the Yemenite accent, and the general sense of Middle Eastern Israeli nativeness.

Elkayam relocates the tiny *'inbal* in its cultural context, redefining its centrality as a unique signifier of her constructed ethnic body. *'Inbal* alludes to both movement and sounds, combining body and voice, matters and performance. Redolent of Israeli culture and nostalgic traditions, the *'inbal* performs ethnicity and, in the process, becomes its own institution. This is reinforced by the fact that voice is real and reproductive. It produces sounds and meaning; it is present. The metaphor *bat-kol*, בת-קול, literally “the daughter of voice,” means an echo or a vocal response or expression, but was more commonly used in rabbinic Hebrew in reference to the divine female voice. Dancing like *bat-kol* alludes to another subtle reverberation of sound and meaning. If an echo is a concrete connection to the talking body, *bat-kol* is an envoy, a female sound that is regenerated by its ability to “reflect on” its original voice, duplicating and reproducing its sign. The Hebrew expression *bat-bat-kol*, בת-בת-קול, “the daughter's daughter of voice,” which appears in modern Hebrew literature in Nahum Sokolov's writings, *Be-Mar'ot ha-Keshet* (1960) (see Even-Shoshan, 2004:1638), suggests a process that builds on an intimate female genealogy of engendered voices and sounds. Elkayam's line: *veha-'inbal roked kmo bat-kol*,

9 Yaron Margolin's website, www.israeldance.co.il/sarah_levi_tanai.htm, is one of many recent work that celebrate the groundbreaking life-project of Sara Levi-Tanai and her dance-theater group, *'Inbal*, with photographs, interviews, historical and production analysis. Similarly, Gila Toledano, who was among the founders of the troupe, documented Sara Levi-Tanai's life,” providing a first-hand testimony of the problematic reception of *'Inbal*, especially during the first two decades of its existence. Despite enthusiastic international acclaim, *'Inbal* was struggling, in Israel, against the essentialized and reduced public representation as “traditional-folkloristic,” “Yemenite” dance group. Instead, it made efforts to introduce itself as a sophisticated, multicultural dance-theater (Toledano, 2005; see also Manor, 1975).

והענבל רוקר כמו בת-קול (And the uvula dances like *bat-kol*, God's voice), highlights the role of the *'inbal* as a body part that marks both ethnic and gender difference.

For Elkayam, the echo of the *'inbal*, as both body part and bell clapper, is an important component in the construction of internal identity. Like the singing mirrors, it compounds the dialectics of mutual reflections and voice. Musical sounds are reverberations of sound waves, chords and visions. Likewise, a mirror is not only a visual, but a musical instrument of endless reflections and reverberations. In Elkayam's poem, the mirror can capture a dancing bell clapper like the echo, and the *bat-kol*, the female voice of the divine, can be seen or heard and children can understand (rather than "know") it all. The less visible objects—the *'inbal*, the *'eli*, עלי (the flower's pistil), and similarly, the *'ish*, איש (the little man) or "homunculus" that is hidden in the word *'ishon* אישון (pupil of the eye)—are all immediate, miniature images that represent, metonymically, Elkayam's garden. In this poetic garden, the *'inbal* is a uniquely situated voice that can never be reproduced and yet can produce a divine echo. As the embodiment of sublime temporality, the *'inbal* is committed to neither the past nor the future. Through a detailed vocabulary of the body, and from the very site of the body, Elkayam's poetry aims to capture the presence of the sublime in the here and now, and at the same time, resists deadening overtones of cultural and religious mythologies.

Elkayam assembles and animates body parts in a number of ways in her poetry. For example, in the poem *Ve-'Osim*, ועושים ("Ones Do"), she "writes sex" by verbalizing or activating certain body parts and positions: tongue, lips, muscles, eyes, hands, legs, "face to face," or "face to back." She presents a hyper-focused and somewhat mechanical sexual act, emphasizing the how of sex in a wholly impersonal mode. Consequently, the human subjects—love makers—are absent.

Elkayam weaves together a tight pattern that draws on Jewish/Hebrew practices of both textuality and corporeality. Her "semantic breadth" (Alcalay, 1993:263) builds on the grammatical body by exploiting the semantic space provided by the Hebrew language, enabling the conflation of the body (*guf*, גוף) with the home (*bayit*, בית), thereby safely containing a spirit, an identity or a political being. Similarly, poetry (singing) that places the male architect at its center is the poetry of making boundaries. The grammatical, idiomatic body—often taken for granted due to its instrumental role in the language (Tsoffar, 2003:101)—is reinvigorated through Elkayam's literal and intertextual playfulness. The result is a new contextual framework for the representation of the self. Structuring and restructuring the semantic possibilities of Hebrew is essential for Elkayam in her project of expanding the referentiality of both body and language and of solidifying the presence and voice in her poetic topography. She always reiterates in her poetry the centrality of Hebrew textual conventions and innovations in a way that underscores the body-text connection.

But if the grammatical body draws the contours of the poetic body, it also serves to flesh out and make visible the ethnic body. Meaning goes from the body to the

language and from the language back to the body. Elkayam carefully construes the detailed meaning provided by the ambiguous space of language. In the same way, *lashon*, לשון (tongue), is both a physical part of the mouth and a metaphor for language (e.g., mother tongue). The same is true for *safah*, שפה (lip, which also means “language”). In her poem *Koach Sus*, כח סוס (“Horse Power”), Elkayam explicitly draws a connection between *sfat 'imi*, שפת אימי (my mother-lip/language), *shrir safah*, שריר שפה (a lip muscle/masculine lip/language) and *ha-safah ha-Ivrit*, השפה העברית (the Hebrew lip/language). *Safah*, שפה (language) itself can thus be conceived as a body part, a lip. In another sense, language is but an abstraction of the muscle. As a matter of fact, there is no distinction between the body and its language: both produce and are produced by culture. *Panim*, פנים (face) and *panim*, פנים (the text) merge to provide an illuminated mirroring of letters and signs (Elkayam, 1987:56). The refracted objects preclude the possibility of an essential, integral female body: shattered and crumbled, it is no longer whole. Even its language is fragmented.

The list of vocabulary that moves from the text to the body and from the body to the text continues. *Perek*, פרק, for example, is both a joint in the body and a chapter, section or lesson. Accordingly, the line, *'ani ga'agu'a ko'ev ba-prakim*, אני גענוע, כראב בפרקים, can be read as both “I am an aching longing in the joints,” and “I am an aching longing in the chapters.” In the poem *Rikud*, ריקוד (“Dance”), *tnu'ot*, תנועות are movements of both the dancing body as well as political and social ones; in Hebrew grammar, they are the vowels (Elkayam, 1983:56-57). In the same way, *se'ipekha*, סעפיר means branches or convolutions—a metaphor for one’s intellectual faculties (Elkayam, 1983:43)—and textual or legal sections or paragraphs.

Elkayam builds on conventional meanings to introduce innovative, uncommon forms of speech. In her poem, *Sh'at Choref*, שעת חרף (“Winter’s Hour”), the female self is described by the adjective *kvuyah*, קוויה, meaning “collected” or “gathered,” from *kav*, קו (a line) (Elkayam, 1983:32). And in the last of the five-poem series, *Divuchim min ha-Mizrach*, דיווחים מן המזרח (“Reports from the East”), she exclaims (1983:40):

And just in case I put a request in writing	ולכל מקרה העליתי בקשה על הנייר
An obvious testimony as Gihon on the face of the page	עדות נוהרת כגיחון על פני הדף
He gave the land to men	את הארץ נתן לבני האדם
While they are still anchored in the rock of the page	עודם עגנים בסלע הדף
Fuse to whatever you'll diffuse	דף נא באשר תידף
You were also	גם אתה היית
for such and such thousands of years	כך וכך אלפי שנים
A longing of an innocent heart	כמיהת הלב החף
and a reality on the face of the page.	ומציאות על פני הדף

The page and the blank page are represented by the verb *nadaf*, נָדַף (a masculine, singular verb in the imperative form), or the process of evaporation, the disintegration of not only ink and text, but of body and being as well. As a noun, *daf*, דָּף means both a page and a leaf. But *daf*, דָּף, as an imperative of the root *n-d-p*, נִדְּפָה (as in *tidaf*, תִּדַּף), also means “to disappear” or “to evaporate.” The dialectics of enduring and fading as ontological and textual processes highlight the meaning of Elkayam’s unique construction of architectural poetry. Page and face are both surfaces for reading.

The repertoire of the body enables Elkayam to recreate endless figures of speech that build on the corporeal in concert with music and meter that highlight her overall commitment to a careful practice of writing. Writing poetry (and singing) is for Elkayam an act of binding. Her deep level of engagement turns the poetic act into a *prophetic act*; an act that begins with her commitment to the word (1983:32):

As for me,	ובאשר אלי
And I took it upon myself for	וקיבלתי עלי בשם השירה שאמ-
the sake of the song so	
Indeed—I'll come back—to God.	נם-אשיבה-יה.
And I gave my name in a word/covenant	וקבלתי עלי במלה
To grow to the scent of a blossom of light.	להיות צומח אל הריח כפרח אור.
To be kindled by the right aroma.	להיות נצת בריח הנכון.
To be	להיות
Amen. ¹⁰	אמן.

Through the poetic act, Elkayam rewrites a new contract that affirms her womanly being. In part, poetry is a prayer, a spiritual conversation with God. Words bear witness to a process of movement and growth towards light, stringing a thread between *'amen*, אמן, *'amnam*, אמנם and *'emet*, אמת (amen, indeed, and truth) that articulates one’s affirming presence and one’s faith. Elkayam’s production of a new intertextuality engaged with unraveling the literal for the sake of rethinking its metaphoric potential is embedded in *millah*, מילה (word). Can words materialize the space between language and the body? In Hebrew, מילה, *millah* is a homophone of מילה, *milah*, the covenant of circumcision. The close correspondence between the two words underscores the deep cultural relationship between male circumcision and Hebrew utterance. The covenant is inscribed in the word in the same way that the word embodies the covenant. But in her newly conceived construction, Elkayam utters a new poetic covenant: a female *milah*, מילה (circumcision), inscribed through the incantation of the word (*millah*, מילה).

10 The translation is a modified version of Alcalay (1996:322–324).

In the name of poetry, she says (1983:34):

Look, finally, the ledger's open,	סוף סוף, ראה, הפנקס פתוח
The ceremonies of the <i>Brit</i> (covenant)	טקסי הברית רשומים בגוף
are inscribed on the body.	
Each man and his covenant	איש ובריתו
Inscribed on his body.	חקוק בגופו הוא.

The poem affirms that the body carries a testimonial message, a historical memory, and that is a readable site. The poem, *Brit Ya'akov*, ברית יעקב ("Jacob's Covenant"), exclaims, *brit Ya'akov le'olam ba-milah*, ברית יעקב לעולם במילה ("the covenant of Jacob is forever by the word"). Here she makes explicit the point that words are not only the material of the covenant, but that they are markers of difference and change. Not only do words articulate Elkayam's gender and spiritual position, but their silencing is associated with violence. Hebrew provides the grid for this semantic conception: 'ilem, אילם (dumb, mute, silent), and 'alam, אלאם or 'alimut, אלימות (violence). The poem *Be- 'Ezrat*, בעזרת ("With Help"), emphasizes that violence can be articulated in silence (Elkayam, 1987:45; translation: Alcalay, 1996:319):

And now, when she speaks violence	ועכשיו, כשהיא מדברת אלי אלימות
to me, without	בלי מלים
words, reckless at times,	לפעמים בשפה רשולה.
To what can she be likened,	למה היא משולה?
what can she be likened to?	למה היא משולה?
I'm unfamiliar with the woods in her brain.	איני יודעת יערות מחה.

Place as an idea "which is set in heaven, as an object of desire and observation" is a repeated theme in Jewish/Israeli narrative (Gurevitch, 1997). In the anthropology of Israeli place, from its early articulation in Genesis, place was introduced in the dialectic tension of place/no place, a place that cannot be placed. "The Jewish past emphasized the lack of locality of the Israeli as long as idea always positioned him in opposition to the place (*makom*, מקום)..." (Gurevitch, 1997:44). If the sense of place is problematic for the Israeli, then for minorities who try to claim nativeness, and for those who write on the culture of exile, it is all the more so. In the narrative of the Israeli history of place, the Israeli of Sephardi and Mizrahi origin is practically absent, assumed by default to share in the same general history of European Jews. I cannot overemphasize the significance of this totalizing historical narrative. Official (European) history precludes even the possibility of raising their collective voice within the domain of mainstream cultural politics. The problematic Israeli notion of time can be generalized to illuminate the marginalized position of minorities in Israeli culture whose struggles take place within a totally different magnitude of historicity.

Through her different constructions, Elkayam resolves to write a new covenant that will include the East, and with it the sun, as seen in her short poem, *Tsarikh liftoach 'et ha-bayit la-Mizrach*, צריך לפתח את הבית למזרח (“One must open the house to the East”) (1983:37):

One must open the house to the East.
To let the morning through,
and drench the bones of the building
in the sun.¹¹

צריך לפתח את הבית למזרח
שיכנס בצהרי הבקר, שיבוא
בעצמות הבית
שמש.

The economy of the poem metonymically binds house and poetry, positioning open structures with the imagery of both *bayit*, בית, a house, with four walls (lines) aligned in four directions, and *bayit*, בית, a stanza of a poem printed in block-shaped font. House and poem both open to the East/east, welcoming the sun. Home and poem together make a platform on which the body is oriented. 'Atzmot *ha-bayit*, עצמות הבית (“the bones of the house”) materialize and construct both kinds of structures: the scaffolding of the building is juxtaposed with the core essence of poetry. And yet, for those who have been relegated to the shadows, the possibility of feeling the mid-morning sun on one's body, penetrating deeply to the bones, is more than a comforting sensation of warmth. Elkayam's use of *tsarikh*, צריך (one must, or it is necessary) strongly suggests that the possibility is actually an imperative. The Jewish prayer position of Exile is directed to the East/east, and is a gesture of deep confidence, underscoring the idea that one is intimately and viscerally connected to Jerusalem and God. Opening the house to the East/east, therefore, is an act of hospitality that, more than simply allowing the East/east to enter, seeks to incorporate it. Hospitality, a social value associated with Middle Eastern cultures, is both a means and an objective.

Writing is generated, produced and reproduced through women's ability to speak; it is a production that rethinks female subjectivity in a new language. Rethinking the old structures, such as *bayit*, בית, *safah*, שפה, *daf*, דף (home/stanza, lip/language, disappear/page), becomes the ultimate act of constructing a concrete and immediate identity. Elkayam attempts to contain in her poetic space—a house, a garden—their sight and the singing voice of the mirrors while resisting external mythologies of times and places. A mediated place in a body, and a body in time, enable her to observe, reflect and listen. From such alternative locations, she is able to sing her poetry. *Bayit*, בית (house, as a stanza in a poem) is its very own construction.

Elkayam's poetry seeks to rethink the place of the body and female consciousness in the masculinist context of Hebrew language and cultural history. The historically objective voice, the old male patriarchal voice, the dominant and controlling voice,

11 Compare with Alkalay's translation (1996:320).

can be reengineered in a new garden fitted with new mirrors that sing in a new, old language, and that rearrange preexisting spatial relationships. Elkayam seeks to disturb the immediate correspondences between reflector and reflected, sound and echo, signifier and signified, by elaborating on the signifying process and the new possibilities it engenders and embodies. Once poetry constitutes the talking body, that body is able to perform. Elkayam, the poet, mixes materials, ingredients and corporeal artifacts in a montage-like fashion, borrowing from the archaic intertextual body (the body of knowledge, like in 'Eden, or the body of the covenant, like in circumcision), as well as from the biographical female and ethnic body. Her new poetics of difference and marginality confuses the old language and reworks the conventional referentiality between signifiers and signified, creating in the process a new and purposefully confusing—and confused—Tower of Babel, *Bavel mevulbalah*, בבבל מבוֹלְבָלָה. In underscoring the primacy of the body—a *bayit*, a home, a fortress—the body of Mizrahi poetry itself sets a new ethnic boundary. In the poem '*Amanah*, אמנה ("A Treaty"), she reveals (Elkayam, 1987:56–57):

Truth inside exists even without her nakedness	אמת בפנים יש גם ללא מערמיה
Lighting an exposed muscular foot:	מאירה רגל שרירה וחשופה:
sometimes	לפעמים
a hand, sometimes a breast.	יד לפעמים שד. כנסיכות
By the circumstances of the body.	הגוף. וגם לפי
And by your request.	בקשתך

A woman in one vertical cut: Miri Ben Simhon

Prior to her death in a tragic car accident in June 1997, Miri Ben Simhon had published three collections of poetry, *Me 'unyenet Lo' Me 'unyenet*, מעונינת לא מעונינת (Interested, Not Interested, 1983), *Shibolet Dakkah Be-khad Cheres 'Atik*, שבלת דקה, צמא (Thirst, 1990). A fourth collection, *'Exizstentzialism Chared*, אקזיסטנציאליזם חרד (Worried Existentialism) was published posthumously in 1998. Of Moroccan ancestry, Miri Ben Simhon grew up in the Katamons, a neighborhood in Jerusalem populated by Middle Eastern and North African Jews. She graduated from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Department of Hebrew Literature. In addition to poetry, she wrote short stories, translated the poetry of others, worked as an editor for *Yerushalayim*, a local publication, and was active in various literary organizations.

Ben Simhon's poetic body constitutes a different anatomy than Elkayam's (see Appendix 2). She uses adjectives (in feminine form) to accentuate the position of a gendered female body by further designating its ethnic character as '*arumah*, ערומה (naked), '*ilemet*, אלמת (mute) or *shchorah*, שחורה (black). Not only does she draw

on other, more obviously female body parts—breast, womb, genitals—but she is also attentive to the interior of the body. The spinal cord, for example, is an important axis along which a new genealogy is mobilized. Ben Simhon draws from within alternative biological and textual connections to her “native” body. In her poem, *Na'arah min ha-Rechem Le'an?*, נערה מן הרחם לאן? (“Woman of the Womb, Where To?”), the spinal cord is electrically charged by the nervous system, becoming a heightened erogenous zone of female sexual pleasure. For Ben Simhon, the poetic act is a sexual act in the same way that the physiological body is sensual (1983:5–6):

She creates in her image another mother	היא בוראת בצלמה אמה אחרת
Why does she need another mother now	למה היא צריכה לאמה עכשיו
woman of the womb	נערה מן הרחם
When inside the parasympathetic	כשבפנים מערכת עצבית
nervous system	פרה-סמפטית
tightly bound to the whiteness of	כרוכה הדוק אל לבן חוט שדרתה
her spinal cord	
conducts electricity to her stomach	מוליכה חשמל אל בטנה ופנים ירכיה
and inner thighs	
In gushing currents.	בזרמים קורחים.

Ben Simhon's poem, *Na'arah min ha-Katamonim (Chatakh 'Orek)*, נערה מן הקטמונים (*Chatakh 'Orek*), introduces the female character, 'Alizah Alfandari (1983:12–13):

A black woman with acne scars on her face	נערה שחורה עם חטטים בפנים
'Alizah Alfandari	עליזה אלפנדרי
In a place intended for other people	במקום שנועד לאנשים אחרים
She is washing her clothes	מכבסת את בגדיה
As if she is doing God's will	כמי שעושה הטוב בעיני אלהים
Then she will mop the floor	אחר כך תדיח רצפה
And fix some flowers in the vase	ותתקן פרחים באגרטל
She matches the color of her blouse	היא מתאימה את צבע החולצה לחצאית
to her skirt	
She doesn't give a damn about the	היא לא שמה על החטטים בפנים
acne scars on the face	
She puts on it a thick layer of “makeup”	היא שמה על זה שכבה עבה
	של “מיק אפ”
So it doesn't show too much.	ולא רואים כל כך.
In general, her rights and successes	בכלל זכויותיה
don't depend on it	והצלחותיה לא תלויות בזה
She makes sure to fulfill her duties	היא מקפידה למלא את חובותיה לפי הסדר
in an orderly fashion	

And is well-trained on who is okay
and who is "not okay."
Now and then she has blowups,
but rightly so
Given that so many people don't
know how to behave
It's her nature
She can't stand all those who speak
nonsense
Who are tasteless
And who don't preserve their honor
Her mother died from a heart attack
when she was young
And her father is a custodian in the
religious public school near home
She loves her brother Ya'akov
Who did well in life
And is an administrator in the
University's agricultural
department
He is responsible for such and such
workers
Who receive their salary from his
hand
and give him respect.
She is a typist and can type
120 words per minute
The job is the most important thing
in her life
Every morning at 7:30 sharp you
can see her at the bus stop
(She has tenure with
retirement benefits).
In her free time she needlepoints
a pattern
That she bought in the Old City on
Shabbat.
Asher calls occasionally from the
garage
But she doesn't lead him on
That's good, then he'll know she's
serious

ואמונה היטב על מי בסדר מי "לא בסדר."
מדי פעם יש לה התפרצויות, אבל בצדק
בהתחשב בעובדה שכל כך הרבה אנשים לא
יודעים איך להתנהג
זה הטבע שלה
היא לא סובלת את כל אלה שאומרים
שטויות
שאינן להם טעם
ושלא שומרים על הכבוד שלהם
אמא שלה מתה מהתקף לב כשהיתה קטנה
ואבא שלה שרת בבית-ספר ממלכתי דתי
על יד הבית
היא אוהבת את האח שלה יעקב
שהתקדם בחיים
והוא אדמיניסטרטור במחלקת המשק של
האוניברסיטה
אחראי על כך וכך עובדים
שמקבלים את המשכורת מידו
ונותנים לו כבוד.
היא כתבנית ומספיקה 120 מילים בדקה
העבודה זה הרבה הכי חשוב בשבילה בחיים
כל בקר ב-7:30 בדיוק רואים אותה בתחנה
(יש לה קביעות וגם הפנסיה שלה מסדרת).
בשעות הפנויות היא סורגת גובלנים
שקנתה בעיר העתיקה בשבת.
אשר מתקשר לפעמים מן המוסך
אבל היא לא מראה לו פנים כל כך
זה טוב בשביל שידע שהיא רצינית

and won't agree to before the wedding.	ושלא יחשב שהיא תסכים לפני החתונה.
Sometimes she goes to the movies with her brother Ya'akov	לפעמים היא יוצאת עם האח שלה יעקב לסרט
Who's clean-shaven, in shiny shoes	מגלח למשעי ובנעליים מצחצחות
And all the neighborhood sees that she's having fun	וכל השכונה רואה שהיא מבלה
and her reputation remains spotless.	והשם שלה נשאר נקי.
Everyone in the neighborhood knows 'Alizah is an unblemished woman	כלם בשכונה יודעים שעליוזה היא בחורה ללא רבב
She says "Shalom" and "How're the kids"	אומרת "שלום" ו"מה שלום הילדים"
She knows how to sew and sits at home	יודעת לתפר ויושבת בבית
A straightlaced woman.	בחורה רצינית.
One day will come and luck will come as well	יום יבוא והמזל שלה יבוא גם כן
A splendid young man will come, and she'll marry	יבוא בחור לענין והיא תתחתן
And give birth to children who will grow up, with God's help,	ותוליד ילדים שיגדלו בעזרת השם
And will appreciate their mother.	ויעריכו את האמא שלהם.

This poem correlates the young woman's place of origin, the neighborhood of the Katamons, with dissection of the female identity. What and how does the subtitle *Chatakh 'Orekh*, חתך אורך ("A Vertical Cut") contribute to our understanding of 'Alizah Alfandari in this presumably simple poem? What kind of a "cut" does the poem and its reading inflict (perform)? And how does a "vertical cut" represent her more vividly than would Elkayam's "horizontal cut?" More than her location in Mizrahi culture per se, Ben Simhon helps us, through this poem, to understand the problematic issue of representation at the intersection of female physical appearance and interethnic projections of identity. The close-up profile of 'Alizah Alfandari conveys a deep sense of her "unhomeliness," cultural estrangement, emotional exile and the lack of a position from which to represent herself (cf. Bhabha, 1994:9).¹²

12 Homi Bhabha's articulation of the "unhomely" is relevant in this context:

To be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the "unhomely" be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres. The unhomely moment creeps up on

'Alizah's color and skin identify her even before she is introduced by name. The young woman is *shchorah*, שחורה (black) and her face covered with *chatatim*, חטטים (acne scars), a graphic description that immediately imprisons her within a gendered esthetic (or anti-esthetic) zone. Nevertheless, the illusion of closeness created by Ben Simhon's language and her photographic closeup is quickly shattered when we realize that 'Alizah's face constitutes a border zone. Her identity is tightly locked within two surface signifiers: color and acne scars. They designate the limited space from which otherness can be performed.

The discussion of skin color in Hebrew literature indeed deserves a closer look. The adjective (or noun) *shcharchoret*, שחרחורת (olive skin), is a more common reference to female beauty. Both "black" and "dark, olive" appear in the *Song of Songs*, in the female's erotic invitation: "I am black (*shchorah*) and beautiful, of daughters of Jerusalem, like the tents of Keidar, like the curtains of Solomon" (*Song of Songs* 1:5); "Don't look at me, because I am dark (*shcharchoret*) because the sun has burned me" (*Song of Songs*, 1:6). *Shchorah* in the first verse has changed into *shcharchoret* in the one following, and black skin into olive skin, suggesting that sensitivity to the erotics of skin color was encoded in the Hebrew language. Not surprisingly, the Rabbis consistently highlighted this distinction between the two adjectives, alerting to the inherent contradiction between blackness and beauty (*Midrash Rabbah*, Exodus 49:2). The olive skin color of the *shcharchoret* female is celebrated in Israeli popular culture as the romantic and exotic female of Yemenite origin (evident in the famous song, *Shecharchoret*, which became a signature of Yemenite women singers such as Shoshana Damari and Ahinoam Nini (Noa). At the other extreme of the color spectrum exists derogatory terms for Middle Eastern Jews, such as *Schwartz* and *Schwartz Chayes*, meaning "black" and "black animal" in Yiddish, used self-consciously by the Israeli Black Panthers (Mizrahim) in the early 1970s (Hamo and Chetrit, 2003; Shohat, 1988). In the history of Israeli ethnic discourse, self-identification as "black" is more than an act of self-assertion and self-recognition: it is a provocation against the common practice to whiten the East (as much as to darken and further "Orientalize" its subjects) (Fanon, 1967:41–62). The ideology of whiteness is at the top of the Euro-American colonial canon. It was conceptualized as integrally attached to beauty, intelligence and power, an ideological category that generated an "esthetics of exile from the body" among many generations of women and men of color (Shohat, 2001a).

you stealthily as your own shadow and suddenly you find yourself ... taking the measure of your dwelling in a state of "incredulous terror." The "unhomeliness" [is] inherent in the rite of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiation. The recesses of the domestic space become sites for history's most intricate invasions. Although the "unhomely" is a paradigmatic colonial and post-colonial condition, it has a resonance that can be heard distinctly, if erratically, in fictions that negotiate the powers of cultural differences in a range of transhistorical sites (1994:9).

The adjective “black” articulates Ben Simhon’s critical voice, claiming that, in the Israeli politics of demographic location, a woman from the Katamons is a woman of color. Her radical poetic representation of racism and identity politics in Israel theorizes the ethnic division among Israeli Jews in terms of “Black” and “White.”

Miri Ben Simhon is obviously engaged in exploring the tense space between the intimate and familiar and the separated and dislocated. Closer attention to the poem’s language reveals that Ben Simhon employs informal spoken Hebrew and includes colloquial expressions that draw from Arabic. For example, the expression, *hi’ lo’ samah ‘al ha-chatatim*, היא לא שמה על החטטים, literally means, “she does not put on the acne scars,” but colloquially means that she does not give a damn about them. However, the fact that ‘Alizah Alfandari applies a thick layer of makeup over her scars reveals that she *does* care about her look. Similarly, the expressions, *zeh ha-teva’ shelah*, זה הטבע שלה, (it is her nature or character) and *bachurah retsinit*, בחורה רצינית, literally, a serious woman (who doesn’t mess around with men), are figures of speech that ironically convey ‘Alizah’s strict, straightlaced persona and pose sharp contrast to the literal meaning of her name, which means joyful, merry or playful. ‘Aliz, עליז (gay, joyful) is also the colloquial Hebrew term for homosexual, much like the English term “gay,” adding yet another (ironic) layer of marked otherness to the reputedly “straightlaced” ‘Alizah. Another expression is a direct translation from Arabic, *Hi’ lo’ mar’ah lo panim*, היא לא מראה לו פנים, literally, “she does not show him a face,”¹³ meaning that she does not look at a man or approach him in a way that would give him reason to suspect her interest in him, or that might stir up his erotic hopes. These colloquial expressions and the unofficial tone of ‘Alizah’s description position her in her native, vernacular environment. She is represented in the Katamon vernacular as the “neighborhood maiden.”

As sympathetic as Ben Simhon’s poetic portrait might seem, she ultimately represents ‘Alizah from an exteriorized distance; that is, the Katamons woman lacks subjective autonomy. In the geographical and cultural climate of Israel, ‘Alizah’s identifying markers (*shchorah*, *chatatim*, *Katamonim*) are loaded signifiers of inferiority. They locate ‘Alizah ethnically, esthetically and politically, raising the question of whether it is ever even possible to represent a woman from the Katamons as attractive. A profile of a young woman that is fixated on origin—in this case, the Katamons—proceeds as a linear genealogy that not only constitutes an ethnic and class distinction, but also, and especially, marks her historical exclusion. The poem’s referentiality therefore extends beyond its geographical or esthetic locations, beyond its neighborhood address. ‘Alizah herself is silent, introduced in the third person by various insiders whose objectifying voice is distant (and distancing). The poem can be read as a series of statements, including gossip, uttered (performed) by different

13 In Arabic, *ma turwintu wutch*.

people in the community: a grandmother, an aunt, a brother, and others in the family and the *shcunah*, שכונה (neighborhood). Collectively, these utterances serve to acknowledge and uphold 'Alizah's good name. Thus, the neighborhood represents the public gaze that effectively preserves the unmarried woman's code of intimacy and privacy. The fact that Ben Simhon does not reveal 'Alizah's name in the title of the poem suggests that the Katamon woman's profile can be read as a biography of the prototypic ethnic woman.

'Alizah's cultural location in the Katamons informs her total identity and supersedes by collapsing the individual categories of gender, sex and even ethnicity. The representation of her appearance constitutes a radical critique of sexual, gender and ethnic politics on several levels. Ben Simhon places at the center of her poem the un(der)privileged Mizrahi woman who is described and profiled by members of her own community. At the same time, 'Alizah is a product of the historical representation of women in the Eurocentric Ashkenazi culture. Ben Simhon puts an ironic twist on the usual exoticization of Mizrahi women by Ashkenazi ethnographers and folklorists. That is, 'Alizah is equally deprived of a subjective voice by her Katamons neighbors, whose own interpolation into gendered, class and ethnic hierarchies both demobilized subjectivity and activated self-directed prejudices.

No wonder women like 'Alizah are especially domesticated by their cultural location, the *schunah*, שכונה (neighborhood). The Katamons are an important aspect of one's identity; a Katamons address is a virtual identification card. The neighborhood fixes one's present, as well as one's past. Here, history is reduced to a physical location, and ethnic identity to what is observed by an external eye. Linearity, therefore, is a strategic paradigm of origin on the basis of which one's identity is indexed. Mizrahi women are doubly marked as female in Israeli culture and as Jews of Middle Eastern ancestry. Ben Simhon responds to the impossibility of constructing an autonomous Mizrahi woman by creating an ironic and oppressed prototype of the typical Mizrahi woman, whose voice is but an empty echo mirroring the internalized prejudices and conventions of the Katamons street: *hi' beseder*, היא בסדר ("She is all right"). In contrast, in the aforementioned "Women of the Womb," Ben Simhon attempts to reconcile the historical inequities and cultural discontinuities manifested by the lack of a common language between a woman and her mother (or rather her mother-tongue) by re-introducing biological and ancestral origins—the womb—and not the geographical neighborhood of the Katamons as a new locus of ethnic, gendered and sexual identity.

Katamons, the Jerusalem neighborhood, is a byproduct of both Israeli Zionism and a specific European modernity. As an important part of colonial practices, its geographical history goes back to the last Haganah attack (April 29, 1948) on the southwestern Palestinian neighborhood in an attempt to occupy the important strategic area south of Jerusalem. Earlier, during the 1930s, new southwestern neighborhoods, such as Talbiya, Katamon and Baq'a, were built and settled by

wealthy upper-class Christian Arab families (Dumper, 1997:66,70). But it was only after the occupation of Katamon that Ben Gurion, prior to becoming the first prime minister of Israel, signed a ceasefire treaty that led to declaration of the independence of the new state (Shlaim, 1998). In its colonial context, Katamon refers not only to the displaced Palestinian population, but also to the reordering and remapping of space and geography under Israeli control. Many Jews living in Jerusalem moved into the Palestinian Arab properties in Katamon right after the war, and during the 1950s many new immigrants, mostly of Middle Eastern and North African origin, were settled in “the Katamons”—a cluster of several Katamon neighborhoods—in mass-produced public housing projects controlled by government policies by companies such as Amidar, Amigur and Prazot.¹⁴

As a product of Israeli modernity, the Katamons symbolize the systematic production of cultural, economical, educational and ethnic marginality. The Katamons can be understood as a Zionist space, evident in their rapid formation following statehood as a dystopic zone of poverty and cultural crisis, in contrast to the ultimate utopian ideal of the kibbutz and moshav. Their existence exposes consequences of asymmetrical patterns of urban migration, namely, a problematic and discriminatory demography, typified by crowded apartments, poorly funded educational and public facilities, high rates of unemployment and the low socioeconomic status of the residents (Yiftachel, 1998). The Katamons continue to be recognized as a cogent and controversial site of inequality in Israel today, as powerfully represented in an ongoing installation cum protest initiated in 1986 by people in the community in collaboration with the artist and videographer, Shlomo Vazana. Titled, “Language/Tongue of Colors,” the project consists of boulders, left behind by construction workers, that are vividly painted and signposted with the slogans “freedom,” “justice,” “education” and so forth. The installation provides an alternative narrative to the national, Zionist narrative of ethnic resilience (http://www.ha-keshet.org.il/articles/asp?action=form&article_id=243). Similarly, Ben Simhon’s poetry represents another mode of social and political protest inspired by the history and present reality of the Katamons.

14 Historical land distribution and the laws regarding public housing and tenants’ rights and regulations are some of the main social issues that Mizrahi organizations such as *Hakeshet Hademokratit Hamizrachit-Siach Chadash* (The Mizrahi Democratic Rainbow-New Discourse) have confronted since the 1990s. More than half a million people, or 120,000 families, most of whom are immigrants from the 1950s and 1970s, are subject to old discriminatory regulations against their legal right to buy and own homes and land. Although the Law of Public Housing was instituted in October 1998, ruling against privatization of the public housing holding companies, it is still subject to negotiation as a result of finance minister Netanyahu’s initiative to greatly limit its application (<http://www.ha-keshet.org.il/volumes.asp?id=2>; see also Yonah and Saporta, 2002).

Ben Simhon was a child of the political and intellectual ferment stoked by protests waged by the Israeli Black Panthers in the early 1970s.¹⁵ Through 'Alizah Alfandari, she theorizes about the dialectical position of the Katamons as a most static, stereotypical and orientalized place, which is, nevertheless, a very real if counter-idealistic Zionist place. 'Alizah is the liminal, oppressed cultural product of such a hegemonic geography; she is born into the fixity and banality of a preordained ontological system. Her identification as a woman of the Katamons recalls the "photographic" identification of males in the idiom of criminology in Mizrahi poetry of and by men (Tsoffar, 2003). For both Mizrahi females and males, the body is an ethnographic site located within a material, economic geography. Ironically, although her biographical portrait of 'Alizah depicts a woman bound by ethnicity and ingrained communal expectations, Ben Simhon's poem also employs the technologies of body and gender to liberate the woman from the overdetermined cultural space of the Katamons.

Still, the poem makes explicit the received notion that women construct their identity only in reference to external mirrors, and that their agency is located outside of the self, apart from personal resources. Feminists have problematized the distorting ability of public mirrors to determine women's sense of identity and its representation, citing examples as diverse as folktales, such as "Sleeping Beauty," and psychoanalytic theory, such as Lacan's internalized mirror of the Mother and the Phallus.¹⁶ Such a public voice dictates esthetic, moral, familial conventions. Once internalized, this voice resides within women: it reflects, judges and approves (or disapproves) of their behavior. The result is that, within the figuratively gated community of the Katamons, one's identity is both imposed and imprisoned: walls within walls, eyes within eyes, exile within exile. In this claustrophobic void, as it were, 'Alizah's body, actions and attention to her cleanliness and virginity are the signs of her social approval. And yet, beyond the solidly constructed walls of communal like-mindedness, one can sense 'Alizah's isolation, her tough skin—"wall"—of perseverance. A testimony of time, a cultural map, 'Alizah's face becomes the authentic surface of her identity, her pockmarks and scars of her ethnicity and gender.

Although 'Alizah presumably is "at home," she is, in fact, absent. The vertical cut of the dissecting eye deprives her of a home in and from which she can voice her needs and desires. She has neither libido nor id, but possesses common sense.

15 In this connection, Ben Simhon's own appearance is telling, as described by Shim'on Schlusht in his "Epilogue" (eulogy) to her 1997 posthumous collection: "Her red hair; she painted her lips and nails fiery red. Focused on one purpose, born out of insistence, perceptive and thoughtful. She glided on high heels, pursing her lips, twisting her mouth, and batting her eyes. As in her appearance, she approached life with a certain boldness, the embodiment of pleasure and innocence" (Schlusht, 1998: 50).

Ben Simhon's title limits the reader to the cold, scientific procedure of a biological dissection devoid of any emotional content. Her (re)presentation of 'Alizah through a vertical cross-section cannot capture the entirety of the woman's being. Dissected identity as a mode of representing the female is related both to the poverty of language and to the landscape of difference. In the line *uve-chol zot, sfat ha-guf shelah, ha-lashon shelah*, שלה הגוף שלה הלשון שלה ("and somehow, her body language is her tongue/language"), Ben Simhon reminds us that the body and its poetry is constitutive of language. She is troubled by the young woman's inability to break through the linguistic constraints determined by her body and her neighborhood.

For Ben Simhon, the body is the primary referent of and for an authentic identity. As I noted earlier in reference to the poem, "Women of the Womb, Where To?", the female body's spinal cord, genitals and pelvis expose, ambivalently, an otherwise concealed zone of insult and memory. Similarly, as the French feminist theorist Luce Irigaray (1985) has asserted, female creativity has drawn on the female body, and especially on the womb, as a place of origin for writing female subjectivity and reinventing its language. Another important alternative location of authenticity in Simhon's poetic body is the gall bladder or *kis ha-marah*, כיס המרה (literally, "the pocket of bitterness"). More than the other organs, the gall bladder and its fluids become important aspects of Ben Simhon's own identity, especially when juxtaposed with her name, Miriam מרים, or with the adjective "black," *shachor*, שחור, as in the expression *marah shchorah*, מרה שחורה, "black bile," literally "black bitterness" or "melancholy."¹⁷ For its phonetic proximity to *mar*, or "bitter," rabbinic commentary drew a semantic connection between the name "Miriam" and the "bitter sea." These three signifiers—Miriam, bitter and melancholy—form a hologram of name, body organ and mental condition, or language, body and mind, that also maps class, ethnicity, sex and gender. The opening lines of *Likra't Shir*, לקראת שיר ("Toward a Poem") are illustrative of this effect (1983:7):

The authentic feelings refuse for the
time being to be imprisoned in the
cage of my

התחושות האותנטיות ממאנות
לפי שעה להיכלא בסוגר

16 For a feminist discussion of mirror as a metaphor of literary paternity, see Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's chapter, "The Queen's Looking Glass" (2000:3-44). For a psychoanalytic explanation, see Jacques Lacan (1982:137-148); in Hebrew literature, see Yael Feldman (1999).

17 The connection between the mental and physiological aspects of melancholy was similarly articulated in classical Greek thought through the metaphor of black bile (*melaina kole*), pointing to an imbalance in the organism represented by the four body humors (blood, yellow, black bile and phlegm), which corresponded to the four elements (earth, air, fire and water) (Kristeva, 1989:6-7). The dark, heavy feelings of depression were lodged in one specific organ, the bile-filled gall bladder, figuratively and graphically portraying the soul as dark and murky.

Thinking and prefer to freely trample in my gall bladder (<i>kis ha-marah</i>)	החשיבה שלי ומעדיפות לבוסס דרור בכיס המרה שלי
But my bitter gall bladder is an expression from my grandmother's jargon	אבל כיס המרה שלי-הוא ביטוי הלקוח מז'רגונה של סבתא שלי
Who, if she could only see me now, would surely say in a heavy Moroccan accent	שלו ראתה אותי כעת הייתה בודאי אומרת במבטא מרוקאי כבד
"Miriam you are in a black bile (<i>marah shchorah</i>)—with a penultimate, rhythmic pronunciation, in an expert's tone.	"מרים את במרה שחורה"—בהגוי מלעלי" קצבי, ובטון מבין דבר.
Although according to the experience of self replicating life	אם כי על פי ניסיון של חיים החוזרים על עצמם
Life that includes, as if it is obvious, The sum of the entire schematic human	וכוללים בתוכם כמובן מאליי סך כל תחושות אנוש
sensations of insult and bitter melancholy (<i>marah shchorah</i>).	סכמאטיות של עלבון ומרה שחורה

Ben Simhon's self-diagnosed melancholy is based on the three parameters that identify her: her body, her mind and her language. It is more than an esthetic choice that motivates her muse and philosophical ethos (Fanon, 1967). Frantz Fanon's discussion of the psychopathology of the colored body of the "Negro" is instructive in this case, for, as he explains, it is a condition that relies precisely on its historical symbolization of potency and biological danger. Melancholy is produced through the encounter between an inferior subject and a hegemonic, controlling world; it constitutes "a certain sensitizing action" which "sabotages the psychic structure of the individual" (Fanon, 1967:154). Ben Simhon's interethnic and interracial exposure of bitterness (*mar*, מר, *marah*, מרה) highlights the very limits of her poetic writing. Her anatomic if figurative reference to female depression recalls the "zone of anxiety" inhabited by people of color (Fanon, 1967). Freud, and later feminists, understood melancholy as a response to the psychological loss of the mother. For Kristeva, for example, melancholy confirms the intolerance for the "object loss and the failure of the signifying bond, especially of language, to generate any compensation for resolving the anxiety of death or suicide" (1989:10). Rejecting the classical Freudian psychoanalytic model of neurosis, Fanon highlights the "imposition of culture" in his topography of the black subject. Melancholy, in this sense, is not simply the impossible mourning for the lost mother, but rather a manifestation of the psycho-existential reality of inferiority, exclusion and discrimination (see also Mizrahi, 2004).

The blackness of the bile (*mara shchorah*) augments Ben Simhon's self-representation as a black woman, adding depth both to her "black" exterior and

to her internal “black” mood. She employs the adjective “black” in its feminine form, *shchorah*. Ben Simhon’s emphasis on color, and on blackness in particular, are especially critical in the context of numerous attempts to whiten the East and to deny the historical specificity of Mizrahi ethnicities. Actually, color may be only one aspect of ethnic differences, but it nonetheless is one of the most visible markers. Ben Simhon’s women, their color, accents, geographies of origin and/or straight-laced demeanor are the organic qualifiers that constitute their gender and ethnic situation and that determine the limits, or potential, of their belonging and exclusion. It is from these qualifiers that she draws as a way to recuperate women’s existential autonomy.

Ben Simhon’s body language melds with her poetic language in the space of female creativity. But “mood language” is closer to home, braided with the spinal cord and steeped in the black juices of the bile. In “Toward a Poem,” the woman’s realization of her melancholy is communicated through the internalized and compassionate voice of her grandmother, who, in her thick Moroccan accent, perceptively discerns her granddaughter’s melancholy, as the two women are intimately bound by the experience of exile and “social insults.” In Ben Simhon’s depiction of ethnic poetics, the grandmother’s ability to recognize the high toll of “human insults” and “bitter melancholy” is an important aspect of her internalized voice that helps the granddaughter find her way home.¹⁸

The political challenge is to imagine and create a new discursive space from which a woman can speak. And yet, writing is an act that exposes the very ambivalence of stripping away one’s interiority. More than that, dissecting is a violent act that invades one’s body and one’s very being. That the dissecting eye can cast its gaze beyond the immediate body is evident in the life story it divulges. Ben Simhon’s ironic portrayal of ‘Alizah demonstrates that very point: a woman like her is unable to escape from the dissecting eye of others. Ben Simhon makes clear that, in the landscape of Israeli ethnicity, women’s skin color and scars are more than mere esthetic matters. Scars are the inferior urban signifier within the architecture of the face. The Katamons themselves are the pockmarks on Israeli ethnic topography.

Between longing and belonging

Ben Simhon’s trenchant engagement with the female body—an explicit, if fractured, ethnic body of color—belies an important and ironic poetic strategy: to re-member a dismembered body with its internal and external wounds. Elkayam similarly attempts to engineer, through body and language, the foundations on which ethnicity

18 Making a link to the grandmother is an important way to authenticate Mizrahi genealogy. See, for example, Shohat (2001b:243).

can be constructed, and female ethnicity in particular. Her architectural project is attentive to the nuts and bolts of such constructions, dissecting the body in order to reconstruct a whole female identity. In part, the dramatic image of the dissected female body is a response to the historical representation of women under the male, so-called scientific gaze. In the colonial discourse, the Mizrahi woman is a metaphor of the land, available to penetration by male Ashkenazi agents through the physical, scientific gaze and its authoritative knowledge. In part, Elkayam and Ben Simhon rely on the authority produced by this discourse in inventing an alternative feminine/feminist discourse of dissection that makes precise “cuts” along the width and length of bodies and identities. But, they also make strategic use of the “master’s language” in emancipating the female body from its objectification and subjugation.

In underscoring the primacy of the body—a *bayit*, home, fortress—the body of Mizrahi poetry itself sets a new ethnic boundary. Mizrahi authors reconceptualize ethnicity through the body as a spatial and relational site of culture. Rather than simply attempting to write the body as an image of ethnicity and gender, their work aims to locate the body and its presence within a national context and to articulate its historical structuration. Similarly, as Homi Bhabha has theorized about the location of minorities in culture, the process of “presencing” becomes possible only once a historical sense of estrangement from the home and the world is articulated or relocated (Bhabha, 1994:11).

One can read the female face, therefore, beyond its feminine, colored, esthetic or erotic reality. In fact, the deployment of the face helps Ben Simhon to substantiate female appearance as a marked category of ethnicity. The topography of the face that Ben Simhon draws depicts the details that constitute a woman’s geographical exile and displacement from her body. Amazingly, both poets struggle with the question of how to create a multidimensional construct of ethnicity that will replace the popular one dimensional, flat representation of ethnic women. By plotting the face with pockmarks and scars, Ben Simhon turns the face into a topographical palimpsest, with its contested experiential and geographical histories. Elkayam’s solution is to situate the female body in a time and place free from the overdetermined influence of the canonical past and preordained future, thereby creating a female ontological presence that manifests an autonomous gendered identity. Her architectural structure mirrors new inner mirrors, reflects new inner reflections and reverberates with new inner voices. In these novel imagined spaces, between body parts and the Katamons, between the architectural home and the intimate *shcunah*, שכונה (neighborhood), exists a “safe zone” from which Elkayam and Ben Simhon can proceed to construct new poetic anatomies of and for the Mizrahi female.

APPENDIX 1: SHELLY ELKAYAM

Upper Body: 124 references				
Head: 88				
skull: 1	head: 4	brain: 6	braids: 1	
face: 24	forehead: 2	cheek: 1	eyes: 17	pupil: 3
mouth: 4	tongue: 4	lip(s): 11	uvula: 1	
nose: 2	dimples: 3		wrinkles: 3	
back of neck: 1				
Torso: 36				
shoulder: 1	arm: 2	hand: 17	fingers: 1	nails: 1
breast: 1				
heart: 9				
belly/stomach: 2		back: 2		
Lower Body: 6 references				
womb: 1				
legs: 3	knees: 2			
General Body: 39 references				
body: 14				
bones: 1	joint: 2			
flesh: 4				
muscle: 4				
nerves: 4				
blood: 1				
voice: 7				
breath: 2				
Total references to body parts: 169				

APPENDIX 2: MIRI BEN SIMHON

Upper Body: 36 references			
Head: 16			
head: 2	hair: 1	face: 5	
mouth: 1	teeth: 1	tongue: 2	lip (language) 3
throat: 1			
Torso: 20			
arm: 2	hand: 5	fingers: 3	
breast: 1	spinal cord: 2		
belly: 3	stomach: 1	gall bladder: 3	
Lower Body: 14 references			
genitals: 2	pelvis: 3	vagina: 1	womb: 3
legs: 4	inner thigh: 1		
General Body: 13 references			
body: 3			
body parts: 1			
skin color: 1			
human image: 1			
joint: 1			
breath: 2			
soul: 2			
blood: 1			
nerves: 1			
Total references to body parts: 63			

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