

1: How to Write an Introduction

A Methodological Introduction IN THE INTRODUCTION, I said that mizrahanut is something larger than merely the academic study of the Middle East. I insisted that a working definition should include all those who, in various institutional locations, produce authoritative discourse on the Middle East, Arab culture, Islamic civilization, or even.

Chapter One What Is Mizrahanut? I insisted that a working definition should include all those who, in various institutional locations, produce authoritative discourse on the Middle East, Arab culture, Islamic civilization, or even mizrahi Jews. I even suggested that such a history should address also something as fuzzy and ill defined as the orientalist function. By saying this, however, I probably have caused even more confusion and questioning: What is the subject of this book? What is mizrahanut or orientalism? Who are its practitioners in Hebrew, mizrahanim? Is it possible to give a straightforward and unequivocal answer to these questions? And if not, is it possible to write a history of mizrahanut at all? There are two commonsensical ways of answering these questions, but neither will do in this case. The first is to define mizrahanut according to its topic, the slice of reality it studies, which is taken as given. In high school we were told, for example, that biology is the science of life or that chemistry studies the molecular structure of matter. Similarly, one could say that orientalism is the study of the "Orient. Everybody knows that medicine, for example, does not have a single topic or object but that it is defined simply by what medical doctors do by virtue of their knowledge and jurisdiction. What is the common denominator between, say, cosmetic surgery, the prescription of antihistamines, and sexual counseling apart from the fact that they are all under the jurisdiction of medical doctors? Similarly, one could say that mizrahanut is the deployment of a particular kind of expertise, in particular, knowledge of the Arab language and Islamic culture. In short, mizrahanut could be defined either by its object or by its subject. But even a superficial examination of these definitions shows that they are inadequate. Suppose mizrahanut is the study of the Orient. What would be the geographical boundaries of this object? A very simple empirical test would be to collect all the articles published in a leading journal, such as the official publication of the Israeli Oriental Society, *Ha-Mizrach Ha-Hadash The New Orient*, and to check to what geographical area they pertain. In the inaugural issue of *Ha-Mizrach Ha-Hadash*, the president of the society wrote that the new quarterly would deal with "events and developments in the countries of the Orient, especially the Middle East. It could be a fairly well defined geographical area stretching from Turkey and Iran in the north and bounded by the Persian Gulf in the east, the Indian Ocean in the south, and the Suez Canal in the west. But my calculations show that only 60 percent of the articles published in the period from to dealt with this area. However, as can be seen in Table 1. I might hypothesize, therefore, that the Middle East is not a geographical but a geopolitical unit and that its boundaries are determined by the intensity of relations between the countries included within it. But in this case I would be hard pressed to explain why at least 10 percent of the articles were dedicated to countries further to the east - Pakistan, India, China, Japan, Burma, and so on - that are not commonly perceived as belonging to the Middle East geopolitical zone. I might hypothesize further that the topic treated by mizrahanut is not just the Middle East but the old, wide territorial expanse of the "Orient," as the president of the Israeli Oriental Society intimated. Even that would not do. Even if I ignore the fact that Egypt lies to the west of Israel and south of Europe, I would still be hard pressed to explain why approximately 8 percent of the articles were dedicated to countries of sub-Saharan Africa Nigeria, Ghana, Ethiopia, etc. I might hypothesize that the geographical boundaries of the Orient are not really defined by the boundaries of states but by the stretch of a certain civilization - the spread of the Islamic religion or of the Arabic language. This hypothesis, too, fails the test. While some of the articles dedicated to the countries of sub-Saharan Africa or the Far East focus indeed on Islamic elements in these societies, many others do not. Moreover, if this hypothesis were true, one would expect to see many more articles dedicated to the countries of North Africa Libya, Algeria, Tunis, Morocco, etc. This is admittedly a crude test. The reader may justly object that the contents of this one journal reflect not the boundaries of the object of orientalism but merely the vagaries of editorial decision-making, a fairly random process. The editors may have decided to provide their readers with articles on some less familiar topics or were simply inundated with submissions

about Africa and the Far East. On this view, the object of mizrahanut remains easy to determine. It is composed of the geopolitical Middle East, which is the subject of 77 percent of the articles; the remaining articles are just "noise," wide blurry margins around a focused lens. I tend to disagree. These margins are a little bit more patterned than one would expect if they were merely the result of a random process. Although from 14 percent of the articles were dedicated to Far Eastern countries and only 5 percent to sub-Saharan ones, these percentages were roughly reversed between and , to 7 percent and 10 percent, respectively. The change is even more striking if we compare the first three years of the journal , when according to my calculations almost 20 percent of the articles were dedicated to India, China, and similar countries but only 2 percent to African countries, with the decade following the war, when the percentages were 6 percent and 13 percent, respectively. Now, to anyone familiar with the history of Israeli foreign policy, these are not random fluctuations. One starts to get the sense that the boundaries of the territorial area understood to be within the mandate of the journal are neither fixed nor random but change in quite determinable ways, in accordance with practices aimed not so much at reflecting a given reality but at shaping it and managing the encounter with it. Or take another quality of the articles appearing in Ha-Mizrah Ha-Hadash. Even though a large proportion of them are dedicated to Arab communities residing inside the State of Israel, almost none deal with Jews—neither with Jews residing in Israel or Mandatory Palestine, nor with Jews residing in or recently emigrated from Arab countries, nor with the history of Middle Eastern Jewish communities. It is free of Jews. Practically all the articles were dedicated to Jewish issues and to Jewish communities of the Middle East, and only a handful dealt with developments in the Middle East. Of course, the two journals are not comparable in a strict sense, but this is precisely the point: This brief empirical test indicates that whoever attempts to define mizrahanut by its object - the "Orient" - inverts the real sequence: As Said puts it, the "Orient" is not a place or a region but an idea, an imaginary entity, and from the geographical point of view, its boundaries are determined and changed quite arbitrarily. It is not that Europe gradually discovered the Orient as over the centuries it probed further and further outward. On the contrary, Europe invented the idea of the "Orient" precisely when it was forced to be at its most insular, least capable of exploring what lay beyond it. The idea of the "Orient" served to aggregate together all that it did not know - all that it experienced as alien and threatening right at its door - and to master it, at least imaginarily. This argument implies another fruitful idea that one can find in Said: These practices shape the modality of knowledge through which the encounter is interpreted and experienced. Dante masters Muhammad and represents him on the European stage by treating him as a "heretic," not only assigning him to a definite circle of hell but using him as an interlocutor within a dramatized polemic composed for European Christian audience. But it also means that a textual attitude shapes the experience of the encounter and how it is interpreted. When Europeans traveled in the Orient, they planned their itinerary in accordance with what they read in books about the Orient, seeking to visit the places described in the scriptures, and they interpreted what they saw in this light as well. The correlate of the textual attitude was, thus, the "Orient" as an ancient, unchanging essence. The terms "encounter" and "mediation" may be somewhat misleading here, to the extent that they connote the image of two distinct entities between which a messenger goes back and forth. Let me emphasize, therefore, that these practices and forms of expertise that mobilize the Orient must be grasped as networks that stretch across the boundary between the Orient and the Occident. In other words, the boundary is internal to these networks and is one of their effects. At one and same time, they ignore the boundary and go beyond it, only in order to turn back and erect it anew in their midst, in the form of a network property, an "obligatory point of passage. To the extent that such informants are elucidating and describing local practices, they are already one step removed from the "native point of view. This aspect of their existence is only reinforced by their connection with the ethnographer. In this sense, we are talking not about two distinct entities being mediated but about a whole set of graduated differences more and more removed from local context. We could say, therefore, that ethnographic expertise consists of a chain of connections reaching from the local context all the way to the air-conditioned office where field notes are reinterpreted in the form of a monograph and that the informant simply occupies one position in this chain. This reasoning can be formulated in one simple question: Asking this question immediately leads us to see the significance of the distinction between "ethnographer" and "informant" and the

role it performs within this network of expertise. First, it serves to position the ethnographer at an obligatory point of passage the point where "data" stops and "interpretation" begins ; second, it purifies the hybridity of the informants and discounts all that is extralocal about them; and third, it purifies the hybridity of the ethnographers themselves, protecting them from becoming assimilated to their informants and infected by their hybridity. These considerations are particularly relevant to what Said described as the second stage in the European encounter with the Orient, the colonial stage. Europeans could now observe the lives and bodies of the inhabitants of distant lands in close ethnographic and physiognomic detail; they mapped the precise topography of such lands; they ordered their colonial subjects to divulge the secrets of their language, civilization, and "mentality"; they ransacked their cities and temples and confiscated artifacts and treasures; and they transported everything back to the European centers, where maps, artifacts, bodies, and mentalities were further studied and analyzed. In short, colonial practices and forms of expertise were networks that stretched all the way from the European centers to the distant colonies and constructed a new modality of knowledge - the gaze. While the precolonial traveler journeyed in an Orient composed of prose, and what he saw there depended on a certain degree of blindness, the anthropologist and colonial agent were charged with seeing and describing everything, and the resulting total description was supposed to overcome and annul the mystery of the Orient. This is why the end of colonialism must have spelled the transformation of orientalist discourse, that is, of the modality of knowledge shaping and interpreting the encounter between the West and its others. No longer available in the same way for the gaze, and yet no longer as impenetrable and inscrutable as in precolonial times, events in the Orient are now monitored from a distance - via electronic eavesdropping, the perusal of Arabic-language newspapers and official documents, and so on - and the results are accumulated, archived, and combined into surveys, chronologies, reports, and assessments. In short, the political, economic, and military parameters of the encounter have changed, and with them also the networks that mobilize and represent distant phenomena. Consequently, the object of orientalist knowledge has changed as well. Here I must register again my dissent from Said, who generally seems to equate orientalism with the textual attitude and with the essentialization and schematization of the Orient. Orientalism is a "tradition," he says, implying that while some changes may take place at the level of "manifest orientalism," at its core, at the level of "latent orientalism," the attitudes, prejudices, and stereotypes have remained the same. There is some truth to this assertion, as stereotypes about the Arabs and Islam are clearly still prevalent in the Western media, for example, but the distinction between the "surface" of discourse and its "depths" is completely unsatisfactory. It is a hermeneutics of suspicion, always ascribing the true meaning of discourse to something hidden, something that is not completely said and yet is "really" what is being said. Not only is the hypothesizing of hidden meanings ultimately unverifiable, a self-confirming suspicion, it in fact imitates the very orientalist procedure that Said himself powerfully denounces. When orientalists search underneath the speech of modern Arab leaders and intellectuals for signs of their "true" meaning, as determined by the Orient, the tribe, Islam, or whatnot, they distinguish between the manifest and the latent just as Said does. Contra Said, I suggest that it is preferable to remain at the surface level of what is being said and to seek to uncover not hidden meanings but what made it possible to say the things that were said, "when and where they did - they and no others. Not only do these practices not construct the Orient as essence, they deconstruct it - they bring about the disenchantment of the Orient. Indeed, the processes I describe in this book are not unique to Israel but characterize the postcolonial mode of encounter in general. The approach I take in this book, therefore, is to write the history of Israeli mizrahanut as a history of the practices and forms of expertise that mediate the encounter between Israelis and the world around them. These practices shape, at each given period, a certain modality of knowledge and discourse that, in its turn, shapes how Israelis perceive, interpret, and react to this encounter. And these practices have a history. They shift and change as they are interwoven with military, political, and economic institutions, as well as with the resistances mounted by those who are to be mobilized and represented. By the same token, however, to say that orientalist discourse is the product of an encounter is also to say that orientalist knowledge is never unmediated - never located outside discourse and outside the practices that shape how the encounter is structured, experienced, and interpreted. Of course, I may have been on the wrong track all along. Things may not be so complicated. It may be true that the topic

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studied by mizrahanut is not quite stable and changes with geopolitical shifts, but what remains constant are the orientalists themselves and their specific expertise. They simply apply it to different cases as needs shift. Who, therefore, is an orientalist?

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