

# *Textual Transmission in Contemporary Jewish Cultures*

Edited by Avriel Bar-Levav and Uzi Rebhun

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**Review of *Transnational Identities: Women, Art, and Migration in Contemporary Israel* by Tal Dekel, Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2016, pp171.**

Tal Dekel's book *Transitional Identities: Women, Art and Migration in Contemporary Israel* focuses on the experiences of three different groups of migrant women artists living in Israel today. Dekel, who herself migrated to Israel as a twelve-year-old from the United States, is interested in the double perspective that immigrants bring to their new life in a new country: both as outsider and insider, both Israeli and/or 'other'. Dekel lectures in the Department of Art History and in the Women and Gender Studies Program at Tel Aviv University, and has a particular interest in gender and transnationalism in contemporary art and visual culture. Her first book *Gendered: Art and Feminist Theory* examined the relationship between feminist theory, politics and art, particularly in respect to the Israeli art scene. *In Transnational Identities*, her second book, she focuses on the stories of women who came to Israel from the 1990s onwards through an analysis of their artistic practice.

Employing a transdisciplinary approach to unpack Israeli migrant women's artwork, Dekel weaves together qualitative in-depth interviews, together with contemporary theories of migration studies, Israel studies, political science, gender studies and sociology, to highlight these women's experiences, as close to possible, in their own voices. As Dekel points out, this delicate balance between their perspectives (the personal) and her own observation and analysis (the political), is beset with the ethical dilemmas of power relationships. Dekel acknowledges the ethical and feminist dilemmas of 'speaking in someone else's name' and is self-critical and reflexive in her accounts of their stories.

Transnationalism, or the development and consequences of transnational processes such as mass migration, economic expansion and the globalisation of capitalism, has led to

the idea that people from diverse ethnic, religious, social, economic or gender-based groups, can transcend national borders or nation-states because of their social or economic interconnectivity (Smith and Guarnizo, 2006). This has been due to expanding social networks and the technological revolution of communications and transportation, as well as the transformations amongst many non-western countries due to decolonisation and the spread of human rights.

In Dekel's study, transnational identities are affected by the process of transnationalism and *inter alia*, their identities as individuals are caught up in its effect. In other words, the process of transnationalism, involves individual people and nation-states and occurs in 'several places at once' (p. 5). Thus, all the immigrants in Dekel's study have been affected by 'geopolitical changes that enabled or impelled population transfers to Israel' (p. 6). The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989, created the opportunity for Jewish emigration from the Former Soviet Union (FSU). The regime changes in Ethiopia, after the collapse of Haile Selassie's empire in the late 1970s/80s and the collapse of communism in 1991, accelerated the implementation of Operation Moses (1984-5), and Operation Solomon (May 1991), and brought the Ethiopian Jewish community to Israel. Bringing foreign workers from the Philippines to Israel in the 1990s, was also a direct consequence of geopolitical, as well as political and economic changes in both Israel and the rest of the world (p. 6).

To this end, the book is divided into three distinct sections following the three differing groups of immigrants: Jewish and non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, Jewish immigrants from Ethiopia, and non-Jewish migrant workers from the Philippines. Using the triangular analysis of race, class and gender, Dekel shows how their artworks not only reflect their diverse immigrant experiences but reflect the issues of power

relations that come with their gendered experiences of being uprooting and re-grounded in a new nation state. A state where conflicts over identity and citizenship, exclusion and inclusion, are tested against the ethno-national issues where being Jewish is an important status for acceptance and belonging. As Dekel points out, there is no scholarly work on the gendered experience of women immigrants in Israel and as her three case studies reveal, this book makes a significant contribution to research into women's lives, into citizenship studies and global migration, as well as Jewish and national identity in women's art in Israel today.

In Section One, Dekel begins by revealing the lacuna of exhibitions on Russian-speaking women that highlight the gendered aspects of their work and life (p. 17) and outlines the two different waves of Russian immigration (the small influx in the 1970s and the larger influx of over 1 million Soviet Jews in the 1990s). She then carefully relegates artists to different themes that relate to their experiences, covering: the migrant body, racist sexism, sex trafficking, employment, cultural branding and sex roles and finally, Who is a Jew? In this last topic, Yasna Goldschmidt addresses the question of who is a Jew through her gendered perspective in her 2011 video *He Who Has Made Me A Non-Jewess*.

Similar themes of Employment, Education, Gender, Race Arts and Craft, are employed by Dekel in Section Two on the Ethiopian Women's experience. However, the section entitled Skin Colour and Blackness, and the works of Esti Almo-Wexler (b. 1980) and Smadar Elias (b. 1981), resonated for me. The last section, dealing with the female migrant experience of Filipina artists, was insightful as it focused on the largest female migrant group of 'caregivers' who work in Israeli homes, offering relief to so many families needing help for their aging parents. The artworks by Patt Luluquisin, Ali Marasiagan and Jenny Cajes in the sections labelled 'Belonging in Liminal Situations' and Community,' brought together

the poignancy of that in-betweenness Dekel spoke of at the outset of her study and highlighted those tensions of ‘outsider’ and ‘belonging’ that are part and parcel of most migrant experiences.

Dekel’s book seeks to give power to the voices of immigrant women artists whose gendered experiences of being uprooting and re-grounded in an ethno-nation state, that bases citizenship on ethno-religious principles and the Law of Return, rather than place of birth, brings with it various degrees of complexity and difficulties. *Transnational Identities*, the English translation from the original Hebrew, is a strong addition to the diasporic English language discussion on contemporary life in Israel today, particularly the diverse stories of women migrants and their art. I only wished that more artworks by these migrant women were discussed in each section.

Words left out:

as both “simultaneously immediate and remote” (p. 129) from into para  
when accounts of the persecution of Ethiopian Jews in Sudanese refugee camps  
reached the West from para 4

While the official policy of urging non-Jewish migrant workers to come to Israel began in 1988, the issues of foreign workers and their place in contemporary Israeli society.

Continues to create