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# Book Review: Maps of Women's Goings and Stayings

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***Maps of Women's Goings and Stayings.*** Rela Mazali. In *Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences* (Series). Eds. Daniel Boyarin, Chana Kronfeld and Naomi Seidman. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press. 2001. 382 pp. Illustrated. \$24.95 (paperback). \$65.00 (hardback).

Reviewed by Chithra KarunaKaran<sup>4</sup>

Narratives in space and time, by women about women for women, are increasingly finding a coveted place in reading lists and bibliographies in Women's Studies. The best among these take creative leaps in format and content, straddling disciplines, braiding continents, and weaving decades and eras into our individual and collective femaleness.

Rela Mazali has collaborated with her co-travelers in space and time to produce one such daring departure from the conventions of being, telling, writing, and knowing. Mazali's work is one in an ambitious series of fourteen Stanford University Press works titled *Contraversions: Jews and Other Differences*, which include Gabriella Safran's *Rewriting the Jew: Assimilation Narratives in the Russian Empire*, Shelly Matthews' *First Converts: Rich Pagan Women and the Rhetoric of Mission in Early Judaism and Christianity*, Marilyn Reizbaum's *James Joyce's Judaic Other*, and Amir Sumaka'i Fink and Jacob Press' *Independence Park: The Lives of Gay Men in Israel* to name a few. The entire listing appears at the end of the book.

In Mazali's work, women of her acquaintance, their mothers, sisters, daughters or grandsons, come and go, leave only to return, return only to leave, or take up temporary residence in "talking houses." The talking houses, simply places where talk can happen, are intimate, often far-flung, and sometimes places of refuge "when the world turns heartless." The talking houses are concrete, finite, everyday living spaces that are most suitable to the exploration of the hearts and minds of women. These spaces--the home, the house, the hearth--spaces most relentlessly assigned to women to confine and restrict them--become the talking houses. The spaces become, in Mazali's work, the places of women's expansive knowledge gathering, the spaces where experiences in-the-world are made whole and retold for other women to make sense of, and retooled to prepare for another adventure involving body and spirit. Most importantly, the women, the girls, and the children, tell their stories, *their* versions of *their* lives as travelers, pilgrims, mothers, resisters, workers, one-time wives, sometime lovers, familiar strangers, writers, and scholars. The task--really, the formidable, admirable responsibility that Mazali has set for herself--is to capture the female word spoken in the precise moment of its speaking, whether fluent flow, or lengthy pause, the stitching and hitching of word to thought, the word easily remembered, or the words caught before they are forever lost to other women.

The book is ingeniously arranged in "visits" one through twelve, and the reader may feel as I did, that there is enough going on to want to return, page after page. The reader receives "Housekeys" to let oneself in. The Housekeys are episteme, no less, the boldly trans-disciplinary world of the women we are or are becoming as we read, from Nawal El Saadawi's *Memoirs from the Women's Prison*, Trinh T. Minh-ha's "Other than

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myself/my other self' in *Travellers' Tales: Narratives of Home and Displacement*, Kamala Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, or Luc Kwanten's *Imperial Nomads: A History of Central Asia 500-1500*.

The Housekeys, we are told right away in the Itinerary, are hanging behind the maps. And these maps are true cartographic innovations! Certainly Columbus could not have steered with one of these, or unleashed genocide on indigenous peoples. But for the women traveling, these maps are trajectories--memoryscapes--of who they are, who they were, where they've been, what they might become and suggest to other women to become or not become. These maps of persons, places, things, feeling, seem designed to encourage one "to stay unaccustomed," in the words of one of Mazali's intrepid traveler-narrators.

Clearly, the range, depth and dimensions of Mazali's preoccupations as she records her narrators on scratchy tape are stunningly eclectic. Yet this worldly perspective is at once made intimate, immediate and personal, and one could argue, made more powerful since extraordinary--because-ordinary women are the doers, the tellers, the knowers. It is this point that underscores the overarching reach of the narratives. The women tell their stories but the closeness with which their stories are attended to by Mazali helps her to tie their individual stories to larger events in a larger world, a world made ever more complex by the fact that ordinary people, women especially, are moving here and there. There is nothing more affecting and poignant than the stories of usurpation and occupation told by women with Israeli mouths and seen with Israeli eyes: "in Jaffa...I couldn't have been more than three when my mother used to tell me (its) story. We had a ritual of walking along sidewalks pushing my baby sister's baby carriage outside the military base where we lived, whose old apartment buildings had, I now understand, only recently belonged to Palestinian Arabs." I, the reader, am immediately encouraged to conjure up an image of the Palestinian children who will never be pushed along in baby carriages or told stories, on those snatched sidewalks, again or at least, not soon. In the chapter called "The Second Visit," June's story of how she became a lifelong practitioner of nonviolence is tied to a peroration on hydrogen fusion bombs and their psychological deployment in the Cold War by Eisenhower in 1952.

The "visits" to the "talking houses" are equally accessible to students and scholars. But this easy accessibility is deceptive. To be really receptive to written tellings of a personal nature is to be nudged into a consideration of larger, broader, deeper questions about our lived humanity--a scholarly rigor combined with a felt connectedness with adjacent or remote femalenesses.

Miller Mair, psychotherapist and author, has noted that "we live through stories...*we are lived* by the stories of our race and place...we are each of us *locations* where the stories of our place and time become partially tellable." In Mazali's careful garnering of "women's goings and stayings," women's tellings are central to taking note of the world, of making sense of it in their terms, on their ground, and offering it to other women for their use.

## Works Cited

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