When putting together a women’s studies anthology on any particular subgroup one is immediately confronted with the problem of defining that group – who belongs, who does not. Over the past three decades anthologies have been published on Jewish women, Muslim women and on Middle Eastern women. The editors of each of these volumes have been faced with two problems: 1) how to define the group and 2) how to incorporate the heterogeneity that exists within each group once defined. Anthologies on women from particular nation-states or geographic regions face an addition problem of defining the borders of their subject, a problem embedded in geopolitical history and contemporary reality, particularly in regions of contested borders. Yet even after these boundaries are defined the problem of accounting for the wide variety of cultures and lived reality of women still occurs. Esther Fuchs faced similar issues in her reader on Israeli women studies. The way she tackles these issues is by both accepting and questioning conventionally defined concepts on Israeli identity.

The goal of her reader was to present a collection of some of the key foundation articles in the field of Israeli Women’s Studies available in English, from the earliest essays published in the beginning of the 1980s, which were devoted to debunking the equality myth and recovering the history of the “New Hebrew Woman,” the female pioneers of the Zionist Movement, to articles published since the end of that decade that question the founding myths of this Movement and the very meaning of the term “Israeli.” Her reason for putting such an anthology together was to have a reader for her own class in Israeli women’s studies. In her introduction she discusses not only the organization of the volume but also defines the field itself. Her definition of the field of Israeli Women’s Studies comes from the criteria she used to collect articles for her class and for this anthology. “… I selected scholarship by and about Israeli women. Israeli women are both the subject of inquiry as a group and the individual actors constructing the research. Among the actors are Israeli scholars who teach in Israel as well as in Europe and the United States, they are residents of Israel and expatriates” (p.2). While this statement implies a self-evident definition of the term “Israeli,” in her section on the future of Israeli Women’s Studies she acknowledges the problematic definition of this very term. “‘Israeli women’ has become a contested term in the mid 1990s in the wake of Mizrahi critiques of the feminist movement and of Israeli feminist scholarship.” (p.22) Even in the 1980s some Israeli sociologists, among them, researchers such as Shlomo Swirksi began pointing out that the definition of Israeli society, and whether non-Jewish citizens of the State of Israel were to be included in this society, was itself a political statement.2

Fuchs allows the contradictions between older establishment definitions of Israeli society and their negation to co-exist in her volume. She points them out in her introduction.
where she provides a very useful historical review of the field of Israeli Women’s Studies and of the history of the contemporary feminist movement in Israel from the 1970s until the 1990s. She describes the transition from an Anglo-American and elite Ashkenazi dominated movement to one where challenges to such domination cannot be ignored.3 The structure of the anthology is well thought out and reflects Fuchs’ interdisciplinary and binary approach. There are sections on “Myth and History”, “Law and Religion”, “Society and Politics”, “War and Peace” and “Literature and Culture.” Articles in each of these sections are organized chronologically so the reader can see how writing on Israeli women in each subject area developed over time. In choosing these articles the stated criteria was that they be “significant historically, substantively, or theoretically. They begin new lines of inquiry, make connections between disparate bodies of knowledge, offer innovative methodologies or shed light on uniquely Israeli configurations.” (p.2) Given that the audience is undergraduate students it was also imperative that the articles not contain overly technical language or content that was too discipline specific. Another limitation that confronted the editor was the need to confine each section to only three or four articles. Despite these limits another goal Fuchs strived to achieve was to select articles that represent both “cutting edge work” and “pioneering work” (p.xiv).

The first two sections of the anthology, in terms of the subject of their inquiry, if not necessarily the approach adopted, represent the ‘pioneering’ phase of Israeli Women’s Studies in that the subject of the section on ‘Myth and History’ is on Ashkenazi women of the ‘pioneer generation’ exclusively and the section on ‘Law and Religion’ does not contain any articles on non-Jewish citizens of Israel. One could make the case for such a selection in the Myth and History segment given that this is an introduction to Israeli women’s studies and the historical fact that the ‘founding mothers’ of the dominant sector of this society were Ashkenazi women, specifically middle class Jewish women from Eastern Europe. Dafna Izraeli’s article, “The Zionist Women’s Movement in Palestine, 1911-1927: A Sociological Analysis,” first published in English in 1981, chronicles the history of the Zionist women’s movement, paying particular attention to the tension between two tendencies, radical and ‘loyalist’ – the later represented by Golda Meir. Deborah Bernstein’s “Daughters of the Nation” continues this history into the Mandate Period, but instead of focusing on the history of the Zionist Women’s Movement her subject is the historical structural impediments to achieving gender equality. The main constraint Bernstein describes was the British Mandate’s immigration policy. Within this policy women were automatically classified as dependents. (80) Despite the experimentation in family arrangements that took place in the cooperative agricultural settlements most of the Jewish population in Mandate Palestine lived in families that reproduced the traditional sexual division of labor. The final article in this section focuses on the conception of masculinity in the discourse of Jewish Nationalism. In “From Zero to Hero: Masculinity in Jewish Nationalism” Tamar Mayar clarifies the ideological impediment to women’s full participation in the Zionist movement from its beginnings. She demonstrates that the cause of this was and is the central role of a militaristic masculine ethos in the socialization of Jewish men in Israeli society, “[f]}
the youth movements to the educational system, paramilitary training and, ultimately, in the modern IDF itself” (113). Mayar ends her article with the hope that as the “myths on which Zionism is based” become questioned Israeli men will also question the need to die for their country, and Zionism and the concept of masculinity will change (113).

One area that has not shown much change in Israeli society is the relation between the religious institutions and the State and the adverse effects this relation has had on Jewish women’s rights in Israel. The section on Law and Religion offers a variety of approaches within this subject matter. The first article describes the adverse effects of the Rabbinic Court’s control over personal status law on women’s rights. The next two articles show how women, including ultra orthodox women cope with, work around and even support the constrictions under which they live. Susan Sered’s article focuses on the urban legends and myths told to young brides, including secular young brides, subjected to the rituals of public bath (mikva) emersion before they are allowed to marry.

In her introduction to the next section on Society and Politics, Esther Fuchs opens with a discussion of both the income and occupation gap between men and women, and the inequality that exists between Mizrahi, Palestinian Israeli and Ashenazi women (12). Given this it is harder understand the lack of articles on Mizrahi women in this section. In fact the entire anthology contains only one article each on Mizrahi and Palestinian Israel women. This section also lacks articles on such topics as women and poverty. This would have been a good place to include articles critical of the Ashkenazi women’s movement that Fuchs mentions in her introduction. In discussion the diversity in Israeli society Fuchs states, “The growing recognition of the national difference of Palestinian Arabs and the ethnic difference of Mizrahi Jews has engendered analyses of the decline of Israeli identity” (22). However, rather than seeing this as a decline one could see this as an opening up and questioning of national and ethnic identities in general. In such an analysis articles that focus on the plurality of this identity and that question the dominant role Ashkenazi women play in the Israeli women’s movement would find there place not only in the Introduction, but in the anthology itself. Instead, the section opens with Judith Buber Agassi’s article debunking the myth of gender equality on kibbutzim. This article can be seen as an important ‘foundation’ text in that it exposes the popular myths related to one of the most famous and unique Israeli institutions, the kibbutz. On the other hand, given the small percentage of Israeli society that lives on kibbutz and given that such a debunking of equality myths is well represented in the section on “Myth and History” perhaps an article on a sector of Israeli female society that was not already abundantly represented in the first section could have been substituted. There are two articles that focus on the clash between the Arab Israeli Conflict, nationalist ideology and women’s movement issues. In both of these articles Israeli Jewish women are presented as an undifferentiated mass lacking in internal conflicts of class and ethnicity. Hanna Herzog’s article, “Homefront and Battlefront: The Status Jewish and Palestinian Women,” does consider the situation of Palestinian women, but subsumes this under the analytical rubric of ‘battlefront’ or more specifically the ‘issue of security.’ In fact some
of her statements regarding the opinions of Palestinian Israeli citizens on the issue of security are simply difficult to believe.

The consensus among Jewish and Palestinian citizens of Israel on the principle of Israeli security is the foundation for the social negotiations between Palestinians and Jews in Israel. Security and security discourse are thus prime factors shaping identity, political positions, and policy within both-the-Jewish and Palestinian communities in Israel. They are the progenitors of social and political disputes, but there is no dispute over one fundamental assumption: the centrality of security. (212)

That security would be more central to Palestinian Israelis than the Occupation, confiscation of Palestinian Israeli land in the Galilee, the destruction of housing, inequality and police violence is contradicted by the major history books on Palestinians in Israel. Instead these works consistently emphasize the Occupation and inequality as the root cause of the plight of Palestinian Israeli women. This emphasis is also echoed in Manar Hassan’s article in the same section. In this regard her testimony is important, but it is regrettable that hers is the only Palestinian Israeli woman’s voice represented in this anthology. Unlike Herzog’s article, Hassan’s article is a personal testimony of one Palestinian woman’s experience growing up in Israel. Although Hassan has published articles on the status of Palestinian women, this article further stands out in that it is the only personal experience work in the anthology. Nevertheless when Hassan asserts that, “the special status of Palestinians within the Green Line is … subjection to national, political social and cultural oppression…” she is describing a reality that all Israeli Palestinian women experience (185). Her discussion of the collusion between local corrupt leaders and the Israeli government in the oppression of women in her community echoes Herzog’s statements. However here, the notion of any consensus or symmetry between women in the two populations is exposed. Instead the reality of their different status and structural inequality in Israeli society is clearly stated.

The articles in the War and Peace section could have included an article on the intersection of the Conflict and Palestinian Israeli women or on the Israeli women’s peace movement and the rift between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi women, or the effects of the Conflict on gender inequality. However the articles it does include are extremely important. Simon Sharoni’s “Homefront as Battlefield: Gender, Military Occupation, and Violence against Women” makes the connection between the violence of the continuing Occupation and domestic violence against Israeli Jewish women. Ayala Emmett’s “Citizens of the State and Political Women” is an analysis of the women’s peace group Women in Black and the Right-wing’s gendered reactions to this group’s activities on the streets of Jerusalem. Orna Sasson-Levy’s “Gender Performance in a Changing Military” points out that, despite the existence of female trainers in combat units in the Israeli military, women still face obstacles to equality in both the Israeli army and in Israeli society.
The book ends with a section on culture and literature. Esther Fuch’s article on Amalia Kahana-Cohen’s writings describes the complexity of this Israeli author’s treatment of women as both an upholding of “women’s traditional enclosure within a male-dominated economy” and a challenge to androcentric sensitivities (286). The article by Ella Shohat, provides in summary of her book length study of Israeli cinema. First published in 1989 Shohat’s critical analysis of Israeli cinema as an expression of a pretentiously Westernizing Establishment is still valid. In fact much of the basis for understanding the ‘Sabra’ myth as an exclusively male Ashkenazi elite fantasy was based on her seminal work. However, her implied assumptions regarding co-existence between Jews and Muslims in the Arab World prior to the establishment of the State of Israeli were too simplistic (295). It also doesn’t reflect the wide variety of opinions one can see among Mizrahi/Arab Jewish women themselves, as can be seen in the anthology The Flying Camel.7 The section concludes with two other articles, one by Yael S. Feldman on Israeli Jewish women writers and another by Orly Lubin on women in Israeli cinema.

Despite the gaps in coverage of different cultural, national and religious communities among Israeli women, in comparison to other anthologies on histories of women in the Middle East and North Africa, Esther Fuchs’ anthology shows a greater interest in being inclusive and multicultural, and in exposing the mosaic of different voices.8 Her discussion of current research and her pleas for tolerance and greater inclusion are well spoken and will hopefully be heeded. While the selection of articles in her anthology does suffer from an over-representation of material on elite Ashkenazi women, it is nevertheless a useful introductory presentation to the field of Israeli women’s studies, particularly when the articles selected are contrasted with her introduction to the volume, where she calls attention to the problems and limits of such a selection. Rather than ignoring the problematic and contentious nature of both Israeli Women’s Studies and Israeli society in general she discusses these issues, calling the reader’s attention to them. In her choice of articles Fuchs allows the reader to experience some of the debilities women face in Israeli society (although the problems of poverty and class divisions are not sufficiently covered). When juxtaposing her introduction to her omissions of articles on the histories of Mizrahi and Palestinian Israeli women the critical reader is able to question these omissions and participate in the debate on the nature of Israeli Women’s Studies and Israeli society in general.

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1 For anthologies on women Muslim women in the Middle East and beyond see: Elizabeth Warnock Fernea, and Basima Qattan Bezirgan, eds. Middle Eastern Muslim women speak, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977; Fawzia Afzal-Khan, ed. Shattering the stereotypes: Muslim women speak out, Northampton, Mass.: Olive Branch Press, 2005; Nikki R. Keddie, and Beth Baron, eds. Women in Middle Eastern history: Shifting boundaries in sex and gender, New York: Oxford University Press, 1991; Margaret Lee Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, eds. Social history of women and gender...

2 Shlomo Swirski, Kampus, ḥevrah u-medinah: ‘al toda`ah politit-ḥevratit shel studentim be-Yisrael (Yerushalayim: Mifras, 1982).


8 See Nikki R. Keddie, and Beth Baron, eds. Women in Middle Eastern history (1991), and Margaret Lee Meriwether and Judith E. Tucker, eds. Social history of women and gender in the modern Middle East (1999).