RICKI LAKE IN TEL AVIV: ORLY CASTEL-BLOOM’S ENGLISH

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In Orly Castel-Bloom’s Halakim enoshivim [Human Parts, 2002], the most ardent desire of the beautiful Ethiopian immigrant Tasaro is to speak perfect Hebrew. Much to her despair, her siblings speak a jumble of Amharic and Hebrew. She owes her superior Hebrew to the subtitles on Ricki Lake. That an immigrant whose native language is Amharic learns Hebrew from watching a television talk show in English – particularly the street English that dominates shows like Ricki Lake – is one way that English permeates Israeli Hebrew in Castel-Bloom’s novels. Additionally, Castel-Bloom’s use of untranslated English, transcribed sometimes in Hebrew and sometimes in Latin characters, has become one of her stylistic trademarks. A note in the English translation of Dolly City (1992) proclaims that “American expressions have been retained by the author […] in order to keep the flavour of the language created by the American orientation in Israel, especially in the Tel Aviv area.” Since this translation was published in England in an unmistakably British English, the need to maintain an “American orientation” is intriguing.

While Castel-Bloom’s innovative style and her cinematic tendencies have been alternately celebrated and reviled by critics, my paper examines Human Parts and Dolly City to broach several questions that remain largely unexplored. What is the “American orientation” in Israel? How is Castel-Bloom’s use of language related to her cinematic inclinations? As one of the most renowned younger writers of Hebrew, why does she inject specifically American English in her writing? Does it convey an extra-linguistic cultural tendency? Linguistic intertextuality is common in American literature, in which foreign words (Spanish or Yiddish, for example) are often used to reclaim a threatened culture. Israeli writers like Yoel Hoffman who include non-Hebrew words in their texts usually do so in a historical context as well. In contrast, Castel-Bloom uses American English in the context of presence rather than past-ness. Her writing portrays an Israel which, though not entirely de-historicized, is apathetic to its Jewish history. This superficiality resembles the widespread political and cultural apathy in the U.S., particularly as it is represented in Hollywood. English is the language of movies and television – not of the Bible, of Europe or the Holocaust, of the ancient Canaanites, or of Castel-Bloom’s Egyptian parents. My paper demonstrates that her use of English deflates
the notion of Hebrew as a unifying national-cultural force, and posits a hollow, ever-present Hollywood as Israel's cultural counterpart.