

Reflection on the 2021-22 Jewish Gender Performance and Drag Working Group

Bryan K. Roby, Associate Professor of Middle Eastern and Jewish History at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor

I've been working through, for quite some time, how queer of color critiques can deepen studies of Afro-Asian (i.e. "Mizrahi") Israeli Jewish culture. Over the past several years, I've translated dozens of Hebrew poems composed by queer- and women-identified Afro-Asian Jewish creators. I was excited to share some of these poems with an Anglophone academic audience given that the work of Ethiopian and Yemenite Jewish Israelis receive little attention, especially those of women and queer folx. I'm especially grateful to Golan Moskowitz for organizing this workshop and showing great leadership and a tremendous amount of patience. Participants incorporated Black and Brown queer scholarship; religious studies; and material culture as a way of approaching drag and gender performativity in Jewish Studies. Johnathan Branfman's presentation on the "drag" aesthetics of Tiffany Haddish reminded me of Jillian Hernandez' theorization of "raunch aesthetics." Raunch aesthetics, as Hernandez theorized, "celebrate[s] the movements, looks, sensations, and affects of bodies" by transgressing respectability politics and normative boundaries of private/public activities. These aesthetics, crossing sexual and gendered norms, "generate pleasure... affirm queer lives, and regularly blend humor and sexual explicitness to launch cultural critiques."¹ Branfman's session dovetailed nicely into my own work on queer Israeli Jewish artists and cultural producers.

During my workshop session, I presented a few poems by Yemenite-origin Israeli Jewish artist Yossi Zabari, some I personally transcribed from his slam poetry sessions and others translated from his published work. A stand-up comedian, actor, and poet, Zabari uses an eclectic array of skills and creativity to challenge Israeli homonormativity and politically conservative trends within the country through raunch aesthetics within his humorous, yet seriously insightful poems and art modeling. The raunch aesthetics of Zabari is exemplified in his poem "[I'm a Homo](#)," performed at the 2015 Poetry Slam Israel audience. Opening the poem with the frank admission, "I'm a homo," he then elaborates with humorous euphemisms for sexual acts between men involving a phallus. He questions why a "pencil sharpener," "embracer of pillars," "soap dropper," or a "seed collector" such as himself should not be able to "throw it in [society's] face." In the lead-up to his book [Yefei-Nefesh](#) [Faggot]², the first Hebrew-language book of spoken word poetry, Zabari modeled for photographic artist [Michael Liani](#). Featured on the cover of the November 2018 issue of *Gendertuck* magazine on masculinity, Liani reconceptualized Botticelli's "Birth of Venus" with Zabari as its Venus subject. Subverting Western and Israeli beauty standards, Zabari stands nude with his thin, muscular brown body in stark contrast to the original's voluptuous, pale, female figure. He adorns himself in a bridal *qarqush* — a Yemenite headdress — signaling to the viewer a merging of cultures and of masculinity/femininity on equal footing.

One of the most exciting aspects of the workshop allowed me to return to late queer theorist José Esteban Muñoz's work and see his work incorporated in a Jewish Studies context. I found it particularly useful in situating Zabari's work within a global queer of color critique. For example, his poem "I Always Wanted to Be Ashkenazi," a satirical take on race relations in Israeli society, fit nicely within Muñoz's featured quote from Vaginal Davis, a queer Latinx Jewish drag performer:

Everything that's negrified or Black--you don't want to be associated with that. That's what I call the snow period...my life could be perfect and I could be some treasured thing. I could feel myself projected through some White person, and have all the privileges that white people get-validation

¹ Jillian Hernandez, "Carnal Teachings: Raunch Aesthetics as Queer Feminist Pedagogies in Yo! Majesty's Hip Hop Practice," *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 24, no. 1 (January 2, 2014): 94.

² The term used "yefei nefesh" in common parlance refers to "bleeding heart liberals". It can also hold the connotation of the word "faggot." Given that Zabari titled his book "Yefei Nefesh" and translated it as simply "Faggot" in English, I have translated the phrase simply as faggot in the text.



through association.

Davis' reflection upon their "snow period," before changing their name to Davis – in honor of Angela Davis – reverberates well with Zabari's "A Loving Ode to Matan Khodorov," a satire dedicated to the openly gay economic news analyst for Channel 13. In it, Zabari fantasizes about the two of them going on romantic getaways and having Zabari's muscles "interwoven with Khodorov's loose abdomen [i.e. belly fat]" where their foreplay would consist of cunning puns on economic terms:

You'll look me deep in the eyes
and whisper what the prime rates are
you'll tear off my clothes
and show me the price rigidity
you'll declare me to be a free market zone
where all income has a revenue
you'll flip me on my back
and to the sound of my beating heart
and in my ears you will moan IDB [a private banking company]!

Here, Zabari plays with the absurdities in the commodification of Black bodies as he weaves sexual acts into commodity market terms. After being declared a free market zone, Zabari's body transforms into a space where income is profitable and, due to the dual meaning of *hachnasa* [revenue or entry], his commodified body can then be entered. As he both "profits from" and "enters into" Zabari, they begin intercourse "to the sound of [his] beating heart" while Khodorov takes a moment to remind Zabari that this their interaction remains transactional as Khodorov moans the name of Israel Discount Bank during the moment of climax.

Continuing with the "snow period" theme in his works, Zabari describes a similar transition to Black empowerment as Davis in his work "I Always Wanted to be Ashkenazi." The poem opens with his admission that he "always wanted to be Ashkenazi" as he initially felt like "a white soul imprisoned in a colored body." Throughout, he defines something that often eludes interrogation: whiteness. In doing so, he shows the practices and body politics of Israeli normativity that centers the national body as powerful, white, male, Jewish and Western European. Zabari's poem has a similar framing to Oscar Brown Jr's *Def Jam* recital of "I Apologize" which provides a lengthy satirical apology to white America for his Blackness and being that which is predicated upon white prejudice and stereotypes. Zabari has a Jewish take on the theme, framing the poem as a confession (*viddui*) of repentance and apology for being Black. Borrowing freely from the Jewish liturgy of *selihot*, he pleads with "the Lord who sits on high" to "make it so ('aseh)" that he would become a white Ashkenazi; jokingly adding that he would give anything "for the sake (*ba'avur*)" of possessing blond hair, even if that costs him an intolerance to lactose, a joking reference to the stereotype that Ashkenazim suffer from lactose intolerance and other allergies. Then, he turns to the body politics of Black male masculinity as one who "suffers" from dark brown skin "with a small brain but a penis...that is huge." The reception of the audience during the slam poetry performance is one of knowing laughter that Black bodies in Israel, especially those of Mizrahim, are hypersexualized in ways similar to Black Americans. As he matures, he recognizes the futility of attempting to "be a [white] lamb with the skin of a [black] panther" and that it is the society at large who imprisons these "confused" souls, not their body or skin tone. He concludes with the admission that he always wanted to be white but forced himself to stop. Rather than being solely defined by others' definitions of Black essence, he recognizes his body as human and normal; free of negative stereotypes. A body of a man "with a penis that is slightly too big." I'm incredibly grateful for being able to join this insightful group of scholars who, while going outside of our disciplinary comfort zones, demonstrated kindness and a collaborative spirit that I hope to develop further in the future.



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