# Black Musics, African Lives, and the National Imagination in Modern Israel

The Harvard community has made this article openly available. Please share how this access benefits you. Your story matters.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Citable link</td>
<td><a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:17467531">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:17467531</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Terms of Use</td>
<td>This article was downloaded from Harvard University’s DASH repository, and is made available under the terms and conditions applicable to Other Posted Material, as set forth at <a href="http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA">http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:dash.current.terms-of-use#LAA</a></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Black Musics, African Lives, and the National Imagination in Modern Israel

A dissertation presented

by

Sarah Elizabeth Hankins

To

The Department of Music

in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
in the subject of
Music

Harvard University
Cambridge, Massachusetts

March 2015
Black Musics, African Lives, and the National Imagination in Modern Israel

Abstract

“Black Musics, African Lives, and the National Imagination in Modern Israel,” explores the forms and functions of African and Afro-diasporic musics amidst heated public debate around ethnic identity and national membership. Focusing on musical-political activity among Ethiopian Israeli citizens, Sudanese and Eritrean refugees, and West African labor migrants in Tel Aviv, I examine how diverse types of musicking, from nightclub DJing and live performance to church services and protest concerts, voice African and Afro-descendent claims to civic status in a fractured urban environment. Grounded in ethnographic participant observation, the dissertation analyzes musical and political activity through the lens of “interpretive modes” that shape contemporary Israel’s national consciousness, and which influence African and Afro-descendant experiences within Israeli society. These include “Israeliyut,” or the valorization of so-called native Israeli cultural forms and histories; “Africani,” an emerging set of aesthetic and social values that integrates African and Afro-descendent subjectivities into existing frameworks of Israeli identity; and “glocali,” or the effort to reconcile local Israeli experience with aspects of globalization.

Tracing “blackness” as an ideological and aesthetic category through five decades of public discourse and popular culture, I examine the disruptions to this category precipitated by Israel’s 21st century encounter with African populations. I find that the dynamics of debate over African presence influence an array of mass-cultural processes, including post-Zionism,
conceptions of ethnic “otherness,” and the splintering of Israel’s left into increasingly narrow interest groups. Contributing to the literature on continuity and change within urban-dwelling African diasporas, this dissertation is the first monograph exploring dramatic transformations of Israel’s highly consolidated national culture through in-depth ethnography with migrant groups.
## Contents

List of Figures vii  
A Note on Translation and Orthography vii  
Acknowledgements viii  
Dedication xiii  

1. Introduction: Blackness, Black Musics and Identities in Israel 1  
   March-April, 2013, Tel Aviv 1  
   *Shachorut*: Blackness in Israeli Society and Politics 11  
   Studying Blackness in Israel 21  
   Black Musics in Israeli Popular Culture 26  
   “African Music” 34  
   Blackness and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict 45  
   Motivations and Methodologies 53  
   Fieldwork Locations, Conditions, and Strategies 58  
   Overview of Chapters 63  

2. Cityspace, Music, and Israeli Interpretive Frameworks 71  
   Interpretive Frameworks 78  
   The *Hevreman* in Cityspace and Time 87  
   *Mizrahiyut* and Native “Blackness” 100  
   *Glocali*: Foreignness in and as *Schonah* 111  

3. Othered Selves: Ethiopian Israeliness, Multidimensional Blackness 122  
   “Your Mother’s Negro”: Ethioianness and Peripheral Israeli Identity 129  
   Reggae’s Ethiopian *Sabra*, Hip Hop’s Glocal Ethiopian 137  
   Amharic Music and Complications of the “Regional” 155  

4. Refugees, Activists, and Sonic “Hidden” Transcripts of Dissent 165  
   Refugee Status and the Making of a “Community of Dissent” 171  
   Performance as Oblique and Overt Resistance 179  
   Public Sound as Force in the Refugee Debate 187  
   Israeli Pro-Refugee Activism and *Glocal* Music 200  
   Music and Commemorative Narrative at Refugee Seder 212  

5. Friendship House: Christianity and African Expression in the Migrant-Israel Relationship 226  
   Body Display and African Expression in Church 234  
   Migrant Musicians’ Presence, Power, and Performance 250  
   Christian Zionism at Friendship House 266  

6. This Na’African Style: Glocal Community in Tel Aviv’s African *Branja* 278  
   “Zombies Be Ready… U Dey Tell Dem Go Dance”: Groove Politics 283
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Community of Glocal Affinity: Structure, Constituency, and Musical Taste</td>
<td>292</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Music, White Community? <em>Branja</em> Frameworks of Authenticity</td>
<td>307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Emotion</em></td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Proximity</em></td>
<td>318</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Epilogue</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>335</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discography and Videography</td>
<td>346</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>349</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
List of Figures

1.1 Rasta Club, 36 HaRakevet Street, Tel Aviv 3
1.2 Khen Elmaleh tending bar at Albi 20
1.3 An army DJ on break in the Galgalatz studios, Jaffa 33
1.4 Promotional flyer for “Tribal War” 38
1.5 Map of Neve Sha’anam neighborhood and environs 60

2.1 Sleeping gear in the Levinsky Park playground 77
2.2 Promotional photo for the Idan Raichel Project 115
2.3 Still image from “Part of the Glory” video (Balkan Beat Box, 2012) 120

3.1 Menelik promotional flyer, with members of the house band 127
3.2 Efrat Yerady at the Raav poetry night, Be’er Sheva, February 2013 133
3.3 Still from “Going to Zion” video (Zvuloon Dub System, 2014) 152

4.1 The protest outside of Sudanese Cultural Day 170
4.2 S2(A)5 card belonging to Sudanese refugee “Din” Ahmed 174
4.3 Fura “warrior dance” at Sudanese Cultural Day 182
4.4 Giving back to the neighborhood at Darfur Remembrance Day 187
4.5 Mubarak’s King Lear monologue at Teatron Tmunah 197
4.6 DJ Andrea spins at Refugee Seder while a group of kids watch from the Levinsky Library roof 219

5.1 Pastor Chidi at the “Double Portion” RCCG 2013 conference, Jerusalem 239
5.2 Dancing at Friendship House 246
5.3 Bonfils Nkiza at the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem 255
5.4 Hillary Sargeant 264

6.1 Elise Element Yves 281
6.2 The Groove Ambassadors and guest Chale Davoe Ascendo at Africa Fest 291
6.3 Perfusion ensemble at the Zone 317
6.4 Ariel Nahum of Fula Express 323
6.5 Promotional materials for Tam Tam events 329

A Note on Translations and Transliteration

All translations are by the author unless otherwise noted. Song texts are translated with attention to idiomatic meaning where relevant. Hebrew words are romanized according to the guidelines of the International Standards Organization in ISO 259-2 (1984) and, where expedient for ease of reader comprehension, ISO 259-3 (Phonemic Conversation, 1999). Romanization of Arabic, Amharic, and Tigrinya uses the International Phonetic Alphabet, revised 2005. Individual, ensemble, and venue names are transliterated according to my associates’ preferences.
Acknowledgements

The vital seed of this dissertation was sown more than a decade ago, when I was working at the American Embassy in Tel Aviv, and it has been growing ever since. Countless individuals have helped me tend this project over the years, and written thanks to everyone who contributed would require a book of its own. Yet I am boundlessly grateful to all of them. I remember each name, whether inscribed here, or in my heart and mind.

My advisor Kay Kaufman Shelemay must have seen the potential of my dissertation proposal even before I saw it myself. Her guidance helped transform my impassioned notions about Israel’s Afro-diasporic musics into a mature piece of scholarship. She offered essential methodological training, theoretical and structural assistance, field connections, area studies expertise, and a peerless eye as a reader. Dr. Shelemay’s reputation as one of ethnomusicology’s foremost innovators and student mentors is well-deserved. Over six years of graduate study, she gave me room to pursue unconventional academic interests, always stepping in with advice and perspective at just the right times. She supported my personal endeavors in the same way, and gave me invaluable help when I had trouble in the field. I came to Harvard with an anthropology B.A., a government background, and a quirky love of music; I leave it as an ethnomusicologist. I could not have achieved this without Kay Shelemay’s guidance, generosity, and intellect.

Ingrid Monson was a crucial voice on African and diasporic musics. Her scholarship on black musical politics inspired many aspects of my own analysis. As course head for many of the classes I taught at Harvard, Dr. Monson also played a major role in my pedagogical development, shaping my ideological approach to instruction in the liberal arts classroom. Our talks about music, race, gender, and identity have enriched my graduate experience immensely.
Richard Wolf has been a constant source of learning throughout my time at Harvard. His feedback on the content, structure, and writing style of my dissertation chapters was incisive and enormously helpful. His breadth of knowledge, rigorous attention to detail, and deep commitment to music are qualities I will seek to emulate in my own career. As a classroom teacher, a reader, and a respected senior colleague, Dr. Wolf has always “pointed to his ears,” and reminded me to use my own.

Many Harvard faculty members were significant in this project. Carol Oja taught me the pleasures and challenges of music history, and the value of clarity in writing. Christopher Hasty welcomed me into a wonderful theoretical conversation about musical meaning. Visiting Professor Martin Scherzinger introduced me to sound studies and music industry politics. Other professors, preceptors, and lecturers also contributed to my academic development, especially Chaitanya Lakimsetti in Women and Gender Studies, and Steven Caton in Anthropology.

The Music Department administrative and library staff were always ready with aid and friendship. I owe special thanks Nancy Shafman, Sarah Adams, Eva Kim, Kaye Denny, Charles Stillman, Jean Moncreiff, Lesley Bannatyne, Kerry Masteller, Liza Vick, and Andrew Wilson.

Friends are a life-giving source of intellectual inspiration, companionship, and joy. Anne Searcy and Olivia Lucas entered the Harvard program with me, and I have relied on them through the years in more ways than I can name. The spirit of our friendship imbues my writing. Ian Power, Jon Withers, John Gabriel, Sam Parler, Emerson Morgan, Krystal Klingenberg, Cynthia Breckenridge, and Madeleine Blum have also been special colleagues and friends on this journey. All of the graduate students of the Harvard Music Department are like my family. I honor them, and look forward to a long and fruitful engagement as our careers progress.
Several generous benefactors provided crucial financial support for my dissertation research. The Harvard Graduate Society funded a summer of pre-dissertation fieldwork in Tel Aviv. The Center for Jewish Studies at Harvard, through the Anna Rabinowitz Fellowship, helped facilitate my primary fieldwork in Israel in 2013. I thank the Harvard Music Department for numerous grants that made possible three additional visits to Tel Aviv, and several productive conference presentations. Harvard’s Graduate School of Arts and Sciences provided me with a Presidential Fellowship that helped support several years of graduate study.

Funding and institutional affiliations brought me to Israel, but individuals helped me find a path through fieldwork and research. This narrative of black musics, African lives, and Israeli national imagination owes much to the early influence of colleagues and friends from my Foreign Service days in Tel Aviv, between 2002 and 2005. I thank Ambassador Daniel Kurtzer, Minister Counselor Bill Weinstein, Minister Counselor Thomas Goldberger, Minister Counselor Clark Price, Counselor Julia Jacoby, and my co-workers at the Embassy and the Office of Israel and Palestinian Affairs. Many formative Tel Aviv encounters were shepherded by Neta Yahav, a friend, partner, and excellent drummer. Neta introduced me to the beautiful musical diversity of Israel’s cultural capital. I give respects to Natan (Natti), elder brother of Neta, who lost his life in the 2006 war between Israel and Lebanon. May his name be remembered.

I am in debt to Dr. Edwin Seroussi of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, whose good offices helped smoothed my travel in and out of Israel for dissertation fieldwork between 2011 and 2014. His historical understanding of Israeli music, unmatched in sensitivity, provided me with crucial context for this study. Steven Kaplan, formerly of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, gave generously of his time and knowledge. Outside academia, the employees of Ben
Gurion Airport have my gratitude: their jobs are difficult, and their methods come under frequent international scrutiny, but I believe that their hearts are true. I also thank Merav Bat-Gil and the staff of the Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel (ASSAF), the staff of Amnesty International Israel, and the staff of the Levinsky Library, especially Eyal Feder.

I am extraordinarily grateful for the wisdom, commitment, and kindness of musicians and political activists across Israel: their work is at the heart of this dissertation. I thank Idan Raichel and his band, whose music was a provocative early influence. Moshe Morad has been a guide for many years; his vast knowledge of popular music is enhanced by his keen attention to race and gender issues. Tony Ray, owner of Rasta Club and elder statesman of Israeli reggae, was a touchstone in an often chaotic nightclub world, along with his wife Angie. Elise Akowendo is one of Tel Aviv’s most outstanding and prolific artists; our conversations helped me understand so much about black musics and African lives in the city. Hillary Sargeant gave freely of her time and wisdom in interviews; her Fanga music got me through many tough moments in the field. Khen Elmaleh offered crucial insights about Mizrahi identity, politics, and music, and issues of race and class within Israeli society. Her intelligence and sense of humor were invaluable to me during fieldwork. Efrat Yerady’s passionate investment in social justice through the arts was a source of inspiration. Gili Yalo and Nadav Haber taught me what I know about Ethiopian-Israeli reggae and musikah Amharit. Eran Sebbag helped me think about blues music in the Israeli context. Nadav Frankovitch sharpened up my Hebrew language skills and took me around south Tel Aviv. I am deeply grateful also to Batel Chikol Akowendo, Kidane Isaac Tikue, Andrea Rosen, Ariel Nahum, Bonfils Babijoux Nkiza, Pastor Chidi Umeh-
Ujubuonu, Lior Amram, Yael Mishali, Richard Savo, Yafit Bavati, Yaron Deutsch, the Groove Ambassadors, the Perfusion dance ensemble, and the members of Amjah,

Ifat Wald has been a dear friend and advisor for over ten years. Her reasoned views on politics and culture are a necessary source of perspective, a reminder to keep believing in the Israeli people. During fieldwork, Ifat and her wonderful husband Joel were always ready with invitations to Shabbat dinner, good conversations, excellent music, and easy friendship.

This dissertation could not have been written without Dr. Nirit Ben-Ari, my cherished friend, colleague, and co-conspirator. Nirit gave me my first fieldwork interview in 2010, and has been by my side ever since, sharing crucial data, opinions, and connections. Nirit’s devotion to music, dance, activism, and journalism inspires and elevates me. Her spirit is indomitable, and benefits all those who are lucky enough to know her. Niritileh, thank you. Your companionship is the best part of my “signifying career.”

Finally, my family are the fountainhead of strength and love that makes possible everything I do. I thank my partner Matthew Blackmar, whose gentleness, artistic energy, and playful companionship have brought me more happiness than I ever thought possible. My mother and father, Marguerite and David Hankins, always encouraged me to follow my creative passions, and made sure I knew that I could be anything I wanted to be when I grew up. Their undaunted support even when I chose a career in ethnomusicology is a testament to their loving kindness, broad minds, and adventurous spirits. My brother, Miles Hankins, has been my best friend for my entire life, and one of my musical heroes. I am consistently blown away by his talent, creative genius, and professional drive. Miles, there are no words to thank you enough. I’m still raising a finger to point at the ceiling when the really good part of the song comes on.
Do not urge me to leave you or return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God.

Ruth 1:16

I'm on the rock
And then I check a stock
I have to run like a fugitive
Just to save the life I live
I’m gonna be iron like a lion in Zion
Iron like a lion
In Zion

Bob Marley, “Iron Lion Zion” (1973)
Chapter 1
Introduction: Blackness, Black Musics, and Identity in Israel

March-April, 2013, Tel Aviv:

The sloping hillocks of Gan Levinsky, south Tel Aviv’s largest public park, are alive with music, dancing, and conversation on the evening before Passover [Pesach], March 21, 2013. Dozens of long tables are strewn with leftovers from Seder, the ritual meal that opens and closes the weeklong holiday. A large black and white banner hung on a nearby wall reads “Out of Egypt” in stark letters. I am observing the fourth annual Refugee Seder, an event sponsored by leaders of Tel Aviv’s Sudanese and Eritrean refugee communities, with support from Israeli social service organizations. Earlier, celebrants partook of unleavened bread, horseradish, and other symbolically important Seder foods alongside East African teff pancakes and spicy lentil stew. Speakers read out sections from an English translation of the Haggadah – a Jewish text that narrates the flight of the Israelites from Egypt. An Israeli co-organizer welcomed celebrants with a short speech relating the plight of Israel’s African refugee populations to that of the ancient Hebrews: “Today tens of thousands of our brothers and sisters are fleeing countries run by modern day Pharaoh. Many of you here made the same journey, across the same desert.”

Although religious Hebrew songs are traditionally part of Seder Pesach, tonight a DJ spins reggae, hip-hop, Latin dance, and pop music from across the African continent. Dozens of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers, the last of some three hundred participants, are dancing and mingling. Two Israeli volunteers wearing orange vests and carrying walkie-talkies are engaged in a breathless game of tag with a group of the
refugees’ children. An Eritrean girl, no older than five or six, dances in front of the DJ table to moombahton, a club genre fusing repetitive “house” synthesizers with Afro-Cuban percussion and rapped vocals. The DJ, an American Israeli woman who has played at every Refugee Seder, transitions to Arabic-language track with an asymmetrical beat that sounds like Caribbean dancehall music: BOOM! tak-a-tak, BOOM! tak-a-tak.

Ten days later, it is Easter, and I am celebrating at Friendship House, a Nigerian church one block from Gan Levinsky. Most of the parishioners are West African labor migrants, but others hail from South Africa, Trinidad, the Philippines, and India. Today, an Israeli couple and their young children, converts to Christianity, have also joined the service, all wearing brightly colored kente cloth from Ghana. The congregation, accompanied by a drummer, keyboard player, and guitarist, sings Easter hymns in English and Yoruba, as well as the Hebrew song “Haveinu Shalom Aleichem”: “we have brought peace upon you.” Keyboardist Bonfils Nkiza, from Burundi, performs a praise song of his own composition that is influenced by Congolese soukous pop music. People dance in the aisles between rows of folding chairs, and shake the Nigerian gourd instrument shekere. Pastor Chidi Umeh-Ujubuonu delivers a sermon at the dais, standing in front of a cross and a tall Israeli flag. He exhorts his congregation to remember the State of Israel in their prayers, drawing a connection between Christ’s triumph over the grave and Israel’s military victories over its enemies.

On April 15, Israel’s Independence Day, I go to a dance party at Rasta Club, a small venue run by 64-year old Jamaican émigré Tony Ray and his Swedish wife Angie. The club caters to an African migrant and Ethiopian-Israeli clientele. Less than a
kilometer’s walk from Friendship House, Rasta Club is packed with revelers, some of whom I recognize from the church. Jamaican dancehall reggae is blasting from the worn-out PA system. Women dance low to the floor, knees bent and hips moving back and forth in the classic dancehall “wine,” while most of the men stand upright, trading tough hip-hop-style hand gestures with each other. Soon, a live band takes the small stage to perform covers of Amharic-language pop hits from Ethiopia. Dancers keep on doing their thing, except that many of them add eskista, an Ethiopian rhythmic shoulder shake. I watch a young woman teaching eskista to Max, a club bouncer who hails from Cote d’Ivoire: the two laugh as he fumbles the rapid staccato movements. At the end of the party, Tony Ray and his band Amjah play original roots reggae and Bob Marley covers. Ray, who has lived in Tel Aviv for almost forty years, is a local celebrity, one of Israel’s very first reggae musicians. When he launches into his well-known “Sons of Solomon,” an up-tempo reggae ode to Israel’s Ethiopian youth, the crowd cheers and sings along.

Figure 1.1: Rasta Club, 36 Ha’Rakevet Street, Tel Aviv
Black musics from around the world are found at every turn within the polyvocal soundworld of modern Tel Aviv. Israelis in this city have been listening to hip-hop, reggae, and R&B for thirty years or more, while regional African traditional, pop, and religious musics are newer arrivals. The proliferation of African and Afro-diasporic genres in clubs, cafes, concert venues, wedding halls, and private homes across the city points to the 21st century growth of Israel’s African and Afro-descendant populations.

Tel Aviv, a city of less than half a million residents, is home to large communities of Ethiopian-Israeli citizens, refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan and Eritrea, migrant workers from dozens of African countries, and black émigrés from around the world. These are the communities of Israel’s African diaspora, a multi-group population numbering close to a quarter of a million. Their musical activities are the ethnographic focus of my dissertation, and their collective influence on a 21st century Israeli national culture in dramatic transition is the overarching phenomenon I explore.

The vignettes above, each describing an Afro-diasporic celebration of an Israeli holiday, point to a deep investment on the part of Tel Aviv’s black communities in ideas of ethnic identity, cultural pride, and national belonging. Refugee Seder inscribes East African experiences into one of the epic commemorative narratives of Jewish Israel – the Passover Haggadah. Easter at Friendship House brings together Christian worship with veneration of the Jewish state. Tony Ray’s Independence Day party at Rasta Club concludes with a Caribbean musical assertion of Ethiopians’ biblical connection to the Holy Land through Solomonic lineage. These events powerfully underscore music’s ability to convey sophisticated messages about black identity in Israel. However, I could have opened this introduction with entirely different musical moments that do similar
work. Throughout the lively spring of 2013, during which I carried out a major portion of my dissertation fieldwork, long warm nights were filled with dance parties, club concerts, and public performances featuring more African and diasporic genres than I could identify by name. In a small city of some 450,000 souls, a metropolis that Israelis still refer to as “the first Hebrew city,” I listened to Eritreans playing traditional music for a rapt Israeli crowd, a multilingual emcee “battle” between aspiring rappers in many different styles, an Ivorian singer backed by a Nigerian-style Afrobeat ensemble, a touring French-Malian R&B artist who thrilled her packed concert audience by speaking a little Hebrew, and more.

In these events, I heard enormous musical diversity, but equally, I encountered the scope and intensity of political issues that shape Afro-diasporic experience in Israel. A troupe of Darfuri refugees sang songs from home for a crowd of hundreds at the tenth annual Darfur Genocide Remembrance Day in Tel Aviv’s monumental Rabin Square. My Sudanese associate Mubarak played the guitar for me in Gan Levinisky, improvising English lyrics about his “search for freedom.” Ethiopian spoken word performers quoted American Black Power authors at a slam poetry event to protest anti-black racism in Israel. Dozens of Israelis demonstrated against African refugee presence outside a Sudanese music and dance showcase.

The explicitly political valences of black musics are just as important to many Tel Aviv residents, African and Israeli alike, as its pleasures and opportunities for sociality.

---

1 “The Hebrew city” is a phrase that first appeared in the late 19th-century writings of European Zionist leaders. It referenced the goal of Jewish metropolitan settlement in Palestine, one component of the larger Zionist vision of state building. The modern-day Tel Aviv suburb Rishon LeTzyion marks the site of the actual first settlement, and its name means “First in Zion.” Greater Tel Aviv retains the honorary title of First Hebrew City in both popular and official discourse.
In fact, during each of my fieldwork visits between 2010 and 2014, I often found it difficult to distinguish between political, recreational, religious, and personal musicking amongst my associates. If Tel Aviv is a “Hebrew” city, it is also the most ethnically diverse locale in Israel. For more than a decade, the city has been ground zero of a heated public debate over the civic status of growing African populations. This debate plays out rhetorically in national media coverage and political sloganeering, and administratively in government decisions that effect the lives of and futures of Israel’s African communities. The fraught, highly contested issues of ethnicity, identity, and national belonging that undergird public debate are facts of daily life for residents of this densely populated city. Such issues have a pervasive influence on urban musical activities, which in turn shape the national cultural landscape at all levels.

This dissertation is an ethnomusicological account of Israeli cultural transformation, which takes as its point of departure the 21st century encounter between Israelis, Africans, and Afro-descendants in the city of Tel Aviv. It is also a study of a relatively new diaspora. Sub-Saharan African populations have only been present in Israel since the last decades of the 20th century, and the dynamics of the Israeli-African encounter are distinct in many respects from those of longer established diaspora encounters in Europe and the Americas. Israel is officially a Jewish state, while many African refugees and migrants are Muslim or Christian. Israel also evinces a highly consolidated national culture, perhaps more so than many other modern nation-states, due to “the relatively greater social mobilization of the Israeli Jewish public” throughout the 20th century (Brinner 2009: 323). Mandatory military service, religious-nationalist pedagogy in public primary education, and historic links between government and the
music industry, among other factors, have contributed to widely shared understandings of Israeli identity. Finally, Israel is a small country, with much of its population concentrated in a central swath of land that is bounded by Jerusalem in the east, and Tel Aviv at the edge of the Mediterranean. This region, called Gush Dan, is Israel’s political, economic, and cultural engine, and local developments here usually have nationwide reverberations. Each of these overlapping characteristics – Israel’s Jewishness, shared national consciousness, demographic concentration, and urban-driven cultural landscape – is relevant to my exploration of the Israeli-African encounter.

Tens of thousands of Africans and Afro-descendants live in Tel Aviv, including some two thousand Ethiopian citizens of Israel (out of a countrywide Ethiopian population of approximately 120,000), another estimated two thousand migrant workers from various African countries, and the largest group, some 30,000 East African refugees and asylum seekers out of a national population of close to 50,000 (Report of the Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers in Israel, 2014). A majority of labor migrants and refugees or asylum seekers live in dense south city neighborhoods, negotiating for space and resources with longstanding communities of working class Israelis. In this environment, music is one of the most prevalent means by which individuals and groups represent themselves publicly, displaying valued aspects of their identities, and staking claims to contested cityspace. These musical processes are forging black community pathways through the upheavals of migration and diasporic life, and helping Israelis navigate unprecedented sociocultural change.

In the pages that follow, I examine musical activity amongst Tel Aviv’s Sudanese and Eritrean refugee groups, Ethiopian-Israeli citizens, migrant workers from throughout
Africa and the diaspora, and various communities of non-African Israelis. I consider many different popular, traditional, and religious musics, in a variety of key settings: nightclubs, live concerts, church, small private events, public outdoor spaces, and political protests and demonstrations. I deal with a wide array of musical forms and sites of activity in order to facilitate a multidimensional account of the Israeli-African encounter. As I learned over the course of my fieldwork and research, being surrounded by so many different black genres and styles has a significant experiential impact for members of Tel Aviv’s Afro-diasporic communities. Musical pluralism shapes the way people socialize and worship, how they relate to other ethnic groups, and their own self-perceptions. Furthermore, the collective presence of black music influences citywide and national cultural trends more powerfully than any one genre alone. A comparative study of multiple musics and social formations is best suited to understanding the 21st century Israeli-African encounter, its evolving dynamics and myriad effects.

This is an interdisciplinary study, incorporating theories and methodologies from ethnomusicology, critical race studies, diaspora studies, media studies, history, and political science, among other discourses. In its attention to multiple musical and social spheres, and overarching engagement with the transformative cultural effects of globalization in a modern nation-state, my dissertation evinces a scholarly approach that George Marcus has termed “ethnography of and in the world system” (1995). As Marcus describes, such ethnography is preoccupied with the dynamic relationship between “local cultures” and “the macro-processes associated with capitalist political economy” (96), among them the globalization of finance and media, large-scale migration, and the ascendancy of transnational institutions from NGOs to virtual taste communities. The
music of black communities in Tel Aviv demands a world system framework of study for several reasons. First, because Israel’s African diaspora itself is a product of recent migrations, and it remains politically vulnerable to shifting international alliances and developments far away. For example, many South Sudanese residents were deported in 2011 when South Sudan gained independence. Israel has offered other refugees money to relocate to Uganda, following a 2013 agreement between the two governments.² African lives in Tel Aviv are deeply intertwined with world system trends and events. Second, most of the musics that Afro-diasporic communities produce and consume in Israel bring together specific African genres and styles with diverse influences from around the world. In the age of globalized entertainment media, many traditions brought intact from countries of origin are hybrid even before they change in diaspora. Black musics, too, are always already products of the world system.

World system ethnography takes two basic forms: either a “single site” study that examines globalization’s multifarious effects on one primary group or location, or a “multi-sited” ethnography that examines “the circulation of cultural meanings, objects, and identities in diffuse time-space” (Marcus 1995: 96). Although I carried out most of my ethnographic participant observation and interviews in a single city, Tel Aviv, I am concerned with macro-cultural transformations that, as Marcus suggests, “cannot be accounted for ethnographically by remaining focused on a single site of intensive investigation” (ibid). In order to grasp these transformations, I trace various musics and aspects of identity through different periods in modern Israeli history, and across multiple fields of contemporary popular culture. My analyses repeatedly scale up and down from

² The Israel-Uganda deal was first reported in Ha’aretz and The Jerusalem Post newspapers in August of 2013.
the subtleties of local person-to-person interactions to the most scopic national phenomena, pausing at many levels of culture in between. Furthermore, the field site of Tel Aviv itself is multi-sited, a globalized locale hosting dozens of communities, big and small, which differ in terms of ethnicity, religion, family systems, language, or other characteristics. So the few city blocks that separate Gan Levinsky and Friendship House church, for instance, potentially traverse an enormous cultural distance between whole worlds of practice, belief, and identity.

Both single- and multi-sited world system ethnography deal with “objects of encounter and response from the perspectives of local and cosmopolitan groups and persons who, although in different relative power relations, experience a process of being mutually displaced from what has counted as culture for each of them: (Marcus 1995: 96). The 21st century Israeli-African encounter puts pressure on established ways of knowing for all actors, whether migrants and refugees grappling with relocation and diaspora, or Israelis facing myriad sociopolitical implications of African presence in the Jewish state. My dissertation explores black musics as products of this encounter, signifying cultural continuity as well as cultural displacement in different ways for variously situated individuals and groups. In order to begin examining how black musics resonate in modern Israel, it is necessary to first survey the cultural landscape into which they have arrived. Although many Israelis feel that sizable Afro-diasporic presence is destabilizing to the national culture they have known, such presence is not a sudden change. Israel has historically had a variety of relationships with black peoples and musics leading up to the 21st century encounter, which shape the trajectory of contemporary cultural transformation.
**Shachorut: Blackness in Israeli Society and Politics**

Since large numbers of African migrant workers began coming to Israel in the mid-1990s, and refugees and asylum seekers in the 2000s, public debate has steadily increased over the civic status and socio-cultural implications of these populations. For some, the influx of persons from countries that have not historically been represented within Israel’s demographic mixture is “nothing short of a threat to the ‘Western’, democratic, and Jewish self definition of the State. For others, the new [populations] strengthen and reinforce Israel’s raison d’être as the place for the proverbial “ingathering of the exiles” (Elias and Kemp 2010: 85). Although much current debate centers on the approximately 55,000 Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers countrywide, who began arriving in the early 2000s, this phenomenon has effected public perception of other black populations as well. Some Israeli activists now refer to all Africans, refugees and migrant workers alike, as *Sudanim* [Sudanese], grouping together multiple populations as a collective problem. Others are involved in broad anti-racism initiatives that purport to address the shared concerns of all of Israel’s black residents, citizens and non-citizens alike. During my fieldwork, many black associates related exchanges with non-African Israelis who assumed them to be members of communities not their own. An Ethiopian-Israeli citizen was called a refugee, a Nigerian an Ethiopian, and so on. “Israelis are figuring out the differences between us,” Eritrean refugee activist Kidane Tikue observes. “It is a slow process, though. We look the same to a lot of them” (interview with author, August 9, 2014).

Sub-Saharan African presence in Israel has been a complicated sociopolitical issue since the immigration of the Beta Israel, or Ethiopian Jewry, under state-military
auspices during the 1980s. Initial public skepticism about the Ethiopians’ “true”
religious status, and exoticist imaginings of African cultural practices, influenced the
direction of government-sponsored assimilation programs during the Beta Israel’s early
years in the country (Salamon 2003: 6-7). Throughout the 1980s and well into the 1990s,
the presence of the Ethiopian eda [ethnic group] fueled an expanding discourse around
“blackness” as a distinct social category, which facilitated public discussion about the
ways that black people were different from or similar to non-black Israelis, and where
they fit into the life of the nation.

Yet even before the state-military Operations Moses (1984) and Solomon (1991)
brought approximately 22,000 Ethiopians to Israel, (Kaplan 2005), race and racial
difference were dynamic categories of social thought in the Jewish state. Israelis were
conscious of the “African” identity of first- and second-generation Jewish communities
from Morocco, Libya, Tunisia, and Egypt. Amongst those edot themselves, community
politics of the 1960s and 70s were influenced by the American Black Power movement
(Horowitz 2010). Then, too, Israel’s formal relationships with sub-Saharan African
countries had been important to its foreign and domestic policy since the earliest days of
the state (Harris and Rabinovich 2006). Until many African nations broke off diplomatic
ties with Israel in 1973, following the Yom Kippur War between Israel and an Egypt-led
coalition of Arab states, Africa was the chief geographic focus of Israel’s development
initiatives. Development work in Africa provided the state with an important public
relations angle in its effort to garner political support within the international community.
It further served the ideological function of strengthening Israel’s national self-perception
as a modern, humanitarian democracy (Bar-Yosef 2013). “Long before the establishment
of the state in 1948, the father of modern Zionism, Theodor Herzl, wrote in his book *Altneuland* [German: Old-New Land] (1902) ‘once I have witnessed the redemption of the Jews, my people, I wish also to assist in the redemption of the Africans’” (Divon 2006: 18).

According to sociologist Eitan Bar-Yosef, Africa in the 20th century Israeli national imagination was a landscape on which territorial and racial fantasies could play out more freely than within Israel’s immediate regional environment, the Arab Middle East (2013). In contrast to Arab people and Arab lands, Africans and Africa represented an essentially unthreatening dark Other, at least while there was no sizable African population inside Israel. The so-called “golden age” of Israel-Africa diplomatic and development relations (1957-1973) helped meet Israel’s need for a national identity that did not relate solely to war and conflict. During this period, Israeli theater and literature produced images of blackness that turned on tropes of exoticism, adventure, and “noble savagery,” and were sometimes aided by the use of blackface in performance (Bar-Yosef 2013: 35). Such representations help establish a lasting place in Israel’s national imagination for the black African figure.

Beginning in the late 20th century, shifting global patterns of immigration and transmigration brought to Israel large numbers of non-Jewish people from a growing roster of nations. When the first Palestinian *Intifadah* [Arabic: uprising] (1987-1993) prevented Israeli companies from employing Palestinian blue-collar labor, low-level jobs in the construction and service industries were taken over by foreign workers: first Romanians and other Eastern Europeans, then South Americans in the late 1990s (Bartram 1998). After a series of deportations in the early 2000s, Southeast Asians grew
into the largest population of ovdim zarim [foreign workers], many of them invited under the auspices of bilateral government agreements, and assisted by official employment agencies (Morad 2004). The Southeast Asian group, often referred to in casual discourse collectively as Filipinim because of the size prominence of the Filipino community, also includes Vietnamese, Thai, and Chinese workers, who have largely taken up domestic employment in private Israeli homes.

Workers from Nigeria, Ghana, Cote D’Ivoire, Congo, and many other Sub-Saharan countries made up a sizable minority of Israel’s documented and undocumented foreign worker population throughout the 1990s. According to sociologist Galia Sabar, this group reached a peak size of 10,000-14,000 in the last years of the decade (Sabar 2004). A massive deportation initiative in 2002 and 2003 reduced this number to less than 8,000, and by 2013 it was estimated to be 2,000 at most (Sabar, personal communication, 2013). Most of this primarily West African group is Christian, and many of its members remain undocumented, having entered Israel on tourist visas and remained to find work. Several hundred, especially Ivorians and Congolese, have gained refugee status. Many Nigerians and Ghanaians have “pilgrim” visas, and others, less commonly, hold temporary residence-and-work authorizations. Many members of the West African group frame their migration as motivated by economic factors, and consider themselves as ovdim zarim in Israel, regardless of their formal visa category (or lack of it), and despite the fact that they are often conflated in public discourse with the East African refugee community. Relatedly, these African workers do not necessarily identify themselves politically with the refugees, even though they encounter many of the same social and economic challenges.
Today, public discussion about black populations in Israel is more prominent than ever, extending to cover dozens of African diasporic communities who have joined Israeli society since the Ethiopian eda first came onto the scene. In addition to the East African refugees and asylum seekers, and the primarily West African migrant workers, many hundreds of Afro-descendants from around the globe reside in Israel, some of them living together in small groups throughout the country, and others living integrated into Israeli communities. Whether or not they form an identifiable, bounded collective, like the Hebrew Israelites or so-called “Black Hebrews” in the Negev desert city of Dimona, who came from the United States in the late 1960s for religious reasons, black émigrés to Israel from places outside of Africa play their own role in shaping societal attitudes about blackness.3

The term “blackness,” or shachorut, has traction within the Israeli academy, where black studies, Africana studies, and critical race theory have a relatively small but

---

3 The Hebrew Israelites or “Black Hebrews” of Dimona, whom I do not discuss at length in these pages because they are already the subject of much sociological and anthropological writing in English, are one of Israel’s influential musical communities. First arriving to Israel in the late 1960s, via Liberia, under the leadership of an African American steel worker named Benjamin Carter/Ben Ammi, the Hebrew Israelites are originally from Chicago and Detroit, and identify as descendants of Ancient Israelites who fled to West Africa after expulsion from Judea circa 100 A.D. (Markowitz 1998). Many first-generation Hebrew Israelites had worked in the U.S. as studio players and tour support for Motown artists and other soul acts. When they arrived to Israel with little money and few connections, these individuals were able to find work as session musicians for Israeli pop musicians (Ben Eleizer, interview with author, April 2013), playing (sometimes un-credited) on many now-classic Israeli rock recordings. Music remains a central fixture of community life and public self-representation: a state-of-the-art digital/analog recording studio is the most expensive structure in the Hebrew Israelite’s Dimona enclave, and their gospel choir regularly performs for large audiences across the country. While this community’s presence in Israel and their formal religious status was controversial for decades, leading Hebrew Israelite musicians had earned a degree of respect and a sense of belonging within professional networks long before their path to Israeli citizenship was formalized in 2003.
tenacious program presence. In academia, *shachorut* refers to black identity and black culture, especially throughout the African diaspora, and encompasses histories of racism and political struggle. Some scholarship deals with aspects of *shachorut* that are specific to Israel, primarily the Ethiopian Jewish encounter in Israeli society, and a small but growing number of studies about newer African refugee and migrant populations (see “Studying Blackness in Israel” below). At the same time, many other Israeli academics deal with *shachorut* as the self-identity professed by many *Mizrahim*, or Jewish Israelis with Middle Eastern or North African heritage. These two conceptual categories, African/diasporic *shachorut* and Mizrahi *shachorut*, are highly distinct, with their own long histories despite their shared Hebrew term. However, sometimes both scholarly discourses get focused on the same issue or event. For instance, many scholar-activists point to the disruption of urban Mizrahi lifeways by the 21st century influx of East African refugees and asylum seekers to working-class neighborhoods. For non-academics, too, there are also occasional points of ideological convergence between African/diasporic and Mizrahi *shachorut*, such as the adoption of African American Black Power rhetoric by Mizrahi community organizers in 1960s Israel (Horowitz 2010). Conceptual affinities and tensions between Mizrahi and African/diasporic *shachorut* figure prominently into contemporary political activist rhetoric around the African refugee issue.

The concept of *shachorut* is now familiar to diverse groups of people, especially those who live in urban Israel, where ethnicity and identity are constant topics of conversation. During my Tel Aviv fieldwork in 2013 and 2014, some Mizrahi associates spoke easily of being *shachor* themselves, and discussed the ongoing relevance of 1960s
Mizrahi Black Power politics in their lives. Meanwhile, an Ivorian musician who had lived in Israel for many years framed *shachorut* as an “African” attitude that influenced his creative work, and a singer from Trinidad urged me to seek its meaning in her own R&B composition “Back to Blackness” (2013). Israeli bloggers reference *shachorut* when discussing topics from music and films to political demonstrations. African refugee and migrant community leaders talk about black pride when outlining their goals and aspirations. Galgalatz, Israel’s premier pop radio station, broadcasts a longstanding program of hip-hop and R&B called *Esek Shachor* [black business]. A coalition of artist-activists have instituted *Laila Shachor*, “Black Night,” a showcase of arts, crafts, and music by residents of south Tel Aviv that intentionally competes with the annual city-sponsored “White Night” cultural event.4

Not every instance of the term *shachorut* means exactly the same thing, of course. A music blogger might use it more loosely than a political activist. Yet any of these references to blackness can call up all of its significations to one degree or another, just as they might in the American context, where it can be stated that most citizens have some familiarity with the country’s history of black-white relations. Black communities are more recently established in Israel than in the United States, yet their presence is a major focus of national attention. Israelis across the country are exposed to extensive media coverage of any government decision that is made about African refugees, to the

---

4 The name “White Night” [*Laila Lavan*] for the city’s official event references the fact that it lights up the city through the night. It also evokes the informal title of “White City,” which municipal authorities coined after UNESCO recognized Tel Aviv’s light-colored Bauhaus architecture as a World Heritage Site. In response, some Mizrahi activists have suggested the term “black city” for south Tel Aviv and its vulnerable communities. “Black city” and the Black Night event point to the racialized nature of Israel’s intra-group contests for political power.
extent that the “refugee issue” is arguably second only to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as Israel’s major political topic. As such, even the most casual participant in Israeli public life is likely to understand shachorut as a charged term in most contexts.

In June of 2012, then-Minister of the Interior Eli Yishai gave an interview to the daily newspaper Maariv, in which he outlined his ideological stance on Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers. “Many of the infiltrators do not even believe that this country belongs to us, to the white man,” he was quoted as saying. The public outcry over this statement was swift, and it came from many directions, not refugees or pro-refugee Israeli activists. For instance, many Mizrahim objected to what they viewed as the rhetorical whitening of an ethnically diverse society (Yishai is Mizrahi himself). Other leftists [smolanim] were aghast at seemingly bald-faced racism and xenophobia on the part of a highly placed government official.

Yishai’s comment reveals several of the overlapping, co-constitutive ways in which shachorut can be and has been politicized in modern Israel. It identifies the African refugees specifically as an unwelcome population, and more generally, it reifies a construction of the Israeli self as white. This construction can be traced to the arrival of the Ethiopian eda in the 1980s, when non-African Jewish populations in the country were “cast as first-time ‘whites’” in race discourse (Salamon 2003: 7). Yet a formula of Israel

\[\text{Initial English coverage of this interview appears in the Israeli newspaper Ha’aretz on June 3, 2012. } \text{http://www.haaretz.com/news/national/israel-enacts-law-allowing-authorities-to-detain-illegal-migrants-for-up-to-3-years-1.434127} \text{ (accessed December 10, 2014). Supporters of the former Interior Minister have argued that Yishai himself was not claiming that Israel “belongs to the white man,” but was rather quoting statements made by refugee community leaders. I have been unable to find any coverage of such statements, which, if a refugee made publicly, would have been almost sure to draw media attention. That said, the published pieces of the Maariv interview do not provide extensive context for Yishai’s brief comment, and it is unsurprising that national audiences interpreted it in a variety of ways.}\]
as white and outsiders as black also evokes Israel’s military conflicts with its neighbors, and the associated fears and anxieties that are targeted at dark-skinned Arabs (see “Blackness and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict” below). At the same time, the conflation of national identity with whiteness implicitly privileges Ashkenazim, Jews of European ancestry, who have historically dominated Israeli political institutions, and continue to wield disproportionate influence in the arenas of economy and culture. Finally, Yishai’s denial of Israeli belonging to African refugees relates to the notion that any non-Jewish presence in Israel is an existential threat to the state. Yishai is not alone in this opinion: public discussion of a “demographic crisis” for the Jewish majority has been ongoing for years.

The breadth of interpretations of Yishai’s Maariv interview suggests that whiteness and blackness signify differently for different groups in Israel. Yet certain shared understandings of black identity obtain across populations as well. My associate Khen Elmaleh is associated with a group of young Mizrahi activists who have argued that African refugee presence in Tel Aviv disproportionately impacts the city’s economically vulnerable Mizrahi communities. Still, she responded to public fervor over Yishai with an expansive formulation of blackness in which Mizrahim and refugees seemed to be allied:

Khen Elmaleh: “People got angry about the racism, but the truth is, they’re afraid. They’re panicking because they’re losing their country.”

Sarah Hankins: “The government is afraid?”

KE: “The Ashkenazim. They know that we are the majority. We’re eighty percent of the population.”
SH: “Who –?”

KE: “Mizrahim, the refugees, the foreign workers from these different countries. The black people” (interview with author, April 28, 2013).

In this instance, Elmaleh identifies blackness as shared non-whiteness, rather than as a trait of a particular ethnicity: blackness is an aspect of difference vis-à-vis Israel’s Ashkenazi population. The fungibility of blackness as a group-specific and a cross-group identity referent is important to understanding race politics in contemporary Tel Aviv. Blackness can signify differently in the contexts of Mizrahi and refugee community relations, refugee and Israeli pro-refugee activist relations, and in discussion and debate between Mizrahi and Ashkenazi residents of the city.

Figure 1.2: Khen Elmaleh tending bar at Albi, a south Tel Aviv café and busy Mizrahi activist meeting spot.
The category of *shachorut* in modern Israel is historically constituted, the result of a combination of factors including state-level foreign policies, cultural fascination with a largely imagined “Africa,” the arrival of the Beta Israel, and, most recently, the growth of a non-Jewish African diaspora comprised of refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant populations from diverse countries. The current public debate over refugee civic status is only the most recent manifestation of societal tension around black presence and the nature of black identity. For this reason, a theme of continuity drives this dissertation, appearing in my exploration of diverse urban musical communities. Collectively, sub-Saharan Africans and Afro-descendants, whom together, including citizens and non-citizens, comprise less than five percent of Israel’s national population (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics 2012), effect a mass-cultural impact that is disproportionate to their numbers. As in the United States, where African American expressive forms have indelibly molded popular consciousness (Monson 2007), 21st century Israeli culture displays the influence of black music at all levels. The diverse ways that Israeli audiences receive African and Afro-diasporic musics reveals much about Israeli efforts to understand black identities, and their own.

**Studying Blackness in Israel**

Across the disciplines, scholarship is replete with large-scale studies of Israel’s history, politics, society, and culture, many of which are explicitly concerned with Israeli identity. An enormous amount of attention is rightfully given over to the Arab-Israeli conflict. A separate body of sociological work has dealt with shifting domestic power dynamics between the different Israeli Jewish *edot*, or analyzed the influence of
prominent waves of *Aliyah* [literally “going up,” the term for Jewish immigration to Israel] (Kemp et. al. 2004; Anteby 2004; Yiftachel 2009; Elias and Kemp 2010).

Writings on memory and trauma have made key contributions to the understanding of collective Israeli imagination, with most studies focusing on histories of Exile, the Holocaust, or the Arab-Israeli conflict (Penkower 1994; Zerubavel 1995; Finkelstein 2000; Segev 2000; Zertal 2005).

From a musicological perspective, major works have chiefly explored Israel’s national musical culture from the perspective of early-state *shirei Eretz Israel* [songs of the Land of Israel], European art music, contemporary Israeli rock, and *musikah Mizrahit* (Shiloah 1995, 2001, 2007; Braun 2002; Regev and Seroussi 2004; Harris and Omer-Sherman 2013; Shelleg 2014). In the past decade, black musics have emerged as subjects of inquiry by some Israeli and Israelist academics, among them Galia Sabar, who has written about church music amongst African Christian migrants (2004), Malka Shabtay, who analyzes the role of hip-hop and reggae in Ethiopian-Israeli communities (2010), and Nirit Ben-Ari, whose doctoral dissertation explores hip-hop across Israel (2011). Of these authors, only Ben-Ari deals directly with the question of how a contemporary Afro-diasporic music comes to be “Israeli,” and to influence ideologies of collective Israeliness, through adoption by non-black Israeli musicians and audiences.

Given the broad scholarly interest in Israel’s national identity – what it is and has been, how it is formed, and where its influence matters in contemporary society and politics – the relative absence of attention to Sub-Saharan and diasporic blackness in the Israeli collective imagination is noteworthy. There are a few possible reasons for this gap. In the first place, many other topics – among them, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict,
domestic Ashkenazi-Mizrahi contests for political power, and transformations of Zionist ideology – are urgent, complex, and rich in primary source documentation of all kinds, thus both demanding and affording extensive academic inquiry. These are also “canonical” discourses in Israeli politics and in university Israel studies, a fact that matters in the world of academic funding, fellowships, and employment.

Another explanation for the limited scholarship on blackness and Israeli national identity is, simply, the newness of Israel’s African diaspora. As Steven Kaplan writes, “prior to the immigration of the Ethiopians, the total number of Israeli residents of sub-Saharan African descent—including the Black Hebrews of Dimona, Muslims of African origin, and Ethiopian Christians—probably did not exceed 1,000. Even the influx of African guest workers from Ghana and Nigeria in the 1990s altered this situation only slightly” (2005: 384). Much of the work on Israel’s black communities has focused on ethnographic information gathering, or comparison with diasporic groups of the same African national origins living in Europe and the United States (Miles 1997, Kaplan and Salamon 1998, Markowitz et. al. 2003, Sabar 2004, Kaplan 2009). Israelis have only recently begun to recognize the different black populations in their country as collectively making up “an African diaspora.” The national social, cultural, and political implications of this nascent conceptual framework are therefore still in flux.

As Israel’s longest-established sub-Saharan population, Ethiopians have received more scholarly attention than some other groups. The relationship between black identity, African identity, and Israeli identity is immediately relevant to any study of this community, because, with few exceptions, Ethiopian-Israelis are Jews and citizens. Kay Kaufman Shelemay (1986), Steven Kaplan and Shoshana Ben-Dor (1988), Hagar
Salamon (2003), Lisa Anteby-Yemini (2005), and Malka Shabtay (2010), among others, have explored Ethiopian ideologies of blackness, Jewishness, and Israeliness using frameworks in sociology and musicology. This body of work primarily examines black, Jewish, and Israeli identity issues amongst Ethiopians themselves; however, it also offers some insights about the influence of Ethiopian Jewish presence on Israeli collective understandings of blackness. For example, Kaplan (2005) marks the importance of the “end of exile” narrative in Israeli societal reception of Ethiopians, where both official and informal discourses positioned the new community as returning to the Jewish homeland rather than emigrating to it (381). Hagar Salamon shows how this end of exile narrative produced an image of the Ethiopian Jew as the “black brother” of majority Israelis (2003: 8), an epistemological shift in terms of Israeli ethnic taxonomies. During the 1990s, she observes, “the Jewish hosts, themselves divided by submerged racial tensions, were recast as first-time ‘whites’” (7).

In this succinct analysis of the initial Israeli national encounter with the Ethiopian eda, Salamon highlights a powerful racial construction that continues to influence the dynamics of the Israeli-African encounter today. This is a construction of African blackness as singularly Other, as more different than existing differences between the many Jewish ethnic communities who constituted Israeli society prior to the Ethiopians’ arrival. This new kind of “black-white” dyad did not entirely erase existing multidimensional ethnic taxonomies (such as the perceived distinctions between Ashkenaziyut and Mizrahiyut; or between Yemenite, Moroccan, and Iraqi Mizrahiyut), but displaced and modified them, with paradigmatic implications for modern Israel’s race relations.
This dissertation seeks to expand scholarly discourse around the theme of black Otherness, a discourse launched by studies of the Ethiopian eda, but which has yet to take in most of Israel’s 21st century African populations. I look at the persistence of the black-white dyad in majority Israeli understandings of today’s Ethiopian eda, refugee and asylum seeker communities, African labor migrants, and black émigrés from elsewhere in diaspora. I consider how the notion of black Otherness is impinged by how Israelis identify themselves ethnically (as Mizrahi or Ashkenazi, for instance), by what they know or imagine about specific black groups in the country, and by exposure to images of Euro-American “black culture” through globalized entertainment media. Likewise, I trace concepts of black Otherness within Israel’s Afro-diasporic communities, many of whose members have exchanged majority status in countries of origin for the position of racial minority in “white” Israel. To what extent has this change informed people’s perceptions of blackness writ large, as an aspect of being distinct from the ethnic identities granted via national or tribal affiliation, religion, or language? How does black consciousness shape musical and other culturally coded aesthetic expressions across different Afro-diasporic communities?

Author and literary theorist Toni Morrison, in her essays on the construction of national identity in U.S. literature, asks whether the “major and championed characteristics” of American letters – “individualism, masculinity, social engagement… moral problematics… thematics of innocence… are not in fact responses to a dark, abiding, signing Africanist presence” (1992: 5). Subtending the chapters that follow, and sometimes laid out explicitly, are related questions about the role of black presence in processes of Israeli collective identity formation. How have “major and championed”
characteristics of the national body – Zionism, the connection to land, military might, humanitarianism, and cosmopolitanism – developed in part around the imaginary figure of a black Other, and honed through Israel’s interactions with black peoples?

As an American ethnographer, I am habituated to the centrality of the black-white dyad in discourse around race in the U.S. I recognize the need for caution when examining the conceptual relationship between blackness and whiteness in Israel, lest an American model overly influence my interpretation of attitudes and events. Israel’s African diaspora is newer than that of the United States, and America’s history of chattel slavery is only the first of myriad differences between the two contexts. Nevertheless, it is time to recognize that the black-white dyad has its own powerful momentum in modern Israel, distinct from older multidimensional taxonomies of Jewish ethnicity. In some respects, this dyad is a latter-day phenomenon of globalization, brought about by late 20th and 21st century migration patterns and imported Euro-American tropes of race that have arrived in Israel via transnational media. History shows us, however, that black Otherness, a key construct of the black-white dyad, has actually been nascent in the Israeli imagination from “golden age” of Africa-Israel relations, through the state’s “rescue” of the Ethiopian Jews, and up to the present. Thinking about the black-white dyad in 21st century Israel means recognizing its structural role over a long period of time; indeed, its influence on thought and culture since the earliest days of the state.

**Black Musics in Israeli Popular Culture**

In 2003, I was a U.S. Foreign Service Officer working at the American Embassy on Ha’Yarkon Street in Tel Aviv. Every morning, I drove to work in a dilapidated
Renault Clio while listening to Galgalatz, Israel’s premier pop radio station, an offshoot of the Israel Defense Forces’ (IDF) channel Galei Tzahal. Galgalatz, whose on-air DJs are active duty soldiers, played Hebrew-language hits along with European and American Top 40, and offered the occasional program featuring “indie” or “world” music. It did not take me long to notice the recorded station voice-over that was often broadcast to introduce certain songs: a seductive female voice would purr the words, “ve achshav... mashehu shachorrre”: And now for something black.

Judging by the tracks that would follow this announcement, it seemed that “something black” mostly meant Euro-American hip-hop and contemporary R&B: artists like 50 Cent and Puff Daddy, Biggie and Beyonce, Shaggy and Rihanna were played frequently in the “shachor” rotation. Having recently earned my anthropology B.A. from an American liberal arts college where disciplined, culturally specific language was the norm in both classroom discussion and casual conversation, I was discomfited by the casually exoticist reference to race in the Galgalatz voice-over: the throaty intonation, the weird growl of “shachorrre”. As I would learn, however, musikah shachorah, “black music,” as vague and capacious as it sounds, has a relatively narrow meaning in the Israeli context, coined as a commercial label by radio DJs in the late 1990s to refer to imported hip-hop and R&B. While this category of music retains enormous popularity amongst Israelis, and is still widely referred to as musikah shachorah, hip-hop and R&B only comprise a fraction of Israel’s Afro-diasporic soundworld.

Black musics in majority non-black societies are perhaps the ultimate “abiding, signing Africanist presence” (Morrison 1992: 5), fueling all kinds of fantasies, fascinations, and interpretations in the non-black imagination, and making key
contributions to popular cultural development. Scholarship on African American music emphasizes that these contributions are frequently minimized, in the sense that many black arts are eventually claimed as “national” (Radano 2003, Tate 2003). Greg Tate glosses this process as “everything but the burden”; that is, white America’s fetishization of black expressive culture, combined with a willful ignorance of the historic and ongoing oppressions that produce it (2003: 3). Similar strains of fascination with/fear of blackness are evident throughout Israeli popular culture, where many Afro-diasporic expressive forms are eagerly consumed, appropriated, and then, over time, identified as Israeli. While no specific black genre to date has been raised up as “the” national music of Israel, like jazz has been in much American discourse, black musics are historically “Israelized” in a variety of ways. The result is a contemporary popular arena of music and style where black-originated forms and aesthetics represent the pinnacle of Israeli hipness, existing alongside a national politics that often frames actual black residents, especially refugees, as dangerous or un-Israeli.

From the 1960s through the late 80s, blues-based rock and roll, soul, and rhythm & blues were probably the most significant black influences on Israeli popular music, either imported for radio play or performed by touring bands from abroad, including some all-black groups. Jamaican émigré Tony Ray, a reggae singer and nightclub owner who was one of my primary associates during my fieldwork in 2013, arrived to Israel almost forty years ago with an African British band called the Cocktails. He describes a lively scene in 1970s urban Israel:

We’d play three times a night in Tel Aviv – Ringo’s in Bat Yam, the Lion’s Club on HaMasger Street, and we’d finish up in the Sunny Club on HaHashmonaim Street… In those days it was a real show. You know, like “Sex Machine” from James Brown. “Proud Mary,” but Wilson
Pickett’s version. I used to do Carol King “You Got a Friend,” and “Get Ready” and stuff like that. I used to go all out, getting down on my knees, begging the audience to clap. Every show, it was a show! I added stuff from Jesus Christ Superstar, then, um… “da da dap dap…” you know, from Cream. But you know, a soul version. It was mostly Israeli kids in the audience, and they were always going wild. They couldn’t get enough (interview with author, October 9, 2013).

During this period, exposure to European and American styles powerfully shaped the development of Israeli popular music. Artists experimented with rock, soul, and rhythm and blues idioms within existing Israeli musical categories, including shirei Eretz Israel [songs of the Land of Israel], an invented folk genre dating back to the Yishuv period of Jewish settlement in pre-state Palestine, and military band music, which through the 1970s was a major form of popular entertainment (Regev and Seroussi 2004: 90). Yet musicians and audiences were not necessarily thinking about rock, soul, or rhythm and blues as specifically black music. Rather, Israelis regarded these fundamentally hybrid genres as broadly “Western,” and were attracted to them as symbols of modernism, cosmopolitanism, and social progressivism (ibid). In this way, black musics entered Israeli popular culture largely divorced from their Afro-diasporic communities of origin, and from the politicized history of these musics in Euro-American contexts. Today, rock Israeli, the Hebrew language genre that emerged out of the 1960s and 70s fusion experiments, is Israel’s closest thing to a national pop canon. Its debt to black forms by way of Euro-American rock, soul, funk, and rhythm and blues has rarely been addressed in music scholarship, and any experiential or anecdotal knowledge of this debt on the part of the founding rock Israeli musicians themselves is long forgotten.

Meanwhile, the mass immigration of Ethiopian Jews under Israeli government auspices in the 1980s and early 90s gave Israeli society its first major exposure to the
music of a particular, immediately present Afro-diasporic community. Public performances of Ethiopian traditional music, which were often supported by state-affiliated immigrant absorption agencies, reached a relatively small but highly curious subset of Israeli elites and cultural creatives (Herman 2012: 10-11). In 1993, Israeli rocker Shlomo Gronich recorded a hit album with a group of Ethiopian children whom he dubbed the Sheba Choir. This introduced a broader national audience to Amharic-language singing and East African instruments embedded in otherwise conventional rock Israeli songs, paving the way for more “world music” experimentation by commercial pop musicians. The most successful of contemporary Israel’s world-pop fusion bands, The Idan Raichel Project, is a large multiethnic ensemble whose chart-topping songs draw heavily on Ethiopian traditions. Musically more sophisticated than Shlomo Gronich and the Sheba Choir (and with no children involved), the Project nevertheless elaborates Gronich’s impulse to spice up Hebrew pop with sonic signifiers of generalized Ethiopianness. Amharic vocal “hooks” are softened with lush reverb; snippets of traditional Ethiopian melodies are modified to conform to Western tonal structures; and instruments like *krar* (a bowl-shaped lyre), *masengo* (bowed lute), or *washint* (end-blown flute) are carefully mixed in the studio to accent, not challenge, Israeli pop rock conventions. “Undiluted” Amharic music, on the other hand, has proliferated almost exclusively in Israel’s Ethiopian enclaves, performed in small urban restaurants and nightclubs, and has never reached national audiences. The juxtaposition of Raichel’s superstardom with the ongoing obscurity of *musikah Amharit* itself, which includes the absence of any commercially successful Ethiopian *Amharit* performer in Israel’s national
market, points to a simultaneous appropriation and erasure of blackness similar to what Greg Tate describes in the American context.

National reception of Israelized Amharic sounds in Gronich’s and Raichel’s work has been guided by public understandings of the Ethiopian *eda* as both black and Jewish, African and Israeli – “end of exile” narrative tropes that three decades of Ethiopian presence have not fully eroded. Such reception can be distinguished from that of *musikah shachorah*, the contemporary hip-hop and R&B to which Israelis were introduced via satellite radio and Music Television (MTV) throughout the 1990s. According to sociologist Nirit Ben-Ari, Israeli enthusiasm for these musics was shaped in part by the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, which catalyzed a period of public optimism and unprecedented levels of openness to non-Israeli cultural forms (2012). The Accords, “although they were never implemented, initiated a period in Israel… in which popular culture was saturated with cultural and musical products whose sole intention was to celebrate and party, in a space free of political conflicts” (2012: 53). Hip-hop and R&B exploded onto this scene precisely because they were ostensibly not Israeli in any way; they were black and non-Jewish, African and American (or European). These genres offered material for young Israelis who were experimenting with identity and self-expression in new ways. If plenty of American and European rappers in the 1990s were confrontational or aggressive, their lyrics had no direct applicability to the Israeli-Palestinian issue, or to Israeli domestic social tensions. Hip-hop provided psychodrama and catharsis, but it was refreshingly free from the omnipresent thematic of Middle Eastern regional conflict.
For a short time in 1990s Israel, imported hip-hop and R&B retained clear associations with blackness (albeit blackness as represented in globalized entertainment media) mostly because there were not yet any countervailing images of Israeli hip-hoppers for audiences to consider. In 1996, however, Galgalatz launched a weekly program called Esek Shachor [black business], which featured an emerging crop of non-African Israeli rappers alongside the imported musikah shachorah. The Israelization of hip-hop and R&B had begun, in no less central an institution than military-run pop radio. Today, while Israeli audiences still hear hip-hop as black music in some respects, they now understand it equally as Israeli. On one hand, black American superstars like Kanye West, Drake, Nicki Minaj, and Beyoncé are all over Israeli radio and television, churning out new releases that Israelis call shachor without hesitation. And station DJs on the Esek Shachor program, which remains a popular Galgalatz broadcast, sometimes discuss hip-hop using a rubric of “authenticity” grounded in black American cultural politics and aesthetic innovations. They keep abreast of ideological rivalries between U.S. rappers, for instance, and compare new rappers’ rhymes and “flow” (verbal rhythmic skill) with that of hip-hop’s beloved founding artists.

On the other hand, music industry professionals and audiences also talk about hip-hop authenticity from specifically Israeli perspectives. One of the country’s most controversial rappers, Subliminal, is a Mizrahi whose right-wing nationalist lyrics have inspired the devotion of fans and the vitriol of detractors, who accuse him of racism and war-mongering. Subliminal fuels this controversy by claiming Zionism as an ideology of resistance rather than hegemonic power, portraying himself in media interviews as “an outcast on the margins of society, like rap’s founding generation” (Ben-Ari 2012: 64).
Where some of the best known black American rappers from hip-hop’s first decade “rapped about state aggression such as police brutality” (ibid), Subliminal criticizes state weakness in the face of threat from the Palestinians. Subliminal further frames his music as a tool of minority resistance to domination by identifying the position of Mizrahim in Israeli society that of African Americans in the U.S. This modified discourse of hip-hop authenticity, where Zionism shares pride of place with black resistance politics, and Mizrahim with black people, exemplifies the contemporary Israelization of black musics.

Figure 1.3: An army DJ on break in the Galgalatz studios, Jaffa

From the early days of touring soul acts to the millennial ascendancy of *musikah shachorah*, popular music in Israel has maintained enormous space for Afro-diasporic forms, whether or not musicians and audiences have always engaged consciously with such forms as black. By the turn of the century, when sizable numbers of African labor
migrants, refugees and asylum seekers were arriving to Israel, Israelis were broadly familiar with the idioms of rock, soul, blues, funk, and jazz in many different manifestations. They also knew something about Ethiopian music, even if only Idan Raichel’s smoothed-out version of it. And they had heard *mashehu shachorrrrrr* often enough on the radio that hip-hop and R&B would hardly seem “imported” or wholly foreign anymore. Then, too, the expansion of alternative and college radio stations in the 1990s, and an emerging Internet media sphere, had helped lesser known Afro-diasporic musics find their way to curious listeners, anything from vintage roots reggae to South African rap (Eran Sabag, interview with author, March 24, 2013).

Israel at the dawn of the 21st century was fertile ground for a massive proliferation of African and diasporic musics, which occurred as migrant and refugee communities became further established in the country. Audiences were more prepared to welcome new sounds, however, than they were equipped to contend directly with the sociopolitical challenges posed by Israel’s increased level of demographic diversity. Music would become a way for publics large and small to “meet” Africans, to learn something about the different communities, and to consider charged issues of ethnicity and identity within the flexible, accommodating sphere of aesthetics.

“African Music”

*Soukous*, a Congolese dance genre influence by Cuban Rumba, lively with shakers and bright guitar arpeggios. *Coupé-Décalé*, the beat-driven nightclub music from Côte d'Ivoire, full of braggadocio and slinky synthesizers, with a cheeky name that means
“steal and run.”

Ziglibity, classic Ivorian pop with a jerky, asymmetrical rhythmic feel established in the 1960s, and developed over decades of sustained national prominence. Afrobeat, pride of Nigeria, the lasting result of pop icon Fela Kuti’s experiments combining funk after the style of James Brown with traditional Yoruba music (Veal 2000). Gambian Fulani praise singing and airy wooden flute melodies. Triumphant gospel songs in English and Yoruba, from the hymnbooks of Pentecostal churches that range all across Ghana and Nigeria. The musics of West Africa are as varied as its peoples, and these are but a few of the countless genres and styles that migrants have brought to urban Israel from their countries of origin.

And from the east: Wolayta, Gurage and Oromo music, traditional styles from the regions of Ethiopia. Musikah Amharit, Ethiopian-Israelis’ beloved popular music that combines the regional styles of their home country with swinging horns, brisk beats, and funky bass lines after the fashion of nightclub bands in 1960s Addis Ababa. Tigrinya radio pop from Eritrea, weighty with pounding drums and massed string instruments, softened by sentimental vocal melodies. Pastoral songs, plaintive laments, and celebratory tunes from villages in Darfur and South Sudan. Some of these musics have sounded out in Israel for decades; others are more recent markers of refugee presence, evoking memories of home and desire for recognition in Israel.

This dissertation engages with many Sub-Saharan African musical traditions in the forms they take in Tel Aviv, yet I can only address a relatively small subset of the city’s vast African soundworld. My decision about which genres to include has certainly

---

been subjective, but it is grounded in ethnographic participant observation in many Tel Aviv scenes, and interviews with a wide range of associates. I have tried to cover a representative sample, choosing musics that are important to different immigrant, migrant and refugee communities as markers of culture and identity, and which also have significant momentum within Tel Aviv more broadly, whether by reaching large Israeli audiences, influencing the work of other musicians, impacting the public debate over Africans’ civic status, or some combination of the above.

Whether a genre is known to wide audiences, like Afrobeat, a signature sound of one of Tel Aviv’s most popular live bands, the Groove Ambassadors, or whether limited to small groups of African and Israeli aficionados, like *Fulani* song, refugee and migrant musics do not sit squarely within the category of *musikah shachorah*. They often sound markedly different from hip-hop and R&B, even the ones that reveal some influence from those global musical juggernauts, and they have Afrocentric extramusical associations that do not commonly emerge in commercial hip-hop and R&B. Groove Ambassadors front man Elise Akowendo, a long-term Tel Aviv resident who hails from Cote d’Ivoire, explains that “*musikah shachorah* is hip-hop, dance, you know… *boom boom boom*, club music. When people say *shachorah* they mean Top 40 stuff. Our music is not what they call *shachorah*, it is African” (interview with author, August 8, 2014). Akowendo is deeply invested in the vibrant pop styles of his home region, and in maintaining his band’s “African authenticity,” yet he not is the only one to differentiate between what counts as *shachorah* and what counts as African music.

Different audiences and taste communities have found various ways to categorize the body of music that has arrived to Israel with African migrant and refugee populations.
Many Israelis are comfortable labeling diverse African traditional and popular genres as *musikah olamit* [world music], a hefty category that includes anything from Arabic classical music to Hindustani *ragas*, to Idan Raichel’s globetrotting fusion pop. The *musikah olamit* scene has been growing nationwide for more than two decades, and is stylistically broad enough to accommodate nearly any “ethnic” music from abroad that isn’t highly commercialized (like hip-hop) or overwhelmingly digital-electronic in its sonic texture. So even though *coupé-décalé* uses synthesizers, for instance, its hand drums, percussion instruments, finger-picked guitars, and lyrics in various Ivorian indigenous languages mean it reads as sufficiently *etnit* (ethnic) for world music fans who encounter it. Moving from the general to the particular, another way that some non-African Israelis identify migrant or refugee musics is, simply, by their names. There is a great amount of cultural connoisseurship in Tel Aviv, as perhaps in most any globalized urban center worldwide; as such, a relatively small but musically influential and growing contingent of Israeli artists and listeners are educated in the conventions and histories of specific African genres.

Israeli fans of electronic dance music (EDM), which takes myriad forms in Tel Aviv’s countless megaclubs, think about African genres and styles in terms of their relationship to trance, drum and bass, jungle, tribal, and other EDM subgenres. The rhythmic conventions of those subgenres signify on non-Western and especially African musics, so there are ready comparisons to be made, whether musically well informed or casual. Israeli *ruchnikim*, the subculture of young “hippies” who smoke hash, wear *etnit* clothing, and attend outdoor parties in remote natural spots, enjoy African musics with strong beats and phrase repetition, the better to facilitate trance-like dancing. For
connoisseur fandoms, as well as for more casual fans of *musikah olamit* in general, African musics are worlds apart, sonically, culturally, and even ideologically, from the *musikah shachorah* of Israel’s commercial mainstream. Exploring the causes and effects of this distinction, and how it influences notions of blackness in the Israeli collective imagination, is an important aspect of my dissertation.

The perceived *musikah shachorah/African music* dichotomy is salient enough in Tel Aviv that one non-African Israeli DJ collective named Black&White hosts a popular monthly dance party called “Tribal War: Africa vs. Hip-hop.” The soundtrack of the event alternates hit singles from the likes of Beyonce, Nicki Minaj, 50 Cent, and Tupac, with tracks from Fela Kuti, Malian pop duo Amadou and Mariam, Ethio-jazz founder Mulatu Astatke, and many other prominent musicians from across the African continent.

Tribal War’s popularity points to an Israeli interest in new musics from Africa that is tinged with exoticism. Promotional materials show a Maasai warrior in elaborate traditional regalia, juxtaposed with a tough looking photo of American hip-hop icon Biggie Smalls. Despite these stereotyped images, however, Tribal War at least suggests
an attempt to acknowledge cultural particularities, and to recognize differences that exist between black communities. Although the tag line of the event, “Africa vs. Hip-hop,” rhetorically reduces black diversity to a simple binary, it reveals an awareness on the part of some Israelis that familiar *musikah shachorah* and Western media images of “black culture” do not necessarily represent the African refugees and migrants who live in Israel. Further, the wide variety of African genres played at the event indicate that the DJs understand “Africa” as non-unitary and multidimensional, at least musically speaking. And the night’s “battle” theme, which is often how DJs show respect for two favorite artists or styles (in Israel, the U.S., and elsewhere), gives African musics a place of honor alongside long-venerated hip-hop. The battle poses a sociological question – what does Africa have to say about the black identity that hip-hop puts forward – and allows music to respond.  

In all its constraints and affordances as an Israeli interpretation of blackness, Tribal War is the product of growing curiosity about African experiences, histories, and identities.  

Like Israelis, Africans and Afro-descendants in Tel Aviv are well aware of *musikah shachorah*, and, as Elise Akowendo does, many distinguish it from their own and other African groups’ musical patrimonies. People who have recently arrived may not use the Hebrew term – although I have found that “shachorah” seems to be one of the words that migrants and refugees learn early. Yet Euro-American hip-hop and R&B have

---

7 Rap, DJ, and b-boy (breakdance) battles were integral to the development of hip-hop in 1970s New York. Battles were not only artistic competitions, but were also a way for young people to express their opinions, work out interpersonal disagreements, and hone their social identities. For discussion of the ideology of battling, see Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (1994, Wesleyan University Press) and Joseph Schloss, *Foundation: B-Boys, B-Girls, and Hip-Hop Culture in New York* (2009, Oxford University Press),
their own strong momentum across Africa today, and most migrants and refugees arrive to Israel quite familiar with imported black music as a commercial category. Within Israel’s African diaspora, understandings of one’s “own” music, of “African” music, and of “black” music as a whole vary from person to person and group to group, but the categories are always in relationship with each other. Their perceived overlaps and discontinuities point to a process whereby Africans and Afro-descendants navigate social identity amongst Israelis as well as other black groups.

In Tel Aviv, the aspect of Israel’s African diaspora as a “community of communities” (Horowitz 2010: 8), with a shared identity even in diversity, is especially realized. Everybody lives close to everyone else in dense south city neighborhoods, and there is a high degree of mingling across populations. This is not universally the case; for instance, most Eritrean Christians attend their own churches, preferring Tigrinya-language services rather than the English of most West African congregations. However, Africans migrants and refugees from different communities, and often Ethiopian-Israeli citizens as well, regularly encounter each other in nightclubs, restaurants, shops, banks, and sites of employment. Musical spaces like clubs and cafes especially can further cross-group social relationships, if they cater to more than one black taste community, as many of south Tel Aviv’s smaller venues must do in order to remain financially viable. Tony Ray’s Rasta Club, for instance, plays Amharic music, urban African dance pop, and Euro-American hip-hop and R&B, in order to bring in as many migrants, refugees, and Ethiopians as possible.

One of the effects of urban proximity is extensive musical exchange: black artists in Tel Aviv often combine musics not “their own” with genres from their homes and
cultures of origin. Plenty of migrants and refugees adore hip-hop as much as the next global citizen, and musicians from these communities often include it in their stylistic repertoire. Just as lovingly, however, they borrow from other African traditional and popular musics. Elise Akowendo is arguably Tel Aviv’s local leader in this respect, picking up new styles from the African artists he meets around the city, adding them to his already impressive roster of musics from home, and bringing them all together in stylistically hybrid Groove Ambassadors performances. Yet even musicians with a narrower focus enjoy experimenting with African fusions: the Ethiopian ensemble who performs at Rasta Club on Thursday nights sometimes includes West African percussion in their musikah Amharit sets, while Tony Ray himself gives featured slots to Amharit singers during shows with his roots reggae band Amjah.

Exploring musical exchange within Tel Aviv’s Afro-diasporic community of communities helps me unpack the co-constitutive significance of national, African, and transnational black identities in the lives of diasporic peoples. Countries and regions of origin, ethnic and family groupings, and other specific diacritica matter to these individuals, but so does Africanness, the sense of a heritage shared with other Afro-diasporic groups in Israel, as well as blackness more generally, their membership in a unique global community that transcends geopolitical borders and ethnic boundaries. I am interested in how African musics brought from home might help their purveyors express not only their originary ethno-cultural identities, but also their new black identities in diaspora. Conversely, I seek to trace ways in which commercial black music – the Euro-American born hip-hop and R&B that has made its way around the world – may signify as African for migrants and refugees in Tel Aviv.
“Africanness” and “blackness” are broad terms with a variety of possible meanings for Africans and Afro-descendants. They reference complex, shifting intersections of ethnicity, culture, geography, and, increasingly in modern Israel, politics. When I consider the ways in which a given African listener or group of listeners hears blackness in a music brought from Africa, one of the factors in my analysis is the extent to which they believe such music articulates the sociopolitical condition of being black amidst a majority non-black population. In other words, what do they feel that the music says about experiences of otherness, difference, and racism? What does it say about black solidarity and opposition to marginalization? I do not suggest that black identity or even black politics is constituted wholly by phenomena of racism and resistance. For Africans and Afro-descendants living in the era of Israel’s intense public race debate, however, such phenomena are widely shared, and they are a large part of what fuels people’s understandings of collective black identity.

In exploring musical representations of Africanness and blackness, I do not assume that people perceive isomorphic relationships between musical form and social identity. While the sound of Coupé-Décalé may evoke Cote d’Ivoire or West Africa for some listeners depending on context, it may be a message of blackness in other contexts – perhaps if it is played immediately after American rap group N.W.A’s famous song “Fuck the Police” (1988) at a Rasta Club party. An Ethiopian-Israeli listener can hear hip-hop on Galgalatz as musikah shachorah, but experience the same track as Ethiopian while dancing at Club Menelik, one of Tel Aviv’s two major Ethiopian nightclubs.

One shared feature of many African and diasporic musical traditions, which further complicates the way music signifies African and black identities, is Israel itself as
a prominent narrative trope. Reggae has been conjuring the Rastafarian Holy Land through references to biblical Israel even since before Bob Marley declared himself an “iron lion in Zion” (1973 [1992]). In the history of African-American religious music, slave songs voiced longing for Jerusalem and the River Jordan, and identified slavery with the plight of “the Israelites.” Contemporary gospel musics around the world that have roots these early “spirituals” likewise glory in biblical sites that are part of Israel’s physical landscape today. Various Pentecostal churches across Africa incorporate hymns professing the doctrine of Christian Zionism, which states that Israel belongs to the Jewish people (Gifford 1998; Corton and Marshall-Fratani 2001). In Ethiopia, where rulers historically linked their power to a mytho-historic Solomonic lineage originating in Jerusalem, religious, traditional, and even popular musics commemorate that story in different ways (Falceto 2006, Kaplan 2006: 448). Even Caribbean dancehall, the down-and-dirty nightclub version of modern reggae, boasts a global star, Vybz Kartel, who has named his crew “Gaza,” a reference to Palestinian armed resistance in the modern conflict with Israel.

In these examples, Israel conveys messages of ethnicity and identity that are bound up with the particular histories of different African and diasporic peoples. When reggae, gospel, Amharic music, hip-hop, dancehall, or other genres in Tel Aviv sound out references to Israel’s lands, myths, and histories, such references can have immediate significance for black listeners, in addition to their received cultural significances. African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Israel are particularly rich sites where this double layer of meaning obtains: I have seen African migrant worshippers take visible pride in singing a hymn about Christian soldiers in the Holy Land, while their pastor shouts
exhortations that they must act as such soldiers themselves. Reggae, an enormously popular music for African and Israeli audiences alike, also does polysemous identity work in the Israeli context. Zvuloon Dub System, a well-known Tel Aviv group fronted by Ethiopian-Israeli Gili Yalo, features gritty street scenes and Star of David graffiti in the video for their roots-style composition “Going to Mount Zion” (2012). I am interested in how Tel Aviv’s black musicians and audiences relate to these references in musics they know and love, and towards which, in many cases, they feel a sense of cultural ownership. How might references to Israel touch on listeners’ perceptions of their own Africanness and blackness? How might they mediate the dynamic conceptual relationship between national, African, and transnational black identities in Tel Aviv’s multi-ethnic milieu?

***

*Musikah shachorah* and African music are encompassing categories that Israelis and Africans, musicians and audiences alike, generally recognize and distinguish. They are used as labels in spoken conversation about music, and in written form in Tel Aviv’s music press and blogosphere. My dissertation not only explores their various constituent genres and styles, but also treats the categories themselves as cultural objects. “*Musikah shachorah*” and “African music” are ideas about things, not the things themselves; as such, they are influenced by an array of ostensibly non-musical inputs. Most prominently, the two categories are laden with ideas about black and African people. Images of contemporary American black culture depicted in globalized entertainment media feed these ideas, as do news media images of Africa (which often turn on poverty and instability), and Israel’s own history of Africa relations. Interpersonal relationships
also influence notions of black and African people (for both Israelis and Africans), and of course, Israel’s domestic political debate about refugees and migrants is an omnipresent source of input. So when my associates refer to musikah shachorah or African music, talking about their likes or dislikes, the features of one or another category, and their understandings of music histories, I understand what they say to be commentary not just on music, but on the people who inhabit their social worlds.

These musical categories would not be as useful or interesting as sociological barometers if they were firm and unchanging. But musikah shachorah and African music gain, lose, and trade attributes as Israel’s African diaspora diversifies, and as Israeli society finds different ways to understand African presence. Commercial hip-hop has long been considered an ideological music, whether in Subliminal’s tracks about Israeli national might or in Kanye West’s “Black Skinhead” (2013); today, Esek Shachor seeks new rap from urban Africa that speaks of African experiences. Musikah Amharit, for most non-Ethiopian-Israelis, is an ethnic music heard in Idan Raichel’s hits or as part of the background soundscape of city streets, yet anti-racism activists increasingly play it as rally music during organizing meetings and political demonstrations. The extramusical associations of genres and styles, and of the categories to which they are assigned, reflect the fluid dynamics of the contemporary Israeli-African encounter at all levels.

**Blackness and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict**

During fieldwork, research, and writing for this dissertation, I frequently faced questions about why I was working on black musics and the Israeli-African encounter rather than the urgent Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Sometimes it was field associates or
colleagues in academia who asked such questions, but often I asked them of myself. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is probably the most significant historical factor shaping conditions of public life in Israel, and plays a central role in collective understandings of Israeliness – even for many people outside of Israel. In Hebrew it is called ha’matsav, which means, simply, “the situation.” In global media, it is headline news. In many academic disciplines, from Israel studies to political science, the conflict is a prestige discourse that receives (and surely deserves) the best and brightest thinkers. It is barely an exaggeration to say that most American and European publics, when we think of Israel, think first of seemingly endless regional strife. Since I am concerned with processes of collective identity formation, this conflict, ever present in Israelis’ lives and psyches, and in the world’s perception of Israel, would seem to demand my greatest attention.

Yet it is the very omnipresence of the conflict that influenced my initial interest in a newer and lesser-understood phenomenon in Israel and in Israel studies: the conflict around African refugee and migrant civic status. My attention to the so-called “refugee issue” grew from a simplistic but compelling observation: Africans seemed to be the “others” whom majority Israeli society angsted over most when they were not occupied by flare-ups (military or political) of the Palestinian conflict. Analyzing the refugee issue soon led to a broader exploration of Israel’s multi-community African diaspora, because the themes of ethnicity, identity, and belonging, self and other, “Israeliness” and “blackness” that crop up throughout the refugee debate are impossible to discuss without reference to other black populations in the country. There was, I came to believe, an “other Other” in modern Israel, an African presence grown sufficiently visible and
 audible that it was complicating, if not fully displacing, the category of otherness in Israel’s national psyche which had for so long hewed close around the Palestinians.

I refer to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict at several places in this dissertation, including when I highlight what some of my associates have said about it. During certain periods of fieldwork, flare-ups disrupted daily activities in Tel Aviv and captured everyone’s attention, refugees and migrants just as much as Israelis. At these times, such as August of 2014, when the IDF was intercepting rockets from Gaza and the skies over the city were filled with daily explosions, my focus on black musics as a locus of identity seemed almost beside the point. The possible resonances of Israeliness and blackness in music seemed faint against the totalizing sounds of war. Furthermore, none of the media coverage during that August drew links between the Palestinian conflict and African refugee debate, and few of my associates seemed ready to discuss the issues together. Yet broad themes of ethnicity, identity, self, and other, rose right to the surface of public discourse, and these brought me back to my dissertation topic. I was able to examine politicians’ explicit calls for national unity, references to historic Zionist ideals, and evocations of shared Israeli experience. I examined racial codes in Israelis’ social media arguments about Palestinians. I listened also for how black communities in Tel Aviv described Arabs and Jews, Israelis and Palestinians, when talking about the flare-up. My dissertation benefits from some of the insights gleaned from this angle of research.

The different spheres of war discourse revealed under-explored similarities between how Israelis rhetorically frame a Palestinian threat to their nation and an African threat to their society and culture. Both peoples are widely viewed as the potential death-knell of Israel’s Jewish demographic majority, and as threats to national security;
literally, as subjects of “enemy or hostile states” in Article 6 of the asylum regulations that Israel’s Knesset [Parliament] passed in 2002. Further, both peoples are said to have lands of their own, to which they should return. Popular sentiments about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict such as “Arabs have half the world,” and “Jordan is already the Palestinian state” assert Israel’s right to its territory, and reject Palestinian political claims to refugee or displaced person status. A related formula of place and belonging is evident in one commonplace anti-refugee activist chant, “Tel Aviv for Jews, Sudan for the Sudanese.”

At the most vitriolic levels of debate, like some social media or personal websites, and in the rhetoric of some hard-right politicians and activists, Arabs and Africans are described in similar racial language. Both peoples have been called “black” or “dark,” “backwards,” “savage,” or “primitive.” Notably, this language does not feature in race discourse around all of Israel’s ethnic minorities. For example, Southeast Asian labor migrants sometimes get represented via exoticist descriptions of their “creamy” skin, eye shape, and hair texture, as having “timid” personalities, or even as being extremely “polite.”

Tropes of darkness and savagery on the one hand, and creaminess and timidity on the other, are value-laden. They have a long history in Western thinking about different categories of “others,” with roots in European Enlightenment-era colonial expansion, and they have collected their own sets of meanings in the context of modern

---

8 Extreme racial language is uncommon in Israel’s mainstream media, and the vast majority of public figures avoid using it, regardless of their political affiliations. The terms kehe [dark] and parai [savage] are exceptions, appearing relatively regularly in op-ed writing about Palestinian militants. Most of these examples, however, come from private individuals’ pages on the social media websites Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter.
nation-states. For some Israelis, Arabs and Africans share certain physical and personality traits that mark them as a unique category of other.

Legal scholar Tally Kritzman-Amir suggests that Israel’s refugee regime, which is partially codified in law and otherwise exists in de-facto administrative practices at state and local levels, frames “Palestinian, Arab, and [African] Muslim asylum seekers [as] being the most extreme embodiment of otherness” (Kritzman-Amir 2009: 1, emphasis mine). Israeli policies group these populations together despite their different reasons for seeking residence in Israel: Palestinians as persons displaced in the 1948 and 1967 wars, and Africans who have fled predominantly Muslim countries as asylum seekers since the early 2000s. As Kritzman-Amir writes, “it is against this otherness” shared by Palestinian and African refugees and asylum seekers “that, allegedly, the Israeli and Jewish identity are sustained and developed” (5). Palestinian and African otherness, she explains, is “extreme” partly because of the particular threat these two groups are seen as posing to Israeli national security, while that perceived threat itself is rooted in figurations of their particular racial otherness (26). In other words, it is not possible to analyze contemporary Israeli views of Palestinian or African racial identity outside the context of the national security discourse, nor vice versa. This is not necessarily the case in Israeli assessments of all racial others, as the Southeast Asian case again illustrates: labor migrants from that region are not subject to national security regulations on entry, travel, or employment, are not generally part of security debates, and codes of threat are largely absent from racial language about them.

A thoroughgoing analysis of the relationship between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the African diaspora as major factors shaping Israel’s politics, society, and
culture requires a dissertation of its own. It is important to recognize, however, that the two peoples, Palestinians and Africans, have come to share overlaps in Israeli national policy, and in the Israeli collective imagination. There was a time in Israel’s history when images of Africa and Africans represented a geographically remote and non-threatening other in the public conversation about Israeli identity, distinct from the image of the Arab. Today, African refugees and migrants are targets of demographic and security anxieties that have long been focused almost entirely on the Palestinians. African and Palestinian persons are figured in shared racial language, different from language used to talk about other minorities. Such instances of conflation point to potential large-scale trends in the way Israeli society grapples with issues of ethnicity, identity, and national belonging.

Black otherness is a complex construction, not restricted to Israeli perceptions of refugee difference or threat. It has been formed around inputs ranging from “golden age” Africa narratives to the arrival of the Ethiopian eda, the rise of hip-hop to Mizrahi-refugee competitions for space and resources in Tel Aviv. Yet bearing in mind that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is one such input, contributing to the construction of black otherness by way of a national security discourse that treats Palestinians and African refugees from Muslim countries as the same, is useful when considering any aspect of the contemporary Israeli-African encounter. This applies readily to political rhetoric of Africans as a security threat, yet there are also evocations of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even in positive receptions of Africans. For example, in the same way that Israeli audiences embraced hip-hop in the post-Oslo 1990s because it celebrated life outside ha ’matsav, many fans of African music today enjoy it as a refuge from the
conflict’s pervasive societal effects. In all, my study of black musics, African lives, and
the national imagination in modern Israel is not a turn away from the conflict that has so
profoundly shaped the life of this country. Rather, my dissertation explores a
phenomenon, the Israeli-African encounter, which implicates historically constituted and
deeply felt ideologies of self and other. The more nuanced our understanding of the
multidimensional Israeli imagination, the more incisive our insights will be into the
Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Before concluding this section, I want to emphasize that pervasive public anxiety
about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict or about Africans does not mean that racial
animosity is universal or even normative in Israeli society. Most Israelis, like most
people anywhere, form opinions about others by trying to reasonably interpret events,
balance received wisdom with dissenting views, and judge their own lived experiences.
There is a powerful faction of social actors – politicians, media commentators, and
citizens – who heatedly object to the presence of African refugees, but they are still a
minority of Israel’s population. And there is institutional racial inequality in Israel that
goes beyond security regulations impacting Arabs and African refugees, as evidenced,
among other things, by statistics that show Ethiopian communities behind the national
mean in education and employment (Statistical Abstract of Israel 2014). Yet structural
racism is hardly unique to Israel. My dissertation explores anti-refugee sentiment
alongside energetic Israeli pro-refugee activism, stereotypes about African people and the
growing rejection of such stereotypes among large segments of Israel’s population,
xenophobic tropes of authentic Israeliness alongside dramatically pluralistic versions of
national identity. These chapters deal with a phenomenon unprecedented in Israel’s
history: the emergence of a multi-community African diaspora. I could not adequately address the experiential dynamics of this phenomenon for people on the ground, or its transformative cultural effects, without delving into the racial tensions that arise in most any new cross-cultural encounter.

Finally, in a related vein, I would like to nuance the terms “Zionism,” “Zionists,” and “Zionist ideologies,” which appear throughout this dissertation. I am aware that these terms are highly politically charged, and carry objectionable connotations in the discourse of the international political left. However, it is simply not possible to talk about Israeli history, or even contemporary popular culture in an urban environment, without reference to Zionism. Zionism remains on the tip of Israelis’ tongues and at the forefront of their social awareness, regardless of any individual’s political bent. One of my hopes for this dissertation is that it will challenge widespread popular reifications of Zionism as a coherent politics of Jewish nationalism, with a teleology of territorial expansion in the Middle East. For 21st century Israelis, Zionism does not necessarily equate to Jewish-religious nationalism, xenophobia, militarism, or anti-Arab sentiment.9 Modern Israeli understandings of Zionism are enormously diverse and often subtly sophisticated. They certainly incorporate knowledge of Zionism’s political origins in Jewish Europe and its role in the founding of the state, a history that is part of primary school education nationwide. But beyond this, Israelis think about Zionism in terms that

---

9 A 2009 survey by the Guttman Center of the Israel Democracy Institute suggests that 78% of Israeli Jews identify as “non-religious,” in categories including “anti-religious secular,” “secular,” and “traditional.” However, in the same survey, more than 90% of respondents identified “traditional Jewish ceremonies” as important life milestone markers, and 70% said they are “interested in the meaning of a Jewish state.”
usually interfacing slantwise with the aforementioned diacritica, and which are highly vulnerable to modification at the level of the individual.

**Motivations and Methodologies**

In a way, I have been doing fieldwork for this dissertation since February of 2003, when I first arrived in Tel Aviv as an employee of the American Embassy on Ha’Yarkon Street. I was twenty-two years old, fresh from a stint in the U.S. State Department’s orientation class for new diplomats and a brief area studies course, but I had few preconceptions about Israeli society. I am not Jewish, although I grew up in a New York suburb with many Jewish friends, often attending synagogue and celebrating holidays with my neighborhood pals, learning the words to the Hebrew folk song “Hava Nagila” in primary school, and hearing plenty of gossip about the goings-on of the Bnai B’rith Jewish youth group to which my friends belonged. So when I came to Tel Aviv as new diplomat, I probably had more familiarity with diasporic Jewish culture than many American gentiles, and an abiding natural interest in Jewish histories and lifeways, but I arrived with no detailed understanding of the national community that is Jewish Israel.

I spent three years as an Embassy staffer in Tel Aviv, during which time I developed what can only be called a love for the country. I admired Israel as the world’s only Jewish state, but also came to appreciate the sociopolitical complications presented by urban Israel’s enormous demographic diversity. One of my responsibilities was the so-called “foreign portfolio,” which involved interviewing prominent members of Tel Aviv’s refugee and migrant worker communities, and reporting their conditions for inclusion in the State Department’s annual Human Rights Report. This work gave me
direct exposure to realities of diasporic and minority experience that I had only previously theorized about as an undergraduate anthropology major in college classrooms. It also drove home for me the necessity for Israel to establish a coherent, comprehensive administrative approach to its non-citizen populations, a challenge the Israeli government has yet to fully meet at the time of this writing. Finally, my perspective on Israeli society was influenced by social and musical interactions with a wide array of city people, whom I met through playing guitar in a local rock band with my girlfriend at the time.

I returned to Washington, D.C., in 2005, and spent several years in the State Department’s Office of Israel and Palestinian Affairs, working mostly on U.S. efforts to keep Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations afloat. Needless to say, this was a daunting project, especially for mid-level officer with minimal decision-making power. In 2008, I decided to leave government work and return to academia, in order to work on the issue that mattered to most to me – ethno-cultural diversity in Israel and its large scale societal implications – from a musical rather than a political administrative perspective.

Any genre would have yielded insights, for most musical activity in Israel, from Hebrew-language radio pop to the most obscure local scene, deals directly or implicitly with tropes of ethnicity, identity, and nationhood in one form or another. I chose to focus on black musics for several reasons. First, as a nightclub DJ in Boston, Massachusetts, I knew and enjoyed a wide array of African and diasporic popular musics. I wanted to understand more about how hip-hop, R&B, and reggae, as well as less familiar but still globalized black genres like dancehall and Afrobeat, signified for Israeli audiences, as compared to the mostly American crowds for whom I DJ’d at home. Just as U.S. race
histories and politics influence the reception of contemporary black musics (whether or not Americans are always aware of or willing to acknowledge this influence), I knew that Israel’s own issues of race and ethnicity would impact consumption as well. As it turns out, my initial thinking about this topic as a new graduate student came to guide much of my research, resulting in this dissertation’s significant attention to non-African Israeli interpretations of black musics.

My motivation to work on black musics in Israel was also catalyzed by my fascination with one of the country’s biggest acts, the Idan Raichel Project, a sprawling multiethnic group who fused Ethiopian traditional music with Israeli pop-rock. Before my stint at the Embassy in Tel Aviv, I had heard little Ethiopian music, and certainly not the kind of Ethiopian pop fusion with which Raichel and his band experimented. I wished to learn more about the original genres that Raichel interpolated, about the Ethiopian community who brought them to Israel, and about the social dynamics that contributed to this unusual band’s national stardom. Again, I was thinking comparatively, wondering to what extent Ethiopian-Israeli social experience had analogs in African America, and what similar national discourses of race might have grown up around this community. Yet I was also compelled by a specific feature of the Israeli context that had no clear U.S. referent: the Ethiopian eda are Jewish citizens of the Jewish state (with few exceptions), and thus share with majority Israelis an enormously important aspect of national identity. The question of how blackness and Jewishness interacted in Ethiopian self-perceptions, and in other Israelis’ perceptions of them, opened up an exciting inquiry into the ideological relationship between blackness and
Israeliness more broadly, and suggested the need for fieldwork with multiple Afro-
diasporic communities.

Finally, I have chosen to write a multi-genre ethnography, rather than focusing on
a single musical community, tradition, or style, largely because my own opinions and
feelings about Israel were so tightly bound up with experiential impressions of ethno-
cultural diversity in Tel Aviv. Both my Embassy work and my personal life had been
enriched by relationships with people from many different communities, and by the
multiplicity that seemed woven into the very fabric of the city: street signs in many
languages; Russian bars, Ethiopian bridal shops, and Turkish CDs on sale in the bus
station; sounds of spoken Arabic at my favorite bakery, and Tigrinya in the shop where I
bought guitar strings; the exuberant cacophony of disparate global musics at the open air
Carmel Market… I suspected I could not do justice to any narrative of Israel, even a
formal academic dissertation, without addressing this urban diversity in and of itself. It is
a condition constituted by many particular cultural histories and practices, but, in its
phenomenology and sociological effects, distinct from and bigger than the sum of its
parts.

Studying black musics in Tel Aviv – their different communities of origin,
multiple spaces of production and consumption, and wealth of meanings for varied social
groupings – has enabled me to represent something of the city’s multiplicity, while still
giving attention to ethno-cultural specificity. Ethiopian-Israelis, Sudanese and Eritrean
refugees and asylum seekers, labor migrants from throughout West Africa, and émigrés
from around the world are all members of Israel’s African diaspora. Each constituent
community has a unique history and set of cultural practices, but they also share many
similar experiences of being black in Israel, of valuing Africa as a place and an idea with which they have special connections, and of making music that reflects those experiences and values.

While my dissertation will return again and again to the multidimensional influence of urban phenomena on the field of national culture, I am committed to exploring the details of lived experience amongst the individuals and groups with whom I have worked. It is hard to be black in Israel, as so many of my associates have emphasized to me. My responsibility is to attend to this difficulty, and how it manifests differently for members of Tel Aviv’s various African and Afro-descendant communities. Certainly, it is also challenging to be Israeli in Israel; accordingly, my dissertation deals with fissures and fractures within Israeli society, highlighting aspects of experience unique to different Israeli Jewish populations, and their contributions to the dialectical process by which national identity comes into being. My related responsibility as an ethnomusicologist is to look and listen for music amidst the difficulties of daily life: how, specifically, does music function for individuals and groups in social intercourse, entertainment, escape, self-representation, political activism, and ideological interpretation?

Urban ethnomusicology facilitates the close study of group musical activity in the immediate context of a multi-group environment. In this respect, I have found Tel Aviv-oriented fieldwork and research to be especially suited to my exploration of *shachorut* in Israeli national imagination. Interactions between diverse ethnic groups—cum—musical communities in a small and densely populated city metonymize the “self-other” ideologies that drive many aspects of Israel’s national culture. Tel Aviv is a living
monument to the 19th century Zionist vision of a Hebrew city. It is a place where, as the saying goes, “even your car mechanic is Jewish” (*afilu ha'mechonai rechev hu yehudi*). At the same time, Tel Aviv is “cosmopolitan” and “global,” regarded by Israelis across the country as, for better or worse, pluralistic and extremely socially liberal, rivaling the great European and American cities in the diversity of its people and its cultural offerings. Nowhere else in Israel do ethnic groups mix with such frequency, and nowhere else do human understandings of Israeli identity so directly interface with the human realities of globalization. Thus is the ethnomusicology of one place (Nettl 1984) informed by local, national, and global phenomena alike.

**Fieldwork Locations, Conditions, and Strategies**

I carried out directed ethnomusicological fieldwork for this dissertation over the course of five visits to Tel Aviv between June of 2010 and August of 2014. Because I had lived previously in the city for three years, I arrived already possessing the broad familiarity with my field site that is a necessary prerequisite for focused research. I was able to begin site visits and interviews immediately, without the orientation period that many ethnographic sojourns include. My first three field stays, in the summers of 2010, 2011, and 2012, were between three weeks and three months long. My main visit took

---

10 The liberalism of Tel Aviv features prominently in publicity initiatives by Israel’s Ministry of Tourism and its struggling tourism industry. For example, recent campaigns highlight the city as a bastion of gay culture, targeting European and American gay male leisure travelers in particular. Tel Aviv is in fact extraordinarily tolerant in this respect, arguably the most gay friendly city in the Middle East. At the same time, a broad coalition of leftist Israelis and international allies who oppose Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian Territories have criticized the phenomenon of “pinkwashing,” or the rhetorical effort to direct international attention away from Israeli militarism by valorizing Israel’s gay tolerance.
place between February and June of 2013, followed by a two-week trip in August of 2014. During each visit, I rented apartments central or south Tel Aviv, close to the neighborhoods where a majority of the city’s African refugee and migrant communities live.

Almost all of the locations I discuss in this dissertation are in our around Neve Sha’anan, a roughly three square kilometer neighborhood that incorporates Levinsky Park, south Tel Aviv’s only sizable green space, as well as the mammoth, seven-block New Central Bus Station (no longer so new: construction was completed in 1992), and the bustling Neve Sha’anan open air market. Neve Sha’anan and its surrounding neighborhoods together host the most demographically diverse population by area in Israel. Sizable Jewish Israeli communities include Russians, Yemenites, Iraqis, and Ethiopians, among many others, with various Ashkenazi and Mizrahi religious groupings represented. Non-Jewish, non-citizen and/or foreign residents include Arab Israelis, labor migrants from Thailand, the Philippines, and South Asia. The most numerous foreign groups in south Tel Aviv are the African refugees, asylum seekers, and migrants who feature in this dissertation. Israel’s Central Bureau of Statistics does not publish official population figures for these communities, but Tel Aviv NGOs estimate that nearly 35,000 non-citizen Africans reside in south Tel Aviv (Report of the Aid Organization for Refugees and Asylum Seekers, 2014).
Figure 1.5: Map of Neve Sha’anah neighborhood and environs. 1) Levinsky Park; 2) the New Central Bus Station; 3) Friendship House Church; 4) Neve Sha’anah market; 5) Rasta Club; 6) 46 Levanda St.; 7) Albi Cafe

Much of my fieldwork in Tel Aviv consisted of regular visits to five sites: Rasta Club on Ha’Rakevet St., Levinsky Park, the Levinsky Park community library, the Friendship House migrant church on Har Tziyon Blvd., and Albi, a small café at the end of Levinsky St. where young Israeli activists gather. In these places, I met several of the individuals who became my chief associates; I carried out formal and informal interviews, and engaged in countless conversations. I visited many other significant sites in and around Neve Sha’anah during my main period of dissertation fieldwork from February to June of 2013, including Menelik, an Ethiopian nightclub, Teatron Tmunah, an experimental performance art venue, the Zone, a popular place for live concerts, and
of course, the Neve Sha’ananan market, where communities from all around the city come together every Saturday for commerce and socializing.

Visiting concert venues and nightclubs that cater to African refugees, migrants, and Ethiopian-Israeli clienteles was a major part of my fieldwork. Nightlife offered excellent exposure to a wide variety of musical genres and styles, and allowed me to participate in a sphere of social activity that is, in practice, mostly closed to non-African “outsiders.” As commercial businesses, clubs like Rasta and Menelik certainly want to draw as many paying entrants as possible, and neither of them explicitly exclude any groups on the basis of ethnicity. Yet almost to a person, Menelik’s patrons are Ethiopian-Israelis, joined by small numbers of East Africans from Eritrea or Sudan, while at Rasta, the clientele is overwhelmingly African migrants, refugees, and some Ethiopians. In general, Tel Aviv clubgoers self-select for venues where they will find people like themselves, whether that means shared musical taste, ethnic identity, or sexual orientation. On top of this, most nightclubs in Tel Aviv, including Rasta, Menelik, and other African-oriented venues, employ an informal process called selectzia [selection] at the door, where bouncers and cashiers can refuse entry to individuals they seem unsuitable for any reason. Usually a selectzia refusal has to do with being underdressed at a dress-code club, or male at a club trying to weight the gender balance on the dance floor towards banot [“ladies,” literally girls]. However, selectzia sometimes takes into account factors like race and class: while I was never refused entry, bouncers at various black clubs often questioned why a bachorah levanah [“white chick”] like me wanted to come inside.
The result of combined self-selection and selectzia in Tel Aviv’s nightlife meant that I was usually the only white patron in Rasta and Menelik. Further, at Rasta I was often one of only a few women: the club draws its main clientele from African refugee, asylum seeker, and labor migrant populations that are nearly 85 percent male. Even though Rasta owner Tony Ray’s wife Angie is a white Swedish woman, well liked and respected by club regulars, I was marked out as different in this primarily African male social environment. Heavy drinking and loud dance music encouraged men to flirt with me, and often to make passes at me. It was a rare night at Rasta that I was not hugged, kissed, or even groped sexually, by men whose advances I had not invited. I tried different strategies for changing this pattern, including dressing in unfeminine clothing, and sometimes asking Tony Ray to give particularly persistent “suitors” a talking-to. I was reluctant to simply stop coming to Rasta, both because it was such a musically rich ethnographic site, and because Tony and Angie tried very hard to help me feel at home there. After several months of repeated difficult encounters, however, I chose to reduce the frequency of my visits, and spend more time at other sites instead, like Friendship House church, the community Library in Levinsky Park, and Albi café.

Nightlife presented enjoyable and fruitful ethnographic opportunities as well as challenges. As a semi-professional club DJ at home in Boston, I was able to perform a few times during my fieldwork, including at events benefiting refugees, and one memorable Rasta Club dance party that drew a diverse crowd of Africans and Israelis. Whether difficult or pleasurable, all of my nightclub experiences were informative, and they indelibly shaped the overall trajectory of my dissertation fieldwork. To the extent that musical nightlife is deeply embedded in the rhythms of metropolitan life, urban
ethnomusicology benefits from focused attention to nightclubs as sites of cultural transformation. Tel Aviv has always been a “club city,” from the pre- and early-state years of European-style cabarets on Rothschild Boulevard, to the modern-day rise of internationally renowned EDM warehouse clubs in the Port of Jaffa (Shor 2008). South Tel Aviv’s black clubs are fixtures of social and musical life for Africans and Afro-descendants, positioned to play a role for years to come in the Israeli-African encounter.

Overview of Chapters

Israeli society is not a unitary entity, despite a great number of shared life experiences, religious practices, social behaviors, and historical narratives that contribute to a highly consolidated national culture. “To say that someone is an Israeli often implies that she or he is a Jew, yet over one million Israeli citizens are not,” among them non-Jewish immigrants from the former Soviet Union, as well as Muslim, Christian, and Druze Palestinians who hold Israeli citizenship (Brinner 2009: 102). Jewish Israel itself is likewise ethno-culturally diverse, including Ashkenazim of European heritage, Mizrahim of Middle Eastern or North African heritage, Ethiopian-Israelis, sizable communities from South Asia and Latin America, and smaller enclaves of Jewish immigrants from other countries. Any aspect of a person’s identity and experience is imbricated in a dialectic of national cultural formation, contributing to and drawing energy in turn from the ideology of collective Israeliness. Chapter two examines constituent elements of this ideology by laying out major “interpretive frameworks,” ideological lenses through which different Jewish Israeli communities see and feel themselves and others, imagine their histories and possible futures, and engage with the
changing world around them. These interpretive frameworks are systems of related ideas and values, some of which are conscious, day-to-day thoughts, and others that operate below the level of immediate awareness, influencing emotions, body experiences, and gut reactions. Each of the frameworks I treat in chapter 1 are linked to important trends within contemporary Israel’s national culture, and they all play a role in societal reception of black populations.

Israeliyut is an orientation towards the concept of “authentic” and “native” Israeliness, including Zionist histories, canonical Hebrew-language arts, the figure of the sabra [born-and-bred Israeli], military heroism, and the schonah [Israeli neighborhood] (c.f. Regev and Seroussi 2004). Israeliyut ostensibly accommodates all Jewish Israeli subjectivities. It is historically grounded in pre- and early-state political Zionism, and is sustained in part through ongoing state support for the cultural institutions that promote it. Mandatory military service is one vector of Israeliyut, as is, for example, government sponsorship of annual music festivals reviving early Israeli Zionist-themed folk songs.

The interpretive framework of Israeliyut is also continually reestablished in the arena of national popular music, where Hebrew-language rock Israeli is one of most frequently played genres on pop radio, and regular “throwback” programs feature familiar classics.

Israeliyut is a syncretic interpretive framework that engages aspects of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi community identities, but is more closely aligned with a European Jewish-centric narrative of Israel’s history. The founders of the state were almost all Ashkenazim, and this demographic still wields more political and economic influence than other national groupings. Israeliyut can thus be said to revolve around Ashkenaziyut, or “Askhenaziness,” in practice, because Ashkenazi power-holders have

64
historically been those who defined the parameters of authentic, national Israeliness. At the same time, numerous features of pre-World War II European Jewish culture are all but extinct in modern Israel: only a minority of Israeli Jews speak Yiddish or play klezmer music, for instance. *Ashkenaziyut* as an interpretive framework therefore has little specific relationship to European Jewish ethnicities. I therefore treat *Ashkenaziyut* interpretation primarily in terms of its mutually-constituted relationship with broader *Israeliyut*.

By contrast, *Mizrahiyut* is a particularistic interpretation with growing social relevance, to the extent that, today, the term “*mizrahiyut*” is used by politicians, journalists, and politically aware Israelis of diverse orientations. *Mizrahiyut* refers to the interpretive framework associated with Israel’s Jewish population of Middle Eastern and North African origin, especially inasmuch as these populations have produced a discourse around their “sense of difference” from the Ashkenazi majority, and have “insisted on the Israeliness of their specific cultural hybrid” (Regev and Seroussi 2004: 16). Components of Mizrahi culture are gathered from diverse national sources – Yemenite, Moroccan, Iraqi, and others – yet *Mizrahiyut* interpretation tends to home in on “an experience of sameness [while rejecting] the meaning and connotations attributed to the entity as a whole” by the Ashkenazi majority (ibid.)

A third interpretive framework that I explore in chapter one is *globali*, named after the Hebrew hybrid of “global” and “local.” Israelis, both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi, are increasingly using the term *globali* to describe aspects of urban life that they regard as shaped by processes of cultural globalization. For example, Glocali is the title of a Tel Aviv concert series underwritten by the music blog Café Gibraltar, which showcases
foreign musicians – sometimes African migrants who live in the city. As an interpretive framework, glocal incorporates non-Israeli, non-Jewish, foreign, and “global” cultural forms and ideas into a “native” Israeli cultural landscape, in order to modify, not jettison, the ideology of authentic Israeliness. Glocal interpretation is political, in that it involves a generally positive value assigned to foreign cultural forms, though the word itself figures more commonly in discourse about arts than about politics.

Finally, Africani is an interpretive framework that guides some Israelis’ endeavors to understand the experiences and subjectivities of the country’s Africans and Afro-descendant communities. While the term “Africani,” which just means “Africanness” in Hebrew, is used in casual conversation by Jewish Israelis who support African presence as well as those who do not, I identify Africani interpretation here as the framework through which growing numbers of young urban Israelis apprehend and engage directly with black communities. Africani is expansively “pro-black,” embracing Afro-diasporic cultural forms from American hip-hop to Nigerian cuisine, and it maintains fundamentally that African diasporas have a right to reside Israel with full civic status.

Africani is the Israel-based interpretive framework with which Africans and Afro-descendants are most directly engaged. Many members of longstanding and recently-established black communities are familiar with the Hebrew term, which cropped up a few times in our fieldwork conversations. For diasporic communities, Africani is distinct from ways of knowing that they may have brought with them from countries and cultures of origin: it is an interpretation they employ in different ways after arriving in Israel, familiarizing themselves with their new environment, and taking on new concerns. Hebrew singing in the Friendship House church, for example, is Africani interpretation in
action, sounding out a spiritual relationship between Nigerian Christians, Biblical Israel, and modern-day Hebrew-speaking populations.

In chapter three, I look closer at *Africani* interpretation and different expressions of black identity within Tel Aviv’s Ethiopian-Israeli community. Israel’s nearly 150,000 Ethiopians are predominately Jewish and have citizenship, almost all of the second and third generations speak Hebrew, and most youth have served or will serve in the IDF. Yet this demographic also has a high unemployment rate, a low level of secondary education in comparison to other Jewish *edot*, and remains a visible ethnic minority in Israel. Many young Ethiopians experience psychic tension between their identification with *Israeliyut* – their deep affinity with many aspects of shared national culture – and their sense of being different because they are Ethiopian, African, and black. Chapter two deals with how this tension gets negotiated in slam poetry performance and in musical nightlife. I explore the work of *Raav* [hunger], a multiethnic poetry collective led by an Ethiopian-Israeli woman who looks to African American Black Power literature to make sense of her own community’s place in Israeli society. I also consider music, dance, and social behavior in Menelik, Tel Aviv’s premier Ethiopian nightclub, where I attend to the overlapping ideological significations of Amharic language pop, hip-hop, and dancehall reggae. For Ethiopians, identity is a dynamic complex of family and community histories, transnational Afro-diasporic culture, and membership in the Jewish Israeli collective.

Chapter four turns to the musical-political activities of Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and asylum seekers in Tel Aviv, and their Israeli supporters and detractors. These East African communities, who have been arriving to Israel by the tens of
thousands since 2005, are the focal point of national controversy and reactionary government policymaking, in part because Israel has no formal administrative process for determining refugee status. Refugee activists draw on traditional music and dance from homes of origin, as well as experimental theater and music, in order to publicly represent cultural sophistication, and potentially appeal to Israeli humanitarian sentiments. On the Israeli side of this encounter, some activist groups publicly articulate anxieties about East African presence in Tel Aviv that reveal a complicated interplay between concepts of Jewish national unity, Jewish territorial birthright, foreign threat, and the physical danger of black men. Meanwhile, Israeli pro-refugee activist initiatives frequently employ well-known black musics from Africa and the diaspora as a means of supporting and allying themselves with the refugee cause, without alienating themselves from mainstream Israeli audiences and fellow citizens. In chapter three, I explore the sonic landscape of a city convulsed by refugee politics, focusing on two major 2013 events: Sudanese Cultural Day, a refugee-organized music and dance extravaganza, and Refugee Seder, the Passover celebration with which I opened this introduction.

Tel Aviv’s African and Afro-descendant migrant workers are smaller in number than refugees and asylum seekers, with many of these communities reduced by mass-deportations in the early 2000s. However, they share overlaps of experience in that most labor migrants, like refugees and asylum seekers, have only temporary residence permits or none, and are employed largely in cleaning and restaurant service occupations. Like the East Africans, they are also the target of societal concerns around African presence in general, especially in the city neighborhoods they share with many other ethnic groups, and are in fact frequently mistaken by Israelis for refugees themselves. Chapter five
examines the migrant social position through an ethnographic account of the Friendship House church community, a Nigerian-based congregation in south Tel Aviv. Here, I consider the role of Christianity, the church sermon and religious music, as well as different African and Afro-diasporic popular genres in the lives of my Friendship House associates. I analyze music, performative speech, and body gestures in and outside the church as vectors through which individual migrants can access experiences of personal empowerment and psychological fulfillment despite constraints on their socio-economic status. The distinctly Christian *Africani* interpretation I locate in Friendship House, in which African Christians belong in Israel by virtue of Biblical histories and divine blessing, helps many migrants navigate challenging diasporic conditions.

Chapter six follows some of the members of Friendship House into the secular spaces of Tel Aviv’s clubs and concert venues, where they are involved in a multiethnic, loosely constituted urban musical community called the “African *branja*” [African scene]. Revolving around live performances of a broad array of “Afropop” genres – contemporary urban African music that is danceable but generally not heavily hip-hop-influenced – the branja community engages indirectly with Israeli politics through music and art. Performers and audiences valorize “groove,” a feel-good, communal musical experience that transcends ethnic divisions, but which is particularly accessible in Afropop styles. De-facto branja leader Elise Akowendo, a Friendship House congregant, helps establish a shared branja discourse of cross-group unity, “brotherhood,” and loosely Afro-centric spirituality, in which many Africans, Afro-descendants, and non-African Israelis find refuge from the fractious rhetoric of identity politics of Tel Aviv. In this chapter, I frame the branja as a uniquely *glocali* musical community, grounded in the
local urban milieu but deeply implicated in phenomena of cultural globalization. I consider the musical and social implications of branja activity for black community and individual self-perceptions, and its evolving role in 21st century Israel’s national cultural transformation.
Chapter 2
Cityspace, Music, and Israeli Interpretive Frameworks

Tel Aviv is the undisputed center of the new Yishuv… What a strong force of attraction is exerted by a Jewish district built on modern lines, and what great effects, both economic and cultural, it generates: to attract immigrants demanding a higher quality of life, and to create in the urban settlements in Palestine, in contrast to the cramped, stifling ghettos of Europe, a symbol of the new Jewish way of life.

Arthur Ruppin (1907)

In Tel Aviv it's normal to have sex with Arabs, to be a woman who was once a man, to go to a sperm bank to have a baby, to be homosexual, not to go to military reserve service or even mandatory service. In Tel Aviv it is not mandatory, and no-one raises an eyebrow. In Tel Aviv people smoke joints in cafes. Everything that happens in other places behind closed doors happens here in the open, without shame, without the need to explain, make excuses or justify. In Tel Aviv the fate of the Jewish people and the Middle East conflict do not define who you are and do not define your existential space. In comparison with the rest of the country, Tel Aviv offers priceless freedom.

(Rogel Alpher, Ha’Ir, January 1, 2010)

South Tel Aviv is South Sudan now.

(Deborah Kamins, The Times of Israel, December 2, 2013)

Tel Aviv is a complicated place: a demographically diverse, globalized city that is also a living monument to 19th century Zionist ideology, and a symbol of modern Israel’s national vitality. As the “first Hebrew city,” site of the earliest Jewish settlements in Palestine, and currently home to almost half a million Jews, Tel Aviv has pride of place in the collective Israeli imagination. If Jerusalem is the ancient heart of religious Judaism and the political capital of the State of Israel, Tel Aviv is its secular twin, a capital city of contemporary cultural “Israeliness.” Furthermore, in its own way, Tel Aviv is just as
important to Israeli geopolitics as Jerusalem. Unlike Jerusalem, whose status is caught up in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Tel Aviv is figured as nearly inviolable Israeli territory: it is usually exempt from international criticism of Israel’s land claims, and it is safely at a remove from borders in the south, east, and north, where wars are fought over constantly changing boundary lines. Media commentators sometimes assert that Israel will know its existential viability is dangerously compromised “if rockets rain down on Tel Aviv.”

While this city is constituted as thoroughly Jewish in Israel’s master narrative of nationhood (Zerubavel 1995), Tel Aviv has long been home to multiple ethnic, religious, and ideological groups. From its earliest days, when Jewish and Arab populations lived side by side, the city has evinced a hybrid cultural life, simultaneously home-loving and cosmopolitan in aspiration, full of patriotic fervor as well as apostasy from the sweeping doctrine of Jewish statehood. Tel Aviv’s multiplicity has long been a subject of fascination, and sometimes anxiety, on the part of Israeli thinkers. Early 20th century Zionist leaders in Europe and settlers in Palestine disagreed on the proper character of the Hebrew city even before its first public buildings were completed. Some wished to emulate the great European capitals, others to raise a city that harmonized with its immediate Middle Eastern landscape (Mann 2006: xix). Several European national groupings, especially Germans in the 1930s, preferred to self-segregate from the Jewish collective, building strictly in their own “quarters” of the new metropolis (Schlör 1999: 83). A city built on the shifting sands of the eastern Mediterranean coast, Tel Aviv was also built on the shifting visions of many different interest groups.
In a historical study of Tel Aviv’s architecture and spatial organization, Barbara Mann reflects on the troubled balance between ideologies of “Jewishness” and “Israeliness” that shaped the first decades of urban development.

Initially viewed as an exemplary “Jewish” space, Tel Aviv was later seen as the paradigmatic Israeli city, a site that turned its back on diasporic Jewish life to embody Zionism’s secular ethos of self-determined productivity. However, although a utopian vision of Jewish urban space led to the creation of a vibrant metropolis, any claims to the “Jewishness” of this space were destabilized and eventually subverted by both the vision’s inner contradictions and the material conditions of twentieth-century Palestine” (2006: xi).

Modern Tel Aviv continues to be marked by tensions between Jewishness, now most visibly personified by various “orthodox” religious communities, and Israeliness, personified by those secular Jewish citizens who make up the city’s majority. Each of these populations tends to impugn the other’s cultural practices, and even their value to the state. For example, some secular Jews criticize the orthodox for using public funds to study in Yeshivot [religious academies] instead of working, while the religious argue that secular moral values are destabilizing to social order. Yet Tel Aviv today is also the locus of another conflict, that of growing divisions within the ideology of Israeliness itself, which were not anticipated in 19th century Zionist debates.

Media commentator Rogel Alpher, in a ten-year retrospective of 21st century Tel Aviv, acknowledges the common Israeli perception that the city is a “bubble,” separated from the rest of the country by a definite (if thin and permeable) border. He notes that Tel Avivim, as the city’s residents are called, are generally less invested than their fellow citizens in Israel’s national singularity. They do not necessarily care that Israel is the only
Jewish state in the world, that it is embattled in a hostile region, or that it represents the glorious realization of two millennia of Jewish suffering and striving. The contemporary city is a far cry from the model Zionist settlement that German Jewish activist Arthur Ruppin described in 1907. Today, Alpher writes, “in Tel Aviv, the fate of the Jewish people and the Middle East conflict do not define who you are, and do not define your existential space” (2010). Paraphrasing Alpher, this relatively weaker commitment to Israel qua Israel opens up space for ostensibly un-Israeli behaviors, from having sex with Arabs, to avoiding IDF conscription, to staying single long past conventional marrying age.

One of the features ostensibly distinguishing the Tel Aviv bubble from the rest of the country is its ethnic diversity. Israel as a whole has always been home to peoples of many different faiths, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds, including multiple Jewish groups as well as Arab Christians, Muslims, and Druze. Tel Aviv, however, is the center of life for tens of thousands of foreign workers [ovdim zarim], refugees, and other migrants from world regions not historically represented within Israel’s demographic mixture, most prominently Southeast Asians and sub-Saharan Africans. As host to these distinctly “other” populations, who are non-Jewish and non-Israeli, non-white and non-Western, Tel Aviv seems perpetually on the brink of seceding from the state entirely — at least according to those Israelis whom have long eyed the Tel Aviv bubble with concern. Foreign presence is integral to public perceptions of the city’s quirkiness, including for Israelis who live there. Pop-rock icon Ivri Lider’s reflective ode to Tel Aviv youth
culture, “Batei Cafe” [Coffeehouses], even opens with a recorded voice speaking in Tagalog, the language of most Filipino labor migrants (2001).

Plenty of Tel Avivim would cheerfully agree with some of their countrymen’s less-than-thrilled opinion that Tel Aviv is incorrigibly “un-Israeli” in countless ways. Citydwellers have traditionally prided themselves on ethnic diversity and cultural pluralism, as has the city government. In the late 1990s, when labor migration from Southeast Asia and West Africa was at its peak, the municipality installed an official “Aid and Information Center for the Foreign Community in Tel Aviv-Jaffa,” advertised with the slogan “Tel Aviv is not foreign to you” (Kemp and Raijman 2004). Then-mayor Ron Huldai, associated with the left-center Labor Party, declared, “this is our responsibility as a city that looks after its residents. This is our obligation as human beings who are confronted with human misery” (27).\(^1\)

In light of this recent past, one might expect the city to be prepared with housing, employment, or social service accommodations for African refugees who have arrived since 2005. Yet shifting political tides over the course of a decade have changed Tel Aviv in dramatic ways. Where it was once Israel’s most “empowering” place for foreigners, __________

\(^1\) As of 2015, Ron Huldai was carrying out his fourth term in the mayoral office. During the 2013 municipal elections, the national Labor Party fielded separate candidates, a result of long-percolating disagreements between Huldai and younger party members who sought greater representation on Huldai’s electoral slate (“Labor Party Splits from Huldai,” Ha’aretz, June 18, 2013). The Tel Aviv elections were characterized by heated ideological debate between Huldai’s supporters and those of Aharon Maduel, a Mizrahi, who ran with the rightist Likud party-affiliated Ir LeKulanu [City for All of Us]. Representatives of Ir LeKulanu attributed Maduel’s defeat to anti-Mizrahi “racism and classism” (ibid). Public debate during the elections ran largely along Ashkenazi-Mizrahi lines, and revealed the depth of antipathy that has developed between the most politically active members of each demographic in Tel Aviv.
extending civic status on the basis of residency rather than ethnic-religious identity (42),
the city has now moved into close alignment with Israel’s national stance on refugees and
migrants. “According to the state, Israel is not an ‘immigrant state’ institutionally or
ideologically; it is, rather, an ‘aliyah state’ meaning a state for Jewish immigration…
Consequently, Israel has no interest in incorporating into its policy any measures that
might be tantamount to recognizing [refugees and migrants] as legitimate immigrants, to
say nothing of recognizing them as legitimate residents of the nation-state” (27).

The Tel Aviv municipality has drawn down its social services for refugees and
migrants, and its police force has assisted in several state-ordered deportations since
2000. Non-governmental organizations and private actors have taken up the task of
providing food, clothing, language instruction, and job placement assistance for Sudanese
and Eritreans, but these efforts have only partially attenuated challenges. In between
2009 and 2011, many hundreds of refugees lived in south Tel Aviv’s Levinsky Park,
sleeping in tents on the grass or, most distressing to witness, in a nearby children’s
playground. The Park remains home to several dozen refugees who have been unable to
find housing elsewhere.

What of the famed (or infamous) tolerance of the Tel Avivim themselves? Always
Israel’s first and most energetic adopters of foreign cultural forms, Tel Aviv’s Israeli Jews
have many different relationships to the African communities in their midst. From deep
personal affection and political support, to strong personal aversion and unequivocal
political opposition, Tel Avivim profess a wide spectrum of opinions about African
refugees and migrants, African cultural practices, and the overall sociological
implications of African presence. The fundamental split of pro- and anti-African viewpoints in Tel Aviv is a product of overlapping forces: domestic contests for political power amongst Israeli constituencies, economic instability at national and local levels, and longstanding tensions between different Jewish ethnic communities, especially between Mizrahim and the Ashkenazi majority. Subtending the Tel Aviv conflict over African presence, which is nothing less than Israel’s national conflict in microcosm, is a master narrative of nationhood that glorifies the singular Jewish character of the state (Zerbavel 1995) (see the Introduction, “Shachorut: Blackness in Israeli Society and Politics”). This narrative, reinscribed in electoral politics, education, holidays, mandatory military service, and the institutions of popular culture, including commercial music, is present in every Israeli’s life; yet every Israeli interprets it in her own way.

Figure 2.1: Sleeping gear in the Levinsky Park playground, 2013.
This chapter introduces multidimensional Israeli interpretation in and of the 21st century African-Israeli encounter by exploring popular musical representations of Tel Aviv, the city both integral to and acutely challenging of Israel’s national master narrative. Despite the sense of difference that many Israelis feel when contemplating the Tel Aviv bubble, and despite the cosmopolitan aspirations of many of its denizens, Tel Aviv’s status as “first Hebrew city” and cultural capital remains deeply embedded in the national imagination. Below, I lay out some of the mechanisms by which music intervenes to negotiate the complex sociopolitical and cultural character of the city, and thereby of the state itself. I consider examples of “mainstream” popular songs about Tel Aviv that shore up hegemonic Israeli identity, and others that reflect shifting conceptions of modern Israeliness, including those that accommodate African presence within the national collective. In order to understand why and how music about Tel Aviv conveys different messages to Israeli audiences, it is necessary to first delineate the major frameworks of interpretation that are salient to modern Israeli thought.

**Interpretive Frameworks**

Sociologist Motti Regev and musicologist Edwin Seroussi describe Israeli culture as highly consolidated, and historically oriented towards “nativeness” as a valuable aspect of being that Israeli citizens either posses by virtue of birth, or to which they aspire as Jewish immigrants (or ought to aspire) through processes of assimilation. “The existence of a constructed national culture in which narratives of ancestry and origin are presented as objective history is widely accepted. In this framework of thought, culture
consists of the material and immaterial assets through which the existence of a national as community is ‘imagined,’ practiced, and believed, that is, one ‘correct’ language, canons of works in the various arts, and specific forms of food and dress that are consecrated as embodying the ‘true,’ ‘traditional,’ and ‘native’ character of the nation” (2004: 3). As Regev and Seroussi point out, Israeli “nativism” has roots in the Zionist enterprise, which placed its hopes in the development of a “Hebrew” Jewish culture in Palestine, a culture more agrarian, physical, and less politically “passive” than that of traditional Jewish communities in Diaspora (15-16).

Regev and Seroussi, like most contemporary scholars of Zionism, emphasize that “nativeness” has been multiply-constituted and contested since its 19th century inception, with influential movement leaders disagreeing over the ideal persona of new Israeli “Hebrew” (ibid). The ideology of nativeness has only grown more internally fragmented in the decades since the founding of the state, as the state agenda has evolved, different Jewish ethnic communities have consolidated their particularistic identities, and the influence of globalization has become increasingly prominent in culture and politics. For this reason, the ideology of nativeness in contemporary Israeli thought is mediated through multiple frameworks of interpretation, which are generally associated with

---

2 The concept of nativeness is contested in academic discourse, governance, and political activism. In Israel, nativeness and indigeneity are claimed by Palestinian Arabs who lost their homes and lands in the 1948 Independence War. Yet Israel’s master narrative of nationhood also turns on an atavistic Jewish claim to ownership of the Land of Israel, as well as the modern notion of the “native” Hebrew/Israeli personality. Despite its controversial associations, I retain the term native throughout my discussion of the Israeli imagination. No other term adequately captures the deeply-felt significance of national belonging within Israeli society.
different subsets of the Israeli Jewish population. I term these interpretive frameworks *Ashkenaziyut, Mizrahiyut, and glocale.*

Logocentrically, *Ashkenaziyut* is the mode of interpretation that is associated with Jewish culture of European origin. Because Israel’s “founding generation” was primarily European a large chunk of what constitutes “native Israeliness” belongs implicitly to *Ashkenaziyut,* a fact that has not lost on countless non-Ashkenazi Jewish Israelis who have protested Ashkenazi hegemony at various points in Israel’s 20th century history. At the same time, many specifically Eastern European Jewish cultural forms, such as klezmer music and the Yiddish language, have lost ground over time within Israeli society. As my associate Nirit Ben-Ari observes, “there is no real Ashkenazi culture in Israel, just an Ashkenazi political identity” (interview with author, March 9, 2013). For this reason, *Ashkenaziyut* interpretation is perhaps best identified by by its simultaneous conceptual dominance and material absence, an Israeli analogue to the “invisible whiteness” that Peggy McIntosh (1989) and others have theorized as so central to the dynamics of race privilege in the United States.

*Mizrahiyut* refers to the interpretive framework associated with Israel’s Jewish population of Middle Eastern and North African origin [*Mizrahim*], especially inasmuch as these populations have produced a discourse around their “sense of difference” from the Ashkenazi majority, and have “insisted on the Israeliness of their specific cultural hybrid” (Regev and Seroussi 2004: 16). Components of Mizrahi culture are gathered from diverse sources, including “traditional Jewish culture from Arab and Muslim countries, various Arab national cultures, Hebrewism, and contemporary global
Despite significant cultural and historical differences among sub-groups of Mizrahim – Yemenite, Moroccan, Iraqi, Persian, and others — Mizrahiyut interpretation tends to home in on “an experience of sameness […] but rejection of the [often negative] meaning and connotations attributed to the entity as a whole” by the Ashkenazi majority (ibid.)

Further complicating the compound framework of nativeness is the cultural effect of several decades of globalization within Israeli society. As I have indicated, much non-Israeli cultural material can be and has been “domesticated,” resulting in manifestations of an Israeli identity not specifically identified with Ashkenaziyut or Mizrahiyut. In the simplest example, a majority of Israelis under the age of fifty – almost anyone with a high school education — speak English. Travel to South America, East Asia and South Asia has become an extremely common and highly desirable life experience, especially right after quasi-mandatory army service. Countless global popular musical genres, including many of Afro-diasporic origin like hip-hop and reggae, are audible in localized forms within Israel’s mainstream mediascape, and the deployment of select black aesthetics, such as dreadlocks [rastot] and the “Jew-fro,” clothing items, and slang, is so widespread within urban Israel that it can no longer be reasonably extracted from the broad landscape of Israeliness. This version of nativeness might be termed “global Israel,” after Regev and Seroussi; or, to further particularize this term with respect to Tel Aviv, “glocal” (global/local) Israel. Glocali is an interpretive framework in which the Jewish Israeli self is apprehended and expressed as native at its base, ontologically
aligned with Israeli space, place, and time, but super-structurally constituted by constant engagement with, and affective receptiveness to, the wider, non-Israeli world.

As nativeness is less a discrete pole than a composite and mutable collection of materials, so too is “foreignness,” the conceptual category encompassing cultural forms, phenomena, peoples, and ideas that are definitively non-Israeli. Obviously, whether or not Israelis perceive something or someone as wholly foreign depends on myriad, ever-shifting factors. American rock music, for example, was not Israeli until became so, adopted and modified by experimental musicians in the 1960s and 1970s (Regev and Seroussi 2004: 42-45). *Glocali* may be a kind of bridge between nativeness and foreignness, a liminal mode of interpretation that refuses to either deny non-Israeli realities or fully domesticate them. I must emphasize that while the phenomenon of identification with global culture is certainly not unique to Israelis, *glocali* itself is Israeli born and bred, surfacing within Israeli psyches and coming to completion within an Israeli context.

In contradistinction, *Africani* [Africanness] is an interpretive framework that is non-Israeli in origin, brought into Israel by sub-Saharan African immigrants, migrants, and refugees. For individuals and groups from across the African continent, whose diversity of experiences in Tel Aviv cannot be comprehensively subsumed under any one heading, *Africani* is a flexible mode of interpretation that is manifested in any array of practices and phenomena, from religious observances to political opinions, clothing choices to foodways, family structures to musical expressions. In these chapters, I define *Africani* interpretation as follows: a motivating conscious awareness of the self as in
some way African (historically, ethnically, politically, spiritually, or in another sense); an attachment to African cultural forms (one or many) as familiar and valuable; a sense that non-African Israelis are “different” and “other” in significant respects; and a sense of identification (weak or strong) with other black peoples and populations in Israel.

Although *Africani* interpretation is an import, 21st century Israelis employ it as well, especially in Tel Aviv, where Israeli and African communities live in close proximity to one another. For some, *Africani* incorporates a deep sense that refugees and migrants pose a threat to Israel. For others, *Africani* is an interpretation of African presence as welcome and beneficial to Israel, and tends to result in a pro-“refugee” and, more broadly, pro-minority political stance with respect to the national demographic debate.

These basic interpretive frameworks of *Ashkenaziyut, Mizrahiyut, glocali* and *Africani* are in many ways co-constitutive. They operate in relationship to one another, identifiable by their differences in addition to their sameness, sharing certain affective dynamics in the psyches, bodies, and behaviors of Tel Aviv residents. In particular, each framework incorporates its own menology, or ideological chronology of past, present, and future that prioritizes collective memories, hopes and desires over and above “facts” and material circumstances. Certain expressions of Israeli nativeness in Hebrew literature, for instance, represent 20th century historical figures as ontologically akin to Biblical heroes who may or may not have existed (Zerubavel 1995: 92). Meanwhile, for West African foreign workers who are Christians, *Africani* may permit the interpretation
of economic migration as eschatologically mandated, a hastening of God’s kingdom on earth.

Each interpretive framework also asserts a fundamental link between person and place. The native body, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, or glocal, is constituted in part by its ties to Israeli land, and the landscape retains its Israeliness in part because of the presence of the native body within it. Conversely, the African body may be variously understood as African because of its lack of ontological kinship to Israeli place, or possession of kinship to Israeli place that is yet distinct from native kinship (as in the case of Ethiopian-Israelis, Israel’s only black citizen population), or superseding tie to a physical home of origin in Africa. Relatedly, the interpretive frameworks of Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, glocali and Africani each facilitate what Davidson et. al. have termed the “spatialization of desire,” (2011: 12), a multiform claim-making over Israel’s material and ideological space, in order to create an opportunity for the full realization of selfhood, whatever that realization may entail.

The distinct yet overlapping affective dynamics of interpretation are complex, implicating an extremely broad range of human activities: imagination, memory, plan-making, aesthetic and cultural expression, interpersonal interaction, political choices, economic actions, strategies of daily survival. As such, Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, glocali and Africani are not only co-constitutive, but are also multidimensional in themselves. They are procedural and in flux, rather than static and stable. In spite of their seeming complexities, however, these interpretive frameworks are all essentially oriented towards the same straightforward objective: the formation and expression of self-identity in Israel,
the answer to the compound questions of who am I, who are we, and where am I located in relation to all that is not me?

In Tel Aviv, even the most casual conversations about social life, music, and current events begin and end with deeply-held views about ethnicity, identity and belonging, which reveal one or more interpretive frameworks in action. While my research interests, and my manner of putting questions to fieldwork associates, have undoubtedly thrown extra light on the functioning of interpretative frameworks in daily life, explicit articulation of related themes is something my associates were accustomed to doing long before I met them. Their ease with which they bring ideological discourse into everyday conversation evinces a certain consonance with a wider Israeli cultural phenomenon in which the “machinery of affect” is closely linked with the machinery of state, of politics, and of social order (Hirschkind 2006). The “relatively greater social mobilization of the Israeli Jewish public” that Benjamin Brinner locates in all arenas of 20th century Israeli national culture has always depended upon the marshaling of Israeli emotions (2009: 323).

One of Zionism’s most powerful tools in the decades of pre-state Yishuv settlement was its knitting together of feeling-states like longing, love, self-respect, and collective shame or pride with specific nation-building objectives. This “surplus of feeling” (Goodman 2010: 45) within early Zionist rhetoric remains overwhelmingly present in all arenas of contemporary Israeli life. Biblical texts feature in military ceremonies. Primary school curricula teach ancient myths as political history. National holidays are marked by massive public displays of emotion. Pop hits on the radio and
music television celebrate Israel’s nationhood almost as frequently as they treat more familiar pop themes of sex and romance (c.f. Zerubavel 1995, Regev and Seroussi 2004, Brinner 2009). It is unsurprising, then, that individuals and groups directly affected by Tel Aviv’s ongoing demographic conflict take recourse to interpretive frameworks dependent upon menology, glorified person-place bonds, and affectively rich notions of self and community.

While commonplace understandings of the term “affect” generally home in on the internal states of individuals, I wish to posit a working definition of affect that does not draw a bright line between emotions, ideologies, bodies, and the wider material and socio-political world. To this end, Davidson et al. describe affect as a kind of apparatus that incorporates all of the above, a fusion of

the body with the imagination into an ethical synthesis that bears directly on the micro-powers inherent in everyday interactions. How these are negotiated builds not only an individual temperament but also a persona and habitus, which are much individual as they are a social style and regime of living […] Affect is […] a flux that is always in context – immanent – and thus draws on a situational ethics and therefore on the social and spatial milieu. Infused with power, grounded in place and located bodies, affect is viscerally political (2011: 5).

In other words, while there is no way to describe Tel Aviv experience without first recognizing the sub-structural realm of “intangibles” upon which daily life is carried out, these intangibles are likewise un-actualized, formless, and moot without the “social and spatial milieu” that co-creates them. Thus “affect” is always already virtual and real, psycho-emotional and practical, individual and collective, and interpretive frameworks negotiate between these supposed binaries.
In the next section of this chapter, I take a closer look at the three forms of nativeness outlined above – *Ashkenaziyut, Mizrahiyut,* and *glocali* – in terms of their relationships to the city spaces in which Tel Aviv’s demographic conflict has played out with greatest visibility, and also, to some extent, in terms of their relationships to *Africani* interpretation. I ground this discussion by focusing on the native body in particular, both because of the significance of the physical body to each interpretive framework, as well as its role as the convergence site of imagination and the social world in the formulation of affect Davidson et. al. put forward.

**The Hevreman in Cityspace and Time**

As soon as I heard the word “Telaviv,” I conjured up in my mind’s eye a picture of a tough guy in a dark blue T-shirt, bronzed and broad-shouldered, a poet-worker, revolutionary, a man made without fear, the type they called a *Hevreman,* with a cap worn at a careless yet provocative angle on his curly hair, smoking Matusians, someone who was at home in the world: all day long he worked hard on the land, or with sand and mortar, in the evening he played the violin, at night he danced with girls or sang them soulful songs amid the sand dunes by the light of the full moon, and in the early hours he took a handgun or a sten out of its hiding place and stole away into the darkness to guard the houses and fields. (Oz 2003: 7)

In this fragment of memory, writer Amos Oz imagines his home city of Jerusalem and his longed-for Tel Aviv through metaphors of the body: Jerusalem’s residents “walk[ing] rather like mourners at a funeral, or latecomers at a concert,” Tel Aviv’s *hevreman,* the “guy’s guy,” that most Israeli of Israelis who is at once utterly native and unimpeachably worldly. Here is a male body, robust and hale, joined to the land (the soil
and/or the metropolitan built form) through his labor and his birthright, yet sufficiently cosmopolitan to play the violin and dance with women in the night.

Oz has been called the voice of Israel’s “national generation,” the group first to be born in Palestine, and here he describes one manifestation of the “New Hebrew,” a figure of early 20th century art, literature, and music whom, in pre- and early-state Israel, represented the national turn away from two thousand years of Diaspora. As Yael Zerubavel explains, the Diaspora Jew was conceived of as overly religious, overly intellectual, passive, insular, and victimized, while the New Hebrew was be secular-traditional, physically robust, proactive, materially productive, unafraid to face Europe and the wider world (1995). Significantly, native soil was the source of the New Hebrew’s powers, his strength of mind and body, his fearlessness and absence of shame. As Jewish labor would “make the desert bloom,” would transform Palestine into the Land of Israel, this labor would in turn transmute the Jewish body, collective and individual, from weakness to greatness, turning the Jew from a wanderer to a member of a nation-state. The linchpin role of the Jewish/Israeli body within Zionism’s claim-making project is evident within the Zionist rallying cry and still-common slogan of “a land without people for a people without land,” an equation that neatly sets up a sacrosanct kinship between bodies and territory; voids any such kinship between indigenous Palestinians and their living place; and substitutes a Jewish collectivity as the rightful custodians of the Levant.

The ideal of land-body symbiosis is as central to the imaginary construction of cityscape as it is to that of Israel’s open space, agricultural land, desert vista, or verdant
Galilee. At the time of Oz’s memory, Tel Aviv was yet new, still a Jewish settlement in its early stages on a site still surrounded by Arab populations. The presence of the hevreman renders the place Jewish and native; his “handgun or sten” safeguards this nativeness against an oppositional Other; and his musical and dancing legs, “at home in the world,” domesticates Europe inside of Tel Aviv.

Although the figures of the New Hebrew and the urban hevreman are broadly Ashkenazi in origin, emerging out of a European Zionist pioneering ideology and incorporating a Europe-identified cosmopolitanism, they implicitly – even necessarily -- afford a Mizrahi interpretation as well. Like early 20th century shirei Eretz Israel [songs of the Land of Israel] which embedded novel “Arab” or “Middle Eastern” idioms within a multi-source Eastern European musical base, the New Hebrew must be at least partly Mizrahi in order to be new, in order to break away from the Diasporic Jewish body. The hevreman is born of Levantine soil, bronzed and burly, a vernacular agnate of the pre- and early-state literary “Canaanite.” Hebrew writers like Natan Alterman, Shaul Tchnernichovsky, and Haim Bialik extolled the nation-building dynamism of this figure, a mythic paragon of physical strength, masculine beauty, and youth, who was “Hebrew” rather than “Jewish,” and “Middle Eastern” above all.

The Tel Aviv of Israeli master narrative is likewise figured as Ashkenazi/Mizrahi, as both and therefore neither, heterotopically constituted by, and conflational of, distinct realities. Specificities of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi history and experience, which may or may not be legible in individual bodies, and in specific Tel Aviv spaces such as synagogues, parks or neighborhoods, are rhetorically and imaginatively subsumed under
the umbrella of nativeness, in order that Tel Aviv’s status as “Hebrew city” be protected. As the influence of foreignness is increasingly felt within Israeli national culture, visible and audible within urban space especially, this composite ideology of nativeness may be reified, fracture under pressure, or both in different ways.

In the realm of musical expression, such reification or fracturing is inscribed by and upon the native body. Gestures, comportment, clothing, and physical location in cityspace mark out an Israeli collective identity well-integrated, or in crisis. One especially potent representation of nativeness in a changing Tel Aviv is “HaTachanah HaYeshanah” [The Old Station] (1995), a down-tempo acoustic ballad by Israeli rock superstars Tippex (or Tea-Packs) that concerns the nature of memory, change, and place. Tippex, formed in 1988 and fronted by Yemenite-Israeli Kobi Oz, has received multiple accolades for their signature brand of Israeli rock touched with Mizrahi instrumentation, rhythms, and vocal melodies. Although most of Tippex’s members hail originally from the southern Israeli city of Sederot, home to a large and primarily working-class Mizrahi population, the band has an unequivocally national status, winning radio-sponsored “band of the year” contests, and charting several number one hits over the course of a decades-long career. Tippex is not considered a musikah mizrahit band, even though Oz’s Mizrahi identity is considered by audiences to be part of what makes Tippex special. For this reason, the group is uniquely able to delineate some of the contours and potentialities of the latter-day hevreman, the implicitly hybrid Ashkenazi-Mizrahi figure whose identity is Israeli above all.
"HaTachanah HaYeshanah" remains one of the band’s best-known songs, a memorial to and re-animation of Tel Aviv’s “Old Central Bus Station,” which served as Israel’s primary domestic transit hub until its closure in 1993, and which remains a prominent fixtures of the nostalgic Israeli imagination. In this track, the Old Station features as a backdrop for individual experiences and cultural objects that are fundamentally native.

Verse I:
This descent into the hot street  
was for me a path to a world  
of a drunk selling cold malabi [parfait]  
with peanuts and red sugar syrup.  
Ten shekel belt with a gift cassette,  
Grape juice and a newspaper while you wait,  
The movie theater showing dirty films,  
And a Parsi [Persian] hat with embroidery

Chorus:
I would get off at the Old Station  
And it was like another country.  
A country of reality on standby  
When the rain would fall  
and when the sun was shining

For Tippex, and for the large Israeli audiences whose enthusiasm made this song a hit in the mid-1990s, objects from malabi and Persian cap to gift cassette and sugared peanuts are material symbols of a shared national personality. These items are touchstones in an experience that is at once intensely material, rich with sights, sounds, smells, and overwhelmingly psycho-emotional, laden with the mixture of desire and awe that a young person might feel when immersed in the bustling environment of an urban
transit hub-cum-marketplace, as well as an adult’s reflective longing for that lost sense of awe. The experience of the Old Central Bus Station is metonymic of a particular communal Israeliness that, like the station itself, like childhood, is both long gone and affectively present. This formulation of Israeliness is temporal, spatial and psycho-emotional, originating in the past and grounded in what Israelis might call *schonati*, a term that may be literally translated as “neighborhoodness” or “neighborhoodish,” and which, in its most common usage, carries a freight of generally positive emotional connotations of home, familiarity, simplicity and old-fashioned values.

Significantly, the concept of *schonati* is a component of both Ashkenazi and Mizrahi interpretation, applicable to either, or able to transcend their particularities. As Nirit Ben-Ari explains, Ashkenazi professionals describe their upscale north Tel Aviv neighborhood as *schonati*, replete with cafes, bike paths, and dog parks where friends and acquaintances can meet casually, just as Mizrahi residents of largely working-class south Tel Aviv may consider particular restaurants, bars, parks or even synagogues. The Tel Aviv *schonah* is deep and wide enough to house any native body, and any native memory, in part because the obvious class connotations of an adjective that can also be translated as “ghetto” seem to be inconsistently acknowledged by those who identify with it. These connotations will be explored in further in the context of my discussion of *glocali* interpretation, which incorporates *schonati* in ways that both reinscribe and disrupt the *schonah*’s “native” character.

As evidenced by Kobi Oz’s description of encounters at the Old Station, *schonati* may also encompass objects and bodies that are not “local” *per se*: the Arab dessert drink
malabi and the Persian hat are schonati, just as one’s Russian-speaking car mechanic or Arab grocer in any Tel Aviv neighborhood may be viewed as schonati. It is the presence of the native him or herself that lends the schonah its special potency to render ostensibly foreign objects comforting, local, and familiar. As the hevreman makes Amos Oz’s Tel Aviv a Hebrew city, embedding cityscape with native presence and protecting the city against non-Hebrew bodies, it is Kobi Oz’s subjectivity that renders Tel Aviv’s Old Central Bus Station schonati, mediating non-local presence and neutralizing the oppositional potential of the “foreign” signifiers.

"HaTachanah HaYeshanah" is a song about a disappeared schonah, a distinct and beloved urban space that belongs, as a transit hub, to all Israelis. In this way, Tippex rhetorically subsumes the national collective into the Tel Aviv schonah, and yet this ode to communal experience is not intended solely as a celebration of such experience. While certain segments of the music video that accompany this track feature vintage images of the Old Station in its heyday, the bulk of the footage is comprised of black-and-white scenes of Kobi Oz and his band mates walking slowly through the abandoned Station parking lot. This somber imagery, combined with the song’s slow tempo, minor chords, and a legato chorus in which vocal lines follow descending contours, results in an overall feeling-tone not only of nostalgia, of “a longing for place, material and virtual” (Davison et. al., 2011), but also of detumescence and decline. Oz’s latter-day hevreman effectively exists in empty space, his experience no longer replete but wanting, his schonah – and the schonah of the national body – now empty of content.
We must take into account that “feeling-tone” here implicates more than simply mood or emotions of the native. As Davidson et. al. emphasize, “affective passage is an increase or decrease of capacity, puissance, or lived power, rather than an affection per se” (2011: 4). Affect’s “situational ethics,” that which organizes the micropolitics of daily life and interpersonal interaction, is itself configured in large measure by the perceived “increasing and decreasing capacity to act” (ibid). In this respect, the nostalgia of HaTachnanah pertains to the agency of the native in a changed city, including – perhaps especially – the power of the native to manage, control, or domesticate the non-native. The Tel Aviv of the mid-1990s was in the midst of significant demographic change because of the first Intifadeh [Arabic: uprising], which disrupted Palestinian labor flows from the West Bank and Gaza Strip into “Green Line” Israel, and precipitated an influx of labor migrants from Eastern Europe, East and Southeast Asia, and Latin America. In this respect, figures of “otherness” which, in the track, are domesticated via the discourse of schonati and tradition, are no longer able to be domesticated. The Neve Sha’an neighborhood is no longer the schonah of nostalgic memory, and thus the power of the native is uncertain.

***

Ten years after the success of "HaTachanah HaYeshanah", pop electronica group Metropolin released "Lishon Bli Lachlom" [To Sleep Without Dreaming], another meditative, down-tempo anthem that seems to echo the alienation of Tippex’s “HaTachanaha HaYeshanah” in several respects, notably by employing the same Neve Sha’an area of south Tel Aviv as a point of material and symbolic reference. Yet while
the Israeli body in urban space again features prominently – this time it is vocalist Dana Berger -- Metropolin conveys a distinct message about uncertain native agency. *Lishon*, which breaks partially away from the *rock Israeli* tradition (and its national-historical resonances) by foregrounding electronic sounds, may be understood as a 21st century answer to Tippex’s latter-day *hevreman* in an empty *schonah*, in that Metropolin depicts a cityscape in which the *hevreman* is psycho-affectively empty.

*Verse I:*
Going to talk
A chat without listening
To whisper from afar
To whisper and to run away

Aircrafts passing low
Taxis going back at night
From north to south
And I am always under

*Chorus:*
To sleep without dreaming
To sleep without knowing
To lie without thinking
To love without touching

Lyrics evoke a mood of in-betweenness, dissipation and ennui that, for the majority of the song, is not affixed to a clearly delineated subject. Verbs retain their infinitive form or plural present tense; non-human objects *do something* while the one instance of “I” is passive. Further, objects of attention are transit-focused, suggesting the lack of significance of place, as opposed to the material objects and haptic potential of Kobi Oz’s Old Station. Of equal significance is the gender of the native body in this
undefined space: Dana Berger is a well-known woman pop singer. Here, she is identifiably Israeli, but cannot physically embody *hevreman*, nor retain his by-definition male symbolic resonances. In this sense, “*Lishon Bli Lachom*” depicts the *hevreman* as castrated or emasculate, devoid or depleted of “puissance or lived power” (Davidson et. al. 2011).

In the accompanying video, which enjoyed as successful a national release as "*HaTachanah HaYeshanah*", Berger lays blindfolded atop a car that is situated in a dark, semi-anonymous urban landscape. Periodically, Berger is joined by other well-known Israeli musicians and additional Israeli bodies, some of them blindfolded as well, who writhe and cavort in backseats. Approximately two thirds of the way through this video, a strange audio-visual moment emerges: one of the vehicles is revealed as a police car in which two Filipina women sit handcuffed. Peering out of the back window, they face the camera directly and speak in a mixture of English, Hebrew, and Tagalog:

I come to...to the place in Tel Aviv, because I want to work here... Central Bus Station, there's no-one...no-one... Dizengoff... I do not like the living conditions here. Ah...the weather here is very hot, but, it's almost the same in the Philippines, But we...there in the Philippines we don't have winter, we have only...rain, and...summer.

This interlude situates viewers squarely within the Neve Sha’anan neighborhood where the New Central Bus Station is located. Shortly, the camera swoops away, yet this mysterious presence casts a lingering shadow over the remainder of the music video.
Israelis in nearby cars stare at the police cruiser and the two Filipinas inside it, before returning to their own delirious couplings. At the song’s conclusion, the cars are revealed as toys on the bedroom floor of a small Israeli boy, asleep in bed. A third Filipina woman enters the room, covers the boy with a blanket and turns out the overhead light.

Boosted to the top of the charts because it resonated with an urban audience for whom “foreignness” had become familiar but not necessarily comfortable, "Lishon Bli Lachlom" depicts the native body lost in the Israeli city. By 2005, the urban population of ovdim zarim that began in earnest in tandem with the First Intifadeh had grown dramatically, including a large population of Filipinos, as well as the beginnings of an East African refugee community and growing had begun arriving in earnest. Despite Lishon’s explicit attention to the sprawling, five-block, seven story New Station looms just steps from the site of the Old Central Station, Metropolin demonstrates little interest in city space as Israeli. Berger’s lyrics are concerned with absence: vehicles travel from here to there, but there is “no there there;” psychic space is delineated by “without,” and the video does not include any recognizable Tel Aviv sites. Indeed, it is the non-native bodies that are linked to the specifically south Tel Aviv place of the New Station; while Israelis drift unmoored through a black and decimated urban landscape, the Filipinas are literally and figuratively shackled in place.

While Tippex’s Neve Sha’ananim retains native meaning, if only as a remembered place where originates said meaning, Metropolin’s city is timeless, existing in the endless now of post-modernity, wherein nostalgia has no power or place, and only immediate sensation holds significance. If nostalgia for the schonah, for childhood, for a
coherent (if hybrid) communalism, produces the “capacity […] to offer an alternative
[…] reading of history and a consequently constraining or liberating version of the
future” (Davidson et. al. 2011: 8), Metropolin’s absence of attachment to the past
bespeaks a numbness with regard to the future, and a resignation to ineffectuality. Desire
here takes the place of nostalgia, as evident in the hungry sexuality on display in the
video, a now-oriented desire that “stretches out open-ended in many directions reveals
the impossibilities of the present and presence […]” (ibid). According to Davidson et. al,
“desire is less directed than nostalgia or hope: while nostalgia tends toward a pastward,
reminiscent desiring, and hope often evokes a future-oriented, aspirational desiring,
desire stretches out open-ended in many directions. The potency and possibility of the
present and of desire are rendered as deep uncertainty and ambivalence” (ibid).

Considered together, "HaTachanah HaYeshanah" and "Lishon Bli Lachlom"

would seem to portray the increasing diffusion of native identity, and increasing native
impotency to shape the future, in tandem with the growing presence of non-native bodies
in Tel Aviv. Yet is important to emphasize that this is diffusion is primarily psychic,
subjective, and/or imaginary, and does not map precisely onto shifts in the taking place
during the ten-year period marked out by these musical releases. Consider that in order
for Tippex to portray emptiness in place of the long-lost schonah and to evoke the
alienation of the native in the city, the band had to clear the site of the Old Station, a
parking lot at one end of Neve Sha’anan Street, ejecting the foreign workers, other
migrants, and impoverished Tel Aviv residents making use of the site for socio-economic
activities including gray-market commerce, drug trade, prostitution, and even residence.

In a very real sense, Tippex remains sufficiently powerful to claim material space, if only temporarily, in which to articulate native identity in crisis. Relatedly, Metropolitan explicitly acknowledges the material power of Israeliness in depicting the Filipina women under arrest. Although these figures embody a haunting potential in their claim to the *Tachanah Hadashah* and their domestic guardianship of the dreaming Israeli boy, the threat of real non-native “ownership” is neutralized by the countervailing power of the immigration police.

Expressive forms exist on the threshold between ideology and its socio-political results, between aesthetics and action. It is difficult to pinpoint exactly where the boundary line falls, especially because, as I have indicated, musical messages can be “affective” in both the psycho-emotional and micro-political senses, implicating mood and feeling-tone as well as the capacity of the individual or collective to actualize desires at ground level. Charles Hirschkind argues that “sonic media” is a powerful arbiter of collective consciousness: “Recorded and rerecorded, passing through worn-out electronics, bustling crowds, and noisy streets […] performances resonate both within the sensorium of sensitive listeners and outside, around them and between them. In doing so, they create the sensory conditions of an emergent ethical and political lifeworld” (2006: 8). “The affects and sensibilities honed through popular media practices […] are as infrastructural to politics and public reason as are markets, associations, formal institutions and information networks” (9). Certainly, Tippex and Metropolín are not only saying things about the place of the native in a changing Tel Aviv, they are also
doing things about it. Tippex may, in fact, be calling forth the hevreman from sepia-toned memory into the brightness of hope, “taking over, reclaiming or rewriting” the emptiness of the Old Station in service of “the possibility of remapping, re-visioning, and re-worlding” (Davidson et. al. 2011: 12). The “sensory conditions” of the song and video may further a real-world agenda, one that is only reinforced by their prerequisite act of clearing out the site of the Old Station. Metropolin’s aesthetic numbness may represent more than an abdication of native agency. In eschewing the psychic fullness of the hevreman, whose ontological ties to place are so crucial in safeguarding the native Israeli character of place, "Lishon Bli Lachlom" affords a sort of tentative acknowledgement that Tel Aviv has room enough for native and non-native alike.

**Mizrahiyut and Native “Blackness”**

If musical forms incorporate political messages and meanings, can be political acts in themselves, or can be used as political tools, no single piece of music is an political end unto itself. “HaTachanah HaHadashah” and “Lishon Bli Lachom” are popular musical interventions into Israel’s national demographic debate; they are expressions of collective anxieties around the position of the native Israeli in the increasingly globalized Israeli city, and they also enactments of native agency in an uncertain milieu. Yet precisely because these songs are expressive of a collective, generalized or hybrid native subjectivity, they foreground a whole that is simultaneously more than and less than the sum of its parts, and elide specificities that shape Israel’s demographic debate at the local, micro-political level. Of particular note here is
Mizrahiyut in its overtly “political” form, an interpretive framework absent from both the Tippex and Metropolin representations, yet overwhelmingly present in the very south Tel Aviv neighborhoods that are celebrated, sought or mourned in these national hit songs.

South Tel Aviv, as my associate Eyal Feder describes, is Israel’s “worst ghetto,” chronically under-funded at national and municipal levels, its neighborhood economy comprised primarily of storefront businesses and gray- or black-market commerce, an approximately three square kilometer parcel of land that currently hosts the most ethnically diverse population in the country (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics 2012). Here, Feder explains, long-term Mizrahi residents experience themselves as not only ideologically but corporeally besieged by African refugees, asylum seekers, and foreign workers who have been “dropped” into the neighborhood by state authorities who do not wish to deal with the migrant and refugee problem.

My initial encounter with “political” Mizrahiyut took place in February of 2013 at a “Sudanese Cultural Day” event that took place in the Yad Eliyahu neighborhood, put together by Amnesty International and leaders of Tel Aviv’s relatively well-organized South Sudanese community. This event, which aimed to showcase a diversity of Sudanese music, dance, and drama, was my first “official” fieldwork excursion, and I was surprised upon arrival to encounter a small gauntlet of Israeli protesters outside of the country club’s auditorium, several of them holding signs that read “Move Them To Ramat Aviv,” a reference to the resource-rich, majority-Ashkenazi neighborhood just north of the city. A man spoke into a bullhorn, reciting a litany of alleged rapes, muggings, thefts, and violence against Mizrahim perpetuated by “Sudanim,” a blanket
term used by some activists to refer to all African refugees and foreign workers from any African country. In eloquent if angry speech, the man with the bullhorn argued that Israel’s national government, its Ashkenazi majority, and Tel Aviv’s municipality ignore the ground-level effects of the refugee problem because of entrenched anti-Mizrahi racism, and disdain for the Jewish Israeli underclass.

Inside the auditorium, it was clear the Israelis who had come to watch the performances and demonstrate solidarity with the refugee community far outnumbered those who had come to protest. Yet conversations with audience members after the show revealed that most of these attendees came from elsewhere in the city; indeed, my associate Nirit Ben-Ari explained later that performances, films, or lectures sympathetic to refugees were rarely presented in heavily Mizrahi neighborhoods because of the likelihood of hostility. One attendee told me that “everyone in the audience” was either Ashkenazi or African, that no Mizrahi person would participate in a Sudanese Cultural Day (interviews 2013). While this may be a hyperbolic statement, it resonates with a widespread sentiment among a segment of politically left-leaning Ashkenazi residents of the city.

Once I became aware of this strain of activism – and, equally, of the discourse about it, which at times appeared driven as much by anxious speculation as by fact -- its manifestations were everywhere I looked and listened. The vitriolic racist sloganeering of MK Miri Regev and other elected officials was present in south Tel Aviv street protests that I witnessed in person or watched on videos taken by observers, while a proliferation of newspaper op-eds and blog posts asserted the victimization of Mizrahi residents in
more nuanced and measured terms. Mizrahit activist Ortal Ben-Dayan, founder of the woman-centered social service organization *Achoti* [My Sister] that purports to assist “all of south Tel Aviv’s marginal women,” emerged as an influential voice against municipal refugee policy, her commentary frequently prompting so-called “flame wars” on social media websites between different collectives of Tel Aviv activists.

Such articulations of a Mizrahi-African conflict indicate the extent to which the migrant and refugee presence catalyzes long-simmering socio-cultural tensions that pre-date African immigration and migration to Israel, and shine a bright light on the elisions and shortages inherent in mass-cultural musical representations of nativeness like "*HaTachanah HaYeshanah*" and "*Lishon Bli Lachlom". Notably, most proponents of political Mizrahiyut with whom I spoke rarely voiced explicit anti-African sentiment; instead, they were careful to describe specific incidents of violence or crime, and reserved broadly negative assessments for national or local authorities and “privileged Ashkenazi activists” who had abandoned the struggles of working-class Mizrahim in favor of refugee advocacy (interviews 2013). Eyal Feder, who is Ashkenazi and, at the time of my fieldwork, ran the library in Levinsky Park that runs social programs (including music lessons) for African refugees and other low-income south Tel Aviv residents, was sometimes targeted for criticism as a “middle class, university-educated white man who comes into the neighborhood from outside,” his work at the library a form of “charity to make himself feel good” and even “colonization” (interviews 2013). This identification of privileged Ashkenazim with African refugees emerged as such a dominant theme among Israeli activists and cultural producers on “both sides” of the
refugee issue that I began think of the city’s activist ideoscape in terms of a “Mizrahi-
Ashkenazi conflict” as much as anything else.

The form of political Mizrahiyut currently ascendant in south Tel Aviv strongly
clarifies the fractured nature of native Israeli identity; yet this is only one of a string of
such clarifications. Native identity as historically constituted within Israel’s national
meta-narrative has always been unstable despite its highly-charged nature. The
compound body of the Canaanite, the New Hebrew and the hevreman, the hybrid musical
idioms of shirei eretz Israel, Tel Aviv’s status as “Hebrew city,” the space of the Israeli
schonah – the formulations have tended to break down in periods of social instability,
with Mizrahiyut emerging in opposition to a perceived and/or actual Ashkenazi
hegemony. “Since the 1970s, cultural producers of and speakers for ‘mizrahiyut’ have
been insisting on the ‘nativeness’ and Israeliness of their particular cultural hybrid,
demanding recognition and legitimacy and rebelling against what they perceive to be the
stigmatizing label of ‘ethnicity’” (Regev and Seroussi 2004: 21).

While the broad native interpretive framework evinced in "HaTachanah
Hayeshanah" and "Lishon Bli Lachlom" has dominated Israel’s national musical culture,
codified in shirei eretz Israel and strongly influencing rock Israeli, Mizrahiyut has made
its indelible mark through the genre of musikah mizrahit. Combining Mediterranean and
Arab-world rhythms, melodies and instrumentation with elements of multiple pop styles
and primarily Hebrew lyrics, musikah mizrahit was forged in the basement studios of Tel
Aviv’s lower-income neighborhoods and satellite towns, proliferating as “cassette music”
in the Old and New Central Bus Stations in the 1980s and early 1990s, and marked in its
early days by explicit opposition to the dominance of *rock Israeli* and other hegemonic cultural forms. Although most early and contemporary *musikah mizrahit* songs do not contain explicitly political content, the genre’s extra-musical associations, and some of its lyrical preoccupations, render it the key aesthetic expression not only of *Mizrahi* culture but of political *Mizrahiyut*, addressing lived Mizrahi experience and socio-political concerns.

As Regev and Seroussi suggest, *musikah mizrahit* is distinctive, aligned with a specifically Mizrahi interpretive framework, but also national, asserting the Israeli character of *Mizrahiyut* itself. In Tel Aviv, *musikah mizrahit* also retains uniquely local connotations, shaping the city’s expressive landscape in aesthetic, ideological, and material ways. Before this genre began to “go national,” a process that, according to some music industry professionals and fans, is still taking place (interviews 2010) *musikah mizrahit* was an urban micro-music that drew upon Tel Aviv’s local networks and gray-market mechanisms of distribution in order to remain viable as a “small music in a big system” (Slobin 1994). Although 21st century *musikah mizrahit* resonates with Israelis of diverse backgrounds and has, in fact, overtaken *rock Israeli* on national sales charts (if not yet on national radio) (Morad 2004; personal communications 2010), it has not entirely shed its associations of political *Mizrahiyut* in the city of its birth. HaMasger Street, marking the eastern edge of the Neve Sha’an an neighborhood, was the home of the first *moadonim shel musikah Mizrahit* [Mizrahi music clubs] in the 1980s, where superstar Zohar Argov played his earliest gigs. Ben Mush Productions, the legendary studio that brought out Argov’s recordings, is still located in south Tel Aviv’s HaTikva
neighborhood, and still churning out *musikah mizrahit* hits. Argov himself maintained an apartment in HaTikva, the area now frequently cited as “most racist” against African refugees, and site of several violent anti-refugee demonstrations. Argov’s untimely death of a drug overdose in 1987 is still referenced as an example of the catastrophic results of socio-cultural marginalization that continues to impact the lives of Mizrahim. In many respects, Argov remains the figure of *musikah mizrahit* and its political connotations, his body the avatar of the Mizrahi native: one-half hevreman yet, in a socio-historical sense, more like the hevreman’s shadow self.

In May of 2011, I attended an all-Mizrahi music night at the now-defunct lesbian bar Minerva on Beit HaShoeva Street, where a young woman who identified herself as Mizrahit expressed surprise that I would visit such a “hardcore” event. “Musikah mizrahit in Tel Aviv is like hip-hop in the South Bronx,” she explained (interview with author, May 8, 2011). Although most mizrahit is sonically dissimilar from hip-hop—the genre incorporates minimal rap, for one thing—there is enough in mizrahit’s explosive musical energy, its powerful commentary on ethno-cultural marginality and worth, and its abiding ties to place, that make the hip-hop analogy a reasonable one. More specifically, *musikah mizrahit* and political Mizrahiyut in general claim the category of “blackness” as different and oppositional vis-à-vis Ashkenaziyut. Not all Jewish Israelis of Middle Eastern or North African heritage are darker-skinned than Ashkenazim, but many are. “Mizrahi” skin tone, facial phenotype, and comportment have historically been called up in vernacular and even official public discourse as evidence of inferiority or as mandates for “civilizing” interventions. And detractors of *musikah mizrahit* often point to Mizrahi
vernacular lyrics and “accent” as evidence of the genre’s low quality and absence of
“musicality,” echoing critiques of hip-hop that embed racial judgments in discourse
ostensibly focused on language use, aesthetics, and themes.

Amy Horowitz, writing of a 1984 encounter with *musikah mizrahit* in Tel Aviv’s
Central Bus Station, cites the designation of “*musikah shachorah*” [black music] as
disdainful, applied to the genre by outsiders and “not used by the performers or producers
themselves” (2010: 2). Over time, many Mizrahi musicians have embraced this label,
claiming select elements of “blackness” that resonate with individual and collective
politics. “Mizrahi activists,” Horowitz explains, “have drawn inspiration from African
American civil rights struggles in the United States. Some Israeli movements, most
notably the one that designated itself the Black Panthers, even attached African American
identity markers to their local struggle” (11). This resonance lingers: Tel Aviv’s hottest
Mizrahi band in 2013 was a distortion-heavy, punk-influenced group called the Black
Panthers. During the course of my fieldwork, many self-identified *Mizrahi* activists,
musicians, and Tel Aviv residents called themselves *shachor*, or cited *shachorut* as
impetus and inspiration for their politics.

In light of political *Mizrahiyut’s* affinity with concepts of black struggle and black
power, engagement with an anti-refugee agenda on the part of many *Mizrahi* activists
may appear contrary or out of place. As is evident in political *Mizrahiyut’s* adoption of
the Black Panther moniker and its attention to particular aspects of the African-American
Civil Rights movement, this interpretive framework does not *prima facie* overlook
specificities of experience, nor is it inattentive to complexities inherent within the broad
concept of “blackness.” For these reasons, and also because Mizrahim actually share significant overlaps of socio-economic experience with African populations in south Tel Aviv, political Mizrahiyut would seem to afford some degree of alliance-building with migrant and refugee communities.

Intersectionality amongst marginal groups is highly prioritized in academic discourse as well as activist rhetoric; “grassroots” or non-governmental political initiatives often aim to draw upon experiential parallels in order to muster the participation of diverse collectivities. Equally, however, many activists and cultural producers cite the problematics of this coalition impulse, from queer and non-white feminists who reject the hegemony of white, heterosexual, middle-class subjectivity in mainstream “Western” feminism, to social actors in the “global South” who critique Euro-American development interventions. Speakers for Mizrahiyut sometimes identify their position in Israeli society as analogous to “former colonial and other ethnic minorities in the West, and to the stance of Third World cultures vis-à-vis Eurocentric dominant and colonial cultures” (Shohat 1988 in Regev and Seroussi 2004: 21). These representatives are highly skeptical of supposed Mizrahi-African affinities enunciated by outsiders, insisting on the legitimacy of their own experiences to determine which, if any, alliances can or will be forged.

As Khen Elmaleh explained to me, Mizrahiyut is a “Middle Eastern blackness, which means my experience doesn’t give me a special relationship to other types of black experience” (interview with author, April 3, 2013). Yet she continues, “Ashkenazim are actually a minority, trying to ignore the fact that we are far more than half of the population. Mizrahim, Africans, foreign workers. The black people. They
are panicking because we’re taking over their country.” In this formulation there is
evidence of, if not a clear mandate for resource-sharing and political consolidation, an
ideological permeability of community boundaries. Notably, some contemporary
Mizrahi musicians have drawn inspiration from the diverse African cultural forms that
are audible and visible in south Tel Aviv, and have sought to undertake cooperative
projects that highlight aesthetic, cultural and political affinities rather than differences.
Black Panthers front man Liron Amram, whose father Aharon Amram is one of the first
proponents of Yemenite Jewish vocal music in Israel, believes there are sonic affinities
between Afro-diasporic musics and musikah mizrahit, and had planned a collaboration
with roots reggae band Zvuloon Dub System for 2014 (personal interview, February 25,
2013). Ariel Nahum, a vocalist who performs Yemenite music and fronts the “Gambian
fusion” band Fulani, suggests that the “nasal” vocal timbre and tight throat required in
traditional Mizrahi singing lends itself well to Gambian music, and that, further, these
two traditions share an indefinable “musical spirit” (personal interview, April 1, 2013).
Khen Elmaleh is open to the idea of “mixtape” project with Café Gibraltar that
incorporates Mizrahi and African musical genres.

Is music a bridge-builder, then? As I discuss throughout this text, music is a
highly social aesthetic form; the pleasures of musiking – creating, performing, listening,
dancing – can engender a kind of psycho-somatic “opening” for individuals and groups
and create positive attachments (to sound, to fellow musikers) that counterbalance or
even trump music’s contestable socio-political associations. In this respect, musical
crossovers may occur before overtly political alliances are formed, and musicians who belong to potentially antagonistic social groups may find it possible to forge ties based on artistic compatibility and appreciation despite political cross-purposes. Benjamin Brinner’s study of socio-professional networks among Jewish Israeli and Palestinian Arab musicians in the late 1990s and early 2000s offers evidence of music’s ability to “soften the tensions” of socio-political conflict “with melodies and rhythms familiar” to individuals on both sides of the divide (2009: 3).

Certainly, this text assumes music’s “capacity to act” in Israel’s civic, social, and political arenas, whether by expressing and shaping different imaginaries, shoring up collective identity for dominant and marginalized ethno-cultural groups, or serving as a practical tool in activist initiatives. Equally significant in the context of Israel’s demographic debate, however, is the tendency of any form of hybridity to exclude the thorny bits of its constituent elements. I have indicated that some musical expressions of the native Israeli interpretive framework overlook Mizrahiyut specificity, and that musikah mizrahit may in turn drawn upon political Mizrahiyut’s “cherry-picked” formulation of blackness. The ideal of coexistence that may be evoked by musical collaboration is “not always easy to live, for social networks continue to demand loyalty to sometimes competing cultural ideals” (Maira 2002: 45). Nowhere is music’s multivalence, its facility to simultaneously gather and exclude, is particularly evident in musical expressions of glocal Israel.
**Glocali: Foreignness in and as Schonah**

The interpretative framework of *glocali* is amply heterogeneous, incorporating Ashkenazi, Mizrahi, and/or hybrid native ideologies and experiences while attending carefully to various manifestations of “foreignness” in an effort to transgress, blur, or erase boundaries between the two. Although later chapters address the ways in which many of Tel Aviv’s African and Afro-descent cultural producers adopt and modify *glocali* to achieve their own artistic, professional, and socio-political ends, its initial proponents in Tel Aviv have been Jewish Israelis. *Glocali*, the Hebrew-language hybrid of “global” and “local,” is most clearly understood as an evolution of the “globalized Israeliness” that developed during the second half of the 20th century in tandem with Israel’s increasing cultural and political engagement with Europe and the United States, especially the incorporation by Israeli cultural producers of “western” popular musical idioms and themes. According to Regev and Seroussi, globalized Israeliness refers to the set of cultural materials associated with the local adaptation of the effects of the globalization of culture […] In contrast to the emphasis […] on Israeliness as a separate universe of meaning, different from others, globalized Israeliness insists on and constructs Israeliness as a local extension of contemporary world culture […] Israeliness, or ideology of nativeness, has a place here as a mode of interpretation only, the adoption of the cultural materials previously perceived as foreign and not fitting local culture” (2004: 19).

Globalized Israeliness was initially conceived by Regev and Seroussi as means of explaining Israeli rock’s fusion of *shirei eretz Israel* and military band music with emerging Euro-American rock instrumentation, song structures, and anti-establishment
ethos. While 21st century “rock Israeli” retains certain “global” or cosmopolitan
associations (though far fewer than it did thirty or even fifteen years ago) I suggest that
the ideology of globalized Israeliness has deepened and widened over the past decade as
it has come into contact with an increasingly unfamiliar slate of “cultural materials” from
a broad array of countries. Specifically, while the ethos of global Israel that animated
Israel’s musical landscape in the 1970s, 80s and 90s was largely formed around
experiences of foreignness that Israelis left home to undertake during travel, or which
were introduced via television, radio, and film, the wider world has come to Israel in a
much more direct way over the past two decades. Israeli audiences need not travel
abroad in order to engage with foreign peoples and cultural forms, but rather walk down
the street, go to work, enter a bar, or, as is the case on many city blocks in south Tel Aviv,
simply open their kitchen windows to hear myriad spoken languages and musics. As
Israel has emerged as a receiving country not only for Jewish immigration but for global
transmigration flows, the originary locations of non-native bodies, cultures and aesthetics
have moved closer and closer to the Hebrew city, and the ethos of globalized Israel has
necessarily adapted to make sense of a highly local foreignness.

One of the earliest well-known musical expressions of glocali to was pop star
Shlomo Gronich’s 1993 recording with an ad-hoc chorus comprised of young Ethiopian
Israelis whom Gronich organized for the album as the “Sheba Choir.” This gold record-
winner, which was produced with partial funding from the North American charity Joint
Israel Appeal, featured Gronich and the children on Hebrew language tracks that fuse
rock Israeli and shirei eretz Israel, interspersed with Amharic phrases, Ethiopian folk
instrumentation and structural elements. Gronich’s release came three years after the completion of Operation Solomon, Israel’s quasi-covert military airlift of some 14,000 Ethiopian Jews, or Beta Israel, who were residing in a politically unstable Ethiopia. While tens of thousands more Ethiopians would immigrate to over the next two decades, the early 1990s was a period of major social change, during which Israel sought to incorporate this new eda [ethnic group] via government initiatives, social programs, and the experimental forays of Israeli artists into and amongst Ethiopian expressive culture. Gronich’s project with the Sheba Choir can be understood as part of this national sense-making endeavor, reflecting collective desires for and aversions to the new “black Jews.”

In songs including “Adama Chama” [Hot Soil], “Zichronot M’Africa” [Memories from Africa], “Bacaravan” [On the Caravan], “Shir Israeli” [Israeli Song], and “Motherless Child,” Gronich presents the Ethiopian children as satisfyingly “African” yet unproblematically Israeli. The children sing primarily in Hebrew, often in unison, and many vocal lines roughly follow melodic contours common to klezmer music or shirei eretz Israel. “Bacaravan,” the most musically “Ethiopian” track on the album, softens the unfamiliarity intervals of the vocal melody and slow chik-chicka rhythm via the repeated Hebrew lyric “aba ve ima ohevim et Eretz Israel” [mother and father love the Land of Israel]. The message of Bacaravan is that of the album as a whole: it is a positivist story about the Beta Israel’s long-awaited journey to the Jewish homeland.

The music video for “Adama Chama,” which was Israel’s 1994 entry in the then-new MTV Eurovideo contest, is shot in southern Israel’s Negev desert, and features Gronich and the Choir dancing energetically in “traditional African” clothing (black
Moroccan *kippa* for Gronich, white Ethiopian *shemma* cloth for the children), cut with scenes of the children gathered on a mountaintop, pointing skyward. This portrayal of awe and gratitude for the Operation Solomon airlift evokes Israel’s military prowess and its guardianship of Beta Israel, the African “motherless child” rescued by the munificence of the Israeli state. In this respect, “*Adama Chama*” is strongly aligned with the image that Israel sought to present to the international community on the heels of 1993’s Oslo 1 Accord, a representation of a global Israel in which national strength is not exclusive of humanitarianism and ethno-cultural pluralism.

Yet “*Adama Chama*” also serves a domestically political function, deploying the body-place connection so central to any native interpretive framework in order to grapple with the phenomenon of “foreignness at home.” If Israel’s socio-cultural landscape is one of “hot soil” – dynamic, maybe shifting alarmingly under one’s feet — it is still Israeli soil. Further, “Ethiopianness” is identified by the child’s body, pre-sexual and quasi-androgynous, and therefore devoid of threatening black African masculinity. As minors, the Ethiopian children belong to the state apparatuses much as to their parents; their social potential has yet to be actualized, and their “capacity to act” can be molded towards Israeli ends. Gronich leads the children in dancing and drumming, he enacts symbolic native mastery over the Ethiopian *eda*, reassuring Israeli audiences that the new African presence can be Israelized.

Shlomo Gronich’s 1993 enactment of *glocali* is certainly influenced by socio-political context, most especially Operation Solomon and the Oslo Accords, yet its fundamental approach to “foreignness at home” remains salient to *glocali* decades on.
Tel Aviv’s Idan Raichel Project, a band whose eponymous 2002 debut album featured some Amharic vocals and Ethiopian instrumentation, has risen to national superstardom with a body of musical output that is lushly orchestrated and primarily down tempo, fusing “global” sounds, pop-rock structures, and Hebrew lyrics of love or self-discovery, all smoothly blended via heavy effects processing. For example, Raichel’s 2005 “Mi’Ma’amakim” [From the Depths], a slow 6/8 ballad in which a Hebrew-speaking narrator assures his dreaming beloved of his protection, manipulates the Amharic chorus of the Gojjami folk song “Nanu Nanu Ney.” Raichel slows and flattening its chick-chicka rhythmic pattern, adjusts some of its original melodic intervals, and darkens the tone of the sung Amharic. Here and elsewhere, I suggest, musical “atmosphere” functions as a nativizing device: Raichel sonically domesticates the foreign, dissolving the oppositional potential of foreign subjectivity within easy-listening groove tunes that have appealed to an Israeli audience of unprecedented breadth.
Raichel explains that his Ashkenazi ethnicity has left him “without a cultural background of [his] own; this is why I turned to Ethiopian music, Arabic music.” (personal correspondence, 2010). This telling comment reinforces Ashkenazi as an “invisible” if immanent social category, just as Raichel’s role as the dreadlocked, be-turbaned front man of a band showcasing multiple musical influences is consonant with the current political conceptualization of Ashkenazi as powerful and culturally appropriative. Despite this currency of this viewpoint among many Ethiopian-Israeli cultural critics, who have publicly argued that Raichel should not be the national “face” of Ethiopian musical culture in Israel (A. Zoho, personal correspondence, 2011), it is perhaps unsurprising that the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs periodically sponsors the Idan Raichel Project’s global tours as part of its cultural diplomacy program. Raichel is well-suited as glocal hevreman, a sabra embodying multiple Israeli cultural elements, and also a global citizen. Overseas, the Idan Raichel Project represents modern Israel as cosmopolitan, diverse, humanitarian, aligned with the “west” and sensitive to “global South,” a collection of features that may comprise the end result of glocal interpretation when it takes as its object the national character writ large.

Returning to the south Tel Aviv neighborhoods that have been the central focus of my enquiry, another internationally-known Israeli group, Balkan Beat Box, turns the lens of glocal on the phenomenon of African migration in their 2012 release “Part of the Glory,” with a video shot on Neve Sha’anan Street. Although Balkan Beat Box is led by Israeli Tomer Yosef, the band is currently based in Brooklyn, New York, and has garnered a small but devoted global following. Yosef performs in English, and this track, like
many others in the band’s catalogue, his gestures towards themes of ostensibly international or universal relevance.

Verse I:
Everybody wants to be big like a God
Everybody wants to have more then they got
Everybody wants to do what they like
Like me on the mic, like me on the mic

Bridge:
Get connected
(Do what they like)
Get connected
(Like me on the mic)
Get connected
(Do what they like)
Get connected
(Like me on the mic)

Chorus:
We are "Part of the Glory" part of the fame
Part of the story part of the same
We are "Part of the Glory" part of the fame
Part of the story part of the same
We are "Part of the Glory" part of the fame
Part of the story part of the same
Same

"Part of the Glory" underscores its collectivist message through musical hybridity, incorporating a prominent Afro-Caribbean dancehall beat, a loosely “Eastern European” horn line, Euro-American sampling technologies, and a section of rapped lyrics. It is the music video, however, which turns this nightclub-ready take on “world music” into a site-specific representation of urban Israeli "glocali." Here, Neve Sha’ananh Street and the parking lot of the Old Central Bus Station serve as backdrop for a dance party featuring
Fi-Hankara, a dance troupe whose members hail from Ghana, Congo, and elsewhere in West Africa, and who reside in Tel Aviv as primarily undocumented labor migrants. Fusing energetic break dance with elements of regional dance from their countries of origin, these dancers enact a highly visible form of power, their sheer physical virtuosity a dramatic counterpoint to the social vulnerability that is a feature of daily life for many African migrants and refugees in Tel Aviv. And while this video also includes some children, they, unlike the Ethiopian-Israeli youths of Shlomo Gronich’s “Adama Chamah,” are surrounded by African adults, their nascent “capacity to act” aligned with the lived power of their parents, family members, and neighbors as they move together.

The African figure stars in ““Part of the Glory”:” close camera work showcases well-defined torsos, muscled legs, graceful hand gestures and swinging braids, and long group shots display multiple dancers in visually “glorious” action. Israeli bodies are not absent in this 21st century south Tel Aviv schonah, however. Tomer Yosef periodically appears shirtless, his “national sex symbol” status getting a solid boost (Ben Ari: 2010); at other points he gives an “interview” to a pair of attractive female Israeli journalists. A white woman jumps rope with a young black boy; a well-known Tel Aviv male-to-female transsexual makes a brief cameo; several Israeli passerby are captured on camera. At the same time, the video documents the presence of Filipinos, South Asians, and other representatives of the collective that Tomer Yosef has called “Neve Sha’anan people” (2012) – all residents, “native” and “foreign” alike, of this polyphonic corner of Tel Aviv.
Unlike Tippex’s black-and-white, acoustic "HaTachanah HaYeshanah", wherein the experience of a native subject Israelizes the schonah, Balkan Beat Box’s high-definition, digital-electronic "Part of the Glory" allows for the incorporation of native subjectivity, into a schonah that appears to be characterized by what Wayne Marshall, Steve Goodman and others refer to as “global ghettotech” aesthetic,

leaner, hungrier, and more explicitly electrified [than conventional world music]. Its rhythmic foundations differ wildly from place to place, as do its melodic content, tonal complexity, and vocal phrasing, but a few characteristics seem to distinguish the newer "world music" on a global scale. Lyrical and graphical content eschews rural folk traditions and pastoral reflection for engagement (sometimes critical, sometimes not) with the illicit extremes of hyper-urban reality. It doesn't shy away from using English [...] in the place of (or alongside) the local tongue, or—more commonly—from making knowing references to Western popular culture. From a technical standpoint, it couldn't be made without studio manipulation and the automated, sequenced processes of electronic equipment (Bailey 2010: np).

In one respect, the glocali interpretation on display in "Part of the Glory" may simply be taking advantage of a commercially viable stylistic trend, in order to both make money for the interpreting subjects and to align native Israeliness with all that is valued on the global socio-cultural stage -- something like an Idan Raichel Project with drum machines and sequencers. After all, the Afro-diasporic dance party featured in the music video is staged, and takes place under the custodianship of a resource-rich, Israeli-led musical group. If the Lions of Zion and Fi-Hankara were to take over a city street en-masse and under their own auspices, the result could potentially be a visit from the Immigration Police, altercations and detentions. Yet understood in the context of contemporary Israel’s demographic debate, the track may represent genuine “critical
engagement with the illicit extremes” of lived experience in south Tel Aviv. Certainly, "Part of the Glory" infuses a level of class-consciousness into the trope of schonati, making no effort to disguise the infrastructural decay, sanitary inadequacies, and bottom-of-the-barrel economic activities that are features of daily life in Neve Sha’anan. Further, its lyrical, musical, and visual focus on multi-ethnic collectivity, rather than a relegation of such collectivity to the backdrop for a single native experience, clears ample and explicit space for “foreign” subjectivity in a highly-coded, much-considered Tel Aviv schonah.

Figure 2.3: Still image from “"Part of the Glory"” video (Balkan Beat Box, 2012)

As Achille Mbembe writes, “psychic life is inseparable from the metropolitan form: its design, its architectural topographies, its public graphics and surfaces. Metropolitan built forms are themselves a projective extension of the society’s archaic or primal fantasies” (2004: 375). I have sought to explore multiple inscriptions of “psychic
life” onto the urban Israeli landscape through musical expressions that engage south Tel Aviv via different versions of a native interpretive framework. Although Neve Sha’ananan appears to mean different things when inhabited by different bodies and subjectivities, this neighborhood – and the city as a whole – is not a *tabula rasa*, but rather a palimpsest upon which other markings and inscriptions can never be wholly overwritten. These markings, imaginary, material and socio-political, are always already intersectional and co-constitutive. The living city is not a “vacuum, within which individuals and things can be located,” but rather a “set of relationships that define positions” (Foucault 1967: 5).

In this chapter I have sought to emphasize the significance of the set of relationships that obtain between “nativeness” in its varying configurations and “foreignness,” in particular the mode of interpretation I have introduced as *Africani*. Indications of the capaciousness of the urban Israeli *schonah* – its ability to contain ethno-cultural diversity – which are given expression in songs like "HaTachanah HaYeshanah", "Lishon Bli Lachlom", and "Part of the Glory", only begin to hint at the ways in which Africans and Afro-descendents are making claims to Israeli space in contemporary Tel Aviv. The next chapter explores variants of *Africani* interpretation amongst Ethiopian-Israelis, Israel’s only sub-Saharan African citizen population.
Menelik is a 3,000 square foot nightclub on the second floor of a commercial building on B’nei Brak Street. Two bars, an elevated DJ booth, and a proscenium stage face each other across an enormous dance floor lined with couches and chairs. Every weekend, a live band performs two long sets, and DJs spin recorded Ethiopian pop, reggae, dancehall, and hip-hop. Although Menelik is Tel Aviv’s largest venue catering especially to Ethiopians, its patrons, by and large, are young middle- and upper class Ethiopian-Israeli citizens, only one subset of Tel Aviv’s Ethiopian resident population. “Wear a skirt and makeup,” I was advised by a friend before I set out for Menelik’s 2013 Purim blowout. In juxtaposition to some smaller south Tel Aviv clubs in which Ethiopians mingle with Eritrean, Sudanese, and West African patrons, and clothing ranges from cocktail dresses to straight-from-work outfits, Menelik evinces relative heterogeneity in terms of its clientele’s economic class, citizenship status, and comportment aesthetics.

I did not wear skirt and makeup to Menelik on Purim, chiefly because I didn’t have time to buy a skirt. Instead, I dressed in black jeans, a silk blouse, and ankle boots. Posters and social media announcements for the event had advertised free entry for anyone wearing a Purim costume, so I told the woman taking money at the door that I was dressed as “a white girl who likes Amharic music.” Unfortunately, I still had to pay my fifty shekels. “It doesn’t work like that,” she said. All the same, jokes about my own whiteness or foreignness had proved handy on previous fieldwork excursions, helping to
diffuse the confusion or mild consternation that an initial visit would often engender on
the part of staff and patrons at majority black clubs. The reassuring laugh I got from
Menelik’s bouncer was, in this respect, worth much more than the cover charge.

Once inside the club, I realized my friend’s sartorial advice was well founded.
Every woman who wasn’t in an elaborate Purim costume wore a skirt or dress. Jewelry
and makeup were universally tasteful, hair elaborately braided, shining pin-straight, or in
perfect Afros. The men wore tailored slacks, collared shirts, belts and buffed dress shoes,
their hair in slick fades, subtle mohawks and tidy dreads. I felt shabby and underdressed.

There must have been at least a handful of migrants and non-citizens in this
crowd, I knew; moreover, some of the clubgoers were probably spending more than they
could afford on the NIS 50 cover charge and pricey drinks. Yet those who were not
citizens, or were not financially comfortable, were trying to appear as if they were.
Menelik had a distinctive look, feel, and target audience. Here, a Nigerian labor migrant
or South Sudanese refugee may have appeared or felt as out of place just as I did, their
economic position or residency status potential markers of a difference as dramatic as my
white skin.

Even still, I was acutely aware of being one of only three white people at
Menelik, along with a woman event photographer and my associate Nadav Haber,
Menelik’s resident saxophone player, whose frequent presence at the club and musical
chops had long since granted him a kind of insider status within many subsets of the
Ethiopian Israeli population of Tel Aviv. About halfway through the night, a man
approached me and asked where I’d put my camera.
“I don’t have a camera,” I told him.

“Weren’t you just taking pictures of the band?”

I laughed and said no, that was the other white woman. “There are two of us! We’re both wearing glasses.”

My interlocutor had on glasses as well, and had made a good-faith gesture towards the holiday by wearing a garish bowtie, now askew about his neck. He had been drinking (as had most everyone), and I prepared myself for the delicate negotiation between ethnographic participant observation and social intercourse that was frequently required when I spoke with men at nightclubs. He sat down close to be on a bench and leaned in; while I was ready to handle a flirtatious advance or the usual questions about my interest in Amharic music, I was unprepared for what he said.

“You’re an anthropologist.”

It wasn’t a question, but a statement. I was genuinely stymied for a moment; this was an instantaneous assessment of my positionality I had not yet encountered in the field. I told him yes, I was an ethnographer, and asked him how he could tell. Instead of answering, though, he threw me another curveball.

“We don’t like anthropologists here.”

He was smiling as he said it, but I was discomfited. I wanted to assure him that I was familiar with the long history of ethnographic interest in the Ethiopian-Israeli population, much of which has been directed by the Israeli government and aimed towards assimilation; that I understood Ethiopian-Israeli anthropology fatigue, but that
my genuine enthusiasm for Amharic music meant my presence at the club and my ethnographic interests were somehow different…

I did as well as I could attempting to explain my awareness of my own problematic positionality, and he in turn. In the end, this question may have meant more to me than to my interlocutor; he seemed amused by my earnestness and satisfied enough with my response, and shortly asked me to dance. Over the PA system a Caribbean dancehall song was playing, one that called for much lower-body involvement in the dance. As I once again struggled with what degree of physical closeness and contact was appropriate and desirable out on the “fieldwork dance floor,” my interlocutor seemed to sense my internal ambivalence. With a flourish, he dipped me, and then yelled into my ear, “so what chapter is this?”

***

This partial account of my experiences at Menelik’s 2013 Purim party is meant to convey more than just the anxieties around power and positionality that attend any ethnographic project. While careful attunement to and acknowledgement of positionality is a must in both ethnographic fieldwork and in writing, reflexivity is necessary but insufficient. Rather, I relate this vignette of Purim 2013 at Menelik as a particularly special fieldwork encounter for me: perhaps because the holiday celebrates performance, costume, and boundary-crossing, I experienced a sense of heightened display taking place inside the club that night, a display of multidimensional Ethiopian Israeli identity both intensely self-possessed and “other”-oriented. Here, live and mediated music constructed a soundscape of “regional” Ethiopian and “transregional” Afro-diasporic genres (Slobin
1993) that together reflected an Ethiopian-Israeli taste pattern I encountered over and over again during fieldwork, in conversations with associates and on venue playlists across Tel Aviv. Meanwhile, Purim costumes – traditionally understood as a means of temporarily embodying an “other” or illicit figure – were legible at Menelik as a form of identity play, with common Purim characters like the “Arab” and the “rastaman” taking on complex, particular meanings in the context of an all-Ethiopian milieu.

Purim at Menelik incorporated another form of boundary crossing, that which occurs when traditional configurations of the ethnographer-associate relationship are disrupted in the field. When my interlocutor told me that Ethiopian Israelis don’t like anthropologists, he was not simply providing me “emic” knowledge or “becoming the teacher,” a manifestation of the ethnographic subject’s authority that has long been acknowledged by responsible ethnographers. More than this, this Ethiopian-Israeli clubgoer was invoking a codified, systematic hermeneutic about ethnography, one so familiar to him that he could discuss it in a second or third language, while drinking alcohol, amidst high-decibel dance music. A great number of Ethiopian Israelis from multiple walks of life share this critical approach to the long history of “expert” intervention within their communities, in large part because many ethnographers, sociologists, and social workers have been directly or indirectly sponsored by the Israeli state. For Ethiopian Israelis, then, a sophisticated skepticism about the stated aims and methodologies of ethnography is not the sole province of academics or activists, but an important strategy for self-protection and community maintenance.
Opening this chapter with a descriptive vignette drawn from one evening’s activities at Menelik nightclub, I have sought to illustrate a moment of dynamic convergence among three tropes that have guided my exploration of Ethiopian-Israeli socio-musical life in urban Israel. As “othered selves” on the national stage, Ethiopian-Israeli cultural production is oriented in large measure towards grappling with and expressing the tensions and generative energies of a liminality unique within Israeli society. As native Israeli Africans, this population employs an interpretive framework that draws impetus from nativeness, Africani, and glocali alike, and which continues to resist reduction in spite of efforts at codification on the part of scholars and agents of Israeli administrative power. And as an over examined community, Ethiopian-Israelis
evince a sharp attunement to issues of representation, whether they emerge in academic writing, media reports, or government-directed social programs.

As should be clear, these three phenomena are interrelated, each orbiting around an atavistic Ethiopian Israeli experience of simultaneous marginalization and self-empowerment, the tendency of the “identity” concept to incorporate a history of racial discrimination alongside communal pride and the active pursuit of self-expression. This “both/and” component of Ethiopian interpretation, heavily salted by sharp self-awareness, emerges strongly in art and activism, from this community’s deployment of “traditional Ethiopian” musicians as a form of outreach to other Israelis during the early 1990s (Herman 2012), to the early 2000s consolidation of Ethiopian Israeli ethnographic critique in the form of the Young Ethiopian Students (YES) collective at the University of Be’er Sheva to the increasingly public proliferation of Ethiopian-led reggae, hip-hop, and other musical projects in urban Israel.

The rest of this chapter focuses on creative expressions of Ethiopian subjectivity in the form of slam poetry, reggae, hip-hop, and Amharic music in urban Israel. With an eye to the relationships between Ethiopianness and broader Israeliness, as well as Ethiopianness in the context of African and Afro-diasporic identities, I do not attempt to clearly separate or delineate the “Israeli” and “African” aspects of being Ethiopian Israeli, but rather I allow these aspects, and their aesthetic manifestations, to overlap and interrupt each other, as a means of foregrounding the irreducible multidimensionality that so many of my Ethiopian Israeli associates insist upon.
“Your Mother’s Negro”: Ethiopianness and Peripheral Israeli Identity

Geography Lesson

To the Igbo everyone is family, everything is connected, Grandmother explained. Like the weave of this raffia mat, we intertwine, see? This is the world to the Igbo. Nodding, the German anthropologist licked her pencil in concentration and wrote: To the Igbo, the world is flat like a mat.

(Chris Abani, 2004)

A Hebrew version of Abani’s poem is included in the first issue of the Hebrew literary magazine Cushilaimashelahem. Translated as “their mother’s negro,” the title is a play on the Hebrew slang insult coos la’ima shelahem/chem, meaning “their/your mother’s vagina,” or perhaps more accurately, “your mama’s pussy.” Published and distributed in the summer of 2012 by the artists’ collective Raav [Hunger], Cushilaimashelahem presents Hebrew translations of African and African American poetry from writers like Chris Abani, Langston Hughes, Gil Scott Heron, and Audre Lorde, whose commentaries on ethnicity, identity, and social (in)justice implicitly challenge the reductive racism of the old-fashioned but still-used Hebrew term cushi, variously translated as “negro” and “nigger.” By embedding this term into the “fighting words” of “your mama’s pussy” – replacing the maternal vagina with the figure of the “nigger” – the members of Raav have set up an intentionally confrontational discourse around blackness, and the position of black persons within Israeli society and culture.
Raav’s overall mission is the foregrounding of all “peripheral” Israeli subjectivities, including queer identities, the experiences of persons of color, and urban lives that unfold outside of the central Gush Dan region. While much of this Be’er Sheva-based collective is non-African Israeli, including both Mizrahi and Ashkenazi individuals, one of Raav’s lead organizers is Ethiopian-Israeli activist and graduate student Efrat Yerady, who played a key role in the Cushilaimashelahem project. For Yerady, alliance with “peripheral” Israeliness neither precludes nor valorizes a specific “Ethiopian-Israeli experience.” Articulating her personal goals in primarily artistic terms, Yerady explains the need to reexamine the widespread construction of upper- and middle-class Tel Aviv society as the “center” of progressive art and culture in Israel, and she is especially interested in poetry as a form of ostensibly “high culture” that is accessible to everyone.

Poetry is the highest form of art, but poetry is not something learned. There’s something about poetry that is very sharp. My goal with this is several levels. First, to involve people who are not students, intellectuals, [in art], next to reach Ethiopians. There are some projects where ‘culture’ goes ‘out to the streets.’ We didn’t want just students, so we held [our event] during exams, during the middle of the week. Our title is meant to say, ‘poetry belongs to the people.’ (interview with author, March 8, 2013.)

Here, the highly charged, racially coded valances of the term cushi are deployed first in service of all marginal social actors, and only secondarily as a means of acknowledging blackness per-se. The category of persons termed “marginal” or “peripheral” in vernacular Israeli discourse can indeed include non-students/”non-intellectuals,” especially inasmuch as these “nons” are underrepresented in the circle of
elite Tel Aviv opinion-makers that, Raav argues, retain too tight a grip on the organization of Israeli leftist politics, progressive art, and “cosmopolitanism” in general. Yet the Israeli concept of peripherality can encompass a much broader array of objects and ideas, ranging from Galilee and Negev towns and “new immigrants” (from any country), to the urban poor, gender non-normative persons, foreign workers and African refugees. Israel’s history and master narrative as a “settler” nation, a haven for Jewish immigration, and a country geographically surrounded by “enemies” has resulted in a complex set of associations that attend any discussion of center and periphery.

Perhaps it is the scope of the Israeli notion of peripherality, as well as the breadth of Raav’s intended audience, that enables Mizrahim and Ashkenazim to join forces under the Cushilaimashelahem umbrella, seemingly undisturbed by the ideo-political conflict that rages between representatives of these two demographics in south Tel Aviv, and which, as I have described, centers ostensibly around the role and rights of African and Afro-diasporic peoples in Israel. Because the concept of the Cushilaimashelahem projects insists on the intersectionality of black Israeli experience and Israeli peripherality, implicitly framing “black studies as human studies” (Joyce 2004), any Raav member or reader may, in turn, frame their own experience as “black experience.” Indeed, Raav’s February 2013 slam poetry night at HaMakom bar in Be’er Sheva was attended primarily by non-African Israelis, many of whom took the microphone to read aloud from Cushilaimashelahem, voicing Hebrew translations of first-person black expression. As I listened to an Ashkenazi genderqueer activist read Audre Lorde’s ode to writing and lesbian sex “Recreation” (1981), another white Israeli render Gil Scott-
Heron’s “Whitey on the Moon” with gusto, and a Mizrahi audience member explain that she is *hetzi-shachor* [half black], I was reminded of jazzman and cultural critic Sunny Murray’s concept of the “universal black man,” a figure potentially embodied by any artist who understands oppression and devotes him or herself to its eradication (Atkins 2003).

While Efrat Yerady firmly de-valorizes Ethiopian subjectivity as any kind of master text of peripherality, she does acknowledge the deep salience of Ethiopian-Israeli experience to the lived reality of Israeli peripherality. In practice, Israel’s “anti-peripheral” cultural bias is inflected by anti-black/anti-African racism – increasingly so as the population African immigrants, refugees, and labor migrants grows – such that addressing the former, as Raav seeks to do, always already addresses the latter. Certainly, Yerady sees no contradiction in speaking plainly about Israel’s explicit anti-black and anti-African racism even as she prioritizes alliance building at and on the peripheries.

“We’re behind the United States in terms of race discourse. Even the “shit white girls say to black girls” [thing] is ahead of us,” she comments, referring to a popular Internet satire meme. Perhaps most pressing for Yerady, “there are no known black poets in Israel.”

In light of the intersectional, multiply-constituted audience that Raav seeks to reach via a collection of African and African-American poetry, Chris Abani’s poem “Geography Lesson” may resonate in diverse ways. The experience that Abani recounts – a woman Igbo elder catastrophically misunderstood as she tries to explain the psycho-social trope of “oneness” driving Igbo cultural phenomena perceived by a “Western” ethnographer – may be read as a reminder of the frustrating experience of voicelessness
that marks the experience of (m)any “marginal” or “peripheral” individuals and groups
during the encounter with hegemonic discourse and its representatives. Here is one
answer, perhaps in the negative, to Gayatri’s Spivak’s question, “can the subaltern
speak?” (1988). Yet the inclusion of this poem in the Cushilaimashelahem collection may
also call for a clearly Afro-centric reading, given its subject matter and authorship: an
Igbo elder speaks, a (presumably) white European ethnographer misrepresents.

Figure 3.2: Efrat Yerady at the Raav poetry night, Be’er Sheva, February 2013

When I told Yerady about my experience at Menelik and my interlocutor’s
statement that “we don’t like anthropologists here,” she became animated, urging me to
devote significant attention to this interaction, and its implications, in my writing. “This
is very important. People don’t understand it.” Efrat talked about the Young Ethiopian
Students association and their objective to call out exoticism, racism, and paternalism in scholarship on Ethiopian Israelis, noting that some non-Ethiopian Israeli academics have received particularly harsh criticism from YES. “[One of them] opened an article about Ethiopians by describing how disgusted she was by injera,” the teff pancake that accompanies most Ethiopian meals (interview with author, 2013). “Why would she say that, if she’s trying to be ethical?” Anthropologists who are known or suspected to have received Israeli government funding for ethnographic projects are the targets of the most pointed YES critiques.

I suggest that Raav’s positioning of Abani’s poem, which marks a uniquely ethnographic interaction, alongside black poetry dealing with a wide array of experiences, is metonymically representative of a much broader dynamic in which Ethiopian-Israelis do not necessarily differentiate between the experience of generalized societal racism and “othering,” and the experience of being observed, misunderstood, and misrepresented by ethnographers, social workers, and other ostensibly “sympathetic” professionals who are often state-affiliated or perceived as such. Perhaps because a majority of Ethiopian Israelis are first-generation “refugees” transported to Israel via the material state apparatus (military aircraft), or their children, government bodies have historically demonstrated a seeming entitlement to near-haptic management of the Ethiopian eda, ranging from forced geographic settlement to limited types of professional training and even, as revealed by the national media in 2012, forced birth control for unsuspecting Ethiopian women when this eda was still new.
In an experientially meaningful sense for many Ethiopian-Israelis, engagement with and within Israeli society is the ethnographic encounter. When, in May of 1991, a radio announcer gravely declared on national airwaves that “the Ethiopian exile has ended,” (Kaplan 2005: 381), there was codified a unique significance for this eda, a sense that whatever happened to this group reflected on Israel as a whole, in terms of its leadership of world Jewry, its humanitarianism, and the stability of its vast immigrant absorption bureaucracy. In many respects, any public encounter between the Ethiopian figure and the Israeli collective is haunted by this history and ideo-imaginary investment.

Perhaps in part because of this history and investment, Yerady’s careful emphasis on the relevance of this project to multiple peripheral communities got somewhat obscured in the initial public reception of the Cushilaimashelahem magazine. During a three-minute slot on one of Israel’s prime-time news talk shows, host Ya’aron London could hardly contain his glee over the magazine’s title, teasing the audience with his hand covering it as he led up to slowly sounding out “cushi-la-ima-she-la-hem” twice in succession. Yerady’s cogent brief on Raav’s mission was simply not as provocative as use of the forbidden/fetishized term cushi on national television, in the voice of London and projected, larger than life, onto the walls of the interview stage.

Drawing impetus and direction from Efrat Yerady’s stated objectives and methodologies, I have paid particular attention here to Cushilaimashelahem as a response of peripheral social actors to representatives of cultural authority, emphasizing the centrality of black Israeli experience even to a firmly-articulated ideology of intersectionality that constitutes this category of peripheral subject. Cushilaimashelahm
raises other issues, however, which are equally relevant to my discussion of Ethiopian-Israeli subjectivity in contemporary urban Israel, and within Israel’s ongoing demographic debate. In particular, Raav’s engagement with Afro-diasporic poetry prompts the question of whether Raav’s overall objective of “re-centering” progressive arts at the periphery engages structurally with the discourses and activities around African refugee and migrant urban populations.

Yerady provides some indication as to a complex relationship here. She says that Raav published *Cushilaimashelahem* in the summer of 2012 “just after all of Israeli society and government was blaming the Sudanese for everything,” implicitly acknowledging that what happens to refugees and migrants is relevant to many peripheral groups. At the same time, she feels that Raav is not prepared to reach out directly to these communities: “Asylum seekers, foreign workers – it's too far right now.” Difficult enough, she suggests, to challenge notions of high-cultural center, to raise up the narratives and experiences of Israeli citizen marginals; they are not yet ready to take up the refugee cause. Indeed, when I asked Yerady if she would consider hosting Raav's next poetry night at Rasta Club, a small south Tel Aviv venue owned by Jamaican émigré Tony Ray and catering largely to Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and West African labor migrants, she asked in return why Raav should put its energies into supporting “somebody else's cause, somebody else's business."

While the publication of a volume of translated black poetry does not obligate Raav to special responsibility towards non-citizen African populations, Yerady's acknowledgement of at least certain overlaps in the way peripheral non-African Israelis,
Ethiopian-Israelis, and urban African groups are treated within wider Israeli society raises questions about the way in which Ethiopian Israelis view themselves as a collective in relationship to a still-new and growing population of black residents in the Israeli state. Where and how are affinities and differences identified? In what ways do these identifications serve strategic purposes, aiding “resource consolidation,” “group status advancement,” or other ethno-culturally specific social goals (Reyes 1975: 101)? If, as suggested by the dearth of non-Ethiopian African partygoers at Menelik nightclub, and the stark visibility of the few who attend, some Ethiopian-Israeli spaces are implicitly organized around a clear social distinction between Ethiopians and “other” black Africans, are there Ethiopian-Israeli sites of identity formation that evince a more consistent incorporation of “other” Africani, and/or tropes of “global blackness” introduced via my discussion of glocali in the previous chapter? The phenomena of Ethiopian-led reggae and hip-hop projects in urban Israel, in which two transregional Afro-diasporic popular genres are shaped to express distinctly Ethiopian-Israeli concerns, provides some insight with respect to these questions.

**Reggae’s Ethiopian Sabra, Hip Hop’s Glocal Ethiopian**

Just as Tel Aviv is frequently cited as a “nightclub city” in scholarly discourse, music journalism, and travel literature, so must it be acknowledged as a major center of reggae production and performance. In addition to reggae’s influence within Israel’s national popular soundscape – Israeli rock superstars Moshe Ben-Ari, whom and whom and whom have all released charting reggae-influenced tracks – Tel Aviv boasts multiple
reggae bands, whose performances provide the backbone of any weekend's nightlife. Gili Yalo, an Ethiopian-Israeli singer who fronts the roots reggae band Zvuloon Dub System, told me in 2011 that around 10 major reggae groups were active in Tel Aviv’s live music scene, along with several MCs who sang, rapped and toasted over Jamaican-style studio-produced “riddims” and club DJs who played mostly reggae (interview with author, July 9, 2011). The world of Tel Aviv reggae has only expanded since I spoke with Yalo, increasingly incorporating dancehall and ragamuffin – two harder, faster, reggae-derived genres reliant on programmed beats and digital electronic instrumentation – in addition to the classic “roots” style made famous by Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and other figures of late 1960s and early 1970s Kingston. Reggae is such a prevalent part of sonic Tel Aviv that it is actually difficult to walk in the city without hearing it played in storefronts, restaurants, or one of the many fruit juice kiosks lining downtown streets.

Ubiquitous as it is, reggae’s presence on the Tel Aviv club scene cannot match that of hip-hop. Mostly mediated, sometimes live – MCs still take the stage periodically at G-Spot, the city’s legendary venue that once hosted MC battles several times a week – hip-hop of multiple genres, languages, and points of origin is an undeniable nightclub “workhorse,” providing the backbone of playlists in clubs across the city.

Neither reggae nor hip-hop was “brought to Israel” by Ethiopians; national radio, television, and touring European and American musicians can be credited with the gradual introduction of these genres in the decades since the early 1980s. These musics, however, have emerged as favorite media for Ethiopian-Israeli cultural actors. In Tel Aviv, most performing reggae bands have at least one Ethiopian member, and some of the
city’s most popular hip-hop artists are Ethiopian as well. These are global musics, with histories so deep and wide as to defy coverage by any single account. However, their histories do contain overlaps, such as the Caribbean identification of both genres’ founders, and their ongoing associations with Afro-diasporic struggle and solidarity. Moreover, both reggae and hip-hop have proven themselves as highly adaptable to localized contexts and concerns. Nirit Ben-Ari has written, for instance, about the effectiveness of hip-hop in expressing both progressive and right-wing Israeli positions on the Israel-Palestinian conflict (2010). For Ethiopian Israelis, reggae and hip hop provide a highly flexible musical grammar with which to articulate elements of African, global Afro-diasporic, and native Israeli affiliation.

The growth of reggae music in Israel is closely linked to a growing population of young Ethiopian Israelis over the course of the 1980s and 1990s, during which time Operations Moses, Solomon and others brought more than twenty thousand “Beta Israel,” or Jewish Ethiopians, to the country. Israel’s complex and ambivalent societal response to this new eda, which I introduce in the previous chapter, tells only a partial story of music’s role during a period of mass-migration and attendant cultural fracture. Ethiopian “traditional” musical groups, writes Marilyn Herman (2012), were a key part of this community’s strategy of presenting itself socially in a manner that was appealing to curious Israelis and amenable to national absorption objectives.

Throughout the early 1990's, children of the “rescued” Beta Israel were primarily audience members and consumers of reggae, rather than producers. Gili Yalo describes reggae’s Tel Aviv incubation as a word-of-mouth process taking place at a sub-cultural...
level, functionally similar in certain respects to the proliferation of *musikah mizrahit* as “cassette music” amongst lower-income Mizrahim in Tel Aviv neighborhoods. Yalo explains, “We heard what the radio gave us, that’s what I grew up on […] But […] twenty years ago there was a club called Soweto, after the neighborhood in Kingston. A handful of Ethiopian would come on Friday to hear reggae, though it was mostly others. We are a small community […] Twenty years ago we were maybe forty, forty-five thousand people. If I heard reggae and liked it, I would give a cassette to my brother or friends, and then they would come with me to clubs” (interview with author, July 9, 2011.)

Two key venues during this period were Soweto, located near the beach on HaYarkon Street, and Jamaica, which opened in the early 1980s and continues to operate as Rasta Club at 36 HaRakevet Street in south Tel Aviv. Jamaica and Rasta have been run continuously by Jamaican émigré Tony Ray, who today is widely credited as one of Israel’s “founding fathers” of the genre. Arriving to Israel by way of England just after the 1967 war, Ray started out playing soul music with a British group called the Cocktails. By the end of the 1970s, he says, the soul music scene had quieted down, in part because major Tel Aviv and Jerusalem nightclubs that featured soul acts had never fully recovered from the economic hit they took from the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Tony split from the Cocktails, and was singing in a Tel Aviv hotel bar frequented by European tourists. Here, he says, he had the encounter with an audience member that changed his life:

This English guy came to me, he said “where you from?” I said, “Jamaica.” He said, “you’re from Jamaica and you’re not singing
reggae? You know what Bob Marley is doing to England? He mashed up England!” This dude, he gave me a cassette of Exodus. And I took home this cassette. I started to listen to the lyrics and the music. I went to sleep, and the one side finished. I was listening while I was sleeping! I would get up, turn it over. For two days I listened. That was in 1979. I made my first reggae band, and since then, I never looked back. There was no money in reggae those days, but I felt good. I felt alive.

This Israeli guy Yossi Fine started playing the bass with me. I had this song, it was called “Fatty Boom Boom.” “A fatty boom boom if I had / I would be happy, not sad / Although my friends would stare / I would not care.” It was recorded, it even went into the hit parade on Galei Tzahal. It went in and came out! I said, “you know, the people, they don’t really understand what I’m saying.” So I went to this guy, a writer, who translated it into Hebrew, and it was called “Shmanmenah.” I put in on vinyl and brought it to all the radio stations. Then it was only Galei Tzahal, Reshet Gimmel, Kol Israel, and Reshet Bet. I brought it to them, and they all played it. People went crazy for it! That was reggae in Hebrew for the first time (interview with author, October 10, 2013).

Tony Ray has long since exchanged the shiny shoes and neat Afro of his soul singing days for shoulder-length dreadlocks and I Love Jamaica t-shirts. In addition to running the Rasta Club, he cuts albums with a group of Israeli and African migrant musicians called Amjah, or God’s People, in the hybrid Hebrew-Patois vernacular of much Israeli reggae lyrical output (Am means people or nation in Hebrew, and Jah is the Rastafarian name for God.) In recent years, he has begun experimenting with the drum machines and synths of contemporary Jamaican dancehall in an effort to eventually reach audiences in his country of origin. While Ray understands roots reggae’s message as universal, as fresh and relevant in Oslo or London as it is in Kingston or Addis Ababa, he is especially interested in reaching out to Ethiopian Israelis. Ray has penned several
songs praising the mytho-historic Solomonic lineage of the Beta Israel, including the energetic, calypso-influenced “Sons of Solomon” (2009).

Chorus:
Ethiopians!
Sons of Solomon
Ethiopians!
From the Gondor region.
Ethiopians!
From Queen of Sheba
Ethiopians!
From Axum and Gojjam

Verse I:
There are Ethiopians
who stand strong to their faith
Two thousand years and more
there is no debate

Descendants of Menelik
and Zagwe
King Solomon’s sons
that his wise men sent away

King Solomon so declared
“If my sons must go
the first son of all you wise men
must go also!”

Verse II:
Sons of Israel
with Menelik and Zagwe
brought to Ethiopia
their beliefs and ways

Sons of Israel
in Ethiopia multiply
All over Ethiopia
till today they survive.
In Gondar, Axum
Gojjam
Addis, Awassa
Shashamane
Wollo, Wolayta
All over Ethiopia!

Verse III:
Ethiopians remember
where you coming from
Your forefathers want you
to stand proud in this land

Haifa, Netanya,
Tel Aviv
Jerusalem, Be’er Sheva
Ashdod
Rehovot and Ramle
All over Israel!

“Sons of Solomon” touches on key aspects of the biblical Solomon story that is laid out in several places in the Tewahedo Canon of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church (Cowley 1974). In the Ethiopian narrative, Queen Makeda (the Queen of Sheba) of Axum traveled to Jerusalem, became pregnant by King Solomon, and returned home with her son, Menelik I. When he came of age, Menelik stayed with his father in Israel for several years. He returned to Axum accompanied by the sons of Solomon’s advisors, bringing with them the Ark of the Convenant. From the 13th century until late 20th century, rulers of the Ethiopian Empire drew on this narrative to legitimize a hereditary dynasty, claiming lineage from King Solomon through Menelik I. According to Steven Kaplan, “in its classical Ethiopian formulation, a book known as the Kebrā Ṯagast [Ge’ez: ‘The glory of kings’], the Solomon- Sheba legend became the basic metaphor for
legitimacy and authority within Ethiopian culture, and a crucial element in the
genealogies of numerous regional and ethnic groups, including the Beta Israel” (1993: 652).

Tony Ray’s familiarity with this legend, and the value he places on it, comes in large part from his own upbringing in Jamaica, where Rastafari reverence of the last Solomonic Ethiopian Emperor, Haile Selassie, is embedded in many popular cultural forms, especially in reggae music. Significantly, contemporary Ethiopian-Israelis do not generally make public claims to Solomonic lineage. “Rather, they present themselves as descendants of Jews who followed the biblical prophet Jeremiah to Egypt, or, in keeping with rabbinic opinion, descendants of the lost tribe of Dan” (Kaplan 1993: 652). In Ethiopia, associating themselves with the Solomon-Sheba tradition allowed the Beta Israel to claim membership in the cultural elite, whereas in Israel, the Danite tradition emphasizes their separation from Christian Ethiopia, and their links to other Jews (653). The shift from Solomonic to Danite identification, Kaplan explains, was both a strategic move in early Ethiopian-Israeli community efforts to gain the acceptance of religious authorities, and a genuine transformation of self-perception catalyzed by migration (ibid).

Reggae diverges from the large-scale trend of Danite identification, because from the perspective of Rastafari, and therefore of roots reggae, Solomonic lineage remains the chief historic and spiritual claim that Ethiopians have to belonging in Israel. “There is of course a connection between Ethiopians and reggae because of Haile Selassie,” says Gili Yalo. “Ethiopians feel very connected to this music; the color of flags, the connection with Selassie. In this music, Ethiopians are saints. If I go to Jamaica, I am respected.
This is something we don’t have in Israel.” In this light, the Ethiopia-centric lyrics of Ray’s “Sons of Solomon” – and, more broadly, the Rastafarian ideology expressed in much roots reggae songs -- may be understood as a turning away from Israeliness, a means of locating the source of ethno-cultural pride in real and imagined Ethiopia. “Until I was 21, I used to believe deeply in Israel,” Yalo explains. “I wanted to be part of Israel only, I didn’t think of Ethiopia. When my parents talked Amharic, I said, ‘we’re in Israel, you need to speak Hebrew.’ But now I think, as Bob Marley said, if you don’t know where you come from you can’t go anywhere. Now, I speak to my parents in Amharic.”

Certainly, in terms of the ongoing connection that diasporic groups manifest with their home of origin – a connection that is maintained in large measure via listening to and making music (Shelemay 2006) – reggae is a key mechanism for Ethiopian Israelis. Despite its Jamaican point of origin, many Ethiopian Israelis regard reggae as Ethiopian, in a sense distinct from but as powerful as the sense in which Amharic music is Ethiopian. Both roots and dancehall are wildly popular in Ethiopia, and Yalo assures me that Bob Marley is “like a god” in Addis Ababa. Moreover, contemporary Ethiopian pop superstar Teddy Afro does a lot of reggae, and contemporary Addis studio releases are increasingly dancehall influenced.

Here is an articulation of Ethiopian-Israeli identity that incorporates elements of Africani interpretation – the focus on Ethiopia as a uniquely valuable ideological and material resource, perhaps over and above Israel – as well as global Afro-diasporic association. Jamaica, birthplace of reggae and Rastafarianism, represents at once
Ethiopian selfhood and the broad, welcoming, “respectful” Afro-diasporic other. Yet Ethiopian-Israeli participation in reggae cannot be adequately understood without further reference to Israel itself as material and conceptual place, as “home” in most senses of the word for a majority of Ethiopian-Israelis, and as one of the great tropes of roots reggae itself. Although the term “Zion” in Rastafarianism refers to Ethiopia, there is immense logocentric slippage here with respect to the Holy Land in the form of the Land of Israel. Emperor Haile Selassie is revered by Rastafaris as the Messiah of Judeo-Christian tradition, and much of Ethiopia’s mytho-history centers on ancestral ties to King Solomon and Queen Makeda, known in the Abrahamic tradition as the Queen of Sheba. Given these historically constituted and deeply felt associations, reggae music as performed by Ethiopian individuals in modern Israel affords not only African and Afro-diasporic interpretation, but a canonically “Hebrewist” native interpretation as well.

I suggest that Ethiopian-Israeli reggae is, in part, an expression of what may be termed the Ethiopian sabra; a figure as tied to the land as the Canaanite, Hebrew, or Hevreman, one whose “belonging in Israel” must be attributed not to the munificence of the modern Israeli state via military airlifts and social programs, but to blood, myth, and ancient history. As proud “sons of Solomon,” – as opposed to the vulnerable children of Operation Solomon — Beta Israel lay claim to the pre-Exile Jewish mytho-history prized by political Zionism. Relatedly, as early Israeli shirei eretz Israel asserted the right of European Jews to reside in the Land of Israel by virtue of ancient right and modern labor, reggae songs like ‘Coming to Zion,’ ‘Iron Lion Zion,’ or ‘The Israelites’ sound out an organic affinity between Ethiopia and the Holy Land.
Turning to local production, Zvuloon Dub System’s release “Mount Zion” (2009) carries a second level of meaning derived from the identity of its creators and place of production.

*Chorus:*
Going to Mount Zion,
Going to Zion.
Going to Mount Zion
Move out of Babylon.

Going to Mount Zion
Going to Zion.
Going to Mount Zion
Where a righteous man shall be.

*Verse I:*
On my way to Zion.
Pray to Jah
For guidance on my way
Protect I and I
From all evil.

*Verse II:*
As I’m standing at the gates of Zion
My heart is full of love and happiness
I’m coming home
To my father’s land.

Here, Zvuloon Dub System can acknowledge “Zion’s” widely received reggae significations by employing a highly conventional roots reggae song form and instrumentation: this downtempo verse-chorus-verse track features laid-back drums, smooth bass, roots’ familiar syncopated guitar and mellow keyboard chords. Yet Zvuloon sings simultaneously of a “Mount Zion” that is proximate and material, a hill just south of
Jerusalem’s Armenian Quarter that, for many Israelis, is unremarkable by dint of sheer familiarity. The music video for “Going to Zion” marks this local salience by incorporating the image of a hand painted with the words “Protect I&I Free From Evil” surrounding a Jewish star, as well as an LP record featuring a camel and palm-tree logo. In this light, Gili Yalo’s glad exclamation that he is “coming home to [his] father’s land” resonates with literal meaning.

There is something in Israeli reggae that evokes the story of the modified dreidel – Chanukah’s spinning top – produced following the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948: while “diaspora” dreidels are still inscribed with Hebrew letters representing the phrase “nes gadol hayah sham” – “a great miracle happened there” – dreidels made and used inside of Israel switch out one letter in order to proclaim that “a great miracle happened here.” In Israeli reggae, the here-ness of Zion is not ignored; Zion emerges as something existentially identified with, yet slightly distinct from, the ideo-imaginary and material Heaven-on-Earth of Rastafarian cosmology, which is constituted by tropes of longing and remoteness. That Ethiopian-Israeli reggae musicians are widely acknowledged as key practitioners of this genre, such that “any reggae group basically has to have an Ethiopian now” (Morad, interview with author, August 2010), may be one effect of their conceptual role as “authenticators” of Israeli reggae, the “Ethiopia connection” in a sense legitimating Israel’s enthusiasm for and participation in Rastafarianism’s originary musical text. For Ethiopian Israeli practitioners themselves, participation in this genre serves multiple functions, but perhaps especially the assertion that Israel’s sabra figure can have an Ethiopian phenotype and an Ethiopian subjectivity.
If the particular characteristic of “Ethiopianness” has earned Ethiopian-Israelis pride of place within Israeli reggae – alongside, certainly, the immense talent of so many of these musicians – it may be that the ascription to Ethiopians of a more general “blackness” has lent special credibility to their participation in hip-hop. While Israelis of all stripes have adopted hip-hop and made it speak to their own concerns, desires, and identities, hip-hop’s origins amongst African-American and Latino/a cultural actors in the United States remains salient to many Israeli hip-hop musicians and fans. That is, awareness of hip-hop as a global phenomenon has not replaced awareness of hip-hop’s concrete history, nor erased its multivalent associations with Afro-diasporic blackness.

I would like to distinguish here between the “Mediterranean blackness” that Khen Elmaleh identifies as belonging to Mizrahim, and the Afro-diasporic specificity that even many Mizrahi hip-hoppers will attribute to the genre, and with which they align themselves, at least in partial measure, as one way to legitimate themselves. As Nirit Ben-Ari describes, hip-hop’s musical structures and aesthetics provide the “vase” or vessel into which Israeli artists may pour the “water” of local and personal expressive content (2010). As such, while “Mizrahim consider themselves the blacks of Israel,” as Efrat Yerady puts it, they do not necessarily consider themselves “the blacks of hip-hop.” With this role implicitly granted to hip-hop’s founding Jamaican and African-American practitioners, and therefore not strongly claimed by any one Israeli group, Ethiopian-Israelis and other African or Afro-descendant hip-hop artists may, in certain contexts, be marked out as special by virtue of being members of the African diaspora themselves.
I describe the above as a reception phenomenon, a way in which audience collectivities think about Ethiopian-Israeli hip-hop. It is important to note, however, that there are no nationally-popular Ethiopian hip-hop artists; most of Israel’s famous hip-hoppers, such as Subliminal and HaDag HaNahash are Ashkenazim or Mizrahim. And in Tel Aviv nightclubs, MC microphones are as likely to be commandeered by Russian Israelis, non-African Israelis, non-Ethiopian Africans, or others as they are by Ethiopian Israelis. How do Ethiopian Israelis occupy their niche, then, in the world of Israeli hip-hop, and how do they understand themselves in relation to this music? In what ways do these cultural actors claim a “global” Afro-diasporic affiliation, and in what ways do they use hip-hop as a means of expressing Ethiopian specificity?

Rapper and producer Kalkidan is a prominent fixture on the south Tel Aviv club scene, regularly releasing studio tracks via the internet and frequently performing live at venues like G-Spot and the now-shuttered Vox Club, which hosted “Ethiopian nights” along with “Russian” and “Top 40” events in order to reach a broad patron base. As a twenty-something Ethiopian man raised in Israel, fluent in Hebrew, and deeply linked into multiple Tel Aviv subcultural scenes, Kalkidan, like Gili Yalo, is in many ways representative of his demographic: young adult children of Ethiopian immigrants who feel as “Israeli” as they do “Ethiopian” and vice versa, while understanding these two identifications as fundamentally inflected by one another. If roots reggae expresses this “both/and” subjectivity through the Zion trope’s mixture of eschatology and “here-and-now” referentiality, Ethiopian-Israeli hip-hop furthers a similar objective via the “post-
modern” materials of rap vocals, sampled instrumentals and sonics, and the gritty evocations of “global ghettotech” I introduced in the previous chapter.

Kalkidan’s 2009 track and music video “Al Tishpot” [Do Not Judge] is a rich example of hip-hop’s densely hybrid and forthrightly urban aesthetics as deployed according to the impetus of an equally hybrid native, African, and global black interpretive framework. Opening the track with approximately one minute of rapped Amharic, Kalkidan next speaks/raps in Hebrew to his peers, Ethiopian Israelis whom, he insists, have gone morally astray, lured either by crime or materialism, and have “lost their identities.” Verses exhort a young man to give up his criminal activity, and a young woman to take pride in herself rather than her clothing and possessions, while the chorus foregrounds these individuals’ response: “What would you do if you were in my shoes? Don’t judge me.”

This track and the accompanying video translate a portion of Ethiopian-Israeli experience via a musical form that is accessible to and loved by many, yet fully comprehensible only to Ethiopians. By rapping in Hebrew and shooting his video on the recognizable streets of south Tel Aviv, Kalkidan invites a broad Israeli audience to share in the reception of this track. By using Amharic at the opening of the track, however, he offers a message directly and solely to his Ethiopian peers. At the same time, the form of hip-hop itself lends Al Tishpot an undeniable Afro-Diasporic inflection, and introduces a “universalist” theme of righteousness in an inequitable world, one legible as well in Balkan Beatbox’s glocali expression discussed in the previous chapter.
While any musical genre can be accurately described as “hybrid” in one way or another, hip-hop is distinctive in its explicit hybridity, built around an aesthetic that lays bare the mechanics of its construction and its multiple influences. As Joseph Schloss describes, hip-hop demonstrates an “affinity for collage” that is reflected in its use of samples “from a variety of contexts,” which are “not bound by the more general constraints of genre or style,” and are “organize[d] into a new relationship” (2004: 64). The in-your-face “sonic promiscuity” of hip-hop (67) can be, I suggest, powerfully expressive of the “bricolage” aspect of Ethiopian-Israeli interpretation itself, constructed of native, Africani, and “global” black elements that are consistently being organized into “new relationships” to reflect a particularly Ethiopian experience.

Figure 3.3: Still from “Going to Zion” video (Zvuloon Dub System, 2014)

Reggae and hip-hop music have long since “level shifted” (Slobin 1993) from basically local genres – tied to Kingston and the South Bronx respectively – to “transregional” and finally global arts, without losing all of their originary associations.
The manipulation of both general/universalist and specific evocations is part of what makes Ethiopian-Israeli reggae and hip-hop so effective at transmitting complex messages about ethno-cultural identity and selfhood. Of course, play with universal and particular meanings is one of the dynamic features of much glocal music; Balkan Beatbox articulates a Tel Aviv reality by using multiple global musical forms – including dancehall and rap – which themselves have not shed links to localities remote from Neve Sha’an. Significantly, among the many characteristics that make “glocal” music so effective as a social text is its tendency to incorporate extremely popular types of music. It is no exaggeration to state plainly that people in Israel love reggae, love hip-hop, love the digital/electronic sound signature of many contemporary Afro-diasporic dance musics.

In one sense, the immense affective pleasure that broad Israeli audiences derive from glocal musics enables peripheral social actors to assert a form of belonging by “speaking through” well-loved sonics. Yet with popularity comes a potential loss of oppositional valence, a sense that music which is “too easy” for diverse audiences to like is also unequipped to account for the very real tensions and troubles of ethno-cultural peripherality. I have suggested that this ease of listening does dilute the “Ethiopian” musical features of Idan Raichel’s chart-topping releases, their broadly familiar structures and digital/electronic timbres smoothing over edges that might otherwise catalyze a productive social conversation. The Idan Raichel Project is led by a member of the Israeli majority, however, and even “easy music,” which reggae and hip-hop can sometimes be, may embed what James Scott calls a “hidden transcript” when organized
according to the goals, strategies, and preferences of minority groups (1990). These hidden transcripts, which are “discourses that take place ‘offstage,’ beyond direct observation by power holders (2), can be introduced into the public sphere obliquely, through the musical medium. Certainly, Ethiopian-Israeli reggae and hip-hop complicate a widespread understanding of “black nativeness,” long constituted largely by political Mizrahiyut and more recently disrupted by the influx of non-Jewish African refugees and migrants. The further work that reggae and hip-hop do to establish a specifically Ethiopian type of Israeliness is substantial, and is shaped by the aesthetic and social preferences of a sizable population of young adults with material and ideo-imaginary ties to both Israel and Ethiopia.

Glocality, however, may manifest itself musically without primary recourse to globally popular musical sound. In the next section of this chapter, I examine what my Ethiopian-Israeli associates term “Amharic music;” Ethiopian pop in the Amharic language that is generally produced in Addis Ababa, and incorporates rhythms, melodies, and structures from several geographic regions of Ethiopia. While this music is language specific, strongly associated with place(s), and remains mostly mute within the broader Israeli soundscape, its 21st century iterations display influences from reggae, dancehall, and hip-hop, and its practitioners are constantly reaching out for artistic and commercial engagement with global musical networks. In what ways, then, does Amharic music in Israel exemplify and/or put pressure on notions of the “regional?” How does this music, which is played in several south Tel Aviv nightclubs, express glocali interpretation for
Ethiopian Israelis: where does it interface with nativeness, broader *Africani*, and global black frameworks?

**Amharic Music and Complications of the “Regional”**

Ethiopia’s music might be thought not to have strayed very far beyond its borders, so little is Ethiopia known to the outside world. Ethiopia has historically served as a global metaphor for isolation and stasis by virtue of its location in the mountainous highland plateau of the Horn of Africa, its topography cross-cut by huge chasms. Hence Edward Gibbon’s famous phrase proclaiming that “…the Aethiopians slept near a thousand years, forgetful of the world by whom they were forgotten. (Gibbon 1952, Vol. 2: 159-160)” (Shelemay 2013: 3)

In one article on Ethiopian jazz (“Ethio-jazz”) and its founding figure Mulatu Astatke, Kay Kaufman Shelemay observes that assumed distinctions between cultural mobility and cultural isolation, modernity and pre-modernity, have historically influenced Euro-American scholarship on Ethiopian popular musics (2013). While 21st century Ethio-jazz has garnered a wider and more diverse transnational following than Amharic music, which is mostly produced and consumed in Ethiopia or diasporic enclaves, Shelemay’s identification of global-regional dialectic tension obtains in discussion of Tel Aviv’s Amharic music scene. In one sense, Amharic music is a “micromusic” (Slobin 1993), unplayed on national, local, or alternative Israeli radio stations, its musical particulars largely even to Tel Aviv residents living in close proximity to Ethiopian communities (see Chapter 5 for further discussion of this phenomenon.) Of the non-Ethiopian Israelis who might recognize the music (for example, those who hear it indirectly while walking past a club in their neighborhood), most associate it strongly with the Ethiopian *eda*, and know little else about it. Despite these hermetic social
aspects, however, Amharic music [musikah Amharit] sounds in many respects like other
global Afro-diasporic popular musics: it can incorporate Afro-Caribbean, North
American, and even Latin American pop idioms, from the jagged kick-driven rhythms of
dancehall and reggaeton to the slap-your-face snare and hard rapped vocals of hip hop,
the mellow rock organ keyboard chords roots reggae, or the fuzzed-out electric bass of
commercial R&B. This music sounds out a clear message that contemporary Ethiopian
cultural producers are neither “forgetful of the world” nor, if they have any say in the
matter, forgotten by it.

Tel Aviv’s Ethiopian-Israeli clubgoers, club musicians, and club staff commonly
use the term musikah Amharit to gloss a wide array of live or mediated Ethiopian genres
and styles that are not necessarily “Amharic” in terms of language or region of origin.
According to Menelik house musician Nadav Haber, “this term is used incorrectly,
because of current political issues (personal communication, May 2014). As Haber
points out, Amharic music is specific to the Gondar, Wollo and Gojam provinces of
Ethiopia; a discourse of Amharic cultural hegemony within Ethiopia and amongst various
diasporic communities, including Tel Aviv’s, drives the rhetorical conflation of the
Amharic language and the Amhara people with the entire country. This is why traditional
Amharic music itself, which is “rarely played in the club” (ibid), can come to stand for
“all urban Ethiopian pop, including Wolayta, Tigrinya, Guragignya, Oromigna, etc.”

At Menelik, at the erstwhile Vox Club, in wedding halls, and even at Tony Ray’s
Rasta Club, which hosts “Ethiopian nights” on Thursdays, the DJs blast Addis-imported
studio tracks that are lushly orchestrated with digital drums, electric bass, multiple layers
of synthesized keyboards and strings, and sometimes live or synthesized horns, krar (a five- or six-stringed lyre), or masengo (a one-stringed bowed lute). Onstage, however, live bands are often comprised of only a vocalist and a keyboardist, who covers as many other timbres as possible using MIDI sounds played overtop one of several pre-programmed percussion loops. Big shows, including holiday parties or concerts by well-known Addis pop stars on tour, will sometimes include a horn player. At Menelik on Purim, for example, my associate Nadav Haber played saxophone alongside his keyboardist colleague, and several vocalists took turns at the microphone.

These live stage shows generally showcase what Haber refers to as traditional Amharic music. Historically grounded in the innovations of itinerant secular musicians called azmaris, Amharic music uses a pentatonic modal system, qenet, which includes the four main modes of tezeta, bati, ambassel, and anchihoy, as well as major and minor derivatives of tezeta and bati (Shelemay, New Grove entry “Ethiopia”). “Tezeta” also refers to a thematic concern with love and longing for a person or a home-place, and many tezeta songs have slow tempos and soaring melodies that work well as showpieces for vocalists. Singing style tends to incorporate a high voice a somewhat nasal timbre, melismatic lines, and a tight vibrato on key words.

Haber notes that clubs can only afford to feature live music one or two nights a week, however, meaning that DJs run the show on most evenings. According to Haber, playlists incorporate roughly “50 percent Ethiopian urban classics, 30 percent modern Ethiopian pop, and 20 percent modern American R&B.” Former Vox Club manager Gili Yalo concurs that “Ethiopian nights” tend to revolve around “Ethiopian music, hip hop
and R&B” (interview with author, July 9, 2011). A DJ’s mix can certainly include some songs in the Amharic language, especially during the “urban classics” portion of the set that draws from a pre-1990 catalogue of Addis radio hits. Yet many dance floor favorites are Wolayta, Tigrinya, Guragignya, or Oromigna tracks that move away from traditional Amharic instrumentation and feel in favor of late 20th and 21st century Afro-diasporic popular soundscapes. Wolayta pop figures especially prominently, in part because, as Gili Yalo explained to me, this style lends itself to mixing with the popular Jamaican dancehall dembow riddim, and promotes energetic dancing on the club floor.

The question of how Amharic music functions socially in urban Israel – as regional music, glocali expression, or Ethiopian soundtrack abroad – is harder to answer than the question of what it sounds like, and how it may not function. Amharic music, for instance, is not global or even transregional. Non-Ethiopians do not produce this genre in any significant way, certainly not outside of Ethiopia, and its primary evocation for the non-Ethiopians who have even heard it is likely to be the general idea of Ethiopia, rather than, for example, diverse concepts ranging from pacifism, Zion, spirituality, and marijuana that non-Jamaicans might think about when listening to roots reggae. Then, too, consider Bollywood, which is language-limited in that it does not generally use English like reggae does; is strongly evocative of place; and plays a major role in the maintenance of South Asian diasporic connection to homeland. These ostensibly “regional” characteristics are counterbalanced by the consumption of Bollywood in various forms (from television commercials to hip-hop sampling) by non-South Asians (Hankins 2010), which does not tend to be the case with Amharic music. Certainly, the
Israeli soundscape evinces minimal influence by Ethiopian pop, with the Idan Raichel Project’s periodic use of Amharic vocals and Ethiopian instruments as the notable exception. Even south Tel Aviv residents who hear Amharic music blasting from clubs, cafes, and wedding halls along HaMasger Street, Neve Sha’anan, and Har Tziyon Avenue may know nothing about this music aside from the fact that there are probably Ethiopians somewhere nearby.

If not global or transregional, then, what facets of Amharic music might be considered “regional?” It emerges from within the “zone of contiguous territory” that includes Ethiopia as well as parts of neighboring Eritrea and Sudan; it is additionally performed and consumed among Ethiopian diasporic communities; and, like other “micromusics,” it is largely mute/invisible to audiences outside of these two spheres (Slobin 1993: 18). These aspects work in tandem with a further dynamic that Slobin’s framework positions as regional, the property of Amharic music as a space in which Ethiopian Israelis can come together, largely undisturbed by “outsiders,” to enjoy “a kind of socially patterned mode of self-fulfillment […] a regular, satisfying exercise in Victor Turner’s communitas,” (30), a strengthening of the collectivity.

Amharic music in Israel is a “small unit in a big music culture” (11), more or less inward-oriented and interfacing only minimally with Israeli popular musics like rock *Israeli, musikah Mizrahit*, Hebrew dance pop, and so on. When I asked Gili Yalo if Amharic pop in Tel Aviv nightclubs like his could be considered “Israeli music” – after all, the Ethiopians who listened to it were mainly Jewish Israeli citizens – he laughed. “If you tell an Ethiopian that this is Israeli music, he will kill you. This is the only thing I
have left to connect me to Ethiopia, and then you take it away from me?” (interview with author, July 9, 2011).

As I have indicated, however, contemporary Ethiopian pop is increasingly influenced by reggae, dancehall, hip-hop, and other Afro-diasporic genres. While Mark Slobin’s account of regional musics does recognize the presence of some musico-cultural hybridity in genres like polka or guitar protest rock, and he is attentive to the role of media and technology in geographically “scattering” even highly local genres (19), there is less attention to “regional” genres that are multiply-constituted and highly technological at the outset. Can Ethiopian superstar Teddy Afro, with his reggae-heavy, enormously produced studio recordings and epic stadium concerts, be considered “regional,” even if he sings in Amharic and his fan base is comprised overwhelmingly of Ethiopians?

On top of musico-cultural complexity in Amharic music production, Ethiopian pop rarely “sounds alone” in urban Israel: it is embedded within a broader Afro-diasporic soundscape at Menelik, played alongside Jamaican roots at Rasta Club, even shares the karaoke stage with other genres at a hole-in-the-wall venue across from Rasta. While Nadav Haber explains that “Ethiopian clubs that don’t play a lot of Amharic never gain a consistent patronage and can’t really last” (interview 2013), Gili Yalo told me that he had to change up the playlist at his Club Vox in order to keep his crowd interested. “We start with roots, then we play some Amharic, then hip-hop and dancehall, ragamuffin, then maybe back to Amharic” (interview 2011). When, during one slow night at Rasta Club, I asked my associate Nava Y to identify her “favorite music,” neither her personal history
of recent immigration from Ethiopia to Israel nor a deep, demonstrated fondness for live Amharic singing seemed to demand any narrowing of the taste preference proclaimed in her immediate reply: “musikah shachorah!” (interview 2013).

If Amharic pop music is a crucial component of Ethiopian-Israeli musical self-expression – a direct link to Ethiopia that “cannot be taken away” no matter how the academic’s taxonomic impulse might codify it – this collection of styles is not a comprehensive text of the Ethiopian-Israeli interpretive framework. Although Teddy Afro’s grand “Tikur Sew” (2012), a beautiful Amharic song about Emperor Menelik’s 1896 victory over Italian forces, will reliably bring throngs of Ethiopian clubgoers to their feet in joyous celebrations that are thrilling to witness, such a moment will more than likely be followed by other moments filled with reggae, hip-hop, and dancehall.

It may be said that Ethiopian Israelis claim multiple identities – Israeli, Ethiopian, Afro-diasporic, black – which they express through diverse aesthetic forms, or it may be said that this population adopts and reinterprets these diverse forms in order to claim a single, coherent identity of “Ethiopian Israeli.” At different times and in different contexts, one or the other dynamic may be in evidence, as in Efrat Yerady positioning of herself as a “peripheral Israeli” native first and foremost as distinct from Gili Yalo’s claim to the particular “Ethiopianness” of Amharic music. From “vintage” African and Afro-American poetry to Jamaican Patois, the studios of Addis Ababa to the barracks of the Israel Defense Forces, the smooth sound of roots to the “ghettotech” of hip-hop – indeed from one Zion to another – Ethiopian Israeli cultural producers are voracious in their influence consumption and prolific in their output.
Ethiopian Israelis are a “diasporic” collective with strong ties to more than one homeland. This group is always already both Beta Israel and modern Ethiopian Israeli; as such, Israel is and has always been ideo-imaginary and now material home. At the same time, Ethiopian Israelis are like many other diasporas in that they have experienced the destabilizing effects of mass-migration over a relatively short period of time, and they are like many other visible minorities in that they have been victimized by societal racism and sometimes invasive state interventions. “Othered at home,” Ethiopian Israelis are at the same time, like much of Israeli society, grappling with the implications of an influx of African refugees and migrants. As distinct from many other Jewish Israeli citizens, however, Ethiopians must contend with not only “difference” but many salient elements of “sameness” when it comes to their engagement with African migrant groups.

Given the extraordinary diversity of conceptual flight lines that intersect within Ethiopian-Israeli experience, it is fitting that this population relies upon multiple interpretive approaches to construct their own framework of “self” and “other.” While much social theory and ethnographic practice operates on the implicit premise that marginal, peripheral, or minority groups formulate the basis of collective identity in opposition to the hegemonic, dominant, or majority population, subcultural studies has done much to break up this formula, reminding us that marginal collectivities may identify themselves in relationship to each other as much as, or more than, in relationship to the broadly dominant “mainstream” (Gelder and Thornton 1997). For Ethiopian Israelis, certain self-conceptions might reflect affinity or alliance with non-African Israeliness, for example shared Jewishness, the Hebrew language, basic elements of
habitus shaped by continuous lived experience within Israeli society; yet much of “what matters” to Ethiopian Israelis, especially as expressed in musical activity, has nothing in particular to do with Israel. I have discussed examples of poetry and music that lean on Ethiopian, broader African or global black forms and concepts to a greater extent than on “Israeliness,” and have indicated that this approach is both furthered and complicated by Ethiopian ideo-imaginary and social interaction with Israel’s newer African populations.

In her 2004 article “Being an Oleh in a Global World,” Lisa Anteby-Yemini suggests that Israel’s Ethiopian population has effected a type of socio-cultural integration that allows for the maintenance of clearly delineated ethnic identity even while insisting on a place at the Israeli civic table. This is distinct from Israel’s traditional model of immigrant absorption: a top-down, multi-pronged engagement designed in many respects to denude Jewish immigrant collectivities of ethno-cultural specificities that might not sit easily within hegemonic national culture. Although this model, which produced a massive infrastructure of government-funded ulpanim (Hebrew language schools), “absorption centers,” and other social programs, remains a major touchstone within the native Israeli interpretive framework, contemporary post-Zionist scholarship argues that in retrospect, the complete assimilation approach was never fully effective (Silberstein 2008). Aside from the near-disappearance of Yiddish from Israeli arts and public discourse, most populations have retained languages, foodways, and plenty of other ethno-cultural specificities.

What may be unique about Ethiopian-Israeli integration, though, is this population’s “blackness” – its visible difference — and, therefore, the difficulty for
Ethiopian Israelis to keep the retention of their traditions and specificities under the social radar. Because they are both very visible and very interesting to other Israelis (recall the sense of national importance attached to the arrival of this eda) Ethiopian Israelis have often had to “take a stand,” cultivating self-awareness among themselves and expressing this awareness in public discourse or, as I have explored, in the more “hidden,” oblique transcripts of poetry and music. Like many Ethiopian-Israeli cultural producers of his cohort, Gili Yalo is cogent, firm, and determined about the pitfalls and potentials of a complex identity, and the importance of holding onto all of its many facets.

Assimilation? This is very complicated. I came to Israel when I was four. I don’t remember much from Ethiopia. But when you come to a country and you don’t feel you belong […] you cannot be only Israeli. You got roots. Your parents came from somewhere. Nobody can take it away or try to “fix” you. A man who have roots will always know where to go, and how to get there.”
Chapter 4
Refugees, Activists, and Sonic “Hidden” Transcripts of Dissent

Culture makes us proud. To be part of it, to present it, to show the people, to participate with others as well. So, I’m hearing a lot of news that’s very funny to me. Like we’re celebrating here, and some people came to demonstrate. It’s pretty funny because I sometimes could say they have riots, because this is their state [of mind.] But let’s be happy together guys. When it’s time to demonstrate, we can also demonstrate together. It’s time for us to show something different; not like always. I profoundly believe that when a society or a community comes together, works side by side, it will make everything easier. When you’re working alone, you’re not going to move forward, but when you’re working together, you will succeed (Mutasim Ali, February 15, 2013, Sudanese Cultural Day, Tel Aviv).

Hundreds were converging on the Goldstein Country Club, a community center in south Tel Aviv’s Kiryat Shalom neighborhood, for an event quite unlike any that had occurred in this space before. Used primarily by the Mizrahi and Russian residents of the neighborhood for youth day camps, adult continuing education classes, and sports (the location is colloquially called habrichat haRussim, or “Russian pool”) Goldstein Country Club was now hosting the city’s first “Sudanese Cultural Day.” This February 2013 event, organized by the Bnai Darfur NGO (Sons of Darfur) in cooperation with Tel Aviv’s Amnesty International chapter, would feature speeches, a theatrical skit, music and dance performances by refugees and asylum seekers from Sudan, South Sudan, and Darfur. As Bnai Darfur director Mutasim Ali made clear in his introductory speech, this unprecedented display was intended to showcase a side of refugee experience commonly overlooked in Israel’s public sphere debate around refugee presence. Art and music, beauty and pride would counter notions of East Africans as dangerous, impoverished,
uneducated and uncultured. In reaching out to sympathetic or open-minded Israelis, the Sudanese community would strengthen valuable interpersonal and institutional ties in their adopted city, forging unity in an urban environment beset by fracture.

Judging by the many Israeli faces amongst the capacity crowd in the Goldstein auditorium, organizers’ hopes for coalition-building were not misplaced. And the celebration of culture that Mutasim calls forth, and which I describe below, would become overwhelmingly apparent in the gorgeous music and dance taking place onstage, in the happy cheers of the crowd throughout an afternoon of performances. Yet, as Mutasim alludes to in his speech, not everybody at Goldstein was celebrating that day. When I arrived to the event, I found a group of approximately forty protesters outside the entrance. A middle-aged man wearing spectacles and a kippa (Hebrew: yarmulke) was speaking forcefully into a bullhorn, and several adults and teenagers held signs:

“Toshvei ha’schonot hem ha’gorshim ve ha’cluaim.” “The residents of these neighborhoods are the expelled and jailed.”

“Sgarat haiynu: hagancha, pasha, ones, alimut.” “The routine of our lives: neglect, crime, rape, violence.”

A young Darfuri man in a cowboy hat and suit jacket was standing a short distance from the protesters to greet those who had come for Cultural Day and escort them inside. There was, I learned later, some concern that protesters would harass participants, or even that a riot might break out; my friend Nirit Ben-Ari had in fact warned me off the event for this reason (interviews with author, February 2013). Nothing of the kind occurred, however. Israelis sometimes joke about argument being their
national pastime, and it was often my experience during fieldwork that individuals on
different sides of the “refugee issue” would engage in long private debates with one
another during public protests and demonstrations. Sudanese Cultural Day was no
exception: rather than violence, the scene outside the country club was marked by loud
but basically reasoned exchanges between pairs of demonstrators and Cultural Day
audience members.

Listening to some of these arguments, and to the words of the man on the
bullhorn, I felt a moment of compunction about crossing through the demonstration. I
could not disagree with some of the protesters that south Tel Aviv’s low-income and
working class Israeli communities have historically experienced neglect on the part of
national and municipal governments (see the Introduction and Chapter 1). This was the
driving idea behind the sign identifying south Tel Aviv’s Israeli residents as “the expelled
and jailed,” a provocative appropriation of language more commonly used by pro-refugee
activists to describe the plight of East Africans in Israel. Notably, there were no
explicitly anti-refugee sentiments expressed in protest signage, and I heard only few in
verbal discussions. Instead, amidst the cacophony of voices, accusations emerged of
Israel-wide anti-Mizrahi racism, of liberal Ashkenazi elitism, and of a government that
was dumping incoming Africans into a resource-poor Israeli neighborhood, rather than
trying to solve the refugee problem at a structural level. As I describe in Chapter 1, this
multi-part complaint is perhaps best synthesized in the slogan “send them to Ramat
Aviv,” which I heard chanted outside Sudanese Cultural Day and at other protests during
my fieldwork. Why, this slogan demands to know, must Mizrahim and other
marginalized Israeli residents share limited resources with the new arrivals, when the primarily *Ashkenazi* residents of Ramat Aviv and other wealthy north Tel Aviv neighborhoods remain unaffected?

The class-focused aspect of protesters’ argument was compounded with an assertion that African refugee presence in south Tel Aviv has exponentially increased crime and violence, especially rape. Between 2012 and 2014, there were fairly regular media reports of Israeli women raped by refugee men in Tel Aviv, and this point was often repeated by politicians and demonstrators during public events. The overwhelming pervasiveness of this notion (to the extent that a *Mizrahit* friend declined my invitation to Rasta Club one night because of fears of rape) is a subject of contention amongst pro- and anti-refugee activist collectivities, with the former claiming that numbers of rapes perpetuated by refugees are inflated, and the latter, that they are under-reported (Derfner 2012: 972mag.com)

The rhetoric of protest at Sudanese Cultural Day, and the arguments taking place there between Israelis (I saw no refugees talking to the demonstrators), revealed once again that much of the intensity of debate around refugee presence is driven by fissures within Israeli society; by conflicts of class, ethnicity, and culture that have been present since the earliest decades of the state. Accordingly, this chapter gives roughly equal attention to East African musical activities, values, aesthetics, and expressed political agendas, and to Israeli participation in refugee-related activities and discourses. As Mutasim emphasizes, refugee-Israeli coalition building is a crucial part of refugee political strategies, and much of the musicking I describe in this chapter is aimed, at least
in part, at winning more Israeli allies to the East African cause or consolidating the support of existing pro-refugee activists.

In order to provide an overview of the vast, complicated world of refugee-related activity in Tel Aviv, I first outline of Israel’s shifting and convoluted policy progression with respect to African refugees and asylum seekers, which has taken place at both national and city levels. Framing Tel Aviv’s Sudanese and Eritrean social actors as a “community of dissent” (Shelemay 2011), bound by the shared project of resisting marginalization, I explore some of the nuanced ways in which expressive forms can further this cause. I next home in on several public events that feature Sudanese and Eritrean performers, as well as Israeli-led protests and demonstrations that rely heavily on music and sound to heighten messages. The dual approach laid out in Mutasim’s Sudanese Cultural Day speech, a simultaneous celebration of expressive culture and fortification of an issue-focused constituency, is found throughout East African performance in urban Israel, pointing up, as I examine below, a marked permeability of boundaries between aesthetics and politics that helps facilitate claim-making. In this connection, I attend closely to the quality of “sound as force” (Goodman 2010) in the music, speeches, and slogans of protests, demonstrations, and public performances on both sides of the “refugee issue,” exploring the effects of sonic vibration, dynamics, and timbre on the psycho-somatic processes of participants and witnesses.
Although this chapter frames East African musicking in urban Israel as political action, I do not suggest that Sudanese and Eritrean refugees engage music only or even primarily in service of overt activism. Personal and small-group music-making is constantly happening in churches and at weddings, in nightclubs, cafes, and homes. Musical production, performance, and consumption remains a source of pleasure and recreation for refugees, even as music has emerged as a central component of group self-representation and public politics. Yet I wish to emphasize that, in the midst of the “Tel Aviv crisis” around refugee presence, music’s pleasures and its politics, its “public” and “private” spheres, are not fully separable, so that even the act listening to an imported CD of Khartoum pop in one’s bedroom can resonate in concert with large-scale events taking place in the city outside, just as a krar performance at thousands-strong demonstration can afford immense private enjoyment for participants. James Scott has described “the political life of subordinate groups” as taking place either “offstage,” in discourses and activities hidden from hegemonic view, or in “disguised forms […] insinuated into the
public transcript” (1990: 136), in which resistance is couched in language or aesthetic expressions that are acceptable to hegemony. As I will describe, the musical politics of East African refugees and their allies complicates this framework to a certain extent, in that the use of music and other expressive forms in public can variously “disguise” or foreground oppositionality. As Mutasim says, “Let’s be happy together, guys. When it’s time to demonstrate, we will demonstrate together.” The arts of refugee resistance are found in celebration and in forthright confrontation alike.

Refugee Status and the Making of a “Community of Dissent”

When I arrived for fieldwork in Tel Aviv in February of 2013, Israel’s non-governmental African Refugee Development Center (ARDC) and Amnesty International were estimating “African refugee population” at approximately 55,000 (ardc-israel.org). This number includes most Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and/or asylum seekers (more on the distinction between these two categories below), as well as some individuals from Ethiopia, Cote d’Ivoire and the Democratic Republic of Congo. This figure does not account for migrants from African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, and Uganda, among others, who may have entered Israel as pilgrims, tourists, or, less frequently, as workers, and who remained in Israel after their visas expired (see Chapter 3). Further, not all children born to African migrants in Israel are counted, and even some adults entering the country have had to elude authorities at all stages of their journey, therefore remaining “off the books.” The figure of 55,000, in other words, is a rough and somewhat
conservative estimate; unofficially, some members of the human rights and pro-refugee activist communities put the number at thousands more.

Of the official count, only a few hundred possess an S2(a)5 card, a document representing one stage of Israel’s seemingly ever-shifting refugee policy. Over ninety percent of African asylum seekers arrived between 2005, the end of Sudan’s second civil war and the worsening of unrest in Eritrea, and 2012; during this five-year period, the permissions and restrictions of “Conditional Release” were subject to change at the discretion of national authorities. Some of the earliest arrivals, for example, were subject to a semi-codified and partially-enforced policy decision colloquially termed “Gadera-Hadera,” which restricted asylum seekers to residence in peripheral parts of the country, delineated as north and south of those two towns (Moshe Morav, interview with author, August 2010). Later came the busses ferrying East African arrivals from holding centers at the southern border directly to Tel Aviv’s Levinsky Park, putting a de-facto end to Gadera-Hadera, but heralding no clear decision about the status of the asylum seekers, nor plans to implement a refugee determination process. By 2010, some S2(a)5 cards were printed with the statement “this visa is not a working permit;” many refugees who arrived after this date have found “under the table” work on construction sites or in restaurants, while others lost work when their employers were fined by the government.

According to ARDC, the period between 2007 and 2012 was marked by “hot returns,” in which Israel expelled hundreds of Sudanese and Eritrean asylum seekers to Egypt, where authorities then sent them back to countries of origin. Although Beit Ha’Aliyon (the Israeli Supreme Court) ruled against this practice in 2011 as a
contravention of the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, to which Israel is a signatory, the majority of the South Sudanese community – undocumented asylum seekers and S2(a)5 holders alike – were expelled in 2012 following South Sudan’s independence. Even during the ostensibly “welcoming” years, then, when authorities were at least issuing residence permits and investing in transportation from periphery to center, national approaches to the African “refugee issue” were mercurial and sometimes internally contradictory.

The major blow, according to many members of refugee communities as well as Israeli and international workers, came in early 2012, when the Knesset and the Prime Minister’s Office passed amendments to the decades-old Prevention of Infiltration Law, revised to permit the detention of asylum seekers for up to three years without trial, or indefinitely for individuals arriving from “enemy” countries such as Sudan. With the passage of this act came the ramping up of security infrastructure including a Negev/Sinai “border fence” and nearby Saharonim detention center. Since that time, the few individuals still able to cross through Egypt into Israel have been stuck in detention without a release date, and the flow of asylum seekers from the Negev to Tel Aviv has slowed to a trickle. While a 2013 Beit HaAliyon decision revoked the revised “Anti-Infiltration Law” as a human rights violation, the fence and the detention centers remain operational. Further, the national government has announced a $3,5000 grant to any Sudanese or Eritrean refugee who is willing to relocate to Uganda, according to a behind-the-scenes deal struck between Ugandan and Israeli authorities.
This roughly nine-year history of East African refugees in Israel, itself only the most visible, public phase of a longer saga of African migrants seeking a place in the country, is marked by a whirlwind of shifting policies, reversed decisions, raging debate amongst Israeli politicians and public alike, and constant, grinding insecurity for refugee communities. Merav Bat-Gil of Aid Organization for Refugees (ASSAF), a pro-refugee Israeli activist who helped me to understand some of the intricate details of various laws and regulations, emphasizes that the biggest problem for both Israel and the refugees is a nightmarish lack of clarity and consistency in policymaking and implementation. “Israel is a signatory to the Refugee Convention, so it knows what it is supposed to do,” she explains. “But it didn’t think about Africans when it signed. There is still no process” (interview with author, March 10, 2013). According to ARDC, fewer than 200 individuals have been recognized as refugees by Israel since its establishment in 1948 (ardc-israel.org); such recognition has come in an ad-hoc fashion, absent an official
determination process or identifiable government body responsible for dealing with asylum seekers.

For this reason, and following usage amongst my refugee and activist associates, I use the terms “refugee” and “asylum seeker” interchangeably despite distinctions between these two statuses. Although an asylum seeker legally becomes a refugee only once such determination has been made by the receiving country, many Sudanese and Eritreans will refer to themselves as refugees even though few have been granted formal recognition. Relatedly, as Bat-Gil and others have pointed out to me, many individuals from countries like the Congo, Ghana or Cote d’Ivoire who consider themselves labor migrants are technically in the same “residence category” as East African asylum seekers, and, infrequently, may gain permanent residence via the same elusive refugee determination (interview with author, March 10, 2013.)

Through interviews with associates, participation in information and planning meetings with activist organizations, and attendance at public performances and political demonstrations, I have come to understand that the question of official status is simultaneously highly-charged and hardly relevant. That is, most any asylum seeker/refugee needs and desires formal recognition as a resident of Israel and member of its labor force, and every pro-refugee activist shares this objective for members of her community of concern. Despite this overarching agenda, and despite the logistical constraints imposed by the status issue – not the least of which may be hours spent standing on line at the Misrad HaPanim every few months to face another S2(a)5 renewal interview – members of refugee communities live out their daily lives only partly in
deference to status. The business of finding work, keeping house, engaging in social
activity, and making music will always occupy a great portion of one’s attention,
imagination and plan-making, whether one faces the immediate future with confidence or
maddening doubt. Moreover, refugee-oriented social service organizations seek to
address immediate community needs like housing, health, employment, and opportunities
for aesthetic expression while attending to longer-term strategies for policy change.
Groups like ARDC, ASSAF, and Amnesty try to help all comers, whether they are S2(a)5
holders, undocumented arrivals, or labor migrants.

There is a communal feeling, a sense of “we’re all in this together,” that marks the
atmosphere amongst refugee community leaders and Israeli activists that I find inspiring.
It is possible to spend weeks, months, even years as an “outsider” in Tel Aviv
encountering primarily pro-refugee, anti-racist attitudes and initiatives, participating in
alliance-building activities, and associating with countless individuals, African and Israeli
alike, who are committed to a wide array of social justice-oriented ideals. As a U.S.
Foreign Service Officer responsible for the “refugee” reporting portfolio at the American
Embassy between 2002 and 2005, this world of pro-active migrants, left-leaning Israeli
political activists, and diverse cultural producers was my initial introduction to Israel’s
complex “refugee issue.” As an ethnographer between 2010 and 2014, I encountered
darker aspects of African refugee experience, and witnessed a turbulent unfolding of the
refugee debate at local and national levels; yet there remains an aura of optimism and
determination around this seemingly intractable “issue” in certain quarters of Tel Aviv
civil society that is difficult to define. This “pro-refugee” Tel Aviv is an urban landscape
simultaneously material and ideo-imaginary, made up of hard work and visible, audible results as well as lofty rhetoric, heartfelt ideals, and future-oriented desires, one which is all the more potent and compelling for its persistence alongside equally urgent cityscapes that can only exist via the destruction of the refugee presence. “Pro-refugee” Tel Aviv is, too, a process, an ongoing “practice[s] of taking over, reclaiming or rewriting actual spaces into hopeful places [a] remapping, re-visioning, and rewording” (Davidson et. al. 2012: 12).

My understanding of the claim-making struggle that plays out between the proponents of pro- and anti-African refugee Tel Aviv(s) has emerged from interviews and personal conversations that always seem to hover around “big ideas” – I think here, for instance, of the concept of “Mediterranean blackness” that drives my associate Khen Elmaleh’s lived interpretation of political Mizrahiyut (see Chapter 1). Equally, though, I have learned much from my observations of, and involvement in, the planning and execution of pro-refugee demonstrations and public initiatives. As an ethnomusicologist, I have been drawn to activities that promised, in advertisements and word-of-mouth promotion, musical and theatrical demonstrations of refugee experience and the “refugee debate.” There were many that took place during my fieldwork, and many more I have encountered via video recordings and eyewitness accounts. Whether or not urban Israel is an especial hotbed of “aesthetic” activism, evincing more politically oriented performance per capita than other modern nation-states, is a significant inquiry that is, in itself, beyond the scope of my research, yet Kay Kaufman Shelemay’s articulation of “musical communities” (2011) incorporates a framework of “dissent” that is powerfully
applicable to contemporary Tel Aviv’s musico-political landscape. “Dissent communities,” she writes, “generally emerge through acts of resistance against an existing collectivity […] Individuals involved in processes of dissent quite regularly draw on musical performance as a mechanism to enlist others in their cause” (370).

Sudanese Cultural Day is a prototypical example of the kind of musical activity that a dissent community may undertake, in which performances of traditional music and dance serve the dual function of reinvigorating communities of Sudanese, South Sudanese, and Darfuri refugees following the upheaval and fracture of migration, and protesting societal racism and institutional marginalization in Israel. Significantly, none of the songs or dances taking place in the Goldstein auditorium was clearly “oppositional” in content. Performers sang love ballads and lullabies from their home villages, enacted ritual courtship dances and elaborately costumed war pantomimes that were old even in their parents’ time. Euro-American (and Israeli) vernacular understandings of musical dissent that tend to mark out explicitly political songwriting as distinct from other forms of music may overlook the valences of defiance in such “folk” and “traditional” performances, hearing them as apolitical or, perhaps, pre-political. As Shelemay emphasizes, however, musics closely identified with “descent” communities – that is, groups formed around shared ethnicity, kinship, religious or national ties – can easily shift from affirming shared identity to voicing political resistance (2011: 360). When a group’s ethno-cultural and national identity are the cause of its marginalization, as is the case for East African refugees in Israel, “descent” music and “dissent” music overlap extensively.
It is context, of course, that is largely responsible for shaping a dissent community; the same music and dance seen on a south Tel Aviv stage in 2013 might convey different messages if performed in Sudan, or even elsewhere in diaspora. According to Shelemay, “Dissent communities […] tend to coalesce quite rapidly, arising in response to a particular event or circumstance at a specific moment in time (2011: 370) East African refugees and asylum seekers have faced challenges to recognition and belonging in Israel for close to a decade; these challenges came to a head in the 2012 with the passage of the modified Prevention of Infiltration Act, catalyzing a major surge in collective organizing and public activity with a performative component. Surrounded by vocal groups who object to their presence, their own civic activities tightly constrained by shifting governmental and administrative restrictions, and immersed in an urban culture that has inherited Israel’s national penchant for expressive politics and political aesthetics, Sudanese and Eritrean refugee groups have come to understand their own expressive forms as integral components of socio-political strategy.

Performance as Oblique and Overt Resistance

Throughout this dissertation, I have sought to highlight music and other expressive forms, including dance, poetry, and performative speech, as effective claim-making tools in part because they can be enjoyable, able to reach audiences at psychosomatic levels where direct protest or complaint may fail. The vigor of musikah mizrahit (Chapter 1), the bold poetry of Raav (Chapter 2), Afropop’s danceable groove (Chapter 3)
generate virtual and material spaces in which complicated discourses and controversial ideas can be gracefully aired; expressive aesthetics prime participants into states of heightened receptivity (Goodman 2010: 150). Shelemay describes this dynamic in straightforward terms with respect to dissent communities and the targets of their messages: “music can give voice to dissent while partially masking its critical edge and reducing risks of retribution from more powerful forces” (2011: 370). Similarly, James Scott identifies expressive idioms such as “disguises, linguistic tricks, euphemisms, folktales, ritual gestures” as “veiled discourses of dignity and self-assertion” in marginal groups’ engagement with agents of hegemony (1990:137). East African refugee communities employ music and dance alongside many of the categories Scott outlines in their public demands for improved status in Israel, under the ever present threats of deportation, detainment, and even violence.

Among Sudanese Cultural Day’s stage performances was a Darfuri “warrior dance” depicting young men of the region’s Fur group preparing and departing for war, fighting, and returning home victorious. A male vocal soloist and three female singers in matching print dresses and head scarves engaged in lines of call-and-response, as four men in modified taub (Arabic: gown) paraded back and forth across the stage to the rhythm of (identify drum) accompaniment. The lead man held a wooden sword, which he raised aloft before “battle,” then turned upside down and held by the “blade” after victory. The pride and pleasure they took in this performance was obvious in their smiles, in the energy of their gestures and voices; the sense of celebration, brought powerfully to the fore as the women singers fell to their knees to praise the returning
“warriors,” was infectious to audience members. Yet this spectacle can also be understood as a representation of conflict in which a clear message of armed resistance is wrapped up in ostensibly innocuous ritual gestures and “folk” narrative. Here, the imagined “pre-modernity” of rural Darfuri song and dance in the collective Israeli ideological imaginary is itself a “disguise,” rendering the performance’s implied threat “too ambiguous to be actionable by authorities” (Scott 1990: 139).

If the oppositional potential of such a performance seems weak on the face of it – this was a staged dance in a country club, after all – consider its rhetorical and even material implications if the group of Cultural Day protesters were to have come inside and watched. How, for instance, would the individual holding the “crime, rape, and violence” sign regard the figure of the sword-bearing refugee? And what if this performance took place outside, perhaps on Neve Sha’anan Street, where Israelis and migrants mix freely and the Immigration Police regularly patrol? Furthermore, Cultural Day organizing group Bnai Darfur maintains a website and social media page critiquing Israel’s reluctance to fulfill its responsibilities under the UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. This NGO has a codified agenda of dissent that does not disappear in the presence of traditional performance, but rather undergirds such performance (bnaidarfur.org).
Music and dance engage the senses to an especially high degree; performers and audiences are immersed in sounds, images, and physical sensations that, by design or not, can serve as agents of indirection with respect to messages of resistance. Yet what of speech, or other expressive forms that transmit such messages with comparatively more straightforwardness? Refugee social actors in urban have built up a robust practice of “political theater” to convey their experiences and aspirations in ways that augment the solidarity-building and symbolic resistance facilitated by the warrior dance and other “traditional” cultural performances. Through drama and comedy alike, refugees can speak directly about the charged topics of civil war, migration, detention, employment troubles, visa status, and racism while retaining certain expressive idioms that render these subjects “safe” enough for performers and audiences to confront together.
Sudanese Cultural Day’s song and dance spectacle culminated in a short, non-musical play that chronicled the first days of a semi-fictional Sudanese asylum seeker in Levinsky Park. This character was played by Mubarak, a cheerful, stocky fellow whom I ended up interviewing several times during my fieldwork. Onstage, Mubarak was fleeing the Janjaweed militia in Sudan, which had killed his family. Arriving in Israel with high hopes of aid and succor, Din’s attempts to learn the ropes were fraught with both hilarity and horror: the thrill of meeting a fellow villager so far from home; a night rolled up on the Levinsky Park lawn; a morning “bath” at the Park’s water fountain; a Kafkaesque encounter with bureaucracy at the Misrad HaPanim (Hebrew: Ministry of Absorption); an Israeli boss, played by Mubarak’s friend Din in a slick silk shirt and tie, shouting out job instructions.

This skit told a true story, or true enough, with each indignity enacted onstage representing a familiar experience for refugees, and a talking point for Israeli pro-refugee activists. Yet harsh realities were transformed through humor, particularly Mubarak’s exaggerated pantomimes of sleeping and washing in the Park, and the extreme dangers that Israeli officials and employers pose in real life were neutralized through Din’s burlesquing of the restaurant boss. This scene is an especially rich example of the “carnivalesque” in Mikhail Bakhtin’s usage, a subversion of hegemonic power structure through humor, chaos, grotesquerie or performative role reversal that is found in the expressive cultures of many marginal or subordinated peoples (Simon 1995). Although Mubarak’s character remains at the mercy of Din’s Israeli figure, this “boss” is portrayed as blustering and buffoonish, contorting himself into absurd postures as he demonstrates
the proper way to sweep a floor, his voice breaking histrionically. As the audience roars
with laughter, Mubarak nods, straight-faced, or replies with a simple “\textit{ken}” (Hebrew:
yes), displaying self-control and physical dignity, a marked contrast to Din’s capering.

Mubarak’s performance here has affinities with other strains of Afro-diasporic
expressive traditions that prioritize subtlety and restraint in the face of insult, for instance
the African-American game of “the dozens” and the narrative of the “signifying
monkey.” As “dozens” players win by not losing their temper and the monkey “tropes a
dope” (Gates 1988: 63) by cleverly turning the words and actions of rivals against
themselves, Mubarak’s equanimity positions him as the clear hero; the Israeli boss’s
antics only embarrass himself and invite audience derision. It is worth noting that the
tactics Mubarak demonstrates in performance are similar to those that Mutasim Ali
employs in his introductory speech, and to which the greeter outside of Goldstein country
club turns, perhaps instinctively, when he matches the shouts of protesters with non-
engagement and words of cheerful welcome to the arriving audience. Much more than a
potent theatrical device, “the ability to control emotions and anger [is] often necessary for
survival” amongst vulnerable communities (Scott 1990: 137).

Significantly, refugee theater engaging burlesque, satire, and physical comedy is
not limited to venues populated by sympathetic audiences, nor are displays of self-
restraint and poise as means of tacitly contradicting authority. While Din and Mubarak
could be reasonably confident that refugees and left-leaning activist Israelis in the
Goldstein auditorium would react to the skit with appreciation, no such certainty exists
during public performances and outdoor demonstrations that are often witnessed by
unsympathetic people in close proximity. For instance, an April, 2013 “Darfur Remembrance Day” event in the Kikar Rabin city square featured Mubarak and several colleagues satirizing the failure of countries and institutions to address the crisis via raucously unflattering portrayals of United Nations, African Union, and Israeli officials. Meanwhile, a number of Sudanese and Eritrean volunteers stood at the edges of the watching crowd, their backs to the busy street and sidewalk, wearing neon vests emblazoned with the phrase “Giving Back to the Neighborhood With Respect” in English and Hebrew. Sporting these vests, arms crossed, the men cut dignified, assertive, but non-confrontational figures, using bodily comportment to contradict public rhetoric that labels African refugees as perpetrators of crime and violence in Tel Aviv neighborhoods.

Thus far, I have described expressive forms as powerful political tools for East African refugee communities because they can transmit complicated, controversial, dangerous or painful content in basically appealing or at least ostensibly “inoffensive” ways. As such, music, dance, and theater partially shield refugee activists from accusations and reprisals. Yet expressive forms serve other functions in addition to this “shielding.” The bolstering of ethno-cultural pride for Sudanese participants in the Cultural Day event is an instance of one such function, and indeed, the strong group-specific associations that music, especially, can contain are always part of the equation when considering the purpose, meaning, and outcome of any public performance. These “extra-musical” associations, however – be they recollections of home, visions of the future, evocations of a transnational African diaspora or a local multi-ethnic coalition -- are inextricably bound up with musical particulars. The sound of the *k*ra*r* can call up a
memory with as much clarity as a lyric. Melody, harmony, and instrumentation work alongside dynamics, rhythm, tempo, and timbre as some of the qualities of musical sound that directly impact the psycho-somatic apparatus of performers and audiences.

Sound retains its materiality whether it is “musical” or not; Din’s satire of an Israeli restaurant boss is effective in part because of certain vocal qualities: loudness, tremolo, register breaks, high tessitura. In Steve Goodman’s wide-ranging discussion of “sonic warfare,” he posits that “before the activation of casual or semantic, that is, cognitive listening, the sonic is a phenomenon of contact and displays, through an array of autonomic responses, a whole spectrum of affective powers” (2010:10). For Goodman, these affective powers “preced[e] ideology” (2010:10). This quality of “sound as force,” I suggest, is partly responsible for the prominence of music, performative speech, sloganeering and chants in public politics. If these forms can sometimes “disguise” resistance in the ways I outline above, they can at other times foreground it, at least in the immediate affective experience of performers and audiences.
Public Sound As Force in the Refugee Debate

When I paused briefly in front of the Sudanese Cultural Day protesters, hesitating before entering the Goldstein auditorium, it was more than just my basic sympathy with Mizrahi-led critiques of the structural marginalization in south Tel Aviv that caused me to halt. If these protesters were, say, quietly handing out leaflets, I would have taken one and moved on. Instead, they were making a lot of noise, and the shouted slogans mediated through a crackly, overdriven bullhorn in particular struck me at a visceral level. It was the aspect of sound as force in addition to sound as message that acted as a boundary between me and the auditorium, capturing my full attention, stopping my feet, and triggering a momentary experience of torn allegiance.
Most political protests and demonstrations are noisy events, and those that are not, as I discuss below, use the absence of sound in order to transmit both cognitive information and somatic experience to participants and witnesses. Researchers across the social sciences and humanities have explored the use of sound as a technology of conflict (c.f. Sterne 1997, Cusick 2006, Goodman 2010). Sounds, as Steve Goodman notes, can trigger deeply painful associations (especially in the case of music), and they can also be painful in themselves, precipitating “an injurious or otherwise painful moment literally recorded by the body. This recording should not be confused with memory that takes place in the brain, and it should not be assumed that a person even needs to be conscious to record an injurious experience” (Semons in Goodman 2010: 135).

Especially when sound implicates both cognition and soma, as much public sloganeering and speech does, it can become an incredibly powerful weapon, an ostensibly “hands-off” instrument of violence. In this connection, I consider a 2011 video of anti-refugee protesters in Levinsky Park chanting “Sudanim le’Sudan” (Hebrew: Sudanese to Sudan) as they ran across the nighttime lawn waving Israeli flags. This takeover of Levinsky’s endlessly contested physical space, which even at the moment of protest was occupied by several dozen refugees sheltering in tents and lean-tos, was rendered exponentially forceful via the sheer volume of the chanting, the abrasive timbre of angry voices, and the “hocketed” quality of the repeated phrase, conveying the presence of a multi-person threat. “Sudanim le’Sudan,” I insist, manifests as inarguably stronger and more dangerous when voiced than it does on paper or in concept; the fact that refugees in tents might partially attenuate the impact of this slogan by physically
covering their ears only underscores the obstreperous, real-world *puissance* of intentional sound.

“Sound as force” (as distinct from latent sound in written words or music) always means sound in place and time. Special experiential meaning emerges at the spots where content-rich sound waves meet the edges, slopes, and bulky forms of the material world. This meeting *is* the nature of affect as described by Davidson et. al: an implosion of ideo-imagination and social/spatial milieu that is “infused with power, grounded in place” (2011: 5). Because sound is here-and-now, and because it impacts the physical body in addition to cognitive structures, its potential to precipitate or even enact chaos and types violence is significant. James Scott points up this slippage when he notes that “actual rebels” often mimic the behaviors of people engaging in “carnival” behaviors, including extreme noisemaking, and that “the world-upside-down symbolism of carnival […] would frequently spill over its ritual banks into violent conflict (1990: 181). Some protests in Tel Aviv have included acts of direct, corporeal violence or the destruction of property (Sheizaf 2012: 972mag.org), yet even “hands-off” demonstrations like the “Sudanim le’Sudan” march have engendered in refugees the visceral experience of attack, and perpetuated a climate of fear that wears down and disciplines refugee bodies (Goodman 2010: 17). It is worth noting that very few individuals I met during the course of my fieldwork had experienced “hands-on” violence, or could identify the exact state of ever-shifting African refugee-related legislation or formal government policy; many of them, however, recounted to me the sonic distillations of racism and anti-refugee sentiment I have described.
Sound’s capacity for somatic impact is not found solely in its relative loudness or softness, of course. Political slogans are often effective in part because they are “catchy,” evincing, alongside linguistic properties such as rhyme or metaphor, qualities like brevity and rhythmic cadence that muster listeners’ bodies into alliance with their thoughts or emotions. When Minister of Knesset Miri Regev of the center-right Likud party sought to mobilize fellow lawmakers and Israeli citizens around proposed amendments to the Prevention of Infiltration Law in 2012, for example, she picked a 1,000 person protest in HaTikva neighborhood to exclaim “plitim hem sartan ba’guf” ["refugees are a cancer in the body"] into a microphone.

This slogan subsequently appeared countless times in printed media, but it also received extensive verbal repetition, including by refugees themselves. Even as most of Regev’s speech was forgotten or misrepresented, refugees remembered the phrase and thereby retained the vicious thrust of her message. One young Eritrean man I met while hanging up posters for an Amnesty International had misheard the Hebrew slogan, repeating it to me as “refugees have cancer in the body,”
and was furious that this lie had become such a common refrain in Tel Aviv (interview with author, April 2013).  

Even memorable speech can be misunderstood; this is, after all, what makes the children’s game of “Telephone” enjoyable, and the experience of having one’s words “twisted” in an argument so frustrating. Thus, if slogans are designed to stick, they can also have a sonic life beyond what is intended, and they ripe for parody. The intentional manipulation of sound has a place in Israel’s cultural politics, from the exaggerated imitation of Eritrean and Sudanese accents I have heard in anti-refugee protests to the “straightening out” of Ethiopian musical rhythms by Israeli pop musicians (see Chapter 1). In one prominent example, producer Noy Alooshe created a hip-hop style remix of another speech by Miri Regev that went viral on the Internet, in which her spoken words are edited into a chorus of “Miri Regev hi schoonah, kapayim!” (Hebrew: Miri Regev is ‘ghetto,’ clap your hands!) (youtube.com). Regev’s utterances are de- and re-contextualized to generate a biting depiction of the right-wing politician as something of a frecha, the Hebrew slang insult for a low-income, tackily-dressed, vapid girl. The

1 This misreading of Regev’s slogan -- that Israelis view East African refugees as harboring disease – can be examined with reference to the targeting of the Beta Israel (Ethiopian Jewish community) as a public health threat at various points since their initial arrival in the early 1980s. Thousands of Ethiopian-Israelis rioted in 1996 after revelations that the Ministry of Health had destroyed all stocks of blood donated by Ethiopians on the grounds that it might be contaminated with HIV. In 2013, Israeli and international media reported Ethiopian-Israeli women coming forward with stories of Israeli doctors and Health Ministry officials who urged or forced them to take Depo-Provera, a long-acting form of birth control, upon arrival to Israel and subsequently. According to some of these women, Health Ministry officials claimed they could not receive Israeli citizenship unless they accepted the shots (Greenwood, The Guardian: 2013.)
kapayim shout’s well-known associations with Mizrahi musical performance enhanced the humor and repeatability of the song – and, not incidentally, perpetuated the sense among some Mizrahi activists of anti-Mizrahi racism among left-leaning Israelis.

Combining memorable speech with a straightforward, infectious dance groove, the Regev remix became an “earworm,” infecting listeners’ somatic experience in ways that written words or “plain” speech might not, such that even mention of the song could prompt roars of laughter and sung renditions amongst pro-refugee urban Israelis for months after it hit the Internet.²

Another widely circulated video, a documentary edited by pro-refugee activists David Sheen and Max Blumenthal (2013), includes footage of an Israeli woman resident of south Tel Aviv yelling into a microphone at a protest, claiming frequent rapes of Israeli women by East African refugee men. “If fear for my life means that I am a racist, then I say it proudly: I am a racist!” (“Israel’s New Racism”: youtube.com). This statement,

² Likud MK Miri Regev is a controversial figure, drawing immense antipathy from leftist Israelis, but a more ambivalent response from Mizrahi activists, including some who identity as leftist themselves. Many Mizrahim appreciate Regev’s outspokenness about her Mizrahit identity, even if they take issue with her party’s hawkish politics. Further, they regard the vitriolic intensity of some attacks on Regev as evidence of liberal Ashkenazi elitism and anti-Mizrahi racism. In one example of Regev’s highly contentious status, Nirit Ben-Ari was widely and harshly criticized by Mizrahi activists for her 2012 Ha’aretz op-ed against the MK, which included the suggestion that Regev’s rightist race and class politics ran counter to her own interests as a Mizrahit. According to Ben-Ari, “these people were actually my friends. We worked together, we agreed on things. But they willfully took my op-ed the wrong way, and they totally shunned me” (interview with author, November 2013). As Khen Elmaleh explains it, “she went too far. How can an Ashkenazit speak for what a Mizrahit should or shouldn’t think? It’s like if I were to claim I, as a Mizrahit, can speak for Africans, or for black Americans” (interview with author, May 11, 2013.)
delivered loudly, angrily, and cheered by a sizeable audience of fellow protesters, amounts to a performative “speech act” (Jakobson 1960), in that it not only communicates content, but by effecting a social “state of affairs.” By presenting an if-then condition that, according to her audience, does apply, the speaker makes herself a racist in any socio-politically meaningful sense of the term.

While speech act theory is commonly applied to circumstances in which utterances comprise the only or primary marker of formal status – e.g. “I do” at weddings, or “adjourned” in courtrooms (ibid.) – I return to Israel’s pervasive “politics of emotion” that, as I describe in my introduction, renders forms and instances of expressive culture so central to the shaping and re-shaping of structural and institutional realities. Just as there is immense historical slippage between art and politics within national Israeli culture (see the Introduction), boundaries between political speech and political action are permeable, and both retain significant hold over the lived experiences of city-dwellers. And, I emphasize again, when speech is presented at a volume and intensity that is sufficient to physically impact listeners, its nature as action (Davidson et. al.: 2010) is all the more difficult to overlook.

***

In presenting a set of culturally rich, refugee-led music, dance, and theater performances that partially “disguise” resistance, and a series of primarily anti-refugee protests in which sonic force is used to confrontational or painful ends, I do not intend to put in place a dichotomy of pro-refugee “good sound” and anti-refugee “bad sound.” Anger and harmful intentions are present in plenty of leftist sonic politics; this is arguably
the case in the Miri Regev remix, in which sonic manipulation and a particular musical
genre are employed to figure Regev in misogynistic and racially offensive terms. Sound
can also disrupt psycho-somatic equilibrium even when it is not necessarily intended to
do so. At a public garden cleanup event sponsored by a group of Israeli residents of south
Tel Aviv, the talk turned to my study of music in Friendship House church services, and,
more broadly, to the pervasiveness of “African music” in public cityspace. “It’s
everywhere,” an elderly woman explained. “I can’t leave my house without hearing them
singing or listening to loud Arabic music. I can’t even open my kitchen window without
it coming in” (interview with author, May 12, 2013).

Sound’s capacity for ideological and material “takeover” is not to be
underestimated. As Jonathan Sterne writes of programmed “Muzak” in the Mall of
America, music can become “a form of architecture. Rather than simply filling up empty
space, the music becomes part of the consistency of that space (1997: 23). Elsewhere I
have described certain musics and spoken languages contributing to the ideological and
material ownership of space in Neve Sha’anans’s Tachanah Merkazit (Hebrew: Central
Bus Station), where native Israelis, Jewish immigrants, refugees and migrant laborers
come together in large numbers on a daily basis for the purposes of commerce and transit
(2014). Sound’s very real claim-staking function is explained in part by the “interaction
between the physical sound environment, the sound milieu of a social-cultural
community, and the ‘internal soundscape of every individual’” (Goodman 2010: 46 –47).
When longstanding Israeli neighborhoods begin to resonate with the sounds of migrant
church singing, Tigrinya and Arabic pop music, and spoken languages that residents
cannot understand (indeed, in the case of Arabic, which many Israeli residents have been
taught to fear), the question of intent on the part of sound’s producers is less relevant than
the nature of this “sonic effect” on listeners (ibid).

Although some Eritrean and Sudanese activists participate in relatively
confrontational sonic activity – Bnai Darfur, in particular, has taken to the Tel Aviv streets
with chanting, slogans, and bullhorns to publicly demand visas and refugee rights
(bnaidarfur.org) – East African refugees and their Israeli allies do not generally shout
anti-Israel statements during protests, demonstrations, and public performances. This
distinction from anti-refugee activity is significant, but it does not necessarily suggest the
presence of different or stronger moral compass on the part of refugee collectivities;
rather, refugee use of music, spectacle, and displays of self-restraint is simply a
reasonable strategy in an environment in which refugees are already labeled as disruptive
and dangerous. Loud, angry chanting of harsh sentiments is more likely to reify than
counteract such labels. Within the multivalent utility of sound as force, then, potentially
inviting rather than hostile sounds, and quiet or silence rather than noise, do a specific
kind of political work for refugees. In the examples of the greeter outside Sudanese
Cultural Day, Mubarak on the Goldstein stage, and the men wearing vests at Darfur
Remembrance Day, I have suggested that self-control, which can include bodily stillness
and minimal or absent speech, dignifies refugees, especially when juxtaposed against
high agitation on the part of protesting Israelis. This dignity is akin to the “personal
power” among African migrants that I describe in Chapter 3: accessible at any time and
in any place, irrespective of structural disenfranchisement and marginalization. In
addition to facilitating individual experiences of empowerment, collective displays of quiet and restraint can be as impactful to witnesses as noisy protest, if for different reasons.

During an April 2013 festival of short plays at the experimental bar-and-theater Teatron Tmunah on Soncino Street in south Tel Aviv, for example, Din, Mubarak, and a third associate presented a series of monologues in which they related harrowing stories of the Janjaweed Militia and their own flight to Israel in measured, somber tones. The stage was empty save for the three folding chairs on which they sat. Surprisingly, one of Mubarak’s monologues was a recitation from Shakespeare’s “King Lear,” which he delivered with careful diction. This interjection, unrelated in terms of content to the other monologues, accorded with the overall emotional tone of the performance. Taken together, the minimalist stage set, the unadorned narratives of war and emigration, and the “sonic effect” of precise Elizabethan English relayed with immense slowness in Mubarak’s Sudanese accent, underscored the gravity and urgency of narrative, conveying information about refugee experience that might be overlooked in the nosier, busier arena of protest or even musical spectacle.
If the subdued comportment of three individuals is a potent message to witnesses, crowds of hundreds or thousands working towards the same affect are exponentially powerful. In January of 2014, some 30,000 Sudanese and Eritrean refugees and their Israeli allies marched from Levinsky Park to Kikar Rabin in resounding silence, a demonstration of, and protest against, voicelessness. Similarly, during that year’s Pesach holiday (Hebrew: Passover), thousands staged “sit-ins” across Tel Aviv and Jerusalem, gathering to sit on the ground with their arms raised and crossed over their heads in a gesture evoking shackles. This silent reminder of injustice was a sharp counterpoint to the commemorations of ancient Israel’s Yetziyat Mitzrayim [Exodus from Egypt] that were taking place in homes and synagogues across the country. As ASSAF employee Merav Bat-Gil observed sarcastically on her Facebook page, “Just as the Jewish people are celebrating Pesach, the spring and freedom fest, memorizing how they escaped
slavery in Egypt, they imprison asylum seekers. Lovely!! Its very important to educate the young generation to remember what happened 5000 years ago, while ignoring today's reality” (April 2014).

***

As a “phenomenon of contacts,” sound can be manipulated in countless ways to actualize ideologies by influencing people. As music or in dramatic theater, sound can synchronize political opposition with celebration, traditional cultural aesthetics, entertainment, or enjoyment, resulting in multifunctional performances whose symbolic and material layers may shield refugee participants from punishment and reprisals. In the form of sloganeering, yelling, and chanting, sound can be understood as a tool of direct conflict, engendering in its targets physical and mental discomfort, pain, or destabilization while protecting its perpetrators from the consequences of doing “hands-on” violence. Even when sound is ambient or undirected, as in the case of much of south Tel Aviv’s public soundscapes, it exists in immediate contact with the bodies, thoughts, and emotions of individuals and groups. What’s more, “sound as force” necessarily entails sound’s attenuation or absence as material force as well: a quiet public display is replete with thrust, intentionality, and power, and has the potential for profound psychosomatic impact.

Crucially, sounds are always ideologically coded. As I have aimed to make clear in my discussion of Sudanese Cultural Day, traditional performances can be politically useful because of the interplay between sound’s nature as force and its nature as cultural text. Likewise, the Miri Regev remix became a “viral” proliferation of leftist Israeli
politics thanks to its fusion of an infectious groove with humorous lyrics and powerful “extramusical” associations. Especially in urban Israel,

a place where sound is nested within a matrix of social tensions and active discourses surrounding ethnicity, it is implausible to conceive of […] music solely as force. [When individuals] respond to sound as bodies, then, they are always also responding as subjects, members of taste communities and ideological communities. This logic […] calls to mind Julian Henriques’s discussion of the Caribbean sound-system culture of audition, which ‘operates in terms of a both-and logic: physical and formal, feeling and hearing, content and form, substance and code, particle and pattern’ (Goodman 2010: 28, in Hankins 2014: 290).

If some theorists have observed that frameworks of “sound as force” do not always attend closely to the histories, sociological realities, and human practices that give rise to sonic phenomena (Sterne 2012, Pinch and Bijsterveld, 2012), the same authors point to sound studies’ interdisciplinary potential, its innate affinities with musicology and ethnography. Indeed, Israel’s history as a markedly conflict-ridden nation with a high emphasis placed on expressive forms as instruments of state agenda calls for a holistic approach to sound’s material and textual properties. In the next section of this chapter, I listen closely to Israeli engagements in the refugee debate foreground musical glocali – that is, “world” musics that carry special aesthetic and sociological meanings in urban Israel – to influence listeners’ bodies and minds (see Chapter 1 for an introduction to the “glocal” interpretive framework). By providing individuals and groups with visceral, immersive experiences in sounds coded as “ethnic,” “foreign,” or “black,” musical glocali appends Israeli mass-cultural cosmopolitan aspirations to minority-initiated political agendas.
Israeli Pro-Refugee Activism and Glocal Music

The period since 2011 has marked a long crescendo in the ongoing debate around refugee presence, with the Knesset’s passage in the summer of 2012 of the amended Prevention of Infiltration Act sparking a firestorm of demonstrations and vitriolic public rhetoric. “Israelis were blaming the refugees for everything,” says Raav organizer Efrat Yerady. “They were panicking” (interview with author, March 2013). Shortly after the “Sudanim LeSudan” march, refugee community leaders and Israeli activists mounted a “protest party” in Levinsky Park, featuring live instrumental music from Sudan and Eritrea, Tigrinya and Arabic rap, and hip-hop dance battles. The event drew over a thousand participants, refugees and Israelis alike, who fanned out across an enormous swath of south Tel Aviv’s largest public space for a night of music and dancing. “I enjoy this unity so much,” explained Ethiopian Israeli participant Ori Beriyum, telling a videographer that he “comes every night” to be with several dozen East African refugees who still live in tents on the grounds of Levinsky. “Blacks, whites – this is the ultimate unity party, as they say” (“Levinsky J14 Protest Party”: youtube.com).³

³ As I discuss in the introduction and Chapter 2, some Ethiopian Israeli cultural producers and activists have expressed frustration that, more and more often, they are mistaken by other Israelis for Sudanese or Eritrean refugees, or that leftists are overlooking existing anti-Ethiopian racism in their urgency to help refugees. At the same time, these and other individuals, like Ori Beriyum, recognize that racism is a cross-group experience, and often desire to help improve the “refugee situation” in some way. Group relational dynamics between Ethiopian citizens, Sudanese and Eritrean refugees are complex and shifting, and call for in-depth study beyond what has been possible to date in my fieldwork and research.
The notion of dance parties as politics has long held currency in Israeli society, manifested especially in the phenomenon of mesibot teva (nature parties), which are large outdoor electronica raves that make a point of welcoming Arabs alongside Israelis, sometimes even “sneaking in” Palestinians from the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Held since the early 1990s in the Negev desert or the forests of the Galilee, mesibot teva often go on all day and night, and some participants take stimulant drugs or MDMA to facilitate transcendent experiences of communalism. For its proponents, mesibot teva actualize peace and intra-group harmony in the face of seemingly unending, unsuccessful processes at the national level. Although I have heard some activists dismiss these parties as superficial to genuine political progress, I suggest that musical celebration does facilitate types of unity and alliance-building not always available in public protests and demonstrations, or in strained government-to-government negotiations. As Ori Beriyum puts it, “People said, ‘do you really believe [unity] can happen?’ And here you live it, you see it, it’s really possible!” (ibid). Benjamin Brinner’s work on musical collaborations between Jewish Israelis and Palestinian Arabs during and after the “Oslo period” of the 1990s suggests that grassroots expressive aesthetics can support “top-down” processes when they are going well, and, when necessary, mitigate some of the micro-political effects of their failure (2009).

As a process that plays out largely on the ground, shaping direct interpersonal interactions between individuals and groups, the Tel Aviv crisis around refugee presence may be particularly open to the “feel-good” influence of parties. The Levinsky event is one among several large-scale parties organized jointly by refugees and Israelis that I
encountered during the course of my fieldwork, each featuring live bands and DJs, and each drawing in some individuals who did not fully identify with “pro-refugee” politics. According to one Levinsky participant who requested anonymity, some vocal critics of pro-refugee Israeli activism came to the party simply for the music, the food, and the desire to witness a big event (interview with author, April 2013). At a July 2011 concert at the now-defunct Vox Club near HaMasger Street organized to celebrate “International Nelson Mandela Day,” Israelis from across the political spectrum joined refugees and migrant laborers to listen to bands performing in English, Arabic, Hebrew, French, Amharic, Tigrinya, Yoruba, and other languages. Speeches at this event highlighted a variety of political issues, including refugee and migrant deportations, Israel’s occupation of the Palestinian Territories, and the persistence of racism and classism within Israeli society, meaning that most people in attendance could find something with which to agree. African labor migrants as well as Ethiopian Israelis, some of whom have objected to racist discourses conflating their own identities with those of East African refugees, were able to give and receive unguarded expressions of solidarity without fear of public misinterpretation. *Mizrahi* participants could cheer the class-focused protests of Arab and Mizrahi hip-hop collective System Ali, which shared the stage with the Groove Ambassadors, Zvuloon Dub System, and other African and Afro-diasporic acts.

Parties like these fall within the purview of “carnivalesque” phenomena, in that they create atmospheres of revelry and personal abandon in which a broad sense of opposition to authority, domination, and restriction carry the day. Although almost all of
the individuals with whom I worked in Tel Aviv pointed to the existence of hegemonic forces within Israeli society and culture, and although many of them disagreed virulently with each other as to the nature and cause of social problems, none identified *themselves* as agents of hegemony. I submit, in other words, that people in fractured environments commonly feel put upon by forces larger than themselves. Carnivalesque behavior is an outlet for this aspect of human condition, and, as such, has genuine potential to create at least temporary alliances across interest groups. As Ori Beriyum says of his participation in the Levinsky protest party,

> I realized what’s going on here, all the injustices, in the Ethiopian community and the rest of society, in the lower classes, or whatever. All economic classes. Everyone has their hardships. We came here as a group to express solidarity. Forget about what injustices we experience in the Ethiopian community, we are part of the people, whether to help the Ethiopian community, or to help those in need, whether black or white. We are all lab rats. We are all stuck in the system, getting hit over the head all the time (“Levinsky Protest Camp Party”: youtube.com).

I do not suggest that social ills are always best solved through partying. Neither Mandela Day nor the Levinsky protest party directly precipitated changes to immigration policy, new jobs for refugees, or recorded confirmation of a major shift in anti-refugee public sentiment. Yet the *affective states* that emerged during the planning, execution, and aftermath of these events – experiences, momentary or sustained, during which desire and reality came together for individuals and groups – cannot be dismissed as irrelevant. In simplest terms, these parties were enormous morale-boosters for refugees, who witnessed their music take center stage, demonstrated their talents in the hip-hop dance battles, taught Israeli participants song lyrics and even the East African *eskišta* dance,
claiming a kind of benevolent authority over Israeli voices and bodies.

Significantly, participants are not alone in recognizing parties as potentially anti-authority. The Immigration Police are known to make surprise visits to south Tel Aviv nightclubs, not only because these are gathering places for documented and undocumented migrants and refugees, but also because, as one policeman told me outside of Tony Ray’s Rasta Club, “things can get out of hand with music and drinking” (interview with author, March 2013). Relatedly, as the chief organizer of Mandela Day, Nirit Ben-Ari received phone calls from the police in the run-up to the event, as well as a four a.m. visit to her apartment afterwards. According to Ben-Ari, the only justification for police accusations of “stirring up trouble” and “harboring refugees” was her role in the party itself (interview with author, August 5, 2011).

In addition to these immediate, measurable effects of a party – enhanced moods, the participation of skeptics, the anxiety of authorities – participatory musical celebration does immense affective work that resonates long after wrap-up. “Ephemeral […] experiences shape our relationships to place. These experiences leave traces in the material world” (Davidson et. al. 2012: 318). In the introduction to a volume of essays reading Michel Foucault’s heterotopia within and against diverse urban case studies, Davidson et. al. distinguish between darkly “extraterritorial” military, labor, and refugee camps from the brightly plenipotentiary spaces of heterotopia: “the camp is the grimmest symptom of a postcivil urbanism, which follows the disintegration of the state" (2011: 5).
If we consider that Levinsky Park’s emergence as a de-facto refugee camp since 2010 has occurred in part because of its longstanding place in collective urban consciousness as a symbol of decay (it was in fact canonized as the “lowest place in Tel Aviv” by rock Israeli founding mother Ester Shamir in a 1980 radio hit) we must also take seriously the potential of the Levinsky protest party for ideo-imaginary and therefore material disruption. In revealing the heterotopic possibilities of the refugee camp, participatory musical celebration challenges the very conceptual categories that organize the inequitable distribution of a city’s resources.

***

I have been using static metaphors of inscription and marker to describe sounding music in physical space as a means of ascribing what I think is appropriate gravity to the notion of parties as political events. At the same time, solidity and stasis may seem at odds with music’s fluidity, mutability, and basic transience. In fact, music evinces both characteristics, able to retain its time-and-place specific associations in the memories and bodies of musikers, while resonating out and away from the site of music, into and through other places, experiences, and imaginings. Music’s ties to location in tandem with this “boundless” quality is part of what drives its functionality within the glocal interpretive framework I explore in Chapter 1, and which I have read in the musical activities of multiple individuals and groups throughout this dissertation. As I describe, glocali is, in the first instance, a mode of interpretation in which selfhood is ontologically aligned with native Israeliness, but expressed through affinity and engagement with the wider, non-Israeli world. It is noteworthy that much pro-refugee activity on the part of
Israelis, including the participatory musical celebrations presented above, takes the form of musical *glocali*. While both refugees and Israelis use and value African and Afro-diasporic musics at refugee-oriented public events, I suggest that they sometimes do so for different reasons.

In March of 2013, I attended an Amnesty International planning session for a bus caravan from Tel Aviv to the Saharonim detention center in the Negev. The proposal: vehicles would be equipped with external speakers playing loud pop music from Sudan and Eritrea outside the walls of the facility. According to Sarah J., Amnesty’s American-Israeli event coordinator, “music from home” would cheer and inspire detainees inside Saharonim; in combination with the busloads of banner-waving Israeli supporters, the music would also underscore a message of solidarity and belonging. To date, logistical objections on the part of national authorities have prevented Sarah and her colleagues from carrying out this exciting project, yet even its conception is a testament to music’s enormous relevance in the refugee debate. As musics with both “regional” connotations (Slobin 1994) and the newly transregional resonances I introduce in Chapter 2, the proposed Sudanese and Eritrean pop would ostensibly sound out familiar, place-specific *Africani*, ripe for individual or collective interpretations among the detainee audience. In “performing” these musics (controlling the PA system), the busloads of Israeli activists would enact their alignment with such interpretations, and their solidarity with the detainees. Meanwhile, the mediated sounds would be carried far and wide in the clean desert air, marking the landscape of the Negev with driving beats, rich bass, and the
strident voices of beloved East African pop stars.4

As I sat with dozens of others on the floor of the meeting room, an unfinished space above one of Tel Aviv’s numerous vegetarian cafés, I was impressed with the creative elegance of the plan, thrilled that Amnesty seemed to “get” music’s potential to comfort and empower refugees in a situation of extraordinary marginalization. I thought, too, of the 1964 Summer of Freedom bus rides that have become such a central fixture of histories of the American Civil Rights movement. These rides, which included group singing of Civil Rights anthems, were as much intentional symbols as they were tactical deployments of personnel for ground-level projects. Yet participation in Freedom Rides was also a way for northern white liberal to claim significant status in their own circles, and was not free of asymmetrical power dynamics. As Marx and Useem explain, whites generally have had greater command over resources, have been freer to act, were likely to be closer to centers of power, and have often had essential ‘organizing’ experience. Their presence in the struggle may add an aura of legitimacy to the protest movement's goals, and when they are harassed or killed in the cause, the situation is dramatized far beyond what happens when minority group members themselves face similar brutalization (Marx and Useem 1971: 89).

4 The Amnesty International planners spent significant time discussing the possible effects of Eritrean and Sudanese pop music on the IDF soldiers that guard Saharonim detention center. Would the soldiers enjoy the music and/or experience feelings of guilt? Might such feelings have the potential to influence their opinions about their jobs or change their behavior towards detainees? The fascinating historical relationship between the IDF and the national popular soundscape – military station Galei Tzahal was Israel’s first pop radio, and remains a dominant media institution – invites further research into active-duty soldiers’ engagement with musical glocali.
The unfolding of the American “folk revival” of the 1960s demonstrates a large-scale accrual of socio-cultural and material benefits to white actors who participated in the Civil Rights movement. As big name musicians like Pete Seeger, Joan Baez and Bob Dylan came to be identified with the musical idioms and basic themes of the Civil Rights soundtrack, at times credited for the compositions of “anonymous” African Americans (‘Pete Seeger Tells the Story,’’ openculture.com), well-funded institutions grew up around the folk revival instead of strengthening black musical communities, and African American performers received limited billing at folk festivals (Cohen 2008.)

In the ambitions of leftist Israelis to ride down to Saharonim prison armed with East African pop music, I read evidence of a pervasive “structure of feeling” (Williams 1977) amongst urban Israelis to live globalism, to come into contact with the danger that is implicitly ascribed to any non-Israeli sphere in Hebrewist, Zionist and native interpretive frameworks. Without dismissing the sincere humanitarian impulse undergirding the Saharonim convoy proposal, or overlooking the tireless effort that Amnesty activists put into their jobs, I want to point up the presence of *glocali* interpretation at work here, and the ways in which a pro-refugee activity can benefit its organizers. As I explain in Chapter 1, leftist Israelis seek to gain the approval of international collectivities, and to differentiate themselves from hegemonic Israeliness, through progressive public discourse and activities. Events that put Israelis in harm’s way, such as protests at West Bank and Gaza checkpoints, sit-ins during demolitions of Palestinian homes and mosques, or convergence on a detention center guarded by
soldiers, have traditionally received extensive media coverage and favorable attention overseas.

Music augments the valuable cachet that Israelis can anticipate from risking their bodies by introducing a richly multitextured symbolism to the proceedings, one that can conjure up cosmopolitan cultural omnicompetence, Afro-diasporic “black cool,” and the gravity of history – freedom anthems and Freedom Rides – all at once. Such symbolism is both other-directed, ideally recognizable and meaningful for those who might witness or learn of events, and self-serving. Psycho-somatic immersion in symbol as it unfolds can be sustaining for activists, affording the experience of fulfillment or victory when, as is so often the case, stated objectives are not met, and even making possible difficult acts that might otherwise be daunting.

Pro-refugee activism is not a zero sum game in terms of its potential effects; East African refugees do not necessarily lose out if and when the Israeli left gains in international standing, numbers, media attention, voice within the national public sphere, or sense of self-worth. The relative “closeness to centers of power” and “aura of legitimacy” that Marx and Useem observe liberal whites bringing to bear on the Freedom Rides obtains as well for Israeli activists, and if their participation is not free of imbalanced power dynamics, it is also helpful and encouraging. As Mutasim Ali claims for Sudanese Cultural Day the strength in numbers of refugee-Israeli cooperation, many refugee community leaders have expressed public and private appreciation for outsider allies. “These Israelis are great people, not racist – they hate the racists as much as we do,” says Mubarak of the volunteers running Sifriyat Levinsky, a public library-cum-
community center that offers language and art lessons to residents of south Tel Aviv
(interview with author, April 2013).

Deep-seated Israeli investment in the pleasures and ideo-imaginary potentials of
glocal musical activity does not prevent refugees from enjoying and making use of the
same music. Demonstrably, East Africans in Tel Aviv want to perform and listen to
traditional and popular musics from their home countries, and taste patterns do not shift
wholesale if Israelis instead of Africans are holding the instruments, pressing the play
buttons, or standing behind the turntables. In one example, when I DJ’d an all-“Afropop”
set at Rasta Club for a mixed group of African refugees, migrant workers, and Israelis,
dancers were excited to hear familiar songs in native languages, and in a few cases,
expressed satisfaction that their music had made its way to America. If, as Mutasim Ali
puts it at Sudanese Cultural Day, sharing culture is a source of pride, then hearing one’s
music performed by others, at the right time and in the right way, can feel bracing and
heartening rather than appropriative or non-consensual.

When Israelis (or American ethnographers in Israel) engage in glocal musiking,
the potential for appropriation and enactment of power differentials is always present, in
part because of music’s capacity to obscure its own socio-political functionality.
Sudanese performances of traditional music and dance are effective as “hidden
transcripts” of opposition because enough members of the dominant Israeli collectivity
understand these expressive forms as apolitical, pre-political, or “exotic” enough to be
harmless. In a related dynamic, leftist Israelis can easily focus on the desirable
resonances of, say, Afropop – among them, certainly, the special value that refugees
themselves place on it – while overlooking other aspects of its histories and uses. I have suggested that rock Israeli heavyweights Shlomo Gronich and Idan Raichel incorporate Ethiopian musical idioms into their compositions in ways that “nativize” Ethiopian Jewish aesthetics (and Ethiopian presence in Israel) by curating the child’s voice or straightening out rhythm (see Chapter 1). That some Israeli musicians critique Raichel, Gronich, Moshe Ben-Ari and other pop stars as appropriative (citations) while claiming their own work as engaged activism indicates music’s commodiousness as a vessel for multiple and conflicting desires.

No stable taxonomy of glocal music’s affordances and constraints, uses and misuses in the world of “pro-refugee Tel Aviv” is possible, as such things are shifting and contingent, and vary from individual to individual, even within ethno-cultural groups, activist collectivities, and social circles. I have worked with a “radical left” troupe of Israeli clown-activists whose members were split between love of hip-hop as progressive discourse and intense revulsion towards its “grotesque” portrayal of black bodies (interviews with author, May 16, 2013). Some refugee musicians I met during my fieldwork found Caribbean dancehall as enlivening a sonic representation of their African identities as their own genres of expertise; another told me he disliked its “nasty” lyrics and could not find a way to dance to it (interview with author, April 2013). If a Mandela Day, a Levinsky party, or a planned musical convoy can provide us with information about music’s symbolic and material place in pro-refugee activism, we are getting only broad outlines; music’s profligate granularity leaves its traces in the bodies and psyches of individuals.
Music and Commemorative Narrative at Refugee Seder

Opening this chapter with a picture of Tel Aviv East African refugees as a “community of dissent,” employing music, dance, and theater to insert their voices into the public sphere refugee debate, I have likewise positioned the activities of pro-refugee Israelis as forms of dissent against hegemonic Israeli insider-outsider discourses. Although these leftist citizens undoubtedly aim to further refugee agendas, and although they open themselves up to potential challenges and censure from fellow Israelis, it is clear that pro-refugee activists also stand to gain at individual and group levels from their activities. In particular, the complex aesthetic and ideological valences of musical glocali offer Israelis substantial currency with which to acquire the respect of the international left, the cachet of cosmopolitanism that structures urban Israeli micro-politics, and the private experiences of pleasure, power, and success that sustain long-term political involvement.

As Kay Kaufman Shelemay notes, “dissent communities are almost always at least partial offspring of the forces they challenge” (2011: 372). Glocal music can do all it does within the refugee debate because of Israel’s decades-long history of widespread consumption and production of genres variously categorized as “global pop,” musikah ethnit [ethnic music], and musikah olamit [world music] (see Chapter 1). When Israeli activists throw parties or co-organize demonstrations that feature Afropop, hip-hop, Tigrinya dance pop, or krar playing, they are leaning on a national musical tradition that has evinced ethno-cultural hybridity from the earliest days of “Arab”-inflected Shirei
Eretz Israel, through the pan-“Mediterranean” sounds of Musikah Mizrahit, straight into 21st century soundscape encompassing everything from jazz to djembe circles to Hindustani ragas. “Israeli musicians want everything,” says Trinidadian-Israeli vocalist Hillary Sargent. “As soon as they hear a sound, it doesn’t matter where it’s from or who played it, they say, ‘I want to be able to do that!’” (interview with author, October 10, 2013). In this respect, Israeli communities of dissent that come together for pro-refugee activities featuring glocal musics can also be understood as “communities of affinity,” in which “straightforward aesthetic and personal preferences may, but do not necessarily, intersect with other powerful diacritica such as ethnic identity, age cohort, or gender identity” (Shelemay 2011: 373).

Dissent is not necessarily less sincere or effective if it takes on forms partially shaped by the very forces it resists: Sudanese Cultural Day derives crucial protection from exoticist discourses within Israeli society; Mandela Day and the Levinsky protest party potentially reach skeptics who enjoy Afropop. I want to conclude this discussion of glocali, and this chapter, with description and analysis of an event that further illustrates the complicated interplay between dissent and orthodoxy, resistance and acquiescence, subcultural and macro-cultural expressive aesthetics in Tel Aviv’s public politics. In “Refugee Seder/Yetztiyat Mitzrayim” [Exodus from Egypt], an annual Passover celebration bringing Sudanese and Eritrean refugees together with Israelis and migrants from elsewhere in Africa, glocal sounds enliven and re-interpret one of Jewish Israel’s most solemn commemorative narratives.
As I discuss in my introduction and Chapter 1, Israeli collective memory and national consciousness are sustained in large measure by rituals, discourses, and retellings of history designed to commemorate Jewish collective sacrifice, heroism, and transpersonal unity through space and time. Commemoration, as Yael Zerubavel intimates, is a dynamic poorly suited to bear the load of socio-political specificity, as it draws from history in a “selective and fragmentary” fashion, producing, in response to communal concerns, narratives that are as much “literary, poetic, fictional” as they are grounded in material reality (1995: 6). Pesach [Passover], a week long holiday book-ended by ritual meals [seder] and readings of the Hagadah [telling], exemplifies the commemorative impulse in Israeli discourse and action, collapsing eons and generations as groups gather to carry out the Biblical imperative, “And thou shalt tell thy son in that day, saying, It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt” (Exodus 13:8).

In Israel, the Pesach holiday minimizes distinctions between national body, religious collective, and private individual: government offices, public transportation, and private businesses close down; bread and pita are not sold in grocery stores, in deference to ritual prohibition against leavening; IDF soldiers get leave to return to their homes for seder, synagogue services, and family togetherness. In the midst of near universal observance – even secular Jewish Israelis widely celebrate Pesach – Levinsky Park’s Refugee Seder transforms this highly determined ritual into an East African-focused event. The night, which has been hosted by ARDC and refugee community leaders every year since 2009, and attended primarily by African residents of the city, feeds hundreds
while rhetorically conflating the plight of ancient Israelite refugees from Egypt and
African refugees in urban Israel. Brief speeches by refugee participants and Israeli
readers punctuate traditional *Hagadah* sections in Hebrew and English. At the April 2013
event, Nir Schlaman, a British *oleh* [immigrant] to Israel who serves as ARDC’s
Humanitarian Coordinator, read out a homily that began with a traditional recounting of
the moment of Israel’s Exodus from Egypt, and moved into an acknowledgement of the
refugee plight on global and local levels:

Moses led the people through the desert, across the sea […] Today tens of
thousands of our brothers and sisters are fleeing countries run by modern-
day Pharaoh. Fleeing brutal dictators and organized murder. Running for
their lives. Many of you here today made the same journey, across the
same desert […] If the story of this festival means anything, it means we
will not give up until every person is treated the same, and no-one rules
over the lives of any other. We wish you peace and prosperity. Join with
us to eat and dance. Make new friends, and share together our dreams of a
better future. *Hag Pesach Sameach* [Happy Passover].

This reading by a Jewish immigrant to Israel, met with cheers and applause by an
audience of non-Jewish “exiles in Israel,” as Sudanese and Eritreans are sometimes called
in pro-refugee publicity statements, serves a major commemorative function. If the
nature of *seder Pesach* and the *Hagadah* is remind to Jewish participants of their innate
oneness with ancient *Am Israel* [People of Israel], and to materially enact this identity,
reading East Africans into the narrative activates a level of reality in which these refugees
are also *Am Israel*, also Jews, also Israelis. Although this kind of bestowal of
“Iraeliness” on Sudanese and Eritrean refugees does not result in the granting of S2(A)5
residency permits or citizenship status, it nevertheless retains the potential to catalyze
ground-level political change. As suggested by the presence at Refugee Seder of countless policemen and policewomen, volunteer medics, and organizers communicating by walkie-talkie, there was more than rhetoric at stake during the event.

Yael Zerubavel is emphatic that commemoration shapes politics, observing, for instance, that Zionism’s partial erasure of “eighteen centuries of Exile” in narratives of Jewish history directly influenced early-state policies of Hebrew language instruction, primary education, municipal organization, and land apportioning (1995: 17). The immense “commemorative density” (9) of Pesach, arguably no less significant to Israeli institutions and individuals than Zionist discourse, lends Refugee Seder a commensurately disruptive capacity. Indeed, the event is a manifestation of “countermemory,” an “alternative commemorative narrative that directly opposes the master commemorative narrative, operating under and against its hegemony […] Countermemory challenges hegemony by represent[ing] the views of marginalized individuals or groups within the society. The commemoration of the past can thus become a contested territory in which groups engaging in a political conflict promote competing views of the past in order to gain control over the political center or to legitimize a separatist orientation” (ibid).

At Refugee Seder, refugees and their Israeli allies operate not “under and against” hegemony, but within Israeli master narrative as expressed in the Hagadah, simultaneously reifying Pesach’s commemorative density and reorienting it to new ends. The closeness with which Refugee Seder hews to hegemonic Israeli practice – it preserves the key elements of the Hagadah reading and the ritual meal – is partly a
function of its organizers’ basically integrationist aims. Refugees desire official recognition as residents of Israel, and their Israeli supporters, although self-identifying as more progressive than many of their co-nationals, seek greater access to Israel’s existing “political center,” not the creation of a separate power structure.

There is perhaps an obvious role for music to play in integrationist activity that turns on the poetic, literary, and mythic tropes of commemoration. Refugee Seder, which is traditionally capped by hours of after-dinner dancing on the grassy lawn in front of Sifriyat Levinsky, marshals the potent affective resonances of glocal music to underscore the event’s nuanced message and channel participants’ energies. In 2013, American-Israeli DJ Andrea Rosen stood behind the decks, spinning a diverse roster of sub-Saharan African genres, Caribbean dancehall, and Latin American hip-hop. “I do freestyle,” she told me. “It’s mostly Afropop or Afropop influenced. The Africans love it, the Israelis love it. It’s good-vibe music, because this is a celebration” (interview with author, April 28, 2013).

Inasmuch as musical glocali implies “selective and fragmentary” engagement with the particulars of a genre’s creation and histories of use as people employ it to consolidate and convey collective values, identities, and goals, it is akin to commemorative narrative. Yet unlike commemorative narrative, which crowds out dissent, musical glocali can accommodate diverse and even contradictory structures of feeling, as, for instance, in the case of reggae, explained to me by Zvuloon Dub System frontman Gili Yalo. “Sure, right wing Israelis can be at a reggae show, it’s not just for smolanim [leftists]. They can relate to the good sound and the lyrics about
peace” (interview with author, July 9, 2010). At Refugee Seder, DJ Andrea’s “Afropop” mediated between the event’s simultaneous imperatives to honor the Israeli master narrative and to invigorate “countermemory.” Because musical glocali is pervasive in Israel without being canonical as “Israeli,” it can paradoxically signify subculture, alterity, and resistance while inviting hegemonic incorporation.  

For participants, Refugee Seder’s soundtrack worked ideologically as well as bodily. Among the experiences that can be precipitated by immersion in high-decibel mediated dance music, Scott R. Hutson identifies “disappearance,” or the dissolution of the human subject when confronted with a “multiplicity of surfaces” (songs, sonic frequencies, dancing bodies, lights) (2000: 37). Over and above individuality, dance parties generate a collective, a body of people moving roughly in unison. In this connection, I noticed that most of the music at Refugee Seder, regardless of language or country of origin, was undergirded by the driving Caribbean dancehall beat that I had encountered in diverse modifications within many of south Tel Aviv’s nightclubs, from Menelik’s intense Wolayta dance pop to Rasta Club’s global reggae-influenced mix.

Dancehall’s “2+2+3” kick drum groove, which can engender in a dancer the sensation of

5 Dick Hebdige’s 1979 Subculture: The Meaning of Style focuses in part on the tendency of socio-cultural “mainstreams” to eventually assimilate subcultural aesthetics and neutralize their oppositional valences. Agents of authority such as politicians, media, and the police are implicated in this process alongside less clearly defined forces like mass-cultural taste patterns, collective anxieties and desires. Afropop has long been part of the internal and external soundscapes of urban Israeli audiences, but was never understood as Israeli, even before pro-refugee activists infused it with new subversive meanings. At the same time, these meanings have not fully disrupted Afropop’s As such, Afropop in Israel may represent a case of “always already subcultural/always already mainstream,” complicating Hebdige’s fairly linear model of assimilation.
falling forward while simultaneously being held upright and propelled by the strong 4/4 hyper-meter, is usually accented by rapid 16th note high hats, intricate filigrees on hollow-based hand drums, or even layered with 6/8 percussion to generate a “polyrhythmic” feel.6

Figure 4.6: DJ Andrea spins while the kids watch from the Levinsky Library roof

6 Kofi Agawu (2003) and Martin Scherzinger (2003), among other researchers, have critiqued ethnomusicological discourses that frame “African rhythm” as “complex” versus “European rhythm” as “simple,” or that identify African musics as dominated by rhythmic concepts. As Agawu writes, such discourses “easily lead to a reciprocal attribution of deficiencies. Nketia’s surprising remark that ‘rhythmic interest often compensates for the absence of melody or the lack of melodic sophistication’ is the kind of mythology that has allowed some Europeans to claim harmony and deny it to the Africans, or some Asians to claim elaborate melody and deny it to the Africans” (2003, Representing African Music: Postcolonial Notes, Queries, Positions. New York: Routledge). In the context of this strain of disciplinary history, my references in this and other chapters to “polyrhythm” raise questions of definition and comparison. I have turned to Agawu’s intentionally pared-down explanation of polyrhythm as “two or more contrasting rhythms in a musical texture […]” Although the term itself remains questionable, the phenomenon it describes is easily grasped” (ibid).
I have already referenced music’s potential to shepherd and discipline masses of people in public spaces; it is not always agents of authority or hegemony who use music in this way. Refugee Seder’s organizers have practical reasons to encourage transpersonal experience amongst participants, and, given the presence of the Immigration Police, to gather participants’ energies into a defined space (the “dance floor” on the lawn). Music’s symbolisms are also in effect here, in a manner broadly consonant with organizers’ objectives. As the dancehall rhythm encourages physical closeness and unity of movement, it inscribes, bodily, its own ideological associations of Afro-diasporic transnationalism, which are themselves implicated in the commemorative effectiveness of the event.

While most of the dancers stayed near makeshift DJ booth in front of Levinsky Library, I noticed a group of refugees who, keeping to themselves at the edges of the crowd, were energetically dancing *eskista* together to the dancehall beat. They were three men, two young and one with grey-streaked hair, first shuffling in a loose circle while shaking their shoulders and upper torsos with immense precision; next stopping to jump, with outstretched arms, straight and high; and then kicking their legs before resuming the circular progression. Whether they could dance with such easy grace because they knew the dancehall groove via its gradual induction into East Africa’s popular soundscape, because their tastes already extended to multiple Afro-diasporic genres, or simply because the music felt good and right and they wanted to move, these skilled dancers
were responding in their own way to the salience and potency of *musikah shachorah* (Hebrew: black music) as it sounds in Tel Aviv.

Yet in the men’s choice to remain apart from the rest of the dancing crowd, which towards the end of the evening was comprised of more Israeli than refugee participants, I read the possibility for multiple interpretations of Refugee Seder’s commemorative orientation and its *glocal* soundtrack. Noticeably missing from DJ Andrea’s Afropop set were Eritrean and Sudanese genres; when I asked her why, Andrea told me she was not sufficiently familiar with “Amharic music,” a term referring to Ethiopian pop in the Amharic language, which she used to gloss a broader collection of East African genres (interview with author, April 28, 2013). I heard no verbal complaints about the absence of Sudanese and Eritrean music from participants, yet its elision was dramatically underscored by the fitting of East African *iskista* dance into the rhythmic space afforded by a Caribbean-transnational beat. Commemorative narrative, as Zerubavel explains, necessarily presents itself as complete, but is nonetheless marked by implicit “tensions” between the categories of remembering and forgetting, between what is included and what is excluded (1995: 15). At Refugee Seder, the gestures and movements of *iskista* dancing reveal the presence of absence, the latent sounds of an “unsung micromusic” (Slobin 1993: 27).

Perhaps because refugees benefit significantly in various ways from Israeli involvement in their causes, I encountered little refugee-led criticism of “universalizing” tendencies in Israeli pro-refugee discourses and activities during the course of my fieldwork. Critique, however, can take forms besides verbal discourse, and we cannot
assume that the macro-scale vulnerability of Sudanese and Eritreans in Israel means that they are devoid of ideological or material agency within the world of “pro-refugee Tel Aviv.” If, as Nir Schlaman put it in his pre-dinner speech, the intention of Refugee Seder was that “every person be treated the same,” the flip side of this valuable idealism is a flattening of individual and group specificities. Such specificities are essential to psychic survival for many refugees, the sign-posts of identity that cannot be fully translated, the intricate details that cannot be adequately encompassed by a sometimes catchall *glocal* interpretation of Israeli activists with too much urgent work to do and too few resources to support it.

At Refugee Seder, it is important to emphasize again, Israeli participants benefit alongside refugees; the event, which boasts a slick dot.com website in both Hebrew and English and an affiliation with the Amnesty International, has received significant coverage in Israeli and international media (refugeehaggadah.org/seder). While I do not doubt the sincere pro-refugee sentiments and deep commitment to action of the Israelis involved in Refugee Seder, I neither doubt the professional and ideological satisfaction that these individuals – often marginalized themselves within Israeli society and misunderstood on the global stage – glean from the success of such an event. The Tel Aviv crisis over refugee presence, as I have discussed elsewhere, is always about more than refugee status specifically. Whether used as a launching pad for debate around longstanding *Mizrahi-Ashkenazi* sociopolitical tensions, or used as a partial means for leftist Israelis to publicly self-identity in alignment with Euro-American driven “global progressive” discourse, the refugee issue is shaped by Israeli desires in multiple respects.
No politics accounts for every aspect of every subjectivity it seeks to bear up. That East African refugees are still a demographically minor part of Israeli society and their civic objectives relatively straightforward in no way ensures permanent consonance among social actors. Yet acknowledging this fact, as well as the multiple valences of Israeli participation in pro-refugee activism, need not detract from recognizing the significance of Refugee Seder as a valorization of refugees in the language of national-religious commemoration; a glocali musical event; and a radical, direct political action. On the evening before Tel Aviv’s hundreds of thousands of Jewish citizens would celebrate Passover 2013 in their homes, facing inward towards family and friends across the seder table, warmed by the “lightness of legality, safety, and full membership” (Yiftachel 2009: 240), East African refugees and Israeli allies took over a public park in honor of the non-citizens, those whose first homes are far away, many of whom who might otherwise have little to eat that April evening. Police stood watch, the DJ threw down blood-pumping Afro-diasporic music, children played, Israelis and refugees danced together and apart, all giving vigorous and place-specific meaning to the

---

7 Celebrating Pesach with family is such a stable tradition within Israeli society, including for most non-religious Jews, that even dedicated pro-refugee activists do not forego it in favor of Refugee Seder. In order to draw Israeli participants, organizers host the event the night before Erev Pesach (Hebrew: Passover eve, when the holiday’s first seder takes place). I have considered whether or not this fact attenuates Refugee Seder’s “commemorative density” and political significance. Because Refugee Seder augments but does not replace the canonical seder, there is potentially less at stake emotionally, ideologically, or logistically for its Israeli participants. At the same time, the event is widely recognized as seder in media reports, and it occurs during the height of the “Pesach season,” which, like the “Christmas season” in the United States, extends well beyond the bounds of the week-long holiday itself. On balance, I regard the timing of Refugee Seder as a logistical requirement with a minimal symbolic downside.
age-old question asked at every Passover seder, every reading of the Hagadah: “what is different on this night of all nights?”

***

Musical communities of dissent in Tel Aviv are always also communities of affinity and taste in one way or another; often, as in collectivities of Sudanese and Eritrean refugee performers, African Christian migrants, Ethiopian Israeli artist-activists, or Mizrahi musicians, they are also communities of descent. Because expressive forms are so closely tied to macro-cultural histories and traditions, subcultural movements, and, increasingly, even fleeting trends with no clear point of origin save the seemingly boundless realm of global cyberspace, they can further specific oppositional claims and disrupt structures of dominance while they consolidate agency and collective identity for marginal actors. Expressive aesthetics like music, dance, theater, even speeches and slogans, partially protect their agents from direct reprisals by providing plausible cover for dissent. Sudanese Cultural Day is a celebration of age-old “folk” traditions; Mandela Day is one among Tel Aviv’s countless nightclub parties; “Sudanim le’Sudan” is “nonviolent” free speech.

Of course, these expressive forms are “hidden transcripts” of opposition only in part. Especially for marginal groups, any public self-representation is a call for space, rights, and recognition, a priori challenging hegemonic Israeli social order and risking at least some attention from non-supporters. Furthermore, the nature of sound as both force and cultural text means that sounds always touch thoughts, feelings, and bodies together. The “sonic effect” of music, speech, or slogan in contact with exterior and interior
soundscapes is a material manifestation of social change, and a potentially powerful tool of direct confrontation.

Music’s functionality as quasi-disguised dissent, and the “sonic effect” within urban Israel’s ever-shifting popular soundscape, are the opening subjects of the next chapter, an exploration of the “African branja,” a broad collective of Israeli and African cultural producers with a shared interest in African aesthetics, especially music. If expressive performances in “pro-refugee Tel Aviv” are usually linked with particular political objectives, branja musicking is diverse in content and form, physically spread out, and draws an enormous body of participants with widely varying attitudes and values. Concepts of progressivism, liberalism, racism, “Israeliness,” “Africanness,” and social justice, which are complex and contentious even amongst political activists who profess identical agendas, take on wider and looser meanings in the context of a movement defined by its members in primarily aesthetic terms. Musical glocali, as I have shown in my discussion of Refugee Seder, occupies a liminal space between subculture and hegemony, between subversion and acquiescence to the socio-musical mainstream. As a glocal musical community, the branja gives space to African artists voicing experiences, identities and socio-political claims, but it also facilitates Israeli performance and consumption of African musics that can crowd out such transcripts. Does branja musical output as a whole challenge mass-cultural constructions of “Israeliness” and expand the scope of socio-cultural inclusivity, or does it reify dynamics of scopism and exoticism that inflect urban Israeli cosmopolitan desires?
Chapter 5
Friendship House: Christianity and African Expression in the Migrant-Israel Relationship

Friendship House church is not easy to find on Har Tziyon Street, a busy thoroughfare bordering the western edge of Levinsky Park. Saturday morning churchgoers must share packed sidewalks with shoppers taking advantage of Har Tziyon’s non-kosher butchers, produce sellers, and nearby Shabbat market on Neve Sha’anan Street. If much of Tel Aviv is shuttered and silent on the Jewish day of rest, Levinsky Park and its surrounds bustle with commerce, sociality, and worship. As one of the city’s major “church” streets, Har Tziyon is always particularly lively on Shabbat, and the small Friendship House door is only one among numerous others.

Shadowed beneath a stone awning, situated between a three-table Eritrean restaurant and a convenience store, the open doorway is adorned with a wooden sign that marks it as a branch of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), a Nigerian-initiated Pentecostal denomination with a growing global following. Friendship House’s status as RCCG’s flagship site in the Holy Land (rccgisrael.org) is not immediately apparent in any aspect of its facility: the dark ground floor hallway and narrow staircase appear under-renovated, featuring crumbled concrete in places and multilingual graffiti on the walls. Metal gates block off anonymous rooms, and the smell of injera from the kitchen of the restaurant next door, although mouthwatering, usually puts me more in the spirit of lunch than of worship.
Counterbalancing Friendship House’s modest physical plant, however, is the gorgeous soundscape in which I immerse myself each time I enter number 46 Har Tziyon Street, where multiple churches rent space and hold services throughout the week. On Saturdays, which replace Sundays as the Sabbath for Tel Aviv’s Christian ovdim zarim, this building seems to vibrate with the exhortations of preachers, claps and “amens” of congregants, and the music of ubiquitous church bands. 46 Har Tziyon hosts several sanctuaries in addition to Friendship House, including Eritrean, Nepalese, and Ghanaian congregations, and many services are bi- or tri-lingual, yet the musical signature throughout the building is primarily gospel, as this genre has emerged within diverse African Pentecostal traditions. Widely known African American religious songs like “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot” and “When the Saints Go Marching In” share this four-story building’s sonic space with the slow R&B of modern gospel songs featuring synth keyboards, drum machines, and slick pop-style vocals. A capella group singing in French, English, and diverse African national or indigenous languages meets the uptempo keyboard and horn stabs of Nigerian “high life” or Ivorian Coupe Decale. If climbing the staircase of 46 Har Tziyon is a visually uninspiring exercise, it is, unfailingly, an energizing aural adventure.

Friendship House itself is one vast room and a suite of small offices on the third floor. In a light-filled sanctuary overlooking the street, folding chairs are arranged in neat rows before a low dais and a glass pulpit. A drum kit and keyboard sit permanently at one end of the dais, ready for a rotating core of musicians who perform at multiple points during every service, often accompanied by the Friendship House Choir comprised of
members of the congregation. On Saturdays for Shabbat, Friday nights for Holy Spirit service, and Wednesday nights for group prayer meetings, music and sound structure the worship program and guide congregants into attitudes of reverence, awe, or celebration as appropriate. Here, sermons by the formidable Pastor Chidi and testimonials from congregants move easily from speech into shouts, shouts into song, and back again, weaving a multitextural sonic fabric that lifts only after the last community notice has been announced and congregants disperse.

In many respects, Friendship House services and administration resemble those of other Pentecostal African Initiated Churches (AICs) in Tel Aviv, across Israel, and around the world. Structured around mainly (though not exclusively) untranslated English sermons, readings, and prayers, services are punctuated by frequent musical interludes featuring electronic instruments (synth keyboard, electric guitar and bass) and a “western” drum kit. Although the primacy of the English language and contemporary gospel musics within Friendship House stems from the RCCG’s “Model Parish” modernization movement of the 1980s, services retain some aspects of earlier “Classical Parish” or “Holiness” Pentecostalism (Ukah 2005: 98), including faith healing, laying-on of hands, ecstatic states, and weeping, groaning, or shouting in prayer.

Organizationally, Friendship House and other AICs maintain clear but flexible leadership hierarchies, with a primary pastor who answers to clergy in countries of origin, as well as deputy pastors, deacons, lay leaders, and various administrative volunteers. As in much African Pentecostalism since the last decades of the 20th century, high-ranking officials of Friendship House and the RCCG more broadly tend to be university-
educated, upwardly-mobile, and savvy in the uses of media and technology to promote church interests (Ukah: 97). As Asonzeh F.-K. Ukah writes, “the RCCG embraced a utopian doctrine of material abundance in the 1980s that was in tune with the promises of proponents of globalisation who see in the cluster of processes of interconnectivity the cure for humanity’s contemporary malaise, particularly poverty” (102). Whereas the early Aladura (Yoruba: People of Prayer) Pentecostalism from which RCCG evolved regarded much economic activity as “at variance with the doctrines of the church” (Ukah: 98), Friendship House’s leadership and congregation alike understand secular activity and resultant prosperity as pleasing to God.

Within the broad parameters of African Pentecostalism, Friendship House’s unique ecumenical “personality” or vibe is generated largely by its people. Pastor Chidi selects topics for sermon as he sees their relevance or urgency arise within his flock; singer and keyboardist Bonfils Babijoux Nikiza picks hymns that suit parishioners’ collective mood; members of the congregation petition for prayers or healing according to the changing circumstances of their personal and professional lives. Pastor Chidi’s congregation is also notably ethno-culturally diverse, more so than many (but not all) other AICs in Tel Aviv. While most churchgoers are west African – Nigerian, Ivorian, Ghanaian – others hail from southern Africa, the Caribbean, South America, South Asia and the Philippines. With its musical leadership comprised of a Burundian keyboardist, an Ivorian drummer, a choir including three Filipina women and a Trinidadian soloist, and one native Israeli guitar-playing convert to Christianity, Friendship House is best understood as a “very Tel Aviv” Nigerian church.
Because religious practice at Friendship House is simultaneously grassroots and top-down – shaped by the affairs and aspirations of individual Tel Aviv residents and by interpretations of Pentecostalism developed in Nigeria over decades – this congregation’s values, discourses, and aesthetic expressions afford a detailed discussion of modes of Africani interpretation as actualized by members of Israel’s African labor migrant population. Within this community, as I will describe, the tenants of Pentecostalism and the aesthetics and significations of music, broadly defined, serve as major interpretive guideposts for believers and non-believers alike. Because Christianity and music cross national boundaries but may also manifest particularistically, African ovdim zarim can engage with both in diverse ways at different times to claim specific national identities, caucus with African migrants from elsewhere on the continent, and assert personal power.

Church discourses and musical expressions also offer African Christians, active and nominal alike, avenues for direct engagement with Israel’s Jewish population. Many Pentecostal denominations, including the RCCG, profess adherence to the “Christian Zionist” belief that Jewish stewardship of the Holy Land fulfills a part of God’s plan, albeit only one stage of this plan. A key Christian role at this period in history, as Pastor Chidi frequently reminds his congregation, is to “Identify, Integrate, and Intercede” on behalf of Israel within global and local networks, and amongst Israelis in order to raise the profile of the church in the Jewish state (rccgisrael.org). Ideologically, then, Pentecostalism offers African Christians the pride of a divine mission, and directs “holy living” at work and play. With Israeli employers, government officials, friends and acquaintances, Christians should display strength, intelligence, and reliability as evidence
of God’s power, grace, and blessings. Notably, although Israel’s Common Law prohibits most forms of religious proselytizing, the RCCG has found ways to build institutional ties with and inside Israel, from meetings between President Shimon Peres and RCCG General Overseer E.A. Adeboye to charitable initiatives with Leket, Israel’s national food bank (ibid).

Music is especially suited to the task of identifying, integrating, and testifying because, more so than Amharic, Tigray, and other east African genres, many west, central, and southern Africa sounds a ready audience amongst urban Israel’s native Jewish residents. As I will discuss in this chapter and the next, these musics can function as “gospel” when performed in church, and as secular expressions of identity when performed for mixed audiences that include Israelis. Such mixed audiences are most active in what some of my associates term Tel Aviv’s “African branja” [Hebrew slang for “scene”] a loose collective of Jewish Israelis, migrants and refugees from across the African continent, and natives of Afro-diasporic communities from Kingston to Rio de Janeiro. This branja, which overlaps with but is distinct in its social dynamics and political objectives from the “pro-refugee Tel Aviv” I describe in the previous chapter, coalesces in large measure around music and dance performances in several Tel Aviv venues. For Israeli branja participants, African musicians are figures of peak power, desirability, and righteousness; for many Africans, branja participation can augment or complement religious community as a site of identity formation and valuable social networking.
Certainly, not every west, central, or southern African migrant musician in Tel Aviv is a Christian or a member of one of the city’s AICs; yet many are, to the extent that secular concerts for mixed audiences sometimes take place in church sanctuaries, and musicians like Bonfils Nikiza and Friendship House drummer Elise Element Yves must juggle ecumenical and secular performance schedules. For these musicians, the bracing mandates of the church and the responsibilities and privileges of *branja* leadership inflect each other. In this chapter, I examine a loose set of musical and other expressive forms like prayer, speech, and personal style that cross boundaries between sacred and secular spaces. Through exploration of the aesthetics of church services and the activities of church musicians who perform elsewhere in Tel Aviv, I identify two major components of African migrant ideo-imaginary that are loosely based in church doctrine and discourse, but applicable as well to other aspects of lived experience in urban Israel.

The first of these driving conceptual forces is a high attunement on the part of the groups and individuals to pride and personal power, which may be acquired through the parallel courses of moral righteousness, social success, and material abundance. Clergy and congregants proclaim in one breath God’s greatness and the value of money; *branja* musicians thank the Lord for a full house and post bible passages on their bands’ social media accounts; professing Christians wear trendy fashions in order to display affluence and hipness. As some of my examples will indicate, conceptions of pride and power are gendered, with certain styles and behaviors common to men and others to women; yet pride and power are themselves available to all.
Relatedly, powerful God and powerful African individual are often rhetorically brought together in displays, religious and secular, that pertain to the significance of Israel as Holy Land. Despite facing socio-economic hardships, many African Christian migrants take a long view of their lives in Israel, believing that Christians should be in the country, and many plan for futures here rather than “back home.” As such, an intense energy infuses many expressive forms in and outside the church, an urgency to resolve contradictions of experience and ideology that destabilize individual and collective relationships between Christian migrants and their adopted home country.

I want to emphasize again that many west, central, and southern African migrants in urban Israel are not Christians, and plenty of nominal Christian migrants are not deeply religious. In positing a “Christian Africani” interpretive framework as broadly salient to this large and diverse “group of groups” (Horowitz 2011), I do not suggest that a Nigerian migrant’s lived experience is identical to that of a Ghanaian, Ivorian, Trinidadian or South African. Yet I do present Friendship House and its musicians as enacting ideologies and aesthetics that are relevant to the consideration of Israel’s non-Muslim African migrant populations more generally. In this connection, such ideologies and aesthetics can be distinct from manifestations of Africani interpretation amongst East African, largely Muslim refugee communities; yet these two collectivities have certain overlaps of experience in Tel Aviv, especially joint participation in some of the musical activities I discuss in the next chapter. What’s more, the tropes of “home,” Africa, and Israel that emerge in various ways within refugee and pro-refugee political aesthetics are
equally salient to Tel Aviv’s African Christian migrants, and manifest in discourses and performances specific to this community.

**Body Display and African Expression in Church**

A Saturday morning in early May of 2013, and Pastor Chidi Umeh-Ujabonu is just beginning a sermon. Standing at the pulpit before a Friendship House congregation of close to one hundred adults, teenagers and children, Chidi’s hands rest flat on either side of a bible. His tone is calm and serious as he reads; he is tall and handsome, sharply dressed in a light gray suit and pale tie. Not yet forty years old, Chidi possesses the energy of youth and the gravity of authority: he is the chief representative of the RCCG in the Holy Land, having previously served in this capacity in Singapore and represented the Church in several capacities in the United States (Umeh-Ujabonu interview with author, October 14, 2013). With a deep, commanding voice, a charming smile, a sense of humor and a sense of style, Chidi is beloved by many congregants, and intimidating to some. He expects to be listened to, whether sermonizing or simply giving informal advice to members of his flock, and he usually is.

Pastor Chidi identifies his role in Tel Aviv as part RCCG administrator, part preacher, and part role model (ibid). Although he lives in a large RCCG-owned apartment in the wealthy north Tel Aviv neighborhood of Ramat Aviv, Chidi spends most of his time in and around Friendship House, and has become deeply familiar with the challenges faced by south city residents. “The guys here can get into a lot of trouble,” he acknowledges, mentioning drinking, drug use, and loose sexual behaviors on the part of
some young migrant men. “The economic situation is very bad, and racism is a problem. This contributes to a lower level of understanding for the [African] people here” (ibid).

Raising community awareness of God’s directions with respect to right living is one of Chidi’s primary day-to-day objectives, and he takes a multi-pronged approach to counterbalancing the troubles and temptations of urban life. Charitable work like clothing and food donations benefit south Tel Aviv’s African migrant communities in general, while talks from the pulpit target his congregants in particular. Chidi’s sermons are best described as full-body, multi-modal performances, incorporating intellectualism and passion, measured tones and stentorian shouting, anger and joy, stillness and gestures so large they become a form of dancing. In this way, Chidi aims to reach his congregants whatever their state of mind or heart, at cognitive, emotional, and somatic levels.

Chidi is proud of his accomplishments, his socio-economic status, his personal comportment and his education, an advanced degree in mathematics from Lagos University among others. He notes, “a lot of Israelis have some funny opinions about Nigerians” (ibid) that he is gratified to upend when he talks to shop owners, Israeli government officials, or people on the street. “They look shocked when they hear my English,” which he speaks fluently and with British diction, a holdover from post-colonial primary education. Indeed, Chidi’s broad vocabulary is one of the things his parishioners like about his English-language sermons. Yet if a kind of intellectual

---

1 Audio of some of Pastor Chidi’s sermons is available at www.rccgisrael.org/the-word.
cosmopolitanism is one important component of the African identity Chidi wishes to represent within Israeli society and to encourage within his congregation, it finds its complement in displays of physicality. In a denomination where hands-on healing and ecstatic states foreground the body as an instrument of God, a whole Christian is necessarily a strong, healthy, energetic Christian. Accordingly, no Friendship House service passes without high-impact physical displays on the part of congregants or clergy.

This Saturday is no different. Where Chidi began his talk in calm stillness, he soon leaves the pulpit and stands at the front of the dais, where he can speak and gesture more freely. His voice becomes louder as he preaches about a problem of special relevance to members of his congregation: the hazards of the domestic and janitorial employment that is so central to Israel’s African migrant community economies. AIC congregations in Tel Aviv maintain active discourses around the health problems associated with cleaning work (Sabar 2004); many Friendship House services are punctuated by churchgoers requesting the healing of ailments they identify as caused by dangerous chemicals, overlong hours, and backbreaking tasks. Cleaning jobs grind the body down, Chidi intones, and also oppress the spirit. His congregation does not need the Pastor to tell them this work is degrading – they know it on a visceral, experiential level – but rather to give them confidence in its eventual end.

“That the Lord lift us out of cleaning work, and into a new economy!” he shouts.

“Amen!” parishioners respond.

“That with the Lord’s help we become strong in our minds and our bodies!”

“Amen!”
As if to demonstrate this strength, Pastor Chidi clenches his fists, bends his knees, and lunges upward again. He repeats the move a few times during this portion of the sermon with slight modifications: a raised arm, an open hand. Next, Chidi moves from the dais to the sanctuary floor, pacing back and forth with long strides in front of the first row of worshippers, as he begins a homily about a woman back in Nigeria who came to him with complaints about her job and her health.

“I asked this woman, ‘have you been righteous?’ ‘Yes, pastor,’ she said. ‘I have been righteous.’ ‘Have you done Christian charity?’ ‘Yes, pastor, I have.’ Then you may demand your reward! You go and you tell God, ‘I have been your servant, Lord; now please send me my reward’” (Umeh-Ujubonu sermon, Friendship House, Tel Aviv, May 10, 2013).

Chidi’s ringing voice traces cadences that remind me of the famous sermons of Reverend C. L. Franklin, father of Aretha, whose virtuosic use of dynamics, timbre, and even pitch in his oratorical style laid an indelible imprint on African American popular music of the 1950s and 1960s. This morning, Friendship House is serving up pure soul in the heart of the Israeli city:

“Do you know WHAT? The next WEEK, this same WOMAN came BACK to me, and she was driving a NEW car!”

Chidi raises his hand high, and then slices his arm sharply down as if chopping away all obstacles to abundance, all doubts as to the incredible power of the Lord.

“A NEW car.”

His hand forms a fist; he pumps it once, twice, three times towards the floor.
“A new car.”

Silence, and then Chidi settles himself, facing his congregation with his arms folded high across his broad chest, a perorative posture that charges his conclusion with a drama words alone could not impart.

“’Pastor, I went and told God I had done my Christian work and would he please help me. Next day, my husband bring home this new car’” (ibid).

Chidi’s story of the woman and her reward is one of many abundance-related sermons I heard at Friendship House during the course of my fieldwork. Narratives of righteousness leading to material success are not only consonant with RCCG’s “Model Parish” valorization of wealth (Ukah 2005), but also well-received amongst congregants, in large part because so many of south Tel Aviv’s African migrants work low-paying jobs and live in situations of relative socio-economic insecurity. This community’s expressions of desire for worldly abundance, which are closely linked to a voiced need for better status and greater freedoms in Israel, can be aptly summed up in the testimony of a Friendship House parishioner upon leaving her domestic employment to return home to Nigeria. “Next time I walk in this city,” she exclaimed to the congregation, “I come as a tourist!” (Friendship House, Tel Aviv, April 2013). This bold assertion was met with pleased laughter and cheering: God would grant the former ozeret bayt (Heb: household helper) wealth enough to travel, and status enough to come and go from Israel as she pleased.

Since the mid 1990s, roughly ten thousand west, central, and southern Africans have entered Israel on tourist or “pilgrimage” visas, or as asylum seekers, and many
remained without documentation in order to work (Paley 2011). Beginning in the early 2000s, multiple deportation initiatives on the part of the Israeli government dramatically reduced these numbers, and as of 2013, only an estimated two to three thousand remain (Sabar 2005: 412). A few of these migrants have been able to adjust their status after marrying Israeli citizens, and several hundred have received formal refugee determinations, including some individuals from Congo and Cote d’Ivoire (ibid). Technically, then, there are hardly any African *ovdim zarim* in Israel; as my colleague Nirit Ben-Ari puts it, “Israelis think they’re all refugees, not just the Sudanese and Eritreans” (interview with author, May 2013). Yet collective experience amongst Tel Aviv’s west, central, and southern African communities is patterned around factors generally associated with economic rather than political migration. As is suggested by the content of many Friendship House sermons, this community is deeply concerned with improving their working conditions in Israel, as well as fulfilling family demands to send monetary remittances home, issues central to economic migrant experience.

Figure 5.1: Pastor Chidi at the “Double Portion” RCCG 2013 conference, Jerusalem
Many African migrants see themselves and their fellows as workers, not refugees, a self-perception I contrast with that of the East African groups who collectively identify as refugees. So, as I describe in the previous chapter, while Dim’s and Mubarak’s Sudanese Cultural Day performance of an oafish Israeli employer and a mistreated Sudanese janitor makes clear that refugees contend with and object to labor problems, such struggles are framed as part of what makes refugee life so difficult, and are theatrically book-ended during this skit by enactments of an encounter with the Janjaweed militia and an interrogation by Sudanese secret police after deportation from Israel. Conversely, official refugee status is uncommon enough in west, central, and southern African migrant experience that it does not emerge as a prominent theme in community discourses.

African migrants living in urban Israel face the same type of anti-black and anti-African racism faced by Sudanese and Eritrean refugees – indeed, some of my migrant associates recount instances in which they were mistaken for a “Sudani” by hostile Israelis – yet they do not, as a group, necessarily benefit from the initiatives of the “pro-refugee Tel Aviv” I describe in the previous chapter. Further, if conflicts in Sudan and Darfur are relatively well recognized within Euro-American led international activist discourses, upheaval and economic instability in other African countries of origin are less understood. African migrants, then, are an internally diverse group, and they are viewed by outsiders absent a ready ideological lens. Here is where, in many respects, AICs fulfill an important role. Researchers including Galia Sabar (2005), S. Kanari (2006), Nelly Elias and Adriana Kemp (2010) have described the African church in Israel as facilitating
collective identity, public representation, claims to Israeli social services and a degree of civic status for African groups that fall outside of refugee-related discourses and initiatives.\(^2\)

With these group oriented functions of Tel Aviv’s AICs fairly well-documented, I am looking closely at what the church, and the expressive forms within it, do for African migrant individuals, whose responsibilities and benefits as Christians are, as I have indicated, tied up with discourses of personal power. This kind of power does not lend itself to straightforward taxonomy or a catalogue of its components; in fact, church leaders do not use the specific term “personal power” in sermons, and church members evoke it only casually, not as a codified theological concept. Implicating factors as wide-ranging as bodily righteous Christian action, confidence in God’s favor, financial security, authority over other social actors, skill in expressive forms, and self-presentation, the notion of personal power might be understood as a kind of “disarticulated knowledge,” emerging in large part through lived experience and “distributed among disconnected or loosely connected cognitive islands of coherence” (Perlman 2004: 17). If African migrant churchgoers do not explicitly identify a qualitative relationship between standing with shoulders thrown back and holding a managerial position on the job, for instance, or

\(^2\) I suggest that Friendship House and other AICs in Tel Aviv not only strengthen pre-existing communities of migrants, but are also community makers, facilitating communal identification for individuals from different African and even non-African countries who might not otherwise come together, but who share Christian faith and, significantly, the complicated experience of working for Israelis.
between clear, resonant speech and a secure visa status, certain behaviors and attitudes imply that these relationships do obtain.

Much of the literature around physicality in Pentecostal worship focuses on the body as a means to spiritual ends – speaking in tongues, laying-on of hands, ecstatic vocalizations and gestures – while the body’s function as potential vehicle of earthly power is either unexamined or relegated to frameworks of sin (Nelson 2005). Although Pastor Chidi is certainly vocal about the dangers of bodily misuse (illicit sex, drinking and drugs, for instance), I suggest that his intensely expressive gestures during his sermons convey the body’s importance and its goodness in ways that his narrative does not explicitly address. As “the Lord lifts us out of cleaning work,” Chidi rises, logically enough, to stand up straight; yet his clenched fists and forward lunges evoke struggle and even anger, affective states not a priori organic to the beneficiary of an act of God. Here, the Pastor’s body tells a parallel story of human determination to refuse abasement, of embodied striving against oppression.

Pastor Chidi’s orientation towards the value of worldly striving is perhaps unsurprising: his resume of achievements is impressive, his appearance and comportment are widely noted – “handsome,” “cool,” and “sharp” are some assessments I heard from his parishioners – and, as I infer from his enthusiastic account of amenities, technologies and cleanliness during his Singapore posting (Umeh-Ujubuonu, interview with author, October 13, 2013), he enjoys creature comforts. I have also heard the suggestion that Chidi might be too materialistic: “he likes his big house in Ramat Aviv,” one Friendship House congregant told me during an interview (interview with author, October 10, 2013).
Yet worldliness and material abundance are sanctioned in RCCG Pentecostalism, and moreover constitute a sustaining vision for West African migrants who face difficult living conditions in urban Israel. My interest here is in the way Chidi’s form and physicality transmit theology and cultural knowledge around the multivalent notion of personal power (Hahn 2007). If, as ethnomusicologist Tomie Hahn writes, “performance provides a special metaphoric space […] revealing how people make sense of their lives and community” (2007: 4), Friendship House sermons not only tell congregants how to live, but also show them.

Pentecostal church services are multisensory experiences, implicating sight, audition, and movement to influence cognition and emotion. They are also highly participatory: the Pastor’s embodied transmission of information “instills profound cultural beliefs in the bod[ies]” of congregants themselves, who in turn access personal power through enactments of their own (ibid). Displays of physical virtuosity are especially apparent during up-tempo group hymns, when church musicians and parishioners sing loudly, perform complicated “polyrhythms” by clapping or dancing energetically while playing the shekere, a west African gourd percussion instrument. Worshippers who sing or move remarkably are given recognition as their fellows move aside to allow them extra space, shout admiration, or lay on hands to transmit love and healing. In such instances, those singled out are not only claiming spiritual actualization, but also worldly greatness as practitioners of skills valued by the collective. As parishioner and singer Hillary Sargent explains, she sings in the Friendship House choir
in part because “they need me. A lot of them can’t carry a tune; I can take a solo and make the music sound wonderful” (interview with author, October 10, 2013).

Physical virtuosity as spiritual tool and personal empowerment is on display as well during Wednesday night “Holy Spirit meetings,” during which congregants meet under the direction of a lay leader to pray for individuals and groups. Here deputy pastor Vicky Ohene improvises prayers that increase in tempo and loudness until reaching a climax; congregants then join in with individual prayers, claps, tambourine playing, kneeling, and dancing. This form of leadership requires considerable expressive skill: on nights I attended Holy Spirit meetings, Pastor Vicky maintained an unceasing flow of prayer that moved from the troubles of individual parishioners through to the wisdom of RCCG leadership and the plea that God guide Israel’s government in proper stewardship of the Holy Land.

It is noteworthy that while diverse modes of church performance afford opportunities for physical display, certain expressive styles are employed more than others when one wishes to capture group attention. These practices fall into two categories: broadly Afro-diasporic Pentecostal, and “indigenous” or “national” African. Powerful gospel and R&B melismatic singing, rapid chant-like praying aloud, and the highly cadential preaching style are examples from the former category. Individuals can and do receive acclaim for exceptional skill in these areas; yet because broadly Afro-diasporic Pentecostalism forms the expressive foundation of most Friendship House services, special regard is given to distinctly “African” performances. An elderly man known as Deacon Joseph, for example, is an outstanding shekere practitioner; his playing
and dancing during up-tempo hymns can elicit louder, longer exclamations from worshippers than nearly any other part of services. Similarly, Pastor Vicky generates an immense prayerful response from Holy Spirit participants when she shifts into the Yoruba language, and Bonfils Babijoux Nikiza can reliably get the congregation on its feet with a *coupe decale* keyboard vamp.

When individuals evoke particular African locations and cultures in sound, music, or movement, they engage in compound spiritual-social acts. From a linguistic-semiotic perspective, these acts are messages that carry multiple meanings because they implicate multiple linguistic functions (Jakobson 1960): the Yoruba utterance *denotes* God’s actions as the discursive referent; equally, it *expresses* Pastor Vicky’s emotions about God. Yet semantic content here cannot be pried apart from its delivery, which, by virtue of being Yoruba in a primarily English-language environment, performs *phatic* and *metalingual* functions that check on listeners’ attention and implicitly (but emphatically) ask “Do you feel me?!”

Above all, African expressive forms in the diasporic church – verbal, musical, and gestural alike – engage a *poetic* function; that is, an absolute set towards “the message for its own sake” (Jakobson 1960: 356) on the part of both performer and audience. The point of Yoruba prayer, *shekere* playing, or *coupe decale* vamp is the *fact of* Yoruba, *shekere*, and *couple decale*; the form of the message becomes, at least for a moment, more important than the worship of God. This is the case primarily because, simply put, worship can take place in any language or musical genre. Therefore, the answer to the
question of “why Yoruba” (or shekere or coupe decale) lies in recognizing that these forms hold some other significance, separate from or supplementary to worship.

These potential significances are sociopolitical in nature, and they are no mystery. In the first instance, African expressions enact parishioners’ connections to homes and cultures of origin. They reinscribe and celebrate African and national identities that are neither separable from nor entirely encompassed by Christian identities. Additionally, such expressions do social work for the performer. Just as channeling the Holy Spirit imbues an individual with the divine, channeling African or national culture imbues her with the power of home and natal selfhood, temporarily extricating her from the debasements of diasporic experience. Although partial familiarity with African aesthetics is widely available, full knowledge of these aesthetics is acroamatic, held only by special (African) cohorts. As such, individuals who employ embody the ideal of personal power that Friendship House espouses: ensconced in sanctified activity and strong, recognized, and accomplished in their social world.

Figure 5.2: Dancing at Friendship House
The unique potency of African expressions to access personal power illuminates a new dimension of the broad Africana interpretive framework that I present throughout this dissertation. For Pastor Chidi and his flock, personal power incorporates identification with African and Afro-diasporic locations, cultures, and collectivities – a fully realized individual understands where she comes from – but also draws upon a highly personal phenomenology of experience, in which African aesthetics can literally occupy and transform the body. I have explored in previous chapters the role of individual experience in social organization and collective political action, framing the body as the affective point of convergence of imagination, micro-politics, and ethics (Davidson et. al. 2011); here, I wish to foreground an aspect of the individual in the social world that is difficult to pin down, and which might be described as “energy,” or, more prosaically, comportment and bearing. For West African migrants in urban Israel, personal presence as felt by the self and others is often linked to African aesthetics and African identity, and immensely salient to the formulation of personal power. I have aimed to illustrate how physical form, use of the voice, and gesture contribute in different ways to realizing personal power in the church environment, and I discuss in the next chapter how African bodies are figured and valued in the branja. Across both arenas, whether one already possesses material abundance and social authority like Pastor Chidi, or whether she holds marginal professional status like so many Friendship House parishioners, a West African may use their body in diverse ways not only to strive for power (working for money is one such use), but also to be powerful right here and right now.
It is impossible to speak of bodies and power without acknowledging that both are gendered in the social world. I have indicated that different personal styles and performances are valued for women and men in Tel Aviv’s West African communities. In this connection, it is notable that more men than women take up the shekere during Friendship House services; that no men sing in the church choir (although Bonfils sings while playing keys); and that the volunteer committee handling many of the church’s administrative tasks is comprised of women. An in-depth analysis of gender roles within the Friendship House congregation is beyond the scope of this project, but it is important to emphasize that men and women do experience distinct affordances and constraints when it comes to how to worship and interact with their community, and that paternalism is not necessarily absent from group dynamics. One woman parishioner who has spent one-on-one time with Pastor Chidi discussing theology notes, for example, that the Pastor’s style, smarts, and attitude can cross the line into “macho,” and that he sometimes “comes across overbearing” in his interactions with congregants. Laughing, she explains, “He doesn’t like if I challenge him” (interview with author, May 2013).

At the same time, RCCG Christianity apportions lots of room for female leadership: a Nigerian woman pastor, higher ranking than Chidi, visited Tel Aviv for all of May 2013 to oversee preparations for the church’s annual international conference, which was held in Jerusalem and titled “Double Portion,” in reference to the abundance God promises to believing Christians. Pastor Vicky enjoys widespread respect in the parish, and Hillary Sargent shines as a chorister. Women are lay leaders and organizers, encouraged to testify on the dais during services, and welcome, as the men are, to meet
privately with Chidi if they have doubts or questions about Christian teachings. Although it may take different forms at the level of gender and individual, personal power is a blessing available to any Christian.

AICs are centers of religious and social life for many West African migrants in Tel Aviv; as I have aimed to demonstrate, they are also spheres of aesthetic expression. In church, individuals use their voices, bodies, and talents to praise to God, ask for divine and community help, reinvigorate connections to African homes of origin, and display personal power. In the multisensory context of religious services, single acts like Yoruba prayer, *shekere* playing, or a *Coupe Decale* style hymn can perform all of these functions at once, within an overarching structure of value that locates God at its zenith. In the next section of this chapter, I explore the ways in which three church musicians, keyboardist Bonfils Babijoux Nikiza, drummer Elise Element Yves, and singer Hillary Sargent, bring to Tel Aviv’s music scene some of the same expressive elements that are found in Friendship House. In city venues as in the church, these performers can access and demonstrate personal power via uses of the body, yet notions of power here are inflected by secular rather than religious values. If church is where individuals go to represent themselves before God and in-group members, the public performance stage is where they go to represent themselves amongst Israelis, and where they may seek fruits of worldly abundance that are not necessarily available inside the church.
Migrant Musicians’ Presence, Power, and Performance

Bonfils Babijoux Nikiza is a friendly, heavyset man from Burundi in his early thirties, with a musical talent and an abiding faith that he shares each week with the Friendship House congregation from his place behind a keyboard. When he isn’t in church, Bonfils heads up The African Orchestra, a group five musicians hailing from Nigeria, Cote d’Ivoire, Congo and Brazil who perform multiple popular genres from these countries on keyboard, bass, guitar, drums, and saxophone. Splitting his time between Bujumbura, Tel Aviv and Nairobi, where he travels on RCCG-sponsored “mission trips,” Bonfils’ church affiliation has enabled him to move in and out of Israel with relative freedom. He sees his time Israel as an opportunity to visit holy sites, live his Christianity amongst Jewish Israelis, and strengthen his relationship with God, and he frames his music, whether in church and outside of it, as a form of worship (interview with author, March 2013). He speaks enthusiastically about his faith in our interviews as well as in casual conversations with associates, and regularly praises God in social media status updates.

Elise Element Yves, a Cote d’Ivoirian who has lived in Tel Aviv for more than eight years and, in 2013, married his longtime Ethiopian-Israeli sweetheart, plays drums at Friendship House, spends several evenings a week rehearsing or performing with his band the Groove Ambassadors, and works as a session and studio musician for additional groups across Tel Aviv. He is a musical wunderkind who can move with ease between reggae drumming with Club Rasta owner Tony Ray, Fela Kuti-style Afrobeat vocals with the Ambassadors, hip hop choreography for the Tel Aviv-based dance troupe From Israel
to Africa, and moon walking on the dance floor to a Michael Jackson track. Elise is a churchgoer, comfortable shouting God’s praises in Friendship House, yet his musical life revolves largely around the secular world of nightclubs and bars. He is everywhere that African and Israeli musicians and audiences come together, and he has many admirers. Female Israeli participants in the “African branja” in particular seem to love him, and he is an incorrigible if harmless flirt. As at home in the club as Bonfils feels in church and at holy sites, Elise has achieved a hard-won sense of belonging in the city.

These two musicians have a lot in common, including emigration from unstable home country situations to Israel, church membership, and success as performers; significantly, they are both exposed to a prominent public sphere discourse that frames them, as black African men, categorically “the same,” representative of demographic threat. As I discuss in the introduction of this dissertation, Israeli social anxieties around identity and ownership of Israeli space can manifest in fears about the black male body in particular, which is viewed not only as potentially violent, but also as hypersexual, virile, and therefore especially dangerous (c.f. Monson 1995). As members of an ideologically and often materially targeted community, Bonfils and Elise carry with them the burden of a highly determined social identity. While the phenomenon of physical African presence is deeply socially fraught, however, large-scale Israeli consumption of “black” and “African” musics goes largely unproblematicized, evidencing a split Israeli social personality with respect to black persons and black aesthetics that calls to mind critiques of the “superhuman/subhuman” trope in white American reception of black musics and popular culture (Monson 1995, George 1999, Tate 2003, Neal 2006).
For Bonfils and Elise, then, black African identity is, paradoxically, locus of both marginalization and incorporation. Amongst Israeli audiences of African and Afro-diasporic musics, there is an equation of African identity with musical legitimacy that lends Bonfils and Elise valuable social currency. This currency, however, does not represent fully realized personal power; it is a resource they can use to initiate projects, activities, and relationships that afford opportunities for the accumulation and display of power. Bonfils, for instance, parlayed recognition as a talented practitioner of desirable musical styles into private Israeli backing for an album of gospel songs that he cut in 2013. Joining a mixed-ethnicity community choir based in an affluent Tel Aviv suburb, Bonfils gained the support of Adriane Bernstein, a South African Jewish *olah* [immigrant] who was taken with Bonfils’ singing voice and his wrenching personal story. Adrienne’s social media publicity and personal fundraising efforts enabled Bonfils to buy studio time, hire session musicians, and distribute the finished product, while also helping him negotiate complicated visa status issues that might otherwise have shortened his stay in Israel while recording.

It is important to emphasize that for Bonfils, “secular” musical activity like the mixed choir or restaurant and club gigs are valuable in large measure because they bring in personal and professional connections and material support for the religious musical projects from which he derives his greatest sense of fulfillment. Yet secular performance is more than just a day job: here Bonfils can hone and display his chops on tunes that are often more structurally and harmonically complex than the downtempo English-language gospel hymns that comprise much of Friendship House’s catalogue. Further, Bonfils has
both opportunity and motivation to represent African identity in secular performances to an even greater extent than in his religious work. One reason for this is practical: there exists a negligible Israeli market for contemporary church gospel music of the type Bonfils prefers to compose, but a large one for the collection of “Afropop” styles he plays well. Additionally, African expressions, which are highly charged within the primarily West African environment of a Friendship House service, retain equally potent but distinct sociological functionality outside the church. For example, a gig featuring Nigerian High Life, Ivorian Coupe Decale, and Congolese Soukous music at Tel Aviv’s Alliance Francaise during a showcase of arts from French-speaking countries allows Bonfils to align himself with transnational cosmopolitanism and garner a kind of official sanction, since the Alliance is a French government institution (April 21, 2013, Alliance Francaise, Tel Aviv). The professional benefits and the symbolic resonances of connections forged with French officialdom and other diasporic musicians alike are invaluable for a migrant musician living without secure status in Israel’s shifting socio-political environment.

As a believing Christian, Bonfils draws a general distinction between religious and secular spheres of life, and often articulates the supremacy of the former over the

---

3 “Afropop” is a broad idea with a complicated usage history. Emerging in the 1990s as a corporate genre label within the equally vast “world music” industry and popularized via National Public Radio’s “Afropop Worldwide” show, the term refers to “popular” (rather than “folk” or “traditional”) music from any African nation, especially musics that incorporate elements of Euro-American pop from the late-20th century on. Although “Afropop” problematically elides multiple genres and musical cultures, I retain the term because many of my associates, African and Israeli alike, use it to refer to musics they produce, perform, or consume.
latter. As an example, here is his Facebook “status update” following a coveted audition for one of Israel’s nationally televised singing contests:

I just wanna share this, last month I was called to audition for Israeli Xfactor, the audition went well and I was called for the next audition that was supposed to give me access to the competition. The day before the audition one of the staff from Xfactor called to give me two songs I should learn and sing them at the audition. One was by an Israeli singer Eyal Golan, the she said that the next one was by Lady Gaga my question was Lady what?????? She replied Lady Gaga!!! That’s how I gave up on that audition!!! My lips will only praise the name of the Lord! (June 8, 2013)

Here is the suggestion that American pop star Lady Gaga’s content – her lyrics, musical style, or personal presentation – is somehow un-Christian, perhaps an unsurprising sentiment from a man who dedicates most of his recordings and public performances “to the Glory of God.” Yet if Bonfils draws a rhetorical boundary between sacred and profane music, he evinces a hybrid personal style that suggests both secular and religious influences. He wears gold jewelry and brand-name clothing in his music videos, and poses for promo photographs with arms folded high across his chest or hands “raising the roof.” In a black-and-white photograph taken at the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Bonfils is seated casually, leaning forward with his arms on his knees, wearing a v-neck tee shirt and big dark glasses, his guitar propped up behind him beside a low door in the stone wall. “AT THE GRAVE OF JESUS,” the caption reads.

Bonfils is not alone among contemporary gospel musicians who have adopted musical and personal stylistic idioms that are widely associated with hip-hop (Pollard 2008), from rapped verses and soaring “hooks” to celebrity clothing brands and upper-body gestural vocabularies based on the uprock “burns” of classic b-boying (Schloss
Notably, Bonfils’ self-representation as a hip black Christian also draws upon Africa as a signifier, as in a collection of Facebook photographs titled “was born African!!” that show him posing with a fedora low over his eyes, displaying graphic tee-shirts, listening to music on headphones, and scything through the air with his forearm (May 10, 2014). These photographs, of the “selfie” genre popularized by Facebook, Instagram, and other social media applications, do the work of establishing “presence” via the elements of clothing, facial expression, gesture, and body posture. In this way, Bonfils signifies upon particulars of black masculinity that are negatively cathected in dominant Israeli discourses, reclaiming these particulars as evidence of personal power, and, further, asserting African identity as a component of that power.

Figure 5.3: Bonfils Nkiza at the Church of the Nativity, Bethlehem (© Nkiza 2012)
Elise Element Yves has nothing if not presence: a confident walk, colorful clothes, a black shell necklace and beaded bracelets, a signature hand movement he uses when greeting associates (third finger tucked, the rest extended), and a big voice onstage and in person. He is also an active user of social media, maintaining pages for himself as well as his band, the Groove Ambassadors. Religious sentiments appear periodically in status updates, including praises to God for big gigs and acknowledgement of other musicians’ talents as “God-given,” yet as I have indicated, Elise’s self-representation across social and musical spheres is not primarily as a Christian. Living long-term in Tel Aviv, married to an Ethiopian-Israeli Jewish citizen, and firmly ensconced as a prominent member of many Tel Aviv communities, Elise’s field of social engagement is arguably wider than that of Bonfils, his opportunities for and displays of personal power more varied.

In interviews, Elise alludes to long periods of significant socio-economic instability, including his departure from home and family in Cote d’Ivoire at an early age, multiple under-the-table jobs in Tel Aviv, struggles to acquire and retain “refugee” status, limited financial resources, and incidents of anti-black racism (interview with author, August 2011). As he puts it, though, he does not like to dwell on negatives; instead, he has incorporated his experiences of travel and movement, as well as Ivorian background and deep familiarity with west African cultural aesthetics, into his music and his public persona. Explaining his band name, the Groove Ambassadors, as a reference to music’s power to generate cross-cultural alliances, Elise performs in multiple languages and diverse Afropop styles (ibid). Onstage, the Ambassadors transition fluidly from Fela Kuti’s well-loved “Zombie,” uptempo reggae and High Life to Elise’s
signature “Ipale,” an Ivorian folk song, in his terminology, on which he plays drums and sings in a silky-smooth tenor.

This catalogue is an audience-pleasing variety of good-vibe groove and dance music that tends to draw enormous crowds to Ambassadors concerts, meaning that Elise’s group is a must-have for any of the multiple band branja events that take place on many Fridays and Saturdays in Tel Aviv clubs. And just as Elise’s enormous network of social connections serves to boost the Ambassadors’ popularity, his ensemble’s signature sound affords him special opportunities to access and display an empowered self. Singing lead on Fela Kuti covers, for instance, Elise embodies the form of African masculinity introduced into a transglobal cultural-aesthetic lexicon by the Nigerian musical innovator, principally displays of sexual prowess and righteous opposition to political authority. To Kuti’s “autocratic bandleading style and dancing agility of James Brown, mystical inclinations of Sun Ra, polemicism of Malcolm X, and the harsh, insightful satire of Richard Pryor” (Veal 2000: 4), Elise Element Yves adds a youthful, eager playfulness.

Just as Bonfils reclaims overdetermined black masculine signifiers in service of his Christian identity, Elise’s Fela-style gestures, choreography, and vocal work onstage untangle such signifiers from a knot of Israeli social fears, weaving instead a multisensory tapestry with himself at the center, flanked by cadre of female dancers, a big band behind him, and a joyful mixed-ethnicity crowd before him.

As in so many instances of musical performance and aesthetic expressions I present throughout this dissertation, the work taking place during Ambassadors concerts is affective, fusing bodies with imaginations into “an ethical synthesis that bears directly
on the micro-powers inherent in everyday interactions” (Davidson et. al. 2011: 5). When
Elise opens the Ambassadors original “Na African Style” (2010) by intoning, “In case
you were wondering, this is Afrobeat, coming all the way from Nigeria,” he produces a
contingent relationship between Tel Aviv, his native Cote D’Ivoire, and Afrobeat’s Lagos
birthplace. This and other sonic manipulations of space and place disrupt native Israeli
interpretive frameworks that assume locality as stable, valorizing migrant experiences of
movement, positioning Elise as the mediator of Israeli “cosmopolitan” and “global”
desires.

This is a role of symbolic and material authority, a display of personal power on
Elise’s part that is often akin in form to individuals’ use of African and Afro-diasporic
expressions during Friendship House services. Ambassadors shows frequently
incorporate vocal call-and-response that puts me in mind of exchanges between preacher
and congregants during church: in Elise’s on-stage exhortation “Now you say! Ay-ya-ya-
yeh!” I hear echoes of Pastor Chidi’s “What do we say? Amen!” When Elise directs his
audience to repeat after him on the chorus of “Zombie” or “Na African Style,” he
exercises over Israeli voices and Israeli bodies the benevolent jurisdiction of a minister
over his or her parishioners.4 The Ambassadors do perform at religious gatherings where
call-and-response retains its overtly ritual function, including the massive Double Portion
conference in Jerusalem, yet even in secular concerts, Elise takes on a pastoral role,
shepherding audiences into states of transcendence and communitas.

4 Video of several representative Groove Ambassadors performances is available at
https://www.youtube.com/user/Grooveambassadors.
Examining Fela Kuti’s engagement with religion and spirituality, Michael Veal describes a syncretic approach grounded in worldly imperatives, one that helps locate Elise’s own work on a continuum in which the religious and the secular are not discrete poles, but rather overlapping spheres of knowledge and experience.

In the Judeo-Christian cultures of the West, religious activity is often seen as a contemplative, devotional, or service activity centered around a single, all-powerful supreme being. In Fela’s variation on traditional spirituality, a different quality was strongly apparent. In his 1982 autobiography Fela discusses his initial involvement in traditional African mysticism as primarily motivated by a need to repel the increasing episodes of government violence directed towards him and his followers [...] A maverick spirit on even the most esoteric levels, Fela appeals to his personal pantheon of archaic and contemporary deities for political empowerment, psychic renewal, and physical protection, regenerating his community’s psychic energy through music and ritualized revisitations of past personal terrors directed toward them (2000:10).

The notion here of religious practice as protection from socio-political threat resonates with an understanding of the African church in Israel as an institutional resource for under-served migrants, a bulwark against oppression. Elise’s “variation” on Christianity may not look like that of Bonfils, yet to assume that his Ambassadors performances are not a form of religious activity is to overlook the breadth of Christian identities and lifeways that are acceptable, indeed welcome, within the Friendship House discourse. Just as Fela Kuti draws together multiple traditions and strands of thought in service of group empowerment, renewal, and healing, Elise leans on Christian, African, and black transnational aspects of his own experience in performances that self-empower and strengthen group ties.
Trinidadian émigré Hillary Sargent, soloist in the Friendship House choir and active professional vocalist with a wide and shifting network of collaborating musicians, is another cultural producer whose work signifies widely on Christian themes, inflecting them with additional spiritual concepts and philosophies of the self. Speaking freely with me about the benefits and drawbacks of church membership, the complications of being a non-citizen black woman living in Israel, and the necessity for unwavering self-regard in all professional and personal dealings, Hillary is the most explicit champion of personal power I encountered in the Friendship House community. Her bearing incorporates strut, swagger, and expressive hand gestures – aspects of comportment generally coded as masculine in the aesthetic repertoire I have been describing – alongside displays of femininity and womanhood in her clothing, vocal style, and choreography. To a large extent, Hillary has made herself at home in the church by refusing to “take any crap” from leaders, men and women both, who have at times questioned her brazen personal style, just as she has avoided dramatic encounters with anti-black and anti-African racism in urban Israel by, as she puts it, “respecting [herself] too much to allow any disrespect” (interview with author, October 10, 2013).

A regular attendant at Friendship House services who, like Elise Element Yves, puts most of her energies into a wide array of personal and professional connections outside the church, Hillary’s major project is FANGA!, a multimedia “inspirational movement” that encompasses musical recordings and performances, poetry, an advice blog, and a modest line of tee-shirts and jewelry. As Hillary writes on her website,
the word FANGA! Originates from the West African Mandingo lingo. Literally it translates: Power! - It hits you to the core, in its multifaceted, powerful meaning: everybody has his or her own FANGA! - To me it is resilient, not only powerful. In essence the African rhythm in FANGA! inspires me with a spiritual enlightenment which has become the matrix of my soul identity (fanga-music.com/myidentity).

“Fanga is the power of who I am, and the power that you are,” she tells me in an interview (October 10, 2013). Hillary’s fanga is inflected with elements of Pentecostal Christian doctrine such as the importance of regularly praising God and maintaining “righteous” personal conduct, as well as the value and rightness of seeking after “worldly” abundance; she sees her membership in the Friendship House community as a means of strengthening, displaying, and sharing Fanga with other Africans and Afro-descendants (ibid). Yet fanga also encompasses elements of broad “new age” philosophies including the power of positive thinking or “visioning” to manifest desired outcomes in the world, and an openness to ideas of karma and reincarnation (ibid). Fanga, Hillary explains, is a structure in which multiple ideologies come together in service of individual self-actualization (ibid). Musically, fanga moves away from the style of Mandinka drumming that gives Hillary’s movement its name, becoming “a unique mixture of that mysterious Caribbean rhythm and Middle Eastern spirit and inspiration with touches of ethno-jazz - no less mysterious in mood, resulting in her haunting melodies […] Though it is tough to categorize her style one can say: this is a unique type of World Music, indeed” (fanga-music.com). Hip-hop, soul, and R&B are also major components of her signature sound.
Hillary’s live performances in clubs, restaurants, and private venues are mixtures of inspirational talk and her own musical compositions; she is often backed by some of the native Israeli musicians and singers she has come to work with over the course of thirty-plus years in the country. Wearing long, colorful gowns, lots of chunky jewelry, and elaborate hairstyles or elegantly wrapped turbans, Hillary’s performance outfits put me in mind of American “neo-soul” artist Erykah Badu, whose omnivorous public spirituality and thematic interest in black womanhood she also shares. Hillary’s 2013 studio release “Who I Am (Back to Blackness),” a mid-tempo groove track, is a rich, smooth expression of self-actualization via embracing of black identity.

Verse I:
One upon a time
They called me nappy hair
I felt so hurt.
Shame took me down
I kept beating on myself.
But my pride kept saying
“No!”

Chorus:
Now ah lovin up meh nappy hair
An ah lovin up the things I wear
(black girls, black girls, black girls)
We killin it!
Ah lovin up meh blackness.
We takin time to show
The young ones ought to know
(black girls, black girls, black girls)
We killin it!
Ah lovin up meh blackness

5 The music video for “Who I Am (Back to Blackness),” with lyrics, is available at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e7zPvMkJgHU
To the song’s reggae-style “one drop” drums, syncopated “double skank” guitar pattern, and Trini Patois lyrics, Hillary adds the legato strings of classic American soul music, a chorus of unison voices reminiscent of Friendship House’s group hymn singing, and a vocal melody marked by R&B’s complex phrasing, melismas, and large leaps. The track’s music video, shot in different Tel Aviv locations and released on YouTube, includes images of black men and women socializing in Neve Sha’ananan, children playing together in Levinsky Park, and video of Hillary and her multi-ethnic entourage dancing on a large yacht in the Port of Jaffa. In this way, she presents the trappings of wealth as part and parcel of self-actualization, ideologically associated with personal power in a manner that would not be out of place in a Friendship House sermon, nor in the aesthetic of black hipness that informs Bonfils’ and Elise’s public personae. And like Bonfils’ assertion of his presence – stance, gestures, brand clothes, stoic expressions – as “born African!!!”’, Hillary’s *fanga* is also fundamentally African by dint of its name, despite drawing freely from different genres of what she terms “world music.”

---

6 Hillary Sargent’s fusion of musical genres including soul, R&B, and “Middle Eastern,” suggests a perspective on “Middle Eastern blackness” that is distinct from Khen Elmaleh’s formulation in Chapter 2.
“FANGA! – the power in ya!”, reads a fanga tank top, silk-screened with a drawing of a black woman raising her fist, her hair an impressive Afro. That Hillary Sargent chooses to market this image as the visual representation of fanga’s multitudinous set of religious, ethnocultural, and musical influences speaks to the evocative potency of African and Afro-diasporic identity in the Israeli context. In the African diasporic church and within major circles of Tel Aviv socio-musical life, African expressions and global black aesthetics are social currency, evincing an undeniable if somewhat ineffable salience. Ineffable, I suggest, because such expressions and aesthetics are overwhelmingly diverse, and their semiotics and significances can change with individual usage. Yet if church elder Deacon Joseph, shekere player extraordinaire, may not automatically identify with Hillary’s picture of a fist-pumping, Afro-sporting young woman, nor will Hillary understand the semantic content of a Yoruba prayer, there
is latitudinous kinship between these expressions as displays of personal power. Just as
the umbrella term *musikah shachorah* (black music) applied to an enormous collection of
genres makes sense for urban social actors – Afro-descendant and native Israeli alike –
the signifiers “African” and “black” are widely legible in expressions and aesthetics with
even remote points of origin.

Looking closely at the output of Friendship House community members inside
and outside of church, I have aimed to iterate the salience of personal power as a
multivalent construct that drives African migrant ideo-imaginaries and behaviors in urban
Israel. For individuals who may not possess the security of a codified visa status, well-
paid work or extended family networks nearby, personal power is a success to which they
can still aspire, and which affords immense psychic satisfaction alongside potential social
and material gain. Significantly, personal power is translatable across religious and
secular spheres, with “presence” emerging as a key component of empowered display in
church and in Tel Aviv venues more widely. Where particularistic expressions of national
or indigenous African identity like *shekere*, Yoruba, or “*Ipale*” call to the fore
circumscribed and therefore *powerful* realms of knowledge and experience, global black
idioms such as English-language gospel music, hip-hop style, natural hair, or R&B vocals
access notions of transnational community that inspire, reassure, and invigorate. As is
clear in the work of Bonfils Babijoux Nikiza, Elise Element Yves, and Hillary Sargent,
African cultural actors can mix and match particularistic “Africanisms” with
transnational black aesthetics in a kind of “*glocali,*” or local-global hybrid, that has pulls
immense weight within the collective Israeli imagination (see Chapter 1).
cultural producers consolidate their social status amongst Israelis via musical performance, professional and personal relationships, they also energize the church’s institutional relationship with Israel writ large, and invigorate the narrative of individual Christian rights and responsibilities in the Holy Land.

**Christian Zionism at Friendship House**

Pray for the peace of Jerusalem […] May those who love you be secure.

Psalms 122:6 (rccgisrael.org)

Behind the pulpit on the Friendship House dais, in between a keyboard and drum set on the left and a screen that displays hymn lyrics on the right, two flags stand prominently side by side: that of the RCCG, and that of Israel. Here in the church, the blue *Magen David* (Star of David) holds a multiplicity of meanings, indexing the modern State of Israel, the Jewish faith, and the Christian Zionism that RCCG shares with various other Christian denominations worldwide. Though RCCG is Nigerian-born, and Friendship House’s congregants hail from many countries, the primary “national” referent here is Israel, acknowledged during almost every service and prayer meeting, understood at once as both modern geopolitical entity and Biblical *am* (nation, people). For Pentecostal Christians who believe that the Jewish people are chosen by God as stewards of the Holy Land, and that Christ’s return may be facilitated or hindered by events taking place in Israel, the symbolical import of the Israeli flag is arguably only rivaled by that of the cross.
If the RCCG itself is a resource-rich, multinational institution (Ukah 2005) that can treat with sectors of the Israeli government on matters like temporary pilgrim visas for adherents and high-level clergy visits to Jerusalem (rccgisrael.org), its migrant membership in Israel has a more complex relationship with the state. Christian migrants must reconcile the challenges of living in diaspora – feelings of displacement, encounters with racism, employment or visa issues – with the ideoscopic veneration of Israel, the Jewish people, and Christian “birthright” to dwell in the Holy Land. In some respects, Israel’s Christian migrants are a liminal diaspora, investing their adopted country with affective significances more commonly reserved solely for countries of origin, including expressed love of land and even nostalgia, albeit nostalgia for a Messianic future rather than for the past. Like Ethiopian Jewish immigrants to Israel and their descendants who embrace a narrative of timeless yearning for “return to” the Land of Israel prior to arrival (see Chapter 2), Christian migrant discourses lay claim to eschatological belonging in Israel. If migrants are not always happy with their material circumstances (though some certainly are), they are, in a theological sense, *supposed* to be happy, or at least blessed to be here.

Sermons, prayers, testimonies and other expressive displays at Friendship House indicate that members of this community do generally feel blessed, as Christians if not necessarily as laborers or members of wider Israeli society. As I discuss above, prayers for the Israeli people, military, and national government are common, and the directive to “identify, integrate, and intercede” is one of Pastor Chidi’s most emphatic teachings. Easter services in 2013 were celebrated with extra music and dancing as well as speeches
about the joy of marking the Resurrection in the Holy Land, and RCCG’s annual
ternational conference drew overflow numbers of participants from around the world
because it was held in Jerusalem. In the run-up to this “Double Portion” conference,
Friendship House leadership continually reminded parishioners of their special
responsibility as hosts, and as RCCG’s keepers of the flame of Christianity in Israel.

The trope of Christian privilege and responsibility in the Holy Land, as I have
indicated, factors into many African migrants’ felt sense of personal power. Similar to
the “presence” element of self-actualized display, which is formed around comportment,
bearing, gesture, sartorial and speaking or singing style, an individual’s Christian identity
is not wholly dependent on external circumstances. In other words, just as one can look
and sound good even without access to abundant material resources, one’s relationship
with God can be strong and healthy whether or not one has a lucrative job, a stable visa
status, or a supportive family network nearby. Faith in divine love and favor, therefore, is
a potent counterbalancing force against less-than-ideal treatment from Israeli employers
and officials, and a Christian’s belief that he or she has a God-ordained role to play in
Israel does valuable psychic work by in terms of leveling perceived power differentials
between migrants and citizens. Further, as Pastor Chidi’s homily about the reward of a
new car for Christian service indicates, one’s private relationship with God carries the
potential for material gain irrespective of immediate socioeconomic circumstances.

If the Pastor’s sermons never fail to remind congregants that they must act
righteously when they go amongst Israelis – a consistent reiteration of Christian
responsibility – much of the music at Friendship House serves to strengthen parishioners’
positive feelings towards their adopted home country, enhancing affective enjoyment of
Christian special *rights*. Gospel hymns referencing Jerusalem, the Jordan river or Mount
Zion underscore migrants’ incredible proximity to a heaven-on-earth in waiting.
Following a sermon on righteousness, a group rendition of “There’s a Great Day
Coming” or “When the Saints Go Marching In” promises the congregation glory as
God’s regiment in Israel.

English-language hymns, many of them derived from the Anglican tradition from
which RCCG differentiated itself in the mid-twentieth century (Ukah 2005), tend to look
towards a Biblical past or Messianic future. Meanwhile, African-American “spirituals”
can also call up heavenly reward while acknowledging present struggles, as in the
Friendship House favorite “Swing Low, Sweet Chariot,” with Bonfils singing lead and
playing gorgeous legato chords with a synthesized Wurlitzer organ patch. African
aesthetic expressions like *coupe decale, shekere*, or Yoruba prayer invoke acroamatic
knowledge that empowers both performer and congregation, affectively linking adopted
homeland with countries of origin. And, compellingly, church musicians sometimes
include group songs in Hebrew, with “*Havenu Shalom Aleichem*” (We Brought Peace
Upon You) prominent among them. In this case, lyrics are transliterated into Roman
script and projected onto the screen at the front of the sanctuary so that even non-Hebrew
speakers can join in, although the song, a single line repeated as long as desired, is simple
enough:
We brought peace upon you
We brought peace upon you
We brought peace upon you
We brought peace, peace,
peace upon you.

This is a Jewish folk song in the sense that no individual is generally identified as having composed it, it is harmonically and melodically straightforward, and it has been familiar to Jewish peoples worldwide for many generations. Even as a nominal Christian growing up in New York with Jewish family friends, I could sing it before I knew all the words to most Christmas standards. By the time I heard *Havenu Shalom Aleichem* in 2013 in Tel Aviv at Friendship House, I had acquired a wider set of associations with the song. Derived from a Shabbat hymn wishing peace to the “ministering angels” that usher in the day of rest, *Havenu Shalom Aleichem* was also commonly sung by passengers of Israel’s national airline El-Al after landing for decades. Perhaps due to the domestication of Euro-American cultural forms and the ascendancy of *glocali* in urban Israel by the early 2000s, this expression of what Motti Regev and Edwin Seroussi call “Hebrewism” (2004), or the aesthetic valorization of early-state Israeli identity, has largely fallen out of use on airplanes. Yet *Havenu Shalom Aleichem* retains Zionist and national associations: I have encountered it in latter-day El-Al commercials, sung around family dinner tables, and referenced ironically by leftist Israelis in political discussions.

Religious in origin and secular in many of its uses, this audible piece of national culture is an open door through which Friendship House parishioners can temporarily voice and embody Israeli identity. I have written elsewhere of the power of sung Hebrew
to facilitate Filipino *ovdim zarim* public belonging in Israel (2014); *Havenu Shalom Aleichem* performs related functions in the African diasporic church. As Charles Hirschkind emphasizes, there is a kinesthetic response that takes place during audition, an innate tendency of listeners to ally themselves with sound even if they are not fully aware they are doing so. “The mimetic reception of the event involves the sensorium in its entirety, entwining proprioception with various forms of synesthetic experience” (2006:78). For listeners that are also performers, this multidimensional response is all the more potent. *Havenu Shalom Aleichem* is inherently communal, best sung in union with others; it begins uptempo and increases in speed with each round, until participants are clapping and dancing at a breakneck pace, forced to essentially shout rather than sing the words. A participant cannot help but celebrate bodily, saturated by a synchronic experience of “Israeliness,” African Christianity, and *communitas*.

I suggest that the Hebrew “we brought peace upon you,” sounding by and amongst Friendship House’s primarily African migrant congregants, affords an experience of welcome that migrants may not always receive within Israeli society, but which is crucial to maintaining an ideology of Christian responsibility and rights in the Holy Land. As a major guiding force with respect to social cohesion and personal power in many of Tel Aviv’s African migrant communities, this ideology requires attention and reinforcement so that it might remain *livable*. Church music goes a long way towards making doctrine reality because it is pleasurable, and because it is psychosomatically immersive. “Instill[ing] profound cultural beliefs in the bodies” of parishioners (Hahn
participatory music actualizes the importance of Israel and the special role of Christians within it.

Of course, migrants are not Israel’s only sizable Christian population; some 120,000 Arab Christians live as Israeli citizens or permanent residents inside the “Green Line” that delineates the internationally recognized borders of the state (Statistical Abstract of Israel, 2013). While migrants and these Palestinian Israelis share a religion, however, there is minimal institutional interaction between the two collectivities, and in fact a degree of expressed animosity at the level of the individual. Galia Sabar writes of African Christians who attempted to join existing, primarily Arab churches on their initial arrival in Israel, only to experience alienation due to their ethnicity, their status as migrants, the absence of sermons addressing daily concerns, and the lack of loud singing or energetic movement during services (2004). Sabar posits that cultural differences, the pervasiveness of anti-Arab rhetoric in Israeli public discourse, and Christian-Muslim tensions in many countries of origin contribute to migrants’ ongoing association of any Arab, Muslim or not, with Islam and even terrorism (ibid). I add to this that anxieties about Arabs are also in evidence in some of the secular social spaces frequented by African migrants. Tony Ray’s Rasta Club, for example, which caters to a mixed Ethiopian Israeli and African clientele – some of whom, like Elise Element Yves, are members of Friendship House -- maintains an unofficial but often articulated “no Arab” policy. According to Tony, “Arabs used to come in here and cause a lot of trouble, getting drunk and starting fights” (interview with author, October 8, 2013). Tony still has many Palestinian Israeli friends who are welcome at the club, but has otherwise
encouraged his bouncers to employ an informal *selectzia*, or selective permission to enter, that limits Arab presence at Rasta.

I never heard explicit anti-Arab sentiments expressed at Friendship House, and only rarely amongst my African migrant associates outside of the church. I believe that an Arab Christian might find welcome in Pastor Chidi’s markedly diverse congregation, and I have also encountered some Palestinian Israeli participants in the “African *branja*” I describe in the next chapter. Yet many friends and associates living in south Tel Aviv have indicated to me the existence of generalized “African-Arab” tensions, at least in spheres of ideology and discourse. Understanding the full scope of these tensions, and their causes, is beyond the scope of this project. It is certainly the case, however, that south Tel Aviv’s limited economic and administrative resources put pressure on each resident ethno-cultural group, be they African refugees and migrants, working-class *Mizrahim*, or Palestinian Israelis.

For African Christian migrants in the Holy Land, perceived and articulated difference with respect to Arab Christians, and Arabs more generally, may serve to reinforce migrants’ *alliance with* Israel’s native Jewish population. Just as AICs in Tel Aviv celebrate national and major Jewish holidays alongside Christian ones – staging large *Yom Ha’Atzmaut* (Independence Day) picnics on the Tel Aviv beach, for instance – vocal support for the Israeli Defense Forces and national government in their ongoing “war” against hostile (Arab) countries aligns African Christians with key aspects of hegemonic Israeliness. Facing immense public controversy around African presence,
frequently confronting racism in daily life, migrants may partially displace feelings of marginality onto the Arab population.

The notion of Arab-as-other may be framed in part as what Adelaida Reyes-Schramm has termed a strategy for resource consolidation and group status advancement (1975), to which I would add the claiming of personal power. Realities of Palestinian disenfranchisement in Israel, impacting Muslims and Christians alike, ostensibly weaken the doctrine of Christian responsibilities and rights in the Holy Land; for the aspect of personal power contingent upon strong relations between an individual and her God presumes that God grants Christians special favor and blessings. And while codified RCCG doctrine condemns the persecution of Christians anywhere in the world (as does much doctrine in denominations worldwide), there remains an imperative to rescue one’s private desire for God-given abundance from broader histories that reveal such abundance as not forthcoming.

Outside of the church, in the urban Israeli spaces where migrant cultural producers like Bonfils Babijoux Nikiza, Elise Element Yves, and Hillary Sargent do so much of their work, value distinctions between Arabs and Africans retain social salience. Tony Ray’s Rasta Club is not the only venue to employ selectzia: the phenomenon of curated entry is such a part of Tel Aviv nightlife that a group of Israelis produced a wildly popular satirical YouTube video about it (2011). Notably, this animated short depicts a working-class Mizrahi, an Arab, and an African refugee as losers in the selectzia game; these fellows eventually unite to commiserate at the video’s conclusion. When, in the
real world, African migrants are granted entry where Arabs are refused, the former earn valuable social currency, and may claim attendant measures of personal power.

Friendship House ethos – its explicit discourses, implicit values, and aesthetics – may be understood as part of a “Christian Africana” interpretive framework. If God is the premier reference object within Christian Africana, perhaps analogous to the Israeli state itself within native modes of interpretation I describe in Chapter 2, there are innumerable other interpretive guideposts that African Christians can use to organize experience and triangulate identities in urban Israel. These guideposts include, among others, national cultures and languages of origin, notions of broadly Afro-diasporic kinship and affinity, hip-hop and “black cool” aesthetics, and aspects of “Israeliness” like the Hebrew language and marking of Jewish holidays.

In its aspect as moral/ethical doctrine, Christian Africana is straightforward: God is, at least conceptually, the apex of the interpretive structure. As a toolkit for understanding the self and managing diasporic life, however, this mode of interpretation, like others, is highly flexible in practice, enacted by individuals through diverse activities, attitudes, and aesthetics. African expressions like Yoruba prayer, shekere playing, or Coupe Decale in church services are examples of overtly religious practices that also do social work for individuals and the group. Yet Christian Africana also includes the ostensibly secular, allowing for Bonfils’ deployment of hip-hop style just as it does his gospel compositions, Elise’s branja leadership alongside his church attendance, Hillary’s black feminist songs as well as her rhetoric of spirituality. In other words, Christian Africana is distinct from conventional understandings of African

275
Christianity: while the latter is a religious category, Christian Africani is a multidimensional interpretive mode that is inflected by religion, and shaped by an individual’s involvement with the Christian collectivity.

The notion of individuals’ and groups’ special relationship with Israel – its geography, history, mythology, people – emerges in different ways as a key component of each of the interpretive frameworks I have explored, from “native Israeli” Ashkenaziyut and Mizrahiyut to Ethiopian Israeliness, from commemorative narrative-building amongst East African refugees and asylum seekers to the Christian Africani of many west and southern African migrants. Israel’s gravitational pull is manifest even in glocali, which, for some social actors, grounds “cosmopolitan,” global aspirations in native Israeli experiences of home.

As I have indicated in this and previous chapters, modes of Africani interpretation are marked by identification of an African self or primary subjectivity. When employed by Israelis like activist denizens of the “pro-refugee Tel Aviv” I describe in Chapter 3, Africani prioritizes African subjectivities and experiences, rearranging Israeli experience and concepts of Israeliness to account for African presence. In the next chapter, I take a closer look at the dynamics of Africani interpretation in a socio-musical milieu that brings together Africans, Afro-descendants, native Jewish Israelis, and representatives of other ethno-cultural groups. As a collection of musical genres, artists, audiences, teachers, performances, and physical spaces, Tel Aviv’s “African branja” further complicates already-fractured, multidimensional interpretive modes. Within the branja, where Africans and Afro-descendent participants seek to express a special relationship
with Israel, and Israeli participants, a special relationship with *Africa*, ideo-imaginaries of self and other, Israeliness and Africanness, personal power and powerlessness, hegemon and marginality, are revealed not as binaries but rather co-constitutive, interdependent concepts.
Most of the Israeli people really like African music because it’s groovy, it makes [them] dance. People call me up and say, ‘I heard about you from my friend, and I want to come to your next show, I want to dance, I like the vibe.’ This is African music. Either it’s very soul kind of stuff with good African melody, or it’s groovy, like, you know, noten ba’rosh (Hebrew: “pumps you up”). So for someone who is down, you come to an African music performance, you will take to the floor and start to dance and forget. That’s why people come to our shows, the Groove Ambassadors. We don’t get into deep subjects… gizanut kmo she’att medeberet (racism like you’re saying.) We are talking about being grateful for what you have, this life that you have, what God gave you, peace, you know… all those subjects. Joy… those are our subjects (Elise Akowendo, interview with author, August 15, 2014).

I sat with Elise Akowendo – otherwise known as Elise Element Yves, choreographer, producer, arranger, Groove Ambassadors front man, and drummer extraordinaire – at Satchmo, a pub in bustling Florentine neighborhood named, appropriately enough, after the great American bandleader Louis Armstrong. Over rounds of Carlsberg and two shots of whiskey on the house, I asked questions about music and politics among performers, producers, and fans of African music in Tel Aviv. Primarily, I wanted to understand the characteristics of the city’s “African branja,” the African music “clique” or “scene” to which many of my Israeli and African associates would refer over the course of my fieldwork, but which, I came to realize, nobody was able or willing to describe in full. If I thought that Elise could define the term with specificity, I was mistaken. When I asked him at Satchmo to name some of the main
performing groups “within the branja,” he gave a raised eyebrow and a wry response that highlighted the limitations of ethnographic taxonomy: “What branja?”

What branja, indeed? The word “branja” itself is derived from the Yiddish branzhe, meaning a “branch of commerce or business.”

1 In contemporary Hebrew, it can be understood as somewhat analogous to the American English slang “hipster,” in that it has multiple meanings, referencing a stylistic category, a vaguely-defined, geographically spread-out group of people, and a set of attitudes about culture and society. Like the “hipster” label, as well, people seem to use branja to refer mostly to others, rarely oneself. At a March 2013 concert by Malian-French singer and guitarist Fatouma Diawara in suburban Holon, for instance, one audience member observed that “the entire African branja is here,” but, when I asked if he was part of the branja himself, laughed and said no. In fact, I did not encounter any performers or fans during my fieldwork who claimed branja identity, even though many were familiar with the term, and some used it in connection with other bands. Often appearing in national Israeli newspapers and blogs to mean “the political elite,” the term branja is therefore an adaptation of an adaptation when used in reference to performers and audiences of African musics. Perhaps due in part to its connotations of elitism, Tel Aviv residents sometimes say “African branja” with tongue firmly in cheek, suggesting inflated artistic egos or self-absorption on the part of scenesters.

Despite the slippery and contested nature of the label qua label, I retain “branja” as a conceptually useful starting point in exploring the performance and consumption of diverse genres of African music and dance by a subset of Tel Aviv’s resident and citizen population. Notably, “branja” does not refer to all of the city’s African and Afro-diasporic musical activity. As I will discuss, the branja is organized around a broad category of genres commonly termed “Afropop” (see Chapter 4 for an introduction to this category), with primary focus given to contemporary popular musics of West and Southern Africa. The branja is also demographically pluralistic, including members of multiple ethno-cultural groups, with participation of more Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israelis as performers and audience members than Africans or Afro-descendants. Additional characteristics of this scene include a high value placed on experiences of communitas (Turner 1974) during live events and ideologies of interethnic unity in group discourse, and the absence of clear boundaries demarcating who and what are “inside” or “outside” of the branja itself.

These characteristics define the branja as a uniquely glocal musical collective, in which participants can draw upon diverse expressive forms, create syncretic value systems and modes of group sociality that are responsive to the shifting conditions of metropolitan life. Because the branja is ostensibly open to anyone – Africans and Afro-descendants, and Israelis of any ethno-cultural background – it offers participants the sense of belonging to something bigger than themselves, without the perceived constraints of sectarianism and intra-group competition that shape other aspects of Tel Aviv society. As I lay out in Chapter 1, the glocal interpretive framework negotiates
between local Israeli experience and desirable aspects of cultural globalization. For Israelis, this partially involves expanding the notion of community, which has historically revolved around Jewish *edot* (ethnic groups) and overarching national membership, to include non-Jewish and non-Israeli individuals and groups. For Africans and Afro-descendants, meanwhile, *glocali* is one part *Africani* – a valorization of African identity and experience in diaspora – one part zest for the life of the Israeli city, and one part commitment to claiming a place at the Israeli civic table.

![Figure 6.1: Elise Element Yves (© Shmulik Balmas 2013)](image)

Paradoxically, because the branja is organized around music first and foremost, it is an ideal space in which to do politics via expressive aesthetics and interpersonal interactions. Israeli participants can embody through performance desirable forms of black and African “authenticity,” and represent themselves as socially progressive, without having to abdicate the privileges of majority membership. Simultaneously,
African artists can voice significant claims to social belonging and civic status through ostensibly apolitical performances and publicity materials. I insist, then, upon *branja* musical activity as identity politics, and as a form of engagement in public sphere debates over the status of Israel’s African and Afro-descendent populations. Israeli scenesters may flock to African music “because it’s groovy,” as Elise told me during our Satchmo interview, but even “groove” itself is laden with sonic and social histories, contemporary racial politics, and ongoing debates.

In order to understand how the *branja* operates as a collective, I open with ethnographic description of a representative branja event, Africa Fest, a May 2013 multi-group concert led by the Groove Ambassadors. In this section, I give special focus to Elise Element Yves himself, who is one of the most active and professionally ambitious performers in the city, and, as such, provides de-facto leadership for branja activities and discourses. Next, I consider the branja’s structure and aesthetic orientation using frameworks of community and subculture that appear throughout this dissertation. I conclude with an analysis of branja concepts of musical and cultural authenticity, which mediate between the multiple and sometimes contradictory needs and desires of Israeli and African branja participants. Marked by performance and consumption of multiple African expressive forms, physically spread out across the city, constituted by diverse audiences, and ambivalently named, what type of entity is the *branja*? How does it shape the urban micro-politics of Israeli debate over the implications of African presence, and how might it inform our understandings of community, ethnicity, and identity in a transforming cultural landscape?
“Zombies be Ready… U Dey Tell Dem Go Dance”: Groove Politics

I had been seeing Facebook and Twitter promotions for an upcoming Tel Aviv “Africa Fest” event for several weeks in the late spring of 2013. Advertising drum and dance workshops and a multi-artist concert led by the Groove Ambassadors, these promos featured colorful images of African musical instruments, art objects, and clothing, video clips of participating acts or well-known African pop stars, and excited comments in Hebrew and English on the part of event sponsors and supporters. “I’m hoping to get to groove, and especially we want to bring our sweet little one!,” posted a young mother, enthusiastic about the event’s advertised family-friendly atmosphere. Much of the hype was focused on this promise of “groove,” including posts like “We hit u with the GROOVE,” “Calling all lovers of African Groove,” and “Good morning groovers!” This was more than just the Groove Ambassadors doing some name-boosting: individual posters and other performance groups were also talking about groove, associating themselves with a loosely defined but particularistic and potent vibe, one I had heard and experienced at different African musical events across Tel Aviv during the course of my fieldwork.

Performers and vendors who were not slated to participate in Africa Fest were also using the event’s Facebook site to promote their own products and shows using what may be understood as a “groovy” vernacular: “music flavors from Kinshasa!,” “four bands together in one romance – regardless of genre or scene – bringing people together for activism and praise!”, “One-time concert of Ethiopian groove,” “Nations come
together!” Eventually, I even got in on this action myself, advertising my upcoming DJ set on the Africa Fest page: “Tonight tonight! Afro-Caribbean remix DJing at Rasta Club. Come one, come all – xoxo, Sarah.”

The practice of using one event’s social media space to promote related content is common; Facebook and Twitter are arguably set up to facilitate this practice through internal links and “hashtags.” Event pages are therefore rich sources of data about their own broader social and aesthetic contexts. Activity on the Africa Fest Facebook page suggested, for starters, that this event was generating immense buzz and would likely be well-attended; that its main organizers the Groove Ambassadors were plugged into diverse Tel Aviv social groupings (based on the frequency of Groove Ambassador cross-posts on other social media pages); that numerous individual and group users were already connected to each other (judging by the exchange of personal messages on the event page); and that, of course, a large number of posters shared an exuberant interest in African and Afro-diasporic art and culture.

Although Elise would later tell me during our Satchmo interview that he and his bandmates prefer to avoid “dealing with politics” in their music and in their private lives, the Africa Fest page revealed much enthusiasm for non-specific concepts of equality, justice, social unity, and peace. There were also notices about political demonstrations and protest concerts: “create a new culture of joint Arab action;” “fight for tax cuts and gas prices.” To this latter event promotion, Elise replied, “[Groove Ambassadors] will be there with a protest song "Na African Style" - i no be beg for food, i no be beg for Gas. POWER TO THE PEOPLE! FELA LIVES!” Although the explicitly political items were
posted by outside groups, not by the organizers of Africa Fest, their presence on the site indicated that this event was perceived by multiple Tel Aviv networks as socially progressive, and that its participants might reasonably be interested in attending leftist political events.

As I came to learn over the course of my fieldwork, many branja activities and discourses manifest ambivalence with respect to activism and specific political agendas. While Elise would agree to do a “political” song at a protest over gas prices and cost of living – a common type of socio-musical event between 2011 and 2013, during which time many Tel Aviv cultural producers were inspired by the U.S.-based Occupy movement and the Arab Spring protests — he regarded such events primarily as opportunities to perform, rather than as political interventions. It is significant that Elise framed his participation in the gas price protest with a reference to his musical idol, Nigerian Afrobeat godfather Fela Kuti. Every time I saw him perform, Elise covered Fela songs, and couched his stage banter in “pidgin,” the creole English also known as “brokin” or “Naija,” which Kuti favored in his post-1972 lyrics (Veal 2000: 94), and which remains a prominent marker of opposition to authority in much contemporary West African musical production. Elise’s apparent comfort with political music, counterbalanced by his stated aversion to “deep subjects” like race, ethnicity, and class –

---

2 In 2011 and 2012, Tel Aviv was the center of a nationwide “tent city” movement similar in structure and aims to Occupy Wall Street. Hundreds of thousands of Israeli residents of diverse backgrounds participated at different points during the movement, protesting a collection of issues from the high cost of living to societal racism and militarism. The first tent city, on Rothschild Blvd. in Tel Aviv, was established a few weeks before the initial Zuccotti Park protests in New York.
topics I sought to discuss with him during our interviews and informal conversations – is shared by other branja participants. In a period of intense political activity across Tel Aviv, concerts by other branja acts like Ariel Nahum’s Fula Express, the Tam Tam *djembe* ensemble, and the Perfusion dance troupe were promoted, like Africa Fest, as community celebrations, not protests or demonstrations.

Rather than labeling the branja as apolitical, however, I suggest that many members of this scene engage with politics through the compound musical, social, and spiritual concept of “groove.” The reason that references to groove appear so frequently in branja event promotions, publicity materials, stage banter, and conversations is because groove neatly encapsulates multiple collective values. Groove is the sound of performers playing together especially well, and the resulting pleasurable experiences amongst audience members. Groove is what performers and audiences “get into” together during live branja events, a shared psycho-affective space in which differences are rendered irrelevant and *communitas* reigns. Groove is about style: the cool cadences of West African pidgin, the bright colors of *dashiki* and *kente* cloth, the head-turning clothes, accessories, and hairstyles of many African and Israeli branja participants. Within the branja, groove is definitely African, although “African” is hard to define with precision. As Elise says, it is very “soul kind of stuff.” And that’s the point: above all, groove is a feelingful experience. If Fela Kuti used the term “zombies” to refer to soldiers, governments, colonial powers, all agents of oppressive authority (Veal 2000), then groove is zombie kryptonite: the unstoppable force of creativity, sound, love, and human vitality. Groove “*noten ba rosh,*” as Elise told me; it “pumps you up,” generates
energy and excitement. Yet it also literally “gives [something] to your head/mind.”

Reason, ethics, and imagination are bound up alongside body and senses in the deeply compound musical and ideological phenomenon that is groove.

Elise and his circle are not alone in seeking out groove as a psycho-somatic refuge from “deep subjects,” nor in understanding groove at the same time as pregnant with desirable socio-cultural potential. Ethnomusicologists of musical worlds as diverse as jazz, hip-hop, Kaluli song, South African studio pop, and European club EDM have explored groove as dynamic that can bridge “sound structure and cultural structure” (Monson 1994: 312) because groove is always ineffable and communal. As a contemporary musical term – a noun, verb, and adjective – groove originates in mid-20th century African-American vernacular (c.f. Monson 1996) and, in jazz, can refer to ensemble rhythm – the thing that musicians play when directed to “keep time,” as well as to a “feeling – something that unites the improvisational roles of the piano, bass, drums and soloist into a satisfying musical whole” (ibid: 26). Yet Ingrid Monson’s work on groove as sound has been in the context of jazz music as a cultural text and a civil rights intervention. Her associates hear/feel/do groove as social life, just as the Kaluli people do “lift-up-over sounding” as a “Papua New Guinea groove […] a local gloss for social identity articulated through human sonic essences” (Feld 1990: 76); as mbaqanga session players in Johannesburg lock into grooves that afford embodied experiences of Zulu identity (Meintjes 2003); as New York b-boys and b-girls “rock a groove” as proof of their ability to “change situations that might appear unchangeable” (Schloss 2009: 33).

For producers and consumers of African expressive forms in Tel Aviv, groove
brings individuals together, makes them dance, generates “good vibes,” and telescopes overwhelmingly complicated socio-political realities into a manageable consensus of aspirational progressivism. If Israel’s numerous competing sectarian narratives and top-down national policies generate a pervasive, chaotic noisescap, African groove embeds a utopian teleology that can temporarily drown this out. Available to black and white, Jew and non-Jew, citizen and migrant alike, groove is satisfyingly tangible and infused with heady sentiments of togetherness and belonging.

***

Africa Fest day dawned sunny and hot, as usual, and the A/C was going full blast by noon in the Zone, the sprawling concert space and bar on Harechev Street in that would host the all-day performance. Laid out like a big living room, with numerous comfortable couches slung about in front of a substantial proscenium stage, the Zone felt like an appropriate venue for what had been promoted as a whole-community, family-friendly event. Already, members of the Tam Tam djembe ensemble were drumming in a wide circle on the stageside dance floor. Dancer Yael Sharoni and members of the Perfusion troupe clapped and stamped their feet to the rhythm, while several parents hung back by the couches bouncing toddlers on their hips. By the look of things, the vast majority of the crowd, including drummers and dancers, were Ashkenazi or Mizrahi Israelis, although I knew this would change to some extent as more performers and audience members arrived. I saw Hillary Sargent make her customarily impressive entrance, wearing a long black gown and turban, and then I talked for a while with Ulrich Goltrand, a musician friend from Congo, who would be making his Tel Aviv stage debut
that day as a guest singer with the Groove Ambassadors. Zvuloon Dub System frontman Gili Yalo was also there, although he would not be performing that day.

By mid-afternoon, the Zone had filled to capacity. The Groove Ambassadors were technically more than two hours behind schedule, but nobody seemed to mind. Drummers continued to tap out rhythms and pleasing filigrees, recorded Afropop played over the venue’s PA system, and audience members socialized. The crowd had diversified somewhat, although non-African Israelis were still the largest group. Many of these men and women wore their hair in dreadlocks, or what Hebrew-speakers call rastot. Other Israelis sported kente cloth head wraps, dashiki, and “Rastafarian” accessories in the colors of the Ethiopian flag. This was a look I had seen frequently over the course of my fieldwork, most recently at a Fula Express restaurant gig where the audience had been split between casually dressed middle-aged patrons and younger Israelis in West African garb.

Israelis in rastot and West African fabrics are a fairly common sight in Tel Aviv’s countless vegetarian restaurants, trendy cafes, and concerts, especially where reggae, Afropop, or musikah olamit (world music) is performed. This style is also in prominent evidence at mesibot teva (nature parties; see Chapter 4], at certain trance nightclubs, and, with modifications, amongst post-Army Israelis enjoying extended tourism in India, Thailand, or Latin America. Ever since my first stay in Tel Aviv as an Embassy employee from 2002 to 2005, I had been hearing Israelis refer to this crowd “shanti people,” or “peace people,” suggesting a South Asian influence, as well as ruchnikim, which is Hebrew slang for “hippies,” and, less commonly, “bereshit people,” from the biblical
Hebrew “Genesis.” My 2013 fieldwork allowed me to add “branja” to this list, and to explore further the local Israeli semiotics of rastot, dashiki, and kente cloth.

Complicating matters, such semiotics are not necessarily legible across all of the socio-musical spaces I might have anticipated. When I once wrapped my hair in a blue cloth before a night out, for instance, Tony Ray greeted me at Rasta Club with a frown and a very surprised “What are you wearing?”

*Shanti* people, *ruchnikim, bereshit* people: by any name or none, they had turned out in force for Africa Fest, and it was clear that at this event, they were not overdressed. When a rumble of percussion announced that it was time to start, and drummer Chale Davoe Ascendo mounted the stage alone, he was wearing a *dashiki* himself, its solid orange color a simple backdrop against which to display intricate manipulations of the talking drum he held under his arm. One by one, the members of the Groove Ambassadors and their backup singers took the stage, resplendent in a hodge-podge of *dashiki* and *kente* garments matched with tank tops and tee-shirts. As Ascendo drummed and sang-chanted in the Nigerian *fuji* style, musicians picked up their instruments and began laying down long, low tones. Next, the two women singers joined Ascendo, repeating his lines. Additional percussionists joined in gradually, filling in Ascendo’s pauses, until all at once Elise Element Yves came crashing in on the his trap set. The sprawling ensemble locked into the driving polyrhythmic groove – a 6/8 pulse on the cowbell and talking drum over fat bass kicks on every quarter note – that has informed the development of Nigerian music from sacred Yoruba drumming to contemporary Highlife, Juju, Afrobeat and beyond (Waterman 1990). Africa Fest had begun.
For the next several hours, the Groove Ambassadors and guest artists carried us along a sonic wave that churned with currents of Nigerian Afrobeat and Ivorian zigilibity, Congolese soukous and Afro-Cuban rumba. Keys and horns, bells and djembe, bass and guitar proved themselves to be multi-lingual and multi-cultural, fluently voicing the idioms of diverse musical styles. The vibe was good, the groove was unceasing. Perfusion performed a hip-hop/Mande/Wolayta fusion dance to a medley of live music, as well as a recording featuring the intensely sharp-sweet voice of Michael Jackson in his disco years. The ensemble’s version of Israeli folk classic “Oseh Shalom” (He Who Makes Peace) was a concert highlight. The Groove Ambassadors exploded the song’s originally somber tempo and minor harmonic palette, derived from Eastern European Jewish liturgical nigunim, with bright Fela Kuti-style horn riffs and vocal interjections. As the audience sang along to familiar lyrics, a elderly Israeli woman actually climbed up
onstage, grabbing the microphone to sing and dance energetically.

When Elise Element Yves took center stage for his well-loved take on Fela Kuti’s “Zombie,” the song’s three-chord loop, quadruple-time high-hat ostinato, and lightning-fast horn runs urged dancers into a frenzy. Audience members moved their arms up and down in time to the beat, swung their heads back and forth, stamped their feet, and chanted “Zombie oh Zombie” along with the band. The rhythmic feel of “Zombie” is intense and relentless: staccato chords stab every quarter note, voices periodically emerge to shout words and phrases in double time, and the high-hat races frantically along, as if chased by the same state-military “zombies” who allegedly killed Fela Kuti’s mother and destroyed his commune in 1970s Lagos (Veal 2000). On the floor, individuals danced as if they, too, wished to shake off the burden of forces larger than themselves. Whatever Africa Fest participants thought or felt about “politics” in Israel or elsewhere, and regardless of their own ethno-cultural backgrounds, it seemed that, as Elise had explained to me, Fela Kuti’s influence was undiluted by time or distance. This music was bringing Israelis together to think, to feel, to dance, to act.

**Community of Glocal Affinity: Structure, Constituency, and Musical Taste**

Everybody likes to see something different, to discover another world. And African music is a whole world. (Elise Akowendo, interview with author, August 15, 2014).

Africa Fest’s multi-genre Afrocentric soundscape, groove politics, primarily Israeli audience base, and African leadership represent some of the defining
characteristics of Tel Aviv’s African branja as a whole, and distinguish this sphere of
socio-musical activity from many others I describe in this dissertation. The branja has no
primary ethno-cultural membership the way Bnai Darfur or Hebdi do, for example, and
no explicit political agenda like the collective of Israeli pro-refugee activists. Although
branja ideologies incorporate aspects of spirituality, as I describe in the last section of
this chapter, it is not a religious community like Friendship House. The branja is not a
particular place, like Menelik or Rasta Club, but neither is it a wholly “virtual” or
“imagined” community, in that the branja is localized in Tel Aviv, and participants come
together face-to-face at live performance events. Furthermore, whereas many socio-
musical collectivities in the city are associated with a genre of primary interest, like
Amharic pop or musikah Mizrahit, branja musics originate in different countries, are
performed in different languages, and evince ties to multiple ethno-cultural groups.

At a basic structural level, the branja can be understood as an amalgamation of
networking activity in material and virtual spaces. It is not static or bounded, but rather,
constituted at any given time by a shifting web of personal and professional connections
between individuals and groups, temporarily activated by specific occurrences such as
live shows, and otherwise latent.³ A handful of ensembles and individuals who regularly

³ The branja evinces aspects of what sociologists Lee and Wellman term “networked
individualism” (2012). Driven by the interests and initiatives of individual participants
instead of rhetorically oriented towards a collective and highly mercurial in terms of size
and participation, networked individualism nevertheless refers to a prominent mode of
group sociality that is increasingly trumping ostensibly stable forms of community
(family, religion, ethno-cultural affiliation), especially among young people in globalized
environments.
perform in Tel Aviv generate most of the opportunities for branja sociality through concerts, rehearsals, and classes, and on their social media pages. The 12-member Groove Ambassadors are the largest and most prominent branja act, playing Fela Kuti-style Afrobeat and other contemporary West African genres that Elise refers to as “Afropop” or sometimes just “African music.” Other groups like the Tam Tam ensemble, the Perfusion dance troupe, and Ariel Nahum’s Fula Express, perform various African and Afro-diasporic “traditional” styles, from Gambian griot songs to Central American garufina dance. A number of solo artists like Ulrich Goltrand, Chale Davoe Ascendo, Hillary Sargent and others will sometimes join these groups for shows and studio gigs. Likewise, ensemble members usually have several side projects going on at once. In addition, Israeli and African instructors teach various drums and dances, often renting space for group classes in one of Tel Aviv’s hundreds of yoga studios.

Performances by visiting artists from Africa and diasporas in the U.S. and Europe also play a major role in organizing branja activity. Several times a year, Tam Tam brings “master drummers” from across West Africa and from ensemble director Pierre Chaillan’s native France. The Groove Ambassadors and Perfusion host guest artists from abroad when they can pull together enough money to do so. Sometimes major “world music” acts come through Israel on international tours, and municipal councils will also bring in performers, as was the case with the Fatouma Diawari concert, sponsored by the city of Holon. Such large-scale initiatives are evidence of an interest in “musikah olamit” [Hebrew: world music] amongst diverse Israeli audiences, and of a strategic investment in multiculturalism on the part of Israeli institutions nationwide. As I discuss
in my Introduction and Chapter 1, many corners of “official Israel,” from the Ministries of Tourism and Foreign Affairs to national arts councils and city governments, support public performances that showcase aspects of Israeli multiculturalism and globalized sensibilities as a means of demonstrating responsiveness to shifting domestic trends, and in order to strengthen Israel’s profile within international communities.

These types of events draw fans from across the country, expanding branja social networks and growing audience bases for smaller Tel Aviv acts. There is an enormous interest in contemporary Afropop and “traditional” African and Afro-diasporic musics on the part of younger Israelis, many of whom have taken lengthy post-army tiyulim (tours) in Latin America, South and Southeast Asia, and Africa. Israelis from among this set – the dreadlocked, dashiki-wearing men and women I saw at Africa Fest – are the primary constituency of the branja, playing in bands led by African individuals, leading their own ensembles, like Ariel Nahum of Fula Express, and filling venues at live concerts. This preponderance of non-African Israelis is a major factor marking out the branja as different from some the other spheres of African group musical activity in Tel Aviv.

Whereas I was one of only a handful of “white people” at Club Menelik’s Purim party and at Rasta Club’s weekend dance nights, it was Africans who were in the minority at branja concerts. Although, as I discuss below, African performers are highly respected

---

4 Tel Aviv’s African branja is certainly energized by the overall growth of Israel’s world music scene since the 1990s, which has itself been catalyzed by the diverse factors, including the growing popularity of post-army global tourism, the emergence of the Beta Israel as a new Jewish eda, and the proliferation of Internet media that provide immediate access to cultural content from around the world.
within the branja, viewed as authorities on certain types of musical and cultural
authenticity, they are far outnumbered by Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israelis, who find in
African arts an outlet for self-expression and creative freedom.

As I note in my introduction above, not just any African music will suit a branja
audience. Collectively, these cultural producers give pride of place to West, Central, and
Southern African musics, both contemporary and traditional, as well as traditional Afro-
Caribbean and Afro-Latin genres. Branja soundscapes tend towards 21st century urban
African sounds of new Afrobeat and “Naija,” the bass-and-beat-heavy Nigerian music
taking over clubs across West Africa, as well as “regional” musics like Congolese
soukous, Ivorian ziglibithy, and Gambian Fulani (Slobin 1990). Equally, guitar-based
singer-songwriting in the vein of Angelique Kidjo, Amadou and Mariam, Ali Farka Toure
or Youssou N’Dour is squarely within the branja wheelhouse. Afro-Caribbean and Afro-
Latin musics that are use hand-played drums, from Cuban changui song to Central
American punta, will prompt cheers from branja audiences; electronic-based genres like
Jamaican dancehall and Brazilian baile funk are less common. Furthermore, while many
members of the Groove Ambassadors, Tam Tam, Perfusion, and Fula Express are
knowledgeable about different expressive traditions, they do not usually perform East
African musics, and they generally limit their use of Afro-diasporic hip-hop, jazz, and
R&B to accents, not as their major repertoire. Tel Aviv boasts top talent in all of these
genres, from Menelik’s Amharic house band and roots reggae heroes the Zvuloon Dub
System to Ethiopian-Israeli hip-hopper Kalkidan and the sharp jazz cats coming out of
the Rimon School, yet these musicians rarely perform at multi-band branja events.
Branja musical orientation, in other words, is simultaneously extensive and restricted. The absence of certain African and Afro-diasporic genres from the otherwise vast branja soundscape does not necessarily indicate an explicit aversion to these genres on the part of audiences, nor professional enmity between musicians. In fact, branja performers frequently collaborate with other artists in diverse styles under the auspices of Café Gibraltar, a Tel Aviv-based online world music blog and event sponsor. I suggest, however, that the general exclusion of particular musics from collective activities and discourses is a result of those genres’ strong associations with specific African ethnocultural groups who are represented in Israel. While Amharic pop is not an uncommon sound in the city, non-African Israelis will most often hear it spilling out of Ethiopian nightclubs like Menelik and Asmara, or playing in Ethiopian and Eritrean restaurants and internet cafes around Neve Sha’anan Street, or at wedding receptions in the enormous rental halls that line HaMasger and HaRechev streets. A majority of Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israelis, even avid world music fans, or ruchnikim who did post-army tiyul in Africa, will rarely if ever enter such venues. For every site of cross-group mingling in Tel Aviv’s crowded, diverse cityscape, there is a de-facto “members only” club, bar, restaurant or private home where individuals from minority populations can enjoy music from countries and cultures of origin without the presence of outsiders.⁵

As Kay Kaufman Shelemay notes, “attraction of an affinity community outside

⁵ The relative unfamiliarity of East African musics among Israeli audiences, even for Israelis who are musically educated and interested in African music generally, may be due in part to the fact that few Israelis travel to largely Muslim East Africa.
those of Ethiopian descent is still relatively unrealized among musicians in the Ethiopian diaspora, although many aspire to reach a broader audience” (2013: 374). While we might hear about a rising Addis Ababa pop star on an episode of National Public Radio’s “Afropop Worldwide,” conditions of life 21st century Israel have separated out East African musics from the larger and increasingly familiar Afropop category, embedding them with locally-specific political connotations. This is part of why DJ Andrea Rosen, the highly knowledgeable music professional who performed at 2013’s Refugee Seder, had to confess her ignorance of Amharic pop. In a very real sense, these particularistic associations contradict branja groove ideologies, which, as I have indicated, are broad, inclusive, and feel-good, smoothing the edges of difference.

In this connection, I return to my observation that many branja participants resist affiliation with specific political agendas, or interest groups that are active in Tel Aviv. Groovy branja vernacular helps frame politics through the lens of musical histories and personalities, as in the case of Elise’s Fela quote about gas prices, or Perfusion and Tam Tam publicity materials that reference “Mother Africa,” “people united,” or “get up stand up.” Relatedly, branja discourses valorize cross-group intrasubjectivity over the consolidation or promotion of any single identity. While the branja absolutely values communal experience, and evinces broad communitarian social values, participants seem to view these things as limited by static group affiliation in the long run, at least as group affiliation often manifests itself in urban Israeli sectarian contests for power. This approach is evidenced, for instance, in Africa Fest “family and community friendly” promo rhetoric, in which “community” does not refer to the branja itself or to another
particular group, but is a gloss for the neighborhood, for the city, for anyone who desires to join others in groove’s experiential and ideological space. Here, “community” is less a human collective than a feeling state available to a theoretically limitless number of people.

If the associative specifics of East African musics are ill-suited to these scopic ideologies, what about global Afro-diasporic genres like hip-hop, R&B, jazz, and reggae? It is difficult to draw clear boundaries between the branja and these spheres of socio-musical activity, largely because they are also vast in scope and diverse in content. For instance, while branja participants do not comprise a major part of the clientele of G-Spot, Tel Aviv’s biggest hip-hop club that features Euro-American Top 40, plenty of ruchnikim are fans of so-called consciousness rap, which foreground themes of racial uplift and community empowerment. Additionally, there is a lot of overlap between branja and roots reggae audiences. Surely, Zvuloon Dub System frontman Gili Yalo’s description of reggae as “mellow, peaceful, feel-good music” is of a piece with groovy branja vernacular. “Reggae preaches for peace; live in peace with everybody. Not just right and left. I’m black, you’re white, it preaches to become one” (interview with author, July 12, 2011).

Because genres like hip-hop and reggae are so diversified, individual artists can make decisions about what works and what does not with respect to branja sounds and sentiments. So they tend to avoid hip-hop sub-genres that are sonically and thematically aggressive, like gangsta rap and crunk, and they also stay away from dancehall reggae’s “slackness” lyrics that celebrate sex, drugs, and party life (Niah Stanley 2005; Manuel
and Marshall 2006). Yet ask Elise Element Yves, Ariel Nahum or Perfusion leader Yael Sharoni about musical influences, and each will name hip-hop and reggae among them. Borrow a ruchnik’s iPod, moreover, and you may find anything from trance EDM to Hindustani ragas alongside the branja’s staple Afropop styles. Branja taste preferences cannot be defined in sonic terms alone. Even setting aside participants’ auxiliary engagement with diverse world musics and popular genres, Afropop alone incorporates many different song forms, harmonic palettes, melodic idioms, timbres, categories of instrumentation, and production effects.

“Pure” sound is never the sole factor shaping musical affinity, though, and distinct genres may be brought together to form a coherent whole that is more than the sum of its parts. As I explain in my Chapter 4 discussion of sound as both material force and cultural text, music can appeal to people via a combination of pleasurable psychosomatic effects and extramusical associations. Over time, these effects and associations come to merge to a certain extent in the experience of audiences, such that new and unfamiliar sounds that produce similar kinds of pleasure and related associations are grouped together with existing genres of affinity (the process by which Afropop emerged as a musical category in the first place.) Shelemay writes that a variety of motivations can be accommodated under affinity, linked on various levels to an array of personal predilections and affective responses. Musical affinity can be driven by sheer sonic attraction, whether based in a desire for the familiar or search for the new; it can catalyze a preoccupation with what is perceived as exotic. The role of a charismatic musician or performer is often a particularly powerful element added to the musical draw in the case of affinity communities. Whatever the basis of the attraction, an affinity community assumes its shape based in the first instance on individual volition, in contrast to motivations deriving from
ascribed or inherited factors (descent) or driven by specific ideological commitments or connections (dissent) (2013: 374).

In the case of the branja, all of these motivations apply in different ways for different participants. Some, like Ariel Nahum, had dramatic first encounters with African musical traditions while traveling, when new sounds, new people, unfamiliar geographies and cultures came together to generate fantastic synesthetic experiences. Others were blown away by African and Afro-diasporic songs while listening to on alternative radio stations. For many educated and savvy Israelis, African musics indeed hold “exotic” appeal, both in terms of their sonic particulars and their evocations of a continent that has long compelled the Israeli imagination. Yet “desire for the familiar” is present even in this yen for newness. Afropop, which is neither “mainstream” nor “native Israeli,” but is an increasingly familiar part of the globalized Israeli soundscape, balances hegemonic and counter-hegemonic drives orientations for Israeli “cultural creatives” – many of them from middle and upper-class backgrounds – who fill branja venues, just as it does for the more overtly political pro-refugee Israeli activists I discuss in Chapter 4.

African and Afro-descendant branja participants share many of these motivations, while bringing to the table additional needs and desires. Issues of descent, for example, are more directly relevant to engagement with African arts for people like Elise, Ulrich Goltrand, Chale Davoe Ascendo and Hillary Sargent than for Ashkenazi and Mizrahi Israelis. As I discuss in the next section of this chapter, branja performance offers Africans and Afro-descendants the opportunity to display valued aspects of black, national, and African identity. Music is a way to invigorate personal connections with
countries and cultures of origin, and/or to participate in Afro-diasporic transnationalism by engaging with different expressive traditions. Elise’s commitment to Nigerian Afrobeat, which is informed by his own West African upbringing, his skepticism of state authority, and his experiences as an adult in diaspora, represents a microcosm of the overlapping processes of descent, dissent, and affinity that guide branja participation for other Africans and Afro-descendants as well.

African artists also understand Afropop as a music on the rise, both in Israel and internationally. With its wide appeal, Afropop can be understood in some respects as a “hidden transcript” of, if not political dissent, then politicized self-representation for Africans in Tel Aviv (Scott 1990). As I argue in Chapter 3, black men are often targets of collective Israeli anxieties around violence and sexuality, in addition to being regarded as part of the demographic threat posed by African populations in general. Some of Afropop’s bright, upbeat, “listenable” styles can provide a partial counterweight to such perceptions. What Afropop “disguises” in its sounds of celebration are the challenges and frustrations that most of its Tel Aviv performers have experienced: displacement from home environments, encounters with racism, financial instability, and unstable residency status. There is a quality of restraint and grace in the face of insult (Scott 1990) that

---

6 In my opinion, the “world music” industry practice of marketing some African popular and traditional musics as “listenable,” “happy,” “chillout,” and the like, evokes histories of 19th and 20th century American minstrelsy. Commercial entertainments played on white American fears of black danger and desires for black difference, and monetized the figure of the “happy coon.” Afropop within the national Israeli soundscape may evince some of these dynamics, even if groove politics and “good vibe” rhetoric amongst branja community members themselves does not.
marks Elise’s generous philosophy of music as a great healer and shared human inheritance, especially when one is aware of the challenges he has faced in migration and diaspora.

Afropop is a genre that Elise and his African branja associates genuinely love (a music of affinity) as well as an effective way to articulate complex aspects of African and Afro-diasporic identity (a music of dissent). It is also commercially viable, which is important to branja musicians who seek financial success and large audiences. Although branja aesthetics are, for now, distinguishable from the Israeli popular mainstream, and many participants understand their collective attitudes about music and society as unique, I do not wish to construct the branja as a “subculture,” largely because its chief artists actively court media attention and aspire to a high public profile. Theorists do not uniformly identify the desire for fame as a prima facie anti-subcultural motivation, yet, as Sarah Thornton points out, “like the mainstream, ‘the media’ remains a vague monolith against which subcultural credibilities are measured” (1995: 4). This is not necessarily so for branja performers and audiences: the Groove Ambassadors have a long-range plan to break into Euro-American markets; Perfusion and the Tam Tam ensemble need sufficient clout and institutional connections to bring big-name African musicians and dancers to Israel. Notably, several branja musicians I spoke to expressed admiration for Idan Raichel, the national pop star whose catalogue of hits incorporates elements of traditional Ethiopian music. In contrast to the members of Raav and the Young Ethiopian Students organization, who critique the potentially appropriative dynamics of Raichel’s project, Elise, Ariel Nahum, Hillary Sargent and others see themselves as artists and professionals
above all, and they respect Raichel as a musical innovator. Relatedly, branja participants do not associate mainstream media attention with “selling out.” When Israel’s largest daily newspaper *Yedioth Aharonoth* published a lifestyle section feature on Elise and his wife Batel, the Groove Ambassadors enthusiastically shared this news with fans across *branja* social media sites, and longtime Ambassadors fans were nothing but thrilled.

In providing this overview of branja structure, group activities, and taste preferences, I have tried to emphasize that the branja complicates frameworks of community in several respects. First of all, the branja draws participation from various other collectivities that are arguably more static and cohesive, from the African church to the Israeli *ruchnikim*. There are no overt restrictions on branja “membership” – anyone can attend a concert or join in social media discussions – and participants can easily move in and out of group sociality. Although contemporary scholarship on musical scenes, communities, and diasporas has demonstrated that these and other social formations evince porous boundaries more often than not, the branja’s “anybody and everybody” attitude towards belonging represents an unusually explicit “emic” theory of community that calls for careful study. Even de-facto constraints around membership in a socio-musical network, which can include anything from social anxieties and musical ignorance, to having the “wrong” ethno-cultural or economic background, are counterbalanced within the branja by the expansively welcoming rhetoric of promotional and publicity materials, by groovy vernacular that riffs on unity and empowerment, and by performers’ intense efforts to generate experiences of communitas at concerts.

I have also suggested that the branja is characterized by extensive overlap of
issues of descent, dissent, and affinity, largely because the branja is constituted by members of several ethno-cultural groups. As the “consensus” musical preference, Afropop goes a long way towards meeting participants’ multidimensional needs with respect to identity, representation, opposition, and pleasure. Yet performers’ periodic incorporation of other genres, and fans’ simultaneous involvement in other musical scenes, may reveal that a single expressive category, even one as broad as Afropop, can never be expressive enough for a diverse community.

Increasingly, communities, musical and otherwise, are diverse. Processes of globalization, including migration, the rapid dissemination of cultural content via Internet media, and the widespread proliferation of data about local and regional phenomena, are catalyzing the emergence of new social formations that respond to dynamic identities, politics, and pleasures. I think here of multiethnic cliques at the universities where I have taught; of American political caucuses whose members may disagree about every issue but one; of fandoms I have encountered in surprising locales, from Bollywood film aficionados in rural North Carolina to death metal fanatics in Madurai, south India. According to Arjun Appadurai, cultural globalization is a “deeply historical, uneven, and even localizing process. Globalization does not necessarily or even frequently imply homogenization … and to the extent that different societies appropriate the materials of modernity differently, there is still ample room for the deep study of specific geographies, histories, and languages” (1996:17). Inasmuch as globalization is a fact of daily life for people everywhere, we can only examine the local by its ever-shifting light.

The branja is a rich case study of community in the 21st century metropolis, a time
and place in which historically salient boundaries around ethnicity, religion, and nationality have not lost their importance, but they operate in dialogue with boundary-crossing cosmopolitan desires, globalized sensibilities, and demographic shifts. To the extent that the branja can be best understood, if not comprehensively described, as a musical community of affinity, this is a wholly glocal affinity, forged by conditions of urban Israeli life, inflected by cultural histories and contemporary socio-politics, and expressed through world musics that have traveled a long way to reach Tel Aviv. Given the freedom that branja participants have to pick and choose from an extraordinary array of musical genres – a freedom that accounts for the branja’s complex style profile – this community may be said to revolve around “groove” itself as the underlying object of affinity. A compound musical and ideological phenomenon, groove can join different expressive traditions into a repertoire that is legible as uniquely branja, and ground unity discourses in the material diversity of urban life.

Without wishing to diminish the affective potency of groove ideology and

---

7 The “scene” rubric may accommodate musical collectivities that arise through processes of globalization inasmuch as it “seeks to reconcile [the] two countervailing pressures” (Shelemay 2013) of group- and place-specific historical continuities, and disruptions of these continuities precipitated by encounters with globalization. In this connection, my fieldwork and research have revealed the ongoing importance that individuals and groups place on their “own” specific histories, cultures, and local experiences, and their simultaneous desire to “cosmopolitanize and revitalize” such categories through activities and discourses that promote cross-group intrasubjectivity. I suggest that the potential limitations of the scene rubric – its relative ahistoricity, its focus on immediate material and imaginary conditions – actually highlight the key dynamics of musical glocali, which, as I describe in Chapters 1 and 4, selectively engages with music’s historical genealogies and originary meanings and re-deploys them in new configurations for different purposes.
experiences for branja participants, or the effectiveness of unity discourses in mitigating the potential influence of sectarianism, it is necessary to emphasize that glocal community is not utopian community. The glocal interpretive framework, as made manifest within the branja and elsewhere, opens up a social-cultural “third space,” in Homi Bhaba’s sense, that is neither fully subordinate to any larger entity, nor entirely independent from larger entities (especially nation and ethnicity) (1996). Marked by hybridity and fusion at levels of aesthetics, sociality, and imagination, *glocali* enables interstitial positions and new avenues of engagement with the world. However, hybridity is not always easy to live (Maira 2002: 45), and the branja does evince internal value distinctions and gradations, elements of competition and hierarchy. The final section of this chapter explores branja concepts of musical and cultural authenticity that help structure relationships between individuals, as well as between Israeli and African participant groups. Authenticity undergirds what will term branja micropolitics: the interpersonal working-out of tensions that are always already embedded within hybridity, and which shadow the unifying ambitions of glocal interpretation.

**Black Music, White Community? Branja Frameworks of Authenticity**

These Israelis, they are doing their thing. Like Ariel Nahum [of Fula Express]. He went to Senegal and made *sivuv* [Hebrew: tour] in Africa to learn the music. He learned, yeah? But I think it doesn’t reflect the real. It’s not authentic. But it’s not authentic if somebody from Senegal plays Mali music! It’s closer to the feel, though. Me for instance, I can play music from Congo, drumming, but if somebody from Congo does it, it will be very different. It will be much better for the same song. I don’t have it in the blood, their feel. I play exactly, but it’s like I’m playing
notes, but he has the feel. You cannot write it, he has the feel (Elise Akowendo, interview with author, August 15, 2014)

Fundamentally, the branja is a collective that is wary of the whole notion collectives in Israel, an set of Afrocentric aesthetic values ostensibly available to anyone, and a politics often articulated as apoliticism. Branja discourses point to an ideo-
imaginary realm of “both/and-neither/nor,” which invites any individual “who is down,” irrespective of his or her ethnicity, socio-economic background, or political views, to partake of musical cultures that originate amongst African populations whose members are undeniably marginalized in contemporary urban Israel. In essence, branja groove ideologies counter racism by replacing ethnicity as a socio-political category with ethnicity as an aesthetic category. In this way, African and Israeli branja participants alike endeavor to reject the negative connotations of blackness as set out in the rhetoric and actions of certain politicians and rightist groups, while retaining access to the special beauty and power of African blackness through musicking.

Yet branja membership is, according to Elise’s estimate, “70 percent white,” which undoubtedly influences collective branja formulations of what blackness really means. Numerous factors shape branja demographics, prominent among them the fact that Tel Aviv’s population itself is roughly 92 percent Jewish Israeli (Israel Central Bureau of Statistics, 2012), a vast majority of whom are Mizrahi or Ashkenazi. Mizrahim comprise just over half of Israel’s population overall, and as I discuss in Chapter 1, many Mizrahim do not consider themselves white, identifying as shachor (black) and engaging with frameworks of political Mizrahiyut that have historically drawn inspiration from the
African-American Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the mid-20th century. For Elise, however, blackness in Israel is the purview of African and Afro-descendant migrants and immigrants. In his view, Mizrahi performers of African music, such as Ariel Nahum of Fula Express, are “white,” just like their Ashkenazi bandmates, colleagues or fans.⁸

It is unsurprising that the city’s majority demographic – non-African Jewish Israelis – would make up significant participation in an active musical community. As I have pointed out, African branja performers are motivated in part by the ambition to increase their audiences and fan base, and do not limit their efforts in this respect to members of their own ethno-cultural groups or close social circles. More generally, histories of Afro-diasporic musical phenomena are marked by ongoing exchange between first-circle producers and consumers and wider publics, with majority actors often becoming increasingly involved over time. If this exchange is a nearly universal factor of popular musical development, however, its dynamics are constituted locally. Israelis who join in branja activity do so not simply because it is available, but because they are attracted to the sphere of aesthetics, sociality, and ideology that African musicking opens up.

I open this chapter by framing Israeli participation in the branja as a way to do identity politics, and a response to public sphere debates over the implications of African

---

⁸ This “whitening” of different non-African Israeli groups is analogous in some respects to strains of public discourse that conflate multiple African populations under the heading “Sudani,” eliding specificities of ethnicity, history, and culture.
presence in Israel. Many aspects of glocal interpretation figure “blackness” as powerful and desirable, and Israelis perceive branja participation as special proximity to “black cool” in many respects. For Africans and Afro-descendants, I have argued that performance affords self-representation in a charged socio-political environment, a path towards potential professional and financial gain, social status and crucial support networks in the absence of full civic status. I have also underscored, however, that these and other politicized motivations and opinions tend to be subsumed under the branja’s broad aspirational progressivism, which is articulated in discourses of groove and unity. Subtending these discourses is a framework of musical and cultural authenticity that scaffolds the immediate work of identity politics for diverse branjaites. Representations and demonstrations of intense emotion and proximity to Africa – especially to African place and/or body – are points of ingress to authenticity that Israeli and African branja participants access in different ways.  

_Emotion_

The complex issue of cultural appropriation has a significant if indirect influence on Israeli branja participation. Although appropriation is not a major topic of conversation within the branja, it is increasingly so across a wide swath of middle- and upper-class, college educated, and left-leaning Israeli populaces. Because these are the

---

9 Authenticity as a singular concept has been extensively problematized in scholarship across the humanities, because the human experience of authenticity is so contingent and relational. I do not seek to intervene within broad debates about what authenticity means, nor argue whether or not the term retains productive scholarly usage across individual case studies. I am concerned with how “authenticity” works as a racial/ethnic signifier within a community mostly comprised of majority Israelis, and how these significations are modified by aesthetic value distinctions.
same publics that field many Israeli branja participants, there is significant impetus to handle implicit questions of appropriation that could put a damper (real or perceived) on branja activities. In my discussions with some Israeli branja performers, this impetus was revealed in different ways, from forthright acknowledgement to veiled frustration. For instance, Fula Express percussionist Nadav Gaiman challenged me during an interview to explain why I believed “only Africans should play African music” (interview with author, March 12, 2013). I had asked Gaiman whether he thought that Fula Express was “Israeli music or African music,” a question I somewhat naively assumed was open-ended, but in fact touched upon his felt tension between the desire to inhabit an expressive tradition, and his familiarity with critiques of appropriation.

Gaiman’s eventual conclusion – “music deals with feelings, not politics”– encapsulates a sentiment I heard articulated by many branja performers and audiences. Music and other expressive forms are ineffable, intensely personal, and transcendent of their immediate contexts. Therefore, anyone who feels deeply and sincerely enough can have an authentic relationship with African arts, irrespective of his or her ethno-cultural background. This construction of emotional authenticity is both a necessary starting point and an end product of groove politics, which, as I have described, bypasses specifics of ethnicity, history, and current events en route to unity. Furthermore, from a structural-materialist point of view, emotional authenticity can be understood as a by-product of commercial musical activity. Unlike early bebop jazz musicians, for instance, who consciously sought to “drop out” of contests for mainstream popularity and financial
success and instead cultivate small audiences of aficionados, African and Israeli *branja* performers want to increase access to and enjoyment of their work. As such, they are incentivized towards a capacious definition of authenticity that will not alienate potential audience bases.

As I lay out in my Introduction to this dissertation, emotion has historically played a key role in shaping collective understandings of authentic Israeliness. Individual agents of power appeal to Israeli emotions when seeking to mobilize support for their political activities, and institutions such as the military and the educational system are structured in part to accommodate human feelings and instrumentalize them when necessary. Israeli cultural creatives are habituated, then, to a worldview in which personal passions are valid elements of public life, recognized as justification for individual and collective behaviors. This aspect of nationhood has developed alongside the conception of Israel as a “melting pot” of ethnicities and cultural forms, a society formed around an “intricate web of contrasting human factors, backgrounds, memories, ideologies, and wills” (Regev and Seroussi 2004: vii). Although the melting pot metaphor is derived in large part from a European Zionist vision of *kibbutz galuyot* (ingathering the Diaspora), and has historically applied to Jewish Israel only, it has come to shape expressions of glocali, especially in the realm of popular music (ibid). For 21st century urban Israelis who engage with their rapidly changing environment through frameworks of glocal interpretation (see Chapter 1), the national melting pot metaphor expands to include non-Jewish ethnicities and cultural forms as well.
Ariel Nahum of Fula Express is proficient in many aspects of Fulani *griot* traditions from Senegal and the Gambia: he plays the *serndu*, a transverse flute, the half-calabash *horde* and other percussion instruments, and sings in a dialect of the Fulfulde language. During our interview, Nahum acknowledged that Fula music is not “his” by dint of birth or history, but emphasized that he had “studied with the masters” during extended travel in Africa (interview with author, April 20, 2013). He also spoke of aesthetic and emotional consonances between Fula music and the Yemenite music of his own family background, and in which he has trained extensively. “The high male voice in *Mizrahit* is similar to the voice in African singing,” he explained. “I can sound black African, probably because *musikah Temanit* (Yemenite music) is closely related to North African music.” Moreover, “the feeling is the same, it’s meditative and spiritual. It just feels right to me.”

Nahum is not the only performer to evoke feelings, desire, spirituality, and affective ties in positioning himself as part of an African musical tradition. The Perfusion dance troupe uses promotional rhetoric that foregrounds emotion and intention rather than ethnicity or history:

Perfusion is an Israel-based group consisting of artists from around the world who share the same passion for the beautiful, vibrant cultures of Africa. It is where traditional African melodies, dances & instruments meet the modern, electric West. Inspired by Mother Africa, Perfusion is a colorful journey of music and dance from around the world, where cultures come together as one” (facebook.com/PerfusionEnsemble, March 20, 2014)
Perfusion has an Ethiopian Israeli member and one from Madagascar, but the majority of dancers are non-African Israelis whose “passion” for “Mother Africa” authenticates their participation in African arts despite the absence of ethno-cultural ties. Elise Element Yves, too, is a something of a spokesperson for passion, although as an African performer of African musics, the authenticity of his *branja* performances is seemingly not at issue. He will often frame the Afro-beat orientation of the Groove Ambassadors, a band with no Nigerian members, in terms of his own love for Fela Kuti’s music. In general, Elise is apt to describe African musics, and Africa itself, in feelingful terms. His catchphrase “this na African style!”, for example, which he uses to hype up concert audiences, express gratitude for especially energetic crowd responsiveness, and communicate on social media, can reference any genre, tradition, or region to evoke basically the same good feeling.

Good feeling, or the desire to create it, pervades groove politics and particular iterations of groovy vernacular. Among these iterations, the rhetoric of “brotherhood” is another valorization of emotional authenticity. Like groove in general, brotherhood incorporates a state of relationality that is intensely positive enough to neutralize any distinction, and cross any boundary. I consider Elise’s Facebook comment on a video of Cape Verdean singer Mo’Kalamity performing her debut “Africa” (2010): “Beautiful song, peace and love brudda. *Selassi Haiyee*” (from the Geez: “Trinity”). In *branja* groovy vernacular, “brudda” can signify all of the posters who will read Elise’s comment, or Ethiopia’s leader Haile Selassie, or the continent of Africa, or Mo’Kalamity herself. The importance of brotherhood here, to paraphrase Homi Bhabha, is not to trace the
original phenomena it draws into itself, but to instrumentalize them in service of here-and-now social unity (1996).

On the involvement of white “cats” in American jazz, trumpeter and bandleader Dizzy Gillespie once posed the question, “how can you distinguish between the pseudo and the truly hip? …The hip way is to live with your brother” (in Monson 1995: 396).

Expressive traditions among marginalized and minority populations are shaped in part by cultural producers from among these groups who challenge or reject participation by majority actors, and equally by those who seek to carve out space for such participation under certain conditions, and in certain ways. Branja performers like Elise Element Yves, Ulrich Goltrand, and Chale Davoe Ascendo who are familiar with experiences racism and othering in Israeli society, have reasonable motivation to do away with difference as a problem, and to organize their socio-musical attitudes and activities around brotherhood instead.

As a facet of groove, brotherhood is inclusive, understood as available to both men and women, and branjaïtes who use the term “brotherhood” do not necessarily intend its gendered valences. Despite the universalist orientation, it is important to emphasize that branja performance is gendered in practice. Most branja instrumentalists and lead singers are male, while most dancers or backup singers are female. Both Elise and Ariel Nahum used only masculine terms when they spoke to me about musicianship, for example, but feminine or plural-gendered nouns and verb declensions when referring to their dancers and audiences. It is noteworthy that Africa Fest featured only one female instrumentalist, Israeli djembe drummer Roni Parass, whose gender was given special
mention in promotional materials. A full treatment of *branja* gender dynamics is beyond the scope of this chapter, but I suggest that maleness itself may open certain doors to sites of musicking and levels of discourse where authenticity gets defined and refined.

I turn finally to the value that *branja* participants, and performers especially, place on experiences of communitas during live shows as a powerful support for the construction of authenticity as emotional sincerity. After Victor Turner, communitas is a fundamentally “anti-structure” phenomenon (1974); “normal” social structures are temporarily suspended or dissolved. To the extent that normative sociality in urban Israel incorporates sectarianism, collective *branja* activities and discourses resist it, and communitas is the ultimate realization of cross-faction intrasubjectivity. Any performer or audience member who contributes to positive group experiences by playing, dancing, cheering, etc., is welcome and necessary. In this connection, I compare events at Menelik or Rasta Club, where one’s lack of knowledge of particular dances such as *iskiksta*, *gurage*, or the dancehall “wine” may draw attention to oneself (something I have experienced myself), with the Africa Fest concert, which was full of audience members engaging in a wide variety of personal choreographies. The most enthusiastic dancers, who were not by any means the most technically proficient, received “shout outs” from the stage and applause from their fellow partiers. The immediacy of communitas pushes bodies, sensations, emotions, and physical energies to the fore: “ethnicity,” “identity,” or “culture” cannot participate directly. Only people dance, sing, and feel.

“White” Israeli *branja* participants, *Ashkenazim*, *Mizrahim*, women and men alike, are increasingly aware of critiques of cultural appropriation, yet they also have recourse
to longstanding collective understandings of emotional authenticity that help legitimate their involvement in African and Afro-diasporic expressive traditions. Moreover, the fact is that Israelis are rarely obliged to explain their involvement in African arts to other members of a community oriented towards feel-good unity over oppositional politics, and materially dependent upon multiethnic participation. This characteristic distinguishes Tel Aviv’s African branja from other collectives I explore in this dissertation such as the Raav poets, refugee communities of dissent, Israeli pro-refugee activists, or political Mizrahim, for whom which identity, ethnicity, and social injustice are prominent features of group discourse. Indeed, my branja interviews were the first time some participants had openly discussed issues of ethnicity and appropriation in the context of their own musicking, and these conversations frequently resolved in evocations of passion, spirituality, intention, and attachment.

![Figure 6.3: Perfusion ensemble at the Zone (© Rochelin 2014)](image)
Proximity

Emotional authenticity is a prevalent branja construct that grants legitimacy and value to many different forms of engagement in African arts. However, emotional authenticity does not figure Israeli and African relationships with African expressive traditions as always identical or equal, and other rubrics of artistic and cultural authenticity are salient in this musical community as well. When artists promote their material as authentic, or when fans describe a performance in terms of its authenticity, they are not really talking about emotion, but rather about the “correctness” of the material or performance vis-à-vis the African or Afro-diasporic expressive tradition of which it is a part. Musicians and dancers who can demonstrate passion and accuracy, artistic flair and deep knowledge of genre idioms, have “extra” claim to authenticity, beyond that which is afforded by passion, commitment, and pro-social intentions.

Various factors contribute to the perception of correctness in materials and performances, from aesthetic particulars and playing style to the background of artist him- or herself: while emotional authenticity is de-linked from aspects of ethno-cultural identity, the overlapping rubrics of artistic and cultural authenticity are not. African and Afro-descendant performers are generally regarded as the purveyors of Tel Aviv’s best African music and dance, with privileged cultural knowledge that comes from lived experience of hamakor (the source), Africa itself.
In the context of an aesthetically diversified musical community, where most participants do not have extensive familiarity with the specifics of every African and Afro-diasporic genre they encounter, distinctions of relative artistic and cultural authenticity are based in large measure on what is known about an individual artist’s physical proximity to Africa. For example, an audience member may be ignorant of the musical idioms and cultural roots of Ivorian ziglibithy, but can assume that Elise’s performance of “Ipale” is an authentic representation of the genre, because Elise comes from Cote d’Ivoire. This construct works in part because performers often announce song titles, genres, and/or African places of origin from the stage, or advertise them in promotional materials: “Perfusion’s Afro-Guatemalan cumbia and garufina,” “Ulrich Goltrand bringing you flavors of soukous from Brazzaville!” Prompts like this help break down and sort out broad expressive categories like Afropop, and they authenticate particular performances as artistically correct.

If the “most” authentic performances are given by Africans and Afro-descendants who play or dance genres from their own countries and cultures of origin, there is also a sense that any African is “African enough” to perform in any expressive tradition with artistic and cultural authenticity. I return again to Elise’s status as a well-known and very popular Ivorian performer of Nigerian Afrobeat. It is not just Elise’s obvious love for the music or his musical skill that legitimates his involvement in Afrobeat and imbues his performances with an air of authenticity, but also his West African identity. In this respect, an African practitioner does not need to have original membership in an expressive tradition in order for his or her presence to grant authority within that tradition.
to Israeli associates. Perfusion dancer Sylver Rochelin is from Madagascar, but performs and teaches in the dance traditions of several countries, and his Israeli students cite his tutelage as evidence of their cultural knowledge and artistic accuracy in performance. Elise says that Pierre sometimes calls him in as a “ringer” for Tam Tam shows and rehearsals because he “has the African feel,” even though the ensemble’s repertoire includes many styles in which Elise is untrained.

Non-African Israeli branja performers, meanwhile, can also accumulate artistic and cultural authenticity through proximity to Africa, by publicizing their exposure to African place through travel, as in the case of Ariel Nahum and Fula Express, and/or their training with African teachers. The Tam Tam ensemble, for example, whose leader is an Ashkenazi French Israeli, and which has no permanent African members, advertises its master classes with visiting African drummers to support its claim as the preeminent representative of authentic traditional djembe styles in Israel. I am reminded here of Idan Raichel’s stage introduction of Ethiopian-Israeli singer Cabra Casay: “She comes to us

11 Non-African Israeli artists, in the branja and elsewhere, who have close personal or family relationships with Africans and Afro-descendants are often highly respected by their peers, and the authenticity of their artistic output is given special consideration. For example, many Ethiopian-Israeli Amharic musicians regard Ashkenazi Israeli Nadav Haber as the best saxophone player in Tel Aviv, and he has enough clout within this community to have opened his own nightclub, Asmara, which is one the two big Ethiopian-oriented clubs in the city. Nadav is an outstanding musician, yet he acknowledges that his marriage to an Ethiopian Israeli woman is a major factor in his community status. “She exposed me to Amharic music and politicized me. They accept me because I’m married to her” (interview with author, March 3, 2013)
from the camps of Sudan!” Just as Casay’s physical presence, and the evoked materiality of an African refugee camp, help authenticate Raichel’s version of the folk song “Ayal Ayale,” African people’s bodies and histories authenticate branja activities around them.

Many Israelis bring a high level of musicianship and skill to their engagement with African arts, whether they have traveled in Africa or not, and so they can also represent proximity to Africa on the stage and in the studio by playing or dancing correctly – that is, the way other performers and audiences know or imagine an African would play or dance the same style. By demonstrating exceptional proficiency in African and Afro-diasporic expressive traditions, several Israelis have come to be regarded as artistic authorities and branja community leaders, alongside Elise and his African associates. Tomer Mash, for instance, is a rastot-wearing Ashkenazi who is almost always playing bass with one band or another at branja shows, and who is widely acknowledged by both African and non-African musicians as an expert player. In Tomer’s case, and in others, performing correctly enacts proximity to Africa in the sense of physically embodying the same sounds and gestures that an African practitioner embodies.

Elise Element Yves describes Israelis in general as educated musically. They know what is good music. And they already know, they’ve already listened to all kinds of rock, pop. They are looking for something more interesting […] There are a lot of talented Israeli musicians. Some of them got the talent to get things very fast, some you have to work hard with them. In the case of African music, you have to have it in your blood, or you have to work very hard, a lot of rehearsal. Most of the time, my guys are good. That’s why I’m with most of them for a long time now. Hem osim et ha’avodah [Hebrew: they do the work] (interview with author, August 10, 2014).
Most of the Groove Ambassadors players are non-African Israelis, some of whom are graduates of the Rimon School of Jazz and Contemporary Music, Israel’s main university-level music school, with ties to Berklee School of Music in Boston. Some members of the band have traveled and studied in West Africa, others have only studied African genres with Elise after formal training in jazz and Western art music, but they are all excellent performers. And the Ambassadors are far from the only Israeli cats with the chops to play African and Afro-diasporic styles. “It’s interesting that there’s so much good black music in Israel, like jazz, R&B, blues, new African, traditional stuff,” says Elise, “and it’s mostly white Israelis playing it.” Indeed, “white” urban Israel is the locus of performance and consumption of many African and Afro-diasporic musics, even as socio-political circumstances reify boundaries between majority Israel and certain African communities, and limit the dispersion of other genres like Amharic music. The adoption African genres as affinity musics by Israeli cultural creatives evinces similarities with the emergence of jazz and blues, once genres of common practice within African American communities, as “niche” musics with a largely white audience base. In the same way that contemporary blues and jazz markets need white participation, the branja’s continued existence as a musical community and a sphere of commercial musical activity depends upon non-African Israelis who can “do the work” of learning how to perform and appreciate African and Afro-diasporic expressive forms.

Yet despite an abundance of skill, talent, musicality, and enthusiasm amongst Israeli performers and fans, and regardless of how many of them have traveled in Africa
or trained with African practitioners, Elise observes that Israeli musicians lack the innate “feel” and “soul” that makes for *fully* authentic African musical performance. As he explained to me of Ariel Nahum and Fula Express during our Satchmo interview, “they went to Senegal to learn the music. He learned, yeah? But I think it doesn’t reflect the real. It’s not authentic.” And of his own bandmates: “They are playing like Africans. But it’s true that the soul is missing. The soul. Because African people, most of the time, we don’t need a lot of rehearsal to play our music. An Israeli guy who is coming, it will take him two or three months to play. I can wake up in the morning and just start to do it, because I just know it and I have the feel.”
Israeli can play or dance “like Africans;” they can also, with sufficient emotional intensity, enjoy authentic relationships with African arts. A few, like Tomer Mash, are recognized as able to lock into a groove and play a “soulful African melody.” Yet having feel and soul is a quality of self that is unavailable to Israelis, no matter how hard or long they practice. “You have to have it in your blood,” says Elise. For the same reason that the elderly Israeli woman who led the Africa Day audience in “Oseh Shalom” received thrilled shout-outs from the Groove Ambassadors and wild cheers from the crowd – as an “owner” of the Israeli folk tradition, she infused the performance with special affective import – African practitioners of African arts accumulate enormous admiration and respect from their fans. Playing “like Africans” is distinct from playing as African, and although both are valued within the branja, and both demonstrate cultural-artistic authority that augments the perceived authenticity of a given performer’s participation in an expressive tradition, the very highest echelons of authenticity are the province of Africans only.

We can understand that the construction of authenticity as proximity actually preserves aspects of ethno-cultural identity regarded as significant and valuable, even as prominent branja discourses of unity, brotherhood and multiculturalism downplay difference, valorize individual musical chops, and foreground emotional sincerity as a legitimate cause for participation. In other words, African branja performers can access pride and self-respect because they are African, despite being surrounded by many talented Israeli performers, and dramatically outnumbered by Israelis whose participation in this scene is crucial to performers’ professional success. African identity in the branja
affords access to “personal power” the same way it does within the Friendship House community (see Chapter 4), where embodied characteristics of “Africanness” like language, speech cadences, or gestures display strength and acroamatic wisdom and counterbalance an individual’s real or perceived vulnerabilities in the wider arenas of economic, social and political life. Likewise, “blood,” “feel,” and “soul,” as compound objects of the body and spirit at once, are not dependent on external factors such residency status in Israel, financial stability, or elite musical training (Elise cannot read Western musical notation and, by his own admission, “failed music school” in Cote d’Ivoire. No matter how many Israeli graduates of Rimon School appear on the scene, African blood, feel, and soul remain undiluted sources of worth, both in terms of how African performers view themselves, and how they are regarded vis-à-vis branja artistic and social values systems.

I suggest that an identity politics that valorizes African selfhood qua African, even if it operates below the level of group ideology and is instead revealed obliquely in discussions of musical authenticity, is deeply relevant to the macro-politics of Israel’s debate over the status of Africans and Afro-descendants. Branja musics comprise a small category relative to Israel’s national popular genres such as rock Israeli and musikah Mizrahit, and even in comparison with EDM, reggae, or hip-hop in Tel Aviv; further, Africans are a minority within the scene itself. Yet the broad and sustained influence of African and Afro-diasporic genres within Israel’s mainstream and subcultural soundscapes means that even local, scene-specific negotiations over African identity and aesthetics have the potential to resonate outward with exponential force.
Moreover, as I have aimed to show, the national controversy over African presence has tended to inflate the potential demographic “threat” of refugee and labor migrant populations that are still small minorities in Israel. Statistics *per se* do not override the “politics of emotion” that drives so much Israeli discourse and decision-making; nor do official population estimates figure prominently in public rhetoric, demonstrations or protests. Outside the realm of NGO issue papers and position statements that foreground numbers to legitimize activist agendas, most Tel Aviv residents think and feel about their African neighbors in terms of anecdotes, personal encounters, and embodied, affective experiences. How do native Israelis feel about the Africans they have met, and vice versa? Does a Sudanese man remember hostility or kindness on a bus ride through the city? How do the sounds of African church singing or mediated popular songs impact one’s comfort level as he or she moves through south Tel Aviv neighborhoods long familiar, or new and still foreign?

***

In emphasizing the progressive potential of branja activities within an urban environment fractured by conflict over refugee and migrant presence, I do not want to raise up Israeli understandings of African identity and African arts as most politically relevant. African individuals themselves live at the center of this conflict, and they retain agency within public debate even while most do not enjoy full civic membership. I have indicated that African performers’ access to personal power via African identity is important to their psychic and material wellbeing in diaspora, and to their professional success. What’s more, there exists no unitary “African identity” in Israel,
notwithstanding some politicians’ and activists’ rhetorical conflations of multiple African nationalities. Specificities of history, culture, and migration status in Israel, among other diacritica, influence the lived experiences and political objectives of African individuals and groups, which in turn shape the direction of Israel’s public debate. Like many of the African and Afro-descendent collectives I explore in this dissertation, African branja participants negotiate between these particularistic and cross-group experiences and objectives through expressive aesthetics. In particular, Branja activities open up space for shared identity across African and Afro-diasporic populations without devaluing intra-African difference. On the one hand, performers believe that national expressive forms are always already African expressive forms, and that their diversity enhances rather than undermines the ideo-spiritual and material power of Africa as the birthright of any African. On the other hand, musicians and dancers can “rep” for their own home countries and cultures of origin by pegging certain levels of artistic authority and authenticity to nationality and ethnicity. As Elise explains, “I can play music from Congo, but if somebody from Congo does it, it will be very different. It will be much better for the same song […] I play exactly, but it’s like I’m playing notes. He has the feel.”

_Branja_ rubrics of authenticity as proximity to Africa are flexible enough to validate national and transnational African self-identities simultaneously; e.g., Elise cannot play Congolese music as well as a Congolese drummer, but his playing will be “closer to the feel” than that of an Israeli drummer. In this way, musicians’ discourses of merit allow African performers of different ethno-cultural backgrounds to engage in
necessary psychological processes of self-differentiation, which have at times come under scrutiny by scholars and activists as detrimental to broad social justice aims. For example, Kevin R. Johnson articulates anxieties that “infighting among, and fragmenting of, minority communities could result in racial minorities failing to satisfy the potential for positive civil rights reform” (2003: 776). I suggest that productive attention to conflicts and tensions across minority populations can be hindered by the tacit assumption that intra-minority coalitions require group self-abnegation, and, conversely, that group self-representation necessarily results in “infighting.” Historically, major social movements from Civil Rights and independence movements to feminism and marriage equality have produced coalitions that accommodate rather than repress factioning and even group rivalries, drawing on debate as a source of vitality and durability.
Figure 6.5: Promotional materials for Tam Tam events
For many refugees and migrants in Tel Aviv, self-differentiation from other African individuals and groups is a valuable psychological process in large measure because African populations are often undifferentiated in Israel’s public debate. While Eritrean musician and activist Kidane Isaac Tikue observes that Israelis’ knowledge of different African groups in their midst is gradually expanding – “these are Sudanese, those are Eritreans, those are West Africans” (interview with author, August 15, 2014) – awareness-building happens slowly, and prominent political rhetoric still glosses “Africans” or “refugees” for multiple groups. This conflation, which manifests explicitly in discourse and affectively within the collective Israeli imagination, has contributed to the emergence of loose national policies and decisions about resource allocation that do not necessarily address the different needs of African residents. At the level of individual experience, meanwhile, perceptions of widespread disinterest in one’s subjectivity can be painful and exhausting. A number of my associates have expressed anger at being called “Sudani” by hostile Israelis, as well as bemusement or frustration with sympathetic Israelis who “still don’t know” where they come from.

Music is a ready means of self-differentiation amongst Tel Aviv’s African groups, even while it is used for alliance-building purposes during certain parties and demonstrations. When I interviewed Kidane Isaac Tikue about his favorite musics, for instance, he soon shifted into discussion of musical boundaries, explaining that “Sudanese people don’t want to come to [Hebdi], they don’t want to hear the music,” and “everybody thinks the church music is too much. Not just the Israelis, but African neighbors too. An Eritrean guy will go complain before anyone else if it gets too loud.”
Significantly, Kidane laughed as he made these observations, indicating that he accepts
and even derives some enjoyment from this type of intra-group “rivalry.” Indeed,
musical complaint allows for the partial working-out of differences and potential conflicts
between communities without jeopardizing cross-group institutions or drawing censure
from agents of authority.

Within the branja, low-level contests around artistic authenticity serve a number
of social and professional functions. In the first instance, such contests implicate
nationality and ethnicity, and thereby enable musicians and dancers to formulate and
represent African identities amongst Africans, which is a dynamic distinct from the
representation of African identities to Israeli or mixed audiences. Further, the freedom to
claim primacy in one’s “home” traditions, and to acknowledge another performer’s
greater skill and talent with respect to their own, helps maintain positive and stable
relationships between professional musicians and dancers who are always in some degree
of competition for finite branja resources, venues, audiences and fandoms. Finally,
because the rubric of authenticity as proximity is not zero-sum – one performer’s special
closeness to African place coexists alongside another’s – this mode of self-
differentiation does not threaten overarching branja ideologies of unity or groove politics.
In summing up his opinion of the various African performers and ensembles, some
“great” and some “okay,” who are active in Tel Aviv, Elise emphasizes that “everybody is
trying to bring the best. We are doing what we know to do. Never think you’ve reached
the top, because there is no such thing. Everyday we come and we try, even the small
boys. You need to work right.”
New York DJs and writers “Chief” Boima Tucker and Neelika Jayawardane explain the provocative title of their blog, “Africa is a Country,” as representing “a state of mind. One where the “nation” operates outside the borders of modern nation states in Africa and its continental and conceptual boundaries. So, yes […] Africa is indeed a “country,” an imagined community whose “citizens” must reinvent the narrative and visual economy of Africa” (africasacountry.com/about). I suggest that the denizens of Tel Aviv’s African branja believe in a similarly hybrid virtual-material Africa: an “imagined community” that incorporates and transcends nation states, borders, and ethno-cultural groups. And just as “Africa is a Country” aspires to strengthen networks of cultural creatives across borders and boundaries who are engaged in “narrative and visual” reinventions of Africa, branja performers grow community through the power of African and Afro-diasporic expressive aesthetics.

Whether considering the “old and tired” political discourses and media portrayals of Africa that Tucker and Jayawardane want to challenge, or the rhetorical repetitions and incomplete solutions that mark Israeli public controversy over African presence, there is evidence that the realms of “politics” as conventionally understood, from governance to direct activism, have failed to fully address the enormous complexities of African modernity, or the implications of new and growing African diasporas in countries worldwide. As Jayawardane writes, “This is the blog that’s not about famine, Bono, or Barack Obama.” Intolerance of well-worn political set-pieces is increasing as well in urban Israel. For many Israelis, Africans, and Afro-descendants, it is African arts instead that hold the promise of genuine reinvigoration, powering vibrant communities with louder public voices, stronger cross-group and transnational
alliances, stable formal and informal social institutions, and fresh cultural production to help carry the nation forward.

This is a sweeping promise, yet I hope that if one theme above all has emerged from this narrative of black musics, African lives, and national Israeli imagination, it is the theme of Israel’s enormous cultural flexibility and dynamic politics of emotion. Promises can start small, traded between individuals on the margins of society or far from institutional centers of power, and can grow into ideas that determine trajectories of public and private life for generations. Art in Israel is an especially strong vector of promise, transmitting new messages to Israeli audiences who are always listening and looking, accustomed to unpredictability and alert for what’s coming next. Not every message is welcome, and not all will resonate across multiple spheres of national influence. As I have tried to emphasize, messages of ethnic difference have been especially high-impact – fascinating, threatening, and destabilizing – at many points in Israel’s history and within contemporary society. If the Palestinian-Israeli conflict has long been the preeminent factor in Israeli mass-cultural conceptualizations of difference and otherness, and the domestic Ashkenazi-Mizrahi divide has structured internal debates around ethnicity and identity, African presence in 21st century Israel is destabilizing all of these categories. In important respects, African and Afro-descendant populations are perceived as bringing all the vastness of the wider world, the non-Israeli world, inside of Israeli borders. For many, African presence is a message of difference that is too immediate, too fraught with unprecedented implications for nearly every aspect of the Israeliness they have known, to be received with equanimity.

But music has so often been a way into Israeliness for “othered” individuals and groups, just as music has provided access to otherness for multitudes of Israelis with globalized
sensibilities. From the obstreperous Euro-American pop influences in early *rock Israeli*, to the forthright “oriental Israeliness” of *musikah Mizrahit* and the tantalizing soundscapes of “world music,” ethno-cultural difference has made its indelible imprint on Israel’s national culture and collective imagination. In a period of dramatic socio-cultural change and fractious political debate, many Africans and Afro-descendants are making their voices heard and claiming belonging in Israel through musical activity. The power and intention of their work cannot be ignored, and its transformative potential is beyond measure.
Bibliography


337


_________. 2007. “Rebuilding Jerusalem: Music and Identity Among Recent Immigrants in Israel.” Presented at the annual conference of the Society for Ethnomusicology, October 2007, Columbus, OH.


Discography and Videography


## Interviews

*Only attributed interviews are listed here, by request of interviewees.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interviewee</th>
<th>Date(s)</th>
<th>Location(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mutasim Ali</td>
<td>February 15, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elise Akowendo</td>
<td>July 15, 2011, August 15, 2014</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lior Amram</td>
<td>April 5, 2014</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merav Bat-Gil</td>
<td>March 10, 2014</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirit Ben-Ari</td>
<td>July 8, 2011, August 5, 2011,</td>
<td>Tel Aviv, email correspondence, February 12, 2014, Tel Aviv, November 25, 2014, Boston</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khen Elmaleh</td>
<td>April 28, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eyal Feder</td>
<td>April 3, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadav Frankovitch</td>
<td>May 25, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadav Gaiman</td>
<td>March 12, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tomer Gardi</td>
<td>August 13, 2014</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nadav Haber</td>
<td>March 3, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mubarak</td>
<td>April 14, 2013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ariel Nahum</td>
<td>March 12, 2013, April 20, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adam Nagemdien</td>
<td>April 14, 2013, May 6, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bonfils Nkiza</td>
<td>March 20, 2013</td>
<td>Tel Aviv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name</td>
<td>Date and Location</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------</td>
<td>------------------------------------------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky Ohene</td>
<td>May 9, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Idan Raichel</td>
<td>September 16, 2010, telephone interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>October 9, 2011, Boston</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>April 15, 2010, telephone interview</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tony Ray</td>
<td>October 9, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Andrea Rosen</td>
<td>April 28, 2013</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eran Sabag</td>
<td>March 24, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hillary Sargeant</td>
<td>October 10, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nir Schlaman</td>
<td>March 24, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kidane Isaac Tikue</td>
<td>August 9, 2014, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chidi Ujubuono</td>
<td>October 14, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ifat Wald</td>
<td>August 13, 2014, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gili Yalo</td>
<td>July 9, 2011, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neta Yahav</td>
<td>August 3, 2011, Ramat Gan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>May 20, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Efrat Yerady</td>
<td>May 28, 2013, Tel Aviv</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adana Zoho</td>
<td>June 13, 2010, Ramat Gan</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>