

“I Can Write in the Dark:” Radical Intertextuality in the Poetry of Adi Keissar

Chana Kronfeld

Adi Keissar, the founder and convener of *'Ars Poetica*, the new radical wave of *Mizrahi* writers, has helped bring poetry – as literary practice, performance, and polemics – back into the center of Israeli cultural life since she established the circle in 2013, in the wake of the 2011 social protest movement. In this article, I take seriously the group's name as a cross-linguistic pun on the prestigious meta-poetic Latin term, linking it outrageously with the Arabic *'ars*, “pimp,” which is used in Hebrew slang as a degrading epithet for *Mizrahi* men. I show how this sarcastic re-appropriation of *'ars* nevertheless retains the Latin sense, namely Keissar's – and the circle's – serious concerns with poetics and with the intersections of lyric poetry and society, in particular. Contra the masculine stereotype of the *'ars*, Keissar has, in fact, insisted – not without a struggle – on an explicitly feminist, inclusive credo and set of practices for the group and its highly popular events, which she also produces. I discuss the ways the metaphors of “pimp” and “whore,” commonly used to denigrate Middle Eastern Jews and Arabs, are systematically reclaimed in the work of *'Ars Poetica* poets (in addition to Keissar, also Mati Shemoelof and Tehila Hakimi, among others). I demonstrate how Keissar, and the poets in the group and around it, use biblical intertextual resonances of the metaphorical “whore of Zion” in the Prophets and the history of its (ab)uses in colonial discourse as a powerful site for constructing a poetics of intersectional solidarity between women, *Mizrahim*, Palestinians, foreign workers, and the poor. I read the poem “The Dominion of Night” (*Memshelet Layla*) as a pastiche of East-West citations and a meta-poetic rewriting of Genesis 1:16, the creation of the moon and the stars that have dominion over the night. I describe how Keissar's use of queer ungrammaticality radically inscribes women's poetic creativity in the foundational myth of creation (as the work of “*elohit*”). At the same time, she settles accounts with the Israeli government – the common, modern sense of *memshala* – and calls on dark-skinned women to “take back the night,” in all senses of that expression. In the process, I argue that Keissar's project compels a rethinking of Western conceptions of the lyric as an essentially apolitical solipsistic soliloquy.

As the founder and convener of *'Ars Poetica*, the new radical wave of *Mizrahi* (Eastern Jewish) writers, Adi Keissar (b.1980) has helped bring poetry – as literary practice, performance, and polemic – back into the center of Israeli cultural life since she established her circle in 2013, in the wake of the 2011 social protest movement. In this article, I take the circle's name seriously as a cross-linguistic pun on the prestigious meta-poetic Latin term that links it outrageously with

the Arabic 'ars, "pimp," used in Hebrew slang as a degrading epithet for Mizrahi men. As Lital Levy (2019: 32)¹ pointed out, while the group's name 'Ars Poetica

...is itself an instantiation of multilingual wordplay in Latin, Arabic, and Hebrew, ... [its] double meaning cleverly signifies both the classical poetic tradition and its antithesis, the quintessence of street culture: a conjuncture that is highly representative of the mix of highbrow and lowbrow culture in the poems produced by the group.

This sarcastic re-appropriation of the term 'ars nevertheless retains its original Latin sense, in regard to Keissar's poetry circle's serious (but often overlooked) concerns with poetics, and with the intersections of lyric poetry and society, in particular. Contra the masculine stereotype of the 'ars, Keissar has, in fact, insisted – not without a struggle – on an explicitly feminist, inclusive credo, and on a set of practices for the circle and its highly popular events, which she also produces. Over the years, poets, writers, and performers of various backgrounds have moved in and out of 'Ars Poetica, establishing it as more of an open circle than as a fixed literary group, school, or cénacle.²

The metaphors of "pimp" and "whore," commonly used to denigrate Middle-Eastern Jews and Arabs, are being systematically reclaimed in the works of 'Ars Poetica poets (such as Keissar, and also Mati Shemoelof, Tehila Hakimi, and Roy Hasan). Yet, this reclamation is performed not only through a transvaluation of Hebrew slang insults, but by means of the resignification – by Keissar, her circle, and surrounding poets – of the biblical intertextual resonances of the metaphorical system of "the whore of Zion" in the Hebrew Prophets (Kronfeld 2022). Judith Butler has shown, in her critique of Althusser's account of the inescapability of interpellation, that in responding to hate speech, the subject may leave herself the possibility, limited as it may be, – to reappropriate the words of authority, to lay claim to them, and to repeat them *differently*. This "gap between redundancy and repetition," argues Butler, "is the space of agency" (Butler 1997:129). I have suggested elsewhere that this insight forms the foundation for the types of radical intertextual dialogue with the Hebrew Bible we find in the poetry of Yehuda Amichai and Dahlia Ravikovitch; in fact, that Butler's account is, in itself, a 'Jewish theory' of intertextuality (Kronfeld 2016: 160-3). Reclaiming the biblical metaphor of "the whore of Zion" (or of Babylon!), and especially the history of its (ab)uses in colonial discourse to motivate the subjugation of native populations and of literal women, – becomes, for the poets of 'Ars Poetica, a powerful place for constructing a poetics of intersectional solidarity between women: *Mizrahiyot* (eastern women), Palestinians, foreign workers, and the poor.³

The groundwork for this poetics of intersectional solidarity was laid by feminist *Mizrahi* movements such as *Ahoti* ("My Sister"), that, in 2012, took over the publication of the established

literary-cultural journal, *ha-Kivun: Mizrah* (*The Direction: East*), which had been published continuously since 2000, and was co-edited from 2006-2008 by Mati Shemoelof. During this time, the journal published a special issue co-edited by Bat-Shahar Gormezano Gurfinkel and Omri Herzog reclaiming *'ars* and *freḥa* (slang for “loose woman” or “whore”), an equally derogatory label for a *Mizrahit* woman (2008). They were following the example of poet and scholar Sami Shalom Chetrit, who had titled his *Selected Poetry 1984-1992, Freha Shem Yafeh (Freha, Pretty Name; Chetrit, 1995)*. In 2007, poets Mati Shemoelof and Roy “Chicky” Arad founded a literary protest group and a publishing house called “*Gerillah Tarbut*” (“Guerilla Culture;” *Ma’ariv* 2009; *Ha’arets* 2010). They immediately created a stir with their Hebrew anthology, entitled: *Tehudot Zehut: ha-Dor ha-Shlishi Kotev Mizrahit (Echoing Identities: Young Mizrahi Anthology)*, literally translated as: *Echoes of Identity: The Third Generation Writes in Eastern [Language]* (Shemoelof et al. 2007). Its Hebrew title puns on the Hebrew word for Israeli I.D. cards (*te’udot zehut*), self-consciously acknowledging that, for third-generation *Mizrahim*, ethnicity becomes a series of echoes (*tehudot*), rather than a unified and stable identity label. We will see that, contrary to common perception, this critique of static identarian politics and poetics becomes a central marker in the works of Adi Keissar and the *'Ars Poetica* project some six years later. At the same time, this anthology’s Hebrew subtitle insists that the third generation has turned *Mizrahiyut* (‘Easternism’) into an adverbial, a mode of action and of writing, indeed – a written language: “*kotev Mizrahit*” (writes in an Eastern language). We will see that it is language that becomes central in the poetics of Adi Keissar, as well, since, for her, writing about poetry (*ars-poetica*) also involves always writing about language. And, as the title of Ketzia Alon’s important anthology suggests – *Lishkon betokh ha-Milah: Hirhurim ‘al Zehut Mizrahit (Dwelling Inside the Word: Thoughts on an Eastern Identity)* – that the words are the sites of *Mizrahi* literary identity (Alon 2015).

“Guerilla Culture” combined social activism with poetry in what they called “*Hafganot shirah*” (poetry demonstrations), for example, by holding rallies for the rights of the Garden of Science employees in Rehovot to unionize (*Ma’ariv* 2009). Starting with the cultural protest movement in 2011, Shemoelof co-edited and published, by means of Guerilla Culture press, a series of pamphlets, journals, and anthologies linking the potential for creative art with the struggle for social justice for *Mizrahim*, workers, women, and Palestinians.⁴ Shemoelof became highly instrumental in the *'Ars Poetica* project.

Adi Keissar is the author of four books of Hebrew poetry, so far: *Shaḥor ‘al gabey Shaḥor (Black on Black* 2014); *Musiqaḥ Gevohah* (translated on the inside flap as *Loud Music*, but which can also mean *Highfalutin’ Music* 2016b); *Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles* 2018), and *Kahol (Blue* 2022), all edited by poet and scholar of Arab-Jewish poetry and poetics, Dr. Almog Behar. Earlier, Keissar

had edited two anthologies of the circle's poetry, *'Ars Poetica I* (Summer 2013) and *'Ars Poetica II* (Winter 2013). The blunt, colloquial diction and politically explicit – if not explosive - thematics of Keissar's poetry, like those of the circle's very public debates, led to a reception that often ignored her poems' intricate verbal art. Read closely, her writing reveals a meta-poetic, literary-historical commitment to redefine the Hebrew poetic chain of transmission in feminist, *Mizrahi*, anti-nationalist terms, while insisting on the cosmopolitanism and open-endedness of those terms, and openly and emphatically resisting being pigeonholed by *any* labels. Moreover, Keissar's poetry and performance art boldly express and embody the meta-linguistic mission of cleansing the language of its political abuses, thus opening Hebrew to its suppressed or rejected others. Keissar's grandmother Sham'ah, to whom her first book is dedicated, had emigrated from Yemen in the 1950s. She is featured in the poetry (most famously, in the title poem of the first book, *Shaḥor 'al gabey shaḥor (Black on Black)* as a beloved woman, with whom she literally shared no common language: "How much awkwardness stood between us/of one blood/and two muted tongues" (2016a). The lack of a common language, brought about by the new Israeli monolingualism and its attendant suppression of Hebrew's sister tongues, becomes a cipher for the intergenerational immigration crisis, as Keissar describes in an interview with Elad Zeret (2016c):

I am compelled to remain in the site of rupture..., the rupture of immigration which the national narrative glosses over in its desire to build a state. But I must live in the breach between two places..., must experience the rupture.... This country is full of people who were subjected to cut and paste.

The grandmother's song and its familiar/unfamiliar words serve as the metonymic link to what fellow *Mizrahi* writer and Keissar's English translator, Ayelet Tsabari, describes as "the ancient tradition of [Yemenite women's] oral poetry that had been created and disseminated by a community" (2016). Describing her own genealogy, as well as Keissar's, Tsabari adds: "Yemeni women's poetry was dynamic and fluid; it was rewritten constantly." This is very different from the rigidly teleological, uni-directional model of the historical canon, that was invested in highlighting the unique talent of the bourgeois individual (male) writer, an individual talent that propels him (and, in this case, it is always a "him"), and the nation for which he has the luxury of speaking, forward, always forward. In contrast, Keissar and the *'Ars Poetic* women, like the Israeli poets involved in the current revival of the *Piyyut* (traditional Hebrew liturgical poems), emphasize the ways in which the *Mizrahi* poetic repertoire is based on open-ended, collective, and multidirectional circulation – forwards, backwards, and sideways.

Contrary to popular views on the *Ars Poetica* project, Keissar's implicit and explicit poetics (articulated in her four poetry books, as well as in performances, event production, interviews, and the two anthologies she edited) openly rejects reductionist identity and gender politics. Her account of her patrilineage is one case in point; her Hebrew poem "*Ani ha-mizraḥit*" ("I am the Easterner") is another. Let me briefly present both. Keissar's father's family emigrated from San'a, Yemen in 1882. In an interview with Eyal Sagi Bizawi in *Ha'aretz* (Keissar 2015), she tells how her great grandfather, a renowned rabbinic scholar, wanted to settle in the Sha'arey Hased neighborhood in Jerusalem, because he felt God's divine presence, the *Shekhinah*, there. "They told him it's an *Ashkenazi* neighborhood and that he can't live there. So, he went to the [Chief] Rabbi of Jerusalem, Rabbi Chaim Berlin, who gave him a letter of special privilege [*"mikhtav protektsiyah"*], in which R. Berlin wrote: "Rabbi Shalom Keissar is a virtuous Jew, a great Rabbi, and like an *Ashkenazi* for all intents and purposes" (*"ke-Ashkenazi le-khol davar"*; Keissar 2015). Then, Keissar adds: "This detail would be mentioned at home as something funny and amusing. And that is how generations of my family came to grow up there, creating a mix of *kubana* and *kugel*, drinking 'Araq and eating gefilte fish, speaking Yemenite and Yiddish. To this day, my father knows Arabic, Yemenite, and Yiddish. [...] and with him they all live together in peace" (Keissar 2015). Note that this is not an accommodation of the status quo of hegemonic norms, the "I'm OK/you're OK" of American self-help culture. It is, quite the contrary, a refusal to be confined to the quaint little *Mizraḥi* corner of the Hebrew literary canon, one especially identified with the ethnic stereotype of the Yemenites as a model Middle Eastern minority, hardworking, submissive, and uneducated.

In her most famous poem (from *Black on Black* 2014: 66-70), "*I'm the Easterner*," Keissar lays out the often-unrecognized hybridity, multilingualism, and cosmopolitanism of *Mizraḥi* women's culture and rejects a facile identity politics of one-dimensional labels. Here are some excerpts from this poem (translated by Chana Kronfeld):

אָנִי הַמְזֻרְחִית
שְׁאַתֶּם לֹא מְכִירִים
אָנִי הַמְזֻרְחִית
שְׁאַתֶּם לֹא מְזֻכְרִים
שְׂיוּדַעַת לְדִקְלָם
אֶת כָּל הַשִּׁירִים
שֶׁל זֶהר אֲרָגוּב
וְקוֹרֵאת אֶלְבֶּר קֶאֱמִי
וְבוֹלְגָקוּב
מְעַרְבֶבֶת הַכֹּל לְאֵט לְאֵט
עַל אֵשׁ קִטְנָה
חֶלֶב וּבֶשֶׂר
שְׁחָר וְלֶבֶן

הַאֲדִים מְרַעֲלִים
אֶת הַשְּׁמִים כְּחֹל לֶבֶן
שֶׁלְּכֶם.
מָה תַעֲשׂוּ לִי?

אֲנִי נוֹשְׁמֶת בְּעֶבְרִית
קוֹנֶה בְּאֲנָגְלִית
אוֹהֶבֶת בְּעֶבְרִית
.....

מָה תַעֲשׂוּ לִי?

I'm the Mizrahit
You don't recognize
I'm the Mizrahit
You don't discuss
Who can recite
All the songs of
Zohar Argov
And reads Albert Camus
And Bulgakov
Stirring it all
Over a low flame
Nice and slow
Milk and meat
Black and white
The fumes poison
That blue and white sky
Of yours.
What'll you do to me?
...
I breathe in Hebrew
Shop in English
Love in Arabic
...
What'll you do to me?

The poem's diction is blunt, colloquial, and exceedingly modern, as is the use of modernist "Western" rhyme (Argov/Bulgakov) that prosodically links "white" and "black" and culminates in a recurring provocative slang address to the (plural) readerly "you." Yet at the same time, this

poem presents Keissar's typical short lines and catalogue of parallelistic antithetical pairings in the tradition of biblical verse, and her use of repetition and grammatical rhyme in the medieval Hebrew-Arabic style. This hybridized East-West poetics makes palpable stylistically what the poem asserts thematically – that the *Mizrahi* woman poet has access, and lays claim to, both highbrow European (“white”) culture (Camus and Bulgakov) and to popular, Middle Eastern (“black”) culture (significantly represented here by the songbook of Zohar Argov (1955-1987), one of the most prominent figures in Middle-Eastern and Mediterranean music in Israeli culture).⁵ The strictly non-kosher dish that she is cooking up – mixing “nice and slow” milk and meat, black and white – threatens to pollute the nationalist blue and white skies with its blends of self and other. But these blends are profoundly literary and linguistic: the books she reads, the song lyrics she memorizes and recites, and the languages and cultures she inhabits. The work of the *Mizrahi* woman poet is, then, not simply to write in *Mizrahit* (which I'd translate as *Mizraḥese*), but to concoct a transgressive intertextual and cross-linguistic multicultural stew that flies in the face of identity labels.

The layered use of the citational mode, in general, and of biblical intertextuality, in particular, is one way in which Keissar writes herself into the chronicles of Jewish textual culture, rescuing it from the exclusive domain of men and providing it with a radical feminist sequel, while treating quotidian and sacred texts equally. Indeed, as she notes provocatively in her third book, *Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles)*: “I am writing a new chapter in the Bible/and a shopping list for the *shuq*” (outdoor Middle Eastern market; 2018: 7).

Several poems draw on the foundational, biblical metaphors prevalent throughout the Hebrew Prophets: The City as “the wife of the male God,” and as the addressee of the male poet, who ventriloquizes God, expressing His love or wrath for Zion. Utilizing the fact that all cities are grammatically feminine and figuratively female in Hebrew, Keissar follows in the footsteps of modern Hebrew women poets, from Esther Raab to Dahlia Ravikovitch and Yona Wallach to queer the biblical trope. Keissar places herself in the role of the male biblical poet/prophet, finding fault with the City-as-Woman, though also making figurative, homoerotic love to it/her. Esther Raab's 1928 lament for Tel Aviv expresses, as I have shown elsewhere, the female speaker's lack of satisfaction with the young city as a female lover, her “skinny bust” covered “with cement blocks” (Kronfeld 2022).

Writing some ninety years later, Keissar condemns “the White City,” as Tel Aviv was called thanks to its landmark Bauhaus architecture, for having become the seat of white capitalist greed, her skyscrapers speaking “the language of Mammon,” its cranes aimed “not to build/but to destroy/people working/long shifts/from morning till night.” In this single-flow poem, written

without any punctuation, only Jaffa, Tel Aviv's Middle Eastern "black" (Palestinian) 'other' "whispers from afar/a good wind" [also: good mood, spirit – "*ruah tovah*"/] when you look forward" [but also towards the east – "*qadimah*"]. By the end of this poem about Tel Aviv, the money men's armed city (but also, in slang, their sexually screwed, female city – "*ir mezuyenet*") is left behind, and the sea remains the only big promise (*Chronicles* 2018: 28-9).

Keissar pairs "the White City" with another single-flow poem *sans* punctuation that extends the biblical metaphorical system of "the city as a woman" beyond its traditional masculine and heteronormative forms. "*ha-'Ir ha-reḥoqah*" ("The Faraway City," *Chronicles* 2018: 46-7) invokes the violence of conquerors and occupiers against the lands they have come to "own"/"marry" and, metonymically, against the city's native population. The poetic speaker is relieved that, for a change, others are responsible for having perpetrated the violence: "In a faraway city/someone else/stole destroyed penetrated smashed/smeared blood on the sidewalks." She recalls (via translation of the English idiom) the racial violence of tarring and feathering African-Americans, while simultaneously reminding the readers whose labor built the roads – laborers now "buried under hot tar." The poem concludes, like Yona Wallach's epoch-making poem "'Ivrit" ("Hebrew") (1985: 9-17), with a scene of figurative, homoerotic love-making between the female poetic speaker and the feminized foreign city. This encounter focuses on embodied language, "*lashon*" (tongue) as a source of intimacy with the feminine other, an intimacy not predicated on conquest and subjugation (translated by Chana Kronfeld):

The faraway city
Is now so near
Different syllables
And the same heavy tongue
I feel her now
Hot tar in my mouth.

A pastiche of East-West citations becomes the site of radical rewriting in the poem "*Memshelet laylah*" ("The Dominion of Night") from Keissar's first book (2014: 46-9). In lieu of a detailed close reading, I have provided an annotated translation, as a gesture towards the ways in which Keissar's *Mizraḥi* feminist *ars/ars-poetic* rewriting of Genesis 1 continues the age-old tradition of Jewish radical intertextuality, of writing that is always a gloss on a gloss, and ultimately, of poetry as biblical exegesis. In the annotations, I have tried to highlight Keissar's use of queer (un)grammaticality to re-inscribe women's poetic creativity in the foundational myth of Creation (as the work of a female divine, *elohit*). I attend closely, interlineally, to Keissar's linguistic choices and the ways in which she lays bare the genders of language, and the languages of gender. This renders meaningless the notion that this poetry is mere political harangue. It also allows us to

see how Keissar simultaneously articulates the oppressions of the present and the possibility of creating in poetry – but alas, she seems to be saying, only in poetry – a utopian alternative. This poem’s title, “*Memshelet laylah*” provides a juncture between those two moments, settling accounts with both the extra-textual present and with the textual heritage of the past. The Israeli Government, the common, modern sense of *memshalah*, is the ‘government of the night’. In Keissar’s poems, the poetic speaker purports to ironically crown in its place a black Ethiopian woman, to dethrone the reign of darkness, and to make it possible for dark-skinned women to “take back the night,” in all senses of that expression. At the same time, the extended radical allusion to Genesis 1:16, the creation of the moon and the stars that have “dominion over the night,” becomes the utopian promise of a black feminine poetic process of re-creation. True, reality checks in by the end of the poem, to remind the speaker that her powerful assertion of “dark” female creativity is a potentiality that is restricted to the poems she will write. In real life, “*ba-ḥayyim*,” as she keeps reminding herself – and us – she is a woman who feels threatened walking alone at night when a stranger walks behind her (in Hebrew, the grammar makes it clear that it is a man, a threatening male stalker, who is boldly, provocatively, the subject of the poem’s address, “*atah: you!*”). She does not have enough money for an apartment, nor enough power to change the regime of darkness; but even in the dark, she can write, and, by such writing, create a changed world.

Below, I have provided an annotated translation of the poem (prepared by myself and Oren Yirmiya) to hint at the multiple layers of stylistic and intertextual reshuffling engaged by Keissar:

ממשלת לילה
 אולי בחיים
 אני הולכת מהר יותר
 כשאתה זר אחרי
 ברחוב חשוף
 ומצמידה נד לפלאפון
 ואת היד השנייה לגוף
 אבל בשירים שלי
 אני יכולה פעם אחת
 לא לפחד ממך.
 בשירים שלי
 אני אלה לפניך
 לאט לאט
 אפתח נדי לצדדים
 ואתפרש מהמדרגה
 עד מגרש הפדורסל
 בצד השני
 אשכב על האספלט
 אנשם
 ואבדק

אם הִירַח מְלֵא או חֶסֶר.
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 אֲנִי אֶכְתִּיר
 רֹאשׁ מְמִשְׁלָה
 אֶתְיוֹפִית
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 לוֹ רִיד
 יִנְקֶה אֶת הָעֶפֶר מֵאֲצָבָעוֹתַי
 וְיָשֵׁב לְכַתֵּב עוֹד
 מִלִּיּוֹן שִׁירִים.
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 הַשׁוֹמֵר שֶׁל הַקְּנִיּוֹן
 שְׂרָף אֶת כָּל
 הַחַנְיּוֹת
 וְאַחַר-כֵּן
 נְשָׂרַף אֶת כָּל
 הַגְּשָׁרִים
 הֵם מִמִּילָא לֹא נִבְנוּ
 כְּדֵי שְׂאֲנָשִׁים כְּמוֹנֵי
 וְכִמּוֹהוּ יַעֲבְרוּ
 אֲנַחְנוּ הַקְּלָבִים
 גַּם אִם הַשִּׁירָה
 מִזְמַן כָּבֵר נֶעְלְמָה.
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 אֶפְשִׁיט אֶת הַמְּלִים
 וְתִרְאוּ אוֹתָן
 שְׂמִנּוֹת, גְּדוֹלוֹת
 לְלֹא אֶפּוֹר
 יָפוֹת יָפוֹת.
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 אֶבְנֶה בְּתִים
 כִּי אֵין לִי כֶסֶף לְדִירָה
 וְדָרְךָ הַקִּירוֹת
 אֶפְשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לְשִׁמְעַ
 אֶת הַצְּעָקוֹת.
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 אֱלוֹהֵית תִּבְרָא
 אֶת הָעוֹלָם עוֹד אֶלֶף פְּעָמִים
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 בְּרֹאשִׁית
 בְּרֹאֶה אֱלוֹהֵית
 אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ
 וְיִהְיֶה אוֹר.
 בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
 כָּבֵר לְמִדְתִּי
 שְׂאֲנִי יְכוּלָה לְכַתֵּב גַּם בְּחֹשֶׁךְ
 אֲנִי זֹכֶרֶת אֵיפֹה כָּל אוֹת נִמְצְאוֹת

גם בלי להסתכל.
קבר למדתי
שאני יכולה לכתב בחשך.

Ultimately, theorizing from Keissar's project compels a rethinking of Western conceptions of the lyric as an essentially apolitical, solipsistic soliloquy. Her poems reject a reductionist, single-lens narrative of *Mizrahi* and/or women's poetry by reshuffling and unsettling the foundational intertextual Hebrew echo chamber, and offering a poetics of direct, even blatant, political statements that are *simultaneously* allusively nuanced and multifaceted.

1-20

4 ברחוב חשוך - In a Dark Street - A later poem, "Generation Goes, Generation Comes" (Chronicles 2018) responds to these lines. See the poem below. The title of this later poem cites the first part of Ecclesiastes 1:4, where the omitted part underscores that patriarchy is as enduring as the earth, and progress in the dynamics of gendered power inequity is but an illusion: "A generation goes and a generation comes but the earth endures forever" (Alter).

12 לאט לאט - "Slowly Slowly" - "Le'at le'at." To give a sense of the colloquial style, I chose to translate the Hebrew usage verbatim. Like Arabic and Yiddish, Hebrew uses a reduplicated adjective and adverbs as intensifiers (meaning "very"). See also "beautiful beautiful," line 48 below.

20 מלא או חסר - waning or full - A Talmudic Midrash on Genesis 1:14-16, the creation of the sun and the moon invoked in the poem's title (Tractate Hulin 60:72). The Midrash stages a feminine moon's complaint to God that she is only in charge of the night. The waning and waxing of the moon results from the arguments between them.

אוֹלַי בְּחַיִּים
אֲנִי הוֹלֶכֶת מִחֵר יוֹתֵר
בְּשֵׂאתָה זֶר אַחֲרַי
בְּרֻחוֹב חֲשׁוֹךְ
וּמְצַמִּידָה יָד לְפִלְאָפוֹן
וְאֵת הַיָּד הַשְּׁנַיִתָּה לְגוֹף
אֲבָל בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
אֲנִי יְכוּלָה פַעַם אַחַת
לֹא לְפָחוּד מִמֶּךָ.

בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי
אֲנִי אֶלֶד לְפָנֶיךָ
לְאֵט לְאֵט
אֶפְתַּח יְדַי לְצַדִּדִּים
וְאֶתְפָּרֵשׁ מִהַמְדַּרְכָּה
עַד מְגֵרֵשׁ הַכְדוּרִסָּל
בְּצַד חֲשָׁנִי
אֲשַׁכֵּב עַל הָאֲסִפְלָט
אֲנִשֵּׁם
וְאֶבְרָק
אִם הַיָּרֵחַ מְלֵא אוֹ חָסֵר.

Maybe in real life
I walk faster
when you stranger are behind me
in a dark street
clutching the cellphone tight in one
hand
and my body in the other
but in my poems
I can for once
not be afraid of you.

In my poems
I'll walk ahead of you
slowly slowly
I'll open my arms to the sides
and spread out from the sidewalk
all the way to the basketball court
on the other side
I'll lie down on the asphalt
I'll breathe
and check to see
if the moon is waning or full.

דור הולך ודור בא

אֲנִי
אִשָּׁה
שֶׁהוֹלֶכֶת בְּפֶחַד בְּלִילוֹת
בְּרֻחוֹבוֹת חֲשׁוּבִים שְׁנִקְרָאִים
עַל שֵׁם
גְּבָרִים

Generation Goes, Generation Comes

I'm
a woman
walking afraid at night
in dark streets named for
men

21-42

24 ראש ממשלה - Prime Minister - "Rosh memshalah"- Literally, "head of government." The same term, in the construct state, is used in the title, "*memshelet laylah*. The biblical "dominion of night" thus also means "the government of darkness," the "dark regime" in modern Hebrew. - **Ethiopian אתיופית** - Not following Keissar's identity (she could have cited Ben-Gurion's "dream" of a Yemenite Commander in Chief) but rather expresses a deep solidarity with the most racialized dark-skinned Jewish minority. But also, subversively, alluding to the Queen of Sheba, whom Jewish and Islamic lore identify as queen of Ethiopia.

26 Lou Reed (1942-2013), Jewish American singer-songwriter and guitarist, known for his experimental style and poetic lyrics. He credited his early mentor, the Jewish American poet Delmore Schwartz, with showing him how "with the simplest language imaginable... you can accomplish the most astonishing heights." Cited from the American Masters documentary, "Rock and Roll Heart: The Life of Lou Reed." <https://www.pbs.org/video/the-open-mind-lou-reed-rock-and-roll-heart-an-american-masters-special/>

בשירים שלי

אני אכתיר

ראש ממשלה

אתיופית

בשירים שלי

לו ריד

ינקח את העפר מאצבעותיו

וישב לכתב עוד

מיליון שירים.

בשירים שלי

השומר של הקניון

ישרוף את כל

החניות

ואחר-כך

נשרוף את כל

הגשרים

הם ממילא לא נבנו

כדי שאנשים כמוני

וכמוהו יעברו

אנחנו הכלבים

גם אם השירה

מזמן כבר נעלמה.

In my poems
I'll crown
an Ethiopian woman
Prime Minister
in my poems
Lou Reed
will clear the dust from his fingers
and sit down to write
another million songs.

In my poems
the security guard at the shopping mall
will burn down all
the stores
and then
we'll burn down all
the bridges
they weren't built
for people like me
and like him to cross anyway
we are still the dogs
even if the caravan
has disappeared long ago.

27 עפר Dust - "afar." Cf. "From dust thou art and unto dust shalt thou return," Genesis 3:19, KJV. **40** "Haklavim" ... "hashayarah" – "Haklavim novhim vehashayarah 'overet." Hebrew proverb: "The dogs bark and (still) the caravan passes" – They're not scaring anybody; no one pays any attention to them. See also fellow 'Ars Poetica poet Roy Hassan 's first book of poetry, *The Dogs that Barked in our Childhood Were Muzzled* (Tangiers Books, 2014).

ממשלת הלילה
The Dominion of Night
43-54

בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי In my poems
אֶפְשִׁיט אֶת הַמְּלִים I'll undress the words
וְתֵרְאוּ אוֹתָם and you'll see them
שְׂמֵנּוֹת, גְּדוֹלוֹת fat, large
לֹא אֶפְוֹר with no makeup
יְפוֹת יְפוֹת. beautiful beautiful.

בְּשִׁירִים שְׁלִי In my poems
אֶבְנֶה בָּתִּים I'll build stanza-houses
כִּי אֵין לִי כֶסֶף לְדִירָה cause I've got no money for a flat
וְדַרְדֵּר הַקִּירוֹת and through the walls
אֶפְשֶׁר יִהְיֶה לְשִׁמֹּעַ you'll be able to hear
אֶת הַצִּעֲקוֹת. the shouting.

44 אֶפְשִׁיט אֶת הַמְּלִים - "Afshit et hamilim... shmenot, gdolot/lelo ipur" – "I'll undress the words... fat, large/with no makeup." An allusion to Yona Wallach's poem, "Hebrew," in *Tsurot (Forms)* 1985: 17-9.

50 בָּתִּים - **Stanza-houses** - "Bayit" is both "stanza" and "house" in Hebrew (as well as Arabic). And see John Donne, "Canonization":

And if unfit for tomb or hearse
Our legend be, it will be fit for verse
And if no piece of chronicle we prove,
We'll build in sonnets pretty rooms
(Selected Poems, 2007: 9-10)

51 אֵין לִי כֶסֶף לְדִירָה - **I've got no money for a flat** - Resonates with the then recent social protest movement of 2011, where the housing crisis was central also to the activism of Guerilla Culture.

55-71

56 אלוהית - "Elohit, a Godly-She" - Radically rewriting "Elohim" (God). *Elohit* here functions as a feminine singular nominalized adjective: the female substitute for the male God (rather than the regular term for goddess, *elah*). In line 62 "elo-hit" can also read adverbially, in a Godly manner. Adverbials are the only parts of speech where the unmarked is typically feminine (singular or plural) in Hebrew. The verb "tivra," feminine singular is future tense in modern Hebrew ("she will create") but in its biblical aspectual form could have an imperfect sense – an ongoing (female-divine) creation. **60 בראשית** - "Bereshit" – I included the transliterated Hebrew in the English rendition because in this new context, the "-it" ending (which is typically grammatically feminine) is made to signify a feminine creator. Literally, "Bereshit" is "In the beginning [of]." This famously mistranslated and misunderstood first word of the Hebrew Bible receives here a reading that personifies the first word's potentially feminine grammatical suffix. Scholarly consensus is that "Bereshit" marks a subordinate clause, the beginning of the process of creation: Alter (2018) translates, "When God began to create heaven and earth..." Speiser in the *Anchor Bible* has "When God set about to create heaven and earth..." Keissar recasts *Bereshit* on the pattern of *Elohit*, as a feminine noun or proper name, in a reappropriation

בשירים שלי
אלוהית תברא
את העולם עוד אלהי פעמים
בשירים שלי
בראשית
בראה אלוהית
את השמים ואת הארץ
ויהי אור.
בשירים שלי
כבר למדתי
שאני יכולה לכתוב גם בחשך
אני זוכרת איפה כל אות נמצאת
גם בלי להסתכל.
כבר למדתי
שאני יכולה לכתוב בחשך.

In my poems
Elohit, a Godly-She will create
the world
a thousand times over
in my poems
Bereshit
the In-the-Beginning-She
created divinely
the heaven and the earth
and there was light.

of the notorious
reading history of
"Bereshit" as the name
of a God who created
Elohim. **62 בראשית**
- בראה אלוהית
"Bereshit/bar'ah
elo-hit/et hashama-yim
ve'et ha'arets"

In my poems
I've learned already
that I can write even in the dark
I remember where each letter is
Even without looking.

– "Bereshit/the In-
the-Beginning-She/
created divinely
(=*elo-hit*)/ the heav-
en and the
earth." If
"Bereshit"
is the femi-
nine singu-
lar syntactic
subject,
then
"Elohit" in
this second
occurrence

I've already learned
that I can write in the dark.

could [also] be read as an adverbial, "in a godly manner," "divinely." The lines could also read as a direct feminine rewriting of Genesis 1:1 - "In the beginning/*Elohit*, the Godly-She,/ created the heaven and the earth." My translation retains the gloss-style on the biblical source text that Keissar adopts here. **64 ויהי אור** - **and there was light** - "Vayehi or." Genesis 1:3. A meaningful omission of vs. 2, with its mythical association of the abyss with the feminine ("*Tohu*," an echo of Mesopotamian Goddess Tiamat).

Notes

An early version of this article was presented at the Association for Jewish Studies Conference in San Diego in December 2019. I am grateful to Oren Yirmiya, Danny Luzon and E. Arnon for their help with the research under exceedingly trying circumstances.

- ¹ On the *Mizrahi* reclaiming of *'ars*, see Madison Margolin (2015) and Smadar Lavie (2018: 201-7). Also see Roy Hasan's devastating critique of the *Ashkenazi* Left's fear of Levantine culture in the poem "*Im yiheh shalom, kol ha-'arsim yavo'u*" (2015a), translated into English by Ron Makleff. Mati Shemoeloff's short story: "*Le-ven zonah*" ("For the son of a whore") is an extended, multilayered literalization of the biblical metaphor of "the whore of Zion." In his story, *Mizrahim* and Arabs are the whores, not of God, but of both *Ashkenazi*-dominated and xenophobic German cultures.
- ² On distinctions between these types of literary groupings, see Kronfeld 1996: 36-40.
- ³ On the history of proto-intersectional solidarity between *Mizrahim* and Palestinians, going back to the early 1950s (as expressed, for example, in the joint *Mizrahi*-Israeli-Palestinian magazine, *Al Jadid*), see Bryan K. Roby's *The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion* (2015). On the important movements that coalesced around literary scholar Shlomo Elbaz' "*ha-Mizrah el ha-Shalom*" ("The East towards Peace") in the early 1980s and "*ha-Ḥazit ha-Mizrahit*" ("The Eastern Front," 1986-1989), see Meir Amor's essay: "*Historyah Yisre'elit shel Smol Mizrahi*" ("Israeli history of a *Mizrahi* Left") (2019: 165-89). During the 1990s, poet and scholar Sami Shalom Chetrit and others founded a coalition: "*ha-Qeshet ha-Demoqratat ha-Mizrahit*" ("the *Mizrahi* Democratic Rainbow" coalition). Along with poet Erez Bitton, Chetrit serves as a paragon for many of the *'Ars Poetica* poets.
- ⁴ See, for example, Shemoeloff, *Shiron ha-Mahapekhah (The Song Book of the Revolution, 2011)*; Shemoeloff and Prosh, *'Avodat Giluy (Discovery Work, 2012)*; and Behar et al.'s bilingual Hebrew-Arabic online journal *La-Roḥav (Widthwise, 2012)*.
- ⁵ Keissar's allusion to Zohar Argov is poignant here. While he was a household name and an icon of *Mizrahi* music at the time of the poem's publication, Argov only received nationwide recognition after his tragic death under police custody in 1987. During his lifetime, while widely popular in the *Mizrahi* cassette scene and having had some crossover success with his hit song: "*ha-Perah be-gani*" ("The flower in my garden"), Argov was still a *persona non-grata* in most Israeli music circles. It was only a generation later, as the newer *Mizrahi*-pop musicians who grew up listening to Argov's music rose to fame during the 1990s, that Argov was retroactively canonized as one of the most important and influential musicians in Israeli music history. By citing Argov, Keissar is also alluding to the history of *Ashkenazi* misrecognition of *Mizrahi* talent and the Israeli social elite's inability to understand the full scope of Israeli culture in real time. I am grateful to Oren Yirmiya for these insights.

Bibliography

Primary Sources

- Behar, Almog, Mati Shemoelof, Naama Gershy and Tamer Masalha. Eds. 2012. *La-Roḥav (Widthwise)*. [Hebrew] at: <https://almogbehar.wordpress.com/2012/07/10>. Accessed 25 August 2021.
- Chetrit, Sami Shalom. 1995. *Freha Shem Yafeh: Shirim 1987-1992* (Freha, Pretty Name: Selected Poetry 1987-1992 [Hebrew]). Noor Books.
- Donne, John. 2007. *Selected Poems*. Penguin Classics.
- Keissar, Adi. Ed. 2013. *'Ars Poetica*. Anthology I & II. Gerilah Tarbut.
- Keissar, Adi. 2014. *Shaḥor 'al gabey Shaḥor (Black on Black)*. [Hebrew]. Gerilah Tarbut.
- Keissar, Adi. 2016a. *Black on Black*. Trans. Ayelet Tsabari. <http://teachgreatjewishbooks.org/6-poem-adi-keissars-black-black-translated-ayelet-tsabari-2016>. Accessed 24 August 2021.
- Keissar, Adi. 2016b. *Musiqaḥ Gvohah (Loud Music)*. [Hebrew]. 'Ars Poetica Press.
- Keissar, Adi. 2018. *Divrei Hayamim (Chronicles)*. [Hebrew]. 'Ars Poetica Press.
- Keissar, Adi. 2022. *Kahol (Blue)*. [Hebrew]. 'Ars Poetica Press.
- Raab, Esther. 1928. "Shirim: Tel Aviv" ("Poems: Tel Aviv"). [Hebrew]. *Hadim* 6.3: 438.
- Shemoelof, Mati, Naftali Shem-Tov and Nir Bar'am. Eds. 2007. *Tehudot Zehut: ha-Dor ha-Shlishi Kotev Mizrahit* (Echoing Identities: Young Mizrahi Anthology). [Hebrew]. Am Oved.
- Shemoelof, Mati. Comp. 2011. *Shiron ha-Mahapeikhah: Shirat ha-Ohalim* (The Song Book of the Revolution: Tents Poetry). [Hebrew]. Gerilah Tarbut.
- Shemoelof, Mati. 2014a. "Le-ben zonah" ("To the son of a whore"). [Hebrew]. *Miqlaḥat shel Ḥoshekh ve-Sipurim Nosafim*. Kinneret/Zmora.
- Shemoelof, Mati. 2014b. *Miqlaḥat shel Ḥoshekh ve-Sipurim Nosafim* (Remnants of the Cursed Book [lit., Showered by Darkness] and Other Stories). [Hebrew]. Kinneret/Zmora.
- Shemoelof, Mati and Tahel Prosh. Eds. 2012-2013. *'Avodat Giluy (Discovery Work)*. [Hebrew]. Gerilah Tarbut.
- Wallach, Yona. 1985. "'Ivrit" ("Hebrew"). *Tsurot (Forms)*. 9-17. [Hebrew]. Siman Qri'ah.

Critical Sources

Alter, Robert. 2018. *The Hebrew Bible: A Translation with Commentary*. W.W. Norton.

Alon, Ketzia. Ed. 2015. *Lishkon betokh ha-Milah: Hirhurim 'al Zehut Mizrahit* (Dwelling inside the Word: Reflections on Mizrahi Identity) [Hebrew]. Gama Press.

American Masters documentary, Season 12, Episode 4. 1998. "Rock and roll heart: The life of Lou Reed" at ["American Masters" Lou Reed: Rock and Roll Heart \(TV Episode 1998\) - IMDb](#). Accessed 30 July 2022.

Amor, Meir. 2019. "Historyah Yisre'elit shel Smol mizrahi" ("Israeli history of a mizrahi Left." [Hebrew]. In *ha-Smol ha-'Atsma'i be-Yisra'el, 1967-1993: Asufah le-Zekher No'am Qaminer* (Independent Left in Israel, 1967-1993: Essays in Memory of Noam Kaminer. Eds. Matan Kaminer, Joel Beinon, Odeh Bisharat, Arie Dayan, Anat Matar, Smadar Nehab-Kaminer, Meir Amor, Carmel Kaminer. 165-89. Sifrei November.

Butler, Judith. 1997. *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*. Routledge

Gormezano Goren, Yitzhak, Bat-Shakhar Gorfinkel and Omri Herzog. Eds. 2008. "'Arsim ve-frehot" ("Pimps and whores"). [Hebrew]. *The Direction – East: Journal of Literature and Culture* 16.

Ha'aretz. 2010. "Mishorer ba-shetah; Qvutsat ha-megafon ha-lavan" ("Poet in the field: The white megaphone group"). [Hebrew]. (8 January 2010).

Hasan, Roy. 2015a. "If there will be peace, all the 'arsim will come." Trans. Ron Makleff. *+972 Magazine* (12 July 2015) at: [If there’ll be peace, all the ‘arsim’ will come | +972 Magazine](#). Accessed 29 July 2022.

Hasan, Roy. 2015b. "Im yihiye shalom, kol ha-'arsim yavo'u" ("If there will be peace, all the 'arsim will come"). [Hebrew]. *Ha'aretz* 30 June 2015.

Keissar, Adi. 2015. "ha-Qeisarit ha-gedolah shel 'Ars Poetica': 'Adi Qeisar hi ha-meshoreret ha-mashpi'ah veba-boletet beyoter ka-yombe-Yisra'el – Ra'ayon 'im Eyal Sagi Bizawi" ("The Grand Empress of 'Ars Poetica: Adi Keissar is the most influential and prominent poet in Israel today - An interview with Eyal Sagi Bizawi"). [Hebrew]. *Ha'aretz* 9 October 2015).

Keissar, Adi. 2016c. "Mlakah lev shahor" ("Black Heart Queen: Interview with Elad Zeret"). [Hebrew]. *Yedi'ot Aharonot 7. Yamim Supplement* (22 June 2016).

Kronfeld, Chana. 1996. *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics*. U of California P.

- Kronfeld, Chana. 2016. *The Full Severity of Compassion: The Poetry of Yehuda Amichai*. Stanford UP.
- Kronfeld, Chana. 2022. "The Land as Woman: Esther Raab and the Afterlife of a Metaphorical System". *Prooftexts* 39.2: 171-207.
- Lavie, Smadar. 2018. *Wrapped in the Flag of Israel: Mizrahi Single Mothers and Bureaucratic Torture*. U of Nebraska P.
- Levy, Lital. 2019. "Accent and silence in literary multilingualism: On postarabic poetics." *Dibur Literary Journal* 7: 32.
- Ma'ariv /NRG/Makor Rishon*. 2009. "Hamishtarah menasah limno'a hafganat shirah"" ("The Police Are Trying to Prevent a Poetry Demonstration"). [Hebrew]. (12 May 2009). Accessed 24 August 2021. (<https://www.makorrishon.co.il/nrg/online/47/ART1/889/722.html>).
- Margolin, Madison. 2015. "The *Mizraḥi* Thorn in the Side of the Israeli Left." *Forward* (3 September 2015).
- Roby, Bryan K. 2015. *The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion: Israel's Forgotten Civil Rights' Struggle, 1948-1966*. Syracuse UP.
- Speiser, E. A. Trans. 2007. *Genesis: The Anchor Bible*. Yale UP.
- Tsabari, Ayelet. 2016. "*Mizraḥi* artists are here to incite a culture war" *Forward* (16 March 2016).