

## Queering Identity Politics in Shimon Adaf's *Aviva-No*

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**Volume 22 Issue 1 (March 2020) Article 8****Yael Segalovitz,****"Queering Identity Politics in Shimon Adaf's *Aviva-No*"**<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/8>>Contents of ***CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.1 (2020)***Special Issue ***Poetry in Israel: Forging Identity***. Ed. Chanita Goodblatt<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss1/>>

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**Abstract:** This article offers a queer reading of Shimon Adaf's volume of poetry, *Aviva-No* (2009), analyzing it in conjunction with his recent collection of essays on identity formation, *Ani aherim* (I am others) (2018). Adaf's oeuvre has been primarily studied through the lens of ethnicity and race. This article demonstrates that gender plays a key role in his body of work. *Aviva-No*, which is a lamentation for the poet's sister, destabilizes the boundaries between the mourning brother and the absent sister. This ontological deconstruction stimulates in *Aviva-No* a broader undoing of gender as an embodied identity. The volume is replete with what I refer to as "plural bodies," fictional figures who transgress binaries of gender, sexuality, and sex, by simultaneously inhabiting at least two points on the continuum between these poles. Moreover, through the mobilization of gender identity in *Aviva-No*, Adaf queers contemporary identity politics in Israel. This discourse, he maintains, forces the subject to narrow down her self-understanding to a set of predetermined attitudes and values, which results in the perpetuation of hostility between reified versions of self and others in Israeli society. *Aviva-No* counters the perilous project of solidifying identity by demonstrating the extent to which even sex, which points to bodily materiality, is a category that is not one.

## Yael SEGALOVITZ

### Queering Identity Politics in Shimon Adaf's *Aviva-No*

"In dreams they're interchangeable—my husband, / my big sister"  
Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*

"What would we have been without our debt to the dead?"  
Shimon Adaf, *Nuntia*

*Aviva-No* (2009), Shimon Adaf's most recent volume of poetry, is a haunting lamentation for the poet's sister, Aviva. Adaf, one of the most daring voices in contemporary Israeli literature, breaks in this volume with the Western elegiac tradition of a male poet mourning a woman who functions solely as a muse or metaphor (Schenck). Instead, he presents Aviva as the embodied intellectual who imparted to him the capacity to write ("At dusk, when Sabbath ended, / my sister would bequeath me books, with fervent soul" [*Aviva-No* 104]). Even more audaciously, Adaf depicts Aviva as inhabiting the body of the male speaker/brother, thus acting posthumously as an agent in the creation of her own lament. In poem 12, for example, we witness a dialogue between Adaf's speaker and Aviva about the poem's word choice. After singling out the "wild carrot" and "rose" as possible flowers to be offered to Aviva, the speaker replies to a voice we cannot hear: "No, not that? What was the flower you desired? The *sheizava*?" (42); Aviva holds a voice inside the speaker, we learn. And she demands "the *sheizava*." Not a flower, this Aramaic word denotes a "rescue" or an "escape." "Sheizava" forms part of the Sephardic version of the *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer traditionally recited in memory of the dead. Aviva, then, who inhabits the speaker, actively intervenes in his creative process, making it her own: she asks for her own *Kaddish*, as well as for a way out (a "sheizava") from carnal finitude. In response, the speaker summons a body for Aviva, with which he ends the poem: "And it [The *sheizava*] is ripe – / reach out your hand" (42).

This article proposes that the ontological boundaries broken by Aviva's presence within the speaker/brother stimulate in *Aviva-No* a broader undoing of gender as an embodied identity. The collection is replete with what I will refer to as "plural bodies," that is, fictional figures who transgress binaries of gender (feminine/masculine), sexuality (queer/straight), and, most pronouncedly, sex (female/male), by simultaneously inhabiting at least two points on the continuum between these poles. In fact, these figures embody such a variety of alternatives in-between and outside these limiting polarities, as to render these binaries obsolete. *Aviva-No* is populated with "sisters" who are also a "brother"; it is mediated by a speaker who embodies two ungendered lovers who "fuck" both each other and Tel-Aviv; and it is written in the Hebrew language, portrayed as a "slut" with a "dick." I claim, however, that this radical, multiply-oriented endeavor appertains not only to gender. Adaf's mobilization of gender identity in *Aviva-No* queers the overall contemporary identity politics in Israel, a public discourse that emphasizes ethnic, religious, and cultural differences in Israeli society in the name of social justice and equality. Adaf maintains that this discourse forces the subject to narrow down her self-understanding to a set of predetermined attitudes and values, a process which results both in the subject's self-alienation, and in the perpetuation of hostility between reified versions of self and others in Israeli society. Reading *Aviva-No* in conjunction with Adaf's recent collection of essays on identity formation, *Ani Aherim* (I am others) (2018), I will demonstrate that his poetry counters the perilous project of "solidifying identity" (*Ani* 12) by demonstrating the extent to which even the sex, which points to bodily materiality, is "a category which is not one" (Stryker 9).

Adaf's objection to identity politics as practiced in Israeli public discourse is especially forceful, since he is himself a member of a marginalized group. Adaf is the son of Moroccan immigrants, who are classed in Israeli culture (together with immigrants from other North African and Middle Eastern countries) under the rubric of "Mizrahi" (literally, "Eastern") Jews. This group has experienced a systematic exclusion from the Israeli cultural and political mainstream, ruled primarily by "Ashkenazi" Jews of Central or Eastern European descent. Adaf, however, resists public pressure to raise the banner of "Mizrahi identity" or "Mizrahi literature" (Shabat-Nadir, "Private"). This is because, in his mind, these categories are foreign to lived experience and serve a discourse that, bypassing its liberal roots, is becoming increasingly conservative. In this sense, Adaf aligns himself with a coterie of Israeli writers—such as Ronit Matalon and Shva Salhoov—who resist public attempts to confine their creative work, as a consequence of their biographical background, to a "set of stereotypes and labels" (Matalon) associated with the socially-construed category of "Mizrahi literature" (Schwartz). Yet the public view of Adaf is still as a primarily "Mizrahi" writer, a conception which has had a limiting effect on scholarship

of his work, focusing almost exclusively on questions of ethnicity and race (on the contested affinity between these two terms in Israeli society, see Shalom Chetrit). Though this subject matter is undoubtedly central to Adaf's work, it by no means encompasses his rich oeuvre, comprised of lyric poetry, novels of various genres (speculative, detective, philosophical), short stories, and essays. In reading Adaf from a queer perspective, then, I hope to invite critical attention to gender as a key facet of his work that has thus far remained unnoticed, and to demonstrate how Adaf puts gender and race into intense dialogue in *Aviva-No*.

My choice in referring to Adaf's fictional bodies as "plural" follows Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's invitation in *The Epistemology of the Closet* to "pluralize and specify" normalizing forms of knowledge and forms of life (8). For her, queer "sexual-political thinking" deconstructs the heteronormative status quo by closely attending to and contextualizing it ("specify"), thereby exposing its inherent multiplicity ("pluralize"). Her "plural" is a counter to any monolithic divisions or undifferentiated artificial groupings. For, as she writes, "the immemorial current that *queer* represents is antiseparatist as it is antiassimilationist. Keenly, it is relational, and strange" (*Tendencies* viii). Interestingly, Sedgwick herself devoted a significant share of her poetry to her sister, Nina, whom, like Adaf, she saw as her source of creativity, and experienced as lost as a consequence of prolonged familial estrangement (Campbell 145). In the poem quoted in the epigraph above, Sedgwick portrays her husband and sister as "interchangeable," blending her desire for both (*Fat Art* 31). Such queer crossing of sex and sexuality boundaries, and the bold reference to intra-familial desire are found in *Aviva-No* as well. In relation to another poem about Nina, Sedgwick explains her motivation for pluralizing desire in terms that echo Adaf's political endeavor, facilitated and charged by his deep attachment to his sister. Sedgwick writes:

I see the whole poem as gathering instances of just such ontological thresholds and of the perverse, desiring energies that alone can move across them: between a person alive and dead; a person and a photograph; a sister and a sister; a present and a past; a person child and adult; people with the same name; a happening and the dream of it; a writer (or a model) and a character; an I and a she or he. (One way to describe the poem's first person is an attempt to make the difference between I and she or he more weighty or unappealable than these other differentials). (*Fat Art* 157)

As we shall see, Adaf also manipulates point of view in *Aviva-No*, and the first person specifically, in order to allow for, and make "more weighty," ontological border-crossing otherwise impossible in Hebrew, between persons alive and dead, an "I and she or he," a brother and a sister. Yet Adaf insists on making felt both the similarity and the difference between "I and she." For him, the site of "sisterhood" allows for a complex examination of one's relationship to the other, an investigation of alterity he finds crucial for rethinking identity politics.

Plural bodies have been pertinent to this article's methodological process. My realization that Adaf continually forges figures that are simultaneously female and male, feminine and masculine, came about while I was translating *Aviva-No* from Hebrew to English over the course of six years (2013-2019). Since, unlike English, Hebrew is a hyper-gendered language, I found impossible to render in English the totality of Adaf's radical linguistic gender manipulations. For example, in poem 34 of *Aviva-No*, Adaf writes: "the sun opaque as the gaze / of a porn star" (*Aviva-No* 108). In English, this line might seem bold because it unexpectedly compares the sun, a romantic trope, with a porn star. Yet the Hebrew is much more provocative. The noun "sun" in Hebrew (*shemesh*) is commonly gendered feminine, but Adaf marks it masculine through the conjugation of the adjective "opaque," thus calling up the more archaic biblical masculine figuration of the noun (e.g. Joshua 10:12). This gendering effort cultivates a readerly expectation to find a masculine equivalent for the sun in the next line (an expectation intensified by the enjambment just before the revelation of the simile's vehicle, i.e. "a porn star"). Instead, this expectation is violated as the readers find that Adaf gendered "star" in the feminine. In this fashion, Adaf invites his readers to imagine a masculine sun who is a female porn star. This "plural" image is especially emphatic since it involves a woman marked by her sexuality, one that traditionally functions as the object of the male gaze and here becomes its co-agent (the sun and porn star share an "opaque" gaze). This is one example among many that make evident Adaf's effort to place masculine and feminine, male and female, within one body. Interestingly, by leveraging the gender fluidity of the noun "sun" in Hebrew to advance a worldview that centers on pluralization, Adaf aligns himself with the Hebrew poet Yehuda Amichai, who famously wrote: "At times the sun is masculine, at times feminine, / at times we are two, at times a multitude" ("Derekh" 81; translation mine). Amichai's translators reached for creative solutions to communicate to the English speaker the psycho-grammatical gender system the poem evokes ("Through" 13; "Derekh" 31). I too, encountering Adaf's poems as the mediator between Hebrew and English, found myself struggling to communicate his radical linguistic gendering,

ungendering, and misgendering in a foreign language. On the most profound level, then, I was made to feel through *Aviva-No* the extent to which the translator is herself a site of plurality, hosting a difficult, imperfect, yet thrilling encounter between two "others" within an apparently single self. In the following pages, I will first unpack Adaf's view of identity politics as it unfolds in his essays and public interviews. I will then turn to *Aviva-No* and follow key poems that demonstrate Adaf's linguistic and stylistic strategies for queering identitarian binaries. To conclude, I will take a close look at poem 15, which brings to a fever pitch Adaf's overall endeavor of crossing and questioning "ontological thresholds" of difference.

### **"To Sound a Voice that is Not One's Own"**

Adaf lays out his view of Israeli identity politics in the collection of essays, revealingly titled *Ani Aherim* (I am others) (2018). He argues that "the central ethos of our times" is identity politics, a discourse that has two main instantiations in Israel (10). The theoretical-critical one examines socioeconomic institutions in order to map out power structures that produce a specific sense of identity in the subject. This line of thought, he argues, has the question of otherness at its heart, as it tries to examine where, within the network oriented towards the solidification of identity, one is able to hold on to a sense of otherness or difference. On the other hand, the more common Israeli public discourse around identity politics excludes rather than accommodates otherness. In 21st-century Israel, Adaf maintains, one is required to "announce one's identity with surgical specificity, to make it stand out against the inexhaustible array of choices inundating the individual, so that one might stop and declare: I'm an A and a B and a D with a bit of an E on the side" (*Aherim* 9). The result, he warns, is a perpetuation of hostility toward any subjectivity that is "other" to the self:

Self-definition [is] achieved through constant identification with a certain identity category. Consequently, all internal efforts are directed at consolidating that identity category, sealing up its cracks and fissures, differentiating it from other [identity] categories, which are then perceived, as a result of the effort to entrench oneself in one's category, as hostile. Thus, the core of identity politics as it is practiced in everyday discourse is sameness and not otherness, a desire towards identification. (*Aherim* 12)

Adaf does not condemn the concept of identity as a "self-definition" that emanates from a specific socio-cultural background. He himself is in constant dialogue with his Jewish and Moroccan roots. What Adaf objects to is the attempt to define identity in oppositional and limiting terms, so as to "differentiat[e] it from other [identity] categories." Within the current Israeli political scheme, he claims, if one identifies with a certain category, she is automatically forced not only to position herself as an adversary to others subsumed under a different category, but her whole existence must then narrow down to a set of preassigned practices, attitudes, and values associated with that identity. This position he finds expressed in Israeli literature as well:

This is the ruling paradigm now. Our identity is not what allows us to understand ourselves, it is a shield from the world. All of a sudden, everyone says, 'that's what I am. You say I'm primitive? So be it, that's my identity'... there is no internal exploration, only a declaration: that's who I am. What used to be a parody, the stereotypical figure, is now what literature wants to be, stereotypical. (Adaf "*ha-krava'yim*")

This identitarian discourse eliminates the possibility of being both/and, by insisting on the cultural imperative to be either/or. And the result of this identitarian self-entrenchment is not only the dwindling of literary self-reflexivity. The "desire for identification" and "sameness" yields an intensified social hostility, which has devastating, concrete consequences for people's lives. In Adaf's words: "Identity politics has become a bloodshed, cruelty of the kind I've never seen before" ("*ha-krava'yim*").

Yet Adaf also believes literature can potentially serve as a site of resistance, given that creative writing invites interactions with other identities, other voices:

Literature is based on the writer's ability to sound a voice that is not one's own, to attest: 'this voice has spoken through me, but it is not necessarily related to me.' Literature teaches us that as humans we... must break out [of our enclosed boxes] and be what we did not expect to become, and that this move is not contingent upon who we are, where we came from, and who we are about to face for our final justice. (Adaf "*ha-krava'yim*")

By viewing the encounter with otherness as literature's basic ethical valence, Adaf joins contemporary thinkers as diverse as Judith Butler and Martha Nussbaum, and writers such as J.M. Coetzee and Toni Morrison, who harken back to the early twentieth-century ethical interest in literature (Hale,

"Aesthetics," "Otherness"). But unlike the purely ethical implications of this discussion about literature and alterity, Adaf's exploration of otherness is oriented towards an intervention in a specific local political sphere, a pushback against the questions Israeli identity politics forces the subject to answer: "who we are, where we came from, and who we are about to face for our final justice." In the Israeli context, these three questions are politically charged, and can be paraphrased as: what ethnic group one belongs to, where on the geo-cultural map one comes from, and where on the local religious spectrum (Jewish, Muslim, Christian) one positions herself, if at all. Adaf himself is unceasingly faced with these interpellations, since his own biography brings into stark relief the conflicts underlying Jewish Israeli identity politics today.

Adaf is not only a son of Moroccan immigrants; he was raised in an Orthodox Jewish home in the Israeli "periphery." Adaf's religious upbringing speaks to Mizrahi culture more generally, which is historically associated with an affinity for Jewish tradition as defined by Jewish Law (Buzaglo; Yadgar; Bar). Furthermore, one of the manifestations of Mizrahi inequality is geopolitical, with the "periphery" referring in colloquial Hebrew to the predominantly Mizrahi under-privileged areas, especially in the south of the country. In addition to economic implications, this peripheralization holds political valence (Yiftachel; Simon), which is especially true for Sderot, the city bordering Gaza in which Adaf was raised, and in which much of his fiction and poetry takes place, *Aviva-No* included. Sderot has been the target of dozens of rockets since the second Palestinian intifada (September 2000) and the Israeli implementation of the blockade of the Gaza Strip (2007), and therefore became one of the most prevalent symbols in the Israeli imagination for the devastating Israeli-Palestinian struggle. Positioned biographically in such an emblematic location within the Israeli socio-political sphere, Adaf is continually faced with the imperative to represent his biographical background realistically in his work. The category that has been assigned to Adaf has proved, however, insufficient in his mind:

Once and again I pause in front of trees, the light arrested in their branches during certain hours of the day, in certain seasons. At times, other sights demand my presence, demand that I attend. A bird cutting through the air, the movement of shade, a countenance, a bodily gesture, eyes, the accent of people I loved which embodies endless warmth, customs and manners that form my very neural network, the cells that shape my veins... Even "Moroccanness" is too general a term for this claim made upon me, even the "Moroccanness" of my family, the "Moroccanness" of the Adaf and Yiftach families, even the "Moroccanness" of Chania Adaf and Tamar Yiftach, even "My Moroccanness" is an empty vessel. This claim has no name but the singular one I give it each time anew. (*Aherim* 14)

The body plays a central part in mediating for Adaf both his personal history, and the collective one from which it springs: "a bodily gesture," "eyes," "my neural network," "the cells that shape my veins." It is precisely since the body is the realm that evades language, that Adaf sees it as a rare site for the destabilization of identity politics' ossified axes of differentiation. Thus when Adaf discusses the efficacy of identity politics' theoretical-critical variant, he asks, "to what extent does this attempt succeed in achieving its fundamental goal? Only in the discursive fields of gender and sex. In both, the body as a mute entity still holds to its enigmatic resistance, able to impede presuppositions" (*Aherim* 10). The body, for Adaf, is "mute"; it communicates itself not through spoken and written words, but through perceptions ("the light arrested in their branches") and sensations ("endless warmth"). This evasion of language is precisely what allows the body to function as a potential space of "enigmatic resistance." In its muteness, the body bypasses the enforced monolithic categories and "presuppositions" that reign contemporary discourse with full force.

### **When a Brother Enters His Sister's Flesh**

The personal and intimate nature of the volume *Aviva-No* might lead one to assume it is politically unengaged. Yet this collection overthrows any artificial split between the private and the public. At the center of *Aviva-No* is a subjectivity teetering on the edge of internal collapse in the face of loss. This driving, disintegrating force makes Adaf's continuous battle against "sameness" even more pronounced in this work than in his oeuvre more generally. The opening poem of the collection, where poems are numbered alphabetically in Hebrew, appears under the letter "aleph," also the first letter in the Hebrew pronoun "I," *'ani*. This pronoun opens the poem: "I'm in a state of how does it go and I shall call it *Aviva-no* / I shall call it sisterless and I shall speak of it with straightforwardness not by way of verse but by pain" (*Aviva-No* 13). It might appear that in *Aviva-No*'s poetic world, in the beginning was the "I," the speaker's pain-struck mournful voice. It is his moan, after all, rather than that of his lost sister, that leads the poem, a "moan" or "sigh" (*'anaḥa*) that echoes through the orthographically and phonetically similar neologism "sisterless" (*'ein-ahot*), as shown by Hadas Shabat-Nadir ("ha-ko'ah").

This cry also echoes through the collection's title, *Aviva-No*, which not only points to the negation at the core of loss, but also resembles the cry of the bereaved: Aviva, please, no. The speaker, it seems, though no doubt in excruciating pain, still claims the strong voice of the lament, functioning as its unified leading authority.

Against this backdrop, gender conventions suggest that this mourner is a male, a "sisterless" brother, a hypothesis supported not only by the biographical name on the cover and the poet's public persona, but also by the literary tradition the collection evokes, that of the Western masculine elegy in the spirit of the *Duino Elegies* (Schenck). Rilke, too, opens his first elegy with a plea for his male mourner to be heard: "Who, if I cried out, would hear me among the Angelic / hierarchies?" (3). Adaf's lament, however, though undoubtedly indebted to Rilke's aesthetics (Pedaya), presents a profoundly different power structure between the speaker and object of lament. Aviva, though her painful absence marks the collection ("the whole world has broken so, facing Aviva-no" [62]), still inhabits the speaker, a state of things expressed by a blending of masculine and feminine that is quite difficult to achieve in Hebrew, as a gendered language. In fact, the genre of the lament is a fertile ground for a queer project. As Gail Holst-Warhaft has shown, in contrast with Western culture, ancient Mediterranean traditions (and their modern iterations) delegated the role of performing the lament to women (e.g., *Jeremiah* 9:17). In his personal lament, Adaf, positioned himself between East and West, bringing these two traditions together by blending the gender roles engraved in their respective practices of pain expression.

Adaf's "Alef" avoids linguistic gendering. In Hebrew, nouns are gender inflected and demand that their modifiers—verbs, adjectives, and demonstratives—be inflected accordingly. To circumvent gender, Adaf has his speaker utilize the archaic imperfect future tense ("I shall call it" [*'ekra'ehu*], "I shall speak of it" [*'adabra bo*]), one of the few Hebrew tenses that do not require grammatical gender inflection. In this manner, Adaf queers temporality as well, given the inherent pastness of loss. He continues this effort of de-gendering with added force in the collection's second poem ("Bet"):

At night the destroyers are given permission,  
the flaming vault of heavens, merciless. Downcast *Kislev*,  
a black conflagration is within him.

The remaining sisters sit and sew  
the shreds of the rent body.  
One threads a string, the other  
strikes the needle,  
the third screams, oh no!  
the finger, it is pricked.

Blinders of the moons, a sketch in silver  
fine as cracked skin, and the fire  
of the crimson drop is glowing.

Blood moves in the world yet suffices not for one being  
to be saved  
and blood spills, how to put it,  
fountains and depths spring out  
of valleys and hills. (*Aviva-No* 14)

The poem is set in the Hebrew month of *Kislev*, which occurs in the winter (around December) and is known to be the darkest time of year. Rather than acting simply as a setting, however, *Kislev* is personified. In fact, as Chana Kronfeld has recently demonstrated, inanimate and non-human grammatical subjects in Hebrew are always poised on the verge of personification as men or women, making the gendering of nouns psychologically real (*Full* 209, 346; *Land*). Adaf takes full advantage of this trait, depicting *Kislev* as a bleak, almost demonic, masculine force, who breeds "a black conflagration" within "him." In fact, "night," which in English functions as part of an adverbial clause, is the subject of the first line in Hebrew, and is also masculine in its grammatical inflection. This explicitly masculine atmosphere, nevertheless, does not pave the way for a man to enter the scene. Instead, Adaf's night of *Kislev* entertains three "sisters." Sitting and sewing in this gothic ballad-like atmosphere, these women conjure Shakespeare's famous three witches, the plotting Wayward Sisters. They, too, plan to meet in a gloomy weather: "When shall we three meet again? / in thunder, lightning, or in rain?" (128). In Adaf's version, these witches are concerned not with the Scottish General, but with their own fourth sister whom they have lost. They hence summon their supernatural powers to mend her broken body through the most mythologically feminine of crafts. Like the Moirai, three Sisters of Fate in Greek

mythology, who spin the threads of human destiny, Adaf's protagonists try yet fail to sew their sister's life and body back together; blood continues to pour out ("and blood spills, how to put it, / fountains and depths spring out / of valleys and hills"). This gender instability reaches its peak when the third sister hurts herself with a needle. She then screams "oh no!" echoing the negation in the collection's title. Yet in the original Hebrew, Adaf takes advantage of the vocalization of the interjection of pain to stealthily insert an additional sibling into the scene, or rather into the sister's body. The sister's cry is depicted in the Hebrew as "ach!," an exclamation of pain that is a homonym of the Hebrew "brother." The blood, then, that pours out in the last stanza could be that of the lost sister's body, or it could be the marker of an encounter, a blending of the two bodies, that of the the brother and the sister. Their point of conjunction leaves its trace on the body's surface: "the finger, it is pricked."

It is only in the eighth poem of the collection that Adaf allows the Hebrew to assign a gender to its speaker, this time as masculine. Yet gender assignment is anything but stable throughout the collection. In poem 38 ("Lamed-*het*"), for instance, the figurative language would have us assume that the speaker is male, since the speaker's language echoes the patriarchal convention of sexualizing the city as a woman, depicting the Tel-Avivian "skies" as "enrobing themselves in *Tevet* like a young nude / exposed in mid-shower" (*Aviva-No* 118). Grammatically, however, Adaf restricts his speaker to communicating in the first person past tense ("I cried" [*bakhiti*], "I delivered" [*masarti*]), which does not disclose gender in Hebrew. More radically, the first stanza of the poem metaphorically "pluralizes" this speaker in terms of sex, gender, and sexuality, destabilizing in advance any attempt to pigeonhole this speaker's identity. The first stanza reads:

Like lovers who house-warmed by fucking  
in every corner, madness  
thrust against the walls, on the counter, trapped  
in kitchen drawers,  
I too cried for Tel Aviv: (*Aviva-No* 118)

The poem throws its readers into a simile; "Like" informs us that the "lovers" of the first line are only a vehicle about to carry a forthcoming tenor. The fifth line will reveal these "lovers" to be like the speaker ("I"), and their "fucking" to enigmatically be like his "crying." Yet the readers are made to spend four lines with these lovers before the simile's vehicle appears. In fact, the location of the "lovers" at the opening of the poem make them as central, if not more so, than their reference. These lovers, "who house-warmed by fucking," celebrate their new house "in every corner." The readers know nothing about their sex, gender, or sexuality—nor even numbers. What is known, however, is that they are "not one," in contrast to the tenor of this simile, the speaker: "I too cried for Tel Aviv." In the following stanzas, the poem will clarify in what ways the speaker is sexually invested in Tel Aviv, like the lovers above. Yet for the sake of the current argument, what is significant in this poem is that no further explanation is given regarding the plurality of the speaker's identity. It is left as a given that the poem's speaker is not the equivalent of one of the lovers, but in some way corresponds in his/her singularity ("I"), in their condition as double or multiple. This speaker is fundamentally "not one"; s/he is the two lovers simultaneously, carrying their mutual sexual desires within.

### **A Slut with a Dick: Hebrew as Plural**

The poem that brings *Aviva-No*'s radical pluralization of sex to a crescendo, and which links it back to the racial and ethnic obsessions that dominate Israeli identity politics, is numbered 15 ("Tet-vav" in Hebrew letters). In this poem, which opens the second section of the collection, the speaker adopts the tone of a biblical prophet of wrath (*navi za'am*), a tone well known to—and easily identified by—readers of Hebrew. Indeed, the Israeli literary critic and poet, Eli Hirsch, depicts this poem as "megalomaniac" ("Shimon Adaf"). This speaker directs his rage at the Hebrew language for permitting itself to bear the dreadful news of Aviva's death:

Let me have those shapes that shrivel language  
and I shall break them up limb-by-limb,  
I shall lay bare their roots,  
their evil-doings I shall dash against the stone,  
malicious sluts say Aviva is gone.  
But I was  
as well, Hebrew pounding on  
my throat-bell, I answered aye.  
It has the dick of a camel, that one. (*Aviva-No* 50)

This poem as a whole is deeply violent, but its opening lines are particularly misogynistic. The words for "language" in Hebrew (*lashon* and *śafa*), as well as the names of all specific languages (Hebrew included), are grammatically feminine; language is a "she." Adaf leverages this grammatical fact to begin his poem with the image of the speaker sexually violating language: "Let me have those shapes that shrivel language / And I shall break them up limb-by-limb, / I shall lay bare their roots, their evil-doings I shall dash against the stone." The "shapes" that make up language, which are themselves grammatically feminine (*zurot*), become in this speaker's imagination incarcerating molds that "shrivel" Hebrew and hence merit their destruction. Yet setting Hebrew "free" of its constricting "shapes" turns out to be a brutal act, a fantasy of dismemberment, even murder. These "shapes" are the body parts of a femininely personified, embodied language. In addition, the speaker's word choice evokes Israeli street slang, *lishbor la-hem et ha-zura*, which literally means "to break their form/shape," idiomatically threatening violent assault. In other words, Adaf's avant-garde speaker views his shattering of conventional forms as the "breaking up" of language's concrete female body, "limb-by-limb."

This disturbing scene is charged sexually in the following line, in which we learn of the speaker's desire to "lay bare" language's "roots." Laying bare, especially when following the depiction of language's "limbs," calls to mind the act of undressing. Thus since linguistic "roots" are the core of Hebrew lexicon, the poem conjures an image of the speaker exposing language's most private bodily parts, her "roots." The speaker's intentions of rape are even clearer in the Hebrew. In the original poem, "root" appears as the literal "foundation" (*yesod*), and is preceded by the archaic verb *le'arot*, meaning "to destroy completely" or "to empty out," a verb notoriously leveraged in the Hebrew Bible to describe brutal sexual violence against women (e.g., *Isaiah* 3:16-17). This verb derives from the noun "nakedness" (*'arva*), which denotes in the Bible both male and female genitalia. These terms (together with the following lines in the poem) form a clear allusion to Psalm 137, the famous biblical lament over the Babylonian destruction and conquest of Jerusalem: "By Babylon's streams, there we set, oh we wept, when we recalled Zion" (Robert Alter Translation, 137:1). Adaf refers, however, not to this well-known verse, but to the two final, excessively violent, and oft-forgotten verses of this psalm. As Robert Alter translates: "Recall, O Lord, the Edomites, on the day of Jerusalem, saying: 'Raze it, Raze it, to its foundation.' Daughter of Babylon the despoiler, happy who pays you back in kind, for what you did to us. Happy who seizes and smashes your infants against the rock" (137: 7-8). Adaf's "lay bare their roots" (*'e'eren ad ha-yesod*) is therefore an explicit play on the line "raze it, to its foundation" (*'aru 'aru ad ha-yesod ba*). When Adaf's speaker professes his desire to "lay bare" language's "foundation" or "roots," he suggests the exposure of her sexual organs, an act whose violence is intensified by its intertextual dialogue with the Edomites' eagerness to destroy Jerusalem, continually personified in the Hebrew Bible as a sexually assaulted woman (Kronfeld, *Land*).

Adaf's following line, "their evil-doings I shall dash against the stone," corresponds to the final verse of Psalm 137, "Daughter of Babylon... Happy who seizes and smashes your infants against the rock." Adaf's neologism for "evil-doings" (*ma'alalan*) is a portmanteau of the Hebrew term for "misdeeds" (*ma'alalim*) and the archaic "infants" (*'olalim*), which also appears in the biblical psalm. Adaf thus conjures a close affinity between the Hebrew language and the metaphorical woman in Psalm 137, whose children are dashed against the stone. Just as the captive Israelites express their anguish over the destruction of Jerusalem by imagining their captors as a woman whose babies they will violently murder, so Adaf's speaker gives voice to his will to shatter the body of the feminized Hebrew language against the rocks. The source of the speaker's anger is revealed in the next line: "malicious sluts say Aviva is gone." Adaf's speaker condemns Hebrew as a "slut" for willingly lending her body, her shapes, to be used as a vehicle for the declaration of Aviva's death. Thus we learn that the speaker's fantasy of sexual aggression towards the personified Hebrew ("I shall lay bare their roots") is inextricable from his conception of Hebrew, equipped with limbs and genitals, as sexually transgressive.

In depicting the Hebrew language as a "slut," who should thus be punished in ways targeting her sexuality, Adaf's speaker joins a long Jewish textual tradition of allegorizing the land, the city, the nation, or its characteristics (in this case, the Hebrew language) as a (frequently transgressive) woman (Pinsker 111; Kronfeld *Land*). We have already seen an example of Adaf's engagement with, and destabilization, of this convention in the abovementioned poem 38, where Tel Aviv figured as a "young nude / exposed in mid-shower." The paradigmatic example of this convention is the biblical book of *Lamentations*, in which the city of Jerusalem, after the destruction of the first Temple, is depicted as a woman who brought this upheaval upon herself through adultery, which is the metaphorical equivalent of the Israelites' idolatry: "An offense did Jerusalem commit, therefore she became despised. All who honored her degrade her, for they have seen her nakedness" (Alter Translation, 1:8). Adaf thereby models his speaker, in the first part of poem 15, on the Jewish patriarchal and misogynistic prophetic tradition in

both tone and vocabulary, while shifting the focus from the land and nation to the language with which they are associated.

The second half of the poem, however, brings about a radical shift. For here it is clear that Adaf evokes this biblical tradition, along with its patriarchal gender categories and hierarchies, only in order to turn them on their head. The line "malicious sluts say Aviva is gone" already hints at a change in the poem through a register shift. In the original poem, the word "slut," "*sharmuta*," injects into the poem the weighty questions of racism and ethnicity. In fact, it identifies the personified Hebrew not only as a sexually transgressive woman, but a specifically Mizrahi one. The word Adaf's speaker uses carries a particular connotation in the Jewish Israeli socio-cultural realm. Originating from Arabic, "*sharmuta*" literally means "old rag, tattered piece of cloth," but it came to metaphorically mean "whore" in Arabic. In turn, this was a derogative term that acquired a racial valence in Hebrew specifically directed against Mizrahi women (Geiger). In poem 15, then, the Hebrew language is portrayed not only as a transgressive woman, but one racialized by a specific, and ostensibly inferior, cultural background.

Unexpectedly, a line later, Adaf's xenophobic, raging, masculinist speaker not only changes his view of this "*sharmuta*," but declares himself to *be* her: "malicious sluts say Aviva is gone / But I was / as well." The declaration "I was as well" (*'aval hayiti gam 'ani*) could grammatically refer in Hebrew to both the noun "slut" and the adjective "dead." Yet the following lines make it clear that Adaf's speaker has the subject of the sentence in mind, admitting here: "I was too a slut." The speaker is no longer only a masculine prophet utilizing his rich metaphorical language to disgrace the Hebrew language as a Mizrahi woman, he is also a female "slut" himself. Indeed, a line later, Adaf's speaker, as both man and woman, has sex with that very woman/language whom he so desired to "shatter" a few lines earlier: "Hebrew pounding on / my throat-bell, I answered aye." Adaf utilizes the Hebrew verb *li-dfoq* that literally means to strike repeatedly, like the English "pound." Yet this same verb is also colloquial for having sex, to "bang" or "fuck." Hebrew and the speaker are "banging"; and while the poem's construction of masculinity might provoke the presumption that active/passive maps onto masculine/feminine, respectively, the opposite is true here. It is Hebrew, the Mizrahi "slut," who does the "pounding," which positions Adaf's speaker in the passive role of this sexual encounter, a form of participation considered under heteronormative gender norms feminine and hence submissive. The speaker's reply, "aye," communicates the pleasure s/he experiences as a "passive" player in this sexual play. Furthermore, this same retort could also be read as the automatic "aye" of a prostitute forced to lend herself to sexual handling, an interpretation that will further the similarity between the Hebrew "slut" and the speaker himself. In both interpretations, Adaf's speaker no longer neatly fits within the heteronormative organization of sex, gender, and sexuality: the speaker is a "he," who is also a female slut, enjoying a passive role in intercourse that cannot be subsumed under the dichotomy "hetero/homo" (both Hebrew and speaker are [also] women).

Even against the backdrop of these lines, the poem's closing line is intentionally provocative: "It has the dick of a camel that one." This concluding move pushes to the extreme Adaf's ongoing efforts to destabilize the monolithic sex, gender, and sexuality binaries and hierarchies set up by the first part of the poem. As the poem reminds us, the Hebrew language is a linguistic "she," and is thus liable to be used as a metaphorical ground for the projection of misogynistic drives. Hebrew ends up escaping this fate, however, in Adaf's poem. Given Hebrew's grammatical femininity, the original line in Hebrew reads: "She has the dick of a camel, that one." By granting Hebrew, then, the "dick of a camel," Adaf exaggerates the social tendency to treat the size of men's phalluses as the determining factor of their masculinity (as Judith Butler reminds us in her discussion of the John/Joan case ["Doing Justice"]). Hebrew's body, in these terms, is plural, comprised of both female and male genitals. That the term "dick" in *Aviva-No*'s universe speaks to a preoccupation with identity is further evinced by poem 40, in which Adaf writes: "this dick just doesn't hold / memory oddity identity." In Hebrew, the word for "dick" (*za'in*) also denotes the seventh letter in the Hebrew alphabet, which is the first letter of the following three words: "memory" (*zikaron*), "oddity" (*zarut*), and "identity" (*zehut*). That the "dick" just does not hold, then, also signifies that these terms, identity included, are unstable, are "odd" (recall Sedgwick's comment above about queer being fundamentally "strange"). More specifically, in light of the three terms beginning with the letter *za'in*, Adaf invited us to read the line "this dick just doesn't hold," as "the letter *za'in*" just doesn't hold. And since "letter" in Hebrew is gendered feminine, here again we arrive at a plural body: the "dick" in poem 40 is potentially female as well.

The slut's "dick," then, in poem 15, is central to Adaf's project of challenging identity categories. Identifying the Hebrew language as a Mizrahi "slut" cannot be separated from the racial and ethnic predicament that Adaf raises. The poem could have set a distinct dichotomy between the violent wielders of power (the masculine speaker), and the oppressed (the Mizrahi woman), delineating an ethical

boundary between perpetrator and victim. Yet as Adaf insists in *Ani aherim* (I am Others), such separatist thinking can only bring about more violence and forestall profound structural change:

The common, everyday expression of identity politics... grew out of the heart of the liberal discourse of rights, whose kernel is: no act or desire are intrinsically reprimandable. They are to be reprimanded only when they are forced upon a participating party... thus vanishes the theoretical drive of identity politics to shatter jails, which is replaced by another drive, to refantasize jails and eagerly watch how authority changes hands from the jailers to the inmates (but penitentiaries do not become more comfortable or less cruel simply since we were the ones to assemble them)... the battle is constantly fought not over the truthfulness of a given assumption, but over the right to enforce it; a right granted to one simply because one's identity is weak or is under unjust control... consequently, the first action in that struggle is the self-entrenchment of that identity, defining it as intrinsic and solidified. (*Aherim* 11)

To promote the "shatter[ing] of jails," the second half of the poem makes a bold and controversial move; it blends the dichotomies. The violent male speaker turns out to be a Mizrahi woman as well, and language as a Mizrahi woman turns out to have a dick. The very categories, in the name of which the battle should have been fought, are found to be plural, that is, tinged with their purported opposite. In a similar vein, Adaf insists throughout *Aviva-No* not on distinguishing Hebrew and Arabic, or their respective historical-cultural contexts, but on foregrounding the silenced presence of Arabic within both Modern Hebrew language and Jewish history. Adaf compels his reader to recall the intimate link between Mizrahi and Arab cultures, as well as historical dialogue between Jewish and Muslim communities and literatures. In poem 25, for example, he writes: "and the neighbor rants unaware in Arabic / *Wu'natalti ruha u'shmait batrai kal zia sagi -*" (*Aviva-No* 84). In this line, Adaf deftly mobilizes the orthographic similarity between the Hebrew term for Arabic (עֲרַבִּית, 'Aravit) and the name of the Jewish ritual evening prayer service (עֲרִיבִית, 'Arvit). The neighbor "rants" Aramaic words from this evening service (more specifically, from the Jewish prayer "And a Redeemer Shall Come to Zion" [*U-va le-tsiyon go'el*]), yet Adaf presents him as ranting "in Arabic." In this way, Adaf underscores the close affinity between Muslim and Jewish traditions, and between the Hebrew and Arabic languages. Even more provocatively, through this linguistic manipulation, he is able to lure the reader, especially the secular one unacquainted with the Jewish prayer book, into believing that the neighbor's Aramaic prayer is indeed a "rant" in Arabic, thus revealing how Aramaic and Arabic are similarly foreign to the contemporary (primarily Jewish Ashkenazi) ear.

Finally, I would like to return to poem 15. The change brought about by the second half of the poem does not erase the social violence evoked in the first few lines. By mobilizing Jewish prophetic rhetoric, as well as Jewish-Israeli slang that degrades Mizrahi women and Arabic-speaking communities, Adaf forces to the fore the violent social exclusion and sexual abuse that exists in present-day Israel. Through his poetics, Adaf suggests, however, that the concrete and symbolic social jails that enclose us will not be shattered by changing the identity of their inmates. Instead, Adaf suggests that it is the identity category in the name of which social jails are built that actually imprisons the subject. Identitarian categories, when leveraged to enhance a sense of "sameness" at the expense of a capacity for "otherness," constrict the space in which the subject can act, and significantly limit the others with whom she can enter into dialogue. In order to shatter jails—racism, sexism, and other forms of social control—one must be willing to engage with others who are categorized differently, in order to realize that the identity of the other is already integrated within oneself. To resist hostility and foster solidarity, one must come to grips with the terrifying realization: "I was / as well."

However, *Aviva-No* is not only motivated by inclusion; it is also undergirded by vigorous negation. With its excruciating pain, this collection desperately searches for words to communicate an unspeakable loss. In the process, it also provides an outlet for a desire to declare "no" in the face of an ongoing coercive demand within Israeli public space that the subject define herself through a set of predetermined attributes and categories enclosed within strict boundaries. Adaf's plural-bodies, which are proudly not one, conduct this work of negation within the diegetic world of *Aviva-No*. Through their bodies, which cross every line of identitarian constraint, Adaf potently asserts: "No."

All translations from *I am Others* are mine.

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