

○ VOLUME 12 NUMBER 2, 2013

Toronto, Sarcelles to Sodom: Cinema of the Arab Jewish Diaspora

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How do films of the Jewish diaspora contemplate the problematic of Arab Jews? Karin Albou's La Petite Jérusalem (France, 2005) and b.h. Yael's Fresh Blood: A Consideration of Belonging (Canada, 1996) use imaginative geography to explore and challenge notions of Jewish identity that rely on the binaries of Arab/Jew and Israel/diaspora. This essay close-reads scenes in which Arabness is (re)mapped onto the terrain of Jewish identity and examines how these diasporic subjectivities deconstruct homogenous Jewish spaces in Sarcelles, a banlieue of Paris and in Israel's Negev desert/Sodom. It argues that Jewish identity is better interpreted as a rhizome, or complex system that has a critical difference as its core.

The complex histories of Mizrahi ('Eastern') and Arab Jews are an under-examined element of modern Jewish cultures, especially in scholarship emerging outside of Israel. The term Mizrahi developed in Israel during the 1970s in protest against the State's Ashkenazi (European Jewish) leadership's homogenization of and discrimination against Jews who emigrated from Muslim countries. Sami Smooha explains: 'The Mizrahi-coined name Mizrahim transmits a sense of unity, of a shared identity and commonality of fate among Jews originating from the Muslim world, in contradistinction to the disunity and disarray communicated by the Ashkenazi-coined name *bene 'edot ha-mizrach* [members of communities of the East]. The new term indicated empowerment and protest' (p. 442). Mizrahi has more broadly connoted non-Ashkenazi Jews in Israel—applied at times to Iranian, Turkish and even Indian Jews. The related term 'Arab Jew,' (specifically referring to Jews from Arabic-speaking countries) is also provocative: it forces us to consider together two categories of identity assumed to be opposites, perpetuated by oft-used terminology such as the 'Arab-Israeli conflict'. At stake is the conception of Jews and Arabs as monolithic homogenous entities, denying the overlap and

interconnection of these identities for Jews from Arab countries. Cinema is a vital forum for exploring the subject of Jewish difference as it is experienced within and across Jewish communities around the world. How do films of the Jewish diaspora contemplate the problematic of Arab Jews? How and why do they invite a consideration of space, place and belonging?

Nearly the entire Jewish populations of Arab-Islamic countries from North Africa to Iraq emigrated or were expelled from their homes between the 1940s and 1970s. The reasons for this mass exodus are complex, but stem largely from a combination of clashing Arab and Jewish nationalisms, periods of intense political and economic insecurity, and anti-Jewish violence. The majority of these Jews moved to Israel, where, rather than simply being welcomed as citizens, they were subjected to a range of state policies that attempted to remove their 'backwardness' and force their assimilation into the new Hebrew nation. Ella Shohat (1999) argues that official Zionist ideology created a taboo on the 'Arabness' of Arab Jews, interpreting it as a diasporic taint to be cleansed through assimilation into Euro-Israeli culture (p. 5-6). Unlike other Jewish diasporas—including Eastern European Jews—who were encouraged to conform to the new Israeli national identity, Arab Jews had the added stigma that associated them with a) the 'primitive' Orient and b) the 'Arab' enemy. While Zionism sought to cut the Arab out of Jewish, Arab nationalism(s) sought to cut the Jewish out of Arab, coming to see Jews and Zionists as synonymous, and making it impossible for Jews to be part of Arab national identities. These opposing forms of nationalism made no room for messy or hybrid identities and left Jews from Arab lands 'trapped' between the new binary of Arabness and Jewishness. The concept of an Arab Jew, with its hybrid, conflictual form that binds together an enemy dialectic in order to deconstruct it, compels us to interrogate the myth of a homogenous Jewish nation and the assumption that Arab and Jew are irreconcilable opposites (See Shohat 2003; Shenhav 2006; Anidjar 2008).

While the majority of Jews from North Africa and the Middle East moved to Israel, France and Canada were also key destinations. This was especially true for the Francophone Jewish populations of North Africa, but also for Iraqi, Egyptian, Turkish Jews and others. Like Israel, France and Canada, the second and third largest Jewish diasporic communities outside of the United States (Schnoor 1), have become sites of heated turmoil over the relationship between nation, religion and ethnic/racial difference. France's attitude toward cultural difference is a Republican universalism whereby citizenship requires the loss of ethnic identity and the conformity to French culture and norms (Killian 18). For many years, Anglophone Canada articulated a state-sanctioned multiculturalism that supported religious and ethnic diversity but also restricted the form it could take vis-à-vis the exalted Anglo-Canadian subject (Thobani 2009). The management of religious and ethnic diversity took a slightly different path in the province of Quebec: first an emphasis on interculturalism and reasonable accommodation and more recently leaning towards the

French Republican model in Quebec's proposed *Charte des valeurs québécoises* that would, if legislated, prohibit public servants from wearing 'ostentatious' religious symbols. As Leroux (2010) argues, these systems rely on a civilizational discourse shared by Western liberal democracies that depoliticizes 'difference' in cultures while obfuscating their racialized dimensions.

Local and global discourses create different possibilities for the cinematic representations of Jewish difference by filmmakers working in different national and transnational contexts. For example, the large corpus of Israeli films that addresses Mizrahi and other forms of Jewish and non-Jewish 'difference' in the public sphere since the 1990s (in contrast to Israeli Orientalist cinema of the past [Shohat 1989]) stands in dramatic contrast to the near-absence of Jewishness on Canadian screens and the difficulties of representing Jewishness at all, let alone a spectrum of Jewish ethnic, class, gender or sexual subjectivities (Byers 2010; Byers and Schwartz 2012). And yet, analyzing contemporary Mizrahi cinema, Yaron Shemer (2005) illustrates two critical limits to the ability of filmmakers to overturn power dynamics that demarcate and suppress 'ethnic' identities in Israel. First, second-generation Mizrahi filmmakers who seek to reclaim the Arabness in their parents' past generally fail to depict a genuinely Arab *and* Jewish space within the film present. Second, cultural policies and the institutional power of the film and television industry in Israel tend to constrict rather than encourage the diversification of Mizrahi voices. Shemer's sobering analysis demonstrates that despite postmodern theories that preach the liberating possibilities of spaces between binaries, it remains incredibly difficult to challenge the irreconcilability of Arabness and Jewishness as essentialized, enemy subjectivities, both on and off screen.

But what of diasporic films that tackle the identity politics of Arab Jews? Does the critique change when informed by the local politics of diasporic filmmakers and their geo-cultural and political distance from Israel? This paper analyzes two films by Arab Jewish women living in France and Canada. Karin Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem* (France, 2005) and b.h. Yael's *Fresh Blood: A Consideration of Belonging* (Canada, 1996) are cinematic examples of films that construct and deconstruct the nationalist conceptions of a dialectic between Arab and Jew from outside of Israel. They do this through a mode of *imaginative geography* that converts landscapes into spaces with meaning. Albou and Yael use their Arab Jewish subjectivities to deconstruct exclusive home spaces and reconstruct them to be inclusive of others. In doing so, they offer diasporic critiques of exclusive Jewish racial/ethnic, gendered, sexual and spatial identities that result in varying conclusions. This essay close-reads scenes in which Arabness is (re)mapped onto the terrain of Jewish identity and examines how these diasporic subjectivities deconstruct homogenous Jewish spaces in Sarcelles, a *banlieue* of Paris and in Israel's Negev desert/Sodom. Arab Jewish subjectivity in both cases uniquely inflects

relations between neighbours and strangers inside homes, neighbourhoods and across homelands.

Jewish Imaginative Geography

Imaginative geography is the term Edward Said uses in *Orientalism* (1978) to describe the way in which vast landscapes could be named 'East' and 'West' and be signified as places with opposing qualities (the West as civilized, rational and modern, the East as barbaric, exotic and primitive). Said builds this concept upon Gaston Bachelard's 'poetics of space':

The inside of a house, [Bachelard] said, acquires a sense of intimacy, secrecy, security, real or imagined, because of the experiences that come to seem appropriate for it. The objective space of a house—its corners, corridors, cellar, rooms—is far less important than what poetically it is endowed with, which is usually a quality with an imaginative or figurative value we can name and feel: thus a house may be haunted, or homelike, or prisonlike, or magical. So space acquires emotional and even rational sense by a kind of poetic process, whereby the vacant or anonymous reaches of distance are converted into meaning for us here. (1978, p. 54-55)

For Bachelard, space is a manifestation of the self, which can be approached and understood through its poetry. Extending this to Said's imaginative geography, we can analyze the practices of empire through the language it uses to describe—or fails to describe—space. Poetry translates a place (a concrete apartment, a brick house) into a 'home' that belongs to 'me'. The same process converts a vast landscape, or an imagined space, into a homeland that belongs to 'us'. It is a means of demarcating belonging by assigning it (confining it) to a territory, and it can have powerful consequences for the people invited inside and those excluded without.

How is imaginative geography used to demarcate 'Jewish' space, homes, neighbourhoods or homelands? Imaginative geography uses the safety of distance to minimize diversity in a landscape and control it. Jews in the diaspora, especially after the 1967 Israeli-Arab war, have increasingly looked to Israel to bolster their identities, thought to be under threat by assimilation or antisemitism (See Troper 2010 for how this affected Canadians). This identification evolved for some into an anxiety, fear or hatred of 'Arabs' (sometimes a blanket term for Muslims) who are regarded as a threat to the security of the Jewish state. Israel's national borders (though officially undefined [Stratton 2007]) attempt to mark a Jewish space distant and different from the Arab or Palestinian space assumed to be outside of it. Imaginative geography created a Jewish 'home/land vocabulary' (Manning 2003) where the security of a 'home' marked in a house, body, or neighbourhood mirrors the borders of a nation. Israel's Arab enemy on a national level, within this vocabulary, is a threat to all Jewish homes. This slippage between modern, sovereign Israel and the

Jewish people is one of the reasons it has become difficult to talk about the Israel-Palestine conflict in the diaspora (Silverstein 2010). Surveying from a distance, simplistic homeland/diaspora and Jewish/Arab binary conceptions of Jewish identity deny the multiplicity of Jewish homes, homelands, cultures and identities.

If, as Derek Gregory (2004) has argued, imaginative geography has been crucial to the colonial process, a creative tool that transforms a conceptual act of drawing a line between 'us' (nationals, settlers, originals) and 'them' (others, nomads) into a performance, this very performance can also unsettle the fixity of its meaning by revealing that it is a social construction. This performance thus simultaneously leaves spaces open to creative possibilities even as it produces restrictive 'truths'. Concrete security walls can become the tablet upon which the poetry of resistance might be written, a symbol that can help to form new types of belonging in communities drawn according to very different lines. Narratives from the Arab Jewish diaspora play an important role in this regard, both supporting and criticizing Jewish homeland vocabularies. The performances of imaginative geography in the films of Arab Jews are therefore particularly enlightening: they directly challenge assumptions about who the 'Arab' enemy is assumed to be and force a reconsideration of the language and spatial practices we use to make sense of Jews, Israelis, Palestinians, Mizrahim, Arabs and others.

Karin Albou: Walking through Sarcelles

Set in Sarcelles, a suburb north of Paris, the very title of Karin Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem* applies a Jewish imaginative geography. 'La Petite Jérusalem' is the nickname of a low-income concrete housing neighborhood within this district, home to a large Jewish—and large North-African Jewish immigrant—population. Carrie Tarr (2009) explains its symbolism:

The title evokes connections not only with the displacement of North African Jews following the independence of France's former colonies in the Maghreb, but also with the larger Jerusalem and thus with the Arab/Israeli conflict. It thereby also alludes to the growth of violent acts of anti-semitism in France, normally attributed to radicalized Maghrebi French youth from the *banlieue*, which since the early 2000s (i.e. since Palestine's declaration of the Second Intifada against Israel, and exacerbated by 9/11 and the war in Iraq) has periodically troubled the Jewish diaspora in France and which was, indeed, the inspiration behind Albou's film. Sarcelles is one of the areas of France which has seen large numbers of Jews seeking to make *aliyah*, that is, to relocate to Israel, as a result of such troubling, destabilizing violence. (p. 8)

Tarr analyzes the ways Albou's representation of the Jewish community confirms and therefore assuages French universalist fears about the 'communitarian' alterity of the nation's postcolonial diasporic population. Albou's work stands out from that of other diasporic

filmmakers in France for Tarr because it refuses to celebrate either individual hybridity or a positive communitarian postcolonial experience in France. Albou's representation of her protagonist's Jewish geography vis-à-vis Arab/Muslim alterity begs a richer analysis.

In *La Petite Jérusalem*, Laura (played by Fanny Valette), a French-born woman of Tunisian-Jewish background, who studies philosophy at the university by day and works at a Hebrew school in the evening, falls in love with her co-worker Djamel (Hedi Tillet de Clermont-Tonnerre), an Algerian man of Muslim background with Sufi convictions. The film follows Laura as she tries to negotiate the laws of her Jewish community with her burgeoning love and sexual desire for Djamel, a religious and cultural outsider. Djamel's outsider status is enhanced by his lack of French immigration papers. While Laura is struggling to restrain her desire for Djamel, her sister Mathilde (Elsa Zylberstein) learns to liberate her desire in an attempt to save her marriage to Ariel (Bruno Todeschini), the patriarch of the family, who is having an affair. The film is an aesthetically rich and thoughtful portrayal of the tensions between the unpredictability and dynamism of living religion (Hall 1997) and the limits of rational thought and regulating practices that demarcate 'Jewish' and other. The film employs imaginative geography as a tool, depicting the poetics of intimate Jewish spaces (home, *mikvah*, locker room in the Hebrew school) and the *banlieue* neighbourhood to represent both the internal struggles of its characters and their precarious position in contemporary France. We can read these poetics to analyze how exclusive Franco-Jewish spaces are constructed and deconstructed through the entry of Arab/Muslim alterity.

Laura's home is the crowded apartment she shares with her mother, Mathilde, Ariel and their three children. Like the apartment, *La Petite Jérusalem's mise-en-scène* is saturated with characters, props and furniture. Steady close-up and medium shots work to create the visual representation of tight, constricted living quarters. This is made evident from the frequent invasion by characters into each other's private spaces. Characters are constantly forcing themselves into the frame: giggling nieces popping their heads into the hallway or Laura's mother dusting her philosophy books, interfere with her attempts to do homework at her desk. Mathilde and her husband Ariel enact their intimate scenes on (what appears to be) a pull-out couch in the dining room doubling as their bedroom. The cinematography emphasizes the cramped but cozy feel of what is coded as an explicitly Jewish space. This coding occurs through the representation of repeated rituals such as Laura and Ariel's recitation of the daily prayers and the vibrant Shabbat meals. The first time the festive meal is portrayed, a single shot follows the goblet of wine as Ariel passes it to his wife Mathilde, who passes it to her mother and around the table over the pair of Shabbat candles, unifying the family in their tradition. But this unity is soon broken up: Mathilde makes a sarcastic remark about her husband's excuse for being late, then her mother warns her in Arabic to respect her husband and they argue at the table. Ariel, unable to

understand the language, gets annoyed and asks Laura what they are talking about. Either unwilling or unable to explain, Laura replies, 'I don't understand much Arabic'. Already, the presumed exclusivity of Arab and Jewish spaces is refuted in the daily life of this family.

Examining the lived experience of home, Sara Ahmed (2000) compares the sense of being-at-home to inhabiting a second skin: '[t]he home as skin suggests the boundary between self and home is permeable, but also that the boundary between home and away is permeable as well' (p. 89). The boundaries of body and home are delimited and can be realigned through the technologies of cartography. The exclusivity of the Jewish home and body is interrupted by the intrusion of Arab alterity both inside and outside the home. Inside, Laura's mother (played by Sonia Tahar) practices the folk traditions of her native North Africa. When Eric, a potential (Jewish) suitor, calls on the phone to speak to Laura, her mother mutters incantations and lights incense to encourage the love match. The words and the smoke infuse the interior of the home, penetrate Laura's nostrils and interfere with her ability to enforce the severity of her boundaries. This subtle but significant encroachment of a traditional Maghrebi past into Laura's modern Franco-Jewish identity is achieved through a cinematic imaginative geography. Maghrebi is not synonymous with Arab, but the repression of Maghrebi culture in Israel and France is part of the mechanism that essentializes and feeds the simplistic binary of Arab and Jew. In Israeli cinema, *shchur* (a term for North African magic) is often depicted as a source of Mizrahi female power and identity: validating traditions other than those of Ashkenazim and Mizrahi men (Lubin 2001), *shchur* stands counter to the complete repression of the Arab or Oriental.

While Laura's mother poses a threat from within a Jewish framework, Djamel, as a non-status Maghrebi man in France, poses a threat from without. In an attempt to contain and suppress her sexual desire, Laura decides to emulate her favourite philosopher, Immanuel Kant, by taking a ritualized stroll through her neighbourhood along the same path at the same time every day. This practice reveals strong similarities between Kant's Enlightenment philosophy, which Laura studies at school, and her practice of rabbinic Judaism at home: both elevate the creation and adherence to law as a guiding principle for human life. The repetition of this act, however, continually leads Laura to encounter difference—most particularly in the form of Djamel, the Arab Muslim other—in her multi-ethnic neighbourhood, Laura's ritualized strolls thereby implicitly confirms Gilles Deleuze's argument about repetition and difference:

[i]f repetition is possible, it is due to miracle rather than to law ... If repetition exists, it expresses at once a singularity opposed to the general, a universality opposed to the particular, a distinctive opposed to the ordinary, an instantaneity opposed to variation and an eternity opposed to permanence. (1994, p. 3)

Difference and singularity, rather than 'identity', is revealed to be at the core of human experiences. The more Laura tries to protect her Jewish body and home through the repetition of a single, exclusive law, the more the boundaries between herself and others break down.

Laura repeatedly encounters Djamel while walking through her neighbourhood, a vast concrete courtyard below looming white apartment towers. Here the camera always follows Laura at a distance. The neighbours she passes on the street or presses against on the train are clothed in hijabs, colourful Boubou dresses and/or *sheitels* (wigs) denoting a mix of cultural diversity. Kosher supermarkets and Arabic graffiti mix across the concrete landscape—but invisible boundaries maintain a separation between identity groups who share the same physical space. A disruption of these invisible boundaries can be observed in the scene where Ariel and a group of Jewish men and boys playing soccer are harassed and beaten by a gang of *banlieue* youth. Laura's little brother runs from the scene and returns with Laura and Djamel still clad in work uniforms. The presence of Djamel, a Muslim other, shocks and offends Laura's brother-in-law. Despite his intention to help, Djamel is looked upon as one of the enemies, affiliated with the hooligans by way of his not being Jewish, and moreover, being Arab/Maghrebi. As a stranger, he has come too close to home and thereby become a threat.

The towering concrete apartment blocks are a constant presence in the cinematography. Whether walking across the courtyard below, or looking out one's window into an apartment in a tower opposite, the gaze of the neighbour is ever-present. The experience of walking through the courtyard offers one means of disrupting the surveillance from the distance of the towers. Michel de Certeau (1984) calls for a movement away from the study of space from a bird's eye view that condenses and totalizes distances and obscures the everyday practices that occur inside spaces. He argues that the tactic of walking in the city can become a practice of resistance against this totalizing gaze. Said offers a similar skepticism towards modern imperial organization of space when he describes the process of imaginative geography, which collapses distance into difference. Far-away people or practices can become the threatening other. Urban planners, cartographers, voyeurs, observers from a distance can theorize spaces, organize them to some extent, but can never completely control what happens inside them. As the Situationists (Debord 1956) demonstrated, physically walking through and playing in a space disrupts the totalizing gaze claiming an expanse of land or territory as 'ours' or 'home'. Walking through neighbourhoods lays a path of resistance, a way of disarming the security fences that try to keep the foreign out.

In the courtyard Djamel sits with his back to a group of men and follows Laura with his gaze as she crosses the yard under the cover of night. Djamel is introduced to the audience a second time inside the

change room of the Hebrew school where he and Laura both work. Whereas in the courtyard Djamel and Laura are separated by distance across the concrete space, in the change room they stand nearly touching back-to-back. Djamel unbuttons his gray work smock as Laura pulls hers on. The camera shots here are again medium and close-ups, the angles—peering at Djamel over Laura’s shoulder, only their necks and faces framed intimately by the camera—present the space of the change room as a space of possibilities. Djamel crosses an invisible line by touching Laura’s shoulder, helping her pull on her smock, despite Laura’s attempt to keep him outside her personal boundaries by refusing to turn around and look at him. Her smile after he departs reveals her failure to keep him out.

The proximity and alterity of both Djamel and Laura’s mother combine to shatter and restructure Laura’s homeland vocabulary that regulates self, home and nation. The ultimate challenge to Laura’s sense of self, community and belonging comes when Djamel penetrates the boundaries of her apartment. Laura returns home to find a letter for her at the doorstep. Below the *mezuzah*, on the doorpost, Ariel opens the door from inside and snatches the letter before Laura, still fumbling with her keys, can reach down and take it. ‘It’s for me!’ she cries. Ariel turns from her, tears open the letter and reads it out loud: ‘I am your slave. May I savour your beauty one day?’ After a brief pause, he demands, ‘Who wrote this?’ Mathilde enters from a room to share the close-up frame with her husband in the hallway. She attempts to mediate: ‘It’s the boy from the mosque. It’s okay, he’s nice’. Ariel treats the letter like dirt, something he is disgusted to touch. Anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) encourages us to think of dirt as ‘matter out of place.’ ‘Dirt is the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements’ (p. 36). Ariel’s disgusted attitude toward the letter, which he tosses down the garbage chute and out of the space of the home, is emblematic of his will to control the home’s interior: keep the dirt out. But the architecture of the apartment building permits Laura to exit the apartment, run down the stairs, open a door to the garbage chute’s landing place, and reclaim the gift from Djamel, the boy from the mosque. Though Ariel insists on excluding his presence, Djamel, the Arab Muslim other, is able to penetrate the space of the home, and the space of Laura’s heart. Through his letter, Djamel moves from the spaces of the Hebrew school and the courtyard and encounters the home territory of Laura’s family. The stranger reveals his proximity, penetrates the secure force of the home constructed to keep dangerous others out. It is this scene that marks Laura’s shifting belonging; she will detach herself from the family home and seek belonging elsewhere.

Laura disrupts the Jewish laws and structures that guided her upbringing and reconstructs a new space in which to encounter the (repressed Arab/Maghrebi) other. The context of her multicultural neighbourhood, the constant rub of the other in the streets and in her classes, compels Laura to test the permeability of her social boundaries by renovating the contour of her own defensive wall and in

effect renovates her home turf. In Djamel, there is the familiarity of a fellow diasporic Maghrebi trying to negotiate his subjectivity in the complex territory of contemporary metropolitan France. Albou's cinematic imaginative geography brings these characters into the same frame, thereby revealing the overlapping layers of Arab and Jewish difference.

b.h. Yael: Sodom revisited

Arab Jewish subjectivity is more explicitly addressed in b.h. Yael's *Fresh Blood: A Consideration of Belonging* (1996). Her hybrid documentary depicts Yael's journey from Toronto, Canada, her current home, to Israel, the place of her birth, and explores the director's interstitial identity.ⁱ Daughter of an Iraqi Jewish mother and Polish Jewish father, and born in Israel to Jewish parents but raised a Canadian Christian, Yael's tangle of identities proves this trip to be no simple journey home. Arab, Jewish, female, Israeli, Canadian, artist, activist: seemingly stable pillars of identity are interrogated in dialogue with each other and explored through the process of looking back. *Fresh Blood* is constructed as a video essay. Interviews with academics and activists are inter-cut with historical reconstructions and first-person narrative. They then weave further with images of fantasy sequences and travel footage. Yael experiments with documentary and narrative styles in order to destabilize the form of dominant stories—the Zionist discourse which insists Israel is the homeland for all Jews and that Arabs and Jews are irreconcilable opposites, and the Western Christian discourse that marks Sodom as the original example of God's condemnation of homosexuality and other stories that essentialize identity and belonging.

Yael's is a striking, self-reflexive work of both art and theory. Theory, like art, opens a discursive space for critique and negotiation that may not be possible in physical space. *Fresh Blood* can be considered an example of intercultural (Marks 2000) or accented cinema (Naficy 2001).ⁱⁱ The video experiments with a new cinematic language that, informed by the loneliness, frustration and double consciousness of the diasporic experience, yearns to know and become the other. Through her diasporic position and nomadic approach Yael is able to critique her sense of self, home and homeland. In particular, she dismantles the homeland vocabulary of Sodom through a differently imagined and performed geography that is informed by her Arab Jewish subjectivity and a complicated Canadian multiculturalism.

Yael is looking for a city that is not there. The film opens with an image of tall reeds against a blue sky. A close up on the reeds dissolves into a travelling shot of the desert landscape. The caption over these images is a quotation from Salman Rushdie: 'It may be that writers in my position, exiles, or emigrants or expatriates, are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim ... to look back ... even at the risk of being mutated into salt' (Yael 1996). Yael, like Rushdie, is haunted by her relationship with the place of her birth and

childhood, a place in which she no longer lives. For Yael, the act of looking back pivots around the dialectic of doubleness, here and there, homeland and hostland.

Looking back, however, always constitutes an element of the present and of the future. This chapter of Yael's work poignantly employs a dialogic style, contrasting a retelling of the story of the destruction of Sodom with an interview with her own mother about homophobia. The filmmaker does not stop at this dialectic, instead overlaying several narratives of the story of Sodom, delivered in voiceovers. First is the voice of Yael as narrator, who informs us: 'There is a pillar to Lot's wife somewhere here, but I think of all this terrain as Her'. The camera cuts to reveal Yael clothed in white robes and sandals running through the reeds. Second, a child's voiceover offers a standard Judeo-Christian telling of the destruction of Sodom. How the men of Sodom and Gomorrah wanted 'to know' Lot's visitors, how Lot offered his daughters instead to the men, how God destroyed the cities for this crime, allowing Lot and his family to escape and finally, how Lot's wife was turned into a pillar of salt for looking back. The costuming, the juxtaposition of Yael in white against the background of yellow reeds and the authoritative child's voiceover all work to transform Yael into Lot's wife.

The child's account is cross-edited with images of the rolling desert seen through a car windshield. Yael narrates: 'On the road to the Dead Sea, to Sodom, mother and I repeat the script we always enact'. In a third level of narrative Yael appears as subject, rather than narrator, in conversation with her mother. Her mother recalls seeing two men kissing at one of Yael's parties. She states with disgust: 'And it makes me sick on my stomach ... For a long time it made me sick'. Yael challenges her mother to contemplate why homosexuality makes her sick, and insists that her homophobia did not emerge naturally, but that she was socialized to think that way. Her mother disagrees, arguing that it was her own research that brought her to this conclusion—the creator made people to be fruitful in a specific way.

Piles of salt begin to appear in the background scenery. Yael tells the audience: 'I think of this as the birthplace of homophobia in Judeo-Christian culture. I want to go to Sodom, as if my standing there would negate its mythic power'. The oppressiveness of Sodom as signifier for homophobia is critically reassessed through Yael's dialogic engagement. She narrates a new story into the landscape:

I once read a revision of the story of Lot's wife which exalted Lot's wife, who has no name, because her turning to give a fond glance back to the town of Sodom was probably her sense of longing for those who she left in the town, women and men, Canaanites and Perizzites, Philistines and Hebrews, travellers and dwellers. Against the petrified image, she dances through my landscape, urging me to turn and return, to shape and reshape history.

This voiceover occurs over images of Yael traversing the desert landscape in white robes becoming Lot's wife. The parallel narratives—traditional stories interlaced with Yael and her mother's modern subjectivities—cover the desert landscape, deterritorialize and reterritorialize the mythical significance of the space.

This search for Sodom, read in the context of Yael's journey between home and homeland, demonstrates the complexity of these vocabularies and geographies for the filmmaker. Israel is imbued with metanarrative: dominant stories about the holiness of the land from Biblical and Zionist mythology. For Yael it is also the location of family history, of her birth, of the loss of her childhood and of her father. It is a heterogeneous, multiple and chaotic concept that can stir up unpredictable emotions. Looking back can therefore be dangerous. Ahmed observes:

The issue is that home is not simply about fantasies of belonging (where do I originate from?) but that it is sentimentalized as a space of belonging ('home is where the heart is'). The question of home and being-at-home can only be addressed by considering the question of affect: being-at-home is a matter of how one feels or how one might fail to feel. (2000, p. 89)

Yael's birthplace is also the birthplace of homophobia; despite yearning for the emotions that accompany the sensation of belonging or being at peace, the cognition of what home signifies fails to offer the peace that Yael longs for. Instead, through self-critique, Yael must re-signify Sodom, drawing on a queer feminist revision of the story of Sodom told through the perspective of Lot's wife.

Yael's invocation of a queer imaginary to challenge perceptions of the Jewish homeland is fascinating, especially when read in relation to the constitution of the Israeli national subject theorized by Raz Yosef. Yosef (2004) sees queerness as a structural element of the Zionist national subject that involves a disavowal of a threatening 'feminine' presence within Jewish masculinity. In Israeli cinema this threatening feminine element is often projected onto Palestinian or Mizrahi males and away from Ashkenazi men. In *Fresh Blood*, however, the feminine becomes an object of (female) desire, and Arab men and women become (counter)authorities on the homeland.

While searching for Sodom, Yael and her mother stop to ask directions from a Bedouin family bathing in the Dead Sea. Yael's mother, after conversing in Arabic, discovers that she shares the same last name with the family. The discovery of this commonality of Arabness, the sharing of a name, contrasts with the conflict between mother and daughter on the nature of sexuality. The man informs Yael and her mother: 'there is no Sodom. This is it,' and the camera pans over the salty terrain and the sea beyond. Sodom is marked only through collective memory as a general space without marked boundaries. The looseness of its boundaries makes the space of Sodom ripe for reinterpretation. Yael, demonstrating that geography is

imaginatively malleable, inserts herself into the space of Sodom as the figure looking back in lieu of Lot's wife. Yael's alternative storytelling unthinks the centrality of Israel for Jewishness, and Jewishness for Israel, by demonstrating how Israel is meaningful for individuals and communities beyond the master narrative of a Jewish homeland, or of the birthplace of Judeo-Christian homophobia. Sodom and Israel, as homes to Lot's wife and Yael, are persistently adhered to even as these characters are compelled to leave the security of these homes.

Yael's political affiliation with minority identities—Arab, Jewish, female, queer, Palestinian—as well as her deterritorializing language, her poor attempts to communicate in her mother tongue, Hebrew, her experimental documentary and narrative work (which unsettle the structures of metanarratives), her becoming Lot's wife looking back in defiance of the condemnation of this mythical figure; all these combine to conjure Deleuze and Guattari's image of an author of minor literature: 'Writing like a dog digging a hole, a rat digging its burrow' (Deleuze and Guattari 1986, p. 18). It is from this 'minor' subjectivity that Yael maps and remaps the contours of her identity and rewrites her homeland vocabulary as a dynamic space with open and/or permeable borders. She narrates: 'My location is unclear. I am between colour and white, between power and persecution; what's inside and outside keeps shifting'. Between the authority of the Bedouin man, who negates the enduring mythology of Sodom by denying its physical place, and the authority of her mother, an Arab Jewish woman displaced to Canada and converted to Christianity, Yael is able to re-map the geography of the desert and rewrite the homeland vocabulary in a way that is informed by the multiplicity of her identity.

Yael's cartography of home explicitly looks for Arabness and Iraqiness and finds it in the lived experiences of her grandparents. Chapter Ten of the documentary, entitled 'Mizrahi, Refining Arabness,' begins with a close-up image of a man's hand caressing worry beads, a dramatization of Yael's grandfather in pajamas pacing with the beads behind his back. A citation from bell hooks appears over the image: 'What does it mean to inhabit a space without a culture of domination defining how you live your life?' This montage sets up a relation between the physical (pajamas, beads) and the theoretical (Arabness, culture of domination). In doing so, Yael questions the connection between Ashkenazi power and the lived experiences of Arab Jews. This image dissolves to reveal Safta (her grandmother) snapping her finger in the 'Iraqi way' in front of the television in her home while dancing. A voiceover explains:

Arab men on the streets remind me of my grandfather. I never understood the memory of him fingering beads as something connected to his Arabness. I come back to her, as if she can offer me some grounding. As if she can make the act of belonging simple.

For Yael, Safta's house and body are spaces where Arabness is repeatedly performed. The director's search for 'grounding' further transforms Safta's Arabness into a home (of safety, origins, comfort). The Arabness of these spaces does not exclude Jewishness. Indeed, they exist within the broader framework of the Jewish state, and the performances that occur within. Safta's house is also explicitly a Jewish home. It is a place where Safta practices the Jewish ritual of lighting memorial candles, explaining: 'This is for my mother, this is for my father ... for Saba Sasson, for Moshe Rabbanu ... for ner neshama' [for Grandfather Sasson, for Moses our teacher/rabbi, a candle for their souls]. An Arab Jewish space is thus actively created through the lived experiences of Yael's family and through the lens of her video camera. This Arab and Jewish space is a place of inclusion, a third space that challenges either pole of the constructed enemy dynamic.

Local context, transnational implications

Returning to Shemer's argument above, Mizrahi cinema in Israel has been limited in two important ways: the frequent failure of second-generation Arab Jews to reconstruct the Arab past of their parents or grandparents on screen, and the restraining structure of power of the film and television industry that limits, rather than encourages, the diversification of Mizrahi voices. Shemer argues:

Instead of a continuous dialogical process between old and new, there and here, Diaspora and Israel, the Mizrahim in contemporary cinema are often cast as shriveled hybrids; they engage in a one-way linear course grounded on a zero-sum system where each nod to the new 'Israeliness' necessarily entails the elisions of aspects of one's past. (Shemer 191)

How do Albou's and Yael's diasporic Arab Jewish films compare? Without going too deeply into discussion of the film industry in Canada and France, I offer some initial observations.

Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem* certainly creates a space in her film where Arab and Jew blend, but it is one that remains liminal and limited and that is eventually crushed by French Republicanism. Laura and Djamel's world is inflected by violence against Jews (diegetic) and Muslims (non-diegetic). Their time together is escapist and fleeting. Djamel eventually rejects Laura, unable to live without his family's financial support. Laura refuses to move to Israel with her family. Laura also loses her only remaining connection to an Arab/Maghrebi Jewish past when, despite her initial resistance, her grandmother moves to Israel with the rest of the family. To emphasize this rupture, Laura's grandmother gives her a ring she carried with her from Tunisia to help support Laura's own move to Paris. The final scene of the film shows Laura on an escalator moving against a blur of faces. As Carine Bourget (2010, p.60) argues, 'Laura might be moving to the city, but she is even more alone than she was at the beginning of the film'. While an Arab Jewish space is achieved in the

portrayal of Laura's mother and in the consummated desire of Laura and Djamel, permeation of home and body, Albou also falls into the trap that Shemer sees for Mizrahi filmmaking in Israel—failing both to overcome the difficulties of representing Arab Jewish space and to move beyond the limited ability of commercial films to enact real social change to improve relations between Muslims and Jews in France. The possibility of a more sustaining Arab Jewish space will have to wait until Albou's second feature *Le chant des mariées* (*The Wedding Song*) in 2007. Though it must be said that, in that film, the Arab Jewish space is also constrained in that it can only live in the nostalgia of the North African past rather than in the French present.

The Arab Jewish space Yael creates in *Fresh Blood* does not suffer the same fate. Hers is not a linear story that seeks an authentic Jewish or Arab past, nor does it entail the elision of her past. Instead, questioning, dialogue and multiplicity are the structuring elements of the film. When Yael does use historical recreation to get at the Arab past of her grandparents it is deliberately playful and disrupted, insisting on its problematization rather than its authenticity. She explores a real Arab Jewish present at the Iraqi Jewish celebrations she attends in Israel, at her grandmother's house where women speak in Arabic and belly dance, and in her interviews with Palestinian women in Israel. The challenging journey 'home' to Israel, doubled with the search for Sodom, compels Yael to reconsider space, place and belonging and enables her to create a new (non-essentialized) Arab Jewish space in Canada. This is manifested in the conclusion of her film when, in a provocative nod to Canadian multiculturalism, the whole crew takes a belly-dancing lesson from a black Canadian woman. It is the mix of nationalist frameworks, in conjunction with the discourses that unsettle them, that enable the radical Arab Jewish space produced within *Fresh Blood*. This is made possible, as Shemer argues, in large part by the experimental nature of the film, which was produced for Yael's Masters thesis at the University of Toronto.

The unique conundrum of Mizrahi and Arab Jews was created in Israel in the context of a desire to construct a Jewish nation built on European values in the face of an essentialized Arab enemy. Karin Albou's *La Petite Jérusalem* and b.h. Yael's *Fresh Blood* challenge us to re-consider the relationship between place, space and belonging for modern Jewish identities by exploring Arab Jewish spaces in the diaspora. Read through a relational critical inquiry (as Shohat suggests Mizrahi studies should read), these films challenge binary Arab/Jew and Israel/diaspora notions of Jewish identity. They demonstrate how the problematic of Arab Jews extends outside of Israel and crosses the nationalist discourses of Jewish communities in France and Canada. At the same time, these diasporic voices connect back through Israel and also across each other, showing Jewish identities and spaces to be less a dialectic of binaries and more a rhizome (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), or complex system that links multiple locations—Toronto, Sarcelles and Sodom—to and through

each other and that has a critical difference, rather than unity, as its core.

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the editors of *borderlands*, the anonymous peer reviewers and the many colleagues and friends who helped in the development of this article. I also thank the University of Ottawa and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting this research.

Notes

ⁱ Yael is Professor of Integrated Media at the Ontario College of Art and Design University. In 2009, Yael was one of eight Jewish Israeli and Canadian women who occupied the Israeli Consulate in Toronto in protest of the continued Israeli occupation of Gaza, calling upon the Canadian government to impose sanctions on the Israeli government to end its abuses of human rights.

ⁱⁱ Accented cinema, according to Naficy, is the work of independent transnational filmmakers. Accented cinema tends towards a certain style: 'open-form and closed-form visual style; fragmented, multilingual, epistolary, self-reflexive, and critically juxtaposed narrative structure; amphibolic, doubled, crossed, and lost characters; subject matter and themes that involve journeying, historicity, identity, and displacement; dysphoric, euphoric, nostalgic, synaesthetic, liminal, and politicized structures of feeling; interstitial and collective modes of production; and inscription of the biographical, social, and cinematic (dis)location of the filmmakers' (p. 4).

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