**Telling their own story: Representations of Black Masculinity in Israel, Art by Men of Ethiopian Descent**

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**Abstract**

This article examines how the masculinity of Israeli men of Ethiopian descent is represented by contemporary black artists in Israel. In recent years, a new generation of Israeli-Ethiopian artists has revitalized local art and engendered deep changes in discourse and public life. This paper draw links between events of the past decade and the images of men produced by these artists. It argues that the political awareness of many Israeli-Ethiopians artists, generated by long-term social activism as well as police violence against their community, has greatly impacted their artistic production, broadened its diversity, and contributed a wealth of artworks to Israel as a whole. An intersectional analysis, it draws on theories in cultural, migration, and gender studies as well as sociology and the work of Pierre Bourdieu, Stuart Hall, Paul Gilroy, bell hooks, Thelma Golden, Chika Okeke-Agulu, Sara Ahmed, Raewyn Connell and others.

**Keywords:** Israeli-Ethiopians, masculinity in Israel, Israeli art, intersectional analysis, representations of black men, gender, protest art.

In recent years, a new generation of Israeli-Ethiopian artists has revitalized art and engendered deep-seated changes in the discourse and public life of Israel (Dekel 2016, 59–96). In this paper, I draw links between current political and social developments and images of men produced by artists of Ethiopian origin living in Israel today. My aim is to use intersectional analysis to examine the ways in which these images are presented in Israeli art.[[1]](#footnote-1)

As background to the problem of how Israeli men, specifically those of Ethiopian descent, are represented in contemporary art, I will discuss the construction of black men in art over the course of history, both in Israel and abroad, and analyze the ways in which these images drew on popular culture, i.e., the mass media in Israel and the world at large. I will then proceed to analyze contemporary works depicting Israeli-Ethiopian men in relation to several themes: work and employment; sex, gender, and sexuality; and masculinity and the military. In doing so, I will argue that the political awareness of many Israeli-Ethiopian artists, which was sparked by protests in the summer of 2015 and nurtured by intense activism, has increased their productivity as well as the diversity of their output and thus made an important contribution to the culture and art of Israel.

**Representations of masculinity beyond Israel: The image of the African-American and the pan-African man**

Representations of Israeli-Ethiopian men have been influenced by the cultures of African, European, and American societies. Images from the United States, which have often depicted them in a biased, stereotypical, and oppressive way, have been especially influential. Innumerable sculptures, paintings and photographs of black men as well as black characters in movies (sometimes played by whites in black-face) portray them with exaggerated facial features. In popular culture, these have served as objects of amusement and sometimes as marketing tools for selling products such as black shoe polish. With the social revolution of the mid-twentieth century, such images fell out of favor. Working with other progressive movements of the time (women’s liberation, the hippy revolution, sexual liberation, the anti-Vietnam movement, homosexual and lesbian rights, etc.), the black liberation movement did its best to undermine the social order and challenge norms.

The political and cultural movements of that era had a deep impact on the arts as well. In 1994, the struggle for black equality in the U.S. was the subject of a groundbreaking exhibition at the Whitney Museum of New York titled *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art* at which images of black men by some thirty artists, including Robert Mapplethorpe, were on view. Some depicted events and demonstrations, some expressed political dissent, others revealed the objectification of black male bodies, or focused on gender fluidity and a nuanced, liberated though not necessarily socially acceptable view of masculinity. Through this range of artworks, Thelma Golden, the exhibition’s curator, made clear that the African-American struggle for social equality and freedom was evident in the art of the previous decades (Golden 1994, 20).

The influence of younger American artists was felt in other parts of the world, including Africa. In 2010, for example, the Herzliya Museum of Contemporary Art in Israel mounted an impressive exhibition of images of black men by contemporary African artists, male and female (Njami and Zyss 2010).[[2]](#footnote-2) These were exhibited alongside images of male masculinity by African artists who had immigrated to the West, and whose work embodied the experience of migration and a multi-layered, hyphenated identity, the result of uprooting and building a new life elsewhere. Many of the male figures in these works were set against the red, black, and green pan-African flag, much as Thelma Golden had grouped the works according to three themes—red, black, and green—in the Whitney exhibit, In another,t devoted his at the 2003 Venice Biennale tos.Although no absolute consensus exists on the meaning of the flag’s hues, the red is usually said to symbolize the blood of black people struggling for liberation; the black, their skin color, and the green, to refer to territory, tradition, and potential growth.

**Representations of masculinity in Israeli art**

The representation of masculinity in Israeli art has its roots in the Bezalel Academy of Arts in Jerusalem, founded in 1906 . The image of the muscular pioneer of European extraction, “handsome with the beautiful forelock,” became inextricably associated with the emergence of Zionism in the 19th and 20th centuries. An early example from the 1920s is Reuven Ruben’s *Self-Portrait with Flower* (1923). Images of pioneers and brave soldiers of that period, including the photographs of Helmar Lerski, established the standard of masculinity for the worthy Israeli male—one based on the desirable manliness then in vogue.[[3]](#footnote-3) Nonetheless, a paradigmatic shift in the representation of the Israeli male occurred in 1967 with Igael Tumarkin’s *He Walked Through the Fields*.[[4]](#footnote-4) This shift continued as a result, inter alia, of the shock of the Yom Kippur War and the trickling down of post-Zionist ideas into local culture. The 1980s, for example, saw the appearance of “the new man,” one unafraid to break socially-constructed gender boundaries and express gender fluidity, as evident in the photography of Boaz Tal (Dekel 2009) or the paintings of Yaacov Mishori (Tannenbaum 2008, 50). In the wake of its massive penetration into popular culture in the 1990s and 2000s, the term “metrosexual” was added to the lexicon of Israel, also affecting the image of men in the visual arts (Refael 2006, 5). Today, young contemporary artists in Israel are adding yet other dimensions to masculinity, such as Guy Ben-Ner in *New Fatherhood* or Adi Ness, who intersects issues of gender and sexual orientation with representations of men.

**The perception of masculinity in general Israeli culture**

Any discussion of the history of art in Israel cannot ignore the influence of mass media. As a social field not directly dependent upon “high” art, and differing from museums and galleries, which have limited influence on the public, contemporary mass media has a much wider impact on the public. It also has the power to create affinity or difference between representations of men from different social groups. For example, it is important to understand how media images of men of Ethiopian origin resemble or contrast those of Mizrahi masculinity (Yosef 2010). Still, there are far more representations of Mizrahi than of Ethiopian men in local Israeli media.[[5]](#footnote-5) In this context, one can speak of “symbolic annihilation,” a term coined by media scholars Amit Kama and Anat First to signify a mechanism that excludes certain groups from daily reality by reducing their visibility in media and art, and by extension, their general social-public power. Such a process clearly betokens unequal power relations in society (Kama and First 2015, 89). Israeli-Ethiopians are definitely underrepresented in the media, and even when they do appear, they are generally represented in negative or stereotypical ways. As Kama and First note, theories of representation help us understand that photography and the media do not reflect or re-represent reality, but rather create and construct it (ibid, 82).

Gadi Ben Ezer, who studies the visibility and representation of Ethiopian Jews in Israel, notes that as members of a Jewish minority in Ethiopia, they believed that their sense of alienation would vanish once they moved to Israel “like a drop returning to the sea” (2010, 305). In Israel, however, their skin color set them apart, so that in many ways the strong sense of otherness they had experienced in Ethiopia only worsened. They were now subjected to the white gaze, which generated stereotypes about them. Despite their small number—only 2% of the country’s total population (Central Bureau of Statistics 2011)—they became the most “visible” immigrant group in Israel in recent years (Anteby-Yemini 2010, 43). Indeed, most Israelis have little personal interaction with Israeli-Ethiopians, which has contributed to stereotypes of this community as a whole and its subsequent exclusion (some obvious, some latent and indirect) from mainstream society. Indeed, the Ethiopians’ desire to be inconspicuous and “like all Israeli Jews” has not been realized, explains Ben Ezer, due to white Israeli attitudes and discrimination (2010, 306–07). “In Ethiopia,” Anteby-Yemini writes, “they never viewed themselves as “blacks.” Only after they arrived in Israel did they begin to describe themselves using this new category of color…in a certain sense, that is when they discovered their ‘blackness’” (2010, 48). As one such individual told her about his recent visit to his former country, “What I most enjoyed in Addis Ababa was that I could again feel invisible, that I wasn’t conspicuous because of my color, no one was looking at me, like in Israel” (ibid, 47). Sara Ahmed terms this the “economy of visibility” (2000), which is also the economy of being marked: the white gaze marks the people of Ethiopian descent as “blacks” in a “white” society, thereby positioning them as the “other” and condemning them as “outsiders.”

**Creating new representations in art**

Among the current male and female artists of Ethiopian descent in Israel, some find these representations relevant and with potential for dialogue and mutual influence, while others feel that they are completely irrelevant to their lives, and thus wish to create a new and separate visual lexicon. In either case, what is evident is the sophisticated ability of these artists to capture and formulate the black man’s experience in Israel in a broad range of media. The works discussed below capture various modes of masculinity in the context of work, institutional violence, the military, music, sexual orientation, tradition, intergenerational respect, etc.

*Men and work*

Tesfaye Tegegne creates complex sculptures out of innovative materials such as industrial paint, glues, polystyrene, and iron, which he integrates with and covers in banana leaves. This combination of materials raises associations between sophisticated technology, traditional modes of work, and meticulous, labor-intensive handiwork based on years of professional practice. In his work, the artist also tends to alludes to geographic places bound up with an agrarian society and a distinctive lifestyle. For his third solo exhibition in Israel, for example, Tegegne created a large sculpture of a man returning from the hunt. The figure, crafted from polystyrene and industrial glue, sheathed in banana leaves and resting on a square iron base (Figure 1) appears to be walking while carrying the animal he has slain. The label next to it read: “This artwork was inspired by my childhood memories from Ethiopia. A group would go hunting in the forest and return with their kill to show the villagers their courage. In this sculpture, a hunter is carrying the dead prey on his way to receive a blessing from his father, as is customary in southern Ethiopia.”

In this work, the artist shows esteem for the ancient traditions of the Beta Israel community and does not hesitate to depict the traditional gendered division of labor in Ethiopia. Tegegne’s sculptures stand in bold contrast to the images of male blackness by artists who feel it incumbent upon them to be “modern” and turn their back on any memory of their community’s customs. In addition, the sculpture raises another issue—an appreciation for ecological and environmental values, as reflected in the use of banana leaves. With its multi-layered meaning, the piece not only addresses memories of an Ethiopian village, but also references the contemporary problem of status (i.e., employment, wages, and social mobility). The sculpture reminds us that there are still significant differences among men in Israel, and that men of Ethiopian descent are often forced into low-paying manual labor that offers little opportunity for attaining social mobility (King, Fischman, and Wolde-Tzadick 2012; Government Program 2016, 20).

The photographer Esti Almo Wexler also focuses on masculinity in the Israeli job market. In a 2006 photo, she captures three young men who decided to open a restaurant together (Figure 2). An image of three successful black businessmen is a rarity in Israeli visual culture, which tends to perpetuate class-conscious and colonialist views of Ethiopian immigrants and to show such men working low-level jobs as street sweepers or factory laborers. In a 2012 interview, Almo Wexler explained that some people in the art world expect her to photograph heart-wrenching images of the hardscrabble lives of Ethiopian immigrants in caravans, but that she is unwilling to do so. “There are many stories of immigration,” she stated. “I am telling only one of them, in another way. In my art, I’m not interested in going to poor neighborhoods and so forth because that’s not my narrative. My parents are learned people, they live in Jerusalem, they worked hard and got ahead! They always made it possible for me to study whatever I want” (Dekel and Almo Wexler 2012). Almo Wexler wishes to go beyond the stereotypes and social constructs of Ethiopian men to show the broad range of “types” within their community—young and old, professionals and laborers, religious and secular, residents of Tel Aviv and of Israel’s geographic periphery, poor and wealthy. She offers us a sober and contemporary picture, as she deconstructs imaginary groups from their invented homogeneity. In her words:

One of the reasons I chose to be a photographer and filmmaker is because I did not find anything in the Israeli media that represents me, meaning someone originally from Ethiopia, but who is already somewhere else…I’m trying to create new portraits that draw upon paintings, film, literature, and various cultures together…I think that anyone who lives in some culture starts to become assimilated to it, I’m in a constant process of absorption, but it’s also a search for an inner voice. On the one hand, I can say that getting a B.A. in art from Bezalel and an M.A. in film from Tel Aviv University is part of my identity because I studied about all kinds of western artists; but, on the other hand, the fact that I choose black images for my work is just as relevant and authentic for me (ibid.).

Presenting Israeli men of Ethiopian descent as well-educated entrepreneurs and professionals is Almo Wexler’s way of normalizing such images and bringing them into the reality of Israeli society. But above all, she wishes to promote a more complex and nuanced view of Israeli-Ethiopian man than that of the past.

*Men and institutional violence*

From time to time, images of men of Ethiopian descent do appear in the media, generally in a negative context.[[6]](#footnote-6) Since the summer of 2015, representations of clashes between citizens of Ethiopian descent and the police have been added to this repertoire. In that year, many members of that community took to the streets in Israeli cities to protest their ongoing oppression, the discrimination against them, and especially, the police violence directed at their youth (Admasu 2015).[[7]](#footnote-7) The clashes between them proved, once again, that racism is deeply embedded in the Israeli establishment and society, and that any encounter between black and white citizens is fraught with explosive tension. Interestingly, these clashes coincided with the “Baltimore events” and the rise of the “Black Lives Matter” movement in the United States.

The repeated incidents of police violence against Israeli-Ethiopians led to a spectrum of artistic representations of the state of affairs. A series of paintings by Nirit Takele, for example, captures Israeli-Ethiopian men in various situations, particularly during protests. *Untitled*, a 2015 painting, depicts three light-skinned men pinning down a young black man (Figure 3). In a virtuoso play of shadows transitioning to rich dark hues, Takele builds the dynamism and volume of the figures while effectively addressing the unequal balance of power between the white representatives of the establishment and the dark citizen pinned to the floor, whose clothing has been torn off during the struggle. The imbalance is represented in motion as a closed elliptical whirlwind from which there is no exit. For many young people, despair and hopelessness in the face of racism and police brutality has undermined their faith in institutions, as, despite frequent government declarations, little has been done to improve their lot, help them bridge the economic gap, or deal with discrimination (Goren 2015, Jan 2016). As a result, they refrain from involvement in general society and draw strength from the energies of their own community, thereby adhering to the familiar principles of identity politics and the politics of recognition. “Identity politics,” in fact, has become a label for a wide range of activism and theoretical discourse of non-hegemonic social groups. It offers excluded groups the possibility of freedom and autonomy within the general social in which they live (Ring Peterson 2012). These groups make demands that are important in their own eyes, but do not necessarily resonate with the dominant culture and the issues it regards as significant. Groups desiring recognition—not according to a separatist or binary worldview—demand what is called a “politics of recognition” (Fraser 2004). In other words, they want official and respectful recognition that would also be reflected in the fair distribution of allocations and support for excluded cultural groups with particularistic ethnic identities (Dekel 2013, 38–40).[[8]](#footnote-8)

To return to Takele’s work, the black man is composed of different planes of shadow, which convey an impressive volume that alludes to his ability—and that of others in his community—to construct their own identity and meaning without begging for permission or acceptance. Takele thus critiques hegemonic society as she draws with a steady and balanced hand the asymmetric power relations between representatives of the authority and establishment and ordinary citizens, and between different groups within Israeli society, including whites and blacks.

*Soldiers and socialization in Israeli culture through army service*

The painting by Tal Magos depicts a saluting combat soldier with the flag of Israel in the background. He displays an officer’s insignia on the shoulder of his uniform, and wears a purple beret and vest for his communications equipment and other combat devices. Gazing into the distance, he seems intent and focused on his mission (Figure 4).

Military service in Israel is a complex experience that offers soldiers a chance to strengthen and empower themselves, provides them with skills and expertise in professional fields, but also allows them to exercise aggression and violence. The army too is a body that excludes and discriminates against some who serve in it. Nonetheless, many see it primarily as a rite of passage into manhood that breeds courage and the power to protect. During their army service, young men undergo a process that leaves them with lifelong impressions and adds a new dimension to their identity. This positive process takes place if they feel that their military service has been meaningful and effective, particularly if they have served in combat and experienced male fraternity, bravery, and a chance to contribute to the greater good (Sasson-Levy 2005). Military service can also lead veteran soldiers to desirable jobs and serve as a means of upscaling and gaining social mobility.

Studies such as those conducted by Malka Shabtay seek to emphasize the positive and empowering contributions that the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) offers young men of Ethiopian descent (Shabtay 1997). Her research emphasizes socialization within the military and the power of Zionist nationalism to improve self-image and heighten a sense of belonging in the army and state. Yet we must also consider the flip side of the problem as discussed by Flora Koch Davidovich in a 2011 study. One of her findings was the lower percentage of Israeli-Ethiopians offered officer training as compared with their peers (8% versus 14%). She also notes the higher percentage of Israeli-Ethiopian soldiers discharged from the IDF before completing their full term of service (approximately 20% versus 15% of the whole) and their proportionately greater chance of being incarcerated in military prisons (despite constituting 12% of the total population of imprisoned soldiers, they amount to only 1.5% of the army (Koch Davidovich 2011). In short, the Israeli army can be seen as a social stratifying mechanism that does not necessarily benefit disadvantaged groups (Sasson Levy and Levy 2005). Indeed, the military administration and Israeli society do not give adequate thought to why so many soldiers of Ethiopian descent end up in prison after going AWOL or deserting, even though they often do so to support their families economically (Cohen and Salem 2011). If we now return to Magos’ painting, we may wonder whether this soldier, and many others of Ethiopian descent, received the entitlements concomitant with their investment in military service—which they fulfilled with devotion—from the Israeli army or society. We may ask whether the tense salute and sidelong gaze are indication of total faith in the military ethos and Israeli nationalism, or an invitation to rethink the situation of Israeli-Ethiopian soldiers within various IDF frameworks.

*Masculinity and music*

Many young Israeli-Ethiopians are drawn to American rap and hip-hop or to reggae and Rastafarianism (which link Jamaica and Ethiopia), but local music that matches their experience in their own country, Israel, is the one to which they prefer to listen.

When Elazar Tamano made a painting of three members of the K.G.C. band and posted it on Facebook on 20 December 2015, he wrote: “Good week, beautiful people…The year of 2015 is coming to its end. Each one of us has a unique way to sum up the passing year, I have my art to express what I went through this year. So a second before this beautiful year comes to an end, I want to share with you the project ‘My Painting’s Playlist,’ a project in which I draw portraits of the singers that I listen to while I’m painting. So K.G.C., thank you for all the powerful words and the amazing muse” (Figure 5).

David Ratner, author of a book on the musical preferences of Israeli-Ethiopians notes that in the 1980s and 1990s, when they first arrived Israel and were urged to adopt an Israeli-Jewish national identity, their own identity began changing as they adopted to the dynamics of economic and cultural globalization (2015, 19). Nonetheless, he goes on to argue, along with their identity and national identification, we must take into account their global consumption of music, which has contributed to their multi-layered identity.[[9]](#footnote-9) Ratner offers a more complex analysis than does Malka Shabtay in her 2001 study of music consumption by young Israeli-Ethiopians, which was based on a binary analysis of data gathered from interviews that broke respondents down into those “belonging to” or “alienated from” Israeli society as well as those preferring local music or international music.[[10]](#footnote-10)

Ratner, by contrast, feels that hip-hop culture and rap music should not be perceived as a monolithic choice, a pathology, a sign of the adoption of an inauthentic identity, or signifying an identity crisis, but rather as a process through which Israeli-Ethiopian youth construct a multi-layered, transnational identity. In his view, hip-hop is a means of expressing identification with the experience of exclusion and racism elsewhere in the world. He thus suggests taking the Black Atlantic approach, led by scholars such as Stuart Hall and Paul Gilroy, which draws identity from pride in historical figures such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, but also sees in music a chance to connect with other communities of the African Diaspora, and thus to reduce the isolation felt by blacks in predominantly white societies. As Ratner states, “Identifying with hip hop is a way to bond to the black, transnational diaspora, with whom they feel connected” (2015, 41). Ratner is notably not proposing the existence of an essentialist link (a shared African origin) among members of the black diaspora, but is pointing to a symbolic resource that can help them mobilize resistance, assertiveness, and the creativity to build a sense of community.[[11]](#footnote-11) Following intellectuals such as Bourdieu (1984), Petersen (1992), and Bryson (1997), he claims that young Israeli-Ethiopians’ interest in this music provides them with the cultural capital that they need to construct an identity within Israeli society. Accordingly, their musical taste is not dictated by the establishment’s definition of “proper” culture and “right” taste (Ratner 2015, 102), but is rather a synthesis of different kinds of music that serve their needs.

The interviews conducted by Ratner bring up two key issues: first, the sense of being “black” in a “white” society; and second, the subjects’ relationship with money, employment, social class, and economic mobility in light of social and institutional barriers. Many respondents spoke about the despair of young people who “did the right thing’, acquired higher education, but still could not find jobs commensurate with their educational level and occupational skills (Ratner 2015, 153). These issues rouse anger and frustration, along with belief in the righteousness of their demands, and find expression in artists such as Elazar Tamano who painted the K.G.C. group, whose lyrics address these problems.

*Inter-generational manhood, venerated dignitaries*

In 2014, Gidon Agaza documented kesim and elderly dignitaries of the Ethiopian community during the Jerusalem Day celebrations at Mt. Herzl. The Memorial Day for Ethiopian Jews who perished in Sudan on their way to Israel falls on the same day. In the photograph, six older men are garbed in traditional robes that convey their regal dignity. A ceremonial parasol is held over the heads of both the dignitary on the extreme left and the one second from the right. Several microphones, through which they will address the audience, are visible (Figure 6).

The status and authority of the community’s kesim are a sensitive and painful issue for Israeli-Ethiopians (Sharabi and Kaplan 2014). Many within and outside the community are working to change this, including Rabbis Reuven Yasu and Dr. Sharon Shalom, who have written about how the rabbinic administration in Israel has stripped the Ethiopian kesim and other Beta Israel spiritual leaders of their authority. As they note:

Despite the cumulative experience of Israeli institutions in absorbing waves of immigrants, absorption of the immigrants from Ethiopia has been beset by serious difficulties. The main one, which most preoccupies the community today, is their Halakhic status. After thirty years of absorption in the Holy Land, immigrants from Ethiopia still have a hard time being accepted as equal under the law, before the religious councils, and before community rabbis in Israel. The immigrants from Ethiopia now face a patently unreasonable situation in which they are forced to prove their Judaism. Some claim that this is no different from the immigrants of other diaspora communities who are required to prove their Judaism, but the Jews from Ethiopia are accorded different treatment. A child of Ethiopian descent who is born and grows up in Israel will discover upon his decision to marry that in almost all the religious councils in Israel, there is a special track for immigrants from Ethiopia (Yasu and Shalom 2015).

The dignitaries photographed by Agaza reflect the desire to preserve the honor and authority of these elderly men, who are the bearers of ancient knowledge and wisdom (e.g., only kesim know the ancient language of Ge’ez and read the Orit, and the older dignitaries also serve as mediators in the community). Representations such as these evoke respect for the elderly and relate to a 2002 drawing by Almo Ishta that shows his father on the arduous march through Sudan to Israel (Figure 7)—an image that clearly conveys the demand that the narrative of Ethiopian Jews be incorporated into the general narrative of Zionism. They also seek to shatter the myth that it was Israel that inspired Ethiopian Jews to immigrate to Israel; here we see an elderly but determined man who takes his fate into his own hands and sets out for Zion. The sacrifice of the family head, who puts everything at stake and leaves Ethiopia, is embodied in Ishta’s representation. The artist, who designed the official 2011 postal stamp commemorating the immigration of Ethiopia’s Jews and was selected as designer of the official medal on the subject, does not hesitate to portray his father, who represents tradition, with pride, even at the price of being labelled “nostalgic” (Bekaya et al. 2013).

*Masculinity and sexual orientation*

Gender studies have long noted the difficulty of changing gender stereotypes or softening public resistance to the break-down of gender constructions that narrow the options for how women and men choose to live. In *Masculinities*, Raewyn Connell explains how social processes shape perceptions of masculinity in Western culture, noting that masculinity is not a biological-essentialist attribute, but a fluid social construct that alters within different cultures and ideologies (Connell 2005). In Israel, the traditional male gender stereotype is generally more inflexible than its female counterpart (e.g., people more readily accept a woman’s decision to become a pilot or judge than a man’s to become a cosmetologist or preschool teacher). Resistance is even stronger to male homosexuality due to the masculine image promoted by the Israeli military and its promotion of hetero-normativity.[[12]](#footnote-12) As one Ethiopian-Israeli artist who requested anonymity, writes:

Sexual identity versus an entire tradition,

In a room without light or walls of understanding,

I didn’t choose to be different,

I also didn’t choose to deny it,

And the moment that I chose to open a window,

Friends and family opened a door for me,

And now there is light (Anon. 2016).

This artist also shot a series of black-and-white photographs of a young male body —that of the artist himself, who identifies himself as an Israeli-Ethiopian gay man. One photo shows the figure, wearing an undershirt and shorts, seated in the middle of a room with minimalist, modest furnishings (Figure 8). Like the others in the series, it is marked by a dark shadow that runs diagonally from the top right to the mid-left side of the photo, sharply intersecting the composition. The shadow plays a dual role: first, by concealing his face it safeguards his identity as he knows that his community will not accept his sexual orientation. Second, the play of shadows in the photo as a whole remind the viewer that there are many shades of grey between the two extremes of black and white, thereby problematizing what is “right” and “wrong” or “proper” and “deviant.” A man’s gayness indicates nothing about his masculinity as sex, gender, and sexual orientation are separate categories, which this artist insists on distinguishing. Gay men often encounter sweeping stereotypes that, reducing them to their sexual practices, ignore their multi-dimensionality. In short, the message of the photographs is that maleness is not, like black or white, good or bad, a fixed category. Homosexuality does not cancel masculinity, nor vice versa. It is society that makes these definitions and artificial distinctions, but there is a harmonious whole that encompasses everything, not as black or white, but as infinite shades of grey and ways of being masculine.

This artist is a member of KALA (Hebrew abbreviation of Kehila Lahatavit Ethiopit, “LGBT Ethiopian Community”). Founded in 2015, KALA has a Facebook page that regularly posts announcements, activities, and information of interest to LGBT Israeli-Ethiopians such as seminars for youth, social events and parties. The organization offers a support system and non-judgmental space for its community. Most of its members are out of the closet and participate in activities and events hosted by other Israeli LGBT organizations. At the fifteenth “Other Sex” conference held at Tel-Aviv University, KALA representatives spoke about their similarities with other LGBT groups in Israel, but also discussed issues distinctive to those of Ethiopian descent, including the taboos on non-heteronormative sex within the Israeli-Ethiopian community. This may account for the lack of images of gay masculinity by any Israeli-Ethiopian artists other than the anonymous one discussed above.

**Into the (different) future of representations**

The aim of this paper is not to arrive at comprehensive conclusions about or to define the distinguishing features of Israeli-Ethiopian art or representations of black men, but rather to contribute to the discussion of this issue. Representations of black men in Israel are clearly a social construction founded on gender-racial stereotypes rather than pure biology (Shenhav and Yonah 2008). In contrast to representations of black men in the United States, for example, which draw either on the myth of a powerful and frightening virility that inevitably leads to sexual violence, incarceration, disease, or drugs, or that of a prodigious athleticism or musical genius, representations of black men in Israel show them aging, passive, and stuck in the past, or else as exercising violence against their female partners, or, if young, as social drop-outs engaging in disorderly conduct or incarcerated. Only occasionally do they convey a positive image of a successful Israeli-Ethiopian man (usually in the military). These images have real impact on their subjects as they distort their real-life experiences, creating and perpetuating stereotypes that become obstacles to their success in many arenas and sometimes turn their bodies into imaginary sites of danger (as in the belief that they all have AIDS) (Ferada Senebato 2008).

This paper argues that Israeli-Ethiopian men have not one but rather various, hybrid, and hyphenated identities by drawing on post-colonialist critiques that undermine the possibility of fixing subjects with pre-assigned identities—be they ethnic, gender, national, or other—because all men experience different life situations (e.g. place of residence, educational opportunities, etc.). Unlike the gender theories of the 1970s and 1980s, which analyzed the elements of power in representations of masculinity to show how privilege is created and perpetuated, those of the present are more nuanced and multi-layered. Moreover, contemporary research points to ways in which men can experience power and exclusion simultaneously (Kegan-Gardiner 2002), so that even if Israeli-Ethiopian enjoy power and agency, they may still face disadvantages and experience exclusion. In light of this insight, I suggest that when dealing with images of black males, we move beyond the binary dichotomies—black versus white, nationalist versus individualist, domestic versus public, career versus leisure—established by the patriarchal perspective. It is in this spirit that the African-American philosopher bell hooks writes in *Black Looks: Race and Representation*: “For those of us who dare to desire differently, who seek to look away from the conventional ways of seeing blackness and ourselves, the issue of race and representation is not just a question of critiquing the status quo. It is also about transforming the image, creating alternatives, asking ourselves questions about what types of images subvert, pose critical alternatives, and transform our worldviews and move us away from dualistic thinking about good and bad” (1992, 4). Indeed, a fresh reading of images of Israeli-Ethiopian men in the hegemonic Israeli art world offers an opportunity to see the dawn of a new Israeliness.

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1. This article does not take an essentialist approach that uses one or another characteristic to describe men of Ethiopian origin. Its goal is rather to conceptualize and describe the experiences of these men, as they themselves understand and experience them. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. For other examples in Africa, such as contemporary art in Nigeria, see Okeke-Agulu 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Representations of this type of masculinity also appear in tangential fields such as literature. The publication of Moshe Shamir’s seminal novel *He Walked through the Fields* (1947), for example, profoundly reinforced the status of the tough, virile, mythological *sabra* (native-born Israeli). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The cultural representation of men in Israel has gone through many phases. In the late 1960s, Igael Tumarkin created *He Walked through the Fields*, a sculpture of a vulnerable and wounded man that differed significantly from the acceptable image of men in the euphoria that followed Israel’s military accomplishments in the Six-Day War. Tumarkin’s sculpture opposes militarism and, in the words of the curator Ellen Ginton, “constitutes a precedent for political defiance, particularly in its physical-psychological aspect, and this with a nod toward literary works and the intense use of the body on which struggle, vulnerability, and violence are played out (Ginton 1998, 28). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Some refer to Israelis of Ethiopian descent as Mizrahi Jews and call for them to work together with Jews of Arab countries as both belong to non-hegemonic groups in Israeli society that could benefit from joint activism on issues such as exclusion from decision-making, the egalitarian distribution of national resources, etc. Others claim that these groups do not share a broad common denominator and should therefore not unite in a common social and political cause. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. A paradoxical dichotomy is evident in the representation of Israeli-Ethiopian men: on the one hand, are the images with positive connotations, such as soldiers serving in the army and working in respectable public jobs, on the other—and far more often—are the media images that demonize and pathologize them by focusing on disorderly conduct among their youth or the violence of their men toward women. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The demonstrations in the summer of 2015 were preceded by protests in Kiryat Malakhi in 2012 caused by incidents of racism, namely, the refusal to sell apartments to Ethiopians based on the directives of Rabbi Pinto (Harush 2012). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. It should be noted that identity politics in contemporary art are part of a multi-layered and not binary discourse on which contemporary critics have offered complex views. More than a few have pointed to flaws in the strategy of identity politics, which often flattens complexity and differences, both in Western and non-Western countries. For more, see Ring Peterson 2012. In my view, the intersectionality approach, which looks at the junction of diverse dimensions of identity, offers the most nuanced understanding of artists, particularly migrant artists. For more, see Dekel 2016, 7–11. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. These musical styles are varied so a general definition of “rap” or “reggae” is impossible. As David Ratner notes, this sub-culture is characterised by a variety of styles. For a deeper explanation in the spirit of the sociologist Bourdieu, particularly in his work [*Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Distinction_(1979_book)), see Ratner 2015, 59. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. It is important to remember that the hip-hop culture and rap adopted by young Israeli-Ethiopians are bound to the mega-corporate world as much as to small industries. The music can be split into sub-genres such as political rap, Afrocentric rap, and gangsta rap. For more, see Ratner 2015, 32. Lisa Anteby-Yemini (2003) examined how young people of Ethiopian origin have come to feel connected to hip-hop culture, not just via the music, but by adopting the clothes and hair styles associated with it, the entertainment that accompanies it in clubs, and by decorating their private and public space with images of its cult heroes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. I tend to agree with Stuart Hall (1992, 4), who suggests that the practices used by blacks to connect with other blacks should be understood not as a search for historical roots (which to some extent are purely imaginary), but as an active search for new paths that look ahead and define the goals towards which they should be striving rather than longing for a better past. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. Nevertheless, we note that changes in the image of the Israeli male in recent years have also affected the artistic representation of Israeli soldiers. Over the past decade, images of gay soldiers as well as homo-erotica have emerged in the work of artists such as Adi Nes, who looks at the military experience of men in terms of the formation of their sexual identity, male bonding, and the intense physicality of army combat service. For more, see Maor 2004. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)