Abstract

Israeli society is not racially divided between Blacks and whites in the way that American society has long been. Still, Blackness in Israel has shaped the relations between Jews and Arabs, Ashkenazim and Mizrahim, Ethiopians and immigrant workers from Africa. Despite the salience of Blackness in Israel, scholars of Israel and the wider academic field of Israel Studies have largely ignored it so far. In this essay I argue that the reason for this scholarly neglect is that in Israel, Blackness does not neatly fit into the conventional configurations that exists in countries like the U.S. and the U.K. I further stipulate that in its uniqueness, the Israeli case shows that Blackness transgresses color lines in new and unexpected ways, offering fresh perspectives on Israeli society and challenging the arbitrary stipulations of Blackness as a concept.

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As an Israeli anthropologist observing the massive protests that have erupted across the United States in response to the police’s brutal killing of another unarmed African American, George Floyd, I cannot avoid making comparisons to the place I come from. There are many significant differences, but also some similarities. While Israeli society is not racially divided between Blacks and whites in the way that American society has long been, Israelis are certainly not color-blind, and having black skin can also have fatal consequences in Israel. For instance, in June 2019, Solomon Teka, an 18-year-old Israeli Jew of Ethiopian descent, was shot to death by an Israeli policeman, sparking widespread demonstrations and riots.

The Solomon Teka incident was not an unprecedented event. In April 2015, video footage of Israeli policemen brutalizing Damas Pakada, a Jewish Ethiopian soldier, moved thousands of Israelis, Ethiopians and others, to the streets. One of the reasons this incident prompted a strong reaction was the fact that Pakada was an on-duty soldier wearing his military uniform. Military service is widely perceived as the ultimate rite of passage into Israeli society and as a stamp of approval for being a loyal Israeli citizen. Watching the footage of his assault (that was captured by a security camera), many Israelis saw Pakada not only as an individual but as an example of the successful assimilation of Ethiopians in Israel. Yet, the incident revealed that despite this assimilation, Ethiopian Israelis still suffered from police brutality and discrimination, even when they are in uniform. Thus, in their protests, Israeli Ethiopians accused the police, and the Israeli establishment more broadly, of racism against their community due to their skin color.

Such claims by Ethiopian Israelis, and the statistics that support them, have had a strong impact on Israeli public opinion (Tabakoff 2019). Notwithstanding the many schisms and tensions characterizing Israeli society, most Israelis still adhere officially at least — to the idea of eliminating the differences between Jews in the country. Although the term “Black” was used in Israeli discourse even before the establishment of the state and was attributed to various groups, Israelis do not usually perceive themselves or groups in Israeli society in racial terms. Therefore, the Pakada incident, revealing this hidden racial aspect, gained widespread attention in Israel well beyond the Ethiopian community.

This was not the first time, however, that Blackness was associated with official racism and discrimination in Israel. In 1971, second-generation Mizrahi immigrants living in the poor neighborhood of Musrara in Jerusalem formed the Israeli Black Panther Movement. By identifying themselves as Blacks, these Mizrahi youngsters alluded to the gap between the official Zionist narrative of ingathering the Jewish exiles and the reality in which some Jews remained outsiders in their home country (Frankel 2008). For the Israeli Black Panthers, Blackness served mainly as a metaphor; whereas, for Ethiopian Israelis, Blackness is the material fact of their skin color that makes them a target for institutional and systemic discrimination.

Despite the salience of “Blackness” in Israel, scholars of Israel and the wider academic field of Israel Studies have largely ignored it so far. In this essay, I argue that the reason for this scholarly neglect is that most of the candidates for Blackness in Israel do not neatly fit into the conventional configurations of Blackness that exists in countries like the U.S. and the U.K. Hence, to better understand Blackness in Israel, it must be examined from its regional perspective. This regional perspective, I claim, will not only highlight aspects of racism in Israeli society but also broaden our understanding of Blackness as a concept.

Blackness and the Zionist national character

The first step in this direction would be to recall that what we now consider “white” Jews have been historically racialized as non-white subjects in European societies. Representations of Jews as possessing certain physical characteristics, including a different skin color, marked them as “others” in Germany, France, Poland and other nations across Europe (Boyarin 1997). In this context, and in an effort to take part in the historical turn to nationalism, European Jews embraced some of the anti-Semitic stereotypes attributed to them — and their bodies. For the Zionist movement, which called for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine, the construction of a national identity was akin to a process of mental and physical rehabilitation. Such national consciousness, claimed Zionist leaders, could only be achieved by actual deeds, namely returning to their ancestral homeland, cultivating it, and defending it. Imagining themselves as successors of the glorified heroes of biblical times, early Zionists aimed at reconnecting to the region, hoping to feel in-

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1 My edited volume Blackness in Israel: Rethinking Racial Boundaries (Routledge, forthcoming) is the first attempt to rectify this neglect.
On the one hand, the Arabs’ skills and adjustment to local conditions were perceived as an ideal model of indigeneity. On the other hand, Arabs’ bodies and manners were also associated with backwardness and primitivity. As the conflict in the region escalated into violence, positive association diminished, and body features attributed to Arabs often denoted potential danger.

The blackened bodies of Zionist pioneers, and their Sabra sons and daughters, should be seen against three opposing models. First, the model of the European Jew’s body, who despite being considered non-white in European eugenic terms, has been depicted in Zionist discourse as pale and feminine. Second, the model of American Jews, who went through a successful process of assimilation into the white mainstream American society (Brodkin 1998). Third, the model of the local Arab, to whom Zionists had an ambivalent relationship. On the one hand, the Arabs’ skills and adjustment to local conditions were perceived as an ideal model of indigeneity. On the other hand, Arabs’ bodies and manners were also associated with backwardness and primitivity. As the conflict in the region escalated into violence, positive association diminished, and body features attributed to Arabs often denoted potential danger.

Palestinians who became citizens of Israel after the establishment of the state, embraced this symbolism of color. As Honaida Ghanim (forthcoming) reveals, insofar as Israeli Jews became whiter, Blackness served as a symbolic resource for Palestinian Israelis in their effort to construct their sense of national identity following the Nakba. Not unlike Zionists — and other ethno-national movements — their imagined bloodline, connecting the people to their land, was indexed by color. Since the 1950s, Palestinian poets like Rashid Hassan and Mahmoud Darwish depicted their people as made of the same substance of the local soil, making the dark complexion of Palestinians a central motif in their poetry. This metaphorical strategy achieved its full effect when opposed to Israeli Jews — and later to the Jewish state itself — who were depicted in terms of whiteness. Color thus decoded Jewish-Arab relations in Israel. Jews have largely identified themselves as white, while Palestinians identified themselves as Black, associating the opposing color to delegitimize the other group.

First indications of Blackness in Israel
Soon after they arrived in Palestine in the early 20th century, European Jews were attracted to the dark appearance of the local Arab fallahin (peasants), whom they saw as the missing link to their imagined history in that land. This fascination was ambivalent; as exotic as they were, the local Arabs and their ways also signified backwardness that stood in sharp opposition to the European civilization that was left behind. Aiming to reduce the Jewish community’s reliance on Arab workers, Zionist leaders embarked on a plan to bring Yemenite Jews to Palestine. For Zionist leaders like Arthur Ruppin, Yemenites’ dark skin indicated a “touch of Arab blood” that made them, according to Shmuel Yavnieli, “natural workers [at] the same backward level as the [Arab] fallahin” (quoted in Shohat 1997: 50).

The mass influx of Jewish immigrants during the 1950s, the first decade after independence, reinforced the division between Jews of European background and those of Middle Eastern and North African background, who are now referred to as Mizrahim. The latter’s skin color has been construed as dark to emphasize their difference and their alleged incompetence. In an infamous journalistic portrayal of Moroccan immigrants living in a transit camp, the writer referred to them as “Africans” and asserted that “this is a people whose primitivity sets a record… only a tad better than the general level of [their former] Arab, Negro and Berber neighbors” (Gelblum 1948, quoted in Chetrit 2010:33). This reference to Moroccans as Africans, comparing them to “Negros,” employed an imagined color-line to place the responsibility for the immigrants’ poor conditions on cultural differences rather than the state.

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2 One example made famous is Menachem Begin’s pejorative reference to Yasser Arafat — leader of the PLO and later president of the Palestinian Authority — as “the man with hair on his face.”
Conversely, the symbolism of color has also been used to criticize the state for enacting discriminatory policies against Mizrahim. In 1953, the German-born journalist Uri Avneri coined the phrase *Dofkim et hashchorim* (“Screwing the Blacks”), a phrase that has been adopted by Mizrahim six years later, during the first mass riots that erupted in the Haifa slum neighborhood of Wadi Salib. A decade later, in 1971, a collaboration between the leftist intellectual group Matzpen and Mizrahi youth of Jerusalem’s Musrara neighborhood paved the way to the aforementioned formation of the Israeli Black Panthers. Young and furious as they were, the Panthers were inspired by the American movement and its machismo images. In the Israeli context, the movement’s name had another — more local — signification. Mizrahi people were often referred to by Ashkenazim as *Schwarze hayes*, a Yiddish expression whose literal meaning is “black animals.” The Mizrahi activists reclaimed the derogatory name imposed on them as a means of empowerment (Frankel 2008, Shenhav 2006). As Frankel (forthcoming) states, the case of the Israeli Black Panthers exemplified the potential political collaboration between Ashkenazim and Mizrahi as well as its inherent limits. Whereas the elitist Ashkenazi Matzpen group intended the collaboration to promote a class-based struggle, the Mizrahi activists refused to ignore the underpinning ethnic dimension and eventually departed from their Ashkenazi patronage (see also Lev and Shenhav 2009). The Black Panthers episode was brief yet significant. Beyond its unquestioned belated effects on Israeli society and politics (such as its contribution to the political turnover in 1977), it featured two complementary aspects that remain pivotal to Blackness in Israel to this day. First, it established an association between Blackness and disfranchisement. As I will show, this association is too often taken for granted. In accordance, any expression of Blackness that deviates from disfranchisement is often being condemned as “inauthentic.” Second, it endorsed the African American experience as the quintessential case of Blackness, and therefore, as the ultimate reference and reservoir of images and symbols to borrow from. These complementary aspects continued to affect Blackness in Israel. As I will show in the next sections, they have promoted the awareness of Blackness among Israelis in two developments: the first is the arrival of a large number of migrants from Africa to Israel since the mid-1980s, and the second is the adoption of postmodern critical perspectives in Israeli academia, specifically in the social sciences and humanities.

**African migrants in Israel**

Israel had no significant population originating from sub-Saharan Africa before the arrival of Ethiopian Jews, mainly in the two big waves, Operation Moses in 1984 (some 8,000 people) and Operation Solomon in 1991 (14,000 people). The seminal experience of Ethiopians in Israel was, therefore, one of “discovering” their physical difference. A difference that was not necessarily perceived by the Ethiopians in a simple dichotomy of Black and white. As scholars point out, racial categorization in Ethiopia includes more than two options. In Ethiopia, most Ethiopian Jews regarded themselves as “reds” and distinguished themselves from those whom they considered as Blacks, who occupied a lower social status than they did (Salamon 2003). Thus, a Black identity was not obvious for Ethiopians in Israel, but instead was “learned” as Ethiopians gradually realized how other Israelis look, think, and talk about them. Indeed, for many Israelis, the visible otherness of Ethiopians was related to a long history of “folk knowledge” about Africa as “the Black continent” and the supposed primitive nature of its inhabitants (Bar Yosef 2013).

“The blood scandal” was a defining moment for Ethiopian Israelis. Clarifying boundaries of belonging, it pushed many in the Ethiopian community to embrace racial self-identification and to affiliate themselves with a global Black diaspora.

Being African and Black, Ethiopians seemed to signify the far edge of Judaism and Zionism (Seeman 2009). The Ethiopian community, known as Beta Israel, was recognized as Jews by the Chief Rabbinate in Israel as early as 1973, a decision that qualified them for Aliyah (immigration to Israel). Yet, their Jewishness was often questioned. Many of them were required to go through a full Orthodox conversion, children were placed in the religious education system to make sure they received “proper” Jewish education, and the religious establishment did not acknowledge the authority of the community’s spiritual leaders. In 1996, an Israeli journalist revealed that the Israeli medical establishment discarded all blood donations given by Ethiopian immigrants out of fear of HIV/AIDS contamination. In Israel, blood donation has symbolic aspects of brotherhood and contribution to the Israeli collective. Categorical rejection of all blood donations from an entire community, therefore, symbolized the exclusion of this community from the Jewish national collective.

“The blood scandal” was a defining moment for Ethiopian Israelis. Clarifying boundaries of belonging, it pushed many in the Ethiopian community to embrace racial self-identification and to affiliate themselves with a global Black diaspora (Antebi 2004, Ben Eliezer 2008). They were inspired by African American celebrities, especially famous rappers and athletes,
Recently, protesters have also used the hashtag #Black_Lives_Matter_Israel, locating their protest in a global virtual sphere (rather than the local Israeli context) and alluding to their affiliation with other Black people, particularly those in the United States. who signified power and success. Many Ethiopians have also dedicated themselves to studying the history of the Black Power movement as a source of inspiration for their own struggle and resistance. A new study by Omer Keynan (forthcoming) shows that nowadays, third-generation Ethiopian Israelis use social media not only to learn about the history of the Black Power movement but also to appropriate their ideas and terminology in their own discourse about their local situation. Recently, protesters have also used the hashtag #Black_Lives_Matter_Israel, locating their protest in a global virtual sphere (rather than the local Israeli context) and alluding to their affiliation with other Black people, particularly those in the United States.

Fourteen months after being beaten by policemen, the newspapers reported that the Ethiopian soldier Damas Pakada became an officer in the Israeli Army. Two years later, a popular news program on Israeli television featured a segment about the officer Pakada, titled “The victory of Damas: the battered soldier who became an outstanding officer.” Made by the program’s Ethiopian reporter Branu Tégene, the segment ended with an optimistic message of self-fulfillment, stating that “despite his difficult experience, [Pakada] emerged stronger, more connected to his roots, determined to continue to fight for his community and for himself” (Quoted in Keynan, forthcoming). By embracing their Blackness as a source of empowerment, third-generation Ethiopian-Israelis reassess their “roots”; unlike the second generation, whose identification with (and sometimes even as) African Americans aimed to “bypass” the backwardness attributed to their parents, Ethiopians today are more open to integrate their grandparents’ cultural heritage as an asset rather than a burden (Hankins, forthcoming).

Since the early 1990s, new groups of Africans have arrived in Israel: first, labor migrants from some 20 different sub-Saharan countries, and then, refugees and asylum seekers, mainly from Sudan and Eritrea. Although there are many differences between these two groups (as well as differences within them), they nonetheless introduced a new Blackness challenge to the state and local society. Being illegal, undocumented, and non-Jewish, their Blackness could not have been “integrated” as a component of the Israeli social mosaic. Unlike Ethiopian Jews, whose Blackness signifies the diversity of Judaism, and hence supports the Zionist narrative of the ingathering of all Jews to Israel, these Africans’ Blackness signifies the other side of otherness.

As I showed in the case of the Ethiopian Israelis, Africans seldom think of themselves as Black before they arrive in countries with a Black-white dichotomy convention (Hintzen and Rahier 2003). Africans in Israel, too, came to learn the fact of their Blackness via encounters with the local Israeli society. Once they did, however, many adopted it as a self-declared subject-position and leveraged it as a means of negotiation with local authorities and with Israelis more generally (Dorchin, forthcoming). Africans in Israel associate their Blackness with the experience of victimhood (Kemp et al. 2000), emphasizing the atrocities they suffered in their home countries and the hardships they experienced on their way to Israel. By stressing such an association, they strive to underscore a sense of similarity with Jewish Israelis based on shared historical narratives of suffering and exodus. For example, in highlighting the journey that took them from Egypt, via the Sinai Desert, to Israel, they deliberately appropriate the Jewish myth of exodus to plea for a sympathetic approach from Israelis (Hankins 2018). This suggested similarity is an effort to create an alliance with the local society, one that bypasses (Jewish) ethno-religious affiliation as the sole basis of belonging (Markowitz et al. 2003).

**Critical theory, or a black-and-white picture**

So far, I have utilized Blackness to discuss the presence of ethnic differences in Israeli society and thus focused on a linkage between visible differences (which may — but not necessarily — be encoded in skin tone) and perceived otherness. But Blackness should not be reduced to skin color or other somatic dimensions. As a notion, Blackness may operate as an abstraction, or an “idea” that helps to make sense of the social reality. This approach can be found in the work of intellectuals that began to analyze Israeli society through the lenses of race relations and, in so doing, introduced the relevance of the term Blackness to the local context. Indeed, people do not think in terms of “Blackness” or use it in their everyday life, if they use it at all. When protesters shout that the state “screws the Blacks,” or when musicians claim to perform “Black music,” they do not speak of “Blackness”; it is the intellectual endeavor to theorize these cultural manifestations that does so.
Since the 1980s, Israeli intellectuals have applied Black studies, post-structural, and postcolonial theories to re-read the history of social relations in Israel and better understand its present (Khazzoom 2003, Shenhav 2006, Shohat 1997). For example, the depiction of the encounter between Ashkenazim and Mizrahim has changed from a dynamic relationship between two shifting ethnic categories (Khazzoom 2008) to a confrontation between “White Jews and Black Jews” (Chetrit 2010). These intellectuals, much like the subjects of their studies, embraced the American color line as a useful template in order to make sense of the local situation and no less important, to add a political edge to their endeavor. Alas, as is often the case, political objectives came at the expense of theoretical ones. Approaching the Israeli social map by using foreign coordinates frequently pointed them in the wrong direction. While generating persuasive analyses, it undermined the scholars’ ability to offer nuanced examinations. The complicated picture turned, quite literally, into an image of black and white.

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The implementation of the American racial discourse into Israeli society speaks volumes about the major influence of the African American context on the field of Black studies. Ever since W.E.B. Du Bois’s essay The Souls of Black Folks (1903), Blackness has been associated first and foremost with Du Bois’s “double conscious”; those who were uprooted and forced to the Western Hemisphere, claimed Du Bois, were doomed to remain in a liminal position, inside and outside of the Western civilization. However, as Michelle Wright claimed, many Blacks were introduced to Western societies in different periods and under very different circumstances. These communities, whose sense of Blackness was not cast through the middle passage, slavery, and Jim Crow, are often deemed marginal (Wright 2015). Likewise, studies on these communities are often considered secondary.

Due to the important influence of American Black studies, discussions on Blackness usually focus on suffering, marginalization, discrimination, and protest, ignoring cases in which Blackness is associated with other experiences. In fact, within the politics of the Black studies field, one soon learns the challenges of approaching Blackness beyond this narrative. Studies of Blackness outside the U.S. are thus expected to teach us something new about their local context but not about the concept of Blackness itself. Take, for example, the study of hip hop in Israel; a quick search will reveal that most of it focuses on Palestinians and Ethiopian Jews, either as performers or consumers (McDonald 2013, Ratner 2019). The reason for this is not the prominence of Palestinians and Ethiopians in the cultural field of hip hop in Israel, but that they fall easily into the narrative of rap as the voice of disempowered minorities. This pattern is also evident in hip hop studies in other countries: Maori rap in New Zealand, Roma rap in Hungary, Basques in Spain, Turks in Germany, etc. In these and many other cases, the research is focused on issues of racism and disenfranchisement in the context of unequal ethnic relations. Many of the scholars immerse themselves in the everyday life of these minorities and highlight the unique point of view of the people being studied. However, by associating hip hop exclusively with rage and protest, as if people could not express them otherwise or as if hip hop cannot convey other ideas, this body of research remains limited by predetermined values of Blackness.

Consequently, as much as these studies add to the repertoire of case studies in the Black studies field, they have only a limited contribution to its theoretical expansion. The study of Israeli hip hop is a case in point, as it bounds our attention to the creative and performative aspects of identification. Blackness performed by Israeli Ashkenazim is no less legitimate or authentic from that of an Arab, Ethiopian, or even African American; it is simply different.

The study of Israeli hip hop is a case in point, as it bounds our attention to the creative and performative aspects of identification. Blackness performed by Israeli Ashkenazim is no less legitimate or authentic from that of an Arab, Ethiopian, or even African American; it is simply different. It shows, that Blackness is a notion and not a thing, and it is therefore necessarily subject to an ongoing process of inventive redefinition. In this process, Blackness is not restricted by skin color — it keeps expanding on a global scale, revealing its creative dynamics throughout different groups and practices. Indeed, redefinitions of Blackness always refer to previous ones. Yet, they cannot be reduced to any of them.

3 The British anthropologist Martin Holbraad (2008) coined the term infinition as a compound of inventive definitions. For Holbraad, a prominent speaker for the ontological approach in contemporary anthropology, notions do not simply depict an objective reality that exists “out there” but create their own reality.
Conclusion

Blackness in Israel reveals that Blackness exceeds visible differences between social, ethnic, or racial categories. It is even more than an analytic device, a metaphor if you will, that helps us think of and represent social inequalities. In Israel, it is not always easy to tell a Jew from a Palestinian, an Ashkenazi from Mizrahi, or an Ethiopian Jew from an Eritrean refugee just by their appearance. Yet, they all engage in practices of Blackness. The Israeli case shows that Blackness, unlike how it is often discussed, transgresses color lines and is open for novel reconstructions. New and unexpected configurations of Blackness offer fresh perspectives on Israeli society and challenge the arbitrary stipulations of Blackness as a concept.

My main claim in this essay is that Blackness is a flexible, ever-changing notion. Therefore, researchers should not try to define it but rather to embrace its multiplicity and the many different, even contradictory, aspects it may hold. The ongoing dynamics of Blackness do not render it useless. Given the ubiquity of discourses, images, and sounds that appropriate this notion, scholars must keep their research dynamic as well. This means questioning templates, matrices, and models by which Blackness is conceived. In the Israeli context, Blackness should not be limited to the American imperative. Instead, it ought to be examined as a local and distinct phenomenon, to reveal new manifestations and meanings of Blackness as a concept.

References


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