

# Home Is An/Other? Desire, Ethnicity, and Queer Documentary Cinema in *Please Love* and *Home Is You*

Shirly Bahar and Yasmin Sason

1. "Now I know what love is" says Yaelle, smiling to the camera. "What is love?"<sup>i</sup> Aya asks, her face unseen on the screen. "It can't be explained," the answer immediately arrives. At the opening scene of the documentary *Home Is You*, appearing in the earlier *Please Love*, too, Aya and Yaelle pronounce: "We are going to change the definition of 'coming out':<sup>ii</sup> everyone who has a secret is in the closet," Aya asserts. "We will use the term 'revelation': when you decide to not lie to yourself anymore, to know yourself, and to get people to know you," Yaelle completes the sentence. This exchange is echoed in the films' identical closing scene. There, Yaelle faces Aya and announces: "You taught me not be afraid of the truth, you gave me strength to be who I am."

The documentaries *Please Love* (Israel, 2011) and *Home Is You* (Israel, 2012), written by and starring Aya Shwed and Yaelle David, complementarily portray their shared everyday life as a lesbian couple in love and living in Israel. Aya is Ashkenazi and white, Yaelle is brown and Mizrahi.<sup>iii</sup> Yaelle wrestles with familial homophobia, whereas Aya's family are a supportive presence in the film. Framing the film, the scenes noted above seem to simply foreground Aya and Yaelle's love for each other, and their mutual desire to experience the power of the revelatory. In their quests for love and to find home, *Please Love* and *Home Is You* outline Aya and Yaelle's journey to personal and relational revelation through cinematic documentation—indeed, through the women's drive to film their lives. Yet while ardently seeking answers, the films also pose two open-ended fundamental questions hinted in their titles: What is Love? And: Where is Home? Accordingly, we too, ask: What do the women reveal, what do they conceal, and what comes through unconsciously, in sharing their

revelatory performances of both sexual and ethnic identifications through the films?

In the following pages, we argue that *Please Love* and *Home Is You* differentiate between two genres of documentary identification performances: the first, which Aya takes on, demonstrates verbal competence and visual coherence attesting to her stable location in a place she can call, and the Jewish Israeli viewer can clearly recognize as, home. The second, enacted by Yaelle, embodies intricate and subversive, dramatic and performative, tactics, which speak to her placement as a Mizrahi immigrant within the predominant ethnonational Zionist and Ashkenazic discursive settings and conditions appearing in, and employed by, the films. To that end, a series of close-ups on Yaelle's subversive struggles are at the heart of *Home Is You* and *Please Love*, and respectively, of this essay. In these close-ups, the filmic lens centers cinematic events of miscommunications between Yaelle, who appears on the screen, and her parents, who are removed from it, as Yaelle intensely negotiates the crisis of familial homophobia with them over the phone. It is, finally, this cluster of abundantly mediated audio-visual accounts of homophobia in the family that serve as the litmus test for tracing, and decoding, the films' constructions of, and differentiations between, the women's diverse Jewish ethnic belongings and power dynamics. It is thus Yaelle's close-ups that pave the path to challenging the hegemonic and homogenizing Zionist and Eurocentric ethnonational culture of Modern Hebrew that the films foreground and reiterate.

2. Typically, as Alisa Lebow has shown in her writings on Jewish queer first-person documentaries, one's Jewish and/or queer identification always either appears as additional to that person's other identities, or, at other times, remains completely hidden.<sup>iv</sup> In the films she studies, "ambivalence may be internal or personal, reflecting the individual blind spots or discomfort ... toward a forthright identification with her sexuality or culture."<sup>v</sup> Indeed, "ambivalence is a running subtext ... a result of mutual, if at time competing, historical survival strategies.... The films ... straddle a zone of unintelligibility."<sup>vi</sup>

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*Please Love and Home Is You* are first-person films that similarly center ambivalence. Aya's and Yaelle's lesbian and Jewish identifications are assumed and explored, yet in different ways: whereas Aya and Yaelle explicitly verbalize their lesbian identifications, they make no direct reference to their Jewish affiliations. At the same time, the films subtly insinuate that familial homophobic prejudices stem from, and are associated with, a particular ethnic background that rejects the women's relationship—a rejection exclusively acted out by Yaelle's father. Aya and Yaelle live in Israel, a place often globally advertised and pinkwashed as a gay haven, presumably contrasting the rest of the Middle East.<sup>vii</sup> Dwelling within the discursive realm of Modern Hebrew, the women avoid any overt statements regarding the diverse charged approaches and accents with which they arrive to it. The films thus naturalize the speaking protagonists' migrations to, and positions in, Zionist culture's nativized tongue, by framing their linguistic rapports as an intimate exchange of personal feelings. And yet, other scenes center rupture, pain, and ambivalence.

The opening scenes discussed above position us as viewers of the film and its embedded performances: Aya and Yaelle's wedding ceremony, codirected as a theater show, where Yaelle commits herself to Aya. In the absence of a rabbi, it is the will to discover and display personal truths that weds Aya and Yaelle. But whereas Yaelle divulges the innermost layers of her ambivalence, Aya coherently narrates their story and sings her own written music. Aya thus pieces the messy materials that Yaelle stutters, as if casting Yaelle's expressions into intelligibility.

Writing their lives on the screen, Aya and Yaelle get a second chance to rewrite their stories complexly. The fact that one—or two, or three perspectives—can tell stories differently, by selective filming and editing, makes all the difference. Like the third woman in the relationship, the witnessing camera documents and shapes their images. This is a woman that, sometimes, Yaelle asks to turn off: "I have nothing to say to the camera anymore."

*Please Love and Home Is You* end with the same wedding scene, but begin differently. Unlike the harmoniously

codirected theater show, *Please Love* alludes to a conflict right as it starts: there, Aya is discontent about the relationship's stagnation: she wants to get married. Yaelle is ambivalent, reluctant to wed without her parents present. Seeking immediate resolution, Aya then suggests that Yaelle confront her parents' homophobia outright. Aya's demands move the film forward to its pivotal, challenging scenes: the close-up shots showing Yaelle sobbing over the telephone when talking to her parents who live in France. "I want to talk to dad," "You never defend me," "I need my parents but they're not there because I'm not what they want me to be," Yaelle repeatedly cries to her mother from the other side of the line. Screaming and screeching in French, Yaelle throws partial, broken sentences that blend with the deluge of her countless touching tears, all creating an intricate and at times incoherent visual, verbal, and vocal vernacular of pain. With Yaelle's dad unavailable, she only talks and cries to her mom.

The close-up scenes unfold private moments of vulnerable disclosure in front of our eyes: here, the production of authentic intimacy inevitably relies on the extensive labors of mediation. While the telephone connects Yaelle with her mother, her mother speaks in the name of her disconnected father, who refuses to communicate with Yaelle. As in Avital Ronell's theorization, "The telephone holds together what it separates. It creates a space of asignifying and is tuned by the emergency feminine on the maternal core reissued ... the telephone was borne up by the invaginated structures of a mother's deaf ear." The telephonic negotiations between mother and daughter also resonate with the workings of the lens filming Yaelle's face. Delivering the very minute details of the live

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drama and Yaelle's facial expressions, the camera often cuts and fragments Yaelle's head from various angles, thus composing incomplete and discrepant portraits that constitute her presumable real self. The performances of truthful revelations in the film underlie and demonstrate the denouncing avoidance of a father, whose hurtful silences are transmitted by several deafened channels, marking a persistently present absence in a daughter's life.

Dispersed utterances entangled with dense wailings in French, Yaelle's expressive outbursts punctuate the flow of the film: emanating from Yaelle's dis/connections to an elsewhere, they interrupt the dialogues and duets spoken and sang in the home of Modern Hebrew. Yaelle's previous homes and familial migrations, absent, abandoned locations, remain mostly outside of the frame. The ethnic, religious, and cultural heritages that Yaelle arrives from are nowhere. As her father stops talking to her, any knowledge about Yaelle's roots is rendered unattainable. The more Yaelle comes out, the less we learn about her possible pre-immigration ethnic identifications.

Wanderings and ponderings between two places shape the story between the two women. Ella Shohat demonstrated how Eurocentric Zionist discourse constructed Mizrahi Jews as "extremely conservative, even reactionary, and religiously fanatic, in contrast to the liberal, secular, and educated European Jews"; this Orientalist view fueled state institutions' strategies to assimilate Oriental Jews into the ways of "a civilized, modern society."<sup>viii</sup> Later, Shohat also showed how Israeli film and representation today both center more Mizrahi people while, at the same time, often avoid naming them as such.<sup>ix</sup> Recently, the global Orientalist perspective has expanded to incorporate homophobic behavior as an additional presumable innate flaw characterizing the Orient. As Jasbir Puar showed, Euro-American discourses portray the Oriental as "simultaneously pathologically excessive yet repressive, perverse yet homophobic,"<sup>x</sup>

promoting homonormativity primarily by permitting same-sex couples to marry. And yet "benevolence toward sexual others" is often "contingent upon ever-narrowing parameters of white racial privilege."<sup>xi</sup>

In Aya and Yaelle's relationship and films, the marriage ceremony is an ultimate aim and endpoint. Under this canopy, Aya and Yaelle stand together, surrounded by Aya's family and friends in Israel; Aya's father, moreover, delivers his wishes and thus declares his acceptance of their relationship with his special dedicated speech. To that end, Aya's efforts to sway Yaelle into the institution of marriage may be seen as attempts to dissipate the Mizrahi immigrant's homophobic heritage and precipitate her assimilation to the presumably liberal Euro-American-oriented Jewish society in Israel. These attempts, finally, require Yaelle's full disclosure of her truthful self. And yet, if we reckon that the revelation and assimilation of Yaelle's presumable inner self inevitably rely on a reflexively mediating camera, and on a feminized telephone device that facilitates diasporic disconnects, we may consequently discern the films' potential points of internal contestation.<sup>xii</sup> Indeed, as our concluding note will now demonstrate, *Please Love and Home Is You* not only reiterate a Zionist and Eurocentric master narrative, they also facilitate a critical reading against its—and its own—grain.

3. Today, the women are no longer together. Home is everywhere—says Aya in the end. Yet the films leave us with questions about home and love that perhaps cannot be retrieved all in one central, or even particular, place. Perhaps it is neither the here, nor the there, but rather, if to borrow from Orly Lubin, only "the margins are the site where ethnicity may find itself, and create itself, a home, where it won't be marked as 'an ethnic otherness.'" Perhaps we should return to our own mothers' tongue, Turkish, where *ev* means "home," and convey that home is, or could be, everywhere. This will certainly require a future film (and/or a future paper).

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- i We shall further discuss their wedding ceremony where Aya recalls that answer as a significant moment in their relationship momentarily.
- ii "Coming out" is also the name of the production company the filmmakers created, and their personal website is named the same as well. See: <http://comingout.co.il/blog/>.
- iii Based on a conversation the writers had with Yaelle David in June 2014.
- iv "The declarative and affirmative statement of identification, coming out, is central to both gay and Jewish visibility in ways that

many other identificatory regimes navigate only marginally ... queers and diasporic Jews have to negotiate the terms of their visibility. Wherever the question of passing exists, so too the problem of the closet. Yet the paths toward or away from visibility of various Jewish communities are historically distinct from those taken by gays and lesbians ... there are competing strategies at work ... and the result is a contradictory ambivalence, evidenced in an ambiguity of representation of one or other of these identificatory positionalities. Alisa S. Lebow, *First Person Jewish* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 115.

v Ibid.

vi Ibid., 113.

vii Aeyal Gross, "Israeli GLBT Politics between Queerness and Homonationalism," in: <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/07/03/israeli-glb-politics-between-queerness-and-homonationalism/>.

viii Ella Shohat, "Sephardim in Israel: Zionism from the Perspective of Its Jewish Victims," *Social Text* 19/20 (Autumn 1988): 3.

ix Ella Shohat, *Israeli Cinema*, 2nd edition.

x Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), xxv.

xi Ibid., xii.

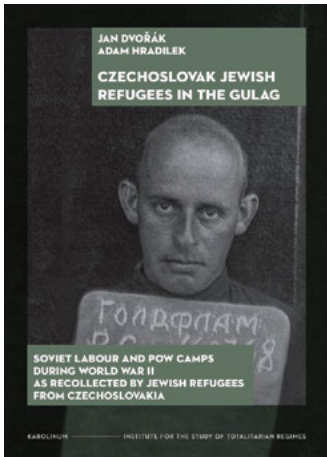
xii "When you're on the telephone, there is always an electronic flow, even if this flow is unmarked", contends Ronell: the telephone "sheds the purity of an identity as a tool, however, through its engagement with immateriality." Avital Ronell, *The Telephone Book* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 5.

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