
6-22-2022

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Recommended APA Citation

Gamliel, T. (2022). Ethnofiction and Interior Protest: Scholar-Activism in the Yemenite Children Affair. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(6), 1656-1672. <https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5191>

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Abstract

In this article, ethnofiction is discussed as a scholar-activist methodology that offers advantages for interior protest within community borders. The case study centers on the affair of the abducted Yemenite-Jewish children in Israel. Ethnographic studies and the researcher's experience with members of the community serve as sources for a dramatic dialogue that reflects the definition of, and coping with, a problem as the topic of protest in the affair. The connection between the case study and its sources of information is stressed and the ethnodrama is instantiated as a transformative methodology. The findings on the acceptance of this ethnofiction in the community show that the transformative methodology allowed the researcher to send a clear and empathetic message of protest to social activists in the affair and did not endanger the researcher-activist as an agent of change. Ethnofiction accommodates the unconventionality of scholar-activism by reflecting the challenge of an interior protest among social activists in a community of victims of a collective trauma, expressed by an encounter with the supernatural. The discussion centers on the efficacy of ethnofiction as a dramatic strategy and the advantages of subverting the "aesthetics of objectivity" in matters of victims' representation and agency.

Keywords

ethnodrama, ethnofiction, methodological activism, interior protest, Yemenite children affair, aesthetics of objectivity

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Ethnofiction and Interior Protest: Scholar-Activism in the Yemenite Children Affair

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In this article, ethnofiction is discussed as a scholar-activist methodology that offers advantages for interior protest within community borders. The case study centers on the affair of the abducted Yemenite-Jewish children in Israel. Ethnographic studies and the researcher's experience with members of the community serve as sources for a dramatic dialogue that reflects the definition of, and coping with, a problem as the topic of protest in the affair. The connection between the case study and its sources of information is stressed and the ethnodrama is instantiated as a transformative methodology. The findings on the acceptance of this ethnofiction in the community show that the transformative methodology allowed the researcher to send a clear and empathetic message of protest to social activists in the affair and did not endanger the researcher-activist as an agent of change. Ethnofiction accommodates the unconventionality of scholar-activism by reflecting the challenge of an interior protest among social activists in a community of victims of a collective trauma, expressed by an encounter with the supernatural. The discussion centers on the efficacy of ethnofiction as a dramatic strategy and the advantages of subverting the "aesthetics of objectivity" in matters of victims' representation and agency.

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Introduction

"I think this play was written for me," a leading social activist told me at the end of an event that had been held for the academic community. By so saying, he implied the attainment of something infrequent: the possibility of determining for whom a researcher acts when he or she becomes a scholar-activist (Ares, 2016; Reiter & Oslender, 2014); he also alluded to the question of the status of an anthropologist as an agent of change. We had met at an event that reenacted our lengthy efforts to put to rest a civil crisis in Israel known as the "abducted Yemenite-Jewish children" affair, an issue that has clung to the Israeli agenda relentlessly due to activists' diverse protest practices and a series of launchings of an exceptional collection of studies (Gamliel & Shifriss, 2019).

The civil protest in question was mounted against a collective trauma experienced in the 1950s and 1960s by Jewish families that had immigrated to Israel. Thousands of these immigrants' children were abducted by someone or something of still-unknown identity. Parents – most of Yemenite-Jewish origin – realized after the fact that they had lost their children by having complied naïvely with an uncompromising demand by their hosts to surrender them for medical care. The traumatic storyline began with news of the "death" of their children, reported to parents shortly after they had handed over the youngsters; it continued with violent distancing of the parents and refusal to let them part with their children, bury them, or receive a death certificate.

As a “native anthropologist” (Behar, 1999), I am personally familiar with this collective trauma, including family stories about an uncle who had been a healthy three-year-old when his grandmother was ordered to surrender him to the crèche at the Rosh Ha’Ayin immigrant camp. She visited him there until finding him gone one morning. He had died, the nurses told her. “What?!” she cried in horror. “How? Yesterday he was cheery and looked fine!” She received no answer and never saw him again. What remained in the family’s residential shack was a gaping void where the boy had been. For weeks, his grandmother stared into it. Shattered and enraged, she wailed in the ritual manner of the women of her community. It was this poignant testimony that inspired me to investigate the wailing culture of the Jewish women of Yemen (Gamliel, 2014) and to edit a collection of articles on the affair as it stands today (Gamliel & Shifriss, 2019) after decades of academic neglect.

To this day, despite the families’ repeated appeals to the authorities, the fate of most of the abducted children remains unknown and no proof of their death has emerged. Some of those missing turned up years later with adoptive families. Since 1960, the state has been responding to the parents’ waves of protests by establishing investigative committees. Their bumbling treatment of their mandate, however, has been acridly criticized. Media coverage of the affair, too, evokes suspicions of harboring the same bias – masking the truth and denying the very fact of the abductions (Madmoni-Gerber, 2009).¹

This article does not concern itself with the twists and turns of this decades-long affair (Gamliel & Shifriss, 2019; Madmoni-Gerber, 2009). Its main purpose is to examine the value of ethnodrama in a situation where available research information about the victims of a trauma clashes with the attitude of the social activists who purport to represent them. Specifically, I focus on what protest ethnodrama may contribute (Saldaña, 2005) to a community’s discussion of its collective trauma without stirring meaningful resistance to its messages. As the written script of a play, such an ethnodrama consists of “dramatized, significant selections of narrative collected from interview transcripts, participant observation field notes, journal entries, personal memories/experiences ...” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 13). The ethnodrama in the case at hand is based on research that I conducted in diverse settings. Below I discuss its potential to represent the victims of the trauma and its effect on the community in its additional capacity as a product that deviates from conventional academic reportage. I chose the methods of ethnodrama *ab initio* in view of disparities of outlook between me, a psycho-anthropologist belonging to the second generation of those who had left Yemen, and most of the social activists, who belong to the third generation. Ethnodrama, I postulated, may bridge the generational gap in view of the power of an ethnodramatic script and its ethnotheatrical production in conferring *representation* and *presentation* (Saldaña, 2011). Although the activists’ campaign in recent years has been typified by strident challenges, well organized demonstrations, and recourse to global discourse and technological media, it has not attained its objectives and appears to have come to an impasse. Its campaign has fallen short of its goal – to induce the state to acknowledge the affair – and even protests that narrowed the focus to specific legal issues have not made a difference. A very recent example, a report from a high-ranking official at the Ministry of Health about the problematic involvement of doctors in the 1950s in the affair, demonstrates this. The activists demanded that the incumbent Minister of Health, a member of a left-wing party, publish the report but he has managed to withstand the pressure thus far. Focal in my critique is the question of how the voices of the victimized

¹ There are conspicuous similarities between the Yemenite-Jewish children affair and the disappearance of children in other countries. In Canada, the United States, and Australia, Indigenous children were forcibly placed with Christian missionaries or in residential schools from the nineteenth century onward. Between 1867 and 1906, the Government of Canada, in cooperation with Christian churches, ran a system of residential schools to which First Nations children were sent, sometimes after police forcibly removed them from their parents’ custody (Milloy, 2008).

parents – especially the mothers – are *represented* in the social activists' remonstrations, an issue inseparable from the suffering occasioned by the trauma itself (Alexander & Breese, 2011). The criticism that follows raises the possibility of an *intergenerational and cultural injustice*, in which the dominant voice of young people in the public sphere has drowned out those of the victims of the affair and disservices their belief system. Mindful of the assimilation of Western values and outlooks among the young and applying a postcolonial perspective, I suspect that these relations somewhat echo the East-West power structure in Israel (Asad, 1998). Ethnodramatic dialogue is a theatrical tool for the indirect poetic sending of a message that will presumably induce attentiveness, attenuate objections, and bridge the gap between critic and objects of criticism. In view of the theatrical characteristics of the ethnodrama, the ethnodrama that follows, performed in a manner accepted in the community and in a culturally adjusted language, was meant to stimulate a discourse of solidarity within the community in a way that would advance its civil goals. It embodies my understanding that an intellectual's moral commitment should at times include an *interior protest*. Such a protest means critical activity by a member of a community for the purpose of changing the views of other community members who are typified by tension surrounding the course of the struggle – the exterior protest – vis-à-vis external oppressors. Interior protest is meant to enhance the effectiveness of exterior protest by channeling its overt messages into internal processes of mediation and conciliation among intergenerational and political subgroups. Despite their conciliatory agenda and their aspiration to cooperation, however, activists who embark on interior protest may be perceived as especially condescending if they are academics in a traditional community.

In my relations with the activists (established two years or so before the dialogue was written), I received a close-up education on the destructive potential of the conflicts among them and how establishment elements have manipulated their associations. I also noticed the cultural disconnection between the grandparents' generation and the young, a gap that abets competition among the associations' agendas without committing them to their client or dealing with the question of how one *should* struggle. Given the challenges that the current activist movements are likely to face (Alexandrakis, 2016), this exemplar article examines the ways ethnodrama may shed light on the *problematique* of internal tensions among members of a community and may mediate among them. Interior protest may be rejected by activists and may even endanger itself by seeking the elimination of obstacles to the goal (Said, 1994, pp. 69–70) of “speaking truth to power.” In this sense, this intention is addressed to ethnographers who “maintain explicit social justice or social change agendas, hoping that their events serve as cautionary tales for the public to never let the inequities portrayed in their plays ever happen again” (Saldaña, 2011, p. 31).

In the next section, I present the research sources that undergird the dramatic dialogue that follows and exemplify the methodology that transforms the findings into ethnodrama. Continuing, I introduce the dramatic characters – the ghost of an elderly mother who lost her son to abduction and has already died, and her social-activist grandson – and present their characteristics. Farther on, I accompany the dramatic dialogue by showing how the characters were shaped in the course of my work with the cast, presenting findings from my observations of events in which the ethnodrama was performed, and describing manifestations of the acceptance of the ethnodrama in various settings. Concluding, I show that the findings of my research and my experience as a member of the ethnic group dictate the traits of the characters in the dialogue and the nature of coping with the hazards of interior protest. This article may contribute insights on the value of ethnodramatic interior protest – especially in its ethnofictional form – by elucidating the issues of representation and agency of a victim of trauma (Saldaña, 2003, p. 230).

Ethnodrama as a Transformative Methodology

As an active strategy, ethnodrama is a complex methodological matrix that reflects both the *diagnosis* of a social problem and *ways of coping* with it. Like other ethnodramas conducted mainly by scholars (Jenkins, 2010; Kondo, 1995; Mienzacowski, 1995; Saldaña, 2005), the dramatic dialogue that I composed is a quintessential example of “social theatre” as Thomson and Schechner (2004) define it: a medium that involves learning the conventions and behaviors of the communities in which a project unfolds (p. 13).

The dialogue is based on a technique called triangulation, in which more than one information source or type is relied upon to collect, compare, and corroborate information (Saldaña, 2011). The sources of information for the script that follows are:

- a. my anthropological research among Yemenite Jews in Israel (Gamliel, 2014), an ethnic group to which my audience, the social activists, the cast, and I belong²
- b. scriptwriting experience that I acquired during my research on the Western theatre (Gamliel, 2019a)³
- c. having edited a pioneering collection of articles about the affair (Gamliel & Shifriss, 2019), a project that equipped me with copious information about various aspects of the affair
- d. initiating encounters for the creation of an umbrella organization of all activists in the affair—an experience that, as stated, bolstered my confidence in being able to diagnose failure in the activists’ doings
- e. initiating encounters toward that led to the establishment of a support organization for women in victims’ families, revealing a generational and intercultural gap between the activists and the victims and offering a way to cope with the failure attributed to the activists.

The *idea* of the dialogue originated in an interview that I held with a ninety-year-old Yemenite-Jewish woman about her views on the activists’ methods of struggle. It happened after she had addressed the group of women and expressed criticism of the social activists that the women affirmed. Below, now wearing the writer’s hat, I serve as a “story-reteller” (Saldaña, 2003, p. 223) of the subjects’ attitudes, doing so in the unreal way of setting up an imaginary conversation between the “ghost” of an abducted child’s elderly mother and her social-activist grandson in a cemetery.

In view of this particular setting, below I relate to ethnodrama by means of the subcategorical concept of ethnofiction. This concept allows me to distinguish between a play based on ordinary characters and events and one partly predicated on supernatural characters and a state of affairs in which the ethnofiction also gives its viewers a reflection of familiar contents of its culture, including its belief system. The unrealistic component, which is larger in ethnofiction than an ordinary ethnodrama would allow, transforms the play into a medium that, in my judgment, gives interior protest a major advantage (below I put the two concepts, ethnodrama and ethnofiction, to alternate use and focus the discussion on the latter).

“Theatre is a weapon,” says Boal (1979, p. ix), reflecting the perception that live performance offers radical potential for change and hope (Kondo, 1995; Kontos & Naglie, 2006; Pollock, 2006; Snyder-Young, 2010). The questions are which identities the ethnographer specifies on either side of the divide and to whom the protest is addressed. One

² The cast is composed of a pair of professional actors: a young man and woman who are third-generation Yemenite-Jewish immigrants to Israel. Given their identification with the linguistic and contextual components of the dialogue, all it took to work with them was a few talks about stage-direction and editing the text.

³ My field work included a dramatic-writing course at a theatre studies department.

should not expect a critique of social activists by a scholar-activist of the same ethnicity to resemble a protest that both the critic and those critiqued address to holders of power who are accused of racism, repression, and gagging.⁴ Interior protest may be harmful if the ethnodramatic text is interpreted as confrontational. The ethnodramatic dialogue tackles this problem by reflecting a ready-made solution in ethnographic studies: considering the art of performative song and wailing a model for other performances and a legitimate medium for the expression of protest in the community. One may adduce this, for example, from Abu-Lughod's ethnography (1990), in which the singing of young women and men from the Awlad Ali tribe is construed as a subversive text of resistance that can elicit desired changes by concurrently confirming and challenging the moral code of Bedouin society. In other words, given that the ethnodrama is framed ab initio as a performative art that includes theatrical characteristics, it may constitute, like singing and wailing, a protected arena in which one side writes a critique while the other side, the audience, remains committed to the conventions of its role in offering attentiveness and respect.

Women's wailing is a sophisticated genre of transition "from tears to [social] ideas" because, in the course of her tear-inducing performance, the wailer sends current messages of her choosing. In my research, I found wailing to be an empathic polyphonic representative voice for the deceased, their relatives, and the *assemblage* that the wailer approaches on behalf of the deceased with words that both reprove and moralize. Her words may at times embarrass and accuse those whom she addresses in regard to unresolved matters between them and the deceased, their breaching of family undertakings and so on, and her demand for redress and repentance. Even though she does not approach them directly, they know whom she means and must obey the rule that forbids them to interrupt the performance. This is because the performance is the wailer's safe space; there she may act as an agent who supervises social relations and transforms wailing into a configuration of constructive subversion (Gamliel, 2014).

The ethnodramatic dialogue that follows was composed on the basis of an analysis of rhetorical tools of protest embodied in wailing, transported from one performative frame to another. What I mean, for example, is the transpositioning of rhetoric that mediates between the living and the dead, the voicing of words that represent the dead, the directness of the moralistic criticism, the repetitiveness of the message, and more. Given the conventions of performer-audience relations in theatrical contexts, ethnodrama and, especially, ethnofiction that includes the character of the ghost of a suffering, vulnerable women is a sure way to get this done.

This transpositioning also promotes the goal of this traditional art form for the Yemenite-Jewish community as an emotion community (Gamliel, 2014). Theoretically, one expects ethnodrama, like every performative art, to be most prevalent within the antistructural and protective frame of the *communitas*, which will use it to examine resistance and unaccepted ideas (Turner, 1969). The scriptwriting began after I had worked through the copious information from all the aforementioned sources of cultural knowledge, and once I internalized my freedom to imagine a concentrated interaction that might stir empathy. The writing was a creative process that drew much inspiration from my relationship with my late grandmother, whose fine nuances enhanced the accuracy of the product.

The Characters and Their Ethnographic Identities

The "ghost" represents the grandmother who has lost her child. She resembles traditional-minded women who, since reaching Israel in 1948–1953, have preserved their

⁴ Importantly, the identity of the abductors and the role of the state in the affair remain unknown for now.

folklore customs and religious way of life in the modern state. The “social activist,” in contrast, represents the young third generation of Yemenite Jews in Israel, an Israel-born collective that has almost totally shed its religious traditions in favor of Western values and lifestyles. The ghosted grandmother belongs to the “first circle,” the one that maintained in Israel the solidarity of the emotion community that had existed in Yemen. The social activist, in turn, affiliates with an outer circle of young people whose critical approach establishes the boundaries of their community.

The dramatic abyss between the characters is populated by features of Israeli identity politics that relate to age and gender but not to ethnicity. In contrast to the social activist, the ghost is marginal in two ways, as a woman and as an elder – a status that still persists in modern Israel. In the patriarchal Muslim society of Yemen, women enjoyed neither political rights nor formal schooling. Immigration to Israel brought some alleviation of women’s inferiority in community and family settings by strengthening their participation in community religious practices and their influence in family decision-making. Israel also improved their status by liberating them somewhat from their husbands’ authority (Gilad, 1989). Even today, however, they face discrimination in political life, as do Israeli women at large. As elder women, too, they are susceptible to a patriarchal order that devalues them all the more due to the sexual, birth giving, and housekeeping roles that they can no longer play (Arber & Ginn, 1995; Nagar-Ron & Motzafi-Haller, 2011).

As for ethnicity, the ghost and the young activist belong to the collective of Mizrahim (Jews of Middle East/North African origin), one of Israel’s two major ethnicities. The other, the Ashkenazim (Jews of European/American origin), wielded the hegemony and produced the ruling elites that subordinated Mizrahim to their social, cultural, and political order for decades (Ein-Gil & Machover, 2009). The critical voice that evolved against this hegemony has been enlisted for war on discrimination, racism, and labeling of the Mizrahi identity. This struggle, led by Mizrahi social activists, intellectuals, and members of the middle class, paid off in the coin of a recent demand to re-investigate the Yemenite children affair. The outcome of the social activists’ struggle was a demand to see this as a mordant manifestation of the primary ethnic conflict in Israel (Cohen & Leon, 2008).

Within the frame of this struggle, the victimized families suspect that those serving the Ashkenazi establishment’s cause have one aim only: to smother the affair under Israel’s existential perils and write it off as the “bygone sin” of individuals within the heroic Zionist enterprise. Here lies the basis of the “civil melancholy” that now typifies the parents and kin of the abducted children (Gamliel, 2019b). Activists who have awakened to relatives’ suffering thus re-live and re-embody the trauma in televised confessions: “The pain drains you of psychological energy. It can’t be phrased in words. Every activist experiences fierce psychological jolts,” one activist elaborated.⁵ This re-telling reproduces the original embodiments of suffering (Weiss, 2001, p. 211), such as the aforementioned civil melancholy, which may infect the young if the social activists’ protests end in failure.

Shaping the Characters

I chose the cast and documented parts of the creative process from the rehearsals up to the conclusion of the performances. After observing three performances as a member of the audience, I interviewed the actors. In the resulting trio of artists of Yemenite-Jewish origin, I served not only as the playwright but also as a mediator among the actors, the historical affair,

⁵ Family members interviewed in a report titled “The Yemeni Kidnapped: When Will the Truth Come Out?” on the TV show “Meet the Press,” June 28, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f3rncI63td8> (last accessed 20/1/2019).

and the intergenerational audience for whom the dialogue was intended. Unlike me, the cast knew little about the affair. The rehearsals, including the psycho-cultural interrogation that they required, put them through a process of self-discovery. The actors treated the script with respect, as a given to which they merely had to adapt. After he received the text, Emmanuel, the actor who played the grandson,⁶ related: “I had to take a deep breath. I realized that it wasn’t a simple dialogue that you could play in the ordinary way. In fact, it’s something big.” For Galit, who played the grandmother or the “ghost,”⁷ it was “an experiment in a sensitive topic.” In the course of the rehearsals, I expressed my opinion about diverse *performative* elements, such as correct pronunciation of the Judeo-Yemenite language, characteristics of the *mise-en-scène*, and the costumes. In their tendency to self-interrogate, the actors based themselves on my knowledge of the affair and on websites and YouTube videos that focused on social activists and mothers who retold the trauma of losing their abducted children. When I asked how she coped with the challenge of playing the exceptional grandmother character who challenges the narrative of traumatic loss and preaches non-violence, Galit answered, “My aunt had a very hard life ... but she was always happy and believed everything was OK ... I also derived inspiration for the character from the subconscious, a hybrid of things that I apparently absorbed all my life from grandmothers, aunts, and the character that you wrote. Her serenity, her equanimity – this grandmother is like the soil.” Thus, the acting, like the script, was inspired by our grandmothers.

The actors’ late fathers also inspired the actors in their work. “I visited his grave a few years after he died ...” Emmanuel recalled. “I remember sitting there and speaking with him ... All the answers were there. In the dialogue now, I experienced those answers anew... Some of them, such as ‘Calm down, *ya ruhi* [my spirit],’ expressed all that love that I wanted to hear again.” Galit said, “I can explain the grandmother’s acquiescence [in her fate] just as I can explain, for example, my father’s death. Although our loss was difficult, I believe that’s the way God wanted it!”

The Dialogue with the Ghost

The “dialogue with the ghost” takes place in a cemetery. A grandmotherly figure, dressed in white, sits erect in the Mizrahi manner with her back to the audience (symbolizing a tombstone). Her grandson, Ro’ey, mounts the stage, lights a memorial candle next to the “tombstone,” opens a prayer book, and recites the Kaddish. When done, he kisses the “tombstone” and begins to retreat. The voice of his grandmother’s ghost, sudden and deep, stops him).⁸

⁶ Emmanuel Salem, an actor and a director born in 1979, is an alumnus of Nissan Nativ’s acting studio who took specialized training in burlesque clowning in Toulouse. He appeared with “Homus Barbus – chef pantalon de culotte” in Switzerland and France. Today he performs with the Kokotsiyot troupe in Israel. He teaches theatre and stage direction in various educational and community settings and gives workshops on body language and burlesque clowning. He appeared in the film *Zohar HaRaqiya*, took second prize at the South Film Festival 2011, and performed in the film *Sippur Aher*, by Avi Neshet, 2018.

⁷ Galit Tzabari, an actor and director born in 1975, is an alumna of the Department of Theatre at Emuna College, MILA Institute School of Dance and Motion, and Nissan Nativ’s acting studio. For more than a decade, while appearing in various productions, she has been creating and acting at Beit Avi Chai, a multidisciplinary cultural center in Jerusalem, and in a series of children’s plays. She collaborated with the Multicultural Center for Research and Creative Art, under the management of the director Baruch Brenner, and acted in his works. In 2016, she directed Nadav Ruziewicz’s *Two Lines* as part of the 26th Theatronetto. She directed Orit Gal’s *Solweg* at Emuna College and *Short Espresso* at the Jerusalem Art Festival.

⁸ The dialogue does not include stage directions.

Grandmother: Don't go! You, boy of my heart. Ro'ey. Ro...ey....

Ro'ey: Savta [Grandmother]?

Grandmother: May God protect you.

Ro'ey: Savta [Grandmother], is it you?

Grandmother: It's me, who else?! There's nothing but graves here.

Ro'ey (to himself): I must be hallucinating....

Grandmother: You came here to make me content, my beloved. Eh?

Ro'ey: Yes. I missed you. Savta, where are you?

Grandmother: Come back to me! Don't be afraid! I feel sorry for you, Ro'ey. You're a young guy; you've got your whole life ahead of you. What pains you so, day after day? I see you and your war for Yosef, the one they took from me.

Ro'ey: Savta.... How can it not pain me?

Grandmother: You're holding Yosef in your heart. My tears for Yosef are like an ocean. They're burning you up.⁹ They give you no respite, *ya bani* [my son].

Ro'ey: I'll never forget the way you cried, Savta.

Grandmother: I know. But it isn't good! Now you go around shouting.

Ro'ey: But how can I help it, Savta? How can I rest while Yosef's kidnappers, curse them, circulate freely?

Grandmother: Yosef's moving around freely, too. Living in America.¹⁰ He's got a good business, Yosef. He's into cars. And three daughters ... and a good wife [says this with satisfaction]. Yosef is seventy by now.¹¹ From heaven they show me that he's writing letters about his mother, as if he knew me, and he keeps them in a drawer. Every night I come down and read the words in his mind. What words for a mother!!¹²

Ro'ey: Savta, what are you saying?! You know where Yosef is?

Grandmother: They sold him to America.

Ro'ey: Who sold him? Do you know who it is?

Grandmother: -----

Ro'ey: Is it good for Yosef in America? Are you sure?

Grandmother: Yes, very sure.

Ro'ey: How do you know?

Grandmother: I know everything. Where I am, we know everything. Everything.

Ro'ey: Why did you call me, Savta?

Grandmother: Because the time has come. Act wisely... You stir up riots. Town squares, letters, talking, so much talking! Everywhere...

Ro'ey: We do what we can, Savta.

Grandmother: You're wasting your strength.

Ro'ey: But just a moment ... didn't you complain, Savta, all your life?

Grandmother: And who listened?

Ro'ey: I did.

Grandmother: Yes, and who listened to you?

Ro'ey: I don't know.

Grandmother: So you see?! You're fighting a big brick wall. People whose hearts are closed.

Ro'ey: But if you don't throw furniture and make riots, you can't move a thing.

⁹ She inverts the prevalent belief that tears of anguish for the dead burn the soul of the deceased.

¹⁰ Based on the activists' discourse about the sale of the abducted children abroad.

¹¹ Some of the abducted babies are almost as old as the State of Israel.

¹² Based on the Jewish belief that the soul remains consciously alive.

Grandmother: You're a captive of the world's stupidity. It isn't your fault. That's why I've come to you.

Ro'ey: They're writing about us in the newspapers. They're opening the archives ...¹³ You were a different generation, Savta. Naïve. They used you. Humiliated you. Laughed at you.

Grandmother: If only you knew how many people are laughing at you now, *ya Ro'ey*. I see them everywhere. You're all shouting and accusing them and they believe in their power even more ... You've got to take the path of truth, *ya 'enni*.

Ro'ey: And what would that path be, Savta? Look, yesterday there was a big demonstration in Jerusalem. It matters what I do; it's public opinion ...

Grandmother: Only lighting a candle. That's all you did. The demonstration's over, the candle blows out. And if the candle in heaven blows out, you're done for. And I ... the angels allowed me, sent me to put words into your ear. There's all kinds of pain.

Ro'ey: We stood in the square for hours. There were tens of thousands, Savta.

Grandmother: Don't be angry with me. You have a heart, but war is your home. Ever since you were little you loved to quarrel. With the kids, with Mother and Father, with teachers ... The whole universe is God's!

Ro'ey: So tell me what I should do now, Savta. I can't sit and do nothing. I've got to get the state to acknowledge what happened, get compensation for the victims, and ...

Grandmother: Here they say you're a messenger. You descended from heaven to do *tikkun* [to make repairs]. Now they say, go away from the *dar a-kharb* [war zone] and take all that stuff with you.

Ro'ey: What stuff?

Grandmother: Everything that you collected. Everything that you know. And go.

Ro'ey: Go where?

Grandmother: To the Western Wall.

Ro'ey: And what should I do once I'm there?

Grandmother: What should you do?! Do what people do in a holy place! Wrap yourself in a tallit [prayer shawl]. It's high time. Pray and plead. That's what's needed. You and your brothers and sisters should be one body. Those young people who're out there shouting with you on the squares. Everyone makes his own flag and then takes over a town square and shouts that way, by themselves. Why by themselves?

Ro'ey: That's right.

Grandmother: The voice pours out of the mouth, but shouting doesn't go from one end of the world to the other. Shouting should make the world tremble. What's the point of fighting with your brothers?¹⁴ They're all part of you. One body. They take someone's heart away, can he live? They take someone's eyes away, can he see? And even the thieves' children,¹⁵ they're your brothers.

Ro'ey: Very well. This whole business is a bit difficult.

¹³ In December 2016, the government resolved to release for publication the reports of the state investigative commission on the "affair" (which met in the 1990s), which were supposed to be sealed until 2071 by law. When he announced this, the Prime Minister proclaimed, "Today we're rectifying a historical injustice."

¹⁴ That is, other activists.

¹⁵ Offspring of the Ashkenazi abductors.

Grandmother: Open the Torah and learn. There were some of the Yemenites who went to the synagogue and came back with a basketful of conflict. How does it happen that sinners shout and slander while the Torah's there, open and waiting? Who's going to read from it? One of them says, "I'll rule" and the other says, "No, I will."¹⁶

Ro'ey: Yes, that's right. Where will I hunt for the cure [solution to the conflict], Savta?

Grandmother: Here, I tell you: in the Torah. The young people don't remember us, how we grandparents and uncles really were. I hope the audience remembers. Nothing remains in your mouth but a word here and a word there from back there, from Yemen. That's all.

Ro'ey: So you think I don't remember either?

Grandmother: And how! Not *tefillin* [leather ornaments that are strapped to the forearm and the forehead for the morning prayer service], not *tzitzit* [shawl fringes], not *shaharit* [the morning prayers], not *arvit* [the evening prayers], not Shabbat, not the synagogue, not *hod* [majesty] and not *hadar* [glory].

Ro'ey: Oh, Savta! That's what Saba [grandfather] used to say.

Grandmother: You thought you wouldn't hear from Saba and Savta anymore?

Ro'ey: No, Savta.

Grandmother: Then you thought so! I'm you. I'm in your heart. You're me. It's you that's speaking to you. How will you succeed if you aren't true to your soul? You've got all kinds of bats in your belfry, words about us that aren't us. Dead words. Civil rights, discrimination, genocide ... Those aren't our words. You imported them from abroad. And what about us, I ask you? Have you wiped out our wisdom?

Ro'ey: Where are you and where am I?

Grandmother: As far apart as heaven is from earth. Put what I'm saying to you into a basket and turn it all into words. Then you'll see for yourself how everything will turn around. Wonder of wonders.

Ro'ey: Wonder of wonders, you say.

Grandmother: Wonder of wonders! They stole our babies and they stole our soul. And you, you're my stolen one. What did you all think? You and your friends, a generation of stolen souls! Lost young kids! Shouting and weeping. No spirit. Walking in darkness. As long as you don't come and pray for me, I'm dead ... I'm dead.

Ro'ey: Savta? Where are you?

<The End>

Accepting the Ethnofiction – An Evolutionary Process

The silent song with which the "ghost" opens plunged the audience into large and lengthy silence. "The audience was there right away," Emmanuel reported, "inside it in the other experience, hyperventilating excitedly." Indeed, some shed a tear when the song was hummed. There were women who clutched each other's hands and whispered the word *savta* (grandmother). When the Emmanuel finished reciting the Kaddish, the men in the audience answered "Amen" as though they had been with him at the graveside. Moist-eyed women told

¹⁶ The grandmother is criticizing the internal conflicts among Yemenite-Jews of the first generation and likens them to those among the social activists.

me that they had found the ghost's language, spiced with Judeo-Yemenite expressions and dicta, "very true" to their memories of their mothers and their cultural heritage.

When reminded of the grandmother's traditional dishes, the audience laughed in fond recollection, responding to internal codes in a dialogue that an outsider would not understand. This experience of flow was evident in the tears in several elders' eyes at the end of the performance, which was greeted with cheering and brought the event to its conclusion. Thronging around the actors and me, elders flooded us with stories of the trauma of losing children that they had experienced in their families, and with accounts of their grandmothers' suffering. The actors described the excitement as so intense that they had to pause at length, feeling obliged to listen in the manner of psychologists.

The nostalgic grandmother character stole the show, not only because her Yemenite-Jewish messages, melody, and language generated empathy and respect for the religious and cultural legacy of the ethnos but also because in dramaturgical terms the character seemed invisible on the stage (with her back to the audience). With their freight of nostalgia and enigma, the elders were surprised by the youthful appearance and voice of the actor, Galit, who allowed herself to be seen at the end. "You're the grandmother?" they wondered repeatedly, as though struggling to bridge the gap between her and the young character who had "returned from the dead." An event organizer booked performances for additional audiences. It was here that the social activist whose character served Emmanuel and me to construct the character of Ro'ey told me that "I think this play was written for me." Several members of the audience shared their positive surprise over the very fact of putting on the performance at the gathering. They compared the experience of the two lectures that preceded it, which sounded "too academic and monotonous," with the empathy that the ethnodrama had created – the conclusive emotion at the gathering. Reflecting on this acceptance, Galit said, "It's a compliment. It says that the dialogue *among the three of us* in the course of the performance worked correctly."

The coronavirus pandemic forced live performances of the play into a moratorium. Continuing to participate in gatherings of the social activists, most of which were held on Zoom, I got the impression that the activists had refined the messages of conciliation that the dialogue expressed and saw conciliation among themselves as a matter of dispositive importance. Memories of a grandmother or mother who had lost a child, as shaped in the dialogue, also created strong emotional empathy among them and softened potential resistance to hearing them out. This strengthened my trust in their ability to separate out the contents that they had positioned between the ghost and me. Seeing that the activists remained congenial toward me, I sought to diffuse the dialogue more widely by sending the text to activists who had not seen it in live performance. Several representative examples of their reactions follow. One activist replied, "It was hard, impelling, suffocating ... The dialogue sent me back to memories of my conversations with my mother about the disappearance of my brother, Yohanan. ... Grandmother talks to the grandson who laughed at the previous generation. They're continuing to laugh at us today, too ... The dialogue is strong and ought to be made more jolting." Another activist said, "There were investigatory committees, but the affair hasn't been figured out to this day; there's still a fog over everything. The pain continues and passes to the next generations. The demonstrations of rage and the tools of war that the grandmother describes aren't helping. They're dividing the Jewish people. Even if the crimes were committed by the 'Ashkenazi others,' we're all brothers and there's no way to fight against them. It's all in the imagination. The right way to cope with the pain is by conciliation, spiritual healing, prayers, compassion, empathy, and good deeds."

It is hard to estimate the impact of this ethnofiction in dissociation from other determinants. The activists' self-discovery of their impasse is, in itself, a hugely influential factor. Nevertheless, I should note the current escalation of that the activists' discourse on the difficulty that their internal rift has created. In addition, in recent rallies devoted to the affair, I

was impressed by manifestations of cooperation among the various associations and their integration of supportive women in the affair, under the auspices of an organization that I established (see above, fifth source of information). In their course, as in gatherings at the Supreme Court, the women of the group disseminated the *messages* of the dialogue in conversations, waved signs (that I had prepared) with quotations from Psalms – a book that was identified with the grandmother character – and uttered a prayer in song form. The most recent rally, held across from the Knesset (parliament) building in Jerusalem, began with a prayer by men who turned in the direction of the Western Wall, as mentioned in the dialogue. Lately, the social activists have been producing and diffusing via YouTube protest videos accompanied by traditional liturgical music in Judeo-Yemenite.¹⁷ Seen through the eyes of an activist scholar, these desirable responses have paved the way forward for the activists and for me. An academic forum for fair discourse about the affair was established in September 2020; in this setting, I served as a mediator between affirmers and deniers of the affair. The polemics in the forum revealed difficulties that traced to the status of the affair as an extreme case in Israel's identity politics; they also demonstrated the lacunae of knowledge that exist among researchers in various disciplines.

In the concluding section that follows, I discuss aspects of the representational value of ethnofiction and its effects on the audience at the live event and in the social activists' settings. First, I focus on the advantages of the ghost character in the cultural context of the affair, then I assess the value of ethnofiction for a scholar's interior protest in view of her deviation for the academic "aesthetic of objectivity."

Concluding Remarks

Why a Ghost?

"If the art form has the ability ... to heighten the representation and presentation of social life, and if our research goal with a particular fieldwork project is to capture and document the stark realities of the people we talked to and observed, then," Saldaña (2011) contends, "the medium of theatre seems most compatible choice for sharing our findings and insights" (p. 15).

Ethnodrama is a genre that encourages the channeling of creative sources and methods along a transformative process that leads from research to performance. I chose the ghost as my dramaturgic vehicle for several reasons. The woman whom it represents is a "non-person" during her life. Namely, in addition to her triadic marginality as an elderly Mizrahi female, she represents social outcasts in her roles as the mother of an abducted child and as a woman whose entitlement to a voice (albeit limited) is conferred only by tradition. At the time the abductions took place, officials labeled Yemenite-Jewish mothers as barbarian, selfish, and childbearing machines who neglect their children. Thus, the medical establishment explained away the "death" of multiple children in the immigrants' camps and renounced its responsibility for their disappearance. This dismissal of motherhood aggravated the trauma of the mothers, who channeled their distress to the only arena that allowed them to speak out amid the loss: bewailing the dead. Yemenite-Jewish women's wailing has waned recently due to deaths among the population of wailers and aggressive gagging by the young generation, which, in the service of Western emotional values, has saddled the practice with epithets such as "hysteria," "vulgarity," "madness," and "irrationality" (Gamliel, 2014). Against this background, one may understand why Yemenite-Jewish women kept performative wailing alive for decades after immigrating to Israel. Paradoxically, when women are deprived of every

¹⁷ For an example, visit <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qmPuhUC9-eQ>.

resource that might give them *social agency*, the dramatic-ghost device acquires an incomparably empowering potential. In view of people's affinity for the supernatural, a phenomenon triggered by anxiety and/or religious conviction, I would say that the ghost strategy offers a second-order solution that may liberate the grandmother figure from oppressive categories so that she may turn the power relationship upside-down in her favor, much as the wailer mediates between life and death and is labeled in certain cases as a witch (Holst-Warhaft, 1995). Thus, by becoming a ghost, she, like "expert" elders in traditional societies (Simmons, 1970), acquires a status of influence that is reserved for *super agency*. This transformation accords with Kondo's (1995) approach, by which "[l]ive performance ... opens up entire realms of cultural possibilities" (p. 50).

The perception of a knowledge advantage that originates in a "world of truth," reflected by the loving ghost-grandmother, is unquestionable in Yemenite-Jewish culture (Gamliel, 2014) and immensely valuable for the transmission of interior criticism of the nature of the protest. The dialogue reflects a direct confrontation between the theological thesis of the grandmother and her generation and the social activists' down-to-earth political outlook, which the elders consider unrepresentative of them. As she challenges her grandson, the "ghost" divulges the reasoning of the world of truth. On its basis, she instructs him to replace his confrontational protests with prayer, perfecting his virtues, and spiritual contemplation. Her celestial authority allows her to express claims that her grandson deems unacceptable if not "irrational" in order to challenge the rationality of the young people's futile protest. An epitomic example of this is her ("irrational") revelation that she knows exactly where and under what conditions her son Yosef is living decades after his abduction; another is her (unacceptable) acquiescence in having lost him, thereby attesting to a love that does not depend on parental possession. Dramaturgical "acquiescence" in loss serves the purpose of sterilizing the dialogue of traumatic suffering and its discursive derivatives in order to focus attention on the grandmother's critique; the idea behind presenting her as omniscient alludes to the powerful validity of her criticism as the product of a superior consciousness that has no temporal and physical limits.

The ethnofiction set a protected experiment in interior protest in motion. As the manifestations of its acceptance grew in number, I carried its messages to relevant audiences in additional verbal ways. As I described, it had the strength to revise the discourse, create a basis for new practices, and promote cooperation between social activists in the community of victims of the affair and those in academia. A reasonable conclusion to draw from the findings is that this super-agency, in its special ways, forced some social activists to rethink their neoliberal principles of human rights, equality, solidarity, and justice through the prism of theological terms that are intrinsic to Yemenite-Jewish culture as a deep area of meaning, and to adjust their methods of struggle – to carry out a "tikkun" – by bridging the chasm between present and past.

Furthermore, I hypothesize that the composition by an Israel-born scholar of an ethnofiction that uplifts the cultural legacy of the grandparents' generation may in itself carry the potential of changing the social activists' approach. Given the internalization among the young generation of the Ashkenazi elite's labeling and silencing of traditional and religious legacies, creating feelings of cultural inferiority and shame, ethnofiction based on academic research and presented in academic forums may give those of this generation the legitimacy to examine the words of the "ghost" seriously and return to their roots.

Ethnofiction and the Aesthetics of Objectivity

The "Dialogue with the Ghost" is an aesthetic dramaturgy that endorses Denzin's (2003) call for the democratization of our scholarship in order to extend its appeal to non-

academic reading communities. Furthermore, as in Spry's (2001) critique, it undermines the dominant paradigm of the aesthetics of objectivity by assuming a nexus of realism and the persistence of existing balances of power. In this sense, the dramatic text performs a dyadic *ostensible* subversion: by being considered the outcome of an "inventive process" undertaken by me (Gray et al., 2015, p. 21) and by using a "ghost" as an extreme deviation from the full set of plausible personae (Bagley, 2008).

The effect of blurring the scholarly voice behind an "irrational" character should be contrasted with the intrinsic threat of interior protest to the scholarly identity. Namely, the inverse of the amplified voice in which the ghost speaks is her uttering of criticism in a way that makes it hard "to put one's finger on the scholar." Similarly, when copious research and experiential material is compressed and symbolized in surrealist dramatic poesis, it unleashes a power of enchantment that may leave the writer beyond suspicion.

The "Dialogue with the Ghost," as an instantiation of ethnofiction, allows deviations from the aesthetics of objectivity toward *acceptance* of interior protest to take place. The value of such deviations lies in the determination that, unlike a theatre that aims to disseminate findings, theatre for the public at large should aspire to be more fascinating than objective (Beck et al., 2011). It also flows from Saldaña's (2003) approach to the fictionalization of a possible dialogue, in which, as a criterion for its involvement, the audience must ask itself: "Do I care what these characters have to say?" (p. 227).

The audience's suspended animation throughout the dialogue and its excitement afterwards, as described above, attest that the dialogue successfully surmounted the limits of time and place. In other words, the audience re-experienced its connection with its dear ones and their legacy. It showed what suspension of the aesthetics of objectivity may contribute to the acceptance of a dialogue among an audience in its experiential and less-reflexive sense. It was a utopia of "profound moments," as Dolan (2008) describes them, in which "performance calls the attention of the audience in a way that lifts everyone slightly above the present" (p. 26).

In discussing the "utopianization" of the theatre's work, which decodes the sociability imbued in those moments of magic in which things "work," Román's term, "critical generosity" (1998, p. 469), is adopted: "a practice that sets out to intervene in the limited perspectives we currently employ to understand and discuss ... performance by looking beyond conventional forms of analysis" (pp. xxvi–xxvii). An audience's utopian acceptance of an ethnodramatic work, especially one that challenges "rational" metaphors and templates, promotes thinking about the utopian in terms of cultural relativism. In the case at hand, the dramaturgic choice of the ghost reveals the importance of the *spiritual utopia* to which that the elder generation clings. The utopia, in this case, is the experiential restoration and reaffirmation of the repressed transcendental dimension to the community, a meaning that a conventional academic article is unlikely to convey despite the tradition in anthropology of ramified criticism of the pretense to represent (Clifford & Marcus, 1986; Vargas-Cetina, 2013).

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Article Citation

Gamliel, T. (2022). Ethnofiction and interior protest: Scholar-activism in the Yemenite children affair. *The Qualitative Report*, 27(6), 1656-1672.
<https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2022.5191>
