

How to be feminist in public¹

Abstract: Feminist investment in penetrating the public sphere has been paradigmatic to feminist politics. This paper addresses feminist scripts of being public and being in public by looking at one of the most divisive debates in Israeli feminism, namely the occupation of Palestine. The analysis presented here is an initial attempt, based on sporadic case studies, to look at the process whereby negotiations within the feminist underscore what determines a feminist public, who (and what) is fit to go public, and what happens once we come together as a public. Employing Eve Sedgwick's concept of performativity, and Michel Foucault's notion of parrhesia, the paper attends to efforts, and failures, to demarcate feminism as a site of witnessing and witnessing as inherently feminist.

(T)o encourage a steely sorrow laced with delight for what we lost that we never had.

(Gordon, 2008, p. 57)

These four questions about truth-telling as an activity – who is able to tell the truth, about what, with what consequences, and with what relation to power.

(Foucault, 2001, p.170)

Voice, visibility and recognition are paradigmatic to feminist politics, which assumes that a successful penetration into the public sphere is the condition for negotiating and acquiring equal rights and civic belonging. The optimistic version assumes that the transformation in women's lives is the result of empowerment and agency, emphasized in politicizing the personal, voicing one's stories and presenting them in public. In other words, compelling the public to witness and, hopefully, to assume accountability. But what happens when a public, or better yet, a feminist counter-public is reluctant to witness the realities disclosed by its members? Here I address the feminist script of being public and being in public, as well as various acts of disengagement and refusals to publicly address questions concerning women's lives, by looking at one of the most divisive debates in Israeli feminism, namely the occupation of Palestine. My analysis is based on sporadic case studies and an initial attempt to play with potential questions and theoretical axes. Hence, this paper does not suggest that there's a coherent feminist discourse or a unified movement in Israel. Rather, my aim is to reflect on a contested field of action. Employing Eve Sedgwick's (2003) concept of performativity, and Michel Foucault's (2001) notion of parrhesia, I draw on three debates that occurred between 1980 and 2015 in Israeli feminism to ask: What it is that we desire when we desire being public? What does it entail to be a feminist in public and to be public as a feminist? Back in 1980, a fierce dispute abruptly terminated

a feminist conference entitled "A Decade of Israeli Feminism", which was being held in Jerusalem. This premature ending was followed by a press release clarifying the occurrences that led to the sudden dissolution of the event:

[...] Following a workshop on the topic 'The Arab Woman's World', which also hosted Palestinian women, we proposed a conference statement [in keeping with] the procedures determined in advance by the conference's organizing committee. The aim of the statement was to emphasize the fact that feminist action cannot be maintained separately from the political situation.

[The proposed articulation was as follows]: "We express our solidarity with our Palestinian sisters in the Occupied Territories, with their struggle for social equality as women, and with their struggle against the occupation as Palestinians. The end of the occupation is a crucial condition for a shared struggle and the liberation of both Palestinian and Israeli women."

During the discussion, another articulation was brought to the table: "We, feminists in the State of Israel, express our identification with Palestinian women in particular, and with Arab women throughout the Middle East in general, in our shared struggle for self-determination and liberation."

In response, a new motion was proposed, intended to remove both proposals from the agenda. However, this motion was dismissed by

a majority of 83 vs. 63 women. [Consequently,] a group of women left the hall demonstratively, a step which put an end to the conference. We would like to stress that this dismaying closure will not terminate the struggle and solidarity of feminists in Israel.²

This was not the first instance where the relatively young feminist movement in Israel was divided over questions of the occupation of Palestine. Marcia Freedman (1990), a veteran feminist activist and a former member of the Israeli Parliament, reflects in her memoir on the line drawn by Israeli feminists in the 1970s, demarcating issues of women's oppression from issues of the oppression of Palestinians.

Three decades later an online Israeli feminist network of NGOs, academics and activists was divided by a heated debate on the same question of witnessing and solidarity. Hannah Kehat, a prominent Orthodox-religious feminist, was dismissed from her teaching position at Orot College located in Elkana, a settlement in the West Bank. Kehat claimed that she was fired due to a successful struggle against sexual assault within the Jewish National Religious community, which she led and where she publicly exposed a sexual harassment scandal that brought about the dismissal of a prominent figure.

Kehat's appeal to the feminist network, as well as the solidarity this appeal invoked, should not come as a surprise.³ Issues concerning sexual violence and the persecution of those who fight publicly against perpetrators are the bread and butter of feminist activism to this very day. This is so especially in regard to women's employment and freedom of occupation, which is threatened in so many cases in which a woman ventures to go public. However, while the feminist network at large was in favor of engaging in public acts of solidarity, such as issuing a petition in support of Kehat's struggle against her college, some questioned the ethics of such an intervention, which disregarded the ongoing violation of Palestinians' human rights. After all, Palestinians cannot enjoy the freedom of employment and of consciousness that Kehat struggled to maintain. Fearing that supporting such a case might contribute to the normalization of the occupation, the opponents pointed out that the college where Kehat taught stood on confiscated Palestinian land in violation of international law. Moreover, many Palestinians were deprived basic freedom of movement, which prevented them from attending universities and schools or

going to work. If solidarity was to be professed by Israeli feminists, some interlocutors argued, it should be solidarity with Palestinian women under military occupation. And if a petition were to be issued, it should call for mass resignation of whoever taught in the debated college.

Well, here the plot thickened as some women pointed out that the settler-colonial regime was maintained on the backs of Mizrahi Jews and migrants from the former USSR, namely those subordinate within the ethnic Jewish divide in Israeli society, who lived wherever they were sent by state authorities or wherever they could afford, within either the 1948 or the 1967 colonial project.⁴ As one of the interlocutors, a migrant from the former USSR maintained, many migrants had no notion of what, or where, the 'Green Line' was.⁵ Most of them would have preferred living in the center of Tel Aviv if only they could afford it.⁶ In response, Kehat, who at that time also resided in the West Bank, argued that she too opposed the occupation; however, as a mother of six she could not simply uproot her kids from their home and schools because it was incongruent with her ideology. "Life is complicated", she concluded (Friedman, 2010). Among Jewish feminists in Israel, this negotiation around and about solidarity in the context of the occupation of Palestine has erupted time and again. A more recent example is the 'Women Wage Peace' movement, established during the Protective Edge military campaign in Gaza in the summer of 2014.⁷ It declares itself "non-political". its members asserting that they wish to be inclusive of all women in Israeli society, their political position notwithstanding. The mission statement in Hebrew asserts that the movement is not ideological but *pragmatic*.⁸ While Women Wage Peace does not identify as a feminist movement, it incorporates ideological and discursive traits which may be identified as feminist, including solidarity among women as the foundation for activism and social change with the explicit aim of uniting women throughout the country; recognizing gender bias in negotiations for peace hence calling for increasing women's representation and endorsing UN resolution 1325; fostering a non-hierarchical organizational structure and sharing leadership ("leaderful", in their language); and training women to take their "mandate seat at the table".⁹

Joining the movement's communal fast outside the Prime Minister's residence in 2015, held by the movement in commemoration of Protective Edge military assault, Shoshana London Sappir

(2015) describes how the organizers repeatedly emphasized that the movement was “not leftist”, adopting the same rhetoric that had fueled a delegitimization campaign against leftist activists:

In an attempt to appeal to the broadest audience possible, they refused to take a stand on any of the core issues that define the struggle for peace: [...] social justice, human rights, occupation, racism, equality, democracy. The most they would commit to was demanding that the government “return to negotiations”, [a] slogan writ large on [the] banners [...].

It should come as no surprise [then] that many a passerby shouted out “[return to negotiation] With whom?” [...] As for the war we had gathered to commemorate, the discourse was limited to our desire as Israelis to keep our loved ones out of harm’s way, but stopped at recognition of the destruction we had wrought on the Palestinian side.

The low point for me was when the organizers invited the wife of one of the heads of Elad¹⁰ to join us for a dialogue. Their line of thinking, they explained to me, was that we can find common ground with other women in the desire for peace, even if we do not agree on the details.

While at times the investment in creating or maintaining a public and penetrating the public sphere may reach some strange conclusions, I do not wish to ridicule it. Rather, I’d like to look at the process whereby these exchanges underscore the negotiations over what determines a feminist public, who (and what) is fit to go public, and what happens once we come together as a public. In particular, I wish to reflect on the poignant efforts, and failures, to demarcate feminism as a site of witnessing and witnessing as inherently feminist. I focus on witnessing for two reasons: first, because feminist investment in telling stories in public, and in compelling the public to see, recognize and know the realities these stories portray, assumes that the public sphere is a site of witnessing and accountability. To paraphrase Foucault’s (2001) discussion of truth-telling, feminism is invested in a public verbal activity which involves criticism, risk to the speaker and a sense of duty to improve society, other people and oneself. Second, the feminist public may be considered a counter-public: it maintains a shared awareness of its subordinate status in a dominant order and is constituted through an address to undefined strangers who are socially marked by their participation in this kind of discourse (Warner, 2002). In other words, a feminist (and perhaps any counter-public’s) reproach or criticism

is made in the context of inferiority in power and vulnerability, and therefore may manifest reluctance to say everything (Foucault, 2001, p. 52-57).

In his analysis of truth-telling in Ancient Greece, Foucault differentiated a male-born citizen of the polis, who had the right to use fearless speech (parrhesia) that took the form of truthful political criticism, from a female-born citizen, whose parrhesia took the form of a confession about herself and a truthful accusation against another person (or deity), more powerful than she. A gender bias in truthful political criticism is evident in the Israeli public debate as well. For example, the Israeli anti-occupation organization, Breaking the Silence, which focuses on soldiers’ testimonies of their military service in the Occupied Territories, constructs its public appeal by invoking valorized cultural symbols and meanings, first and foremost by inhabiting war experience as a privileged source of knowledge (Katriel & Shavit, 2013). This symbolic capital is inherently masculinist and militarist in the localized Israeli version of fearless speech and public condemnation of the occupation (Katriel & Shavit, 2013, p. 99).¹¹ However, Jewish women do exercise fearless speech, as Merav Amir has demonstrated in her study of Checkpoint Watch. Checkpoint Watch is an organization of Israeli women opposing the Israeli occupation, who have realized the detrimental effects of checkpoints on the lives of West Bank Palestinians and who go to the checkpoints to witness, monitor, and document (Amir, 2014, p. 364). Amir suggests that this form of reporting to the Israeli citizenry is parrhesian talk, namely a form of knowledge transference that bestows on its target audience accountability and a moral duty to act (Amir, 2014, p. 376).

As we have seen, feminist publics embed moments and acts of dis-engagement or dis-interpellation, or, as Sedgwick (2003) puts it, a failure or momentary collapse in the consensus that such a space of a “we” of witness is expected to invoke. Sedgwick noted that these collapses or refusals to engage in the act of witnessing are not manifested as explicit performatives, or through a powerful formulaic negative response, but through a renunciation, a “count me out”, and the refusal to be interpellated as a witness (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 70). Pushing on with the Althusserian concept of interpellation, she defines these acts as periperformatives, namely utterances which do not fulfill the conditions of explicit performative utterances, as in “We hereby consecrate”, but

instead allude to explicit performative utterances as in “We cannot consecrate” (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 68). Demonstrating a periperformative utterance, Sedgwick contended that any queer who has struggled to articulate to friends or family why he or she loves them but just doesn’t want to be at their wedding, knows from inside the dynamic of compulsory witness generated by a public that comes together (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 72).

Kehat’s appeal to the Israeli feminist public to support her struggle, as well as go public with this support, rested on her assumption of a pre-existing consensus on what may or may not be witnessed and addressed by a feminist public. The interpellation of the members present in the digital network as witnesses to her suffering was based on Kehat’s guaranteed agency. In other words, she had a pretty good idea how to be public, and what was considered legitimate to call for in a feminist public and as a feminist public. Indeed, the response was overwhelmingly supportive: the petition was issued and endorsed by many feminist NGOs and prominent academics and activists, though some shunned this compulsory witnessing.¹²

It is important to note that those refusing or deflecting the logic of automatic solidarity with Kehat are precisely those whom the discourse of Women Wage Peace defines itself by excluding. Indeed, simply invoking the state of occupation is taken as a move that counters the normalization and obfuscation of the Israeli occupation regime (Katriel & Shavit, 2013, p. 89, 101). Paraphrasing Foucault’s discussion of truth-telling as a public activity that involves certain privileges and duties, but also risks and dangers, one may assume that the contract of truth-telling in cases of sexual violence consists of a sort of “deal” between the one lacking the power and the one who has the power; and that one may exercise fearless speech without being punished. Of course, this contract has its limits; women have been punished for speaking of sexual assault in public, as in the case of Kehat. Thus going public does not involve reckless courage, as the contract of fearless speech involves awareness of the consequences and is intended to limit the risk one takes in going public (Foucault, 2001, pp. 32-33). So we could assume that feminist truth-telling, courageous as it may be, might regretfully result in a forgetting of Palestine as a strategic (pragmatic) means, or simply as part of the truth-telling contract.¹³ We might also argue that forgetting or un-knowing Palestine, as Gil Hochberg (2015) defines the process by which a people fails to appear from

the perspective of the colonizer, predetermines the conditions of speaking as a public in Israeli society. In other words, recruiting legitimacy to be feminist in public, and in the name of a certain public, either against sexism (Kehat) or for peace (Women Wage Peace), prescribes a forgetting.¹⁴

As Hochberg, as well as Adi Kuntsman and Rebecca Stein (2015) maintain, the conditions of seeing and knowing the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do not organize along the dichotomous lines of exposure versus concealment of violence. Indeed, various normalizing mechanisms such as public secrets and exceptionalism come into play in justifying this learned myopia. By myopia I do not suggest that feminists fail to see. Rather, the reading I suggest points to the mechanisms of public secrets, or pseudosecrets as Sedgwick has defined them, which determine how, who and what should and could be witnessed, and verbalized, in public.

The crucial moments when a feminist killjoy, to use Sara Ahmed’s articulation of the costly acts of refusal and disengagement¹⁵, points to these secrets might not overcome the dominant sphere of witnessing and knowing, but it may nevertheless render visible a certain public’s reluctance to see and know, as Hochberg contends. Such acts of dissent and disengagement, of both the killjoys and their pragmatic sisters, unveil the public contract or the contract of how to be feminist in public, and calls to problematize the feminist investment in the public sphere as a source for legitimacy and a utopian horizon. It demonstrates our poignant fantasy about the public sphere: that if only we could decipher the best way to speak truth, power, finally, would listen. As Hannah Kehat contended, life is complicated. Yet as Avery Gordon demonstrates, what complicates life is precisely the loss of that which never even existed (2008, p. 57). Truly, feminist negotiation with, in and through the public sphere in Israel has changed through the years. While it does not lie within the scope of this paper to map these shifts, the case studies presented here may serve as a road map of the negotiations, efforts and rules of how to be public. These negotiations animate the repressed and unresolved violence that continuously puts us at risk of exclusion or worse, no matter how “pragmatic” we may be; which makes us vulnerable to symbolic and real violence; which leaves traces we should and indeed must read to understand what it means these days to be an activist, a scholar, a movement, invested in going public.

Endnotes

- 1 Versions of this paper were presented at the Gender Studies Program Seminar at Ben Gurion University (2017) and at the Reconfiguring Cultural Inquiry conference at the ICI Berlin (2017). I wish to thank the participants in these events, as well as my interlocutors on the panel ‘The Bad Feminist – When Failure Is not Enough’ at the ICI, for their comments and questions, and for the conversations that helped me articulate my ideas. I am also grateful to Merav Amir, Inna Michaeli and Amalia Ziv for their inspiring and knowledgeable comments on earlier drafts and Ronnen Ben Arie and Chen Misgav for their helpful suggestions.
- 2 Jerusalem, 26/05/1980. Feminist Archives. Haifa Feminist Institute.
- 3 The debate reported below relates to the discussions on an email list on 5/5/2010.
- 4 In fact, as Rachelle Alterman argues, despite the fact that the ideological agenda of Likud (right wing) governments to build up Jewish settlement in the West Bank was backed by planning policy and units’ allocations, only 0.8 percent (East Jerusalem excluded) of the immigrants chose to live in this region. See: Rachelle Alterman, Can planning help in times of crisis: Planners’ response to Israel’s recent wave of mass immigration. *Journal of the American Planning Association*, 61(2), p. 156-177.
- 5 The Green Line is the border between the West Bank and Israel.
- 6 For a discussion on the ethnic-class composition of Jewish settlement see: Rivi Gillis (2016). Ethnic identity in the Israeli settlements. *Theory and Criticism*, 47, p. 41-63.
- 7 See mission statement: <http://womenwagepeace.org.il/en/mission-statement/> (retrieved on 15/7/2017).
- 8 My emphasis. See: <http://www.womenwagepeace.org.il/%D7%A2%D7%A7%D7%A8%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%AA-%D7%94%D7%AA%D7%A0%D7%95%D7%A2%D7%94/> (retrieved on 26/6/2017).
- 9 See mission statement: <http://womenwagepeace.org.il/en/mission-statement/> (retrieved on 15/7/2017).
- 10 Ir David Foundation, or the City of David, is an archeological site in the center of Silwan, a Palestinian neighborhood in

East Jerusalem. It is managed by the Elad settlers’ organization, which is engaged in Judaizing the adjacent Silwan. See: <http://www.ir-amim.org.il/en/tags/al-bustan;> <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium-1.626823?=&ts=1499105764992>.

- 11 On gender bias in public debates concerning national security in Israel see also: Sarai Aharoni, 2011. Gender and “Peace Work”: An Unofficial History of Israeli-Palestinian Peace Negotiations. *Politics & Gender*, 7: 391–416.
- 12 10.5.2010, *The Israeli Association for Feminist and Gender Studies*. www.gendersite.org.il/2010/05/10/1152/ (retrieved on 26.6.2017).
- 13 See for example Nadera Shalhoub-Kevorkian (2012, p. 106-151), where she demonstrates that the existing Israeli human rights (and feminist) framework, operating in a colonial context, cannot be an emancipating force.
- 14 This is not to say that feminist groups that openly oppose the occupation do not exist, for example: Isha L’Isha Haifa Feminist Center, the Coalition of Women for Peace, New Profile, Women in Black, Black Laundry and, of course, Checkpoint Watch.
- 15 See: <https://feministkilljoys.com/>

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