



Project
MUSE[®]

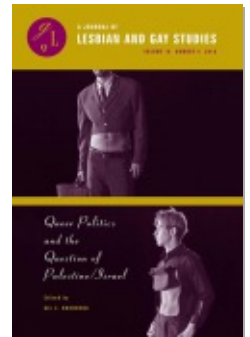
Today's Research. Tomorrow's Inspiration.

Performative Politics in Israeli Queer Anti-Occupation Activism

Amalia Ziv

GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies, Volume 16, Number 4, 2010, pp. 537-556 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press



▶ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/glq/summary/v016/16.4.ziv.html>

PERFORMATIVE POLITICS IN ISRAELI QUEER ANTI-OCCUPATION ACTIVISM

Amalia Ziv

The Tel Aviv gay pride parade of June 2001 featured an unusual block of marchers. Amid the colorful mass of rainbow flags and floats carrying muscular, smooth-chested young men dancing to loud club music, a block of some two hundred people dressed all in black stood out, flying black balloons and holding black triangular signs with pink inscriptions. Unlike other groups that marched in a looser, more disorganized fashion, the “black block” marched solemnly, chanting a single slogan: “There’s no pride in the occupation.” The black block was an ad hoc group of people mobilized by a call for action that circulated through flyers and word of mouth. The context was the outbreak of the second Intifada in the fall of 2000 and Israel’s harsh military response. The call for action voiced a number of sentiments and notions: that it was improper to hold the parade as usual with no reference to these circumstances; that the flourishing of gay rights in Israel was being used by the government to divert attention from its gross violations of human rights in the occupied territories; and that in the face of such violations it was impossible to keep one’s sense of gay pride apart from one’s sense of shame and accountability as an Israeli. In addition, there was a wish to repoliticize the parade, which within the span of a few years had become a thoroughly mainstream and commercial event.

The strong impact achieved by that initial action led to the formation of the group that adopted the name Black Laundry and operated under the heading “lesbians, gays, and transgenders against the occupation.” *Black Laundry* suggests a double pun—it plays both on the expression “black sheep” (in Hebrew the word for *sheep*, *kivsa*, closely resembles the word for laundry, *kvisa*), and on the idio-

matic expression “dirty laundry,” which refers to matters that would be shaming if publicly known. The name also references the most marked visual characteristics of the group, whose members wore black and carried black signs, and establishes the group’s affinity to and filiation from Women in Black, the Israeli women’s anti-occupation movement.

It was Black Laundry that inaugurated the queer moment in Israel. Not only was it the first LGBT group to embrace *queer* as a term of collective identity, but more important, the style of activism it adopted—direct local interventions in the public arena, a preference for performative practices, and a confrontational “in your face” approach—is one that has come to be identified in U.S. gay politics with the term *queer*. The emergence of the queer moment in Israel, however, cannot be accounted for simply in terms of the developmental trajectory of a universal gay evolutionary narrative (emerging in the United States and migrating, as it were, to Israel). The insufficiency of such an account becomes apparent in view of the striking fact that *queer* as an identity formation and a politics appeared in Israel in the context of anti-occupation activism. The emergence of the queer moment in Israel and its significance cannot be taken for granted. Instead, it needs to be read for the way that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (as perhaps the major shaping force of Israeli reality) inflects local gay identities and politics and at the same time provides a symbolic terrain in which dramas of identity, belonging, and disidentification are played out. As I shall show, Black Laundry borrowed and adapted strategies and styles of action derived from U.S. queer activism to intervene not only in local LGBT politics but also in the arena of Israeli national politics, yet through this very intervention it contested both the terms of entry into this arena and the very definition of the political.

Black Laundry did not remain a single-issue group; over time, its scope of activism expanded to encompass a whole array of causes and struggles: violence against women, feminist body politics, social justice, transgendered oppression, and eventually also animal rights. As its self-understanding evolved, the group came to see its mission as one of fostering an understanding of the links between different oppressions and struggles. The group was highly active for approximately two years, but by the end of 2003, regular meetings ceased, and many of the original members had left. For another couple of years or so, the group existed as more of a virtual entity in the form of an e-mail discussion list before it was finally acknowledged to be defunct.

In its prime, Black Laundry had a core of twenty to forty active members, but the group’s e-mail list comprised between one hundred and two hundred people. Those more loosely affiliated joined the group at Pride or during

large peace demonstrations. The age of the members spanned from twenty to forty years old, but the majority were in their early twenties. In terms of ethnicity, about 90 percent of the members were Ashkenazi, that is, Jews of European origin (in this, the group shared the traditional ethnic slant of the Israeli Left), and except for one Israeli-Palestinian member, all were Jewish. Most members came from a middle-class background, and the majority, though certainly not all, had a college education or were enrolled in college.

My inquiry into Black Laundry's conjunction of queer politics and anti-occupation politics takes several directions. First, I am interested in reading the group's political performative practices, which I argue contain implicit claims about the very nature of the political, claims that I attempt to unfold. I also take the group as a case study for asking about the ways in which sexual and gender dissidence translates into identification across national and ethnic divides, about the relation of performative practices to a politics of identification, and about the links between political performativity and the performative construction of identity. The analysis I present relies both on my own observations, as one of the more loosely affiliated members of the group (I was on the e-mail list, which gave me access to the group's internal discourse, and I had close rapport with some of the members, who were friends or students), and on interviews conducted with a number of former group members between the fall of 2004 and the summer of 2005.¹

The Politics of Black Laundry vis-à-vis Mainstream Israeli LGBT Politics and the Israeli Left

Before Black Laundry, the political struggles of the LGBT community in Israel focused solely on issues of direct concern to the community: equal rights, discrimination on the grounds of sexual orientation, and homophobia. The institutions of the LGBT community never took part in other groups' struggles and attempted to maintain a "neutral" and "apolitical" image. Further, as Anat Lieber shows, all the mostly successful struggles undertaken by the community bespeak a longing for assimilation and imply a republican notion of citizenship as premised on contribution to the common good.² Two of the most prominent issues on the community's agenda were abolishing the discrimination against gays in the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) and the right to same-sex parenthood and particularly motherhood. As critics have previously pointed out, these two struggles need to be understood in light of the centrality of soldierhood and motherhood in the Israeli citizenship regime as the main venues to citizenship for (Jewish) men and women, respectively.³

Generally speaking, the image that the community has projected to the straight world is one of educated, professional gay men and women, who have served in the military, live in long-term relationships, and raise children, thereby corresponding on all points to the prevailing heterosexual model. As Lieber points out, the public image that the community cultivated emphasized both the normalcy and respectability of its members in general, and more particularly their gender normativity. Taking together the nature of the struggles conducted by the LGBT community and the logic, both implicit and stated, that underwrote them—equal rights as predicated not only on resemblance to the heterosexual norm but also on demonstration of civic virtue—Lieber concludes that the struggles of the LGBT community to broaden the citizenship of its members have not challenged the Israeli citizenship regime itself:

The nineties were years in which the community achieved unprecedented success in the legal, political, and cultural arenas, and lesbians and gay men attained at least partial inclusion in the institutions equated with realizing one's citizenship, i.e. the army and motherhood, and in the national collective. However, though lesbians and gay men contested the "naturalness" of the subjects that can embody civic virtue and broadened their definition, they challenged neither the venues to inclusion in the Israeli regime of citizenship, nor the boundaries of the national collective.⁴

In contradistinction to the community's official politics, Black Laundry proposed for the first time a queer politics that is not an identity politics—at least not in the simplistic sense of representing interests arising from a common identity—but a politics of identification.⁵ Black Laundry also replaced the quest for assimilation and normality with a celebration of deviance. Contrary to the usual attempt to counter "negative stereotypes," the group's strategy was to embrace such stereotypes defiantly. Thus the handout that the group circulated at Pride 2002 proclaimed: "We are ugly, sexually frustrated, hairy, mannish, fat lesbians; bitter humorless feminists in need of a good fuck, whores of Arafat, bleeding heart Israel-hating traitors; effeminate cock-sucking sissy pussy-boys taking it up the ass."

This kind of self-identification obviously aims to defuse the hurtful power of such interpellations, as well as to confront the bystanders with their own sexism and homophobia. In addition, to embrace these stigmatized and abject identities is also an attempt to produce speech that is expressly from the margins, speech "in the name of deviance" and one that claims deviance as a positive value.⁶ Fur-

ther, while the official politics of the LGBT community took place mainly in the parliamentary, legal, and mass-media arenas, with street demonstrations as the exception, Black Laundry defined itself from the outset as a direct-action group. Its actions always consisted of direct interventions in the public sphere, usually involving bodily presence, and the style of these actions was both theatrical and confrontational.

To the extent that Black Laundry diverged from the identity politics characteristic of the LGBT community, it also departed from the traditional mold of Left politics in Israel. Traditionally, the Israeli Left defined its position on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the product of either a universal ethics or an objective rational deliberation. That is, it did not assume any relation between the social positioning of the political subject and his or her political stance, and I believe would even oppose such an assumption. Black Laundry, on the other hand, linked the marginal sexual and gender identity of its members to the group's solidarity with the oppression of Palestinians and insisted on rendering that sexual and gender identity visible when participating in Left demonstrations. This insistence became particularly salient in the face of pressures toward closeting, as happened, for instance, in 2002 when Black Laundry, together with other Jewish peace groups, participated in the Arab Land Day procession.⁷ Muslim organizations that took part in the organizing objected to the group marching with signs proclaiming its members' sexuality. Eventually, a compromise was reached according to which none of the Jewish groups carried signs, but the Black Laundry contingent showed up with T-shirts that stated the members' identity.

The rationale behind this linkage of marginal positioning and anti-occupation politics was formulated in terms of the systemic relation between different oppressions. To quote an example from a handout Black Laundry distributed at a gay event:

The oppression of minorities inside Israel is a product of the same racism, the same chauvinism, and the same militarism that sustain the oppression and the occupation of the Palestinian people. There can be no genuine freedom in an occupying society. In a militaristic society there is no room for the other and the underprivileged: lesbians, gay men, transsexuals, labor immigrants, women, Mizrachim, Arabs, Palestinians, the poor, the disabled, and others.

Underlining the connections between different forms and mechanisms of oppression became an important part of the group's agenda. Yet Black Laundry's truly

innovative and radical move consisted in redefining the political subject as concrete, localized, vulnerable, and above all corporeal and sexual.

Black Laundry was not the first group to mobilize against the occupation on the basis of a concrete social positioning. This had already been done by the Israeli women's peace movement, of which the oldest group is Women in Black, which emerged in 1988 after the outbreak of the first Intifada. As has been pointed out, the very "invasion" of the public sphere by Women in Black to voice political protest (an invasion consisting of weekly vigils in central intersections for over two decades now) challenged the place of women in Israeli society, and particularly their exclusion from the political domain.⁸ Since the membership of Black Laundry was predominantly female, its presence in the public sphere entailed similar implications, but in this case the challenge was even more acute because of the group's emphasis on the "perverse" sexuality of its members. If, in the national division of labor, women are expected to make their contribution through their maternal role and abstain from direct political involvement, sexuality is defined from the outset as belonging in the private sphere, and gays, of course, are seen as sexual in their very being. Moreover, since the national collective is imagined to consist only of heterosexuals, lesbians and gay men intervening in the political realm—and in matters that do not concern their own particular rights—are even more scandalous than women intervening in issues of war and peace.

While the hostile reactions to the presence of Women in Black in the public realm often took a sexist and sexual character, attempting to delegitimize the group's protest by calling into question its members' femininity and feminine morality, Black Laundry claimed from the very beginning a position outside the bounds of normative femininity and appropriated strategically some of the slurs traditionally hurled at Women in Black, such as "whores of Arafat." As opposed to members of Women in Black, whose physical appearance never sought to draw attention to their sexuality, Black Laundry's practices sometimes included provocative physical presentation (marching topless or in underwear), ambiguous gender presentation (men wearing bras, women in male drag), and the inscription of the members' bodies as sexual—and sexually perverse—by wearing labels such as "I have sex with Palestinian women" or "I blow Arafat." One can say, then, that Black Laundry adopted as its performative identity everything that Women in Black was accused of, most particularly, the accusations of gender and sexual deviance.



Black Laundry at the Tel Aviv gay pride parade, 2002. Gili Pliskin, Tel Aviv (2002)

Political Practices

As noted above, Black Laundry offered a new formation of politics that was neither universalist (like traditional Israeli Left politics) nor identity politics (like mainstream LGBT politics), but rather a politics of identification rooted in a marginal positioning, which emphasized the corporeality of the political subject. This formation was manifested in the group's political practices, some of which were a novelty in the Israeli landscape. Three of those practices merit special attention: linguistic hybridity, corporeal inscription, and performance.

Linguistic Hybridity

Hybridity was a central feature of Black Laundry's poetics as a whole; moreover, it can be regarded as one of the very premises of its politics. Hybridity is already fostered by introducing the anti-occupation agenda to Pride and other gay events and, concurrently, introducing a queer and feminist agenda to anti-occupation demonstrations. But more concretely, hybridity was produced on the linguistic plane through slogans that tied together sexual or gender transgression and national transgression: "Transgender, Not Transfer," "Free condoms, Free Pales-

tine,” or “Men refuse to give head to soldiers” (a takeoff on the refusal theme that parodies the very normative masculinity of the Israeli refusenik movement).⁹ Such hybridity undermines the prevailing view of nationality and sexuality as separate spheres and discrete dimensions of identity and contests the hierarchical ordering that regards national identity as the more primary and important category of affiliation.

Often verging on nonsense, hybrid utterances of the kind I just cited do not function by establishing some kind of coherent connection between the two spheres; rather, they exploit rhyme, alliteration, and anaphora to create contiguity between elements of these two semantic universes. Such contiguity forms an instance of semantic transgression, with a slogan like “Free condoms, free Palestine” embodying in its very anaphoric structure the refusal to subsume queer issues like safer sex to the “higher” politics of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Corporeal Inscription

In addition to standard demonstration practices, such as carrying signs and chanting slogans, the group occasionally employed the practice of sticking labels onto the members’ bodies or writing on the bare body. These labels or inscriptions usually defined their bearers as owners of a stigmatized identity, for example, “Israel-hater,” “feminist pervert,” “sleeping with Palestinian women,” and “butt-fucked.”¹⁰ This practice calls a doubled attention to the demonstrators’ corporeality: not only by using the body as a medium of writing but also by having the text refer to the very body on which it is inscribed. It indicates a choice not to inhabit the position of enunciating subject but rather to use the body as a surface for writing in an act of self-objectification, thus creating subjectless utterances (the phrasing of the label or inscription always implied a speaker other than the person bearing it), in which the self figures as object. Such a choice implies an understanding of the political agent not as a transcendental consciousness but as bodily implicated. Further, since most labels concern sexual practices or identities, they define the demonstrating body as a sexual body, thereby conveying once more the refusal to divorce sexual politics and national politics while also foregrounding the artificiality of the separation between the logos and the sexual body. Moreover, in lieu of a statement of opinion that one holds as a universal subject, what we have here is an adoption of a stigmatized positioning, one allegedly “beyond the discursive pale.” Slurs such as “whores of Arafat” are intended as acts of silencing. The conjoined accusation of national betrayal and sexual depravity is meant to situate the addressee outside the Jewish Israeli discursive community, in a location from which it is impossible to speak legitimately. By wearing labels like “sleep-

ing with Palestinian women,” the members of Black Laundry deliberately situated themselves outside the boundaries of the national discursive community, thereby challenging the very location of those boundaries and contesting the status of the terrain beyond the pale as a locus from which it is impossible to issue political speech.

Performance

Practices of corporeal inscription were accompanied by other performative practices, not unlike those used by queer groups in the United States. Groups like ACT UP, Queer Nation, and the Lesbian Avengers have developed tactics of local, theatrical interventions in the public sphere designed to enhance gay visibility, capture media attention, and directly affect their audience. Actions like Queer Nation’s “kiss-ins,” “queer nights out,” and “mall visibility actions” and the Lesbian Avengers’ “metro actions” are all aimed at fostering lesbian and gay visibility and contesting the heterosexualization of the public sphere. They set out to achieve this through the performance—whether exaggerated or matter of fact—of queer identity itself.¹¹ Having taken their cue from the U.S. model of queer activism, Black Laundry’s performative actions involved the extravagant performance of a range of queer identities and styles, but they also involved theatrical enactments—either dramatic or parodic—of other social identities. The group’s performative span ranged from relatively minimalist acts, such as standing in pink headscarves with “bloody hands,” to semitheatrical happenings that involved playing a role—for example, a procession of bound and blindfolded Palestinian detainees at an anti-occupation demonstration—and more rarely to elaborate productions, such as a mock “opera,” a politicized version of Verdi’s *Aida*, performed on May 1 in front of the Israeli Opera, in support of a workers’ struggle against exploitative employment there.

Among these, I see special significance in those practices that involve personifying the national “other,” such as putting on a headscarf or marching as a row of Palestinian prisoners. Such practices express identification through embodiment. In the Israeli peace movement, identification with Palestinians usually takes the form of solidarity—solidarity manifested either by verbal acts (a statement on a sign) or by acts of material support (food convoys, assistance in the olive harvest, joint demonstrations against the separation wall), acts that entail joining the other in his or her own territory. Physical embodiment, on the other hand, brings the concrete presence of the national other into the very heart of the local terrain. Obviously, this form of identification lacks a practical aspect and has no bearing on the lives of actual Palestinians as opposed to the kinds of solidar-

ity manifested in material support and joint protests, but for the Jewish Israeli public there is something perhaps even more transgressive in it than in acts of solidarity, since it symbolically undoes the boundary—a boundary supposed to be absolute—between Jewish Israeli identity and Palestinian identity. It is an act of identification with those with whom identification is proscribed.

Perhaps this is the place to clarify that my stress on the originality and radical implications of Black Laundry's practices does not preclude an acknowledgment of the limitations of its politics, limitations that were readily acknowledged by most of the former group members I interviewed. These consist of the fact that the group's insistence on foregrounding its members' sexuality not only stood in the way of getting its message across to wider audiences but also prevented it from becoming a truly Arab-Jewish group. In highlighting those aspects of the group's politics that I find interesting and valuable, I am not thereby privileging Black Laundry's type of politics over all others. For instance, in the Israeli context there is a lot to be said for groups that found their political activism on genuine Arab-Jewish cooperation. I am also quite aware that it is possible—and indeed all too easy—to judge Black Laundry's politics as self-absorbed and to dismiss the group as a bunch of privileged kids enacting a form of adolescent rebellion. In the next section, I explicitly discuss the identitarian functions that political activism fulfilled for the group members, but instead of regarding the identitarian dimension of activism as somehow tarnishing its worth by rendering it less “pure,” I want to suggest that this identitarian dimension is not only integral to activism but forms a vital motive force.

Political Performativity, Identitarian Performativity

Black Laundry regarded its performative practices as an instrument for delivering political messages. Undoubtedly, performance is an effective political tool, owing both to its immediate dramatic and emotional impact, and to its ability to suspend automatic reaction patterns. But an instrumental understanding of performance is bound to be partial and reductive, since it examines performative practices only from the viewpoint of the addressees; further, it assumes the existence of a message that is extrinsic and prior to the performance, which is only its medium of transmission. What gets lost under this description are the effects that the performative act exerts on the performers themselves and the affective and libidinal investments that fuel and come into play through them.

This point can be illustrated through one of Black Laundry's actions. In a Left demonstration in Tel Aviv, Black Laundry members portrayed a group of Pal-

estinian prisoners, replicating an image that had recently appeared in the media. They walked in single file, blindfolded, their hands tied, and bound to each other with a long rope. On a closer look, one could see that this action had a deep effect on the performers themselves—unlike the other demonstrators, they hardly talked and projected a sense of great vulnerability. When I asked about this action in the interviews, my informants confirmed that this was an intense experience, one that lent them insight into the psychological effects of such a state of helplessness and fostered identification with those who experience it in actuality. That is to say, marching as a “Palestinian prisoner” was an act that fostered identification just as much as it expressed identification, and an act that had a consciousness-raising effect on the performers themselves—just as it did on the spectators. Interviewees also reported a heightening of their commitment to the action. It seems that performative practices, practices that make representational use of the body, mobilize their performers differently from more conventional kinds of activism.

On the other hand, the interviewees indicated that for such practices to be effective, they needed to bring into play genuine aspects of the performers themselves. As the interviewees testified, political performance was often nourished by individual feelings of vulnerability and anger that the collective performative actions transformed into a sense of political empowerment. The affects and identifications that the performance brought into play were usually of a kind that could not find expression in everyday behavior (whether out of shame, ambivalence, or fear of social repercussions), a fact that might account at least partly for the power of performative practices to mobilize, foster identification, and enhance commitment. What permitted the expression of covert or threatening aspects of self was the element of play and the distancing from the “real self.” The performative dimension of Black Laundry’s actions provided protection not only on the intrapsychic plane but also on the intersubjective one. The performative context provided a protective shield because it put the performers in control of the interaction. By exaggerating and drawing attention to those very traits that have been a source of shame and social rejection (e.g., effeminacy in men or masculinity in women), the hostile response when it came was a solicited one, thereby reinforcing the performers’ sense of agency.

The former activist Dalit Baum recounted an anecdote that illustrates this dynamic: in 2002 Black Laundry protested a beauty pageant competition outside the venue in which it was held in Haifa. Members of the group, both female and male, all dressed for the occasion as “beauty queens” in mock-glamorous female drag. At the end of the protest, the group members decided to go for a round in a nearby mall, since they felt they had not had enough public exposure. As

the overall effect of their appearance was ridiculous and bizarre, seeking interactions meant inviting negative reactions that were interpreted as confirmation of the performers' audacity and nonconformity. Hostile or derisive reactions merely validated the performance's dissident status, thus confirming the performers' radical identity.

To recapitulate, as the discussion so far shows, one identitarian function of political performance seems to be providing an opportunity to bring repressed or abjected aspects of the self into the public domain in a playful and supportive context, thereby enabling the performers to explore, process, air, or exorcise them. The interviews furnished various examples of the different functions of performance such as processing a childhood trauma through parodic repetition or exorcising nationalistic sentiments through an exaggerated acting out. Performance also provided an opportunity to "try on" identities by performing them experimentally. Political performance supplied many occasions for doing male drag—whether impersonating Israeli soldiers, Palestinian youths, or politicians—and for some group members this provided an opportunity for experimenting with cross-gender identification that in some cases led to embracing a partial transgendered identity. Here, again, the identitarian function of the performance was conditional on the group's acceptance and support, which lent recognition to the individual identities of its members and grounded them in a collective queer identity that provided an alternative to dominant identity categories.

When we try to formulate the connections between political performativity and identitarian performativity, between performativity as fostering identification with the other and performativity as constructing and resignifying the identity of the self, however, it is important to remember that the very distinction between the two is largely artificial. Thus, for example, the cross-gendered performances of some group members formed part of an individual project of exploring and reformulating their gender identity, but at the same time they were also part of a political project of resisting oppressive gender categories by creating "momentary utopias" in which individuals are free to be what they like (genderwise and otherwise) in the public sphere and are accepted. Moreover, political activism itself has obvious identitarian functions. Trying to distinguish Black Laundry from other groups in the Israeli Left, a former member, Noam Holdengreber, stated: "Standard Left politics . . . always felt to me condescending. . . . it isn't speaking in one's own voice but on behalf of someone else, some kind of oppressed somewhere; it's not speech that strives to save oneself." The need to "save oneself" relates to what Baum terms "the pain of the oppressor," which she identifies as a motivating force in activism. Saving oneself is saving one's identity—by disidentifying with the

oppressive system and constructing an alternative identity. In the case of Black Laundry, however, the pain of the oppressor was accompanied by the identity-shaping experience of sexual and gender oppression. This formative experience of oppression constituted not only a ground for identification with the oppression of Palestinians and other subjected groups but also a source of political energy.

The most helpful articulation of the intricate relations between performativity, identification, political activism, and the identity-shaping experience of sexual and gender deviance is provided by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in her landmark essay “Queer Performativity: Henry James and the Art of the Novel.” Sedgwick describes the queer subject as one whose identity is delineated by the formative experience of shame, an affect that while it becomes too integral to the self to be simply gotten rid of is nevertheless available for the work of metamorphosis—for instance, through political activism or theatrical performance. Sedgwick coins the term *queer performativity* as “a name of a strategy for the production of meaning and being, in relation to the affect shame and to the later and related fact of stigma.”¹² In the activism of Black Laundry we can see how formative experiences of childhood and adult shame related to sexual and gender deviance fuel political action—and shape its terms. The group’s choice of performative practices corroborates Sedgwick’s intuition concerning the intimate relation between performance and shame.

Shame, Sedgwick notes, is also a contagious affect: the bad treatment of someone else by someone else, someone else’s pain or stigma, can flood with shame those for whom shame is constitutive—hence the link between queer identity that is grounded in shame, and a politics of identification.¹³ Understanding shame as identity constituting lends us insight into the way in which the need to rehabilitate one’s own identity results in mobilization for the causes of others. A politics of identification is, then, one form of “queer performativity” as Sedgwick defines it. Based on this insight we can begin to contest the very distinction between identity politics and a politics of identification as founded on a reductive and erroneous understanding of the notion of identity politics. As Douglas Crimp argues, the prevailing view of identity politics as necessarily essentialist is based on a false description: “We were gay, and on our gayness, we built a political movement.” Whereas, in fact, it was the emergence of a political movement “that enabled the enunciation of a gay—rather than homosexual or homophile—identity.”¹⁴ Moreover, that political movement was formed through identifications with other political movements (particularly Black Power and feminism). When mainstream lesbian and gay politics disavows these political identifications, it ceases, as Crimp points out, to be an identity politics and becomes a liberal politics of minority rights.

Political identifications across identity boundaries are not only constitutive of gay or queer identity, they also sustain and resignify it. Crimp discusses the example of queer ACT UP activists who fought for needle exchange for IV drug users and were arrested for distributing clean needles. The queer identity of those activists, he argues, which had originally been premised on their sexuality, was transformed through their activism to encompass the relation between their sexuality and those circumstances “that make very different people vulnerable both to HIV infection and to the stigma, discrimination, and neglect that have characterized the societal and governmental response to the constituencies most affected by the AIDS epidemic.”¹⁵ Identity, then, is not a given from which a certain politics naturally derives. On the contrary, identity itself is fashioned through political practices and identifications. Black Laundry’s political identifications, and the collective practices that both expressed and fostered these identifications, resignified the lesbian/gay/queer identities of its members. If we understand identity as relational, we see that a politics of identification does not stand at the opposite pole to identity politics; rather, it is integral to it. As I have shown, Black Laundry kept insisting that the sexual identity of its members was central to the group’s political identifications, but it also insisted that these political identifications are fundamental to queer identity. And indeed, one of the effects of Black Laundry’s activism was to articulate the signifier *queer* in the Israeli context in opposition to the occupation and in solidarity with Palestinians, an articulation that persists long after the group’s demise.¹⁶

Gender Relations and Transgendered Practices

Black Laundry was the first queer group to emerge in Israel in the sense of cultivating a joint “queer” identity for lesbians and gay men. Joint organizations and forums had existed previously (e.g., the Society for the Protection of Personal Rights, Israel’s major LGBT organization), but these were often male dominated, and political cooperation between lesbians and gay men was seen (by both parties) as strategic, based on shared discrimination and shared needs, not on a shared identity. It was mainly lesbian feminists who, fearing the elision of lesbian specificity and rejecting modes of action incompatible with feminist principles, had reservations both about joint action and about the idea of a shared identity or culture. As a mixed-sex group, and one in which at least some of the women had a background of feminist activism, the first few months of Black Laundry’s existence were marked by tensions between male and female members that eventually resulted in a large group of men leaving. Once a female majority was established, the group

defined itself as feminist in its political affiliations and modes of operation. Those gay men who remained accepted this group identity and were comfortable with the female dominance—moreover, some of them even developed strong feminine and feminist identifications; concomitantly, the group's feminist character made it easier for some of the female members to adopt the identity label *queer*, of which they had been previously suspicious. This peaceful cohabitation of queerness and feminism as two aspects of the group's collective identity is interesting to observe, especially in light of the often-noted conflicts between queer and feminist politics.¹⁷ The fact that such conflicts were lacking in the unique configuration that characterized Black Laundry indicates that they are not inevitable. However, I do suspect that the numerical superiority of women in the group was an important enabling condition of this amalgamation of feminist and queer politics.

One interesting manifestation of the group's feminist character was the emergence of a discursive norm of collective speech in the first-person feminine plural.¹⁸ The collective identity of the group was female, and most male members employed the first-person feminine plural—or even the first-person feminine singular—as an act of feminist identification. Aside from making a political statement, this linguistic practice has long roots in local gay male culture, where it may be said to express a kind of gender dissidence, a defiant embracing of the stigma of the effeminate homosexual. Speaking in the feminine is then a multivalent practice—both an act of political solidarity with women and an expression of abjected aspects of gay male identity—which worked to blur the male/female divide.

Linguistic gender crossing was not the provenance of the men alone, but a near universal practice in the group. The female members, while employing the first-person feminine plural, nearly all spoke in the first-person masculine singular. As a linguistic collective, the predominant discursive norm in the group was lack of coherence between the speakers' biological sex and their linguistic gender, and correspondingly, most members also adopted cross-gendered nicknames. Such linguistic practices, together with the corporeal practice of drag, fostered a kind of "transgendered" group identity that made it possible to transcend the male/female divide and defuse potential tensions between lesbians and gay men.¹⁹ The suspension of commitment to a unitary and unequivocal gender identity, and the refusal to be mobilized by it into a ready-made configuration of loyalties, exclusions, and conflicts, made it possible to create a group identity based on flexible identifications that enabled people to occupy simultaneously identity categories considered mutually exclusive. Holdengreber explains: "[If a question was raised] I had no way of knowing whether X [a biological female] would respond to it more as a dyke or as a gay man or as a transperson. It was never obvious out of which identity

people would speak; it never became automated. Even when I myself insisted on speaking in the masculine it became my type of 'trans,' it didn't turn me into a man. In the context of Black Laundry it was hard to tell whether I'm not a lesbian masquerading as a man."

Black Laundry and Queer Counterpublicity

As I have shown, Black Laundry challenged the Israeli citizenship regime in several ways: by opposing the ethnic (i.e., Jewish) character of the national collective, by contesting the republican ethos that conditions citizenship on contribution to the collective, and by challenging the status of the army and the family as the central institutions of Israeli citizenship. Moreover, Black Laundry's political practices also entailed a more fundamental critique of notions of citizenship and political agency as structures that can be abstracted from an individual's concrete social location and detached from the physical and sexual aspects of existence. As I have shown, practices of hybridization, corporeal inscription, and performance imply a claim about the political relevance of sexual desires, identities, and practices and of the bodily dimension of experience in general.

Rendering queer bodies, identities, styles, and utterances visible at the heart of the public domain bespeaks a refusal to limit them to the private sphere or to semipublic spaces that mark the boundaries of so-called social tolerance. In this sense, Black Laundry's political actions were not merely acts of protest, they embodied a vision of changing the face of the public sphere and the modes of political discourse. I want to suggest that Black Laundry initiated what Michael Warner designates a queer "counterpublic." Borrowing Nancy Fraser's definition of counterpublics as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs," Warner notes that a counterpublic "can work to elaborate new worlds of culture and social relations in which gender and sexuality can be lived. . . . It can therefore make possible new forms of gendered and sexual citizenship—meaning active participation in collective world making through publics of sex and gender."²⁰ Many of the group's practices should be understood in terms of such world making. Its alternative discursive gender norms constructed a world of fluid and elective gender while its political practices constructed a world in which sexuality supplanted nationality as a primary axis of identity and belonging.

While Black Laundry itself was a relatively small group characterized by a high level of intimacy and social cohesion, its practices nevertheless addressed

and thus brought into being a broader public that could recognize itself as the addressee of the group's queer modes of address. In this sense, Black Laundry was first to create queer counterpublicity in Israel and therefore at least for a while became synonymous with it.²¹ Looking back, those former group members I interviewed felt that Black Laundry had an impact in two major sectors—the Israeli Left and the LGBT community—while it failed to address broader audiences. Nevertheless, after the group's demise, the kind of discourse it circulated and the queer counterpublic generated by it survived and kept flourishing in other sites, such as the Cinema Paradildo collective, which organized queer cultural events, and the Jerusalem drag king scene. Although creating a queer counterpublic wasn't part of Black Laundry's stated agenda, in retrospect it is very likely to be considered the group's major achievement.

Notes

An earlier version of this essay appeared as “‘Lachatzot et gvulot hamigdar, livgod bigvulot haleom’: Hapolitica haperformativit shel ‘kvisa shchora’” (“‘Transgressing Gender, Betraying Nationality’: The Performative Politics of Black Laundry,”) in *Pe'arey ezrachut: Hgirah, piryon vezehut beyisrael (Gaps of Citizenship: Immigration, Reproduction, and Identity in Israel)*, ed. Yossi Yonah and Adriana Kemp (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute/Tel Aviv: Hakibbutz Hameuchad, 2008), 290–320. Special thanks are due to David Halperin and Dafna Hirsch for their searching comments on the current version of the essay, and to Anat Lieber for sharing with me her still-unpublished paper on Black Laundry. Finally, I am most grateful to Dalit Baum, Yotam Yoana Gonen, Noam Holdengreber, Gili Pliskin, Idan Segev, and Dafna Stromza, the former Black Laundry activists who, during interviews, generously shared with me both their experiences and their insights. Work on this project was supported by a postdoctoral fellowship from the Lafer Center for Women and Gender Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

1. Interviews were conducted with six former members, four women and two men. Two points are worth stressing: First, since the interviews took place several months after the group's demise, what the interviewees provide are retrospective assessments of the group's activism and their own experiences within the group. Second, the group's activities were always characterized by a high degree of reflexivity, and many of its members were familiar with contemporary theoretical discourses on gender and sexuality, a knowledge that fed into their activism. Hence, for me, the interviews were not an instrument for collecting raw data but a dialogue in which the interviewees shared with me their insights regarding the group. I should stress, however, that the questions at the center of this essay reflect my own concerns, not necessarily those of the

interviewees, and the account I am offering represents neither the self-perception of Black Laundry as a group nor the account that any of the interviewees would have composed individually.

2. Anat Lieber, "Bein 'yachad bega'ava' le 'ein ga'ava bakibush': Dilemot shel ezrachut, zehut, vekwiryut basiach hapolity shel hakehila hahomo-lesbit beyisrael bein hashanim 1996–2003" ("Between 'Together with Pride' and 'No Pride in Occupation': Dilemmas of Citizenship, Identity, and Queerness in the Political Discourse of the Gay and Lesbian Community between 1996–2003") (MA thesis, Ben-Gurion University of the Negev, 2006).
3. This point has been made by Aeyal Gross about military service for gay men and by Ruthi Kadish regarding motherhood for lesbians. See Aeyal Gross, "Miniyut, gavriyut, tzavah ve'ezrachut: Sherut homo'im ve lesbiyot betzahal bemishkafayim hashva'atiyim" ("Sexuality, Masculinity, Army, and Citizenship: Gay and Lesbian Military Service in the IDF in a Comparative Perspective"), *Plilim* 9 (2000): 95–183; Ruthi Kadish, "Israeli Lesbians, National Identity, and Motherhood," in *Sappho in the Holy Land: Lesbian Existence and Dilemmas in Contemporary Israel*, ed. Chava Frankfort-Nachmias and Erella Shadmi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2005), 223–50. For similar arguments concerning the conditions of citizenship in Israeli society, see Nitza Berkovitch, "Ezrachut ve'imahaut: Ma'amadan shel hanashim beyisrael" ("Citizenship and Motherhood: Women's Status in Israel"), in *Yisrael: Mechevrah meguyeset lechevrah ezrachit? (Israel: From an Enlisted Society to a Civil Society?)*, ed. Yoav Peled and Adi Ofir (Jerusalem: Van Leer Institute/Tel Aviv: Hakkibutz Hameuchad, 2001), 206–43; Nira Yuval Davis, "The Bearers of the Collective: Women and Religious Legislation in Israel," *Feminist Review* 11, no. 4 (1980): 15–27.
4. Lieber, "Between 'Together with Pride,'" 102.
5. I employ the term *politics of identification* to refer to political activism for a cause that is not directly one's own, that is, a struggle to lift the oppression or secure rights or freedoms for a group to which one does not belong—a struggle that nevertheless predicates and grounds itself on a relation of identification with the group for whom one is struggling.
6. Lieber, "Between 'Together with Pride,'" 69.
7. Land Day is an annual day of protest observed by the Palestinian minority in Israel since 1976. The day is marked by a general strike, marches, and rallies in protest of the ongoing discrimination against the Arab population and most especially against massive governmental confiscation of Arab-owned lands.
8. Sara Helman and Tamar Rapoport, "'Eleh nashim ashkenaziyot, levad, zonot shel aravim, lo ma'aminot be'elohim, velo ohavot et erez-yisrael': 'Nashim beshachor' ve'itgur haseder hachevraty'" ("These Are Ashkenazi Women, Alone, Whores to Arabs, Who Don't Believe in God, and Don't Love Israel': Women in Black and the Challenging of the Social Order"), *Teoria vebikoret (Theory and Criticism)* 10 (1997): 175–92.

9. The refusal movement, represented largely by the organization Yesh Gvul (There's a Limit), is a movement of IDF soldiers, either conscripts or reservists, who refuse to serve in the occupied territories and to take part in the oppression of the Palestinian people. In the discourse of the refusal movement, reserve soldiers with an impeccable military record (which equals model masculinity) receive center stage. For example, the Yesh Gvul Web site states: "A notably high ratio of refuseniks are combat officers (ranking from sergeant to major) i.e. soldiers who have served with distinction" (www.yeshgvul.org/index_e.asp [English], www.yeshgvul.org/ [Hebrew] [accessed March 29, 2010]).
10. The actual Hebrew expression is *ochel batachat*, a rather graphic piece of slang, which literally means "someone who eats up the ass."
11. For a description and analysis of some of Queer Nation's performative practices, see Lauren Berlant and Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Nationality," in *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory*, ed. Michael Warner (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 193–229.
12. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity: Henry James and the Art of the Novel," *GLQ* 1 (1993): 11.
13. Sedgwick, "Queer Performativity," 14.
14. Douglas Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!" in *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 189.
15. Crimp, "Right On, Girlfriend!" 192.
16. Black Laundry's focus on the occupation was a source of much criticism in the local LGBT community. Many argued that the question of the occupation is extraneous to gay and lesbian identity and the politics that flows from it; hence the group's politics were seen as an attempt to introduce "foreign" issues to community events and to enforce an artificial and destructive linkage between genuine and "apolitical" community concerns and unrelated and properly political questions. Such criticisms assume that both the defining core and the contours of lesbian and gay identity are given and indisputable. Yet, in fact, the group's major—and contested—intervention in the sphere of LGBT politics was its attempt to posit a relation to the occupation and Palestinian oppression—as well as to other social oppressions—as central to the definition of queer identity as such.
17. See, for example, Bidy Martin's important critique: "Sexualities without Gender and Other Queer Utopias," in *Coming Out of Feminism?*, ed. Mandy Merck, Naomi Segal, and Elizabeth Wright (Oxford: Blackwell, 1988), 11–35.
18. Hebrew is a highly gendered language. Verb conjugations are gendered in the first and second person, in both singular and plural, and personal pronouns are gendered in the second person as well. Hence it is nearly impossible (unless through awkward circumlocutions) either to make a personal statement without specifying one's gender or to address others without indicating/assuming their gender. Mixed-gender groups are always referred to in the masculine.

19. For this insight I am indebted to Noam Holdengreber.
20. Nancy Fraser, "Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy," in *Habermas and the Public Sphere*, ed. Craig Calhoun (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 122–23, quoted in Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone, 2002), 118. See Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics*, 57.
21. Concurrent with the group's formation, there emerged a few other sites of queer counterdiscourse: the annual queer studies conference at Tel Aviv University; "Ann FranQ," a zine for queer-lesbian culture, edited by two Black Laundry members; and the Queerhannah collective, whose first action was an alternative Pride event in 2002.