Dege Feder, Dancing Mobile Geographies: Ethiopian Jewish Contemporary Dance Migrations in Israel

by *Hannah Kosstrin*

Abstract

Ethiopian Israeli multimedia artist Dege Feder embodies Jewish and African diasporas in her dances. She uses the structures of Ethiopian eskesta dancing as a basis for contemporary experimentation. Feder migrated from Ethiopia to Israel during Operation Moses (1984-1985). Her work determines Israeli contemporary art from an Afrocentric foundation through its East African Jewish migrations. By manifesting the corporeal evidence of her migration and assimilation, her work re-establishes perceptions of Israeli physicalities, culture, and nationalism. This article argues that the migratory aesthetics in Feder's cultural production determine a post-melting-pot conception of Israeli nationhood for mobilizing collective memory and mapping emotional and corporeal cartographies of Jewish diaspora. Her dances and videos Amaweren'ya *(2018),* Rewind/Repeat *(2020), and* Mesnko *(2023) embed Ethiopian memory within the corporeal territory of contemporary Israeli arts. Feder's work establishes an Ethiopian Jewish contemporaneity by refusing binaries between traditional and contemporary aesthetics that have historically sidelined artists of color.*

Introduction

Dancing Mobile Geographies

Contemporary Migrations within Contemporaneity

Affective Dimensions of Migrating Aesthetics: Corporeality and Acculturation

Conclusion

———————————

Introduction

Whose body builds the nation? What does corporeality afford histories of migration and experiences of exile? These questions direct my analysis of the dances and music videos of Jewish Ethiopian Israeli multimedia artist Dege Feder, whose compositions embody Jewish and African diasporas. Feder's work blends the swiftly shimmering, rolling, and bouncing isolations of the shoulders, sternum, and belly of Ethiopian eskesta dancing (Amharic shoulder dancing) with compositional devices like abstraction, deconstruction, and generating movement in service of a dance's theme from Israeli contemporary dance. Her musical compositions similarly expand upon Ethiopian musical structures. As a child, Feder migrated from Gondar, Ethiopia to Israel in Operation Moses (1984-1985), the Israeli government's first clandestine airlift to bring Ethiopian Jews to Israel via refugee camps in Khartoum, Sudan.[1] Her works' elements evidence East African Jewish migrations and determine Israeli contemporary art from an Afrocentric foundation. In this article, I argue that the migratory aesthetics in Feder's cultural production determine a post-melting-pot conception of Israeli nationhood for mobilizing collective memory and mapping emotional and corporeal cartographies of Jewish diaspora.

[1] After Israel's Chief Rabbis determined that Israel's Law of Return applied to Ethiopian Jews—the Sephardic Chief Rabbi in 1973 and the Ashkenazi Chief Rabbi in 1975—Israel embarked first on Operation Moses in 1984-1985, which airlifted 7,700 Ethiopian Jews from Sudan who had walked there from northern Ethiopian provinces, and then completed Operation Solomon in 1991, which airlifted 14,400 Ethiopian Jews from Ethiopia's capital city Addis Ababa over three days. Shalva Weil, "Ethiopian Jewish Women: Trends and Transformations in the Context of Transnational Change," *Nashim: A Journal of Jewish Women's Studies & Gender Issues* 8 (2004): 73-86; 79. Genetic information ascertained from Israeli expeditions in Ethiopia between the early 1960s and 1970s did not factor into this decision. Nurit Kirsh, "Jewishness, Blackness, and Genetic Data," in *Blackness in Israel: Rethinking Racial Boudaries*, eds. Uri Dorchin and Gabriella Djerrahian (Abingon-New York: Routledge, 2021), 43-57 and 46-48. Instead, it was based on *halakha* (Jewish religious law). Omer Keynan, "Black-Israeli Lives Matter: Online Activism Among Young Ethiopian Israelis," in *Blackness in Israel: Rethinking Racial Boundaries*, eds. Uri Dorchin and Gabriella Djerrahian (Abingdon-New York: Routledge, 2021), 77-90; 78.

As dance and physical culture fostered Israeli nationalism since the British Mandate period,[2] and the kinesthetics of dance choreography offer potential for altering Israeli political conditions,[3] so too does contemporary eskesta embodiment signal multiethnic Israeliness within geographic and emotional cartographies of Jewish migrations from East Africa. Examining population migrations through dance practices is one way to understand how culture migrates because dance practices signal region and syncretism through movement combinations, body part articulations, and temporal qualities. Eskesta remains central to Ethiopian Jewishness, even as the immigrant generations have acculturated into Israeli society and their Israeli-born children have assimilated as Israelis. Ethiopian Jewish immigrants and Ethiopian Israelis practice eskesta as part of community and artistic pursuits. This motion represents what anthropologist Pnina Werbner identifies as "culture as discourse": "Migration thus entails more than cultural transplantation or translocation. It involves acts of cultural and material *investment* and *creativity*."[4] In Feder's work, this material investment manifests in the corporeality of eskesta dancing. Eskesta is a communicative, social practice that forges community through the body;[5] in Feder's process, eskesta inherits choreographic rules,[6] which are parameters for making a theatrical dance based on movements' qualities. Themes of journey and family explicitly tie Feder's work to Ethiopian Jewish experience through competing feelings of peoplehood and exile that have, in turn, marked Israeli society since the founding of the state.[7]

---

[2] Nina S. Spiegel, *Embodying Hebrew Culture: Aesthetics, Athletics, and Dance in the Jewish Community of Mandate Palestine* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

[3] Melissa Melpignano, "Choreographing Livability after Oslo: Israeli Women Choreographers and Collective Responsibility," in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, eds. Naomi M. Jackson, Rebecca Pappas, and Toni Shapiro-Phim (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 565-588 and 579-580.

[4] Pnina Werbner, "Migration and Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Politics of International Migration*, eds. Marc R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 215-242; 220.

[5] Dege Feder, "Ethiopian Dance: From Traditional to Contemporary," (master class given at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, February 25, 2020).

[6] Dege Feder, "Composing During Covis," (master class given at The Ohio State University via Zoom, March 10, 2021).

[7] For example, Mizrahim excluded from a Euro-Zionist imaginary found exile rather than homeland within the State of Israel. Ella Shohat, "The Invention of the Mizrahim," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 1 (1999): 5-20; 17. This feeling of exclusion repeated in Ethiopian Jewish experience in Israel.

By considering what identifying diaspora through the body instead of through cartography can do for people's feelings of belonging, I contend, we can reevaluate the place of dance in determining diasporic subjecthood within Israel. The 1950s-1970s *mizug hagaluyot* (melting-pot) cultural policy aimed to create a unified Israeli society, which often entailed appropriating, then eradicating, non-Ashkenazi elements.[8] Fifty years after the end of the *mizug hagaluyot* policy and continued migration into Israel, particularly of Ethiopian Jewry, Ethiopian Jewish cultural production contributes to a sense of the Israeli collective. Feder's work demonstrates how contemporaneity functions within global North-South flows of artistic production of MENA Jewry in Israel. By grounding the emotional map of migration within the body, my discussion makes corporeal, temporal, and artistic interventions in this volume's investigations into North African, East African, and Middle Eastern affective migrations.

As a dance historian, I pursue how people's dancing bodies produce culture across historical and regional contexts. This means that people make meaning of their cultural context by performing dances and by watching dance. In this way, the body is a mobile vessel, both in terms of people moving in population migrations and moving their bodies in artistic expression, for navigating memories of mobility. Through archival materials, including press, photographs, and film, paired with ethnographic activities like interviews, observing Feder's company in rehearsal, and taking her classes, I posit the body as a repository of Jewish migratory corporeality that determines Israeliness. To do so, I build on dance theorist Priya Srinivasan's formulation of the "bodily archive," which asserts that people's bodies retain a repository of movement knowledge collected through their embodied experiences.[9] Feder's aesthetics display corporeal diasporism, which is the bodily material evidence of Jewish diasporic cultures, wherein dancing bodies in migration and their shared and unshared racial, ethnic, political, and economic experiences and belief systems determine diaspora.[10] As embodied

[8] Bryan Karle Roby, *The Mizrahi Era of Rebellion: Israel's Forgotten Civil Rights Struggle, 1948–1966* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2015), 5-8.

[9] Priya Srinivasan, *Sweating Saris: Indian Dance as Transnational Labor* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2012), 67-73.

[10] Hannah Kosstrin, *Kinesthetic Peoplehood: Jewish Diasporic Dance Migrations* (New York: Oxford University Press, forthcoming).

Israeli cultural production, Feder's dances index how the physical culture of Israel's *edot* (ethnic groups) build the nation.

Feder's choreography is premised on infusing the shoulder articulations of eskesta dancing with the subject and emotionality demands of a given work. Her dances hold within them the history and memory of the journey of migrating from Ethiopia to Israel, referencing a common Operation Moses journey narrative that entwines the sojourn with memory.[11] But even in Israel, where Ethiopian Jews could be said to have arrived "home" to Yorusalem/Jerusalem, the journey is ongoing for Feder,[12] because she reconciles her African diasporic context as much as her Jewish Israeli one. Thus, even as her work maps emotional cartographies through kinesthesia (body knowledge),[13] it also negotiates a relationship to Jewish collectivity and histories of assimilation within the Israeli nation. In the dances I analyze, *Amaweren'ya* (2018), *Rewind/Repeat* (2020), and *Mesnko* (2023), Feder uses the structures of traditional Ethiopian dance and musical forms as a basis for contemporary experimentation. In doing so, she embeds Ethiopian memory within the corporeal territory of contemporary Israeli arts. Encounters with contemporaneity underlined Ethiopian Jews' migration to Israel. As a social condition *and* a set of aesthetic rules, contemporaneity—here, a response to the artistic demands of the global North—determines Feder's participation in the Israeli artistic landscape.

[11] Like Beta Dance Troupe's *Maharo* (1998). See Ruth Eshel, "A Creative Process in Ethiopian-Israeli Dance: Eskesta Dance Theater and Beta Dance Troupe," *Dance Chronicle* 34, no. 3 (2011): 369-375; and Ilana Webster-Kogen, *Citizen Azmari: Making Ethiopian Music in Tel Aviv* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 115-118.

[12] Dege Feder, "Mahol Etiopi Akhshavi," *Mahol Akhshav* (*Dance Today: The Dance Magazine of Israel*), February 2023, 56.

[13] Notably, Ruth Eshel's dance *What the Shoulders Remember* (*Ma Sh'haketafa'im Misparot*), (2007) for Beta Dance Troupe established the eskesta shoulders as the emotional-kinesthetic manifestation of this memory. Ruth Eshel, chor., *Ma Sh'haketafa'im Misparot*, 2006, uploaded by Ruth Eshel, February 5, 2018, YouTube, 18 min., 5 sec., accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UktKfWrqisE.

Dancing Mobile Geographies

As Jewish Ethiopian cultural production, eskesta tracks Ethiopian Jews' migration history through the body as much as through space in an affective migration history. Ethiopian Jews' migration to Israel aligns with a spatial theory of migration that demographer Elizabeth Fussell defines is based in "a multiplicity of social structures that contribute to the emergence and growth of migration systems" with late twentieth-century migrations from the global South to the global North.[14] Different from most contemporary migration patterns of migrants' volition driven by economics or positive selection,[15] Ethiopian Jews' migration to Israel was largely religious, based in a yearning of return (coterminous with antisemitism and famine in Ethiopia) and facilitated by the Israeli government with international partners in the name of an Israeli ethos of *kibbutz galuiot*, or "ingathering of the exiles" (that is, gathering together Jewish diasporic communities living outside Israel).[16] Ethiopian Israelis maintain connections to Africanist cultural flows within Jewish histories of migration layered onto contemporary social conditions. Historian Gabriella Djerrahian has argued that many Ethiopian Israelis tap into pan-African diasporic cultural products like music in order to assert their place within Israeli society as Ethiopian Jewish Israelis.[17] These negotiations follow historical distinctions within Jewish racial categories. In the early twentieth century, racist attitudes of Jewish sociological race scientists gathered Ashkenazim and Sephardim into categories of whiteness

[14] Elizabeth Fussell, "Space, Time, and Volition: Dimensions of Migration Theory," in *The Oxford Handbook of The Politics of International Migration*, eds. Marc R. Rosenblum and Daniel J. Tichenor (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 25-52; 34.

[15] Fussell, "Space, Time, and Volition," 34 and 42-43.

[16] For tensions within this migration history, see Shula Mola, "Ethiopian Immigrants and the Perception of Media," in *A Justice-Based Approach for New Media Policy: In the Paths of Righteousness*, eds. Amit M. Schejter and Noam Tirosh (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 71-85; 71-75.

[17] Gabriella Djerrahian, "The 'End of Diaspora' is Just the Beginning: Music at the Crossroads of Jewish, African, and Ethiopian Diasporas in Israel," *African and Black Diaspora: An International Journal* 2, no. 2 (2018): 161-173.

and defined Ethiopian Jews as specifically *not* Jewish.[18] In response, historian Bryan Roby notes, "in the twentieth century, global Black communities began to shape and reconstruct what it means to be Black."[19] These efforts appear in Israel in the way that, in the words of ethnomusicologist Ilana Webster-Kogen, eskesta corporeally mobilizes Blackness as Israeli citizenship.[20] Webster-Kogen asserts that eskesta is "a prism through which to interpret the entangled workings of the Afrodiasporic, Ethiopianist, and Zionist myths,"[21] that is, Ethiopian Jews experience both being of and estranged from the Afrodiasporic and Jewish diasporic worlds. Feder's work refuses exile by creating Afrodiasporic-Jewish diasporic belonging through her compositional logics that employ both movement aesthetics. Embodying both engenders affective migration.

To address the question of what corporeality affords experiences of exile, I turn to Feder's history and the way she composes movement and music from eskesta's component parts. The aesthetic and compositional blending in her work creates an Israeli theatrical space built on East African migrations that encompasses experiences of self and other. Since 2011 Feder has directed the music group Lela, and since 2013 she has directed the Beta Dance Company in Haifa. The name "Beta" refers to "Beta Israel," the name attributed to the Ethiopian Jewish community. Feder danced in the company under Ruth Eshel's direction since 2006, and before that in Eshel's student company at the University of Haifa called Eskesta Dance Theatre. Feder's Ethiopian-Israeli contemporary practices in her movement technique, music composition, and choreography trace her Jewish and African lived experiences, even when she does not feel fully part of Africa or Israel. She arrived in Israel in 1985 from Operation Moses and was separated from most of her family for months. Her first experiences reconciling Israel's skyscrapers with Gondar's mud-hut structures into her worldview sharpy distinguished Ethiopian from Israeli encounters with contemporaneity in the built environment.[22] Feder

[18] Bryan Karle Roby, "How Race Travels: Navigating Global Blackness in J. Ida Jiggett's Study of Afro-Asian Israeli Jewry," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 27, no. 1 (2022): 1-42; 6-10.

[19] Roby, "How Race Travels," 30-31.

[20] Webster-Kogen, *Citizen Azmari*, 104-131.

[21] Ibid., 106.

[22] Dege Feder, "A Journey in Motion," (lecture given at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, February 24, 2020).

experienced an in-between feeling as a teenager. She told the *Jerusalem Post* that "she tried to fit into Israeli society by shaking off her Ethiopian heritage and trying to be like everyone else. 'But that doesn't help you to be a part of Israeli society, escaping from yourself'."[23] The combined alienation and belonging that Feder experiences in Israel because of her migration challenges the myth of Israel as an ingathering of Jewish exiles. Navigating discrimination as a racial minority in a place mythologically for all Jews underlies Feder's work.

In the 1990s, when Feder danced in Eskesta Dance Theatre, she met Ethiopian Israelis who were her age but had immigrated after her, during Operation Solomon (1991). The Eskesta troupe presented a blend of staged Ethiopian folklore practices and contemporary artistic renderings of Ethiopian Jewish cultural themes. Feder's colleagues who made aliyah in the early 1990s were proud of their Ethiopian heritage and did not try to shed it as she had since her childhood.[24] Their pride, and Eshel's group, got Feder interested in her roots that she had neglected since her attempts to assimilate.[25] Tensions within the Eskesta company's legacy related to Israel's concern with uplifting while devaluing cultural practices of its *edot* have underlined Feder's artistic endeavors and their reception.

In Israel, the Ethiopian Jewish community fights discrimination from the Ashkenazi-Sephardi establishment legislatively, socially, religiously, and aesthetically. Markings of skin tone are not the only determinants of difference between Ethiopian Jewry and mainstream Israeli society. Ethiopian cultural differences include, among others, hierarchical respect for elders, allowing events to unfold with gentle temporality (which opposes Israeli insistence on directness

---

[23] "Proud of their Roots: Ethiopian Performers Fight for their Place in the Cultural Scene," *The Jerusalem Post*, n.d., n.p., File Name 150121_the jerusalem postlite.jpg, Folder: Dege Feder 0.(7)122, Israeli Dance Archive at Beit Ariela, Tel Aviv.

[24] Aliyah means "going up" or "ascension" and refers to Jewish people immigrating to Israel from the Diaspora. Moreover, pride in Ethiopian culture was common among Jews who emigrated during Operation Solomon. For example, musician Tamar Rada, who immigrated to Israel at the age of four with Operation Solomon, recalled that her family only spoke Amharic at home and her father wanted them to speak perfect Hebrew in public, so that they would both remember their Ethiopian heritage and be fully Israeli. For Rada, see Jessica Steinberg, "Festival of Israeli-Ethiopian Culture Keeps the Beat, Even Online," *The Times of Israel*, December 22, 2020; reprinted in *Capital* (Ethiopia), January 11, 2021.

[25] Dege Feder, "Dege Feder Talks about her Choreographic Work," (lecture given at The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, February 24, 2020).

and speed), and conceiving a day's time as twelve hours related to the passing of day and night instead of twenty-four clock hours.[26] Another point of difference points to rabbinic and non-rabbinic lineages of Judaism that philosopher and historian Sharon Zeude Shalom calls "two opposing models of Judaism."[27] The rabbinic literary canon began after the destruction of the Second Temple in Jerusalem in 70 CE. Because Beta Israel were in Ethiopia (where they practiced what anthropologist Shalva Weil calls a Torah-based non-Talmudic type of Judaism[28]) at this moment widely understood as the Jewish people's expulsion into exile, the Beta Israel were cut off from post-Second Temple Judaism in a way that Mizrahim were not.[29] Because of shared diasporic-as-exile histories between Ashkenazim, Sephardim, and Mizrahim, from an Ashkenazi point of view, according to Webster-Kogen, Mizrahim are exotic versions of the familiar, whereas Ethiopians are altogether Other: "Ethiopian rituals, like Ethiopian bodies, are conspicuous in Israel, since they do not conform to an agreed image of Jews or Israelis."[30] The Israeli Ministry of Education's curriculum includes Ethiopian Jewish history, but its application across individual schools is uneven.[31] This process often leads to a double sense of alienation for Ethiopian Israelis—from their parent culture, and from the one into which they are assimilated. Moreover, many Beta Israel *halakha* (laws) were organized orally within Africanist tradition, which differs from Talmudic traditions of written transmission.[32] Some Ethiopian Jewish prayers are maintained through a combination of written and oral

[26] Nigist Mengasha, "Ethiopian Heritage, Culture & History in the Israeli School Curriculum," (paper presented during the online symposium "From Ethiopia to Yerusalem: We Came Bearing Gifts," Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University, July 27, 2021), accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR7t_iIAALA.

[27] Sharon Zeude Shalom, "Integrating Beta Israel Halakha into Israel's Rabbinic Mainstream," (paper presented during the online symposium "From Ethiopia to Yerusalem: We Came Bearing Gifts," Hebrew University of Jerusalem and Tel Aviv University, July 27, 2021), accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AR7t_iIAALA.

[28] Shalva Weil, "Religion, Blood and the Equality of Rights: The Case of Ethiopian Jews in Israel," *International Journal on Minority and Group Rights* 4, no. 3-4 (1997): 397-412; 399.

[29] Zeude Shalom, "Integrating Beta Israel Halakha into Israel's Rabbinic Mainstream."

[30] Webster-Kogen, *Citizen Azmari*, 125.

[31] Nigist Mengasha, "Ethiopian Heritage, Culture & History in the Israeli School Curriculum"; Noa Shapira and Shula Mola, "Teachers 'Looking into a Mirror': A Journey through Exposure to Diverse Perspectives," *Intercultural Education* 33, no. 6 (2022): 611-629.

[32] Zeude Shalom, "Integrating Beta Israel Halakha into Israel's Rabbinic Mainstream."

practices,[33] reflecting both the Jewish written tradition and the Africanist oral tradition. Due to this and other restrictions against Beta Israel's pre-rabbinic practices, *qesim* (Ethiopian Jewish clergy) do not have the same state-level clerical rights as do Ashkenazi, Sephardic, or Mizrahi rabbis. Israel does not recognize marriages performed by *qesim*, and Israeli law requires either Ashkenazi or Sephardi rabbis to perform all marriages recognized by the state. Tensions from these exclusions surface in Feder's work, through a blend of these traditions that reclaims minoritarian cultural production.

Contemporary Migrations within Contemporaneity

Feder's answer to her national context occurs through her movement practice *mahol etiopi akhshavi* (Ethiopian contemporary dance).[34] The Hebrew word *mahol* indicates theatrical dance. Within the term *mahol etiopi akhshavi*, *mahol akhshavi* is "contemporary dance" that relates to the Israeli theatrical stage within a global context. So, the term itself shows a specific Ethiopian (*etiopi*) Israeli artistic practice while connecting to larger contemporary Africanist flows. It establishes an Ethiopian Jewish contemporaneity by refusing binaries between traditional and contemporary aesthetics that have historically sidelined artists of color. It is also a vehicle to establish home in the body when diasporic circulations otherwise exclude Feder's Ethiopianness as not contemporary or her Jewishness as not of Africa. In Beta Dance Company, she gathers Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian performers to get dual qualities: dancers who danced eskesta since childhood, and dancers trained in concert (theatrical) dance techniques that afford *a priori* reading as "contemporary" who are able to acculturate eskesta into their bodies.[35] That dancers of Ethiopian and non-Ethiopian backgrounds perform Feder's technique

[33] Simha Arom, Frank Alvarez-Pereyre, Shoshanna Ben-Dor, and Olivier Tourny, "The Beta Israel Liturgy: Components and Dynamics," in *The Liturgy of Beta Israel Music of the Ethiopian Jewish Prayer*, Anthology of Music Traditions in Israel, ed. Edwin Seroussi, vol. 26 (Jerusalem: Jewish Music Research Centre, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 2019): 1-94; 13. Accessed June 25, 2025, https://jewish-music.huji.ac.il/en/content/liturgy-beta-israel-music-ethiopian-jewish-prayer.

[34] Dege Feder, "Mahol Etiopi Akhshavi," 54-56.

[35] Beta Dance Company rehearsal, Pyramid Art Center, Haifa, Israel, March 18, 2022.

signals a contemporary approach to concert dance that values repetition of a choreographers' specific movement vocabularies in other dancers' bodies.

The label *mahol etiopi akhshavi* at once signals a genre, an artistic methodological affiliation with contemporary concert dance, and a temporal designation that reflects migration. The idea of "contemporary" in dance is constantly under revision, referring alternately to genre, time period, movement vocabulary, qualitative marker, or ethnically-infused label.[36] One aspect of this term's longer history relates to the ways dance critics separated artists—and, by extension, the cultural background their work represented—into self and other. In the twentieth century, American and Israeli culture brokers shared labels of "modern" or "contemporary" (Eurocentric modernity considered unmarked by cultural contexts) valued as high art over "ethnic" (non-white, pejoratively culturally marked, stuck in a mythic past). American influence in the Israeli concert dance scene beginning in the 1950s established channels of shared values in terms of movement characteristics and critical discourse. In Israel in 1971, the Histadrut's (General Federation of Labor) cultural branch established the Ethnic Dance Section distinct from the Folk Dance Section, wherein "folk" was the Ashkenazi nationalist-project Israeli folk dance (*rikudei am* in Hebrew) and "ethnic" was Mizrahi or other non-Ashkenazi-originated dances determined worth preserving as national heritage but not as contemporary practice.[37] In the late twentieth century, the term "ethnic dance" was largely replaced by "world dance" but the colonialist stigma remained.[38] The Israeli dance lineages in modern dance include the German expressive dance that fostered Israeli contemporary dance from the 1920s to 1940s, Yemenite practices since the late 1940s, and American modern dance influences starting in the 1950s. Local Israeli developments in companies like Batsheva Dance Company, Inbal Dance Theater, Kibbutz Contemporary Dance Company, and Vertigo Dance Company since a 1990s artistic turn in Israeli concert dance have created a distinctive Israeli aesthetic. The term "contemporary" in concert dance often refers to these aesthetic properties.

---

[36] See, for example, SanSan Kwan, "When Is Contemporary Dance?" *Dance Research Journal* 49, no. 3 (2017): 38-52.

[37] Dina Roginsky, "Nationalism and Ambivalence: Ethnicity, Gender, and Folklore as Categories of Otherness," *Patterns of Prejudice* 40, no. 3 (2006): 237-258; 250-253.

[38] Susan Leigh Foster, "Worlding Dance – An Introduction," in *Worlding Dance*, ed. Susan Leigh Foster (Hampshire-New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009), 1-13.

Within the global circulation of concert dance, concomitantly, the term "contemporary" is a way for artists of the global South to respond to the aesthetic and compositional rules of the global North. Dance theorist Ananya Chatterjea defines dancing in a "contemporary" way is "in response to the issues of the day," and that contemporary dance investigations focus on choreographic strategies that push formalistic boundaries.[39] While historically through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries the production of the contemporary was restricted to artists from the global North, Chatterjea shows how artists from the global South determine a contemporaneity that answers to the global North while innovating within South-South discourses. She defines South-South contemporary dance as recognizing and embodying

> [...] resonance among artists from Indigenous communities across the world, those living and working in the geographic Third World/global South, and Black and brown artists living in First World/global North diasporas, working from their own local cultural contexts and aesthetic particularities toward self-determined narratives of justice.[40]

Contemporaneity, then, is artists' double refusal to be defined only by their cultural contexts or to fully uphold choreographic methods of the global North.[41] Feder's work for stage and screen exemplifies this double refusal by driving her choreographic experimentation with eskesta logics.

Feder's screendance *Amawenren'ya* (2017), directed by Daniella Meroz, is one example of the way Feder choreographs contemporary work from eskesta elements that manifest her migration history. She composed *Amawenren'ya*'s music and lyrics in Amharic. She collaged eskesta patterns into filmic editing techniques, juxtaposed ancient against modern through the film's setting and through the way she used eskesta, and incorporated performances by her mother, daughter, and herself. Feder explained that she and her family members appear on "the screen as they are—my mother who still lives in the traditional world, my daughter who is

[39] Ananya Chatterjea, *Heat and Alterity in Contemporary Dance: South-South Choreographies* (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), xii and 3-4.
[40] Ibid., 28-29.
[41] Ibid., 30.

already a member of a new generation and me as someone who is in the middle—living in the contemporary world but still having a link to tradition."[42] Feder wrote the song when she briefly lived in Germany and tried to get local Israeli news from Israeli outlets. It addresses the media's manufactured duplicity. *Amawaren'ya*, according to Feder, "is a cynical, humorous song [she] composed that is critical of the media world,"[43] wherein "truth was less important than ratings and popularity."[44] Feder's simulacra call truth and fabrication into question while generating long matrilineages through their stirring scapulae and smiles flirting with or shooting cynical glances at the camera.[45]

In the film, digital duplicates of Feder, her family members, and Beta company dancers playfully shift their shoulders back and forth and roll their bellies in different parts of the basin of the Mamilla Pool in Jerusalem. Built during the Second Temple period and once a main aqueduct for the region, the now-dry landscape dotted with arid shrubs features vintage chairs (imported for the film) and is backgrounded by the pool's ancient stone wall.[46] Some points of the film slow down the image, so eskesta's liquid-fast isolations gain an expansive buoyancy suspended in time, and contrast the sharpness of Feder performing in real time. These filmic techniques' juxtaposition presents one example of the way Feder applies compositional tools of abstraction to eskesta vocabulary. Feder's work maintains eskesta's bubbling torso as an undercurrent even when her dances encompass movement vocabulary outside eskesta tradition. And yet, because Feder brings the movement qualities of eskesta into the full body, instead of keeping it in the shoulders, and the dancers (except the elders) don contemporary clothing, more traditional Ethiopian audiences do not consider her work to be

---

[42] Dege Feder, "From the Other Side: An Interview with Ethiopian-Israeli Dance Artist Dege Feder," trans. Gur Hirshberg, in *The Oxford Handbook of Jewishness and Dance*, eds. Naomi M. Jackson, Rebecca Pappas, and Toni Shapiro-Phim (New York: Oxford University Press, 2022), 173-190; 184.

[43] Feder, "From the Other Side," 183.

[44] Ibid., 184.

[45] Dege Feder, chor., *Amaweren'ya*, 2018, uploaded by dege feder, June 25, 2018, YouTube, 4 min, 21 sec., accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kg1fony6Nqc.

[46] Feder, "From the Other Side," 184; David Raphael Lockard, "Tourist Tip #276 Mamilla Pool, an Eerie, Crumbling Treasure in the Heart of Jerusalem," *Ha'aretz*, July 2, 2013. Accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/travel/2013-07-02/ty-article/.premium/tourist-tip-276-mamilla-pool-in-jerusalem/0000017f-dc29-df62-a9ff-dcffaabe0000.

eskesta because eskesta is only about the shoulders, keeps the lower body still, and is performed in traditional dress.[47]

Part of the emotional map of Feder's work is the way she experiences its reception. Feder gets caught between predominantly non-Ethiopian concert dance audiences who label the Ethiopianness in her work as "other" or "world dance," and Ethiopian audiences (in Israel and in Ethiopia when she toured there) who perceive her work to be exciting but not Ethiopian because of its contemporary quality.[48] Chatterjea has argued that viewers identifying a dance as "contemporary" means that there are aesthetic markers in the movement tracing to Euro-American histories of modern/contemporary dance and the individuality of artistic voice—that the global stage demands this familiarity with the aesthetic global North—and at the same time culturally marked dancers are expected to stand in for traditional practices.[49] "Culturally marked" refers to dancers who either are presumed to be not of European origin due to their physical characteristics, or their dancing contains elements of non-Western lineages. This spectatorial angle alternately boosts and foils Feder depending on who presents her and what audiences she draws. Feder regularly presents her work on Ethiopian cultural festivals like the Sigdiada (f. 2012) for the Ethiopian Jewish holiday Sigd, and she has premiered many dances at the Hullegeb Festival of Ethiopian-Israeli Art in Jerusalem, where she headlines.[50] She has shown her work at the Pyramid Gallery in Haifa, at Inbal Dance Theater's Interdisciplinary Ethnic Arts Center in Tel Aviv, at solo at events around Israel and those in collaboration with other artists. Though it took longer for her to be presented in contemporary dance venues,[51] she has performed at the Suzanne Dellal Centre for Dance and Theatre in Tel Aviv, Machol Shalem Dance Center in Jerusalem, and the Tmuna Theater

[47] I thank Danny Admasu for this distinction.

[48] Dege Feder, in conversation with the author, February 24, 2020, Columbus, Ohio.

[49] Ananya Chatterjea, "On the Value of Mistranslations and Contaminations: The Category of 'Contemporary Choreography' in Asian Dance," *Dance Research Journal* 45, no. 1 (2013): 7-21.

[50] See, for example, Barry Davis, "Ethiopia for All at the Hullegeb Festival," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 11, 2015, 18.

[51] Ori J. Lenkinski, " 'Jalo' from the Other Side," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 17, 2017. Accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/culture/jalo-from-the-other-side-515909; Ora Brafman, "Dance Review – Beta Company: Bug," *The Jerusalem Post*, February 10, 2019, 16; Ori J. Lenkinski, "Beta Dance Troupe Gets Bugged," *The Jerusalem Post*, December 21, 2018, 3.

in Tel Aviv. Feder's dances speak to audiences who recognize their dynamic hybridity.

Contemporaneity is not just about abstraction, responding to the current moment, a manner of composing, or reception. Within it is a sense of global circulation that maintains contact or aesthetic dialogue with the global North while challenging it. Such migrations visible in Feder's *mahol etiopi akhshavi* answer Chatterjea's call "to insist on re-mappings on our own terms"[52] by defining Israeli contemporary aesthetics through eskesta movement qualities.

Affective Dimensions of Migrating Aesthetics: Corporeality and Acculturation

For a dance to look like it participates in contemporary art, specific movements, including the way dancers move in and out of the floor, roll backwards over one shoulder, arch the torso, or crumple the body into a floorbound side fall, uphold the corporeal rules of contemporary dance. Feder's dance *Rewind and Repeat* (2020) displays these contemporary cues.[53] In the dance made in the thick of the coronavirus pandemic (2020-2022), six women fight alienation of the possibilities of a posthuman ecosystem or a postapocalyptic landscape. They punctuate the dance's emotional undertones with shivers at the backs of their necks that send their heads vibrating against a piercing frequency in the soundscore; both together generate a sense of the uncanny. Eskesta cues like these neck articulations undergird *Rewind and Repeat*. Others include insistent chin pecking initiated from the base of the skull, and petite undulations from between the shoulder blades, where eskesta is centered, that send the torso into a forward, contemporary-dance-legible curve. The robotic boops and beeps of Frank Bretschneider's electronic music enhances a sense of alienation that the dancers typify through sharp head punctuations and shoulder shivers. These movements demonstrate assertions in publicity descriptions stating this dance is composed of

[52] Chatterjea, "On the Value of Mistranslations and Contaminations," 17.

[53] Dege Feder, chor., *Rewind & Repeat*, 2020, Confederation House, Jerusalem, uploaded by Beit HaKonfederatzia [Confederation House], December 29, 2020, YouTube, 56 min., 37 sec., accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m7AIoowTMqA&t=2612s.

reconstructed elements of Ethiopian dance.[54] Another example is when the dancers fit themselves into a round clump, rest their head between the next person's shoulder blades, and rise and lower *en masse*, they look like they could be from any number of contemporary dance companies. Yet, their sharp double exhalations of breath that initiate stark double-bounced drops of their bodies toward the floor are a transposition (putting movement originating from one body part into another) of a double-shouldered drop from eskesta dancing.[55] During a break in the music, the dancers' rhythmic clapping and footfalls undergirded by low rhythmic vocalizations emphasize additional Africanist aesthetic elements. These movement markers reinforce that the Ethiopian contemporary signals the ways East African Jewish migrations define, contribute to, and redefine Israeli cultural production.

Within Feder's contemporary compositional strategies, eskesta embodies the intersection and retention of Ethiopian Jewishness amidst Ethiopian Jews' assimilation into Israeli society. The eskesta movement markers in the music video *Mesnko* (2023) spliced in with more general grooving exemplifies this syncretism. Written and directed by Tai Morris, with lyrics in Amharic and Hebrew by Amen Cholé and music and choreography by Feder, *Mesnko* features a multigenerational family gathering to celebrate an elder's birthday.[56] The performers are all members of Feder's family—her mother, siblings, daughter, nieces, and nephews, along with members of her Beta Dance Company. Similarly, to *Amaweren'ya*, the performers' embodiments hold the corporeal memory of three Ethiopian Israeli generations: Feder's mother, who immigrated to Israel as an adult; Feder and her siblings, who immigrated to Israel as children and married

[54] HaBamah, "*Bayit HaKonfederatzia Beta v'Dege Feder"* ("Confederation House, Beta and Dege Feder"), accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.habama.co.il/Pages/Event.aspx?Subj=8&Area=5&EventID=39846; Suzanne Dellal Center, *Dege Feder v'Lihakat Beta – 'Ba'Ima Sheli'* Rewind & Repeat *Sh'nai Mofim* (Dege Feder and Beta Dance Company – *In My Mother, Rewind & Repeat* Two Works), accessed June 14, 2023, https://vod.suzannedellal.org.il/shows/דגה-פדר-ולהקת-ביתא-באמא-שלי-rewind-repeatשני-מופ/.

[55] My analysis here is based on how I learned the double-drop of the shoulders in Dege Feder, "Ethiopian Dance: From Traditional to Contemporary."

[56] Dege Feder, chor., *Mesnko*, 2023, uploaded by dege feder, April 27, 2023, YouTube, 3 min., 41 sec., accessed June 25, 2025, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=orXa5lQ45Ok.

non-Ethiopian spouses;[57] and Feder's daughter, nieces, and nephews, who are biracial and were born in Israel. The dancing and music generate an Ethiopian Israeli space. In *Mesnko*, as in much of her music, Feder incorporates influences from multiple Ethiopian regions.[58] Mesnko (massenqo) is both a single-stringed fiddle and a mode of instrumentation generated by bowing the string that establishes the Ethiopian modal system[59] in much the same way as eskesta establishes Ethiopian embodiment. Massenqo is often used for eskesta dancing.[60] *Mesnko*'s blended sounds layer massenqo and Ethio-jazz with an eskesta rhythmic emphasis on the "one" of the musical phrasing, foregrounding the composition's Ethiopian musical markers.

As the performers groove, spin on roller skates, twirl a lollipop, and braid each other's hair in an apartment decked out in vintage chairs, draperies, fans, fringe curtains, and other sundries, they maintain distinct eskesta movements like pulsing the head side to side, bubbling the shoulders, and sending waves of movement across their torsos. By using the full body for expression and wearing street clothes instead of traditional white robes, *Mesnko* introduces hierarchy into Ethiopian Israeli aesthetics by reading as more contemporary than traditional. Feder's choreographic tactics claim minoritarian Ethiopian Israeli corporeality and make a pluralistic ingathering of the exiles corporeally legible.

Conclusion

I have shown how Dege Feder's compositions of eskesta dance and music in Israeli contemporary art makes Ethiopian Jewish migration to Israel visible through the body. But what, you might be wondering, makes Feder's dances Jewish? Eskesta is a pan-Ethiopian, and not expressly Jewish, dance practice with which the Ethiopian Jewish community migrated to Israel as a Jewish diasporic dance practice. While not all Israeli contemporary choreographers are Jewish, Israeli

[57] Dege Feder, in conversation with the author, March 11, 2022, Haifa, Israel.
[58] Preview of screening of *Mesnko* at Goldmund Books in Haifa. Accessed June 25, 2025, https://eventbuzz.co.il/lp/event/tnyzo.
[59] Webster-Kogen, *Citizen Azmari*, 55-58.
[60] Ibid., 107.

contemporary dance is often linked to cultural production of the Jewish Israeli national collective. Feder's work is based in the physical pleasure of the kinesthetic text of eskesta and not in Jewish religious themes *per se*. Yet, Feder's work is thematically based in ideas of family, the collective, or the Operation Moses journey, which mark it with distinctly Ethiopian Jewish experience. Her *mahol etiopi akhshavi* contains this Jewishness within. The question of whether Feder's work is Jewish highlights another one about the Jewish collective in Israel. My assertion that Feder's work builds the nation is at odds with traditional Euro-Zionist Israeli discourses that exclude Mizrahim and Ethiopian Jews from the national collective. My project here tracks, however, with post-Zionist framings that recognize the endurance of Jewish migration and indigenous histories within Israel by acknowledging that Jewish sovereignty in Israel's Ashkenazi-majority hierarchy should not disenfranchise oppressed peoples, including Arab Israelis, Palestinians, Mizrahim, and Jews of Asian and African descent.[61]

Feder navigates generations-old labels of ethnic versus contemporary because critics often label the Blackness in her work as Other. But if Israeli culture is recognizable through Israeli contemporary dance, the compositional tools that determine *mahol etiopi akhshavi* establish it within dually AfroJewish diasporic Israeli cultural production. Since the 1980s-1990s migrations of Ethiopian Jews to Israel, Israeli cultural production has been shaped by these *edot* without acknowledging it. Eskesta is a vehicle for Feder to find home in the body when diasporic circulations exclude either her Ethiopianness or Jewishness. Eskesta is a generational embodiment of Ethiopian Jewishness amidst Ethiopian Jews' assimilation into Israeli society. Without romanticizing the relationship of *edot* to Israel's national collective, the lived archive of Feder's work that manifests the corporeal evidence of her migration and assimilation offers a blueprint for re-establishing perceptions of Israeli physicalities, culture, and nationalism.

---

[61] Erez Levon, *Language and the Politics of Sexuality: Lesbians and Gays in Israel* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 21-25; Alisa Solomon, "Viva la Diva Citizenship: Post-Zionism and Gay Rights," *Queer Theory and the Jewish Question*, eds. Daniel Boyarin, Daniel Itzkovitz, and Ann Pellegrini (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), 149-165; 153-154; Yair Lipshitz, " 'This Is a Historical Israeli Play': Spectatorship, Ownership and the Israeli Localizations of *Salomé*," *Theatre Research International* 42, no. 3 (2017): 257; Ilan Pappé, "Post-Zionist Scholarship in Israel," in *The Struggle for Sovereignty: Palestine and Israel, 1993-2005*, eds. Joel Beinin and Rebecca L. Stein (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006), 151-161.

Hanah Kosstrin is a dance historian who researches Jewish dance in global contexts. She is Director of the Melton Center for Jewish Studies and Associate Professor of Dance (and Near Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures by courtesy) at The Ohio State University. She is author of *Honest Bodies: Revolutionary Modernism in the Dances of Anna Sokolow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), finalist for the Jordan Schnitzer Book Award, and the forthcoming *Kinesthetic Peoplehood: Jewish Diasporic Dance Migrations* (New York: Oxford University Press). Her article "Whose Jewishness?: Inbal Dance Theater and American Cold War Spectatorship" (*American Jewish History*, 2020) won the Gertrude Lippincott Award Honorable Mention. She currently serves on the Editorial Boards of the *Journal of Jewish Identities*, *Dance Research Journal*, and the *Shalvi/Hyman Encyclopedia of Jewish Women*.

Keywords: Eskesta, Israeli Contemporary Dance, Migration, Corporeality, Ethiopian Jews

How to quote this article:
Hannah Kosstrin, "Dege Feder, Dancing Mobile Geographies: Ethiopian Jewish Contemporary Dance Migrations in Israel," in "(E)motional Maps: Affective Geographies among Jewish Migrants from North Africa and the Middle East," eds. Aviad Moreno, Piera Rossetto, and Emir Galilee, *Quest. Issues in Contemporary Jewish History. Journal of the Fondazione CDEC* 27, no. 1 (2025), DOI: 10.48248/issn.2037-741X/15957