

A Proposal for a Thesis in Creative Writing

Big Bones

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הצעת מחקר לתיזה בכתיבה יוצרת

עצמות גדולות

המחלקה לאנגלית

אוניברסיטת בר-אילן

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## Aims and Description

I arrived in Israel 4 years ago, 5 days after Operation Protective Edge ended. The country I arrived in was still shaking in the aftershocks of explosions and the ringing of sirens. The 3<sup>rd</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> graders I had come to teach were fussy and confused, back in school after a stolen summer spent in bomb shelters. I saw the shadows of transition fall across hot concrete as my first holiday season began in the Middle East.

Israel is a region constantly in flux, a place that combines joy and grief and beauty and carelessness and anger and ultimately profound ambivalence. Looking back at that 22-year-old who wore Chacos and a college sweatshirt as she stepped off the plane at Ben Gurion, I was in the midst of my own aftershock, my own set of transitions. In the past 6 years, I have undergone a physical transformation – from 40 pounds overweight to waifish. I have undergone a sexual awakening; learning to use, appreciate and also scorn my new (and old) body through the eyes of lovers and partners. I moved from Rehovot to Tel Aviv. I've lived in 6 apartments. I stopped fasting on Yom Kippur. I feel completely Israeli and entirely American and absolutely neither.

Through the set of crafted essays that will comprise my thesis, I explore personal identity – and the ambivalences that attend it – through the various lenses of nation, religion and gender. Through gender especially, with contemporary feminist discourses, I will explore how this period of transition has formed me as an individual, with narrative and personal explorations along the way, punctuated by the complexities and constant contradictions of life in Israel. Hybrid forms further complicate and deepen my exploration outside of the realms of traditional narrative. In my series of essays, “Big Bones”, “The personal *is* political.” That is, though profoundly personal, the essays show through my own self-examination, and the examination of interpersonal relationships that have defined and complicated this transitional period, how a greater knowledge of my own body has given me

a deeper insight into the societies that have raised me. My thesis, however, will not be a cautionary tale or a lesson in morality, nor will it “solve” the complex issues of identity. Rather, *Big Bones* provides a travelogue of what it has felt to inhabit *my* female body over time, moving from America to Israel - and the insights and questions that have arisen along the way.

## Conceptual Background

My literary influences include women who have written about their own creative and ultimately socially significant explorations of the female body, as well as the (perhaps unlikely) male humorist whose distinct voice and perspective have shaped my style for over a decade. What these sometimes disparate literary voices share is the ability to position and write about themselves from both inside and outside the culture in which they find themselves. That is, they write as insiders into their own distinct psyches and experiences (and bodies), but also from the outside of the society they find themselves navigating.

Roxane Gay's *Hunger* is a bold and haunting portrait of one woman's perspective of the world as a super-morbidly-obese woman. Gay fully explores the boundaries of narrative in her memoir, refusing to force her story into a traditional, linear form. Instead, she experiments with varied chapter lengths (ranging in length from 2 sentences to 11 pages) as well as bold leaps in genre, time and tone to represent her journey in her own terms. The liberties she takes with form underly my own storytelling, as I experiment with hybrid and unconventional forms to shape my memoir. Further, in Gay's representing leaps in time, she shows herself to be less concerned with linear storytelling and more in ordering the parts of her narrative as to deliver the greatest emotional truth. Where Gay plays with length and content, I am interested in the hybrid forms employing elements of social media, modern communication (as in texting) and theatrical forms of dialogue – to construct my story in a way that lends force to the memoir and gives authority to the voice I am constructing. Like Gay's *Hunger*, Natalia Ginzburg's "He & I" employs rapid-fire comparison to construct relationships and carve out characters, lending itself to the less typical narrative constructions I imagine for some of my essays.

What I find arresting as a precedent for my own writing is the way Gay deploys images from popular culture, especially in *Hunger*, as a means to construct her complex and

often hybrid conceptions of self. She writes about herself fully: She was brutally raped; she is the daughter of immigrants; she watches reality television. Without making light of her trauma, Gay explores all the parts of herself – the obviously life-changing and seemingly-trivial – as valuable and worthy of exploration. The resulting memoir illustrates a fully fleshed-out human being (in both literal and metaphoric senses), a product of her circumstances and time. Gay's use of the carnivalesque informs all the ways the reader can know, understand and appreciate her identity. Following Gay, essays in my thesis will turn to various aspects of pop culture as part of the multiple lenses through which I explore the contours of the self.

In ways similar to Gay's *Hunger*, Lindy West's *Shrill* is a book of personal essays that mainly explore feminism, misogyny and body image. The topics of her essays are wide-ranging: she explores her comical exploits while attending a women's festival, her romantic relationships (both successes and abject failures), and her battles against fatphobia in her professional life. Throughout all of these accounts, a distinctive and inviting authorial voice is a constant. West manages to represent her persona as funny and self-deprecating without giving herself over to self-hatred, lending depth and authority to her narrative voice. She is relatable, observant and curious about herself and the world around her – a world that tends to reject her overweight body. The way in which she figures her own body in relationship to social representations of the female body serves as a precedent for my own explorations of self and identity.

In one essay, West explores how the extent to which women literally take up space (their size) serves as an indicator for how they are valued and evaluated in society. The narrative begins with her infancy as an exceptionally large baby and continues on to her development as a fat woman, always highlighting her relationship to the concept of size in general, both in relation to herself and the media. In one example of the latter, she details how a particularly vulgar American radio host produced a segment consisting of the host

“sizing up” women with a tape measure on the air. This particular essay and other essays in *Shrill* branches out from the particularities of West’s experience to find within them the personal and then more general conceptions of feminine identity in 21<sup>st</sup> century culture. West’s curiosity is manifested in an almost scientific dissection of the world around her, much like Joan Didion’s wry but ultimately tender examination of sociological snapshots of California. West manages to be both informative and introspective – without becoming polemical, a balance my thesis also works to strike.

Rebecca Schiff’s book of short stories, *The Bed Moved*, while fictional, focuses on themes of sexuality and Jewish-ish-ness with a wry outlook and irreverence relevant to my thesis. Through her representation of a particular brand of American-Jewish feminine neurosis, infused with a liberal arts education (and one too many stoner boyfriends), Schiff is able to flesh out her various protagonists. These protagonists are all women, all smart, all just beyond the grasp of the reader. A series of portraits, Schiff’s work cultivates small truths and moments in time that build eventually towards larger statements about growing up as a Jewish American woman. My thesis, like *The Bed Moved*, aspires to be greater than the sum of its parts.

*Me Talk Pretty One Day* was not the first David Sedaris book I read, but it is the volume I reference as being one of the pivotal works in my development as a writer, thinker and observer. While not dealing with questions about the feminine, the essays collected in the volume illustrate the observations and insights of an outsider. In the title essay, for example, Sedaris describes a French class in which he enrolls while living in France. Through his acute observations of his teachers and classmates, he sets a scene in an almost theatrical way, giving voice and conflict to the classroom drama, representing himself as an outsider within a community of outsiders. In this essay, like many of his others, Sedaris takes seemingly mundane and frustrating linguistic and cultural interactions, and through dramatic dialogue and description makes them dynamic. In the essay, “Jesus Shaves,”

Sedaris further explores how it feels to be an outsider when he and his classmates attempt to describe Easter to a Muslim classmate in their broken French. Sedaris takes the romantic notions of being an expat living abroad (a la Hemingway) and (quite literally) “queers” it. As a gay man, Sedaris is always acutely aware of his outsider status, but this status is further heightened while living abroad. Sedaris examines awkward social experiences with his surrounding Frenchmen while showing, always with humor, his deeply personal crisis of self. As Sedaris represents it, there is no greater challenge to one’s ego than moving to a foreign country. I take Sedaris’ combined self-awareness and cultivated outsider perspective as a model for my own exploration of the differences and sometimes surprising similarities between my American and Israeli sensibilities.

## Shape of Project

My thesis will be comprised of a series of stand-alone essays focusing on the four-year transition I have undergone since moving to Israel. Some essays will focus on illustrating specific interpersonal relationships or encounters, while others, less focused on narrative, will instead explore broader topics, extrapolating from personal experiences to more general observations about concepts like weight, sex and religion in the construction of identity. Between more standard-length essays, I will feature 1-2 page dialogues, lists, text message exchanges and other “found” writing items to introduce and explore different themes and incarnations of the narrating self throughout the memoir.

The following are a representative sample of essays that will be included in my thesis.

‘Big Bones’: This essay opens with a sexual encounter shortly after I moved to Tel Aviv. During this encounter, I had an exchange with a man that forced me to confront the transition my body had undergone. The essay then pans out to explore my relationship with my body starting from childhood and then explores how my weight loss influenced how I see myself and those around me. The essay is a deep dive into the societal and emotional implications of weight loss and provides a psychic lens of the narrating self that continues throughout the series of essays.

‘Tel Aviv Arrhythmia’: Shortly after the terror wave of Fall 2015 began, I began sleeping with a volunteer medic. This essay explores the erotic within tragedy and the clinically medical. The essay concludes with the events of one evening, a sexual encounter in an ambulance as an endless stream of tragic stabbings from around Israel made headline news. The essay ends as the relationship meets its logical conclusion, the thrills of sex and tragedy no longer able to sustain themselves.



'The Rabbi's Daughter': This essay explores my status as a certified "rabbi's daughter" and how this identity marker has influenced my religious and spiritual identity, especially in an Israeli context. Dipping into the mystical, this essay is composed of a series of vignettes that explore how my proximity and familiarity with the ancient religious tradition and how my own secular identity in Israel has been complicated.

'31 Months': This essay is portrait of my longest partnership thus far in Israel, with my Israeli partner, Tal. Through squabbles, cultural misunderstandings and medical crisis, the fundamental differences between are further exposed. Through the differences between us, my own tension with Israeli culture is brought to the surface. Using short plays as an organizing principle, the dialogues between Tal and I expose clear distance while also demonstrating improved communication. The essay concludes as I return home from the hospital after a serious infection. I finally see my partner for who and what he is. Home.

'Total Reach': This essay explores my job as a social media content writer for a pro-Israel organization. The essay will examine how social media works to achieve political goals through various conflicts and events in Israel, i.e. the Palestinian terror wave, the Israeli embassy move and the 2016 election. Writing personally, I will explore how my identity and my relationship with Israel has been shaped by social media. I will examine the unique experience of seeing a global audience react to local Israeli events and how my failures and successes on social media have had personal repercussions.

'Brown Paper Bag': This essay illustrates an unpleasant evening I spent with a man shortly after moving to Tel Aviv. Our sexual encounter and the events that occurred before and after dealt in issues of consent, loss and desire. I mostly forgot about this encounter until the thinkers and writers of the #MeToo movement told me this was also a story worth

telling. This evening taught me the dangers of rewriting trauma out of your own history. Ultimately, this essay shows a deep battle within myself—a feminist who demands respect, and a deeply insecure young woman who is compelled to be receptive to male attention at any personal cost.

'Fast': This essay explores my complicated relationship with food. A disturbing experiment in a college psych class shows me that my eating habits and religious identity are deeply intertwined. From there I explore my relationship to food over the course of my transformation and transition. How Israel has become a haven for my eating habits, and how the United States has turned itself into a gastronomic battleground. The essay is ultimately interested in my complex relationship between home, food, safety and Judaism.

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