

The success of Adi Nes's fictional photographic portraits: figures of alterity and the utilization of memories in visual self-portraiture

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This paper demonstrates the way an autobiographer shapes his/her identity in the creation of his/her narrative. The autobiographer's struggle in his/her understanding of the self is sometimes evident in the work. This project focuses specifically on the work of Adi Nes, an Israeli photographer. His photographs demonstrate the ways in which he feels like an outsider in Israel, as both a member of the Sephardic community and a homosexual. His photographs are staged, and he uses figures of alterity by projecting himself into his images with the use of models, which may lead the viewer to question the referentiality, or truthfulness, of each image. While demonstrating his identity through personal experience and memories, his images are created in the context of a stratified society, demonstrating the power dynamics of the military and the different groups that reside within Israel. The paper draws on images from three series – "Boys" (2000), "Soldiers" (1994–2000) and "Prisoners" (2000).

KEYWORDS: autobiography, identity, photography, referentiality, figures of alterity, Adi Nes, Israel, army

During an autobiography's conception, its creator shapes an identity through the sharing of the personal chronicle and the particular experiences which constitute one's narrative. Oliver Sacks explains how "[...] each of us constructs and lives a 'narrative', and [...] this narrative is us, our identities [...] for each of us is a biography, a story".^[1] The creator manufactures his/her self through the construction of his/her autobiography. Occasionally, an artist struggles with an understanding of their self, as evident in the autobiographical work.

This project focuses on the autobiographer's role in the creation of his/her narrative. Adi Nes was born in Kiryat Gat, Israel in 1966. James Estrin and David Furst, in their article for *The New York Times* titled "Underpinnings of Greek Tragedy in Israel", describe Nes as a "Sephardic Jewish gay artist".^[2] They explain: "He is an outsider in Israel, a country that was forged by a people who, during two millennia of diaspora, were outsiders".^[3] This designation describes Nes as marginal

[1] Quoted in T.D. Adams, *Life writing and light writing: autobiography and photography*, "Modern Fiction Studies" 1994, 40 3 (Fall), p. 460.

[2] J. Estrin, D. Furst. *Underpinnings of Greek tragedy in Israel*, "New York Times" 2012 (July), <[\[lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/17/underpinnings-of-greek-tragedy-in-israel/?_r=0\]\(http://lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/07/17/underpinnings-of-greek-tragedy-in-israel/?_r=0\)> \[accessed: June 20, 2018\].](http://</p></div><div data-bbox=)

[3] Ibidem.

in the Israeli collective, a collective that itself can be considered on the global peripheral. Although part of the majority religion in Israel, he is a member of a minority religion in the world. As a Sephardic Jew, he found that he was on the margins of "...the Ashkenazi Jews, of Eastern-European descent, that dominated popular culture".[4] Nes also identifies as homosexual. He found that he was unable to find a place to belong in the "...mainstream Israeli culture that he saw as promoting the ideal of the macho Israeli settler or soldier".[5]

In his article titled "Life Writing and Light Writing: Autobiography and Photography", Timothy Dow Adams discusses the evolution of photography and states: "[In] a history remarkably similar to that of autobiography, that photography is equally problematic in terms of referentiality, that the old notion that photographs never lie or that photography was an objective 'naturally mechanical' process of reproducing reality are much more complicated than they might first appear". [6] According to Adams, referentiality denotes the idea of truthfulness. Since Nes's photographs are visual representations, they must be true and accurate; however, it is possible to question the referentiality (or truthfulness) of Nes's photographs. On the one hand, since his work is autobiographical, some viewers may question the referentiality of his photographs, since Nes does not photograph himself and his images are staged. On the other hand, his works draw on personal experience and memories (which construct his identity) and therefore, viewers are justified in seeing his work as representative of his personal narrative. Nes creates these figures of alterity or otherness by projecting himself into his photographs, even though he, himself, is not the subject, thus indicating his marginal role in Israeli society.

Nes's entire photographic collection comments upon a number of contentious matters in Israeli society. These include the power dynamics of the Israeli military with the undercurrents of the Israeli Palestinian conflict; conflicts between religious and secular groups; issues between Ashkenazim, as a privileged and elite group, and Sephardim/Mizrahim, as a non-privileged group; and more. In doing this, he demonstrates the stratification of Israeli society while also demonstrating his own autobiographical narrative. This essay draws on images from three of his photographic series: "Boys" (2000), "Soldiers" (1994–2000), and "Prisoners" (2000). Nes photographs "...ordinary Israelis, and the occasional actor, [posing] them as if he were both cinematographer and screenwriter".[7] The viewer is aware that the photographs are staged and fictionalized, yet the images still represent the reality of both Nes and the Israelis. Through the evaluation of figures of alterity or 'otherness', Nes communicates to the viewer the questions of referentiality, how memories build the autobiographical narrative, and the way in which an individual transforms the past into the present while coming to terms with identity.

[4] Ibidem.

[5] Ibidem.

[6] T.D. Adams, op.cit., p. 465.

[7] J. Estrin, D. Furst, op.cit.

The “Boys” series was created in development towns in Israel. These towns were established in order to house the massive waves of Jewish immigrants arriving mostly from Arabic speaking lands. Nes’s family immigrated to Israel from Iran.[8] These towns were remote and peripheral and “...most of these new towns became nodes of neglect and marginality, where frustration and lack of opportunity prevailed”.[9] The families residing in these areas were distant from the large, urban, cultural centers like Tel Aviv or Jerusalem. These towns illustrate how individuals struggled economically and socially. They also struggled with personal issues relating to identity, since community members lived on the margins of society and were therefore considered outsiders by the majority culture.

In the first image from the “Boys” series (fig. 1), the viewer witnesses two shirtless males in a static pose. The older male rests his arm on the younger child in a protective and affectionate embrace. While the older figure looks into the distance, the adolescent stares intimately into the viewer’s eyes. Since the photographs in the series were created throughout the country with no specific clues as to their exact location, one might determine that this photo could be any society.[10] The two boys are models and unrelated to one another; however, they appear to be very familiar with one another in the image. As mentioned previously, Adams discusses how the photograph is considered a reproduction of reality, but this image makes the viewer aware that the process of reproduction is complicated. Since Nes creates (or stages) this image based on memory, this photograph is not a reproduction of reality; rather, this image is a representation of Nes’s reality.

Nes uses figures of alterity (i.e. other male models) to demonstrate how he feels like an outsider in the Israeli mainstream culture. He projects himself into the third person and into both of these male characters. He demonstrates the ability of an individual to rely on memories and resurrects moments from his childhood into his images. Many immigrant fathers in the development towns, like Nes’s, struggled to provide for their families. Nes reflects upon his experiences as a child and replaces his father with the older male figure who embraces the child. In doing this, he expresses to the viewer his feelings of familial disconnect and discomfort since his father did not successfully provide for his family. This older figure may represent Nes’s homosexual identity as he searches for a fatherly figure on whom he can depend. In comparison, DeLappe discusses his own photographic images, in which he transposes himself as a child in the same image as himself as an adult and states: “The Series represents an attempt to forge a healing connection with the past by transforming it in the present. I forgave the past, and let it be the past, by reconfiguring the photographic documents of my life”.[11] In a similar fashion, Nes utilizes past experiences,

[8] Ibidem.

[9] D.L. Harten, *Less the Horror than the Grace*. *Adi Nes*, Tel Aviv 2007, p. 135.

[10] N. Goren, *Turning Fiction into Routine*. *Adi Nes Photographs*. Tel Aviv 2004, p. 8.

[11] Quoted in T.D. Adams, op.cit., p. 483.



Fig. 1. Two boys ("Boys" series, 2000)

transposing them into his visual self-portraiture through the use of third person and in doing this, he reconciles his past with his present. He attempts to reconcile his past memories in order to actualize his present identity.

The second image (fig. 2) is from the same series and illustrates a burning playground with a group of teenage boys standing beside it. Although staged, the scene documents a frequently occurring scenario in these development towns. Once more, Nes recreates this scene by relying on childhood memories. The referentiality of the photograph does not need to be questioned, since he reproduces a real social scenario. He writes: "I referred, among other things, to a childhood memory as someone who grew up in the time of the project-rehabilitation



Fig. 2. Burning playground (“Boys” series, 2000)

program in Kiryat Gat. Every morning the municipality would place fibreglass playground equipment in deserted public gardens, and at night, reckless street kids would burn them down”.[12] Countless problems transpired in these marginal towns, such as economic and social instability; however, the municipality chose to ignore the larger issues by attempting to beautify the towns with playgrounds for children. As a result of frustration, local teens would burn them down in defiance.

An individual’s former memories construct and develop one’s present and future being. James Olney asks: “If *bios* is ‘the course of life, a lifetime,’ and if it is already spent and past, then how is it going to be made present again, how is it ever going to be recaptured, how is that which is no longer living going to be restored to life?”.[13] Olney refers to Barrett Mandel’s discussion on the past and states that “...the past...never really existed: it has always been an illusion...”.[14] Olney concludes that *bios* is “...an ongoing process – the process of being, the process of existing”.[15] Memories help Nes to form and mold his bios,

[12] M. Omer, *Forward. Adi Nes Photographs*, Tel Aviv 2004, p. 4.

[13] J. Olney, *Some Versions of Memory/Some Versions of Bios: The Ontology of Autobiography*, [in:] *Autobi-*

ography: Essays Theoretical and Critical, ed. J. Olney, Princeton 1980, p. 237.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 237.

[15] *Ibidem*, p. 238.

which is a continuing progression, a process with which he struggles. This struggle incorporates the contemplation of his identity, which is established in his photographs.

In the reconstruction of this scene, Nes casts himself into the position of the teenage boys. He struggled to live in these development towns existing on the margins of Israeli society. Teenage boys existing on the periphery of Israeli civilization were considered delinquent and degenerate by mainstream Israeli society, but Nes disputes this connotation attributed to him as a Sephardic Jew in a development town. By using figures of alterity, he removes himself from the scene and proclaims that he is not one of these delinquent kids. He negotiates with his memories to assert that he is responsible for manufacturing his identity; though society endeavors to label him one way, he refuses to accept these stigmas. Since the image is staged by Nes, it leads one to consider the ways in which Nes rewrites his personal history, breaking free of the labels which society attributes to him. The referentiality is not at risk as being categorized as false, since the photograph relies on recollections and Nes's autobiographical narrative.

Israeli identity is constituted of many different elements, one of which is the core symbol of quintessential Israelis: "the soldier figure..." [16] explored by Nes in the "Soldiers" series. In 1903, Max Nordau discusses how Jewish physical life is valuable. He states:

All the elements of Aristotelian physics – light, air, water and earth – were measured out to us very sparingly. In the narrow Jewish street our poor limbs soon forgot their gay movements; in the dimness of sunless houses our eyes began to blink shyly; the fear of constant persecution turned our powerful voices into frightened whispers... But now, all coercion has become a memory of the past, and at least we are allowed space enough for our bodies to live again. Let us take up our oldest traditions; let us once more become deep-chested, sturdy, sharp-eyed men. [17]

Nordau proclaims: "We must think of creating once again a Jewry of muscles". [18] A core symbol of Israel is the 'New Jew' created during Israel's history as a newly-founded nation. Before the declaration of the State of Israel, the 'New Jew' represented an individual who was strong and able-bodied – able to successfully work the land. After 1948, this term became intertwined with the image of the soldier: an individual who was no longer just able-bodied, but could protect and defend the new nation and its people. In this series, Nes deconstructs the ideality of the 'New Jew' and displays the participants in a circus-like scene: "[H]is soldiers are objects of both ridicule and compassions – and as such, they are a far cry from representing the armoured body of the state". [19]

The first image in this series (fig. 3) is considered Nes's most famous and well-known photograph. In the reenactment of Leonardo

[16] D.L. Harten, op.cit., p. 141.

[17] M. Nordau, *Jewry of Muscle (Muskeljudentum)*. *Juedische Turnzeitung*, trans. J. Hessing, [in:] *The Jew in the Modern World: A Documentary History*, 2nd

ed., eds P. Mendes-Flohr, J. Reinharz, Oxford 1995, p. 435.

[18] Ibidem, p. 434.

[19] D.L. Harten, op.cit., p. 139.



Fig. 3. The soldiers' last supper before battle ("Soldiers" series, 1999)

Da Vinci's *The Last Supper*, Nes parallels the experience of Jesus and his disciples with that of the soldier and his unit. As the soldiers eat, they are aware that this theoretically could be their final meal together. Nes states: "I thought since everything is staged, I will cast for the pictures boy-like faces, childlike faces and light them with very romantic and soft light because I wanted to show how much they're fragile, and to show the person behind and under the uniform".^[20] Although the image is staged and fictional, the idea behind the image is accurate and exact. The viewer engages with the raw emotions of the soldiers and the photograph largely impacts the viewer. Although not an exact reproduction of reality (as Adams discusses in regard to the role of the photograph), the image represents the reality of Israeli society.

Lejeune delineates the role of the autobiographer in life writing and states that

[...] the autobiographer tries to imagine what would happen if someone else was telling his story or sketching his portrait. He isn't looking to represent [...] the gaps of his internal perspective, but to recover the discourse that others are capable of holding on him, in order to impose on them...the image of himself which seems real to him.^[21]

[20] L.-E. Arrazola, *Israeli Photographer Adi Nes Mixes Style, Sexuality and Soldiers*, "National Post" 2012 (May), <<http://news.nationalpost.com/arts/israeli-photographer-adi-nes-mixes-style-sexuality-soldiers>> [accessed: June 20, 2018].

[21] Ph. Lejeune, *Autobiography in the Third Person*, Chapter 2 [in:] *On Autobiography*, trans. K. Leary, Minneapolis 1989, p. 46.



Fig. 4. Male soldier posing (“Soldiers” series, 1996)

The autobiographer sometimes places himself in the third person in his/her work in order to attempt to understand the viewer’s point of view of him/herself. Nes imposes himself into the third person in his visual self-portraiture – in each and every one of his soldiers – in order to demonstrate to the viewers the way in which soldiers perceive themselves.

Every soldier in this image is a part of Nes, whether talking, eating or contemplating. In comparison to ‘The Last Supper’, the role of the central figure differs from Jesus’s role. Harten states:

[...] the soldier representing Jesus is not the focus of attention and none of his fellow soldiers look at him [compared to DaVinci]: while he is the formal centre of the picture, he is not the focus of its narrative [...] there



Fig. 5. Circus of soldiers ("Soldiers" series, 1994)

is no gesture inviting us to participate in the scene... Jesus left alone, Jesus noticed by no one, is a soldier predestined to die who [...] is already becoming eradicated from the memory of the people surrounding him..."[22]

The role of the central figure implies the difficulties of becoming a soldier and going to war. The soldiers must separate themselves from their reality (as demonstrated by the use of third person) in order to survive – *if* they survive. Since the soldier is 'predestined to die', the soldier chooses to disconnect himself from reality instead of accepting his fate.

[22] D.L. Harten, op.cit., p. 138.

In the next image (fig. 4), the viewer observes a shirtless male figure posing, his muscles on exhibit. His masculinity and strong body are evident. The soldier is “[...] cut off from [his] actual surroundings, [is] a phantasm of erotic joy remodelled into the history of art through a long succession of manifestations of the eternal youth motif”.[23] In this image, the reality of the soldier is not authentic – a soldier goes off to battle. The soldier, instead, stands around, flexing his muscles for the public. The soldier represents the Israeli ideal and he is always on display for society to view and criticize. The erotic image is not the reality of the soldier and army life and therefore, Nes demonstrates how every move is witnessed, reviewed, and studied by the collective. He uses figures of alterity in order to project himself into this idealized male model. The homoeroticizing of the male soldier demonstrates the internal struggle of identifying as homosexual in the army. He pokes fun at the fact that soldiers are meant to always be perfect representations of “the armoured body of the state”.[24]

Since the image is presented as a fictional image of a soldier, and since Nes transforms himself into the third person, one might consider how to determine if this image is a visual self-portrait. Adams states:

Even if we limit portraiture to photography, we quickly realize that not every picture of a person constitutes a portrait, and that determining whether a photograph is a portrait or self-portrait can prove... complicated... Richard Brilliant names reference to an actual person as a fundamental prerequisite for portraiture, citing Gadamer’s term ‘occasionality’ as essential...[25]

The awareness of this image as autobiographical is not significant (unless the viewer is attempting to understand Nes), because Gadamer states that “a portrait’s claim to significance lies in that intended reference, whether the viewer happens to be aware of it or not”.[26] The concept of referentiality is complicated, especially when the artist projects himself into the third person. The image remains significant and meaningful, since it largely impacts the viewer by demonstrating issues of identity and the Israeli collective.

The last image (fig. 5) considered from the “Soldiers” series demonstrates a group of soldiers ‘messaging around’ at their base camp. The image captures the soldiers as circus performers. Nes’s soldiers are “...sleeping, laughing, communicating – are more dainty nymphs than machos, which makes their rendering surrealistic, for the truth of their reality is well known: soldiers behave differently in real life, especially when meeting Arabs and Palestinians”.[27] These soldiers, once more, remove themselves from their reality by creating a fictional scene, leading one to question the referentiality of the photograph.

Nes utilizes the male body to demonstrate his private history as a homosexual male.[28] The work is influenced by Greek ideas because he

[23] Ibidem, p. 139.

[24] Ibidem, p. 139.

[25] T.D. Adams, op.cit., p. 474.

[26] Quoted in Adams, op.cit., p. 474.

[27] D.L. Harten, op.cit., p. 139.

[28] Ibidem, p. 135.



Fig. 6. Prisoner and guard (“Prisoners” series, 2003)

“[...] relies on a long tradition of bonds of military friendship among the ancient Greeks [...] where ideas of friendship topped with homoerotic relations consolidated solidarity among the soldiers, making them better fighters for their city states”.[29] The homoeroticism of the soldiers is based on the friendly bonds between the male characters goofing around, rather than on physical qualities, since some of the soldiers are fully dressed and others are not completely nude.

The use of the third person reflects on Nes’s time in the army. Soldiers are unable to always be perfect representations of “the armoured body of the state”.[30] They are genuine people – most of whom have only recently finished their pubescent stage – who continue to try and enjoy life even when they find themselves in precarious positions. He removes himself and makes himself an outsider in order to demonstrate what many soldiers must do, as mentioned above. He imagines himself as each soldier, demonstrating how he sometimes partook in fun activities, but that, just like in a circus, one must remember that the performer’s act is always on parade.

The last series considered in this essay is “Prisoners” from 2003. It was created for the *Vogue Hommes International* fashion shoot. The

[29] Ibidem, p. 134.

[30] Ibidem, p. 139.

clothing is designed from Autumn/Winter 2003–2004 and the location is Israel. Nes photographs this series in a prison where “[...] Israeli, Palestinian, foreign workers, minors and adults are all incarcerated together”.[31]

Nes plays with the idea of memory when he creates the “Prisoners” scenes: “Nes himself had spent some of his military service as a guard in a detention camp for Palestinian political prisoners, so the dynamic ingrained in the warden-prisoner relations – the undercurrents and insinuations that such an encounter produces, the boundaries breached as well as those that become sharply defined – are well known to him”.[32] The last image (fig. 6) demonstrates a confrontation between a male guard and a male prisoner.

Nes once more employs figures of alterity to highlight his experience as a prison guard. His inspiration stems from a specific experience in the military and his autobiographical history is on display in the third person. When he was a guard, he became friends with a prisoner and realized that he would never be able to shoot his friend if the need arose.[33] He, therefore, removes himself from the scene, recreating it as if he is an outsider looking in. Being in the army, overall, forces one to remove themselves from their current circumstances, since one sometimes commits certain acts that he would normally not consider doing.

These experiences in the military, both as a prison guard and in other roles, helped to construct Nes’s Israeli identity. To help build his present identity, he “[...] transposes [his] role to the third person and into the past [...] helps [him] to express [his] problems of identity and at the same time to captivate [his viewers]”.[34] As an Israeli citizen, it is incumbent upon him to complete his army service, which helps him identify with and become a part of the community – a community in which he felt like an outsider growing up. While struggling with this experience and finding the need to remove himself from his reality, this experience also helped forge the identity he expresses to his viewers.

Nes not only demonstrates his autobiographical narrative to his viewers, but he also illustrates the collective biography of Israel. Through an evaluation of the way in which Nes projects himself into the figures of his images (using figures of alterity or ‘otherness’) and the way in which he relies on his memories, he communicates to the viewer three major issues. First, while many want to critique the referentiality of his photographs, since they are staged and fictitious, his images are created from real experiences and memories demonstrating the collective Israeli society and therefore, the referentiality of the photographs remains intact and believable. Second, his images express how memories build the autobiographical narrative, since he relies on recollections of his past in the recreation of specific settings and social situations. Third, he endeavors to reconcile his past by transposing past events into his present photographs in which he is the main character(s).

[31] N. Goren, *op.cit.*, p. 7.

[32] D.L. Harten, *op.cit.*, p. 130.

[33] J. Estrin, D. Furst, *op.cit.*

[34] Ph. Lejeune, *op.cit.*, p. 31.

Nes is a successful photographer and effectively communicates his message to his viewers. Even though he does not photograph himself, his autobiographical narrative is undoubtedly demonstrated in his self-portraiture. None of Nes's images are titled – they are all referred to as “Untitled, Date” creating a potential problem for the viewer. Adams states: “Walter Benjamin’s 1931 statement [...] predicts the current situation: “The camera will become smaller and smaller, more and more prepared to grasp fleeting, secret images [...] At this point captions must begin to function, captions which understand the photography which turns all the relations of life into literature [...]”.[35] It would have been possible for him to efficiently title his images, thus making clear his autobiographical narrative; however, instead, he chooses to leave his images open to interpretation. What each individual wishes to take away from his photographs is up to him/her, whether this be a commentary on Israeli society or new fashion styles from *Vogue Hommes International*.

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[35] Quoted in T.D. Adams, op.cit., p. 480.