EthnoScripts

Jewish Cultural Heritage, Minority Agency, and the State

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Abstract:

Using an interdisciplinary perspective at the intersections of anthropology, Jewish Studies, and critical academic scholarship of heritage, this special issue presents ethnographic examples to explore the relationship between minority groups and the state through the prism of representations of Jewish cultural heritage in the European public sphere. On an empirical level, the articles focus on personal, community-led, and wider public discussions of the way Jewish experience and histories of migration have been (or should be) represented in museums and historical sites, in musical productions and open-air displays, at sites of restitution and in virtual spaces. In this introductory article we summarise the main points of each contribution and some of their connected themes. We then briefly discuss the articles we brought together and outline the main matters of theoretical concern they raise. Key are the aspirations that members of Jewish communities have in negotiating representations of Jewish heritage in Europe and the agentive capacity that diverse Jewish publics, including individual artists and professionals, demonstrate in shaping these representations to achieve, disrupt, or suspend state-sponsored consensus about the preservation of minority heritage.

Key words: Jewish heritage, agency, Europe, minorities, state

Using an interdisciplinary perspective at the intersection of anthropology, Jewish Studies, and critical academic scholarship of heritage, this special issue presents ethnographic examples to explore the relationship between minority groups and the state through the prism of representations of Jewish cultural heritage in the European public sphere. On an empirical level, the articles focus on personal, community-led, and wider public discussions of the way Jewish experience and histories of migration have been (or should be) represented in museums and historical sites, in musical productions and open-air displays, at sites of restitution and in virtual spaces. On a broader theoretical plane, the contributions that we bring together unsettle binary-based theorisations of minority–state relations and political-cultural interactions between dominant and subaltern groups by highlighting processes of negotiation through which minorities and the state continuously (re)define each other in state-led and grassroots curation projects to achieve, disrupt, or suspend consensus.

The notion of 'heritage' has emerged since the 1960s from relatively localised initiatives to achieve significance on the global scale as something of value that should be preserved. In 1972 'UNESCO adopted the Convention Concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage, which

established an international agenda for the protection and conservation of sites of universal significance, and importantly confirmed the presence of "heritage" as an international issue' (Smith 2006: 26). With the emphasis on heritage and its preservation came many discourses and legal stipulations about how heritage should be defined, governed, and treated, and by whom. These shifts in focus and definition have often been determined by competing stakeholders and actors in the 'heritagisation' process. For several decades 'heritage' was restricted to tangible objects such as buildings and other objects (including human remains). In 2003, the UNESCO 'Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage' attempted to draw attention to what was termed 'intangible heritage', a category that included music, recipes, crafting, and other practices considered to be non-material heritage. However, critics have argued that most heritage is a combination of tangible and intangible since an object itself is not 'heritage' as such without the practices surrounding it, be they modern heritage 'practices' or the practices of the past that were associated with it by the communities who used and created it.

For the past two decades or so, attempts are being made at stimulating community involvement in heritage-making initiatives. This has only met with partial success, not least because community agency was limited owing to the predominance of top-down approaches to such endeavours:

> *Not only does this discourse frame heritage audiences as passive receptors of the authorised meaning of heritage, it also creates significant barriers for active public negotiation about the meaning and nature of heritage, and the social and cultural roles that it may play. (Smith 2006: 44)*

Even attempts at initiating discussions towards inclusion are often patronising and assimilative: 'excluded community groups become "invited" to "learn", "share" or become "educated" about authorised heritage values and meanings' (Smith 2006: 44).

Jewish heritage, particularly Jewish heritage in Europe, occupies an interesting place within this discourse. Since the 1980s, the presentation and preservation of Jewish cultural heritage has become imperative for many large-scale institutions and agencies in Europe. They present it as part of a shared European cultural heritage, highlighting its universality rather than its Jewish particularity or its significance to Jewish subjects or positionalities, let alone their agentive potentialities. In view of these developments, Jewish cultural heritage has become a resource for political interventions – whether enacted in good or bad faith – to strengthen tolerance and intercultural competences in many European countries, particularly those with Jewish populations decimated during the Shoah (Levy and Sznaider 2002). With the heritagisation of static objects in Europe, abandoned Jewish sites such as

synagogues and cemeteries have been provided with new cultural-political values and meanings under the seal of 'heritage' – turning 'cultural heritage tourism' into an economic resource (Ross 2024). The term 'Jewish cultural heritage' became associated with monument preservation, museums, tourism, and politics as part of 'a destroyed Jewish past' whilst 'intangible forms of Jewish heritage such as music, rituals, knowledge or everyday practices, which are passed from one generation to the next, are mostly ignored' (Ross and Kranz 2023).[1] At times Jewish institutions and individuals were able to negotiate certain outcomes related to Jewish heritage and Jewish sustainability within these frameworks, but arguably always within the etic constructions and frameworks of a broader majority. In some cases, Jewish viewpoints and Jewish intra-communal concerns in state-sanctioned representations of Jewish heritage are not heard or acknowledged at all.

Jewish cultural heritage created by Jewish positionalities that do not represent non-Jewish public interests (which are arguably most of them) have often been excluded from public discourse. Indeed, in situations with diverse Jewish communities, state-led initiatives often approach those Jewish communities whose interests are viewed as corresponding most closely to the state's understanding of heritage to appoint them as 'gatekeepers' of Jewish heritage; others are excluded, including Queer, orthodox (Crowdus and Kagan 2025), and non-European Jewish subjects (Everett and Vince 2020). These ethical problems and power imbalances foreground the need for critical heritage studies to explore more deeply how heritage and representation interact in the context of minorities. The lack of acknowledgement of 'minorities within minorities' concerns not only how heritage is perceived and processed but the very identity of what constitutes heritage or its important aspects.

Key here is paying attention to the agency of minority groups. Groups have agentive capacities through movement and migration. Thus, it is necessary to consider the impact of Jewish migrations and transatlantic pilgrimages on constructions of Jewish cultural heritage. Movement is an integral though usually unacknowledged part of minority–state negotiations. Building on contemporary anthropological writing, we conceptualise the state as a fluid structure with distributed agency rather than as a stable and monolithic entity (Navaro-Yashin 2002; Kravel-Tovi 2017; Taragin-Zeller 2023). We draw on a variety of conceptualisations of the state and of minority populations that interact with it. We suggest that what emerges in encounters in the arena of Jewish cultural heritage is a multidimensional web of memory building that constructs 'Europe' symbolically as a central component of a traumatic Jewish past. We argue that this construction – albeit ephemeral – must be revisited as it forms a crucial part of Jewish sites of memory and belonging.

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1   All quotes from German have been translated by the article authors.

In exploring the agential capacity of minority groups in navigating minority–state relations in the arena of cultural representation, this special issue achieves the following: first, it contributes to the burgeoning anthropological literature that examines heritage preservation in relation to national memorialisation practices (Macdonald 2009; Lehrer 2013; Boum 2014; Demetriou 2015; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2017; Everett and Vince 2020; Slyomovics 2024). Second, it problematises state-led and international heritage management structures (Geismar 2015). And, third, it questions assumptions about the significance of cultural transmission that are often made in heritagisation practices (Berliner 2020). By highlighting emic perspectives – artistic, professional, or community-led – the contributions assembled here contribute in three further ways: first, they speak to studies that offer fine-grained ethnographic analyses of the changing meaning and potency of objects and images (Irvine 2018; Fortis and Küchler 2021; Everett 2024); second, they make a call for anthropologists to consider the diversity of professional and lay voices in the study of heritage (Brumann 2014); and, third, they approach heritage practices as processes, paying analytical attention not only to the materiality of heritage preservation but also to a range of emotional, ethical, and conceptual dynamics associated with it (Yarrow 2019; Jones and Yarrow 2022).

Indeed, the conversations we present in this volume add complexity and humanity to what could be considered a problematic 'cycle of patrimonialisation' often defined by politically motivated top-down processes concerning the administration and management of cultural heritage. This increasingly disconnects heritage from the lives of its (original) bearers and often renders the bottom-up processes of preserving and transmitting Jewish culture invisible. The articles in this special issue explore a variety of different case studies that show the nuances of negotiation and mediation between Jewish minorities and their representation and/or curation in public facing initiatives.

The special issue opens with an exploration of popular culture as a productive medium through which younger generations of Jews can construct Jewish heritage as an alternative to state-sanctioned heritage. Miranda Crowdus analyses Jewish participation in the gangsta rap scene in Germany in the past fifteen years by the children of escapees from the former Soviet Union. Her biographical and musical analysis focuses on the work of Dimitri Chpakov aka SpongeBozz. She argues that he offers a fresh, futures-oriented role model for young Jews in Germany that highlights the stark disconnect between state-sanctioned displays of Jewish heritage and the identity and realities of the tiny Jewish communities that exist in Germany today. Until recently, Jewish heritage in Germany was understood to refer almost exclusively to objects of Jewish provenance from the time of the Holocaust, mobilised under the umbrella of *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of remembrance). In

this article, Crowdus links a close reading of Chpakov's music with broader observations of the New-New Jews in Germany, who make up at least 90% of the country's Jewish population – but are scarcely acknowledged in Jewish heritage initiatives. In a wider frame, the article offers a broader reading of post-Soviet positionalities in present-day Europe.

Norm Ravvin's article falls in the domain of personal Jewish agency, transatlantic 'pilgrimage', and a return to a European (Polish) past, overlapping with the field of Canadian Jewish Studies. It highlights the sociopolitical dynamics and explorations around Ravvin's 'returns' to Radzanow, a village in Poland not far from Warsaw, in which his grandparents had once lived. Ravvin's exploration of his family's past intersects with a variety of factors – social, political, archaeological, and place-related – as he visits and re-visits Polish spaces of his past. His account highlights in striking ways how what he considers as heritage is shaped by multiple factors at different levels whilst he encounters acceptance, denial, and ambivalence on the part of the present-day inhabitants towards the Jews who had been murdered there. Rather than describe these reactions as static stances, Ravvin unravels how different factors – down to the aptitude of his translator – contribute to the connections (or lack thereof) that he is able to establish as he moves through the spaces of his European past.

Yulia Egorova's article presents a case study on how Jewish British citizens in northern England think that Jewish heritage should be represented in the public sphere. Working in collaboration with the Manchester Jewish Museum, Egorova explores how her interlocutors see the future of British architectural sites connected to Jewish histories that have been abandoned or redeveloped in ways that have silenced their Jewish past. The article deploys the concept of ambience and draws on anthropological scholarship focused on the agency of landscapes. It suggests that sites stemming from the histories of minorities have the capacity to enhance the well-being of individuals who identify with the heritage of these spaces *if* these are visible enough to form an unmissable part of the built environment. In tandem with Crowdus's findings, Egorova's interlocutors do not see Jewish heritage sites as static relics of the past but emphasise the importance of presenting and preserving Jewish histories in ways that reflect the diversity of contemporary Jewish communities and engage with their lived experiences.

Focusing on the area of agency and restitution in the aftermath of the Shoah, Elisabeth Becker describes the activities of what she calls 'Jewish cultural brokers of restitution', outlining the transnational constellation of actors and factors involved in this process. She highlights the complex negotiations engaged in by, and the ingenuity of, a minority in exercising agency in the aftermath of catastrophic loss. Becker outlines the organisations that have emerged from the complex negotiations with their past that second- and third- generation descendants of Holocaust survivors have engaged

in. Drawing on anthropological analyses of heritage work as both practice and process, the article posits that 'restitution at once informs and is itself a form of Jewish cultural heritage work'. Becker theorises this work as an active practice of return which involves multiple forms of restoration and reclamation that give agency to lives lost and the objects that were once theirs. Drawing on in-depth interviews, Becker's contribution also highlights the importance of a social scientific approach to the study of restitution, one that has scarcely been adopted.

Sami Everett analyses how artistic and historiographic representations of Jewish life in North Africa have been produced and received in France. His article hones in on projects that seek to provide a platform to these in the arts and creative industries, creating an important ethnographically informed constellation of Jewish cultural heritage encounters to generate broader discussions to destabilise current conceptualisations of minority–state relationships. His analysis reveals how different approaches engage with what he terms 'interrupted transmission': the disruption of cultural knowledge and practices across generations due to displacement and historical ruptures, demonstrating the limitations of binary frameworks (roseate/lachrymose, assimilation/marginalisation) in capturing Maghrebi Jewish experiences. Central to his argument is how post-memory generations actively reimagine rather than simply preserve inherited cultural materials, with grassroots initiatives creating more flexible spaces for embodied memory work compared to institutional frameworks constrained by national narratives. Through the concept of intergenerational 'return' to the Maghreb – both physical and imaginative – Everett shows how minority agency operates most effectively when communities gain control over heritage representation intergenerationally, challenging nationalist historiographies and pointing towards curatorial practices that can accommodate the complexities of postcolonial memory whilst fostering creative reimagining of cultural belonging beyond state-centred frameworks.

Pedro Antunes' contribution draws on the concept of 'endangerment sensibility' (Vidal and Dias 2016) to examine the digital revitalisation of Haketia, a Judaeo-Spanish variant that emerged through centuries of linguistic contact between Sephardic exiles and Arab, Judaeo-Arab, and Tamzight (Berber)-speaking populations in Morocco and Algeria. Tracing the colonial suppression of this hybrid translingual repertoire – from its stigmatisation under Spanish and French imperial rule to its near-disappearance following the mass exodus of Moroccan Jewish populations in the mid-twentieth century – Antunes demonstrates how contemporary digital heritage platforms like eSefarad.com have become spaces for what he terms 'open-source Sephardiness'. Through a virtual ethnography of online Ladino communities and courses, Antunes shows how diasporic Jewish communities are using digital technologies not merely to archive endangered linguistic heritage but

to actively generate new forms of cultural expression that reassemble a precolonial 'worldly common' characterised by inter-ethnic 'convivencia'. His work illuminates how minority agency operates through digital heritage-making practices that simultaneously resist historical colonial erasure and contemporary standardisation efforts by state institutions.

Anoushka Alexander-Rose's article offers a reflexive review of the travelling exhibition 'The Wandering Jew', which she curated in 2024–2025. The exhibition presented the artistic and literary history of the myth of the Wandering Jew, which emerged as an anti-Semitic legend in the medieval Christian oral tradition but has been reframed in numerous literary writings and works of art as a narrative about a paradigmatic nomad, with Jewish actants associating themselves with this figure and imbuing it with an agentive capacity to give meaning to their diasporic experience. In the exhibition, Alexander-Rose tracks the development of artistic and literary representation of the legend through centuries and geographic contexts. In the article, she reflects on the way the exhibition was received by audiences in the United Kingdom. The author draws analytical attention to what she describes as a 'metamorphising and reclamatory potential of the legend', which has the agency to represent the power of the transitory dimension of Jewish histories. In Alexander-Rose's discussion, the figure of the Wandering Jew presents European publics with a unique opportunity both to approach critically the topic of historical Christian antisemitism and to engage in positive interfaith exchange.

Overall, this special issue analyses and critically examines the content of Jewish cultural heritage displays and how they are received, and engages with what they do not consider. For instance, it seeks to highlight aspects of Jewish identity and culture that are either deliberately, strategically, or accidentally omitted, such as the musical agency of Jewish subjects that does not align with state definitions or that requires intimate, emic knowledge to appropriately represent, such as practices that are not written down or visual-centric (Crowdus 2018). It also seeks to highlight a diversity of intra-Jewish subaltern identities operating on the periphery of mainstream Judaism, including a spectrum of Jewish forms of identification such as Sephardi, Judaeo-Arab, and post-Soviet, and transnational positionalities and religious-aesthetic sensibilities. The problematisation of Jewish subjectivities also occurs at the institutional level, showing through our investigations that 'mainstream Judaism' is not a monolithic construction against which marginalised subjectivities must contend but rather a changing, often transnational, and continually changing set of norms and institutional parameters that, in the context of Europe, must continuously negotiate the hegemonic dictates of the state from which it enacts or negotiates its own agency. Even 'the state' in this sense does not constitute a monolithic bloc but comprises a multitude of apparatuses and positionalities (Carr 2009) with which a va-

riety of Jewish subjectivities must contend for representation in the public sphere, be they curatorial, artistic, or otherwise.

This special issue aims to stimulate varied conversations by offering an array of examples across heritage ontologies and locations in the European Union and the United Kingdom across different social, political, and religious dynamics. We hope that this allows the reader to identify connections between Jewish minority agency and the heritagisation processes governed by the state across national and local contexts. This approach interrogates the construction of contemporary European Jewish cultural heritage by using a critical lens that rethinks Jewish heritage as processes that are initiated and stimulated through Jewish encounter and strategic engagement, highlighting seldomly heard Jewish voices and positionalities. It is hoped that this collection may open the door to future research that can further develop these diverse perspectives.

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