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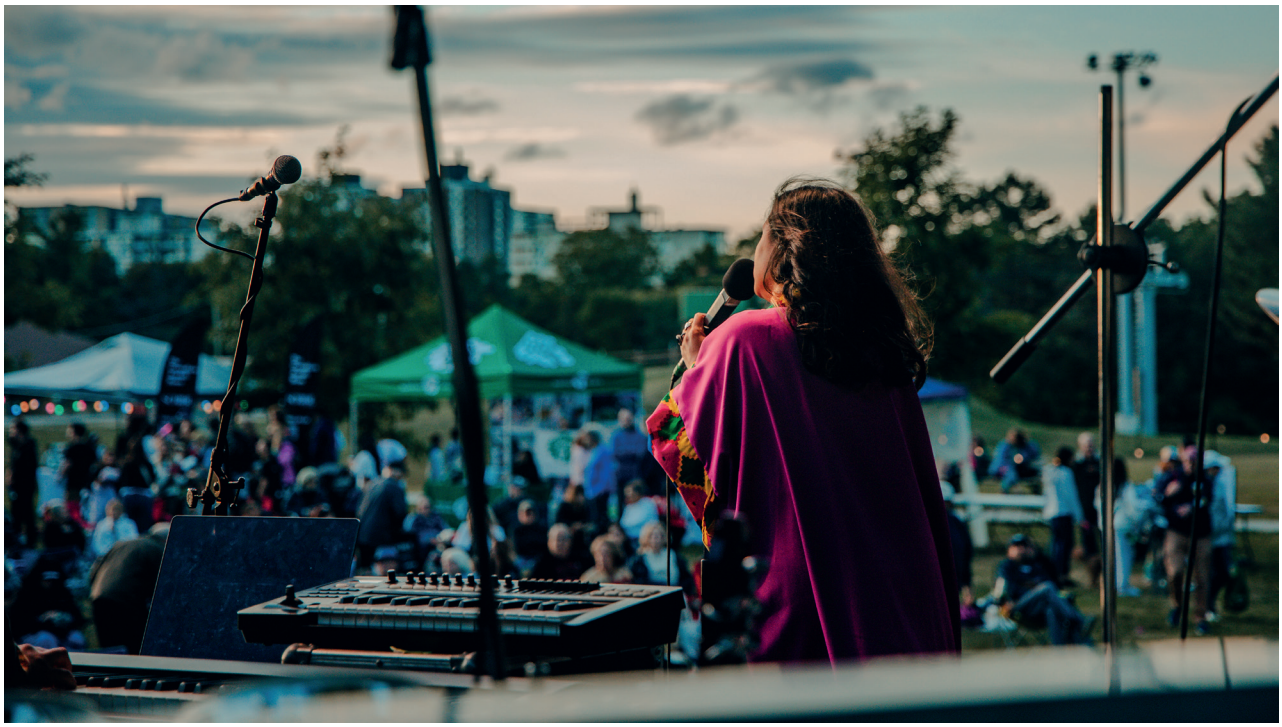
Jewish Cultural Heritage, Minority Agency, and the State



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Contents

Editorial

Our current times urgently need anthropological perspectives. Authoritarian movements challenge democratic institutions, migration policies become sites of exclusion and resistance, and the rule of law faces attacks from multiple directions. In such moments, anthropology must respond – not only with careful ethnographic research but also with timely critical interventions.

Ethnoscripts engages with this challenge through a diversity of formats, each with its own strengths. Our guest-edited special issues remain the journal's core, providing space for in-depth ethnographic analysis and theoretical innovation. We also publish reviews, obituaries, interviews, and research reports that capture different aspects of anthropological work. And now we are introducing a new format that allows for timely critical interventions: Think Pieces.

Think Pieces are short, incisive essays (1,000-1,500 words) that engage critically with current developments within anthropology and beyond. They reflect on key challenges in our discipline, address trends in anthropological research and practice, and explore how anthropology can contribute to wider societal debates. This format allows us to bridge the gap between the often slow cycles of academic publishing and the urgency of contemporary issues. We invite thought-provoking perspectives that spark reflection and discussion, and we look forward to receiving your submissions for future issues.

The four Think Pieces in this issue exemplify the kind of critical engagement we envision. Žiga Podgornik Jakil draws on ethnographic research with alter-globalisation activists during the 2015 "refugee crisis" to show how egalitarian assemblies and visions of open borders can counter nationalist exclusion. Stefan Wellgraf reflects on the methodological and ethical challenges anthropologists face when studying right-wing movements, navigating the complex terrain between "immoral" and "militant" approaches. Jonas Bens and Larissa Vetters argue that legal anthropology must respond to global attacks on the rule of law by studying both alternative legal orders and the transformation and weaponisation of liberal law itself. Gabriel Scheidecker critiques "academic gossip" in anthropology – the tendency to criticize other disciplines while speaking primarily among ourselves – and calls for genuine interdisciplinary dialogue that extends anthropology's critical relevance.

These contributions demonstrate how anthropology can intervene in urgent debates: about migration and borders, about the rise of the political right, about law and its limits, and about the role of our discipline in academia and society. They show that critical intervention and careful analysis are not opposed but complementary modes of anthropological work.

The current issue also features a special section on "Jewish Cultural Heritage, Minority Agency, and the State," which explores how Jewish communities navigate heritage politics and state power in diverse contexts.

Ethnoscripts – now after a relaunch of our website at Hamburg University Press even more accessible than before – is committed to publishing both new research and critical interventions on our times. We invite you to engage with the contributions in this issue and to consider submitting your own work, whether as detailed research or as a timely intervention.

The *Ethnoscripts* Editorial Team

Think Piece: Alter-globalisation, not Anti-globalisation for Europe: Learning from the Anthropology of No-border Activism

Žiga Podgornik Jakil

Abstract:
Anti-globalisation authoritarians and alter-globalisation activists criticise Europe's liberal political order but offer opposing views. Ethnographic research with no-border activists during the 'refugee crisis' of 2015 reveals how egalitarian assemblies and open borders can counter nationalist exclusion.

Key words: No-Border Activism; Alter-Globalization Movements; European Long Summer of Migration 2015; Political Atmospheres; Egalitarianism

> *We reject the ideology of globalism, and we embrace the doctrine of patriotism. — Donald Trump at the UN General Assembly in 2018 (United Nations 2018)*

> *The liberal idea presupposes that nothing needs to be done. The migrants can kill, plunder and rape with impunity because their rights as migrants must be protected. — Vladimir Putin in an interview with the* Financial Times *(Barber, Foy and Barker 2019)*

> *Migration is a necessary condition for building an inclusive society [...] Thank you [asylum seekers] for opening Europe! — Andrej, Slovenian activist*

The words of the Russian and American presidents could not sound more politically different than those of the Slovenian no-border activist. But what do they have in common? If anything, all three are critical of the existing liberal political order and see it as one of the reasons for the crisis of the European Union (EU). However, their criticisms are directed at completely opposite ends of the political spectrum: far-right authoritarians such as Trump and Putin see migration, labour, and minority rights (such as religious or LGBTQ+ rights), green policies, and global cooperation as values that the EU embodies in excess. Activists like Andrej accuse the EU of lacking these values or, at worst, of promoting them mainly in order to pursue its own political, economic, and cultural dominance.

At the moment, the wind of nationalism and authoritarianism seems to be blowing stronger in the EU. This can be felt in the dominant political atmosphere, that is the general affective political mood that people share in situations involving a certain distribution of bodies in space (Schnegg and Bens forthcoming). Whilst there is a lingering sense of tension that the war in Ukraine could spread beyond its borders in the face of continued Russian aggression (Von der Leyen 2025), a topic beyond the scope of this text, there is also a fear of uncontrolled migration from the Global South as a potential threat to the stability of the EU, at worst as a gateway for Islamist terrorism.

Indeed, policies on migration and borders that were once marginal are now being championed by EU institutions and national leaders. For example, the EU Commission is currently proposing to detain rejected asylum seekers in so-called 'return hubs' outside the EU (a policy that is part of the Migration and Asylum Pact from 2023) (Ismail, Vermeylen, and Payne 2025), whilst the leader of the German Christian Democrats, Friedrich Merz, recently called for a de facto ban on all undocumented migrants entering Germany, including those entitled to protection (Klug 2025). During his speech at a traditional folk festival almost two years ago, Merz, who has recently become Germany's new chancellor after the federal election in February 2025, claimed that the Berlin district of Kreuzberg was 'not Germany' (Schmitt-Roschmann 2023). Picking on Kreuzberg — the neighbourhood, by the way, in which I live myself — is an apparent reference to its multicultural and queer-friendly atmosphere and the fact that it has historically been a hub for left-wing activism.

Do these reactionary responses that call for protecting the EU's body politic have anything to do with the decline of progressive social movements in recent decades? Were the social movements that helped asylum seekers during the so-called European refugee crisis in 2015 not also one of the reasons why the EU took a humanitarian stance towards the asylum seekers, at least temporarily (Podgornik Jakil 2024)? In this piece, I examine what lessons no-border activists — shaped by the legacy of the alter-globalisation movements — offer for resisting the increasingly authoritarian political atmosphere of today.

The long summer of migration of 2015

As an activist anthropologist, I have been studying social movements organised around the issue of migration in Slovenia and Germany for over a decade. The year 2015, referred to by some critical migration scholars as the Long Summer of Migration (Kasparek and Speer 2015), was a time when the number of asylum seekers arriving in Europe was the highest since the end of the Second World War. They were fleeing armed conflict, increasing poverty, and the negative effects of climate change in the neighbouring continents of Asia and Africa. Many drowned whilst trying to cross the sea from Turkey

to Greece, the latter of which is one of the few remaining entry points for non-European asylum seekers, or were found dead on their journey through Europe (Bell and Thorpe 2016).

In the face of these tragedies, tens of thousands of European citizens took action outside the traditional frameworks of major humanitarian organisations like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Committee of the Red Cross. They mobilised spontaneously, donating clothes, helping new arrivals on the shores of Greek islands, and welcoming them at train stations across the continent. Their presence and actions created a highly visible welcoming atmosphere, amplified by widespread coverage in both mass media and social media. The affective intensity of this atmosphere helped to push the EU authorities to temporarily set up a humanitarian transportation system across Europe to bring asylum seekers to safety. If, as Schnegg and Bens (forthcoming) argue, atmospheres have the power to move people beyond their control, then the one these citizens created undoubtedly exerted real pressure on policymakers.

No-border activists as alter-globalisation movements

Amongst the volunteers were no-border activist groups rooted in left-libertarian and alter-globalisation movements, drawing inspiration from Western autonomous and anarchist groups and indigenous struggles like the Zapatistas in Mexico. They had a much more radical vision than just helping asylum seekers. At border crossings and, more significantly, in social centres — spaces they established by squatting in abandoned buildings and managing them outside the reach of the state and private companies — they organised assemblies with the asylum seekers. These gatherings aimed to create an atmosphere of radical equality through a certain arrangement of bodies in space: participants, regardless of their background, sat in a circle and made decisions together to plan direct actions and learn together what kind of world they want to live in.

At the assemblies, activists and asylum seekers planned protests, which they carried out at national borders across Europe to put pressure on state authorities to allow asylum seekers to pass. They held pickets in front of refugee camps to demand more humane living conditions and the right to stay for all. Yet the transformative work took also place elsewhere: in the countless events they organised together, such as communal cooking sessions, decolonial reading groups, and skill-sharing workshops. These assemblies and activities had a prefigurative function: they were acts of world-making, spaces where different bodies came together to imagine and begin constructing an alternative, more just world.

What distinguished the no-border activists, who were also my comrades, from today's authoritarian anti-globalisation politicians was that they

continued the rich tradition of alter-globalisation movements fighting for an alternative sociopolitical and economic world order, especially since the Zapatista uprising in 1994. These movements have always made assemblies the core of their decision-making practices (Della Porta 2014). But whilst the main target of these movements was neoliberal doctrine, today we face something much more dangerous.

New futures require open borders

So, what can we learn from the no-border activists when current authoritarian movements and leaders see globalisation as a threat and call for a return to nation states and exclusionary values?

Many of my comrades in Germany and Slovenia shared the sentiment that the mass self-organised solidarity of European citizens in 2015 prompted the EU authorities to take in asylum seekers. However, they felt that humanitarianism, the more or less apolitical work of helping people in need of assistance, was not enough; it is a temporary, patronising effort and selective of those who 'deserve' protection (Ticktin 2014). The EU's border and migration regime has become much stricter since then, as the wave of volunteering died down after a few months.

The struggles inspired by the alter-globalisation movements have shown that one must be radically open to collaboration with the oppressed. Change can only be achieved by prefiguring the future together through decision-making practices and sociopolitical relations (Graeber 2009) that cultivate radically egalitarian atmospheres and empower others to build an alternative world.

Whilst the EU authorities panic about the imminent collapse of the European Union if external and internal security are not strengthened, no-border activists see the movements of asylum seekers as a potential for the abolition of borders and the transformation of Europe into a truly democratic and inclusive space. They seek a 'world of many worlds', as the Zapatistas put it: a world that brings together people with different ways of knowing and being, and in which dominant identities (religious, gender, citizen/non-citizen, and others) are constantly problematised in favour of living and flourishing together (Cadena and Blaser 2018).

Although no-border activists may not have succeeded in creating a sufficiently resonant political atmosphere for radical political change in 2015, the knowledge and experience they have accumulated through their struggles is more relevant today than ever. They show that alter-globalisation movements live on and re-emerge in times of crisis, offering egalitarian global alternatives. My comrades have taught me a valuable lesson: the EU will not fall apart because people reach its borders in search of a safer and better life but because the EU is not ready to become truly democratic. They were right.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Think Piece: Ways of Seeing: Anthropological Approaches to Right-Wing Movements

Stefan Wellgraf

Abstract:
The article shows the diversity of ethnographic work on the far right. It distinguishes between different approaches, highlighting their potential for the anthropology of right-wing movements: participant observation, interview-based studies, and a focus on cultural semiotics and political economy.

Key words: right-wing, populism, anthropology, ethnography, research ethics

With the 'shift to the right' that has become increasingly evident in Europe and beyond since the 2010s, a new branch of anthropological research, a dynamic subfield of political anthropology, has emerged. In a highly politicised field of research, the question of the appropriate relationship between proximity and distance to those being researched plays a special role. There are different and controversial answers to the related questions of research ethics, ranging from 'ethically correct' to 'ethically permissible' to 'immoral anthropology'. This brief, trenchant sketch of ethnological approaches is based on a longer, German-language publication (Wellgraf 2024).

The anthropology of right-wing movements sits in an uncomfortable position, as it exposes shortcomings in the academic debate and reveals gaps and misunderstandings in public debates without wanting to become an advocate or champion of the right. It resists monocausal explanations and undermines common stereotypes, for example by presenting right-wing groups as heterogeneous and contradictory entities and right-wing actors as complex but by no means always unsympathetic personalities. At the same time, ethnographers must be prepared for hostility, attempts at appropriation, and threats from the right. The study mentioned here focuses on right-wing movements in Europe and North America. In order to diversify the spectrum of ethnographic work and to highlight its achievements and current challenges, I distinguish between different approaches: participant observation, interview-based studies, and a focus on cultural semiotics and political economy. These approaches build on older traditions and are now being transferred to a new field of investigation.

Participant observation is considered the most important research tool in anthropology and the importance it is given in the research process marks

a difference to approaches in other disciplines. Examples of such a classic approach in the studies of right-wing movements include Hilary Pilkington's (2016) *Loud and Proud: Passion and Politics in the English Defence League* and Lene Faust's (2020) *Neofascism in Italy: Politics, Family, and Religion in Rome*. The strengths of the ethnographic approach based on participant observation lie in the fact that it opens up a complex perspective on the inner views of right-wing movements and often also sets new conceptual accents. Such studies make clear what drives the actors in right-wing movements and what holds them together. By showing that right-wing fields are complex and changing, stereotypes can be challenged and new perspectives opened up. This body of work tends to focus on more positively connoted emotional complexities such as pride and empowerment, as well as feelings of solidarity and community, or at least appeals to the reader's understanding. The danger of this approach is that it gets too close to the field in that it adopts self-victimisation and the political partisanship that goes with it.

Some studies primarily or exclusively use interviews as a data collection method. These differ from conventional qualitative sociological studies in that they focus on the encounter itself, making the personal journey to right-wing actors the object of research. Biographical accounts, with the attempt of getting '[i]nside the racist mind' (Ezekiel 2015), walk a fine line, as the abyss of glorification and heroisation is always only a step away and giving an account of the problem through individual stories runs the risk of personifying social problems. Kathleen Blee (2002), who published such a study on the American white power movement, later wrote about the question of whether anthropologists should talk about rights. She set out a strict guideline: research should not only be 'ethically permissible' but must be 'ethically right', including in terms of the possible consequences of the research (Blee 2018: 98). The burden of proof associated with this high ethical bar is difficult to meet as ethnographic research is often exploratory in nature. However, such demands can be read as a reminder to keep a closer eye on the potentially negative consequences of one's own research. For anthropologists, the question of how to talk with right-wing actors – in what contexts, in what forms, and for what purposes – is perhaps even more relevant. Appropriate positioning is evident in the ways we meet our interlocutors and how we write about them.

Alongside ethnographic approaches in the narrower sense, which rely on intensive participant observation and intense personal encounters, there are also anthropological works that are based on selective or kaleidoscopic field research in which different facets of a thematic context are illuminated. These works on cultural semiotics often take detours, broadening the perspective at best. As a result, ethnographic fieldwork sometimes takes a back seat to discursive and semiotic inquiry. Two very different studies from cultural anthropology in the United States – Nitzan Shoshan's (2016) *The*

Management of Hate: Nation, Affect and the Governance of Right-Wing Extremism in Germany and Benjamin Teitelbaum's (2017) *Lions of the North: Sounds of the New Nordic Radical Nationalism* – show that the pendulum of interpretation can swing in very different directions. Whilst Shoshan was conducting undercover research to expose 'Nazis' in East Berlin, Teitelbaum was fraternising with radical right-wing musicians in Scandinavia. This proximity is part of Teitelbaum's (2019) provocative programme of an immoral anthropology. Based on the imperative of unconditional solidarity with research subjects and the primacy of friendship as a relational mode in fieldwork, Teitelbaum necessarily makes anthropologists collaborators with their fields, even if this does not mean acting immorally themselves. Blee's admonishing do-no-harm principle and Teitelbaum's sinister immorality can be seen as two opposite poles of a broad spectrum of research ethics. However, there is also a middle ground between an immoral anthropology and a militant anthropology, as advocated by Nancy Scheper-Hughes (1995, 2019), who is unsurprisingly one of Teitelbaum's most vehement critics. Rather than having to take sides in this battle, the anthropology of right-wing movements should be more concerned with further exploring the in-between space of what is ethically justifiable, recognising the specific problems and challenges of ethnography in specific right-wing fields and seeking appropriate solutions.

Whilst interpretations in cultural semiotic approaches are sometimes quite arbitrary, the thrust of neo-Marxist research on right-wing movements tends to remain relatively clear. In this line of interpretation, the rise of right-wing movements is primarily the result of the oppression and disenfranchisement of the former working class, which is increasingly drifting to the right politically after being largely abandoned by the left. Texts of this kind often contain long historical and theoretical derivations. Marxist anthropologists have also been amongst those who have taken up the task of analysing right-wing movements at a time when little attention was paid to this topic. The anthology *Headlines of Nation, Subtexts of Class* edited by Don Kalb and Gábor Halmai in 2011 can be seen as programmatic for this line of research. It implies that although (neo-)nationalism dominates the headlines, there is a subtext of class underneath, a politically momentous transformation of the class structure. Books written in this way are therefore often a little more abstract than is usual in the ethnographic genre, and the analysis of political-economic circumstances they practice can sometimes seem rather cumbersome. Comparative approaches and large-scale explanations are also typical. In his study *Integral Europe: Fast-Capitalism, Multiculturalism, Neofascism*, Douglas Holmes (2001), for example, jumps from northern Italy to Strasbourg, Brussels, and London to work out an overarching motif of integralism that, in the context of right-wing populisms and under the conditions of contemporary capitalism, leads to a new fascism.

As we have seen, anthropologists look at right-wing movements differently from how they look at other topics. The first step must be to recognise the very different types of research a focus on the right wing requires and to appreciate its specific contributions to the understanding of right-wing movements. A second step could be to combine the strengths of the different approaches and avoid their weaknesses as far as possible. The ethnographic sensitivity of participant observation to everyday contexts, the art of listening in interviews and the potential of biographical writing, the importance of cultural contexts and artefacts in semiotic analyses, and the impact of larger political and economic developments emphasised in neo-Marxist writing – there is much to be learnt from each of the research strands described. A final step could then be to bring anthropological research more confidently into the public sphere, to highlight the valuable contributions and insightful perspectives of our research on right-wing movements. This may help to reduce mistrust of such approaches to the far right – not only amongst colleagues from other disciplines but also within our own discipline.

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Think Piece: Moving beyond and towards Liberal Legalism: Legal Anthropology and the Liberal Rule of Law

Jonas Bens and Larissa Vetters

Abstract:
Liberal legalism is under attack from authoritarian movements worldwide. Legal anthropology must respond by studying both: alternative legal orders and how liberal law itself is being transformed and weaponised.

Key words: liberal legalism, authoritarian governance, ethnographic legal studies, legal anthropology

In recent years, the liberal rule of law in Europe and elsewhere has come under sustained and multifaceted pressure. Democratically elected leaders in countries like Poland, Hungary, and India employ legal techniques in the service of an illiberal agenda, for example by packing constitutional courts, curtailing judicial independence, subordinating legal institutions to executive power, or amending campaign finance laws (Scheppele 2018; Acevedo 2022). Right-wing authoritarian movements make use of core protections of liberal legalism and human rights frameworks in their campaigns against abortion or gender equality to subvert this very same liberal order (Gal 2018: 19–20; Blokker 2024: 415). Migration governance has grown increasingly exclusionary, with policies that criminalise asylum seekers, externalise borders, and erode protections under international law – visible in the European Union's deals with third countries and in national regimes of detention and deportation (Greenberg 2021; De Genova 2020). At the same time, we witness a loss of faith in liberal legalism as the implicit ideological baseline amongst scholars and practitioners. These developments point to a deepening crisis in liberal legalism[1] – not merely its erosion but its transformation – and compel us to rethink how we study law and what we understand law to be.

In this short piece, we argue that ethnographic legal studies (see Bens and Vetters 2018) are uniquely positioned to respond to this moment by helping us understand what is going on right now and by providing alternative social imaginaries to this rise of a new kind of authoritarian governance. To do that, it is necessary to begin with a fundamental reflection on the role of liberal legalism in anthropological approaches to law and the plurality of normative orders.

1 Whilst the term 'liberal legalism' has diverse genealogies, we gesture both to the specific legal principles of political liberalism (including capitalist property, legal individualism, and nation state sovereignty) and to political liberalism's peculiar prioritisation of the legal form over other mechanisms of government and social organisation.

Legal anthropology's relation to liberal legalism

Since its inception, legal anthropology has interrogated law as a social and cultural phenomenon – far beyond the narrow confines of the written law of the liberal state. However, this has often been done with liberal legalism as an explicit or implicit point of reference – a kind of normative background against which other legal and normative orders were made legible: traditional law, informal justice mechanisms, religious codes, moral orders. Liberal legality was the unmarked constant category.

Today, that background is crumbling. The rule of law, once taken as the sine qua non of democratic governance, is no longer a given but a contested, fractured, and politically volatile terrain. This rupture calls for a renewed commitment to ethnographic legal studies – not as a simple reaffirmation of liberal values but as a mode of inquiry that moves dialectically between different sites, actors, and regimes of normativity.

The discipline of legal anthropology has long grappled with internal dualities. Classic dichotomies such as 'non-state law' versus 'state law' (Griffiths 1986), 'studying up' versus 'studying down' (Nader 1969), or 'anthropology abroad' versus 'anthropology at home' (Conley and O'Barr 1993) have structured methodological and theoretical debates. Whilst often presented as binaries, each of these moves aimed to decentre – from a particular perspective – what anthropologists perceived to be the globally hegemonic normative order: the law of the liberal nation state.

But what happens, we now must ask, when liberal legalism becomes actually decentred, though not by anthropologists but by authoritarian movements and governments? We argue that this calls for a dialectical movement: a reflexive oscillation between studying law in and beyond the state, engaging with hierarchies from both above and below, and situating our work across different spatial and institutional contexts.

Moving beyond and towards liberal legalism

The first direction this movement takes is outward – beyond liberal legalism. Ethnographers of law are well-equipped to document and analyse the rise of non-liberal and illiberal normativities. This goes beyond right-wing legal imaginaries (Bens 2017) to include alternative legalities and informal systems of justice that operate outside, or alongside, state law (Bens 2020). That also means an in-depth ethnographic investigation of how different kinds of communities, all over the world, generate normative orders, drawing on customary, moral, relational, and affective logics that do not map neatly on to liberal legality.

What kinds of law become imaginable – and indeed liveable – when liberalism loses its hegemony? Legal anthropology can help answer this question by uncovering the conditions under which alternative legalities are

forged, contested, and sustained. These may be emancipatory, regressive, or deeply ambivalent. But they all challenge the supposed universality of liberal legalism and open up a comparative horizon of legal possibility.

Paradoxically, the second movement we propose is towards liberal legalism – but this does not mean simply studying liberal legal frameworks as they currently exist, nor defending them in their present form. Legal anthropology has already established that liberal legalism can empower marginalised actors to resist rights violations, albeit always within the limits of the liberal state and its capitalist economy (Povinelli 2002; Eckert et al. 2012). Our anthropological knowledge of liberal legalism's contradictions and limitations indicates that simple restoration or defence cannot be the solution to the current crisis.

What we propose instead is a critical investigation of the current transformations of liberal legalism itself. This involves detailed ethnographic analysis of how liberal legality is being reconfigured, hollowed out, or weaponised in contemporary governance. As legal anthropologists show, mundane administrative practices – such as the issuance of immigration guidelines (Vetters 2019) or competing administrative and judicial interpretations of statutory law (Bernstein 2023; Bernstein and Staszewski 2023) – can reflect broader shifts in legal authority and political contestation. Moreover, mobilisations of legal forms are both taking place 'at the heart of the state' and are leveraged by activists as a 'radically legal' expression of politics (Kusiak 2024).

This approach demands that we take liberal legality seriously as an object of study. We must attend to its internal contradictions, its technocratic mutations, and its vulnerabilities to authoritarian capture. At the same time, we should explore how actors resist, reinterpret, or subvert the legal frameworks imposed on them.

In this sense, legal anthropology can become a site for critical diagnostics: uncovering the micro processes by which formal legal norms are bent, stretched, or recalibrated under political pressure. This requires moving 'up' into elite institutions and legal bureaucracies as much as 'down' into grassroots mobilisations and everyday encounters with the law.

Both movements – beyond and towards liberal legalism – can be seen as grounded in the long-standing tradition of legal pluralism (Benda-Beckmann and Turner 2018): a tradition both of us have been academically socialised in. Far from being merely a catalogue of normative diversity, legal pluralism insists on the co-presence of multiple legal orders within a single social field. It recognises law's fragmentation, its layered sovereignties, and its embeddedness in power relations.

Yet today, legal pluralism must be recalibrated to account for a more radical instability. The question is no longer just how state and non-state laws interact but how the very authority of liberal law is being contested and re-

negotiated. In this context, insisting on investigating 'the law' always as a plurality of normative orders is not only an analytical tool but also a critical stance: a refusal to naturalise any single legal form, including the liberal one and its contemporary authoritarian transformations.

Ethnography as an entangled political practice

Lastly, we must recognise the political conditions under which we conduct ethnographic legal studies. This is a matter of acknowledging our own normative positions and entails a deeper reflection on how our research is implicated in the legal transformations we study.

Ethnographic studies of law should become a meeting ground: a site where methodological experimentation, political engagement, and theoretical innovation intersect. This means fostering a wide variety of ethnographies that illuminate the granular details of legal life across different regimes and contexts whilst remaining sensitive to the entangled and multi-vectoral nature of such ethnographic projects (Vetters and Margaria 2025). By moving both beyond and towards liberal legalism we can capture the contradictions and possibilities of law in the present conjuncture.

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Think Piece:
Anthropological Gossip: On a Bad Habit in Our Discipline

Gabriel Scheidecker

Abstract:

Anthropological gossip, that is, writing mainly for an anthropological audience while criticising other fields, undermines the discipline's relevance within academia and beyond. To realise the discipline's critical potential, this piece argues, anthropologists must speak more actively across disciplines.

Key words: public anthropology; engaged anthropology; interdisciplinary communication; early childhood intervention; international development

As social and cultural anthropologists, we are intimately familiar with gossip – both as a research subject and as a practice. We often encounter it among the people we study, and it offers valuable insights into everyday micropolitics (Besnier 2009). But gossip is also relevant as an anthropological practice. Here, I do not mean the obvious fact that informal conversations among anthropologists often consist of gossip about colleagues but rather gossip in our professional communication, especially our writing.

This form of gossip, which I refer to as *academic gossip* or, more specifically, *anthropological gossip*, is characterised by the sharing of critiques of non-anthropological research and theory primarily with fellow anthropologists rather than speaking to those being critiqued directly. Like everyday gossip, academic gossip refers to two audiences at once. On the semantic level, anthropological gossip refers critically to an external audience, such as scholars from other disciplines. On the performative level, however, this critique is communicated internally to other anthropologists, scholars from closely related disciplines, or like-minded lay people. In short, by *academic gossip* I mean writings that primarily speak to colleagues within one's own field while their critical thrust is directed at audiences from other fields.

Although everyday gossip is often associated with spreading rumours, I do not wish to carry this connotation over into academic gossip. Academic gossip may indeed facilitate the circulation of flawed critique, since communication among like-minded people reduces the chances of objections from those being criticised. Yet it can also consist of well-founded critique, and this is the scenario that prompts me to think with the notion of academic gossip: although our discipline generates abundant, well-grounded, and highly relevant critical insights, these too often fail to reach the scholarly or practical fields in which they could make a real difference. Hence, I wish to draw attention to the fact that merely publishing critique of other scientific

fields in anthropological formats does not automatically constitute a critical practice but may amount to academic gossip. Given that the social world we engage with through our publications is just as complex as the social worlds we study, it is unrealistic to expect that our critical findings, presented in a unique anthropological style, will automatically reach those fields we wish to criticise. Therefore, genuine critique requires actively addressing the audiences to whom it is directed. In what follows, I reflect on why academic gossip is common in anthropology, why I regard it as a bad habit, and how it might be transformed into more effective modes of critique.

Why academic gossip is common in anthropology

Although academic gossip exists across disciplines, it may be particularly common in anthropology owing to the interplay of two features that are especially pronounced in our field. On the one hand, anthropology has a strong tradition of being critical of knowledge produced by other disciplines. On the other hand, it places particular emphasis on a distinctive writing style, perhaps best exemplified by the ethnography as a peculiar genre of the discipline. Accordingly, anthropology generates abundant external critique that circulates within the anthropological realm, while often failing to reach those who are the actual targets of the critique.

The first constitutive feature of anthropological gossip, the critical stance of anthropology towards the methods, findings, and theories of other fields, is a central purpose of anthropology and a key source of its raison d'être as a discipline. Most anthropological subfields, such as economic anthropology, medical anthropology, and psychological anthropology, engage with subject areas dominated by specialised disciplines like economics, the medical sciences, and the psychological sciences. These hegemonic disciplines tend to exhibit Eurocentric biases, as their paradigmatic research continues to be conducted mostly in Euro-American settings (for psychology, see for example Thalmayer et al. 2021). By studying economic, medical, or psychological processes among people or in settings marginalised or entirely overlooked in dominant research, anthropology is positioned to identify such biases and to contribute to a more globally representative social science. As such, anthropology is fundamentally critical of other disciplines.

Despite its critical aspirations, anthropology does not have a strong tradition of engaging directly with other, more dominant disciplines. Exceptions notwithstanding, we write most of the time for other anthropologists or scholars from closely related fields. This is not necessarily an intentional act or failure by individual anthropologists but results in large part from a pronounced disciplinary culture of thinking and writing. This culture is often defined in distinction to neighbouring disciplines, especially the more 'positivistic' sciences that are typically the targets of critique. For example,

the discipline's appreciation of nuance may be expressed through particularly 'entangled' language, positioned in contrast to the more 'reductionist' modes of other disciplines.

By following such an anthropological writing culture, relying on assumptions or concepts familiar and credible within our field but not necessarily beyond it, and employing anthropological genres such as the ethnography, we are unwittingly addressing fellow anthropologists or those who share our intellectual culture. To speak primarily to one's own discipline is neither inherently problematic nor unique to anthropology. Only when this is combined with a critical focus on the findings of other disciplines, an endeavour that is in itself justifiable and indeed an important purpose of anthropology, does it turn into academic gossip.

In a review of three ethnographies about the Anthropocene and its destructive consequences, Alf Hornborg (2017) provides compelling examples of the gap between criticising other fields and speaking primarily to one's own peers, a practice he titles 'dithering while the planet burns'. The three ethnographies he reviews are written in such a stylised manner that 'the growth enthusiasts and ecomodernists who are promoting this [destructive] civilisation are unlikely to be the least perturbed' (Hornborg 2017: 67). While stylised anthropological writing can successfully engage a large, like-minded audience, it may actively alienate those who are supposed to learn from the critique and take action in response.

I do not deny that, time and again, anthropologists have called for, attempted to, and succeeded in reaching out and affecting those they criticise. However, repeated calls for an *engaged* or *public anthropology* (for example, Borofsky 2018; Low and Merry 2010) confirm rather than contradict a persistent practice of internal communication – otherwise such calls would not be necessary. Moreover, with anthropological gossip I do not wish simply to issue yet another call for public anthropology. Rather, I aim to highlight the need to speak to the specific audiences to whom critique is primarily directed. This is not necessarily a general public beyond academia, since many of the critical findings our discipline produces concern most directly the knowledge claims of other academic fields.

Why excessive anthropological gossip is a bad habit

To further illustrate the downside of academic gossip, I draw on my own engagement as an anthropologist with Early Childhood Development (ECD) interventions in the Global South, which has led me to reflect on this habit and how to overcome it. Global ECD is a booming area of international development and global health that seeks to promote economic growth by optimising individual development (Scheidecker et al. 2023). It assumes that poverty is intergenerationally transmitted through sub-optimal cognitive

and socio-emotional development in early childhood. By changing caregiving practices to align with Western middle-class norms, ECD interventions seek to improve early development and, in turn, enhance school performance and adult productivity. Broad implementation is promised to create a 'breakthrough generation' of fully developed, well-adjusted, and highly productive individuals who lift themselves and their societies out of poverty. Crucially, the field of global ECD legitimises the idea that inequality stems from brain deficits among the disadvantaged, as illustrated, for instance, in Save the Children's Building Brains programme (De Castro 2023). Increasingly, portable neuroimaging is used to demonstrate such deficits in the Global South (Lloyd-Fox et al. 2024) – not so different, in principle, from the skull measurements of earlier times.

Anthropological research is virtually absent from the evidence base that informs ECD interventions (Scheidecker et al. 2023, 2024). This is not because anthropology lacks relevant research. For many decades, the anthropology of childhood and related fields have produced abundant ethnographic studies around the world on child-rearing, socialisation, and developmental pathways (for example, Lancy 2022; Keller 2022). This research is highly relevant for global ECD: it offers concrete insights into many of the very communities in which ECD programmes operate and contradicts central assumptions of the field, especially that deviations from Western middle-class norms in child-rearing, development, and brain images represent deficits by default (Scheidecker et al. 2022, 2025). Hence, anthropology has produced abundant research on childhood that is in theory highly relevant to ECD but remains de facto irrelevant.

This is the case even though the anthropology of childhood is one of the more interdisciplinary subfields of anthropology, marked by close collaborations with cultural psychology and other disciplines. Nevertheless, it has largely failed to realise its critical potential in relation to an applied field like global ECD. This example highlights that academic gossip is usually neither a deliberate or malicious act nor merely a matter of self-reference. Rather, it is a pattern that emerges and persists like a habit, often unnoticed, unless conscious efforts are made to overcome it. It is a bad habit because it prevents anthropology from fully realising its critical potential, in the case of ECD, to effectively question scientifically legitimised and widely disseminated claims about brain deficits in the Global South, to counter potentially harmful and even colonial interventions, and to contribute to more meaningful forms of support for families.

From anthropological gossip to more effective critique

A straightforward way to avoid excessive academic gossip and to realise anthropology's critical potential is to speak directly to those whom our critiques

concern. There are many possible strategies to do so. One approach I have pursued along with colleagues is to publish in the major outlets of the fields we critique. In the case of global ECD, this means medical journals like *The Lancet* (for example, Scheidecker et al. 2022, 2025). While these venues may not accommodate original ethnographic articles because of their medical methodological standards, they often offer formats such as correspondence, commentaries, or viewpoints suitable for interdisciplinary exchange. Anthropologists have rarely made use of these opportunities (but see, for example, Krugman 2024; Lachman et al. 2021).

Publishing in the journals of those we critique helps overcome academic gossip in several ways. First, it makes the critique harder to ignore, as it appears in the very forums where the criticised claims are made and is directly linked to them. In the case of correspondences or commentaries, the editors usually invite the authors of the criticised article to reply. Second, the critique gains credibility in the eyes of those we critique when published in journals they respect. Third, to be accepted, anthropologists must make their arguments specific and comprehensible to that audience. While this may result in critiques that are less general (or sweeping) than those typically found in anthropological journals, it increases the chance of having an impact.

However, the main point is not whether a particular strategy works in every case but whether we as anthropologists take on the task to systematically speak to the relevant audiences. If we do so, suitable practices and strategies will emerge. As anthropologists, in the context of ethnographic fieldwork, we are already trained to acquire and adapt to various forms of communication. We could apply those same skills to our communication within a diverse academic landscape.

For this to happen, it is crucial to change the incentive structures that arguably promote anthropological gossip. As long as single-authored ethnographies and articles in anthropological journals – written in a distinct disciplinary style – remain the gold standard for measuring success and distributing recognition, anthropologists will be inclined to package their critical findings in ways that appeal primarily to colleagues rather than to those who could act on them. Under such exclusive standards, anthropologists who adapt their writing style and publication strategies to reach those for whom their findings are directly relevant risk not only backlash from those they criticise instead of approval from those who already share their perspective but may even undermine their recognition as proper anthropologists among colleagues.

To counter excessive anthropological gossip and foster a more effective critical practice, those who are in the position to define success in anthropology, especially the criteria for allocating jobs, promotions, and funding, could broaden and diversify these criteria of recognition. Academic performance should not be measured solely by traditional anthropological publica-

tions but also by serious efforts to speak to relevant audiences, if necessary across disciplinary boundaries.

Such efforts should not be treated as merely 'nice to have' but as integral to a discipline that seeks to realise its potential relevance within broader academia and upholds the fundamental scientific principle of critical scrutiny. Merely voicing critical perspectives about a theory or findings from, say, economics or psychology within an anthropological arena does not yet constitute proper critical scrutiny; it risks turning into academic gossip. Genuine critique requires conveying points of contention to 'the other side' and thus enabling academic exchange, learning, and action. While some may fear that engaging with other disciplines could dilute anthropology, I believe the opposite: it is precisely through such engagement that anthropology can underline its relevance within the social and medical sciences and demonstrate that it is needed.

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Jewish Cultural Heritage, Minority Agency, and the State: Introduction

Miranda Crowdus, Yulia Egorova, and Sami Everett

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.

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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'Yellow Bar Mitzvah': Mobilisations of Gangsta Rap as Futures Oriented, Agential Jewish Heritage in Germany

Miranda Crowdus

Abstract:

State-approved and -funded Jewish cultural heritage has largely focused on concrete tangible spaces or structures, such as synagogues and *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and material objects. They often represent and evoke an idealised, unchanging Jewishness of the past that is presumed to be acceptable to non-Jewish audiences, yet one that bears little resemblance to lived Judaism, whether past or present. Using hip-hop by Jewish subjects in Germany as a case study, with a special focus on rapper Dimitri Chpakov, this article investigates the mobilisation of popular culture in the twenty-first century by diverse Jewish subjects under the radar of state-sanctioned conceptualisations and representations. Past studies have examined Jewish hip-hop in Germany within the authorised heritage discourse around Holocaust commemoration and anti-Semitism. This article argues that Jewish hip-hop initiatives need to be explored as alternative statements of Jewish heritage, Jewish communal identity, and Jewish diversity, geared towards young living Jewish community members. Such functions tend to be ignored or misunderstood in top-down discourses perpetuated in the public sphere. This article examines the extent to which present-day German Jewish hip-hop prompts a counter-heritagisation process: by creating compelling, deeply personal, and imitable musical forms, it reimagines and reforms conventional definitions of heritage in the service of young Jews living in Germany.

Key words: Jewish heritage, hip-hop, minorities, migration, Holocaust

Jewish heritage in present-day Germany

Heritage is not something fixed but rather something continuously negotiated by stakeholders in the heritage-making process (Smith 2006). Jewish heritage in the public realm in present-day Germany is almost exclusively overseen by non-Jewish heritage gatekeepers or by gatekeeping processes in the service of non-Jewish state apparatuses (Ross 2024). State-approved and -funded Jewish cultural heritage in Germany has been described as part of the national *Erinnerungskultur* (culture of commemoration) (Ross 2024: 36). This is a rather loose term to describe the totality of non-academic, public uses of heritage across a wide variety of means and for a variety of purposes that are united by their commemorative function, specifically in relation to the Holocaust. Such constructions of heritage result in a dominant, backward-looking historicisation of often symbolic Jewish subjects that functions in the service of non-Jewish subjectivities, often to create a progressive, enlightened pan-European secular identity forgiven for the sins of the Holocaust (see, for instance, Bodemann 1996, 2025; Assmann 2020;

Ross 2024). In the context of modern Europe, scholars have discussed how Jewish cultural heritage sites and related Jewish objects have been instrumental in constructions of a post-war identity, first European and later of the European Union (see, for instance, Diner and Wunberg 2007; Probst 2003; Ross 2024). A few Jewish figures have assumed or have been placed in key positions in service of the German state, with some academics and museologists, often from Israel, working on heritage initiatives in key Western German cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt. However, this is the exception rather than the norm and such figures tend to contribute to projects of a national culture of commemoration rather than representing bottom-up emic Jewish perspectives. There remain what Ross (2024: xi, 36) terms 'lop-sided power relations' in the representation and maintenance of Jewish heritage as a 'culture of commemoration'. Ross and Kranz (2023) show how the presentation of Jewish heritage in Germany to align with state-approved mandates is quite different from, for instance, its presentation in North America where 'Jewish heritage' (which they differentiate from *Jüdisches Kulturerbe*) is for the most part community led. In this context, 'the state' does not constitute a monolithic bloc but a multitude of apparatuses and positionalities (Carr 2009). In effect, these state-sanctioned heritage sites and discourses often serve purposes and goals not aligned with the stories of the people that they tell and even less with the tangible well-being and sustainability of their surviving descendants (Podoshen 2016).

The state-sanctioned heritage approach has led to the assembly of Jewish objects into thematically grouped heritage formations, part of an extensive project of the communication of culture. In these constructions, physical spaces are marketed as meaningful experiences: iconic, authentic objects and authentic places are generalised to meet the demand and sustain consumption, a process that marketing scholars have dubbed 'heritage branding' (Fournier and Alvarez 2019) or 'place marketing' (Napolitano and De Nisco 2017). Heritage-wise, with the absence of the former Jewish 'enemy' reconfigured into the (dead) Jewish victim (Lapidot 2021), German non-Jews are regarded (and regard themselves) as the only legitimate gatekeepers for Jewish heritage in Germany:

> *The logical conclusion of this argument is this: because the former cultural context of this heritage has been destroyed, there can be no Jewish cultural bearers and stakeholders today, which is why the non-Jewish society must take on this heritage, and maintain and preserve it. (Ross 2024: 55)*

In practice, Jewish heritage in present-day Germany is almost exclusively focused on concrete tangible spaces or things – synagogues, *mikvaot* (ritual baths), and other spaces and objects that are organised to remember Jewish life that was ruptured by the Shoah. As such, state-sanctioned displays of

Jewish cultural heritage tend to be considered as important *lieux de memoire* in which

> *memory crystallizes and secretes itself [...] at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory. (Nora 1989: 7)*

Such sites and configurations of Jewish heritage are viewed as having the important pedagogical capability of 'preventing antisemitism' or discrimination more broadly (Pearce 2007: 126). Whilst the use of Jewish heritage as German commemoration is still largely normative, in recent years some have begun to question the meaning and even the ontological dynamics of heritage in Germany, particularly heritage relating to Jewish people (Ross and Kranz 2023: 1). Some Jewish museums have made efforts to diversify Jewish heritage displays, to draw attention to the intangible elements of Jewish heritage and to the diversity of current Jewish voices (as, for instance, the Jewish Museum of Berlin with its 'Music Room'). Others are increasingly offering guided tours that represent alternative Jewish voices (such as the Queer Jewish tour offered by the Judengasse Museum in Frankfurt). However, the material and visual-based focus on the Holocaust remains largely the norm.[1]

The Jewish populations of Germany were destroyed during the Shoah. As a result, there are currently relatively few 'German' Jews. The 1990s saw a proliferation of 'Russian' Jews arrive in Germany after fleeing from the former Soviet Union. With them, these Jewish people brought not only a different conceptualisation of what Judaism is and how they experience and express it but also different notions about Jewish heritage – including musical heritage. These communities of 'New-New German Jews' (Ross 2024: xxxv) make up 90% of the current Jewish population in Germany, which numbers approximately 300,000 in total. The largest New-New German Jew communities are in Berlin and Frankfurt (Kotowski 2019: 107–109; Cronin 2019).[2] The second and third generations of these Jewish communities have been searching for alternate forms of heritage-making through which to exercise agency and create heritage. They are doing so in a way that mobilises their own futures-oriented, existential concerns. This stands in contrast with the dominant memory culture that surrounds them and that defines how Jews should be (symbolically) understood in the public sphere.

1 In my research, I differentiate the term 'Holocaust' – a reified 'event' that is understood and processed at the national level – from that of the 'Shoah' – the attempt to understand how Jewish subjects or other descendants of survivors process or respond to commemoration (Crowdus forthcoming).

2 Recent accounts maintain that the percentage of Russian Jews might even be as high as 98% (Ross 2024: xxxiv).

In the context of the culture of commemoration through which Jewish heritage in Germany is largely conceived, hip-hop, and particularly its gangsta sub-genre, seems like an unlikely expression of heritage, let alone Jewish heritage. However, there are a few key instances of Jewish subjectivity in Germany in recent years that draw on hip-hop's grassroots and agentive potential. In fact, it could be argued that these Jewish rappers have drawn on this medium as a highly potent, emic, and alternative form of heritage. Music performed by Jewish subjects rapping about Jewish concerns constitutes an intervention to the dominant commemoration-oriented constructions of Jewish heritage. This article investigates the Jewish mobilisation of gangsta rap under the radar of state-sanctioned conceptualisations and representations in Germany. It does so by focusing on Dimitri Chpakov (b. 1989), a second-generation New-New Jew and a gangsta rapper.

This study is based on the textual analysis of secondary sources in the academic scholarship and on fieldwork that examined Jewish and non-Jewish attitudes in present-day Germany towards Jewish cultural heritage and the sites and objects associated with it. The fieldwork was conducted over the periods 2017–2019 and 2022–2025. Interviews were conducted with New-New Jews in West and East German towns and cities, across all adult age groups (from 18 to 70 years). The article applies a musicological analysis to Jewish gangsta rap in Germany but also draws on analyses of Jewish-themed rap on a global level. It offers a detailed analysis of Chpakov's lyrics and the reflections he offers on his music in his autobiographical account, *Yellow Bar Mitzvah* (Sun Diego and Sand 2018).

Chpakov's gangsta rap

Rap music problematises material-focused, past-looking conceptualisations of heritage. This is achieved in part by rap's effectiveness in drawing attention to what Pinn (cited in Heck 2001: 44) calls 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics', namely 'a form of interpretation that is much more comfortable with the nastiness of life'. These forms of engagement, Pinn argues, are easily given life through the medium of rap music because of the way it can emphasise 'real' and everyday experiences. Giving 'primary orientation to human existence', what 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics encourages', Pinn (1999: 116) writes, 'is the full presentation of black life with its full complexity, untainted by static tradition'. Whilst Pinn's (2024) work deals with important aspects of African American struggles in the United States, what it effectively highlights here is that the subjugation of certain peoples or groups or their symbolic use by the majority can be challenged through attention to the messiness of real life and lived experience.

In Chpakov's music, no song demonstrates this 'nitty-gritty hermeneutics' and highly personalised Jewish oral history so well both lyrically and

musically as the song 'Rostov on Don'. The song's title refers to the Russian town where Chpakov's great-aunt Sofia and her two children had fled from the Nazis in 1941. The song opens with a solo violin of 'Hava Nagila', a Jewish folk tune that is widely known well beyond Jewish circles. As soon as the melody is established, the instrumentation changes into a distorted electronic version. Whilst this opening is relatively slow, the lyrics are introduced in fast and acerbic 'double time', which immediately references the history of Chpakov's family: 'Rostov on Don | komm' von Beton | wollten entkomm'n | Koffer genomm'n' (Rostov-on-Don | come from concrete | wanted to escape | took the suitcase).[3] The song pivots between the experience of fleeing and Chpakov's Jewish past with statements placing current Jewish affiliation in contrast with normative German society, such as: 'Kabbala Schrift statt Ballermann Hits' (Kabbalah script instead of Ballermann hits). By denouncing the 'Ballermann hits' (a reference to the German hit parade), Chpakov declares that he is following a different 'script', a Jewish mystical one that trumps the superficiality of the hit parade (and the word 'kaballah').

Chpakov's over-the-top persona, glaring idioms, and provocative lyrics offer an alternative model of Jewishness in the public sphere. It is an alternative to Jewish masculinity, both different from the stereotypical weak and nerdy Yeshiva 'bochor' and the strong Israeli pioneer (see, for example, Rubin 2021; Krondorfer 2009). And whilst the way in which women appear in his music videos might be perceived as demeaning (young, scantily clad, and without faces), the women who feature in his narratives are family members who are presented as modest, tough, and strong – indeed, stronger than most rappers fancy themselves. In this account, Jewish men are raised by powerful survivor women whose skills and strengths far outshine 'wannabe' rappers, as Chpakov raps in 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah': 'rappers act like cocaine dealers | but were never in the ghetto like my grandma Sofia'. At this point in the music video, we see a gravestone marking the passing of Sofia. In his book he also recounts her harrowing story escaping the Nazis. Here too he narrates his own refugee story and positionality alongside narratives of his experiences with gangsta rap. Chpakov relates how his mother fled from the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic to the Federal Republic of Germany in 1992. Chpakov places his Ukrainian-Jewish positionality and internalised migration history as well as his grandmother's persecution and experience of violence in a Nazi ghetto at the centre of his subjective narrative (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 15–18).

In Chpakov's representation, and especially in the imagery he uses, being Jewish is linked to strength. Chpakov raps on a throne surrounded by a giant Star of David, with a flamethrowing menorah flaring up in the background. The deliberately over-the-top imagery and lyrics typical of gangsta

3 Unless otherwise indicated, all German concepts and lyrics have been translated into English by the author.

rap portray Jews as enacting living heritage, laying claim to Jewish symbols and using the performativity of rap to push back against their usage in state-sponsored representations. For instance, social mobility is one of the key tropes in rap music videos, namely the ability of the disempowered to become socially mobile and enact their own agency. Chpakov raps in his song 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah': 'from coke dealer to Lambo owner' (SpongeBozz 2017). In this case, they can do so all whilst embracing a fresh and modern form of Judaism and Jewish pride. Moreover, as suggested by fellow contributor to this volume Samuel Everett, the video also works with anti-Semitic imagery, such as rats, and neutralises these with the power of his agential position (Everett, personal communication). Also in 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah', Chpakov calls out other rappers for behaving in a negative manner attributed to Jews by anti-Semites: '[t]ell me, if money doesn't stink, why can the rats [other rappers] smell it?' (SpongeBozz 2017).

Chpakov's songs that tell his personal story hold references to an indelible, almost 'branded' Jewish identity. Jewish identity in the former Soviet Union is quite different from that in America, Canada, or even Europe since in the former it takes on a form of 'national' identity. Soviet Jews have the designation 'Jewish' stamped on their passports as their nationality, a designation enforced by the state, which may have impacted Jewish self-perception in various ways. For this article, it is important to note that for Soviet Jews, being Jewish it is an unavoidable designation and one that likely strengthens communal identification, regardless of the individual's level of religiosity or ritual observance. This certainly shapes how Chpakov represents Jewish identity in his music, which carries an indelible marker of Jewishness. His song 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah' is charged with it, as in the line: 'Spongie is the one and only ghetto star, Star of David' (SpongeBozz 2017). The implication of Chpakov's reference to Jewish heritage is that Jewish identity and the lived experiences that come with it cannot be merely symbolically donned for commemorative purposes. It is not an identity that one chooses or that can be escaped or denied. It is one that is permanently and inevitably branded on one's documents and even one's very body, until death.

Gangsta rap in Germany: the bigger picture

German-language gangsta rap has developed into the most successful rap genre in Germany since the 2000s. It is difficult to provide a concise definition of 'gangsta rap', but one attempt at a description is the following:

> *At its core, gangsta rap is [...] a musical and lyrical description of the world of a gangster. The term 'gangster' is flexible: it can be the petty criminal hashish dealer from the Märkisches Viertel [Berlin] or the Italian American mafia boss from Brooklyn [New*

> *York]. The description can be given from the perspective of an observer or in the first person. (Szillus 2012: 41)*

Most German gangsta rap negotiates experiences of discrimination, racism in its varied forms, class prejudice and unequal opportunities, difficult family life and the lack of stability, mental or physical illness, or the problems that reunification poses for East Germany. Typically characterised by loud, decisive beats and smooth flows, gangsta rap often tells the story of the rappers' difficult upbringing in precarious, hopeless circumstances. Often the singers have achieved various degrees of success through their music, requiring them to reiterate their difficult past or the obstacles that they have overcome to maintain their authenticity and 'street cred' (Dorchin 2012; Crowdus 2019). Gangsta rappers often portray themselves as up-and-comers and use violent language and images that make them appear as hardened, almost unassailable winners. It is precisely the fact that rappers provoke and do not appear to follow the majority of society that make them attractive for many young people – regardless of whether they themselves have experienced discrimination (Dietrich and Seeliger 2013).

One lens through which scholars have examined the rap genre in Germany is that of Holocaust commemoration and anti-Semitism, areas located firmly within authorised heritage discourse (Köhn 2025). Yet to be looked at extensively in the scholarship is the fact that these musical initiatives can also be understood as alternative configurations of Jewish heritage, Jewish communal identity, and Jewish diversity, geared towards young living Jewish community members. This article suggests that such creations prompt a counter-heritagisation process – which is relevant both in the German and the post-Soviet context – that reimagines and reforms conventional definitions of heritage into a forward-looking (rather than a backward-looking) conceptualisation of Jewish heritage that works in the service of young Jews living in Germany today. Concurrently, such contributions also mark the participation of young Jewish rappers in global hip-hop culture, a culture built by 'a global urban style that is underpinned by the racial experience of Black Americans [that] provides a discursive repertoire with rich imagery that can be appropriated and actualized in different local contexts' (Dorchin and Crowdus 2024: 101). As such, we can say that such participation marks alternative Jewish and global hip-hop constructions of heritage simultaneously.

Owing to the relative absence of heritage initiatives and representational possibilities led by local Jewish communities, Jewish people in Germany of the third and fourth generations after the Shoah seek out other avenues of representation through which they can communicate their Jewish histories, legacies, and, most importantly perhaps, a forward-looking, sustainability-oriented vision of their Jewishness. In many cases, such endeavours make up for the absence of such visions in past-looking heritage formations

endorsed by the state (Crowdus forthcoming). Popular culture that lies at the margins of public discourse, especially rap music, has become an effective medium to contest hegemonic conceptualisations of heritage and formulaic expressions of the culture of commemoration. Hip-hop culture and rap in particular have often been romanticised through the lens of 'resistance' (Crowdus 2019).[4] Rather than conceptualise the rap examined here as 'resistance', I examine how it offers 'replacement ideologies' – discursive iterations of alternative ways of being – to critique or engage with status quos that are perceived to be problematic (Crowdus 2019). Such iterations can enter into conversation and dialogue with other, surrounding, and more publicly visible expressions of Jewish heritage, such as the culture of commemoration.

Rap music in particular becomes an effective alternative to larger-scale forms of Jewish heritage owing to its expression of what I call the 'extreme local' – a reference to local streets and shops, to living people, whether mentioned affectionately or with the goal of 'dissing' them, and to one's own family members, including those who have had a formative influence. The personal, 'enmeshed' (Ingold 2021) expressions of the 'extreme local' (Crowdus 2019) are foundational elements of many rap songs. Articulations of the 'extreme local' are not simply a reference to the rappers' immediate surroundings but to the way they experience these surroundings intimately and sensorially and are 'entangled' or enmeshed in relations with other human beings and non-human beings and urban surroundings (Ingold 2021). Such localisations serve to redirect heritage from a national scope to a local, urban one, reinventing and reframing the experiential lens through which this heritage is communicated to others. These and other grassroots place-making dynamics, which allow a potent articulation of oral history, identify rap as an efficient – albeit marginal – tool for not only alternative projections of Jewish identity and heritage but a revision of the 'lieux de memoire' aspect of heritage sites into something that acknowledges rupture but is also living, fluid, and dynamic.

Rappers in Germany today have different national, ethnic, social, and religious origins, some of which they choose to highlight as part of their persona or directly in their lyrics. Other aspects of their identity might be underplayed because they are considered unimportant or hidden for other reasons.[5] Chpakov was not the first German-Jewish rapper to explicitly reference his Jewish roots and identity in his music. Berlin-based rap artist Ben Salomo combines discursive negotiations of 'being Jewish' with state-

4 Rap's potential for resistance is rooted in the fact that it is viewed as edutainment and culturally peripheral and therefore as not capable of fully challenging the status quo (Crowdus forthcoming).

5 Jew hatred has been described as an ongoing problem in the German rap scene, gangsta or otherwise. Baier describes it as a discourse that legitimises anti-Semitism (*antisemitischer Legitimationsdiskurs*) that hides or denies antisemitic content or even justifies it (Baier 2025: 395).

ments against racism, discrimination, and right-wing populism in his songs. In this process, he draws on memories connected to National Socialism and the Holocaust and interweaves them with other historiographic and political representations. The track 'Identität' (Identity), which was released on his 2016 album *Es gibt nur einen* (There is only one) (Salomo 2016), makes this particularly clear. Salomo uses aspects of Jewish history and liturgy and connects them to autobiographical, family, and wider collective memories (Köhn 2025). Köhn (2025) draws on the concept of 'alternative narratives' (Crowdus 2019) to describe the process that Salomo is invoking, namely, rewriting the story of Jews from that of victimhood to one of agency coming out of oppression. Building on this observation, I posit that the efforts of the few Jewish rappers in the German gangsta rap scene who evoke their Jewish identity in their work are more than just shedding the designation of victimhood. These works normalise Jewish spaces that are free from acting on behalf of others and that are not beholden to a moralising currency (Ross 2024) or identity politics. These spaces are rather geared towards young Jewish people and linked to their current struggles and their well-being and sustainability in the here and now. Thus, such efforts serve to normalise Jewish agency in such processes and stand in contrast to local and national public representations of Jewish heritage.

Such mobilisations of rap can also be viewed as an attempt to redefine 'the scene'. Straw defines a 'scene' as

> *particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them. Scenes may be distinguished according to their location [...] the genre of cultural production which gives them coherence (a musical style, for example, [...]) or the loosely defined social activity around which they take shape (as with urban outdoor chess-playing scenes).* Scene *invites us to map the territory of the city in new ways while, at the same time, designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted. (Straw 2004: 412, emphasis in original)*

Purely by existing and being involved in Jewish events and family life, many New-New Jews 'live' an alternative form of Jewishness that stand in contrast to state displays of Jewish heritage. However, the public-facing aspect of popular culture and directness of gangsta rap in particular provides a discourse that goes beyond lived experience and communal life. In other words, whether rappers draw on their Jewish pasts and presents deliberately or not, they coalesce the gangsta rap scene with the New-New Jewish 'scene', rendering the latter's realities and concerns palpable and distinguishable from those that operate outside this tiny German minority. Arguably, the reason why artists like Chpakov are able to do this with credibility is because they are

firmly committed to both forms of identity and belonging, Jewish and gangsta rap, in practice and discursively.

Battling in 'spongeface'

It was arguably Chpakov's participation in the gansta rap culture that gave him the space and infrastructure to learn the skill sets that would effectively allow him to express an alternate form of Jewish heritage through gangsta rap. He did not start out in the German rap scene as openly Jewish; and in the European summer of 2024, he left the scene in an act that was accompanied by a dramatic Instagram post. German newspapers cited anti-Semitic hostility and violent threats, also directed at his family, as reason for this step, but also the high pressure in the gangsta rap scene to perform (Hallstein 2024).

Chpakov's career started from humble beginnings and was characterised by many ups and downs, including rivalries with other rappers. At first he showed his talent by delivering hard and fast rhythms and insults during rap battles, which can be defined as

> *war[s] between or amongst rappers, dancers, DJs, emcees, for prizes, bragging rights and to see who is best. When lyrics are involved, it is what is said and how it is delivered – the cadence and complexity of the lyrics; if music is used, the originality and quality of production also are judged. (Westbrook 2002: 6)*

Chpakov's aptitude for 'battling' later provided him with the canniness and creativity to articulate his past and present Jewish persona with the same presence, energy, and conviction.

Chpakov's skill at creating fast, hard-hitting lines is exemplified in his first rap battle, in 2004. He demonstrated a savviness for using forms of popular culture and German slang fluidly and lucidly, achieving a smooth flow and being concise with the words he used – dominating the technique for his own purposes. At the time, he rapped under the pseudonym 'Capri Sonne', chosen for the empty bottle of Capri Sun juice on his desk when asked to pick a name, a choice that exemplifies his combination of creativity and pragmatism. Through the 2000s, Sun Diego (a new stage name Chpakov assumed in 2013) worked hard at remaining relevant in the rap game. In 2011 a quarrel erupted between him and the up-and-coming rapper Kollegah, which undermined his position. At some point, Kollegah went so far as to produce an aggressive video about Sun Diego, mocking his choruses and autotune. It 'made Sun Diego look like a joke' in Germany's rapping community (described in Kielman 2017).

Perhaps in response to Kollegah's video, in 2013 Chpakov began to don a SpongeBob SquarePants outfit and participate in rap battles. It is also possible that Chpakov's decision to don the costume was motivated by a desire

to make a comeback after yet another harsh criticism directed at him, this time by JuliensBlog, aka Julien Sewering, a German rap commentator and YouTuber. But certainly this move led to Chpakov's first real successes. Calling himself SpongeBozz, he wore a SpongeBob SquarePants outfit that completely covered his face and most of his body, making it impossible to identify him. This highly recognisable outfit, which is imbibed with a strong element of humour 'straight outta Bikini Bottom', drew the attention away from Chpakov's identity and rather placed it on his rapping. His delivery was strong, marked by acerbic wit, strong flow, ruthless 'disses' and a tongue-in-cheek humour. Chpakov's rapping was described as follows: 'the dialogues of the various characters appeal to different age groups. SpongeBozz disguises his voice by imitating SpongeBob's German dubbing voice, which underlines his cheeky acerbity' (Steckert 2024: 462).

In spite of the costume, or perhaps exactly because of it, Chpakov experienced notable success as SpongeBozz. For instance, during a 2013 rap battle hosted by JuliensBlog, he was far ahead of his fellow participants both lyrically and musically. The popular rap blogger who goes by the pen name Martine_Canine (2017) describes SpongeBozz's delivery as being marked by a 'double-time [that was] faster than Kollegah's, highly multisyllabic, unexpected and witty rhymes, and an overall attitude somewhere between menacing and cartoonish, making each punchline twice as hard-hitting'. People debated about SpongeBozz's real identity and known artists such as Kollegah, BattleBoi Basti, and JuliensBlog himself were amongst those assumed to be his true identity. The most popular opinion was the correct one, that it was Chpakov seeking a fresh start for his rap career. He achieved notable success, winning the popular German YouTube rap contest 'JuliensBlogBattle' in 2013 and 2014. In 2013, SpongeBozz battled Gio, the winner of the previous season. In the battle, SpongeBozz spun a fictional story around Gio, portraying him as a Nazi, paedophile, and liar. He ripped Gio apart with braggadocio lyrics and 'disses' that mocked Gio's appearance, even comparing him to Adolf Hitler:

> *Yo, social parasite, I shoot bullets from the barrel*
> *Into the spastic Hartz IV recipient with Down syndrome*
> *You son of a bitch!*
> *Call yourself Adolf Gartner [...]*
> *I'm just alive to destroy your image [...]*
> *You should be gassed, you skinhead [...]*
> *But you are so ugly, not even the maggots want to eat you*
> *You look like you've taken a beating*
> *I opened your image in Photoshop and it uninstalled itself*
> *I puke when I think about it [...]*

Even Gollum would say: 'What the fuck? Gio is fucking ugly, my precious!'
Again Leonidas, again Ephialtes
Again I punch this care case away for sure
And Xerxes did not defeat them with blades
The 300 saw you and jumped off the cliff [...]
And the worst thing about the Nazi photo still was
Your shitty face, cause it looked like Quasimodo's asshole.
(SpongeBozz 2013)

The 35-minute battle earned SpongeBozz the nickname 'God of Battle' and has been referenced in other rap songs since then. This was the last time that Chpakov participated in a battle rap tournament as SpongeBozz. His 'disses' are rife with references to Ancient Greek warfare, but also to popular culture, such as with references to the films *300* and *Lord of the Rings* and to malfunctioning computer software. What is important to note here is that this performance and its content are absolutely typical of rap battles as regards quickly and smoothly delivered hyperbolic insults. The rap firmly cemented SpongeBozz's presence in the shared practices and values of global hip-hop heritage, here exemplified by rap battle heritage. In this battle, Chpakov for the first time begins using elements of the *Erinnerungskultur*: when comparing his opponent to the most undesirable elements of society, he references not only Nazis, his grandparents' past, but also 'skinheads', contemporary Nazis and bigots. Chpakov reveals himself as an artist savvy in negotiating the social and cultural capital around him to create biting lyrics and creating a successful costume (his attempt could have backfired were it not done with such an impact and, arguably, humour). It is through his canny usage of affordances – possibilities for engagement that depend on leveraging existing expectations, norms, conventions, and cooperative social practices – that Chpakov's 'coming out' as Jewish should be understood.

Coming out

Despite his success as SpongeBozz, Chpakov reinvented himself again a few years later after another nasty feud with Kollegah in 2017. In the music video for his song 'Started from the Bottom' (2017), Chpakov performed wearing a yellow bandana across his lower face instead of wearing the full Spongebob costume. In 2018, he published the coterminous book and album *Yellow Bar Mitzvah*, in which he expressly outed himself as Jewish. This was against the stated wish of his grandmother, who according to him was always afraid of identifying as Jewish and often denied her own identity out of fear:

> *My Baba didn't like the idea of me discussing my Jewish roots. She asked me to think about it again. To this day, she is afraid that there will be a rollback in Germany at some point. That the social mood could change again. And that my son would have to suffer in the future because I had so openly declared my Jewishness. Her fear alone was an indication of what a major social issue anti-Semitism still is. And I noticed this in my circle of friends too. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 161)*

According to some of Chpakov's fans, acknowledging his Jewish identity was partly done pre-emptively to mitigate the anti-Semitism he was shown by other rappers in the German scene. According to political scientist Jakob Baier (2022), it was a daring move. Baier describes reports of anti-Semitism being on the rise in the German gangsta rap scene amongst both immigrant groups and young Germans removed by generations from the lessons of World War II. In his estimation, the fact that the scene is dominated by Arab and Turkish artists is partly responsible for this, although these are not the only rappers from whom anti-Jewish hate emerges (Baier 2022). Indeed, some of the country's most popular rappers have put out videos featuring Jewish stereotypes and lyrics drawing on anti-Semitic conspiracy theories; Chpakov experienced some of this even before his 'coming out' when not wearing the Spongebob outfit, although some of this anti-Jewish sentiment seemed to form part and parcel of the normal 'ribbing' amongst rappers in social settings and certainly would have been 'fair game' if drawn on with skill in a rap battle. Interestingly, given this context, incorporating his Jewish identity into his new persona seemed to intrigue fans, rather than repel them: '[w]hen I put out the book and the videos, it was like I had been resurrected. Finally, I have an identity of my own and can do something with it' (Chpakov, cited in Curry 2018). Chpakov's explicit use of 'disses' and street talk can be viewed as creating a cognitive dissonance in relation to symbolic depictions of Jews in the public sphere, defined by stereotypes that are 'frozen in time' before World War II. Thus, Chpakov can be viewed as reclaiming a German appropriation of Jewish heritage within a frame of post-Soviet Jewishness, showing minoritised 'street cred' and his ghetto origins with which much of the non-Jewish German public is deeply unfamiliar.

The lack of familiarity with a Jewish identity outside of how it is typically mobilised in the *Erinnerungskultur* caused quite some confusion and even astonishment amongst the German public. An encounter that I had with a journalist exemplifies this confusion and the inability to understand – or arguably even the will to understand – what Chpakov was doing on his own terms. It was 2018, not long after the book *Yellow Bar Mitzvah* had appeared. It is an autobiographical account that chronicles the life and times of Chpakov with a direct, slightly humorous narrative voice. Knowing that I was doing research on the rather niche subject of Jewish or Jewish-themed rap at

the European Centre for Jewish Music, a journalist interviewed me about the book and the artist's controversial music video of the same name. The journalist expressed his shock in particular at the video's opening scene in which Chpakov, dressed in an expensive tracksuit, sits on a golden throne, flanked by a yellow Lamborghini, scantily clad young women, and cocaine, in a set that carries numerous explicit Jewish symbols: the star of David on the rapper's sleeve, a flaming Star of David behind him, a video of Chasidic men dancing to Hava Nagila on a retro television set, and the gravestone of Chpakov's great-aunt Sofia, who survived the Holocaust. At the time I had seen the music video and had begun reading the book.

> *Interviewer: It is a parody of Judaism, don't you think?*
>
> *Crowdus (MC): No, I don't. Not at all.*
>
> *Interviewer: No, but I mean – it is making fun of Judaism [...] and Jews, isn't it?*
>
> *MC: No, I don't think so. That is not what I think the artist is doing.*
>
> *Interviewer: So, it is not a parody to you?*
>
> *MC: No.*
>
> *Interviewer: What is it then?*
>
> *MC: You should ask the artist. But it seems to me he may be acting as an example for all young Jewish people in this country from the former Soviet Union, providing them with a new, fresh, if not German-Jewish culture, then Jewish-in-Germany culture and heritage with which they can identify.*

To my knowledge the interview never made it into any newspaper or podcast. I certainly did not understand Chpakov's book and new album to be a parody of Jewishness. And if it were a parody at all (and that was debatable), then it was one of the culture of commemoration that he 'sampled' so well.

A year later, Chpakov confirmed my reading of how he staged his Jewish identity in his music when he stated in an interview with the *New York Times*:

> *So far there hasn't been a really big and well-known rapper in Germany who has declared himself Jewish. And yet identity is an extremely important topic, especially in the hip-hop scene. The kids have many Muslim, Christian, German, Turkish, American, Lebanese or Kurdish role models. There hasn't been a Jew as an identification figure in the German rap scene so far. So I thought it was time to make a confident statement. (cited in Curry 2018)*

Chpakov's oeuvre represents Jewish agency that ruptures the suffocating formulations of the *Erinnerungskultur* that could feel quite disconnected from the experiences and concerns of Jewish people, and even of myself. During my fieldwork in 2023, many young New-New Jews commented that Chpakov's work was 'different' and 'refreshing', noting that he was taking 'ownership' over his Jewish identity. Whilst one *rebbetsin* (rabbi's wife) commented that gangsta rap was distasteful in general, she still understood it as an attempt to provide an outlet for Jewish heritage which stood in contrast with the 'dead Jews in the museums'. Clearly, this form of Jewish heritage will not resonate with all Jewish positionalities: queer and feminist Jewish people, for example, may find the images and lyrics objectionable at best and an example of extreme heteronormativity and toxic masculinity at worst; religious Jews may find his music highly improper or immodest. Chpakov's artistic contributions suggest, rather, that rapping offers an agency-rich alternative rubric through which to create and transmit Jewish heritage. Overall Jewish people saw Chpakov as pushing back against the state's perceived lack of support for Jewish subjectivities in everyday life, even as such support was consistently symbolically celebrated and performed in national-oriented commemorative practices.

Yellow Bar Mitzvah: keepin' it real in commemoration culture

The book *Yellow Bar Mitzvah* is ostensibly about a rapper who mobilises music as an escape from his difficult upbringing and unfavourable surroundings and who is passionate about his art. The book gives an account of Chpakov's rap journey and is structured around the rapper's Jewish identity – but not in a static or stereotypical way. His story is highly personalised and seamlessly enmeshed in his identity as a newcomer to Germany, growing up in temporary refugee accommodation, not doing well in school but having lots of creativity and being street smart, to becoming a budding rapper. Jewish identity and Jewish practices are presented as formative, lived experiences but ones that are marked by tension and experienced both profoundly and superficially in different ways. There is a sense of 'realness' to the way in which Jewish aspects are described that is totally different from how Jews and Judaism are represented in the public sphere. The chapters, for instance, are ordered according to Hebrew letters. These do not merely correspond to the Hebrew alphabet but to a specific story that Chpakov's grandmother used to tell him and that still fascinates him:

> *My Baba told me a story every night before I went to sleep. She knew an infinite number of stories. I liked listening to the ones from the Torah the most. Or some Jewish folk myths. One of her stories fascinated me in particular. The story of Moloch. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 24)*

The story of Moloch is one about idol worship that aims to show 'that Judaism had established a [...] humane faith. That it brought civilisation to people. And a God who did not demand sacrifices' (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 24). But Chpakov read a different meaning into the story; for him it spoke to the depths of human nature: '[h]ow could they be willing to sacrifice something they loved? Just to give themselves a better life. I couldn't understand it' (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 24). This telling of stories from the Torah is a Jewish experience to which the young Chpakov relates; however, he enacts his own agency about what he finds relevant. Jewish heritage is at once collective and individually focused: it is alive through personal memories and forms the structure for the unfolding of the narrative.

The highly personal Jewish-oriented formation structures the book and shows how our collective pasts and collective belongings inform our individual destinies. Chpakov does not see this as something negative but rather as something inevitable – and yet also something of which he is proud. The book starts on a dramatic high, with Chpakov's arrest by the police who find weapons in his studio. He concludes the first chapter by stating:

> *A person's story is the sum of their crises. Every crisis is a test that gives us the opportunity to grow beyond ourselves. To face our shadows. To prove ourselves. But in my case, the shadow of the catastrophe had already fallen over my life long before it had actually begun. Like a curse that you can't escape. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 17)*

The chapter leaves the reader hanging, wondering what catastrophe Chpakov might be referring to. The second chapter takes the reader there. It opens with a scene from Rostov on Don in south-western Russia on 19 November 1941 – a scene that has shaped his current situation and informed the way in which he relates to the world. The protagonist is his great-aunt Sofia who decides against the wishes of other family members to leave rather than stay and fight. With her two small children, she makes her way through to Tashkent, Uzbekistan. Chpakov describes the situation she is escaping as follows:

> *These were not easy stories to tell. They were horror stories that could not have been made up any worse. In the best case, it was said, the Germans would simply take the men as prisoners of war and shoot the women and children on the spot. In the worst cases, the women were brutally raped by the soldiers. In front of their men and children. And in the worst cases, you were Jewish. And as a Jew you were deported and taken to Germany and put in concentration camps. That was the worst of all. Either you were cruelly gassed there or even more sadistic things happened. (Sun Diego and Sand 2018: 20)*

Chpakov goes on to describe brutal experiments performed by Nazi doctors. It is unclear here whether this reflects Sofia's experience; indeed, it is unlikely that Chpakov's great-aunt would have been aware of these experiments, the horrific details of which often only emerged later. It is more likely that this is Chpakov's account of his wider knowledge of what the Nazis perpetrated. Whilst this story could be interpreted as a form of *Erinnerungskultur* in which rap becomes a way of remembering the Holocaust (Köhn 2025), I do not believe this to be the main motivation behind Chpakov's work. Unlike Salomo's music, Chpakov's work is firmly rooted in the 'hood', whether this is his local neighbourhood of Osnabrück, where he still lives, or the historical 'hood' in which his Jewish family resided in the past. This rootedness in local spaces inhabited by everyday people helps – in hip-hop terms – to 'keep it real', to convey a sense of genuine lived experience in contrast with the symbolic use of Jews and Judaism as imparting a moral message. On the contrary, this 'realism' is reflected in Chpakov's more general reflections on the Holocaust. Chpakov does not regale us with trite messages like 'never again' or hopeful ones that atrocities like these will not happen again.

What makes Chpakov's book particularly powerful as regards how it negotiates his Jewish heritage is that it neither corroborates nor contradicts some of the central aspects of *Erinnerungskultur*. It is indeed a story rooted in the tragedy of the Shoah, which validates it according to the dominant forms of remembrance and Jewish heritage. But it also deviates drastically from these agendas in that it is characterised by the agency of a complex Jewish young man, not primarily in the service of a national identity but as a role model specifically for Jewish youth. Again, we can say that Chpakov is 'sampling' *Erinnerungskultur*, as he did during the rap battle against Gio.[6] But it is a more sophisticated form of sampling, referencing in particular the propensity of the culture of commemoration of highlighting oral histories and broadcasting them to a general public. Here, however, he links up the story with that of his own contemporary and slightly criminal life. He has a special message for his young Jewish public and negotiates it on his own terms through the transformation of his family history into gangsta rap.

Anti-Jewish hate in the rap scene

Anti-Jewish discrimination in the gangsta rap scene has proven to be significant. Baier (2025) and Baier and Grimm (2022) note that there were two other openly Jewish rappers in Germany but that they were subjected to and silenced by anti-Semitism to the point that they (more recently than Chpak-

6 'Sampling' is a common practice in rap music of citing or recontextualising sections of existing songs and sounds to create new music. Here, I propose that sampling does not need to be confined to the 'borrowing' of audio tracks but can include the borrowing or integration of discursive subjects and significations, such as those belonging to *Erinnerungskultur*.

ov) have left the rap scene. Baier (2025: 176) describes the abnormally high content of anti-Jewish lyrics and behaviours in the gangsta rap scene. These are often dismissed as normative 'rap battle' behaviour, but such excuses, Baier (2025: 176) argues, serve to mask anti-Semitism and in some cases even bolster Holocaust denial. Based on an examination of lyrics, documentaries, numerous interviews, and secondary sources, Baier (2022: 26) is able to lay bare the anti-Semitic codes and dog whistles that are well understood by those within the gangsta scene. Given this state of affairs, it is unsurprising that Jewish rappers leave the scene:

> *The fact that anti-Semitism is virulent in German rap is probably due, on the one hand, to the lack of Jewish perspectives and debates about them in the scene. On the other hand, anti-Semitism is repeatedly put in competition with one's own experiences of discrimination or it is even assumed that the accusation of anti-Semitism only serves to silence rappers with a Muslim migration background. (Baier et al. 2023: 37)*

Indeed, the two other Jewish rappers who left the scene, Ben Salomo and Arye Sharuz Alicar alias Bozz Aro, both left exactly because of anti-Jewish discrimination (Köhn 2025). Ben Salomo ended his long-standing project 'Rap am Mittwoch' because of anti-Semitism in the hip-hop scene,[7] and Arye Sharuz Alicar went to Israel to be able to live his Jewish-Persian identity freely, something he felt he could not do in Germany: 'I felt like an outsider [in Berlin], excluded everywhere, by Germans, Arabs, Jews. I didn't really fit in anywhere, I couldn't identify with any group' (cited in Jäger, Gross, and Méndez 2022: 37). The fact that Jewish rappers, or rappers of any minority, are not welcome in the German rapping scene and are effectively 'chased out' owing to this identity (and not for their bad rapping) is cause for concern. However, despite this difficult situation, Chpakov was able to briefly engage with broader structures in the local scene and transnationally that had to do with Jewish heritage, agency, and the realities of being Jewish in Germany today. This does not mean that his alternative form of heritage discourse is somehow invalid: first, the fact that he felt obliged to discontinue his rap career is not a criterion for invalidating this expression of Jewish heritage – and others may follow in his footsteps, whether on German soil or elsewhere. Second, technological innovation and the accessibility and streamability of popular music means that rap songs remain publicly available even when their creators leave the scene. It can continue to be enjoyed and consumed by youth – including Jewish youth – from different spaces and positional-

7 When I met Ben Salomo in 2017, he also spoke about having children to care for, becoming a family man, and becoming more religiously observant. These considerations may also have influenced his decision to leave the rap scene, even though he did not explicitly say so.

ities for many years to come.[8] In other words, he acted as a role model for an alternative expression of an agency-based Jewish heritage and leaves this rubric as a legacy for a younger Jewish generation, to emulate and be inspired by. Whether they will do so while openly claiming a Jewish identity or not remains to be seen and is perhaps not only dependent on them.

Conclusion

Today, the children of the New-New Jewish communities in Germany are growing up. Fieldwork with people across the age groups from these communities in cities across the western parts of Germany reveals that many are in some way interested in and devoted to their Jewish identity. They are often traditional if not religious and tend to be politically conservative and staunchly Zionist in their commitment to Israel. They describe continuously facing anti-Semitism in the public school system, directed at them from many different groups, whether people whose families have held German citizenship over generations or Germans of Turkish and Syrian origin who have arrived in the past thirty years or so. Many interlocuters expressed that there were few prospects for them as Jews in Germany owing to this anti-Semitism and a general lack of recognition. They often saw their futures in Israel or in English-speaking Western countries like the United States and Canada. These sentiments remain almost completely outside the purview of Jewish heritage discourses in Germany today.

Regarding heritage, Chpakov's coterminous album and book are neither part of the culture of commemoration nor a parody of Jewishness. They are rather an alternative for Jewish youth, who constitute a tiny minority in Germany today. These youth are almost exclusively part of the New-New Jews of Germany who struggle to find their place in a changing society. Rapping might even be a way of making sense of their intersectional identities in an affirming and popularly accessible way. This younger generation is continuously negotiating existential fears and worries about integration into German society, particularly considering the increasing anti-Semitism (Baier 2022). This disconnect between the lived reality of Jews and the temporally static symbolic Judaism in heritage sites and state-led initiatives is most visible in the state's lack of acknowledging the concerns and post-Soviet identities of

8 This music is not only consumed by (Jewish) youth. Indeed, I played Ben Salomo's song 'Es gibt nur Einen' at a workshop for orthodox Jewish women in Montreal to showcase the wide-ranging and inspirational elements of Jewish-themed rap for Jewish identity making. It should be noted, though, that Salomo's rap is clean and spiritual in nature, expressing a form of liberal Zionism based on inclusion – an appropriate German Jewish rap song to play in that context. Sun Diego's 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah' would have been decidedly inappropriate.

New-New Jews.[9] In drawing attention to his personal story as a New-New Jew, Chpakov perhaps inadvertently offers a new type of Jewish heritage that is embedded both in the history of the Holocaust and in the experiences of Jewish people from the former Soviet Union. Arguably, Chpakov's connections with the Shoah, but also those of Salomo and Arye, serve not only as commemoration but as legitimisation for present-day German Jews to claim access to a German society that is largely excluding them or considering them as unimportant.

Chpakov's Germany-based 'Yellow Bar Mitzvah' song is firmly embedded in representations of Jewishness, with the same goals of exploring Jewish identity, representing lived experiences, and working towards the sustainability of Jewish communities.[10] By participating in the shared values of global Jewish hip-hop, Chpakov establishes himself as a rapper on a global level. He creates new ways to express the 'extreme local' in order to negotiate a deeply personal heritage rooted in phenomenological experiences and close personal relationships, local surroundings, and family histories. Overall, his work echoes a broader Jewish message: be twice as good as the others; when in doubt, perform in costume to showcase their talents to a world that will judge them not for their Jewish identity but for owning *being Jewish* and publicly defining it as something that is important, both in the past and in the present. Perhaps nothing could be more important that keeping this message alive even after Chpakov left the rap scene, so that others can continue on the path of creating new, fresh, forward-looking Jewish-infused heritage for a younger generation.

9 This is not unique to Germany but arguably reflects a worldwide problem with how the state and other structures that minorities must negotiate represent and mobilise minority heritage.

10 It is not possible to fully reflect on global resonances here, but it should be noted that many of Chpakov's approaches are also used by Jewish rappers outside of Germany. This includes representing the experiences of elderly Jewish family members and the Shoah in the songs, referencing personal life cycle events, enacting Jewish agency on its own terms, and pushing back against the marginalisation of Jewish artists. This often empowers an alternative Jewish role model for current Jewish youth. In these respects, Chpakov's work aligns most notably with the artists Remedy, Masta Killa, Koshadillz, and Jewcy in the United States of America and SoCalled and SHI 360 in Canada. In the song 'HYFR', for example, the Canadian rapper Drake uses images of his own bar mitzvah. The video that 'offers the platonic ideal of American Judaism' while eschewing the many 'kitschy and opulent' pitfalls of recent bar mitzvah portrayals in pop culture on shows (Klein 2012). His portrayal challenges the status quo through over-the-top portrayals, humour, and personally experienced Jewish moments.

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Radzanów on the Verge of Change: Jews, Non-Jews, and a Returning Canadian

Norman Ravvin

Abstract:

This article examines changes in travel to Poland since the decade after the fall of communism. Using as its focus the author's ancestral village, Radzanów, located north-west of Warsaw, it traces patterns in Jewish return to such places, shifts in Polish attitudes about Jewish heritage and history, and the impact of key heritage institutions and tourism trends. In Radzanów, a derelict synagogue building and an unmarked burial ground desecrated by the Germans in wartime are the lasting markers of pre-war Jewish life.

Key words: Poland, Jewish return, synagogues, heritage organisations

Radzanów is a typical Polish village of a thousand or so people, an hour by car north-west of Warsaw. Twenty-five years ago, on my first visit, the infrastructure of the market square, along with the roadways leading into it from nearby towns, conveyed to the imaginative eye how the village would have looked in the years before World War II, when its Jewish population, most of it living around the central square, had made up a third of the total population. Streets retained their age-old names, marking the towns towards which they lead: *ulica* Mławska leading to Mława and *ulica* Raciążska to Raciąż. In the pre-war years, Jews rendered these in Yiddish-German, calling Mławska the *Mlawer Gasse*. The large white basilica named after St Francis of Assisi at one side of the square dwarfed the derelict red-brick Moorish-style synagogue on the other side, as it had since the church was built in the 1920s. Numerous single-storey wooden houses with gabled roofs, more than a hundred years old, remained, many of them once Jewish homes and businesses, now weathered but still appealing in their obvious poverty (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Radzanów village centre, 2025. © Norman Ravvin.

My first visit to Radzanów was remarkable, largely because of the impressive guide I travelled with. Zbigniew Polakowski, a Pole of impressive bearing, drew locals to us and was skilled at fielding questions about who I, an outsider, was and what we were doing in the village. One of the people questioning us was old enough to remember the pre-war home of my mother's family and my mother's elder brother, then nick-named Berek, with whom he had often played. Other younger men recounted, some with more, others with less detail, the story of the return of a single Radzanów Jew upon the end of World War II, a rare remnant of those who had been murdered in the Mława ghetto or at Auschwitz. Another local offered us the opportunity to view what he called an 'archive of the Jews'. Some of my interlocutors told me these stories as we sat over Zywiec beers in a *kufelek*, a small bar in a mobile home at the edge of what had been the market square. In this, our meeting was not unlike the business done before the war between Jewish artisans in their storefronts and the locals and agriculturalists who came from the countryside for market days.

As I do not speak Polish – Yiddish is my only Radzanów-relevant language – my guide and driver on that first visit translated all aspects of these encounters for me, thus mediating the knowledge gained. But I was inspired, even charmed, by what transpired during the time we spent in the village square. This was followed by a car ride to retrieve a set of keys that let us into the synagogue. In the late 1990s, the village had its public library in the building, including a section of books on the wartime, which happened to be shelved on the upper level, once the women's gallery – which my grandmother told me had collapsed during a wedding. After this we drove to the unmarked burial ground on *ulica* Gorná (High Street) where relatives on both sides of my mother's family were buried under wild grass.

When I returned to Radzanów a few years later, many things had changed. The Warsaw-based Foundation for the Preservation of Jewish Heritage in Poland (FODZ) had forced the removal of the library from the synagogue, which now stood derelict, its windows boarded up. The *kufelek* was gone. The locals who had previously remembered my family were not around. On a visit to an archive in neighbouring Mława, I ran up against an unhelpful archivist who claimed there were no documents that would be useful for my research into the pre-war years. In part, I felt, he took this approach because I was escorted by a guide who was less aggressive than and lacked the bearing of my former guide. This one sat passively as my questions were rebuffed with a repeated *nie* (no).

Radzanów has remained in my thoughts ever since, and I continued to return, including in May 2023 once the Covid-related restrictions were lifted. Nothing can stop me when it comes to revisiting Radzanów. Yet what drives this commitment to the birthplace of my mother, my grandmother, and three

of my great-grandparents, along with a host of cousins and relatives by marriage?

My goals in relation to Radzanów have not been scholarly, though I am a teacher and researcher of pre-war Jewish life and Holocaust literature. From my first visit, my goals were, almost unconsciously, creative. I wanted to explore what these visits might reveal; I also wanted to develop my own relationship with the village.[1] I did not want to view it solely through the eyes of others – even if I had, before my first visit, read all I could find in English and Yiddish on pre-war and wartime life in the area. I also had access to my grandmother's substantial oral account of her youth, from early in the twentieth century up to her departure for Canada in 1935. My grandmother's account of her childhood and young adulthood in Poland included nothing stereotypical or sentimental, only the facts of her traditional, middle-class upbringing. Her parents had lost previous babies to infant death, so she was named Chaya Dina, 'sweet life', to herald her healthy arrival. Over tea and honey cake at her Vancouver home, I heard that an array of family members lived in the vicinity of the village, some running businesses on the market square, others married and living in nearby towns, including Szreńsk and Drobin, a few in thrall to the Chasidic leaders of the Gerer and Aleksander courts. Leaving this world in the summer of 1935 was, for her, a tragedy. And yet she surely appreciated that if she had not left then, she, like almost all her family, would have been murdered by Germans in the Mława ghetto or at Auschwitz. We never spoke about those people as murder victims. Rather, they were living souls in the squares of Radzanów, Mława, Szreńsk, and Drobin.

The attention I pay here and elsewhere to Radzanów is not a 'heritage' study, per se, but a life study, one that includes what is rendered 'heritage' by the disaster that befell Radzanów's Jews. The synagogue and the burial ground, the two remnants of a centuries-long Jewish presence in the village, are both endangered. Although it is fortunate that both are intact, their status in the village is at a crossroads. When the local library was removed from the synagogue, the expectation was that FODZ had a plan for what to do with the empty building; but it did not. Removing the building's purpose as a library downgraded it to a shell, a tomb.

In 2016 an idealistic group of high-school students and their teacher, Barbara Zaborowska, aimed to 'open' the building to new uses for its own protection. They undertook a study of the building and mounted an event in Radzanów's community hall to raise the building's profile in the village and further afield (JHE 2016). The list of attending guests included the local priest, a Polish national government representative from the hard-right Law

1 Much of my published writing on this subject is non-fiction and autobiographical, but in 2019 I published a novel, *The Girl Who Stole Everything,* set in Radzanów and Vancouver (Ravvin 2019), which linked travel and research with personal concerns related to Jewish identity and history.

and Justice Party, FODZ representatives from Warsaw, and me, the lone descendant of Jewish Radzanowers, one generation removed by my Canadian birth. My role in the afternoon event was to talk about the pre-war Jewish community, which I presented in English, accompanied by a Polish translation by a capable interpreter from Warsaw. After the event some of us entered the synagogue building, with its ruined interior – the ark and other decorative work having been stripped, taken to the cemetery, and burnt by the occupying Germans. Later we gathered at a nearby skansen – an outdoor history museum, with buildings and artifacts meant to recall the area's past – for an outdoor meal prepared by a group of history reconstructionists who were prone to dressing up as Napoleonic-era gendarmes, old-time Polish farmers, or faux Jews. I sat next to the wife of a manager from Cedrob, a large local poultry-raising company, who supported a preliminary plan of repairs for the synagogue. After dinner, two young Radzanowers told me that friends of theirs now owned my family's former house, just off the market square. I did not press for the opportunity to visit the house where my mother and her mother had been born. I cannot properly explain why I took this approach but will live with this decision and accept that there will forever be a missing piece in the puzzle of recovery.

On my first visits to Radzanów, I focused on the area around what had once been the market square, named for Marshal Józef Piłsudski, and near to the synagogue, with the adjacent wooden houses, tethered now to electric wiring, their orchards of geraniums, and tattered curtains filling the window frames. On a recent visit, the skills of my guide led to discoveries related to life in Radzanów and to the general atmosphere around Jewish heritage in contemporary Poland. In 2023, my driver and interpreter was Witold Wrzosiński, director of Warsaw's sprawling Okopowa Street Jewish cemetery, where pre-war history, ongoing burials, and negotiations around governmental cultural policies form the challenges he tackles in his working life. Before Wrzosiński took the job at Okopowa, he was a tour guide, working on a field guide to Polish Jewish cemeteries for Polish readers (Wrzosiński 2016). At Okopowa he oversees the much-visited burial sites of I. L. Peretz, Ida Kamińska, Ludwik Zamenhof, S. Y. Ansky, to name a few, and a host of *ohel*s, mausoleums marking the burial places of religious figures, which attract visits by the faithful all year round. Wrzosiński's willingness to drive me to Radzanów was a piece of good fortune. As we travelled up from Warsaw, I learnt about ongoing challenges at Okopowa – including the efforts by the Law and Justice government to tie heritage funding for the cemetery to the kinds of memorials it deemed worthy. Wrzosiński negotiated with the staff at the Radzanów mayor's office, fetched the key to the synagogue, and then drove us down *ulica* Górna to visit the burial ground that had served the pre-war Jews of the village. Though one can find it described in various post-

war accounts of sites in need to attention, it remains unfenced, without any remaining *matzevot* (grave stones) and unmarked by any memorial (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. The historic burial ground in Radzanów, 2023. © Norman Ravvin.

Discussions in Canada about unmarked burials at residential schools, which came to the fore in the spring of 2021 (Meisner 2021), drew attention to the fact that I, too, had an unmarked burial ground in my heritage. Like sites at the Kamloops Residential School in British Columbia, where more than 200 unmarked graves are thought to lie, at Radzanów the dead have not been recognised; neither have the perpetrators who destroyed the cemetery. The location is not marked as a 'heritage' site. You could call it orphaned land, or stolen land. In a number of different ways, it is a crime scene. Established in the mid-1700s, the graveyard covered 7,500 square metres by World War II. In the spring of 1940, the occupying German army destroyed all burial markers and surrounding structures. Gravestones were destroyed, stolen, or used as paving stones, as in some nearby villages; one is said to be retained in the wall of a local school. The non-Jewish Pole named Ząbkowski, who maintained the graveyard and worked as its gravedigger, was murdered at the time of the cemetery's destruction (Altman n.d.). Documentation suggests that the Germans used the burial ground as a killing site for some of those incarcerated in the nearby Mława ghetto. The site of the burial ground, as far as one can recognise its current perimeter, has shrunk by as much as four fifths owing to development along its margins (Altman n.d.).

Why the Radzanów cemetery has remained at all, in such a sad and unattended condition since the war, seems a mystery, though it is likely that lo-

cals could tell at least some of that tale. Many Jewish cemetery sites in Poland have been recovered, fenced, and marked with commemorative plaques and monuments. These now represent straightforward heritage sites and places where descendants can visit their ancestral past. An early version of this work, undertaken in the communist era, exists at Mława where the pioneering Nissenbaum Family Foundation took partial responsibility for the restoration, as it did with other early projects. A host of funds and organisations, including FODZ, remain dedicated to maintaining abandoned Jewish cemeteries in Poland. A long-standing and impressive example of these efforts is the 'To Bring Memory Back' project organised by the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw, which motivates schools in towns and villages to involve students in the repair of cemeteries (AJHIP 2018).

All of this demonstrates the challenges related to repairing and properly marking Radzanów's historic burial site. During the first years of my interest in the village, I did not focus on the burial ground. But more recently my interest has grown, following the confirmation by one of my uncles that at least two of our relatives are buried there. These are my mother's paternal grandfather and his eldest son, both of whom died of natural causes before the outbreak of the war. They carried my mother's maiden name, Eisenstein.

Discussions with various historical organisations and correspondence with the Chief Rabbi of Poland, Michael Schudrich, have not led to concrete outcomes.[2] Though the village claims the land on which the burial ground sits, I have seen no documentation explaining how it passed from pre-war Jewish ownership to general communal property. It is the Chief Rabbi, the chief ritual expert in the country, who is responsible for staking out the ritual sanctity of a desecrated site. The mayor of Radzanów has stated his willingness to clear discarded farm implements and scrap that sit at the edge of the burial ground and to distribute a message to Radzanowers and others in the area via the village web site requesting the return of any gravestones they might have, anonymously if necessary.[3] As of this writing no grave markers have surfaced.

For over twenty-five years, I have involved myself in Jewish Polish heritage as I tried to become part of Radzanów village life. Throughout this time,

2 My correspondence with Schudrich alerted him to the fact that the Radzanów burial ground was unmarked. He corresponded with representatives at Radzanów about the matter, without results.

3 The public notice was as follows: 'Szanowni Mieszkańcy Gminy Radzanów, Żydowski potomek przedwojennych rodzin radzanowskich zwraca się za pośrednictwem urzędu do mieszkańców naszej gminy „aby każdy kto wie o pozostałości macew/nagrobków z przedwojennego cmentarza, zwrócił je anonimowo, jeśli czułby taką potrzebę. Proces zwrotu może być zorganizowany nieformalnie [...] odzyskanie kamieni nagrobkowych przyspieszy możliwość naprawy i godnego oznaczenia miejsca pochówku'. Bliższych informacji w w/w sprawie udziela Sekretariat urzędu pok. nr 23.'

dramatic shifts have taken place in Polish political and social life, some of them only recognisable in hindsight. My earliest visits in the late 1990s revealed a hint of what I would call post-Soviet fiasco: at the same time that westernising political and cultural trends were gaining momentum, the Soviet years retained a subtle influence over personal interactions and institutions – even in such seemingly insignificant places such as the front desk of a student hotel. Old authoritarian ways of asserting dominance and resistance to independent motivation that might reek of 'western individualism' would suddenly erupt. Post-Soviet Poland was at times a kind of absurdist theatre that one had to contend with, considering that the power base supporting it had evaporated. In those years, travel in Poland had elements of dreamlike surprise; the country's post-war past lingered in unexpected ways. Many of the remarkable monuments and commemorative sites dedicated to pre-war Jewish history were not yet in place. The dereliction of the two Radzanów sites, alongside the large graveyard memorial at Mława, represented the status quo response to Polish Jewish historical memory. I experienced these sites on my own, accompanied only by my guide-translator, as a tourist-scholar-writer might, recording and photographing them for my own purposes.

It was on later visits that I contacted representatives of heritage organisations in an effort to have an impact on my own ancestral places by seeking a use for the synagogue and the appropriate marking of the burial ground. It took a while for these efforts to show results. My meeting with Monika Krawczyk, then head of FODZ, left me with an unsettled feeling of misdirection. Our discussions were unfocused and I was unable to convince her to make resources available for restoring the Radzanów sites.[4] Krawczyk's successor, Piotr Puchta, who took over the position in 2019, proved to be an able and open collaborator as he honoured FODZ's responsibility for the synagogue in Radzanów. FODZ was obliged, for instance, to buttress the synagogue's outer wall when roadworks on Piłsudski Square damaged it.

It was through my discussions with FODZ representatives, as well as with Witold Wrzosiński, that I came to understand recent trends and challenges in the effort to manage Polish-Jewish properties left ownerless after the war: finished restoration projects are few and far between; major projects on significant buildings take years to complete; the general interest and funds for renovations of derelict buildings are declining; and the overall number of Jews who visit their ancestral places decreased dramatically during the Covid pandemic and has not recovered since. It is likely that in the near future no new cohort will be interested in undertaking this kind of travel or in engaging in the kind of philanthropic efforts undertaken by survivors and their children during the post-communist decades.

4 Krawczyk later moved on to more public-facing roles related to Jewish heritage in Poland. After the Law and Justice party lost power in 2023, she was dismissed from her position as director of the Jewish Historical Institute in 2024 (JHE 2024).

In the intervening years, the options for Jewish heritage travel in Poland have improved dramatically, as centres of attraction – including Auschwitz with its state museum; the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw's Muranow neighbourhood; and Kraków's Kazimierz district with the nearby Oskar Schindler's Enamel Factory museum – attract audiences and philanthropic support. These major locations alone provide an array of historical and local contacts for international and Polish visitors. The centrality of Auschwitz in the mainstream public narrative of the Holocaust; the intactness and appealing scale and character of historic Kazimierz; and the opening of POLIN in 2013, a truly internationally inspired project, all point to the future of heritage travel in Poland.

POLIN is a notable success, dwarfing Nathan Rapoport's adjacent monument to the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, a significant memorial to the Holocaust. The POLIN Museum's site, once a large park surrounded by communist-era housing developments, is on a street named for ghetto fighter Mordechai Anielewicz, with modest commemorative plaques dating from as early as 1946. Visitors sitting on the plinth of the Rapoport monument, with its Yiddish, Hebrew, and Polish plaques, can watch all sorts of groups enter the POLIN museum.[5] These include large groups of Polish school kids and North American and Israeli tour groups, whose guides lead them from the sculpture of Jan Karski to the path honouring Irena Sendler, saviour of children in the Warsaw Ghetto. Upon entering POLIN, an impressive array of Polish Jewish heritage presents itself, even as the exhibition highlights a distinctive, even idiosyncratic focus: Jewish life in Poland over the course of some thousand years, rather than Jewish death in Poland at the hands of the Germans. Yet, however much I appreciate each visit to POLIN, and to a lesser extent to Kazimierz (to Auschwitz I have not gone, and will not go), the success of the museum contributes to the decrease of people exploring the country independently in search of their ancestral connections.

If people do make the trip to their ancestral place, they do it, for the most part, only once. Yet repeat visits are the best way to understand how Poland is changing and how these changes affect the potential for Jewish memory travel and tourism. On my first visit I encountered people who retained pre-war memories, as well as what can be called lore, heard from parents and grandparents. During subsequent visits I focused on the potential for restoring neglected sites and met with village administrators. It was on a visit in 2023 that I was forced to face the first substantial outward change in Radzanów in more than twenty years – the transformation of the square's

5 The text on the plaques can be translated as 'The Jewish People – its fighters and martyrs'. As was appropriate in 1948, the monument's designers placed the text in Yiddish at the centre, with Polish on the left and Hebrew on the right. Groups often leave flowers at the base of the monument, choosing to place them in front of the Yiddish plaque, as if that version has no audience. When I visit, I make sure the Yiddish version is legible.

character as a communist-era time capsule of pre-war Polish Jewish life. Government funding had allowed the central square to be remodelled, which included the creation of a small pond not far from the synagogue, along with landscaping, a miniature walkway, benches, and, of all things, a fountain that spouted water. To me, the communist-era square, overgrown and a little seedy, was preferable to this European Union-style upgrade. Though the communist era's neglect was not an expression of sympathy towards Jewish history, it did, as it precluded change, prevent the removal of pre-war structures in favour of new developments. The transformation included the replacement of once-Jewish wooden houses, which for some eighty years had been owned by locals, by generic boxy, stuccoed two-storey suburban 'villas' of a style found throughout the country. Though the Jewish 'heritage' of Radzanów remains visible, especially because the synagogue still stands, the fuller sense of a pre-war Jewish village that I had encountered a few years earlier was fading from view.

If one is dedicated, haunted, or simply interested in these shifts over time, changes like this can lead to strange, even extreme ideas. I had one: if the houses of Radzanów Jews murdered during the Holocaust were gradually disappearing (Fig. 3), should I not look into the option of buying one of them, so that at least one house on Piłsudski Square would, at least in my lifetime, hedge against the trend? How many złotys would it cost? Could the house become a counterpart to the synagogue, in whose view it sits, and then, too, a part of a larger project of preservation and recovery in the village? This led me to consider my contacts at FODZ and elsewhere; perhaps I could find others interested in such a scheme.

Figure 3. Wooden house near Piłsudski Square, Radzanów, 2023. © Norman Ravvin.

Radzanów is a full and complete story in its own right. The stories of the lives of its Jews before the war are in great need of being told; their torture and murder in the ghettos and at Auschwitz is a worthy subject; as is the Jew-less ache of the post-war years under cynical, thieving, nationalising Soviet-style apparatchiks. Still, there are potential future chapters. After twenty-five years, my engagement has yet to lead to any substantial restoration. I have become part of the life of the village with my ramblings, my savvy guides, my letters to the mayor in Polish, rendered by friends dedicated to the cause. I have encountered rust-red hens at the burial ground and seen the long cracks on the synagogue's interior walls caused by the development of Piłsudski Square. Future visits may signal new possibilities, so I remain vigilant, ready to return, ready to be surprised, but also ready to be disappointed. One thing is guaranteed, though: when I am there next, the Jewish population of Radzanów will increase by 100%.

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Ambient Landscapes and Minority Heritage: Representing Jewish Histories in the United Kingdom

Yulia Egorova

Abstract:

Stemming from a larger study aimed at considering emic views of heritage at the grassroots level of British Jewish communities, this article explores the topic of minority agency through a discussion of the different ways in which Jewish British citizens would like to see Jewish history and culture represented in the cities of the United Kingdom. Drawing upon anthropological literature on the agency of landscapes and material objects and on the notion of ambience understood as the background cultural/material environment, I focus on my interlocutors' views about visual representations of this heritage and put forward two interrelated sets of arguments. First, I suggest that my conversation partners imbue spaces pertaining to Jewish heritage with agency to inform the wider community about Jewish history. Second, I propose that their sense of belonging to British society and the overall sense of well-being are in turn affected by the agentive capacities of these sites, some of which are visually prominent whilst others are hidden from sight or unmarked.

Key words: Jewish heritage, United Kingdom, agency, ambience

I met Claire at a workshop on British Jewish heritage. I was at the beginning of a study exploring the way Jewish history is presented in different curatorial spaces in the United Kingdom (UK) and had organised a workshop at the Manchester Jewish Museum with the volunteers of the museum and other Jewish residents of Manchester interested in the topic. During the discussion, the participants were invited to reflect on what they experienced as examples of good or deficient practice of local tourist boards and general museums in engaging with the histories of Jewish communities. After the workshop, several participants granted me a follow-up interview and Claire was amongst them. She was born and grew up in Manchester and in our conversation reflected on what in her view would be the best way of representing Jewish history in the city and particularly in the neighbourhood of Cheetham Hill, where the museum was located:

> *My grandparents lived here. My mum was brought up here. I remember my grandparents' house till I was about ten. And I remember the area really well. There was a number of synagogues there. They're all now warehouses, food places [...] Some of them are takeaways and stuff like that, which is quite sad [...] There used to be a regular tour of Jewish history here. It was*

> *very interesting, and it went around Cheetham Hill, which is where Jewish families lived. The boundary was four main roads around the area [...] I think it would be great to bring that back [...] And not just for the benefit of Jewish people.*

Claire explained that Cheetham Hill was once home to Jewish residents, many of whom were first- and second-generation migrants,[1] and in the twenty-first century the area still had a significant migrant population stemming from communities who arrived in the UK in the second half of the twentieth century. Indeed, Cheetham Hill is now home to a plethora of communities tracing their origins to the Caribbean, South Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and Eastern Europe. Claire said that the Manchester Jewish Museum, which opened in a building of a former synagogue, was an example of a very good way to honour the heritage of Jewish Mancunians – to turn an abandoned house of worship into a cultural site rather than a shop or a warehouse, as had happened with some other buildings that had formerly housed synagogues. And such buildings did not need to serve only the Jewish community, she said. They could be cultural centres that would support the local migrant population of Cheetham Hill, as long as the Jewish history of these buildings was acknowledged.

Stemming from a larger study aimed to consider the diversity of emic views of heritage at the grassroots level of British Jewish communities, this article explores the topic of minority agency through a discussion of the different ways in which Claire and my other conversation partners would like to see Jewish history and culture represented in UK cities. It focuses on their views about visual representations of this heritage and argues that what transpires in the reflections of my interlocutors is an understanding of the sites of Jewish material culture that imbues them with agency to educate broader publics about Jewish history, to enhance the well-being of Jewish residents of the city, and to serve local communities. As the earlier quote from Claire suggests, these reflections also convey a desire to reclaim the agentive capacities of sites that have lost the visibility of their Jewish history and to make them a more prominent feature of the visual built environment of British cities.

The ethnographic part of the article builds on two sources. One of them comprises the material from a focus group convened at the Manchester Jewish Museum and ten interviews conducted with the participants of the focus group and other respondents whom I met during the course of my project. My research participants had an interest in Jewish heritage, identified as persons of Jewish ancestry, and lived in or had a family connection to Manchester or Newcastle-Gateshead. The choice of the geographic location for the study was based on my long-term research in Manchester, my collaborative work with the Manchester Jewish Museum, and my personal con-

1 For a discussion of Jewish migration into Cheetham Hill and Manchester more broadly, see Kasstan (2019: 49–71).

nection to North East England (I am an anthropologist based in Durham). This allowed me to acquire a familiarity with initiatives in preserving and representing Jewish heritage in the region and to meet participants who volunteered to take part in my study. My interviewees were not professionally involved in Jewish heritage projects or museums (though some of them worked professionally in the broader heritage sector) but, at different points in their lives, had had voluntary roles at organisations associated with Jewish heritage, history, and culture. In the article I particularly focus on the interviews conducted with Alex, Alice, Claire, Daniel, and Erica, whom I had an opportunity to interview extensively and four of whom were my long-term conversation partners.[2]

My analysis was also informed by my experience of following Jewish heritage walking maps and tours developed in the past several years in the UK. In doing so, I particularly drew on the project titled 'Unlocking North East Jewish Heritage' led by the Tyne and Wear Archives in Newcastle Upon Tyne in collaboration with local Jewish communities. I chose this project for its geographic location and because it was illustrative of possible pathways for reclaiming those parts of the material and aesthetic landscape of British cities which are associated with the less known or visible dimensions of British Jewish history.

In exploring the agentive capacities of spaces of Jewish heritage, I draw on different bodies of anthropological literature that have engaged the topics of agency, heritage, and curated sensory environments. Anthropologists have for a long time argued that the agency of non-human entities deserves analytical attention and that people tend to attribute agentive action to objects in a variety of ways (Gell 1998; Küchler and Carroll 2020; Layton 2003). Germane for this article, ethnographic interventions have been made into the study of the effect that the aesthetics and materiality of landscapes and built environments can have on our well-being (Bender 2006; Laviolette 2011; Tilley 2006; Tilley and Cameron-Daum 2017) and the study of landscapes as sites of contestation. Paying analytical attention to differences in how built environments and sites of historical heritage are perceived, particularly by minoritised groups, features strongly in a growing scholarship focused on memorialisation and heritage conservation practices that stem from colonial, postcolonial, and post-conflict contexts (Basu 2009; Bryant 2014; Hicks 2020; Macdonald 2009; Mookherjee 2022; Navaro-Yashin 2009; Slyomovics 2024; Von Oswald and Tinius 2020) including contexts pertaining to Jewish history (Berlinger and Von Bernuth 2024; Crowdus 2017; Everett 2024; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2016; Lehrer 2013, 2020).

With this article I contribute to these bodies of literature by making two sets of arguments. First, I suggest that my interlocutors imbue spaces as-

2 For the purposes of protecting my interlocutors' anonymity, I changed their names and some of the details of their interview accounts.

sociated with Jewish heritage with agency to inform the wider community about Jewish history. Second, I propose that their sense of belonging to British society and their overall sense of well-being are affected by the agentive capacities of these sites, some of which are visually prominent whilst others are hidden from sight, unmarked, or long gone. In this respect, my analysis also builds upon anthropological interventions into the notion of ambience, understood as part of the visible but also of the cultural/material background environment. In the following sections I draw on Matthew Engelke's (2012, 2013) work on ambient faith, thematised as a sensorially perceptible part of public religion, and Sami Everett's (2020) theorisation of ambiance diaspora, which highlights the sensorial dimension (amongst others) specifically of the minority experience. I argue that what my interlocutors understand as potentially conducive for their sense of belonging in the UK is seeing Jewish heritage represented not just in a visible way but also in one that positions it as part and parcel of its surroundings, allowing it to be conspicuous and part of the background urban environment at the same time.

In the group discussion and the interviews, I invited my research participants to share their experiences of encountering representations of Jewish history in museums, galleries, open air displays, and historical heritage sites. As I demonstrate below, evident in their responses is a wish to ensure that these spaces comprise, where appropriate, visible elements of the aesthetics and materiality stemming from British Jewish histories. In the following two sections, I discuss their reflections on encounters with representations of Jewish history and culture and the impact these had made on them. I then focus on the way they see the relationship between Jewish heritage and that of other minoritised groups in the UK.

Silent spaces

My question about examples of best practice in representations of Jewish heritage would often be followed by silence, as most of my conversation partners needed time to recall their experiences of seeing artifacts related to Jewish history in British venues other than the Manchester Jewish Museum, the only Jewish museum that was open in the UK at the time of writing.[3] Some would note experiences from temporary exhibitions in museums and galleries they had occasionally attended. Several participants talked about experiences that they thought were disappointing. For instance, Alice told me how, on holiday in a city which had a medieval history, she had gone on a tour of the cathedral where she saw a painting that made her think about the medieval history of the Jewish community of that city. Yet the guide could not give

3 At the time of writing, the Jewish Museum London was in the process of working towards finding a new permanent home. In the meantime it was operating online and by exhibiting items from its collections in other venues (Jewish Museum London 2025).

a satisfactory answer to her question on the history of Jewish presence there. This is how she described her overall impression of the visit:

> *I thought the cathedral was great. You know, full of medieval Christian wealth and importance. […] So, there was a guide who was taking us around the Cathedral. It was a small party of us. There were some paintings on the wall, I can't remember exactly what it was […] which prompted me to think about the Jewish history of the city in the Middle Ages. I am not sure if it was a picture of a Jewish person, maybe not. But it was something about moneylending. And I asked the guide about the Jewish history of the city, prompted by the picture. And he sort of said, 'Oh, it's not a very good history.' He did not know a lot, and I didn't either […] But clearly there was a history of medieval anti-Semitism in the city, but none of that was memorialised. It made me feel a bit awkward for asking the question […] Like, why would I be interested.*

Alice then told me that she had a very different experience when she recently went on holiday to a town in central Europe. On a tour of the town, she was pleasantly surprised to see that it involved a trip to the Jewish quarter of the city:

> *The tour guide just stopped by the Jewish quarter and said, 'I am going to take you on a tour of this neighbourhood. This is the history of the local Jewish community.' And it was all named as it was. Somehow it made me feel included. Actually somebody acknowledging, 'You were part of that story.' And during that other visit [in England], there was a lot of awkwardness in that encounter. The guide was not expecting my question, he was embarrassed and under-informed. I was under-informed and feeling disturbed about feeling on the margins, wanting to know more. But there was definitely a sense that this was something people did not want to dwell on giving you the history of the cathedral. But this was important for me because I am a Jew.*

Later in the conversation Alice provided an example of some of the better practice in acknowledging and memorialising the anti-Jewish violence in medieval England: the recent efforts at the refurbished Clifford Tower in York, where the town's Jewish community had been massacred in 1190, to include visual signposting referencing Jewish history: 'I used to live in the area and I would sometimes come to York before the Clifford Tower was redeveloped and think about what had happened. I think there was a plaque there at the time, but it was very, very small,' Alice said.

Daniel, a young professional in his twenties, also noted that he felt a personal connection to the way Jewish history was represented in museums and at heritage sites:

> *If you ask me specifically about the UK, to be honest, the first examples that come to mind are not very positive. There is so much focus on the Holocaust, but other dimensions of Jewish heritage are not very well represented. For instance, I have been to general museums and seen collections dedicated to medieval history of England, and you would think that they would mention Jewish history, but they don't [...] And I want to see it because it is my culture [...] I guess it is all about the context and it is important to make sure that other groups are represented too [...] Maybe I am unfairly placing an expectation on something where there is not a relevant link to the display. I try to moderate this expectation, but sometimes you encounter parts of English history shown in a museum where you would think Jewish history was relevant, and it is a shame that it is not there.*

Like Alice, Daniel told me that my question made him think about a visit to a Jewish heritage site he made during a trip to a European city, though in his case the encounter with the site and its reception of the local public was not unproblematic:

> *They showed us this beautiful old synagogue, which is now a museum. It used to be within the limits of the old city, and it was all built over [by newer buildings]. It was so lovely, and the guides there were really knowledgeable about it. But then I remember talking to somebody literally down the road from this little museum, and they had no idea that it used to be a synagogue. And I thought, how can you not know it, your business is right next to this synagogue, and you are here all the time [...] So, the visibility of Jewish heritage is an issue and the knowledge of it is an issue too.*

In considering the relationship between persons and objects, anthropologists have made a call to focus on the sensorial dimension of human life, to reconceptualise perception away from a notion of subjective experience and instead to thematise it as a relationship between a perceiving subject and a world of material objects (Hirschkind 2006: 2832). As Tilley and Cameron-Daum (2017: 10) have observed in a study of the anthropological significance of landscapes, our surroundings offer different possibilities and potentialities for different groups: they act as 'structures of feeling, outcomes of social practice, products of colonial and postcolonial identities and western gaze, bound up with class divisions, property and ownership, outcomes of

the contemplative sublime or places of terror, exile and slavery'. Indeed, in the accounts of Alice and Daniel, representations of Jewish heritage have the capacity to affect their sense of belonging to European societies and therefore their sense of overall personal well-being. The splendour of the medieval cathedral, which Alice noted during her tour with admiration and respect and which was an important and initially positive part of her visit to the city, was affected by a painting that reminded her of the history of anti-Semitism, even if in her view it did not register explicit anti-Semitic content. This effect would not have incontrovertibly tainted her experience of the cathedral if the guide had given a more satisfactory answer to her question or if the Jewish history of the city had been visually acknowledged through appropriately informed signposting. Indeed, for her the Clifford Tower initiative was a meaningful step forward and an improvement over the previous attempt at memorialisation through a barely visible plaque. At the cathedral, Alice's discomfort at the sight of the painting was exacerbated when the guide's short and awkward answer made her feel embarrassed about having raised a question about Jewish history and feeling a connection to this history in the first place.

Daniel's story of a trip to the synagogue museum at first blush could have offered a counterpoint to Alice's experience but fell short of doing so. For him, the positive effect of the visit and of his interactions with knowledgeable guides at the museum was undone when he realised that the 'built over' structure of the old synagogue was only 'visible' as a site of Jewish history for those who already knew about it; it was entirely invisible to everyone else, even those working in nearby buildings and walking past it every day. A tour that for Daniel started as an exciting and positive encounter with a heritage space left him with a sense of disappointment so acute that he shared this experience with me as an example of unfortunate rather than exemplary practice in representing Jewish culture.

The question of the visibility of Jewish heritage came up also in my conversation with Erica, who pointed both to the importance of making sure that it was unmissable for the wider community and of paying particularly careful attention to how it was presented for non-Jewish audiences. Erica said she was wary of seeing Jewish artifacts in general museums:

> *It is one thing when you go to a Jewish museum, but when Jewish history is on general display and non-Jewish people are more likely to see it, it is different. I remember once a colleague telling me, 'You know there is a Jewish exhibition in the cinema round the corner!' It made me feel strange. It does not feel right seeing Jewish culture at a random exhibition, as if it was not a living thing.*

Congruently with Miranda Crowdus's analysis in this special issue, which takes an emic Jewish perspective to question top-down practices of turning elements of Jewish cultural legacy into authorised heritage (see also Crowdus forthcoming; Kagan and Crowdus forthcoming), Erica did not find it empowering to see the Jewish tradition represented in what in her view was a random curatorial space not connected to Jewish history. She rather felt that sites with a connection to the Jewish history of British cities needed to be visually acknowledged, and seeing such acknowledgment was personally important for her.

During our conversation, Erica and I looked at an online map of Jewish heritage sites of the neighbourhood where she lived. I had made a lot of use of the map to explore the buildings that had housed former synagogues in the region and appreciated the way it indexed spaces associated with Jewish history that had been demolished or completely redeveloped. Erica clicked on a dot on the map that pointed to a well-known industrial area. A brief description of its early history that popped up explained that the business it had developed from had been established by a Jewish family. 'I know about this,' Erica said. 'I live close to this place, and it makes me feel good to know that it has Jewish history. There aren't any historical signs acknowledging it on the real site, though.' Erica said the map I was showing to her was a good idea, but it would only work for people like her who were already interested in Jewish history.

> *Wherever I travel, I go and check out Jewish heritage sites. But this map would not make these sites more visible for the general public. This is a shame. Our region is a melting pot of different migrant groups. This has been the case for quite a long time, and this needs to be acknowledged.*

Erica's words signal a desire to draw attention to the historical diversity of the north of England that she felt could be brought out in visible ways through a more appropriate signposting of the built environment of her neighbourhood. Whilst she saw online maps as good tools, she felt that they did not have the capacity to reach and inform those publics who did not have an initial awareness of the history of Jewish communities in the region. Jewish heritage sites that were only signposted as such on an online map but that did not correspond to the observable materiality of the built environment were not part of the ambient landscape of the city. In her view, they therefore did not have full agency to educate the wider community, and their capacity to enhance the well-being of the Jewish residents and visitors to the city, whilst not entirely non-existent, was nevertheless limited. The Jewish histories of these spaces remained hidden and silent. As I discuss later, it may be argued that, to have the power to affirm an alternative cultural ambience, these sites would need to have the visibility that is hard to miss.

'Unmistakably a synagogue'

'Unmissable' is the first word that comes to mind when one drives up to the Ryhope Road Synagogue in Sunderland. The synagogue was built in 1928, designed by the Newcastle-based Jewish architect Marcus Kenneth Glass. Born Yekusiel Glaz in Riga, Latvia, in 1887, he was a young child when his family moved to Newcastle in the 1890s. He later went on to have a successful career in architecture (Kadish 2015: 223). This is how Glass described the style and location of the Sunderland synagogue, which is considered to be one of the most notable examples of his work:

> *The site is a fine one situated in the best part of Sunderland and has frontages to Ryhope Road, a wide tree-lined thoroughfare [...] The dressings would be of artificial stone and the Hebrew inscription over the main entrance would be of gilt and coloured mosaic. The front elevation would be surmounted by stone 'Ten Commandment' tablets [...] Generally, the building has been designed in a free Byzantine style, with an endeavour to give it character, that it should be unmistakably a Synagogue, and be worthy of the Congregation it would represent. (quoted in Levy 1956: 147)*

Described in architectural literature as 'vigorous and decorative' (Pevsner, cited in Kadish 2015), the building has become a 'Heritage at Risk' site following the closure of the synagogue in 2006 after the Jewish community had largely moved out of Sunderland. The building now stands empty, but its status as a Grade II listed site prevents it from being demolished (Gillan 2021).[4] Another prominent site designed by Glass in North East England and built in a similar style is the former Jesmond Synagogue in Newcastle, which was initially converted into a school and later into a block of flats. Its sister synagogue, the Clapton Federation Synagogue in London, also designed by Glass in a similar style, was demolished in 2006, the year when the Ryhope Road Synagogue was closed (Kadish 2015: 221).

Ivan Kalmar observes in his work on synagogues built in the Moorish style[5] that houses of worship constructed by minoritised communities reflect not only their religion but also their struggle to define their status in respect of the majority faith and the secular polity where majority and minority populations live together. Synagogues built in the striking Moorish style could, therefore, be seen to be a result of Jewish communities' endeavour to state through an architectural landmark their rights and achievements, as well as

4 Grade II listed buildings are properties in England that have been designated as being of special historical or architectural interest.

5 Moorish style is an architectural innovation which emerged in Germany in the 1830s and continued to be popular in Jewish communities throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century.

success at integrating into the mainstream society, coupled with a desire not to lose their specificity (Kalmar 2013: 171; see also Kalmar 2001).

Arguably, Glass's synagogues are a good illustration of Kalmar's observation. Sharman Kadish describes Glass's three main synagogues in her guide to Jewish heritage in Britain and Ireland as having 'a striking cinematic art deco style' featuring large stained glass Magen David roundels at both ends of the buildings (Kadish 2015: 223).[6] Designed in a fashion that combines art deco, Byzantine, and Moorish styles, Glass's synagogues were meant to be, as he put it when writing about the Ryhope Road building, 'unmistakably' Jewish houses of worship, projecting a sense of community agency and altering the visual ambience of the neighbourhoods where they were built – with the Sunderland synagogue situated on the thoroughfare in the best part of the town.

In addition to the Ryhope Road Synagogue, I visited ten other former synagogue buildings and sites where synagogues had been demolished or redeveloped, using the online map produced by the 'Unlocking North East Jewish Heritage' project. The buildings now housed a wide range of venues including offices, flats, churches, shops, and other commercial enterprises. Some still had recognisable signs of their original purpose, such as Magen David symbols on the outside walls – a particularly visible one found on a synagogue in Newcastle, a Victorian terrace that Marcus Glass had converted into a synagogue, imparting his own style onto it (Kadish 2015: 227). The former synagogue in South Shields – which, though built after Glass's death, counts as his legacy as it was built with the use of his designs (Kadish 2015: 230) – now houses several studios. As if in tribute to his wish to make Jewish community architecture recognisable, the building's official name is 'The Old Synagogue'.

Visiting these sites brought back home to me another example of shortcomings in representations of Jewish heritage that Daniel noted in our conversation:

> *Every now and then you see old synagogues or other old buildings that have Hebrew on them. But the buildings have been repurposed and are not community spaces anymore. Actually, this is really the closest that I can think of in terms of how Jewish heritage is represented in public spaces. These are spaces that have associations with Jewish communities, but they are not embodying that because they are being used differently [...] I remember as a child I used to sometime pass by this beautiful building that used to be a synagogue and then it was converted*

6 Kadish (2015: 223) notes that Glass had an unusually successful career for a first-generation migrant of the time but died prematurely at the age of 45, which might explain why his legacy had not received the appreciation it deserved.

> *to something else. And there was no indication that this is what this building was, at least not at the time. And the only way I knew what it was, was because there was Hebrew at the front. So, sometimes the Jewish history is still there in the building, but it is not explicit.*

Of all the sites of former synagogues I visited, only the one in Jesmond, now an apartment block called 'Byzantine House', bore a plaque saying that it was originally a synagogue. The building came up in my conversation with Erica, and I asked her whether she had a view about whether former synagogues should have clear signs with an explanation of their history. At first, she was not sure whether it would be appropriate:

> *Erica: I don't know what I think about plaques.*
>
> *Egorova (YE): Do you think there was no need to put a plaque on the former synagogue in Jesmond?*
>
> *Erica: I would be too scared to put one for fear that the building will be vandalised. It is fine for me to talk about my Jewish identity, and I am very open about it. But I would not do this to a public building. I know how Jewish cemeteries get vandalised, and how my father sometimes calls me and asks to check on my grandmother's grave [...] Though if it was a building of a former synagogue, a plaque and a historical notice maybe would be a good idea [...]*
>
> *YE: Would you say then that, but for fear of vandalism, it would be all right to put signs like this on buildings?*
>
> *Erica: Yes, but for prejudice and vandalism, there would be signs everywhere. When you go to places where there is a large Jewish community, everything is much better signposted.*

In a study of the role that cassette sermons in the Middle East played in the development of Islamic ethical traditions, Charles Hirschkind (2006: 29) has suggested that perception is not merely a passive motion but an act that connects the sensory experiences of the past to the actions of the present and that 'objects are endowed with histories of sensory experience, stratified with a plurality of perceptual possibilities'. For Erica, seeing a sign bearing an acknowledgement of the Jewish history of a site simultaneously evokes a positive sense connected to the history of the region and a sense of apprehension regarding the risk of vandalism, linked to her own experience of caring for her grandmother's grave. Putting concerns about vandalism aside, Erica wanted spaces of Jewish heritage to have the agency to tell the story of the Jewish community in her neighbourhood and, in doing so, to highlight the agency of this community in shaping the history of the region and the coun-

try. At the same time, as I discuss in the following section, Erica, as well as my other interview partners, also felt that places representing Jewish heritage needed to reflect the diversity of British Jewish populations and highlight both their connection to other minoritised groups in the city and their embeddedness in the wider community.

Ambient heritage

When describing her encounters with public representations of Jewish culture, Erica pointed out that she would like them to go beyond offering images of one particular modality of Jewish religiosity:

> *You sometimes see in museums a display of a Seder or something like that, with a note that this is what Jewish people do on Sabbath. And it makes me think [...] this is not what Seder looks like in my home [...] It makes me feel awkward, particularly if the display is at a general museum where non-Jewish visitors are more likely to see it [...] And I would want them to have a fuller picture about Jews and Judaism. Maybe it's an impossible task, though. I don't know what I would put on such a display [...] maybe a video of my friends talking about what they do on Saturday or of their son going to play football.*

Similarly to Erica, Claire felt that the task of representing Jewish history at a register that would capture the diversity of Jewish experience was both complex and important. In her view, spaces associated with Jewish history also needed to have the agency to support the wider community and, particularly, the community of other migrant populations, as transpires in her answer to my question about what sites she would like to see included on a tour of the Jewish history of Manchester:

> *Actually, I am not big on [...] saying we must have this and we must have that. I think we must be doing things that are a little bit more subtle and maybe a little bit more interesting. And something that will show that Jews come in all shapes and sizes [...] That not every Jewish person is, I don't know, either Orthodox religious or a communist [...] Does it make sense? Maybe it could be part of a larger project which involves all religions [...] We could take buildings of old synagogues and other former Jewish community spaces and do something for local communities there. This is what they do at the [Manchester Jewish] Museum, showing how Jewish people came to Manchester and what their lives were like in Cheetham Hill in the nineteenth century. So, if there were other old synagogue buildings available*

> *it would be good to use them to do something about both Jewish and wider migrant experience.*

Celebrating the broader diversity of the region was also important for Erica, and in her view having minority heritage visibly acknowledged was likely to improve the lived experience of minoritised groups. This is how she continued answering my question about putting historical signs on buildings associated with Jewish history:

> *I really appreciate it that we live in a diverse part of Europe and of the UK. It makes me feel safer [...] So, if we are talking about acknowledging Jewish history, I would want to have the heritage of all migrant communities to be acknowledged too. We are here now in a historical building. Say, if somebody told me that it used to be a house of worship of, for instance, a Hindu community, I would say, this needs to be known [...] We want to change attitudes and show how diverse British cities have been for a very long time. So, yes, visible plaques with a proper historical explanation would work well for this.*

Erica would like the built environment of cities like Manchester and Newcastle to have the agency to remind every passer-by that the north of England is a diverse part of the UK and that migrant experience is an important dimension of its history. Whilst, as we saw in the previous section, seeing signs explicitly acknowledging the Jewish history of former synagogues would make Erica feel worried about anti-Semitic vandalism, being part of a diverse community makes her feel safer. Arguably, having visible, material expressions of minoritised heritage would change the aesthetics of her surroundings in ways that would enhance feelings of security and perhaps allow more room for safely indexing an explicit acknowledgment of the history of Jewish spaces as well. Similarly, for Claire, it was important that Cheetham Hill, where her mother grew up and her grandparents used to live, had a cultural landscape friendly to migrant communities.

I suggest Claire's testimony could be understood through what Engelke has called ambient faith in his study of a Christian charity, the Bible Society of England and Wales. Through exploring the efforts of his interlocutors to make religion more visible in the public sphere, Engelke highlights the significance of what he describes as a sense of ambience. In anthropological terms this notion is akin to context or culture, he argues, but it differs from them in that it conveys a more distinct understanding of what is in the background in sensorial terms. Building on Hirschkind (2006), Engelke (2012: 56) calls on anthropologists to recognise the importance of the material and sensory dimensions of community imaginings and suggests that ambience is a useful concept to think with in the study of the relationship between religion,

community, and the state. He demonstrates that for his interlocutors from the Bible Society, making religious symbols and activities a more visible part of the background environment of British cities was key to augmenting their sense of belonging to the wider society, which they experienced as overly secularised.

I propose that when Claire suggested that 'we should do something more subtle' when presenting the Jewish heritage of the area, this 'more subtle' did not mean making Jewish heritage less visible. Rather, it meant making it more ambient, in two ways: turning it into a more prominent part both of the background environment, following Engelke, and of the social and informational landscape of the neighbourhood, in a broader sense. It is important for Claire to ensure that the Jewish history of Cheetham Hill is visible through a renewed Jewish heritage tour of the neighbourhood. But what in her view would give this heritage more agency is allowing the architectural landmarks that were brought into existence by their Jewish founders to engage with the experiences of the current residents of the area, many of whom also have migrant background.

My interview partners' vision of the ideal way in which the built environment can honour British Jewish histories is also illustrative of Everett's (2020) concept of 'ambiance diaspora', understood as a sense of shared intercultural competencies and convergent references based on relational practices. Focusing on the way in France Jews and Muslims of North African descent negotiate differences and build local solidarities whilst working together in a commercial company, Everett demonstrates how these practices, which involved shared language, elements of cuisine, forms of religiosity, and work ethic, created for his interlocutors a particular background environment that engaged their sense of belonging to Maghrebi culture. Moreover, in Everett's analysis, such examples highlight that what it means to be Jewish, or Muslim, or Maghrebi cannot always be reduced to a set of sedimented imageries.

Similarly, for Claire and Erica, putting the heritage of Jewish communities in conversation with cultural specificities of other diaspora populations and allowing this heritage to have the agency to serve contemporary migrant groups would not only enhance Jewish British citizens' sense of well-being. This redevelopment would also make for a productive way of indexing the deep embeddedness of Jewish populations in their local communities and convey a fuller diversity of Jewish experience in the UK, promoting understandings of Jewish culture that go beyond the images of Jewish orthodoxies (or secularities) that circulate in the popular discourse.

At the same time, and importantly for all my interlocutors, the aesthetics and materiality associated specifically with Jewish heritage would need to be visible, durable, and explicit in these ideal urban diasporic environments.

Conclusion

The very first interview I conducted for this study was with Alex, my long-term conversation partner, who worked in the education sector and from whom I have been learning about the history of Jewish Mancunians for the past ten years. I told Alex I was starting a project on Jewish heritage and that I thought I would begin by focusing on representations of medieval Jewish history in England. I asked him whether he was familiar with any heritage sites connected with this. One episode immediately came to his mind. Back in the 1980s, he was on a trip to York with his children and went to see a memorial plaque that had been installed earlier that year on the site of a medieval Jewish cemetery. The cemetery had been discovered by archaeologists in the early 1980s at the site of what is now a multistorey car park of a Sainsbury's supermarket. 'When they cleared the car park, they found that there was this medieval Jewish cemetery underneath it,' Alex explained. 'On one of its entrances, the car park has a brick wall. And if you go through the entrance, on the right you will see a marble plaque. I think I went to see it after I learnt that it has been unveiled [...] When I later took my cousin there to see it, it was already all covered in ivy. But if you looked for it, you could find it.'[7]

The accounts of my interlocutors suggest that they would prefer for Jewish heritage to be represented in such a way that it would be visible; that it would be part of the ambient aesthetic and built environment of British cities; that one would not have to look hard for signs indexing Jewish heritage to be able to find them; and that they would not be forgotten by local authorities, left excluded from vegetation clearings on public properties. As the discussion showed, if my interviewees had any reservations about whether it would be appropriate to make Jewish heritage more visible in the UK, it was only because of their concern about vandalism.

Building on anthropological research into the agentive capacity of objects and the notion of an ambient environment, I argue that in the view of my conversation partners more visible representations of Jewish history would have a stronger agency in enhancing the well-being of Jewish residents, informing the wider community, and supporting other groups of migrant background. Visible representations would also be projecting a story about Jewish communities being part and parcel of a diverse Britain. They would signal that being Jewish means being a migrant and a local at the same time and in equal measures and thus unsettle the host versus migrant dichotomy. Finally, the material that I presented here creates room for a discussion not only about the agential capacity of material representations of Jewish heritage but also about the historical agency of Jewish communities in the UK, a discussion which would go beyond conventional reasonings about the

7 The cemetery was granted protected status in May 2025 (Hadaway-Weller 2025).

contribution that minoritised groups can (are expected to) make to the perceived host society. However, this topic would merit a separate consideration.

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From the Objects to the Actors of Restitution: Jewish Agency in the Nazi-Era Looted Art and Artefact Restitution Field

Elisabeth Becker

Abstract:

Scholarship on the restitution of art and artefacts looted during the Nazi era has predominantly focused on objects rather than the actors who have shaped this field. This article adopts an actor-oriented approach to examine the agency of Jewish cultural brokers formative to restitution processes since the 1950s. Drawing on interviews conducted with fifteen Jewish cultural brokers from 2022 to 2025 and archival research at the Leo Baeck Institute Archives in New York, it traces how Jewish actors have pioneered and transformed the restitution field. The research reveals two phases of restitution work. In the first phase (1950s–1990s), Jewish lawyers and organisations established legal frameworks for restitution claims. In the second phase (late twentieth century to the present), second- and third-generation Jewish actors shifted the field from national toward moral and global frameworks to emphasise 'just and fair solutions'. Contemporary Jewish cultural brokers understand their work as both personal heritage practice and moral obligation. They assert agency, seeking not merely the return of objects but the restoration of marginalised stories to history. This actor-centric approach reveals restitution as a processual, relational, and spatial practice of heritage-making that encompasses voice, recognition, and collective memory. By centring Jewish agency, the study demonstrates how marginalised populations can transform institutional fields, offering new perspectives on cultural heritage as an active, lived process rather than a static product of the past.

Key words: restitution, Jewish, cultural heritage, Nazi era

Introduction

On Bergheimer Strasse in Heidelberg, Germany, is a café named Sternweiler, marked by a black sign jutting out from the side of a stone building. Named after a Jewish family, the Sternweilers, who resided here a century ago, three *Stolpersteine* (stumbling stones) are emplaced outside of its entrance to mark the violent deaths of Nathalie Sternweiler, Rosita Wertheimer (born Sternweiler), and Arthur Abraham Wertheimer (Rosita's husband) following their deportation by the Nazis.[1] Sternweiler is owned by Umut Demirhan, who hails from a Turkish Alevi family, with its own history of persecution and exile.[2] It is arguably his own family history that led Demirhan to highlight the lives of the Jewish family that once lived where his café today is located,

1 *Stolpersteine* is a project of German artist Gunter Demnig. To mark victims of Nationalism Socialism, he lays small brass stones inscribed with their names, dates of birth and death, and location of death outside of their former homes.

2 The Alevis, an ethno-religious minority in Turkey, have experienced severe persecution by the state since the mid-twentieth century (Mutluer 2016).

not least of all by naming the café after it. For Demirhan, Sternweiler is more than a café. It is part of a process of inhabiting and actively contributing to the cultural heritage of the city he calls home, by narrating, conversing with, and creating space for this history.

In the autumn of 2024, I met Barani Shira Guttsman at Sternweiler. I was working on a research project tracing the agency of those I term Jewish cultural brokers involved in the restitution of art and artefacts looted during the Nazi era, including lawyers, researchers, and mediators.[3] Guttsman had moved to Berlin in 2022 to work at the Freie Universität Berlin on a project entitled 'Persecuted and Robbed: The Sultan Family and their Nazi Asset Losses'. While still based in Berlin, she was visiting Heidelberg to access archival holdings on her family, as members of her extended family had resided in the city before World War II. A Heidelberg resident had discovered these holdings in a number of long-unopened boxes in the attic of his house, on a street leading to the Odenwald, the forest abutting the city. He had given the boxes to the archivist at Heidelberg University. Guttsman's research project aims to locate and recreate the art collection of her great-great-grandfather, the Jewish Berliner Adolf Sultan, which had been looted by the Nazis. Guttsman is, however, not only a family representative on this project but also a researcher and historical excavator, dedicating herself to bringing back stories lost to Nazi-era persecution, displacement, and dispersal.

Objects rather than *subjects* of restitution have been at the centre of discussions over Nazi-era looted art and artefacts. The media has tended to focus on high-value works from the pre-eminent artists of the early twentieth century. The restitution of paintings by Renoir, Pissarro, or Klimt, for instance, has garnered the attention of a large public. This focus on objects is also reflected in the scholarly literature, which is concentrated in the disciplines of law, history, and art history. The legal field has focused on seminal court cases in national and transnational contexts, while identifying the notable limits of non-binding global law in the restitution of many objects that crossed national boundaries (Keim 2002; Hay and Hay 2017; O'Donnell 2017). Historical research has examined the contexts and motivations of looting (Fleckner 2015), how individual nation states have redressed Nazi looting in the post-Holocaust world (Barkan 2001; Campbell 2024), and the intersection of restitution and memory regimes (Diner 2003; Diner and Wunberg 2007; Rothberg 2014). And art history has largely focused on tracing the provenance of particular objects and examining the role of institutions, most notably museums, in the display of looted art (Nichols 1995; Schuhmacher 2024).

3 I use the term 'cultural broker' because not all such individuals utilise the law to broker restitution; some use non-legal mediation, research, and other means.

Behind sought-out stolen objects, however, there have always been Jewish actors seeking redress of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts – people who themselves or whose forebears had been forcibly dispersed across the globe. These actors have contributed to restitution as a process of reclamation, return, and making amends. Guttsman is but one among many whom I call Jewish cultural brokers of restitution: individuals who have devoted themselves not only personally but also professionally to the work of restitution. Whether heads of organisations, lawyers, researchers, archivists, or mediators, these Jewish cultural brokers have been present in, if not recognised as formative to, the restitution field since the mid-twentieth century.

In this article, I explicitly shift the focus of restitution research to the Jewish actors and thereby the agency of a minoritised populace in the aftermath of catastrophic loss. This is an agency that does not undermine or stand in conflict with, but rather one that arose in response to, victimhood. In so doing, I move from an object- to an actor-oriented approach to researching Nazi-era looted art and artefact restitution. Following Bortolotto (2007), I understand Jewish heritage not as a product but rather a process in the post-Holocaust world. Here restitution emerges as an active and engaged form of heritage-making, one that grants and also foments agency among particular Jewish actors in the restitution field. To make this scholarly shift entails, in part, a historiographical methodology: tracing and demarcating the role that Jewish actors have played in this field over time, from the years just after World War II until today. This shift is crucial as no systematic anthropological or sociological research has been conducted in relation to Jewish restitution actors. Such a shift thus requires a distinct disciplinary intervention, drawing on both archival research and interviews with such cultural brokers, to lay the groundwork for sociocultural research on restitution. Such an approach speaks to the ways in which stakeholders in cultural heritage actively and agentively engage with that heritage.

This article is largely based on interviews, conducted between 2022 and 2025, with fifteen Jewish cultural brokers of restitution who reside in Germany, Austria, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States of America. Many of them work across national boundaries, with offices, cases, and/or clients in multiple countries if not on multiple continents. In this article, I draw predominantly from the interviews with the following six people:

1. Barani Shira Guttsman, heir to the Sultan family collection and restitution researcher at the Freie Universität Berlin
2. Richard Aronowitz, Global Head of Restitution at the auctioneer Christie's, in London
3. Anne Webber, co-founder and co-chair of the Commission for Looted Art in Europe
4. Ned, an independent restitution lawyer in New York

5. Michael, director of restitution and lawyer for a major art auction house in New York City
6. Sara, an independent restitution lawyer in Paris, interviewed on … … 2022 in …[4]

I also draw from archival research in the Leo Baeck Archives at the Center for Jewish History, New York, and on secondary literature to illuminate how Jewish actors have chartered the direction of the field on the restitution of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts since the 1950s.[5]

Jewish agency: rethinking the twentieth-century field of restitution (1950s–1990s)

Historians have come to reference the Holocaust generation as the 'silent generation' – both as witnesses to and victims of unspeakable violence (Anderson 2003). As Hermann von der Dunk writes:

> *The war generation was the silent generation. It had been witness to the tragedy, and yet had no real knowledge of what was in progress; the architects and perpetrators of the Holocaust had concealed their intentions behind a screen of lies. The executioners* would *not speak and the victims* could *not speak. (Von der Dunk 2002: 55, emphasis in original)*

From the 1950s until today, however, Jewish actors have in fact both spoken out and acted with agency to shape and reshape a field of claims-making in response to the dispossession Jews experienced during the Holocaust. This includes the so-called first generation, that is those who experienced the Holocaust first-hand.

Exemplifying this generation, I here turn to the story of the Jewish lawyer Hans Deutsch who rose as one of the most renowned restitution lawyers in the early post-war years. Born in 1906 to Jewish Austrian parents, Deutsch fled from Vienna to Palestine in 1938; both of his parents were murdered in Auschwitz. He returned to Austria in 1953 and began to dedicate himself to seeking restitution for Jews who were dispossessed of their property during the Holocaust. In the process, Deutsch became the target of political persecution by the West German state. On 3 November 1964, the German authori-

4 Several names have been changed to preserve anonymity, except when individuals agreed for their real names to be used at all times, as in the cases of Webber, Guttsman, and Aronowitz.

5 Relevant files at the Leo Baeck Archives, Centre for Jewish History, New York (hereafter Baeck Archives) include: Ernst Wertheimer Family Collection; Restitution Claims, AR 6305/MF 876; Erich and Grete Baum Collection, AR 10782; Hugo Windmueller Collection, AR 25214; Hans Reichmann Collection, AR 2236; Walter Breslauer Collection, AR 4129; Hans Heinz Altmann Collection, AR 6294; and Ernst C. Stiefel Collection, AR 5230/MF 744.

ties arrested him on false charges of fraud. He was jailed for a year and a half and it took nine years of battles to clear his name. This was an unprecedented and unmatched attack on an early Jewish restitution figure who had sought redress for the victims of looting in the direct aftermath of the Holocaust.

While Deutsch was eventually acquitted of all crimes, his career was ruined. This scandal, referenced alternatively as 'the German Dreyfus Affair' and 'Deutschland gegen Deutsch' (Germany against Deutsch), revealed the uncertainty and danger of engaging in restitution work in the context of a post-war Europe that was in flux (Juncker 2005; United States Holocaust Memorial Museum 2007; List 2018; Gaudenzi 2023). Indeed, it was later revealed that his persecution had been orchestrated by several former leaders of the SS, the Nazi special police force.

While he became a public figure through this case, Deutsch was only one among many European Jewish lawyers who devoted themselves to restitution efforts in the early post-war years (Hoffmann 1971). This undermines the commonly held view that organised restitution efforts began only several decades after the war. Walter Schwarz was another German-Jewish lawyer who became a publicly recognised figure in these early years. Schwarz had also fled to Israel, leaving Germany after the rise of the Nazis. He returned to Berlin in 1950 and began to litigate cases for Nazi victims across the globe (Petersen 2021; Schwarz 1981). The Jewish lawyers who turned to work on restitution cases had often been trained in other, often unrelated subfields; most did so from exile in the United States, the United Kingdom, or Israel, where they had fled as a result of the Holocaust; few returned to Germany.[6] Personal exchanges and case files from numerous such lawyers can be accessed at the Leo Baeck Archives (Lowenstein 1989).

It is important to note that at the time many of these lawyers did not see themselves as restitution lawyers. They worked on restitution from various positionalities: some worked independently, others for private law firms, and some formed organisations to collaborate, such as the Berkeley Juristenkreis, a group of German-Jewish lawyers based in California (1946–1980).[7] Still others worked with or for restitution organisations that emerged in the immediate years after the war, in particular the United Restitution Organization. Since the late 1940s, the institutional terrain of the restitution of Nazi-era looted art, artefacts, and property has been made up of organisations founded and led by Jewish actors, notably including Jewish Cultural Restitution, the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization, the United Restitution Organization, the Conference on Jewish Material Claims against Germany

6 In his book *Deutsche Juristen im amerikanischen Exil (1933–1950)* the lawyer Ernst Stiefel (1991) traces the biographies and fates of German-Jewish lawyers who fled to the United States.

7 Nothing has been published on the Juristenkreis yet. Archival information is held at the Baeck Archives, Ernst Marcus (Breslau) Collection, AR 25006.

(hereafter Claims Conference), the World Jewish Restitution Organization, and the Commission for Looted Art in Europe.

The first of these organisations, the Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, emerged in April 1947 and remained active until 1952. It had the explicit goal of identifying and relocating heirless Jewish property in the American Occupied Zone of Germany (Rauschenberger 2008). Led by German-Jewish scholars – such as Hannah Arendt, Salo Baron, and Gershom Scholem – it quickly became nested under the Jewish Restitution Successor Organization. This organisation, founded in 1948, entailed a conglomerate of Jewish organisations on a transnational scale, including Jewish Cultural Reconstruction, the American Jewish Committee, the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee, the Anglo-Jewish Association, the Board of Deputies of British Jews, the Council for the Protection of the Rights and Interests of Jews from Germany, the World Jewish Congress, and numerous others (Takei 2002; Gallas 2019).[8] It focused on reclaiming heirless property in Germany and redistributing it to Jewish organisations (Lustig 2017). The United Restitution Organization, founded in London in 1948 with support from the Council of Jews from Germany (in exile), aimed to provide legal aid to the victims of Nazism. Many of the litigators involved in this organisation were German-speaking Jewish lawyers who had fled from continental Europe. The United Restitution Organization also established a German journal, *Rechtsprechung zum Wiedergutmachungsrecht*, on law and restitution, edited for over three decades by the German-Jewish lawyer Walter Schwarz (1949–1981) (Hockerts 1989; Siemens 2023). The Claims Conference was founded in 1951 and included leadership from twenty-three Jewish organisations across the globe. Its aim was both to bring about the return of looted property and objects and to seek retributive payments for Holocaust survivors (Claims Conference 2024). A resurgence of institutional activity in this field occurred in the late twentieth century. The World Jewish Restitution Organization was formed in 1993 to recover stolen properties across Europe (aside from Germany and Austria) (Clearfield 1998; Zabludoff 2007). This organisation emerged through the cooperation of a conglomerate of already established Jewish organisations seeking material redress for victims and their heirs. Finally, the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, a non-profit organisation founded in 1999, seeks to recover looted art and artefacts, using research and mediation with institutions and individuals who hold objects identified to have been looted by the Nazis. It has also increasingly become a major player in the development of policies on restitution across the globe.

8 Baeck Archives, Jewish Restitution Successor Organization Collection, AR 1485.

Jewish cultural brokers in the contemporary restitution field

As can be gleaned from this list of individuals, lawyers, and organisations, Jewish actors have been formative to the restitution of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts. Equally, they have been transformative of the restitution field. The restitution field has not developed in a linear fashion since the Holocaust, though it has generally followed a similar trajectory across the affected nation states – utilising and/or expanding national laws in order to restitute looted art and artefacts after World War II. The first phase of restitution (1950s–1990s) occurred largely through national legal regimes and means, focusing on returning objects or providing reparations equal to the value of looted objects (Bazyler and Fitzgerald 2002; Bazyler and Alford 2006; Dostal et al 2014; Campbell 2021). The late twentieth century has seen a shift in approach, marked by the coming-of-age of the second and third generations of Jews after the Holocaust. This shift has entailed interlinked globalising and moralising trends. Two major global meetings on restitution were held since: the Washington Conference (1999) and the Terezin Declaration (2007). These meetings have emphasised the need for 'just and fair solutions' for an aging generation of Holocaust survivors and their heirs. Ultimately, they framed restitution as a moral responsibility and a form of justice. Their efforts showcase the increasing internationalisation of the restitution field, owing to the forced dispersal of both persons and objects (Rowland 2013; Bazyler et al. 2019).

My interlocutors all belong to the second or third generation after the Holocaust, as children or grandchildren of the generation that experienced the Holocaust first-hand. In coming to terms with their own relationality to the Holocaust, which is still present, still haunting, those in these second and third generations have come to embody a certain form of becoming in the aftermath of this at-once personal and collective tragedy. This is true not only for the professionals in the restitution field examined here but for all who belong to these generations more broadly (Sigal 1998; Aarons and Berger 2017).

For most of my interlocutors, the desire to discover and situate themselves in relation to their family history was a major motivating factor regarding their involvement in restitution work. In trying to more fully understand and give voice to these family histories, they also zoomed outwards towards the broader collective of Jews persecuted during the Holocaust. Thus, the personal and the professional became intimately linked in the larger field of restitution work. When Michael, a restitution lawyer for an art auction house in New York, spoke to me of his work in the restitution field, he began with his family history, recounting his mother's unlikely escape from Europe. Reframing her as a person with agency – rather than solely as a victim – motivated him to work in this area. Aronowitz, in the restitution team at Christie's, spoke of his mother's experience on the *Kindertransport* – the separation of children from their families and their transport away from their

homes by the Nazis, leading to trauma of dislocation and separation – as the motivating factor for his work. As he described it in the interview, his family story and profession 'feed into and bleed into each other'. Similarly, Sara, an independent restitution lawyer in Paris, detailed her family's history, including her grandmother's internment in Auschwitz, as what had drawn her to the restitution field in spite of more lucrative opportunities in other legal specialisations. She said that her parents were initially surprised, but that she was convinced that she could have the most impact by working in this field.

While locating themselves and their identities in relation to their family histories, my interlocutors notably shifted away from seeing themselves and their generations as victims. Instead, they consistently highlighted their turn towards agency in the post-Holocaust world. 'I've grown into not wanting my identity to be based in that victimisation,' Michael explained. In his case, such a sense of agency was largely shaped by his involvement in the famous Mauerbach case, in which he refused to be cowed. The Mauerbach case emerged from a 1996 auction at Christie's of Nazi-looted artworks that had been stored at the Mauerbach monastery outside of Vienna since the war. At this auction the government of Austria intended to auction off hundreds of supposedly 'unclaimed' art objects for US$14.5 million to benefit Holocaust victims, despite the fact that the Austrian authorities were indeed able to identify the former owners of these objects (Akinsha 2009).[9] Michael described the case as follows:

> *In this Mauerbach trove, we were told to let sleeping dogs lie. It was seen as unseemly and greedy, [the] same tropes as always about Jews. But this is fucked up. This [art] is clearly looted. This is called 'heirless property'. 'Heirless' probably means they were murdered [...] I wanted to take it on as a sale. I thought it was the righteous and just thing to do. We did the sale in Vienna, and it broke the taboo about talking about these issues.*

The language that my interlocutors used to describe their motivation and influence in this field is a language not of passivity or victimhood but of giving voice – to themselves and also their forebears – through agentive action. Here, for instance, Michael broke a taboo through his choice not to remain silent but to confront the legacies of this 'heirless' property. Such an overriding of silence – *speaking* about the horrors while also *acting* to right the

9 Such practices of impunity at the level of the state, often characterised by 'grey zone[s] of justice' – and grassroots resistance to them – are also present in other contexts of rupture and transition (Sanford 2003: 393). For example, Noa Vaisman (2022) examines how grassroots protests contest impunity, while also exposing the complex entanglements in contemporary Argentina. She terms 'irreconciliation' an active response to impunity, seeking not closure but rather consistent engagement with violence and its aftermath – and in so doing 'keep[ing] the past alive' (Vaisman 2022: 112).

wrongs of history – was a narrative employed by every Jewish cultural broker whom I interviewed. As Ned, an independent restitution lawyer in New York, asked of the role of his (second) generation in both speaking and acting against such silence: 'How could our parents' paralysis be overcome? Could we somehow speak for the silenced?'

Understanding restitution in moral terms: healing the past

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Jewish cultural brokers of restitution have ushered in a new era, in which restitution work operates not only at the national but also the global level, with restitution largely framed in moral rather than solely legal terms. Through this framing of their work as 'righteous', 'just', and 'fair, these brokers of restitution have not only come to see themselves as agents rather than victims but also as moral actors, imbued with a responsibility to right the wrongs of history. For them restitution work as moral work facilitates both a healing of the past and a better future for all. In fact, they linguistically frame their work in the field in terms such as 'trying to set things right' or 'fix[ing] something in the broken world'. Such articulations reflect the central notion of 'tikkun olam' in Judaism, which means repairing the world.

Such moral terms of restitution are, on the one hand, universal. On the other, they draw on the particular position of Jewish actors in the post-Holocaust world. This includes invoking not only personal histories of persecution, dislocation, and loss but also Jewish practices and (biblical) narratives. While my interlocutors identified in various ways with Judaism and Jewish culture more broadly, the utilisation of these Jewish terms, or what Bortolotto (2007: 21) calls 'cultural expressions', transcended the ways in which they identified, whether this was as 'religious', 'non-religious', or something in-between.

For instance, Guttsman did not explicitly identify as Jewish but rather as 'human first', rooted in both her Jewish and her Hindu familial ancestries. Still, she spoke about restitution work as a Jewish practice. Following our meeting at the Sternweiler café, Guttsman and I walked to the Heidelberg University archives, to look at the personal papers of the Sultan family, which she had laid out in neat piles on a table. From one of the neatly arranged stacks, Guttsman pulled out two personal letters. The paper on which they had been written was thin but still intact, with words that remained a hundred years after they had been written. It was at this point that she spoke about Judaism and its role in her restitution work. 'I don't have to go to synagogue for my Judaism. I don't have to daven or stand up each time the Torah Ark is opened. But this right here,' she said, gesturing towards the papers, 'this is as much an act of reverence as those.' She spends long days working alone in the archives, connecting to members of her family through

their letters, personal documents, and artefacts. Sara offered a similar comparison with Jewish religious practice and restitution efforts. She drew an analogy between the increasing organisation and collaboration of Jewish cultural brokers in the global restitution field and the *minyan*, the group of people needed for communal prayer in Orthodox Judaism. 'I mean, we need ten people to pray. So those ten people need to get together. So we organise ourselves.' Throughout the interview, Sara consistently emphasised the collective action required for restitution.

Ned, too, framed the contemporary restitution field in terms of collective action among Jews and non-Jews alike. He perceived restitution not as an act of reverence (as per Guttsman's description) but rather one of atonement. He did so by invoking a parallel between restitution work and the Jewish high holiday of Yom Kippur.

> *In the Yom Kippur service, there is a point at which we stop saying 'forgive me'. We are asking God, 'forgive us'. The understanding is that we are not only asking for forgiveness for something that we, as individuals, have done. We want the strength to recognise that there are sins and not to repeat them. Redemption is in atonement. Transitional justice is in atonement.*

Interestingly, whether or not they used Jewish practices or narratives as a narrative frame, all of my interlocutors saw themselves as implicated in such atoning acts. To 'set it right, to the degree that we can', as Sara expressed it, requires continued, consistent, and collective action in the restitution field. This again speaks to the idea of cultural heritage as not only an object-oriented but also process-oriented practice – of confronting, narrating, and conversing with the past over time.

The moralising of the restitution field by twenty-first century Jewish cultural brokers must also be seen in light of the reality that most legally straightforward cases of restitution have been resolved while those that fall into a legal 'grey area' remain. As Michael explained,

> *the ones that slipped through are mainly not pictures that were literally looted but works of art in terms of forced sales. We need a more expansive notion of restitution: not just things that were stolen [but] things sold to fund life in another country or pay the German Tax [a Nazi requirement imposed on people wanting to flee Germany]. These are works sold under what claimants would say is undeniably under duress.*

Similarly, Webber, from the Commission for Looted Art in Europe, noted that the law is not always the right place in which to redress wrongs:

> *These shouldn't be legal cases, especially when the law is out of time, eighty or more years after these artworks were taken [...] Fundamentally these are moral and ethical issues, matters of justice, and should be resolved on that basis rather than through polarising and expensive litigation and the deployment of legal and technical defences to prevent restitution. Most of the time it shouldn't need to come to that. But where it does, and frequently that's the case in the USA, it means that museums spend vast amounts of their scarce resources on legal fees, and the families have to as well, and then it doesn't necessarily achieve the aim, which is to establish the facts and find a just and fair solution, as the Washington [Conference] Principles set out.*[10]

My interlocutors emphasised the need to both expand and think beyond the legal frameworks of individual nation states – again in at once global and moral terms – understanding themselves as responsible for enacting alternative processes. In the words of the post-war Jewish restitution lawyer Walter Schwarz (1959: 55): '[l]aws one can create; climate one can not; it has to emerge. The ground out of which it can blossom is human behaviour'.

Narrating history: another story?

A few months after we first met, I sat with Guttsman in another café, this time in the centre of Berlin. The red-brick building in which the café is located – a former post office – is among the few buildings that survived bombing of the street. Guttsman gifted me two books, of which one was a compendium of *Grimms Faily Tales*, which I had once read in translation as a child. Both books had belonged to her great-grandmother and were inscribed with her name, Beate Berwin. They had recently been returned to Guttsman by a bookseller in Berlin. The value of these objects – this gift – lay not in their fiscal worth but in their story, passed between us and across time. In Jewish culture, we lay stones on the graves of our dead. This too is a way of laying (metaphorical) stones, exchanging the gift of stories in order to remember that they have been here: re-inscribing those who were purposefully erased from history into our lives, keeping them alive through collective memory. In re-inscribing the dead, by tracing and re-emplacing not just stolen objects but also their attendant human stories, we are also enacting a more multicultural memory, which makes space for difference and expands the bounds

10 The Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, which took place in 1998, set up eleven non-binding principles as a framework for identifying Nazi-looted art and facilitating the return of such works to their rightful owners or heirs (Commission for Looted Art in Europe 2025). The principles were signed by forty-four countries.

of the 'we' – those who we imagine as being part of our story both today and yesterday (Becker et al. 2025).

Recent news coverage regarding the restitution of Nazi-era looted art exposed the case of Camille Pissarro's painting *Le Repos*, also called *Girl Lying in Grass*, sold under duress by a Dutch Jewish family during the Holocaust and today held at the Kunsthalle Bremen, Germany. At the centre of this story sits not the physical object of the painting but rather the actors, in particular an heir who negotiated a form of restitution different from that of the return of the work of art: the restitution of her family story to history. The headline in the *New York Times* on 13 November 2024 read: 'Their Pissarro Is Staying in Germany, but their Story Is getting Out' (Siegal 2024). In the article, Dutch restitution expert Rudi Ekkart explains the matter as follows: 'It turned out that the financial part was not the most important part to her [the heir] […] The publication and the exhibition were more important to her. That's the reason we came to this very original solution.' The solution that was found was this: the heir allowed for the painting to remain at the Bremen Kunsthalle, while the museum helped to publish a book on the heir's family, which appeared under the title *Girl in the Grass*: *The Tragic Fate of the Van den Bergh Family and the Search for a Painting* (Muller and Kool 2024).

Today's restitution work is about restoring individual and family stories to history, thereby telling a collective story that includes rather than erases the victims of Nazism. This was expressed across my interviews with Jewish cultural brokers, who pointed time and again to restorative approaches to life stories/histories as a desired outcome of their work. As Webber explained:

> *In every single one of our cases, we are writing the history of the family. Our work is about restituting not just the object that was taken, whether a painting, a drawing, a book, but about restituting the history, restoring the family and their experiences to the historical record […] the story of a family whom the Nazis intended to erase from history.*

To not return a stolen object is problematic, according to Webber, not simply because of its fiscal value or legal obligations but equally because of moral obligations, as this entails an outright denial of history:

> *In one of our current cases the looted painting represents a member of the family […] And the people who have it today are saying, 'well, this painting is in private ownership now and we can keep it, we don't have to do anything.' It starts with them saying, 'there's no evidence of what took place.' But we've done the research and there is compelling evidence of what happened, and that the family member who commissioned and owned the painting was deported and murdered. Despite this, the current*

> *possessors say, 'under the law, we have title because it's been inherited several times from the person who originally took it, and we have it in good faith.' Well, yes, under that legal system, an inheritor has no legal obligation to return. But their family has had it for over eighty years, hidden all that time, so do they really have good title, do they really have it in good faith? […] It's a form of denial of history.*

And yet, Webber emphasises that it is not only the return of an object that is sought through restitution. To restitute a work is to recognise wrong and to respect the agency of the wronged – regardless of whether an actual object is ever exchanged in this process.

> *Why would you be reluctant to return something when it was taken in these circumstances? […] Museums represent our view of ourselves, don't they? They represent our views about our social, aesthetic, and cultural values, they are a public reflection of our aspirations, whether about art, society, morality, or ethics […] And yet directors and curators in many countries are often reluctant even to acknowledge the Nazi-era history of the works in their collections. They see their primary role as to study and look after the objects in their care. But why choose to disconnect the object from its history and choose to disconnect themselves from understanding and acknowledging that history?*

As Joshua Abarbanel, a Jewish American artist whom I interviewed and who worked with the Jewish Museum Berlin, asserts: 'Whether the context is personal, communal, or even global, we live inside our own stories' (Wecker 2020). The work of Jewish cultural brokers in the restitution field thus turns from a focus on the return of objects to the return of marginalised actors to history – to the shared stories of the societies in which we live – which in turn gives shape to the sociocultural imaginaries that bind or divide us.

Revaluing restitution as processual, relational, and spacial

The online Merriam-Webster dictionary defines 'restitution' as 'an act of restoring or a condition of being restored: such as a: a restoration of something to its rightful owner, b: a making good of or giving an equivalent for some injury'. Restitution is not always a discrete act but can also be understood as part a broader process of restoration, return, or otherwise making right. The role of Jewish cultural brokers in this field is also processual. Whether through law, research, mediation, or storytelling, they participate in ongoing processes of restitution, which are aimed at healing small slivers of history: bringing not only objects back but bringing recognition, justice, and atonement to bear on how loss is redressed in the post-Holocaust era. In so doing,

they shed light on their own agency along with the agency of the claimants they represent, whether those directly dispossessed or their heirs. Webber in particular emphasised the need to bring claimants more centrally into these *processes* of restitution, arguing that restitution is not simply about outcomes (i.e. the handing back of an object) but about conversation and participation – again, the combination of voice and action in the post-Holocaust world. She provided an example to illustrate this:

> *We're currently having a settlement discussion with a museum which has had the painting in question for over sixty years, knowing to whom it had belonged and the role the owner played in championing the work of the artist. The owner had to flee with nothing but a few small paintings; everything else had gone. But he fled to a country where he was to be persecuted again, and he had to sell the painting just to be able to have something to eat. Then the persecution intensified, he was interrogated and died. And all the museum is saying is, 'well, we'd like to keep it'. But they have never actually asked the family, 'do you want it back?' They've had it for sixty years; it's only rarely been on display, and they're saying, 'we would like to keep it'. And* that *is the beginning of the conversation when surely the conversation should start with, 'we understand and respect the history; we accept that this is a case for restitution. What does the family want?' Then they can say that they would like to keep it and ask if there is a way that could happen. That would create the possibility of a mutually respectful conversation rather than one where those who suffered feel treated as unequal and unseemly supplicants.*

While restitution is processual, it is equally relational, built on the engagements and interactions between multiple actors. This includes compromise and negotiation between actors just as between actors and objects. Rethinking the object in relation to the actor exposes the objects themselves as having not only financial but also moral worth.

An interesting case that sheds light on the 'pricelessness' of these objects is that of Klimt's painting *Woman in Gold,* portraying the Viennese socialite Adele Bloch Bauer. In 2006 it was famously restituted to its heir, Maria Altmann, a citizen of the United States and a resident of California. The restitution emerged from a court case, arbitrated by the Jewish American lawyer Randol Schoenberg, grandchild of a Jewish Holocaust refugee from Austria. This case had made headlines when the Supreme Court of the United States ruled in 2004 that Altmann could sue the state of Austria for the return of the painting and other artworks owned by her forebears. Altmann subsequently sold the painting through Christie's to Jewish philanthropist

Ronald Lauder, who purchased it for US$135 million – the highest recorded amount ever paid for a single painting. He bought it for the Neue Galerie in New York which he had opened in 2001 to collect and feature German and Austrian modern art. Lauder conceptualised the gallery as a space akin to an early twentieth-century Viennese gallery, providing a kind of portal to a lost world (Findling 2012). The act of overpaying for the Klimt artwork highlighted its pricelessness, pointing to the fact that restituted art carries a profound moral significance surpassing monetary worth (Impert 2008; Sezgin 2012; Christie's 2016).[11] Referenced today as the 'Austrian Mona Lisa', *Woman in Gold* sits at the centre of the Neue Galerie's permanent exhibition and draws visitors from across the globe (Findling 2012; Regatao 2015).

This case thus also speaks to the *spatial* implications of restitution – how objects are emplaced as representations of peoples and their histories. Today, the Neue Galerie holds multiple restituted paintings, many displayed in the 'Degenerate Art: The Attack on Modern Art in Nazi Germany, 1937' special exhibition in 2014 that sought to recreate the famed Nazi exhibition of degenerate art. In terms of spatial representation, Guttsman has called for pairing museum exhibitions with restituted artworks and artefacts that portray the objects alongside their individual and family stories.

The case of the *Woman in Gold* speaks to the potential to claim a space in the broad public imaginary even further, namely through media representations of restitution in the form of the 2006 film *Woman in Gold* starring Helen Millen. The film emphasises Maria Altmann's agency (as well as that of her Jewish lawyer, Randol Schoenberg) in the struggle to recover part of her family's heritage, and through it also their histories.

Restitution as a form of cultural heritage-making thus entails a reclaiming of histories together with a (re)claiming of space (Apaydin 2019). Reconsidering the role of museums brings to the fore questions not only regarding the relations between actors and objects but of the interlinked spatiality of restitution. Where can and should restitution be enacted? And how can – or should – such spaces be demarcated for onlookers, visitors, witnesses, and other stakeholders in implicated or contested histories? Today museums across the globe have put in place restitution research and implementation teams, marking looted objects, telling the stories of their movement across place and time and of the actors attached to them as well. At times there is also a performative aspect to restitution in such institutions. For instance, in 2018 the Museum of Jewish Heritage in New York hosted a public ceremony for the return of the Renoir painting *Deux femmes dans un jardin* to Sylvie Sulitzer, heir of Alfred and Marie Weinberger, who had owned the art until

11 Viviana Zelizer (1985), in her seminal cultural sociological work *Pricing the Priceless Child. The Changing Social Value of Children*, writes of the rise of framing children as 'priceless' as a modern cultural phenomenon. Just as the child's worth cannot be measured in fiscal terms, restituted art has increasingly been culturally framed as 'priceless'.

its looting in 1941 from their Parisian collection. Sulitzer described this moment of restitution as one of '[h]uge emotion, but not especially for the painting [...] It's more the symbol of the justice, and the huge work that everybody did to make this day possible' (Glassman 2018).

Conclusion: rethinking Jewish cultural heritage

Objects of restitution have been at the centre of scholarly work on the restitution of Nazi-era looted art and artefacts, with topics such as the motivation of looting, provenance, and legal regimes. Yet the actors involved in restitution, Jewish actors in particular, have been largely left out of the story. This is again at least in part a disciplinary issue, since the scholarship on restitution has been generally relegated to the fields of law, history, and art history. The disciplines of sociology and anthropology are better positioned to explore agency, networks, and meaning and are therefore apt at tracing, describing, and analysing the mechanics of human interaction. Silence surrounding the role of Jewish actors may also be due, in part, to their overwhelming framing as victims in the post-Holocaust world and the silencing of the generation that experienced the Holocaust first-hand (Anderson 2003).

An actor-centric approach as put forward in this article is at its heart an agency-centric approach, showing how those at the social margins put pressure on – and thereby transform – the centre. Such agency relates restitution directly to heritage, here the re-emplacement of both looted/lost/hidden/erased objects and actors in the post-Holocaust world. Jewish actors laid the foundations of the restitution field in the early decades after the Holocaust and World War II – as individuals (often lawyers) and through Jewish organisations. They have also instigated the reform of the restitution field, leading to its moralisation and globalisation, highlighting the many, often complex cases that cross international boundaries and that may not be easily or sufficiently dealt with through (national) law.

This article identifies the pressing need to rethink the nexus of restitution and Jewish cultural heritage, moving beyond seeing it in terms of the relationship between a minority and the state. It has done so by suggesting that Jewish actors, both individual and institutional, filled a void after the Holocaust and World War II, thus pioneering the restitution field; and that Jewish cultural brokers have been equally formative to moralising and globalising shifts in this field – beyond the individual state and beyond the law as the singular place of redress. Such an approach has shown how involving Jewish actors who experienced looting (or their heirs) – their voices and also their (desired) actions – in a process of restitution also paves the way for alternatives to a simple and singular return of an object, such as the return of subjects to history. For instance, telling the stories of families whose lives were lost during the Holocaust, as per the recent case of the *Girl Lying in*

Grass, is an alternative form of restitution; ceremonies of return, whether the object stays in a museum or not, also speak to the vitality of recognition and to the ways in which different spaces can be re-thought as part of the larger restitution field. As Guttsman explained of a course on restitution offered at Freie Universität Berlin that she is attending and that discusses the case of her family:

> *You can hand me a two million painting back, but it wouldn't come close to sitting in a classroom at the Freie Universität and seeing a wall-sized photograph of my great-grandfather projected in front of us. In that moment, the schism in history was coming back together [...] It's healing.*

Restitution at once informs and is itself a form of Jewish cultural heritage work, specifically when it is reconsidered as not only a stolen object's return but also as an active process – what Jones and Yarrow (2022) reference as a 'heritage practice'. Such a practice of return entails various forms of reclamation and restoration: giving voice, enacting agency, and ultimately re-inscribing into history the lives lost or marginalised (and the objects they held and which, in turn, hold their stories). Restitution as a practice, that is restitution in action, requires a better understanding of the actors who have shaped the field over time – here Jewish cultural brokers who asserted agency in and from the margins, often in and from exile. These cultural brokers recognised the globality and the morality of restitution as an ongoing process in the post-Holocaust world – disfigured and reconfigured as it is. In so doing, they became practitioners not only of law, research, or art history but also of Jewish heritage.

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North African Jewish Heritage, Interrupted Transmission, and Return

Samuel Sami Everett

Abstract:

This article examines contemporary curatorial practices in France as contested sites where North African Sephardic Jewish cultural heritage intersects with broader questions of memory, transmission, and return. It is based on an ethnographic analysis of four case studies: an academic meeting in Cassis in 2019, two exhibitions at the Palais de la Porte Dorée and the Institut du Monde Arabe in 2022, the grassroots Dalâla festival in Paris in 2023, and the 2024–2025 'Revenir' exhibition at the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée in Marseille. The article explores how 'interrupted transmission' shapes intergenerational creative memory work among Maghrebi Jewish communities and individuals in France. The study contributes to critical heritage studies by illuminating how minority communities navigate state-sanctioned representations while creating alternative spaces for cultural transmission. Drawing on Svetlana Boym's concept of reflective nostalgia, Marianne Hirsch's theory of post-memory, and David Berliner's work on heritage temporality, the analysis reveals how different curatorial modes – from institutional to grassroots – negotiate the complexities of colonial legacies, displacement trauma, and cultural reclamation. Central to the analysis is the examination of 'return' – both the physical journey to an ancestral homeland and the imaginative process of cultural reconnection – as an agential mode of self-affirmation for French-born Jews of Maghrebi descent. I argue that effective engagement with Maghrebi Jewish memory requires multilayered approaches that balance institutional resources with community agency, moving beyond binary frameworks of assimilation/marginalisation or a Jewish/Arab division.

Key words: Sephardic heritage, post-memory, interrupted transmission, museum curation, Maghrebi Jewish-Muslim interaction

This article takes the space of contemporary curation in France as a contested site where community, regional, national, and supranational representations of specifically North African Sephardic Jewish cultural heritage intersect and sometimes collide, often creating tensions between institutional narratives and lived experiences in the ethnicising, postcolonial context of contemporary France (Amselle 2011). Within academic, museum, and festival contexts of curation I ask, first, how and what components of North African/Maghrebi language and memory are transmitted intergenerationally. Second, I investigate how this pertains to the complexities both of wider geopolitical dynamics of conflict between France and North Africa and in Israel-Palestine and of intra-familial Maghrebi Jewish memory. By 'interrupted transmission' I refer to the disruption of cultural knowledge, practices, and memories across generations due to displacement, trauma, and historical ruptures – processes that have profoundly shaped Maghrebi Jewish experiences through both exogenous discrimination and endogenous interruption. Furthermore, the interrupted transmission of Maghrebi Jewish experiences spotlights the

question of intergenerational return, that is the going 'back' to the Maghreb a generation or two later. Such returns have become increasingly salient as an agential mode of self-affirmation for French-born Jews of Maghrebi descent as the generations that once lived in the Maghreb pass on. My examination draws on three theories. First, Svetlana Boym's notion of reflective nostalgia distinguishes between restorative nostalgia that reinstates past social orders and reflective nostalgia that critically engages with multiple pasts (Boym 2001). Second, Marianna Hirsch's concept of post-memory helps us understand how trauma and displacement are inherited by generations who did not directly experience these events (Hirsch 2012). Third, David Berliner's work on heritage and time explores how the past is actively constructed and negotiated in the present (Berliner 2020). Together, these frameworks illuminate how interrupted transmission operates across generations. I apply them to each case study to identify their distinct approach to curating fragmented histories.

The substantive material of this article takes us through different modes of curation at academic, institutional, and grassroots levels that seek to build and explore narratives of northern African Sephardic Jewish life and migratory trajectories to France, often alongside or in resonance with trajectories of Muslim Maghrebi populations (Silverstein 2018). This is a subject seldom examined in French historiography (Morin 2022) because of how it deals with different French citizenship statuses in the pre-independence and immediate post-independence period. The four case studies build on each other, laying out different curatorial modes of analysing forms of intercommunal Judaeo-Muslim Maghrebi memory space and overlapping interruptions between Jewish and colonial memories and historiographies. First, I analyse the intense debate that took place at an academic and artistic retreat held in Cassis, close to Marseille, in 2019 on the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim interaction in North African (Maghrebi) popular culture. Second, I explore the exhibition 'Juifs d'Orient' (Jews of the Orient) that took place at the Institut du Monde Arabe in central Paris in 2022 and the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration exhibition 'Juifs et musulmans de l'Empire à l'Hexagone' (Jews and Muslims: from Empire to Hexagon [France]). Third, I consider the 2023 Dalâla festival to promote North African Jewish cultures that was marked by intergenerational complexity. Last, I examine the 2025 exhibition 'Revenir' held at the Musée des civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Mucem) with a focus on the notion of 'return' in relation to mental and physical return to Algeria. By examining these four cases in chronological order, I trace a line between academic discourse, institutional exhibitions and grassroots initiatives, revealing how different curatorial approaches engage with the challenges of interrupted transmission.

Taken together, the cases demonstrate a multiplicity of public representations of Sephardic cultural heritage. In each case I discuss the central

geographical locales of the curatorial mode in question (for example, Algiers, Rabat, Paris) and the forms of heritage-making in operation and their reception, reflecting critically on both academic and curatorial actors and considering how they inspire one another. The analysis draws on my active and publicly engaged work in France. In the last seven years I have organised and taken part in Sephardic cultural productions that often intersect with Maghrebi Muslim productions. My research and involvement include several public engagement-type research projects with Dalâla, particularly in the production of animated films for the Palais de la Porte Dorée. Following Hadj Miliani's practice-based methodology, I proceed as both participant observer and creator, organising and producing while simultaneously analysing (Miliani 2010). Such a method is of vital importance for a diachronic perspective to emerge.

Contested historiographies: Algerian Jewish memory in postcolonial France

In this section, I first provide a broad overview of the contemporary literature pertaining to memory, decolonial/postcolonial theory, and Jewish Studies with particular reference to North African and Sephardic cultures. I then spotlight the notion of 'return' as key to both the burgeoning interest in contemporary Sephardic Studies in its relationship to Middle East Studies and as a way to reclaim histories and historiographies intergenerationally despite the interruptive power of traumatic stories of departure and the broader Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) context of Jewish exile from the Arab and Islamic world.

Algerian Jewish historiography is central to constructions of Sephardic stories in France and to the vexed political and family-level dynamics of postcolonial memory culture in Europe at large. This is because Algeria was long in cultural and legal proximity to France. One hundred and thirty-two years passed from the French invasion of 1830 to Algerian decolonisation in 1962. This period spans French conquest, war, expropriation and settlement, juridical integration, and the extremely bloody war of independence. For nearly a century during that period, the three 'French' administrative regions – Constantine (East), Algiers (Centre), and Oran (West) – of l'Algérie française (French colonial Algeria) were considered an integral, legal part of the 'French metropole' (the imperial term for the present-day national territory of France). Jewish populations, both *megorashim* and *toshavim* (Everett 2026),[1] were present in Algeria long before the French. However, via the Crémieux Decree the French state made all Jewish populations from the

1 *Megorashim* are Jewish populations expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in the fourteenth century; *toshavim* are indigenous, often Berber- or Tamazight-speaking, Jewish populations already present in the Algerian territory before the Sephardic expulsions.

most populous urban territories in northern Algeria French citizens in 1870. Jewish historiography in the Algerian territories is therefore entangled in a contemporary politics of precolonial indigeneity as a form of postcolonial minoritised legitimacy and retroactively labelled as one of those European populations from the north-eastern Mediterranean or Alsace-Lorraine that were settled in the Algerian territories by the French state and made French citizens but derogatorily called *pied-noirs* upon 'repatriation' to France. This dual bind marks the salience of Jewish Algerian historiographies in contemporary francophone colonial debates.

These historiographies manifest in museum curation practices as living memory of colonial Algeria fades and younger generations reinterpret them. This generational shift is set against a backdrop of intensive public debate on the decolonisation of public memory (Cooper 2022). Politically, this means the recognition of the crimes that the French empire committed, as in President Chirac's 1996 apology for French complicity in Jewish deportation or in the acknowledgement by Presidents François Hollande and Emmanuel Macron of the massacres and torture of fighters of the Algerian National Liberation Front in Sétif, Algeria, respectively. In France, this process is freighted by multiple ambivalences. At a macro level, these two levels of Orientialist discrimination – representational and ethno-religious – collide with contemporary Middle Eastern geopolitics and global capital flows both in relation to ongoing French business interests, particularly in northern and western Africa, and culturally, or through soft power, via the Francophonie and Middle Eastern diplomacy as mediated by key links with the Gulf. At a micro level, these national and global pictures also collide with familial and community dynamics of memory transmission that are equally burdened by the application and revocation of French citizenship laws for Jewish populations.

In contemporary France, the history of Jewish Maghrebi subjugation, frustration, and racialisation (see Everett 2024) is less known than that of French collaborationism and deportation during the Second World War, that is, a deeply traumatic French memory of the Holocaust. The long-standing campaign by Serge Klarsfeld to bring the responsibility of the French state for collaborating with the Nazis into the open only began to bear fruit in 1995. It led to practices of memorialisation with engraved signs being placed at schools from which Jewish students had been deported to be murdered during the Second World War (Klarsfeld 1995). North African cultural heritage and its political complexities have found larger public attention at a much slower pace. And yet the Algerian Jewish story brings together these two dynamics – post-Holocaust and postcolonial memory culture – that profoundly mark the French political landscape today. The narrative of that story is multiple. In the public sphere it is recounted by Benjamin Stora, historian of Algeria and thinker of the postcolony (before this became a term), who held an important advisory role on Algerian matters under the administrations

of Presidents Hollande and Macron. Yet it is also recounted by former television pundit and popular history writer Éric Zemmour, today leader of one of France's most populist right wing political forces. Both men are of Algerian Jewish descent and have mobilised this position to argue for their (significantly different) understandings of French Algerian history. These competing interpretations create fundamental tensions that museum curators must navigate when representing Algerian Jewish experiences.

Benjamin Stora's (1994) understanding of the Algerian Jewish story is fundamentally hopeful in outlook and postcolonial in perspective. It highlights that the conception of a Judaeo-Christian French bulwark standing in Algeria against Islamic violence is a historical construct (see, more recently, Bessis 2025). He argues that though the imperial machine installed in Algeria since 1832 left significant traces on Jewish community life, it could not remove a deep bind these communities had to an indigenous Jewish Maghrebi past, a bind pointing to a strong, ongoing albeit submerged affective relationship (Stora 2006). In a personal conversation on postcolonial scholarship in the United States seeking to excavate Algerian Jewish histories (for example, Schreier 2010), Stora reflected that *his* work on memory and forgetting (Stora 1994) had been an epistemological precursor to that newer scholarship. In work that relates post-Holocaust memory to postcolonial memory, Michael Rothberg (2009) takes a similar approach. Drawing on Delbo and Sartre (Rothberg 2009: 145, 155), Rothberg posits the Holocaust as a moral reference point with which to denounce colonial inhumanity in Algeria. This finds a parallel in how Stora links up Algerian Jewish exile from France with the revocation of rights and citizenship during the Second World War and with an anti-imperialist Judaeo-Arab solidarity that developed in Algeria after that war (Stora 2006: 116–117; see also Le Foll-Luciani 2015 for a detailed account). If Zemmour's vision can be captured by the notion of a clash of civilisations, then Stora's underlines the possibilities of progressive humanism born out of shared (Algerian) suffering.

Theoretical framework: interrupted transmission, post-memory, and reflective nostalgia

Thinking through the prism of a traumatic Jewish diasporic condition in the former Soviet Union, Boym (2001) argues that fractured pasts can be embraced and nurtured productively. The ambiguity of displacement – from Russia for her, from Algeria for Stora and Zemmour – can nurture creative imaginaries (Boym 2001). Her notion of 'reflective nostalgia' (Boym 2001: 18) is not systematically regressive but nevertheless expresses a desire to look backwards in a time of accelerated change. Boyms's notion of reflective nostalgia provides a powerful platform for intergenerational proto- or post-nostalgia in France today. However, unlike Stora's experience of living

in Algeria or Zemmour's witnessing of the fallout of displacement from Algeria in peri-urban Paris, the intergenerational shift around memory and heritage cultures among French-born Jewish populations of Maghrebi descent since the 1980s not only uses memory as a creative resource but constitutes a Hirschian 'post-memory' vantage point, that is, it deals with memories that have been inherited or transmitted, not lived (Hirsch 2012).

Hirsch discusses how subsequent generations give form to reimagined and re-interpreted memory, focusing intangible cultural heritage such as photography, literature, and even graphic novels like Art Spiegelman's *Maus* (Hirsch 2012). Likewise, anthropologist Berliner (2020) has long explored the complex constructions of heritage through time, nostalgia, and the politics of memory, especially as they relate to objects shaped by colonial histories. He argues that the right to express diverse perspectives – the 'right to difference', as he puts it (Berliner 2020: 96) – is often in tension with forces that promote exclusivity and conservatism. This tension can undermine openness and lead to misunderstanding, anxiety, and a sense of loss. Berliner calls for a continued effort to unsettle fixed categories and to see the anthropologist as both translator and facilitator of meaningful dialogue. He advocates for a nuanced and sensitive approach that negotiates rights to difference in the face of social and political pressure. This process of translation and negotiation is complex. Dialogue – both intergenerational (intra-familial) and intercommunal (Maghrebi Jewish–Muslim) – does not always begin in mutual recognition; it may be preceded by resistance or rejection. Navigating this space often requires careful attention to positional and political complexities. Museum exhibitions, as we see in the cases that follow, become sites where these tensions between fixed categories and nuanced dialogue play out in material form.

The anthropological literature that has directly informed Maghrebi museum curation over the last three decades has problematised the complexities of changing memories, particularly of intangible cultural heritage. They have discussed in detail North African Jewish culinary, mythical, and musical transmission and their intergenerational and intercommunal overlaps. Since the late 1980s, Joëlle Bahloul has adopted the anthropology of food as a connective resource in memory co-construction. She has shown, particularly in her book *The Architecture of Memory* (Bahloul 1996), how transnational co-constructed memory can redefine patterns of conflict in the present; the architecture of her book pertains to her family's former house in Sétif, where an Algerian Muslim family resides today. In a bid to give a clearer understanding of the structures of community narrative, Majid Hannoum (2001), an anthropologist of poetry, nationhood, and discursive historical narratives, demonstrated the myth-making importance of a Maghrebi regional symbol of reconciliation, the eighth-century warrior princess la Kahina, and her elaboration and political appropriation over the centuries by different im-

perial and nationalist powers, Arab, French, and Israeli. Jonathan Glasser, in studies of Andalusi musical revivalism in Algeria (Glasser 2016) and France (Glasser forthcoming), shows similar consonant and dissonant Judaeo-Arab understandings and practices of musical heritage (for a historical perspective, see also Silver 2022). Andalusi music is a quintessentially Sephardic contribution to the Maghreb region's high culture.

In France itself, both as one of the key places of cultural production of Sephardic heritage and as a site of self-reflexive knowledge production, this intergenerational moment highlights Berliner's 'right to difference' and the importance of return to the Maghreb – conceptualised as both the physical journey back to an ancestral homeland and the imaginative process of cultural reclamation – allowing younger generations to engage with their heritage beyond simplistic nationalist frameworks. These journeys, both individual and collective, imagined and physical, function as forms of reflexive nostalgia. Through them processes of post-memory reclaim a plural Maghreb and keep alive the counter-discursive work of Bahloul, Hannoum, and Glasser, away from the historical and ideological binary of assimilation versus marginalisation or roseate versus lachrymose. Self-aware post-memory reclamation shifts over time; it does not attempt to prove nationalist credentials – Algerian, Israeli, or French – but is sensitive to the historical reasons for these inclinations at the level of the lived experience of parents and grandparents. Moreover, this post-memory is permeated with a broader Middle Eastern and North African perspective on memory and heritage in the region or what Michelle Campos et al. (2023) have termed the 'Middle East turn', which looks at the cross-region for a fuller picture.

Having established the theoretical framework of interrupted transmission, reflective nostalgia, and post-memory, I now turn to examine how these concepts manifest in practice through an analysis of four chronologically sequenced case studies. Each case represents a different curatorial mode – academic, institutional, and grassroots – that grapples with the complexities of transmitting fragmented Maghrebi Jewish heritage across generations with specific reference to the Judaeo-Arab cultural sphere (see Levy 2008; Hochberg 2010; Anidjar 2019; Gottreich 2020; Everett 2024). The discursive progression from scholarly debate to museum exhibition to community festival reveals how different approaches to curation either reproduce or challenge the ruptures in cultural transmission that characterise postcolonial minority experiences in France.

Case study 1: academic debate and imperial de-structuring in Cassis

In this first case study, I examine the deliberations at a meeting in Cassis in 2019 on the dynamics of Jewish-Muslim interaction in North African (Maghrebi) popular culture. This meeting was one of many that took place in prepa-

ration of an exhibition staged in 2022 at the Musée National de l'Histoire de l'Immigration, also known as the Palais da la Porte Dorée, under the name 'Juifs et musulmans de l'Empire à l'Hexagone' (Jews and Muslims: from Empire to Hexagon [France]). These debates represent the academic foundation for curatorial approaches adopted subsequently. The discussions brought together artists, museum professionals, and researchers to navigate complex perspectives on Algerian Jewish memory. Held before the acceleration of conflict in Israel-Palestine but after the 2015 Paris attacks, the two-day gathering in Cassis centred on reconciling diverse historiographical approaches. Many of those whose scholarly work on Maghrebi Jewish dynamics I cite above were present.

Beyond the inclusion of Algeria as a key site for reconciliation and curation, the meeting in Cassis was also strongly angled towards giving voice to a new generation of Jewish artists of Maghrebi descent, including Jerusalemite singer Neta Elkayam, as instrumental to the production of North African Jewish culture at a time when those Jewish voices who had firsthand experience of the Maghreb were passing away. Language, music, and art were at the forefront of the deliberations. The importance of Maghrebi Judaeo-Arabic language (Darija, a North African variant of Arabic) firmly anchored the discussion and served to showcase the indigenous longevity and cultural entanglements of Algerian Jewish populations. Art was noted as a medium capable of expressing sentiments less jarring than words. The late Miliani contributed significantly to the discussion by raising questions about Orientalism within the French imaginary, as refracted through early twentieth-century Jewish musician-performers emerging during the Nahda (Arabic renaissance) movement. The Nahda put forward Arabic cultures as modern and integrative of religious culture, with theatre being a prominent form (Goodman 2013). Jewish artists played a significant role in this cultural shift, especially in local vernacular Arabic productions (Roth 1967).

Miliani's expertise in local Algerian cultural production, particularly Judaeo-Arabic music and theatre, revealed that these cultures were also influenced by Orientalist tropes. Miliani scrutinised a photograph of Edmond Nathan Yafil in Ottoman attire from the Mutrabiyya troupe (Fig. 1). Miliani questioned whether this was Yafil's typical dress given the fact that in newspapers from the same period performers would be wearing suits and hats indistinguishable from the Parisian urban attire of the time. Instead, he proposed, this garb was a form of self-Orientalisation used to market Arabic music to French audiences even in the 1920s, reflecting the performance of cultural identification. This analysis of self-Orientalisation reveals how curatorial representations must go beyond the level of the aesthetic to contend with the complexities of agential performativities for ends that are economic or geared towards prestige and fame.

The Cassis meeting further explored the role of Algerian Jewish historiography as a focal point for understanding French imperial de-structuring and the divide-and-rule strategy employed by the French Empire. Beyond the life cycle of the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition, curator and historian Mathias Dreyfus aimed to reintroduce this historical context through a mobile exhibit that would make a critical engagement in state education through local museums and schools.

Figure 1. Edmond Nathan Yafil in traditional garb. Source: Personal collection of Dr Naïma Yahi. Reprinted with the kind permission of Dr Naïma Yahi.

Central to the discussions on imperial de-structuring of society was the Crémieux Decree, a key legal artefact in the Algerian Jewish story that is fundamental to understanding Algeria's minoritised populations within colonial history. The decree – which was made a centrepiece of the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition – highlights the intricacies and ambiguities of post-memory perspectives. Dorian Bell (2018: 14), a historian and critical scholar, posits that the decree serves as a crucial dividing line in postcolonial French understandings of Jewish solidarity with indigenous movements, as it marked a pivotal shift from Judaeo-Islamic commonality to a Judaeo-Christian imperial legacy. He looks at the extensive debate between political activists and

thinkers such as Alain Finkielkraut and shows that they selectively use the decree as a pivot point from Judaeo-Islamic indigenous commonality to a Judaeo-Christian imperial legacy (Bell 2018: 279).[2] Leaning on Bell, in the meeting we discussed the degree to which antisemitism and antisemitic tropes permeate these perspectives, particularly in understanding as an emissary of French modernity the decree's name-giver, Adolphe Crémieux, a Jewish lawyer from Alsace-Lorraine who had undergone a process of assimilation into the republican model.

Seeing the decree as a salient juncture point holds affective importance in the early twenty-first century because this is not a history that is taught in the French school curriculum. Rather, it is one that is taught at home and among families of North African Jewish and Muslim heritage. It tacks on to histories of migration, minoritisation, and sometimes racialisation in metropolitan France, as well as on to dichotomic forms of thinking about 'Jews' and 'Muslims' from the Maghreb. The decree was an important point for the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition for the importance it holds for the post-memory generation and as a way of bringing this history into the mainstream on the platform of a national museum. After all, the guiding idea of the museum is to allay overriding French concerns about 'welcoming migrants' into the country (even as North African migration is no longer such an important demographic question) and to valorise the contribution of 'migrants' to society. This focus on shared perspectives taps into national-level concerns about decolonial antisemitism, dealt with in the final exhibition film on the peripheral Parisian neighbourhood of Sarcelles (Mréjen 2022), known for having significant Jewish and Muslim populations.

At the meeting, Naïma Yahi discussed at length the degree to which she found strong resistance from various elderly Jewish ladies from Algeria to acknowledge the logic of juxtaposing Jewish and Muslim Maghrebi migratory trajectories in an exhibition. As a young woman from a Kabyle family in northern France, Naïma Yahi had wanted to discuss feelings of nostalgia and the question of immigration with these elderly women, but it seemed that they had a strong sense that the word 'immigration' did not capture their experiences. This is perhaps because immigration in the French imaginary is bound up with stories of North African economic labour after the so-called *trente glorieuses* (30 years of French economic expansion) after the Second World War, in which North African migrant labour played a huge part. This is not a frame that is considered as relevant to an Algerian Jewish story. And yet interpretations of the Crémieux Decree would have us understand otherwise. After all, when the decree came into legal force, town-based Jewish communities in northern Algeria were deeply involved in the urban fabric of material life through occupations important to the economy such as trade,

2 For another take on the same theme, see Segré's reflections on Bouteldja's book (Segré 2016).

the fabrication of artisanal goods, and cultural production. It is easy to forget, too, that there were parallel Ottoman, Arab, and Amazigh (Berber) town-based populations living alongside these Jewish Algerian communities partaking in contingent and connected trades and modes of production (Lorcin 1999).

The tensions revealed in the Cassis discussions illustrate the point made in the introduction to this special issue that minority–state relations involve 'processes of negotiation through which minorities and the state continuously (re)define each other'. The debates over the Crémieux Decree demonstrate how Jewish heritage becomes a site where these negotiations play out. The conflicting interpretations of Yahi and her interlocutors exemplify what Berliner identifies as the active construction of heritage through contemporary political frames. The Crémieux Decree becomes what Berliner (2020: 47) calls a 'heritage tool', an element of the past 'activated, deactivated, and reactivated' according to present needs. Yahi's encounter with elderly Algerian Jewish women reveals what Berliner terms 'heritage dissonance' (Berliner 2020: 96), that is, the tension between stakeholders' interpretations based on their positions in the present.

The issue of Algerian Jewish historiography as a lightning rod for discourse around French imperial de-structuring of Algerian society and the divide-and-rule strategy of French Empire is a very important one. And it is one that curator Mathias Dreyfus, alongside co-curators Benjamin Stora and Karima Dirèche, wanted to bring back into educational focus: Mathias centred not only the decree in the 'Juifs et musulmans' exhibition but also its critical pledges to state education; and the exhibition is made up of a parallel mobile instantiation that travelled to local museums and schools across the country.

Case study 2: institutional curation and the 'Middle East turn' at the Institut du Monde Arabe

In the second case study, I analyse how institutional curation at the Institut du Monde Arabe attempted to capture the broader Middle Eastern dimensions of Jewish experience through the exhibition 'Juifs d'Orient', revealing both the potential and limitations of national museum frameworks.

The 'Juifs d'Orient' exhibition was all-encompassing of the Jewish Studies Middle Eastern turn proposed by Campos et al. (2023). The exhibition attempted to capture two millennia of Jewish historiography, from the interactions of the prophet Muhammad with the Jewish tribes of Mecca and Medina (Miské 2013) to the sounds of AW-A, a contemporary Yemeni Israeli female hip-hop collective. The Institut du Monde Arabe's purpose is entangled in the soft power politics of France and French presence in the Levant. Some have argued that this entanglement continues a colonial epistemology

through (often static) repertoires of visual culture in the Arabic speaking region (Mihalache 2011). At the same time, the museum has been subject to an intense focus on decolonising curation (see Vergès 2023). The exhibition was marked by three circumstances in particular: it was co-curated by Franco-Israeli scholar Denis Charbit and Benjamin Stora; it borrowed items from Israeli museum collections; and Neta Elkayam performed in a music event parallel to the exhibition. The combination of these raised questions around the boycott of Israeli culture, particularly via the normalisation of Moroccan–Israeli ties – a theme often juxtaposed with colonial legacy and decolonisation. The question of normalisation reveals a continuous, problematic double standard in which Israeli connections (notwithstanding the period of conflict) are subjected to political scrutiny in ways that similar dynamics in local contexts are not. This highlights the complex position of Jewish Maghrebi cultural expressions within broader decolonial politics. The question of normalisation has been treated elsewhere, particularly in the study of international relations (see Salman 2024), but it should be noted that the exhibition, following in the wake of the Abrahamic Accords, was touted as a history of peace, a form of 'bridge-making' (*des paserelles*), behind which Stora, as a scholar of Algeria, and Charbit, as a specialist of Zionism, could coalesce. While the exhibition attempted to present a unified narrative of Jewish-Muslim cultural affinities that transcended conflict, the approach revealed the tensions inherent in institutional curation of interrupted transmission.

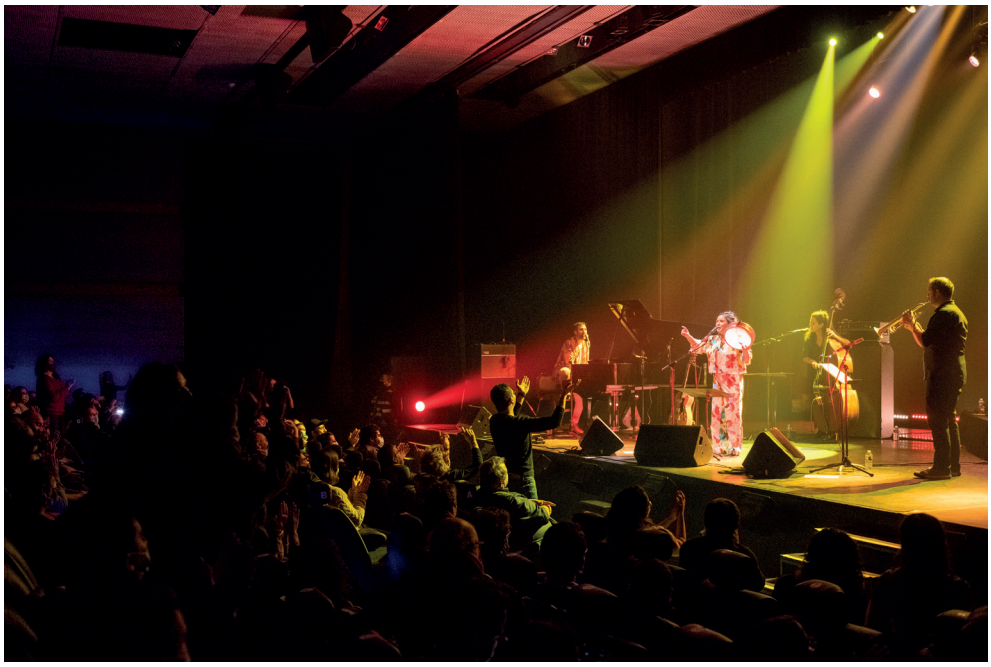

Figure 2. Neta Elkayam with bendir (Maghrebi single-headed frame drum) during the "Arabofolies" music festival, Institut du monde arabe (IMA), Paris, 2021, Source: ©IMA/Alice Sidoli — with kind permission to reproduce.

Elodie Druez and Anis Fariji's research on music and intercommunal connection offers an intergenerational corrective to this simplistic narrative of peace/conflict.[3] In their study of Elkayam's concert at the exhibition, for which they asked concert-goers to complete simple questionnaires, they show that there is a mediation of generations across the purported Franco–Maghrebi divide, capable of differentiating between politics and music, between state policy and Israeli art. These generations refract Mizrahi (Eastern) and post-Mizrahi memory, nostalgia, and its relationship to societal violence in Israel-Palestine. In many ways, the great paradox of 'Juifs d'Orient' was that the concert was perhaps what made the biggest splash as regards the performance of Israel-Palestine antagonism in France. And yet, like the exhibition itself, what the concert demonstrated was the degree to which families and French-born Jewish Maghrebi generations found the 'exhibition-event' (*un expo-événement*) empowering and liberating.

This generational shift in perspective away from the roseate versus lachrymose binary view of Jewish histories in the Middle East in fact takes up the least space in the exhibition. Two corners of the last room gave space to music, which enabled visitors to understand forms of contemporary Judaeo-Arab expression. On one side of the room was music by DJ Sharouh, who mixes Judaeo-Arab sounds from the 1940s and onwards with the voice of Dalâla to narrate the histories of these musics. On the other side, video clips by the band A-WA capped the contemporary and interactive final part of the exhibition. The room in which this video was projected allowed space for an alternative intergenerational historiography of seldom heard Mizrahi so-called 'Oriental Jews' to emerge. The video depicts the members of the band living a full life, in Arabic, in a MENA region that includes Israel. The lack of ideological edge in the perspectives of Sharouh and A-WA make them slippier, messier, and less easy to curate into a single story. Music functions as a particularly effective medium for articulating the 'messiness' of Maghrebi Jewish identification precisely because it resists binary categorisation. The sonic elements – whether in A-WA's contemporary reimagining of Yemeni Jewish traditions or DJ Sharouh's mixing of vinyl – convey affective dimensions of heritage that conventional curatorial frameworks struggle to represent (see Crowdus 2024). These musical expressions create embodied experiences that collapse temporal and spatial distances, allowing audiences to engage with cultural memory through sensory rather than merely intellectual channels. The exhibition's music and contemporary expression around it speak to the earlier mentioned point about heritage being 'a combination of tangible and intangible', where objects require 'practices surrounding them' to become meaningful heritage rather than mere artifacts.

3 This research was conducted as part of the ORA funded Muslim-Jewish Encounters project (2020–2023), in which I participated.

The IMA exhibition's success demonstrated a hunger for cultural transmission between generations of Maghrebi Jewish populations. It centred both first-hand memories of North Africa across ages and, though to a lesser extent, their reinterpretation intergenerationally, creating an urgency around memory preservation. The exhibition's limited space for contemporary voices reflects the broader challenge of representing post-memory perspectives within traditional museum frameworks structured around chronological, artifact-based narratives.

Case study 3: grassroots heritage-making at the 2023 Dalâla festival

The 2023 Dalâla festival, held in Paris's nineteenth arrondissement, offered a counterpoint to national museum exhibitions by prioritising embodied, participatory experiences of North African Jewish heritage. Unlike the national museum exhibitions with their institutional framing and their core political agendas, Dalâla – whose name derives from Maimonides' Arabic masterwork *Dalâlat al-Ha'irin* (The Guide for the Perplexed) – offers a participatory approach to Maghrebi Jewish heritage more akin to the Elkayam concert or the musical space that the 'Juifs d'Orient' exhibition created to talk about and heal some of the scars of interrupted memory. Founded in 2019, the Dalâla festival focuses on promoting North African Jewish cultures through language classes, music, cuisine, and artistic workshops. As the introduction to this special issue notes, minoritised groups demonstrate significant 'agential capacity […] in navigating minority–state relations in the arena of cultural representation'. The Dalâla festival exemplifies this agency by creating alternative spaces for heritage-making that resist the 'top-down approach' of authorised heritage discourse, exemplifying a distinctly post-memory curatorial approach. Rather than positioning visitors as spectators of curated narratives, Dalâla deliberately creates spaces where intergenerational transmission becomes an embodied, collective experience. During the festival, Joëlle Bahloul (1983, 1992), the aforementioned anthropologist of food, especially Sephardic, gave a presentation on the artichoke and its tentacular culinary histories. It demonstrated how vernacular food practices carry Rothbergian multidirectional memory across imperial histories from ancient Rome to modern France of the twenty-first century. Her presentation sparked lengthy conversations about the importance of listening to grandparents' stories, highlighting how culinary traditions function as archives in the sensory palimpsestic form of interrupted transmission in which Hélène Cixous (2010) has imagined them (see also Everett 2017). Bahloul's presentation exemplified how the post-memory generation engages differently with heritage than museum exhibitions allow, creating what Hirsch describes as an active reimagining rather than passive reception of predecessors' memories.

The approach of the Dalâla festival eschews rigid chronological frameworks and instead emphasises interactive co-creation. Where museum exhibitions necessarily contain narratives within the constraints of western time, Dalâla creates in-between spaces – for cooking, dancing, singing, and conversation – that allow for more fluid, embodied forms of memory work. This perspective aligns with Hirsch's concept of post-memory, where second and third generations actively engage with, rather than simply receive, the memories of their predecessors. The festival culminated with a cemetery visit to honour Reinette l'Oranaise (see Everett 2024), the celebrated blind Algerian Jewish singer whose Arabic language performances of Arab-Andalusi music represent the complex cultural entanglements of Maghrebi Jewish cultural identification and affective resonances. The visit demonstrated how post-migration memory operates at an affective, embodied level beyond classificatory frameworks. Here music functions not merely as an artifact of the past but as an active medium of intergenerational connection, collapsing temporal and spatial distances as a visceral experience of the past in the present.

For many young Jews in France, as evidenced in conversations and observations at Dalâla events, such as the 'mint tea and pinenuts' breaks between seminars, concerts, screenings, and dance and cuisine workshops, these emerging forms of post-memory curation represent not just a recovery of interrupted transmission but a creative reimagining of what it means to be simultaneously Jewish, Maghrebi, and French. As one participant explained: 'I'm not trying to recreate the Algeria of my grandmother. That's impossible. I'm creating something new that honours that past while making sense of the world in which I live today.' This active articulation of multiple forms of identification contrasts with museum representations that can treat such forms as fixed rather than in constant negotiation. Unlike museum exhibitions that almost necessarily frame narratives through national and institutional lenses, grassroots initiatives like Dalâla allow for more experimental and embodied approaches to memory work that sidestep the binary narratives of assimilation versus marginalisation of Jewish North Africans or roseate versus lachrymose interpretations of Jewish–Muslim relations. What emerges is a form of memory practice that neither disavows the traumatic histories of displacement nor reduces Maghrebi Jewish experience to these traumas. Instead, it creates spaces where interrupted transmission becomes a site of creative possibility rather than merely a wound to be healed, pointing towards new possibilities for reconciling the jarred transmissions that characterise post-memory experience. In this way, Dalâla exemplifies Boym's 'reflective nostalgia' which 'dwells in algia, in longing and loss' (Boym 2001: 41) rather than attempting to reconstruct lost traditions in their entirety. Unlike restorative nostalgia that serves nationalist narratives, the festival's workshops created what Boym (2001: 251) calls 'a home in exile' – a third space where

participants actively engage with cultural memory rather than merely preserving it.

The question of return to the Maghreb emerges as a crucial dimension in this post-memory framework of impressionistically interpreting and recreating memory worlds only partially passed on. Unlike the charged notion of *revenir* ('come back/return') that Ariella Aïsha Azoulay critically examines in her work, and which was heavily featured in an eponymous exhibition at Mucem, intergenerational Jewish return operates on multiple registers simultaneously, be they physical, imaginative, or affective. For Jews of Maghrebi descent born in France after 1980, journeys to ancestral homes in Algeria, Morocco, or Tunisia represent not simply tourism or nostalgia but what Boym might call 'reflective nostalgia' – a creative engagement with fractured pasts. The film *Que D-eu te protège* (*Rabbi maak* or G-d protect you) by director and podcast creator Cléo Cohen (2021), which explores her relationship with her North African grandparents and her subsequent lived experience of the everyday in Tunis as a Tunisian Jewish returnee, is exemplary of such active, reflexive, and reconstructive practice. These returns, often undertaken alongside or in conjunction with French Muslim friends of North African descent, challenge the nationalist narratives that frame Jewish exodus from the Maghreb as unidirectional and definitive. Yet while these lachrymose narratives can oversimplify historical complexities, they nonetheless reflect genuine lived experiences of adversity that cannot ethically be erased.

Rather than dismissing these accounts, intergenerational return acknowledges these historical realities while refusing to allow trauma alone to define cultural identification. Thus, in contrast to both the detailed historical accounts of Jewish expulsion from Arab lands and idealised visions of precolonial harmony, intergenerational return acknowledges the complex entanglements of colonial history while refusing to allow these histories to foreclose possibilities for reimagining connections across religious and national boundaries. As younger generations of Maghrebi Jews undertake these returns – documented in films, photography, and social media – they create new archives of memory that sit uncomfortably alongside official narratives, whether French republican, Israeli, or Algerian nationalist. These returns constitute a practical expression of the 'Middle East turn' in Jewish Studies, relocating Maghrebi Jewish identity within its regional context while acknowledging the multilayered postcolonial realities that shape contemporary encounters. The final case study to which we now turn, returns to institutional curation but reveals new tensions in representing return across multiple diasporic communities.

Case study 4: Contested returns and decolonial tensions at the Mucem exhibition 'Revenir'

Building on the tensions between institutional and grassroots approaches seen in the previous cases, the final case study examines the exhibition 'Revenir' (return), which ran from October 2024 to March 2025 in Marseille and attempted to navigate the complex politics of return across multiple Mediterranean diasporas. Staged at Mucem, a space which inherited collections partially derived from the colonial-era ethnographic collection of Musée d'Ethnographie of the Palais de Trocadéro, 'Revenir' grappled with the ambivalence of return. The exhibition channelled localised, binational French Algerian questions while expanding outward into the broader Mediterranean region. Particularly significant was how it juxtaposed Jewish returns to North Africa alongside Armenian, Greek, and Palestinian narratives of displacement and homecoming. However, the exhibition's attempt at inclusive curation was not without profound tensions, particularly evident in Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's installation.

Azoulay (2019), a prominent art theorist, filmmaker, and scholar, whose work explores the political dimensions of visual culture particularly in relation to colonial archives and displacement, contributed a star made of flat-packed balsa wood displaying fragments of poetic text alongside Amazigh-Jewish jewellery under glass, emphasising indigenous Algerian Jewish presence. Inadvertently, however, it reproduced certain colonial-like exclusivist dynamics through its use of English-only text and academic poesis inaccessible to local audiences. The installation, like her recent work *La Résistance des Bijoux* (2023) and *The Jewelers of the Ummah* (2024), emphasised that Jewish presence in North Africa predated even Arab arrival and thus in many ways is as autochthonous as the Amazigh story itself. That story of origin – which Hannoum (2001) and many others have deconstructed as lending a nationalist hue to complex and entangled histories, though, at a normative and moral level, no doubt good to remember for its pluralising potentiality – proves in Azoulay's presentation as disconnected from local Marseille communities and their multiple constructions of origin and exile. Written entirely in untranslated English and employing an at times impenetrable metaphorical language accessible primarily to specialist audiences, as well as presenting an anachronistic discursive framework that elided Palestinian experience with Algerian Jewish history, the installation inadvertently alienated its intended publics. While the installation represented a sophisticated transnational theoretical approach to decolonial memory, eloquently and clearly expressed (and translated) in the exhibition catalogue (Azoulay 2024), its material presentation was locally inaccessible.

The disconnection is particularly fraught given Azoulay's own complex relationship to North Africa. Though descended from an Algerian Jewish family – her father told Israeli authorities upon arrival that he was 'from

Oran in France', with a smile on his face (Azoulay 2023: 22) – Azoulay's approach to her descent also reflects post-memory uncertainties. The Azoulay patronym itself embodies these ambiguities: while some trace it to a Hebrew acronym from Leviticus concerning marriage prohibitions, others suggest Spanish origins (from 'azul' [blue], referring to ceramic tile makers) or Amazigh roots (from 'Izil' [good], as in the ubiquitous salute 'Azul' [hello]). This name, carried across Mediterranean Jewish and, in derivative form, Amazigh (so predominantly Muslim) communities, underscores the complexity of identification that resists binary frameworks. Yet Azoulay equally explains that her inside-out position emanated from the fact that her surname seemed European, perhaps Italian, during her upbringing in a 1970s Israel and that European-Latinate culture was certainly not considered Arabic. Her second-generation Iraqi and Moroccan peers, therefore, did not perceive her familial background as Mizrahi but rather as (at that time) more privileged and Ashkenazic (Azoulay 2023).

The installation's political framing, which aligns indigenous Jewish claims with contemporary Palestinian solidarity, created a profound sense of disconnection from local Sephardic experiences in Marseille. This illustrates a tension that Hirsch (2012: 19) identifies in post-memory work: the risk that theoretical frameworks may 'build on memory's many tracks' but fail to address 'the needs of the multiple constituencies of memory cultures'. While attempting to forge what Rothberg (2009: 9) calls 'analogical solidarities' between different displacement histories, Azoulay's installation inadvertently reproduced some of the ruptures in transmission it sought to confront. As an American-Israeli professor dealing with French colonialism from a self-identified 'Palestinian Jewish' perspective, Azoulay's work seemed to overlook how, for many Maghrebi Jews, the French Republic has been a space of relative post-war comfort, despite its historical colonial contradictions and above and beyond post-Holocaust guilt. Or that the French language, despite its soft power and its use as a tool to 'civilise', has born great music and literature, not least by Algerian writers such as Kateb Yacine and the Marseille-inspired French hip-hop scene. The exhibition thus unintentionally highlighted what Joëlle Bahloul, channelling Yosef Yerushalmi's (1982) concept of *Zakhor*, understood as the communal specificities of memory that resist universal narratives. Azoulay's installation seemed oddly out of kilter with the rest of the wall-mounted scenography – perhaps deliberately so. While the jewels themselves were beautiful and deeply symbolic of Amazigh-Jewish cultural synthesis and precolonial indigenous artistic traditions moving beyond a conventional chronological organisation typical of museum displays, their presentation in a makeshift wooden structure appeared incongruous with their cultural significance – though, again, these representational dynamics may also have had symbolic reasons. This aesthetic tension mirrored the conceptual difficulties in representing interrupted transmission through in-

stitutional curation. Where post-memory initiatives like Dalâla create spaces of embodied reconnection through music, food, and language, museum exhibitions can remain caught between institutional imperatives for coherence and the messier realities of memory work subject to the whims of an at times tense relationship between scholarly depth and curatorial storytelling.

The Mucem itself embodies these tensions. As a relatively new major European institution dedicated to European and Mediterranean civilisations, it inherited problematic colonial collections while simultaneously positioning itself as a decolonial space of encounter. This institutional paradox mirrors the broader difficulties in curating return: how to acknowledge historical ruptures while creating possibilities for reconnection; how to represent trauma without reducing communities to their wounds; and how to navigate the political dimensions of memory without instrumentalising the past. 'Revenir' ultimately revealed that curatorial attempts to reflect on interrupted transmission inevitably confront not merely historical gaps but contemporary political divides. The exhibition, in its strengths and limitations, demonstrated how return functions simultaneously as historical reconciliation, political intervention, and ongoing process of negotiation between generations, geographies, and the unfinished business of decolonisation.

Taken together, the four cases that I have sketched out in this article demonstrate how curatorial practices function as contested sites where theoretical frameworks of memory and heritage meet the lived realities of intergenerational transmission. From the academic tensions in Cassis to the participatory possibilities of Dalâla, we observe how different modes of curation either perpetuate or confront the challenges of interrupted transmission. The progression of the article from the institutional to the embodied reveals a movement towards more inclusive, corporeal approaches that acknowledge the complexities of post-memory while creating spaces for creative reimagining rather than simple preservation.

Conclusion

The four cases outlined in this essay evolve as an ark from institutionalised curatorial approaches to grassroots Maghrebi Jewish memory. They contribute to what the introduction to this special issue identifies as the 'the intersections of anthropology, Jewish Studies, and critical academic scholarship of heritage' in demonstrating how communities negotiate between state-sanctioned representations and community-led heritage practices. Moving from scholarly discussions in the Cassis debate to national museum exhibitions at the Palais de la Porte Dorée and the Institut du Monde Arabe, to grassroots initiatives like the Dalâla festival, and finally to an exploration of return at the Mucem, we observe a shift in inclusive practices from institutional to participatory frameworks that can more flexibly accommodate the complexities

of interrupted transmission. This trajectory demonstrates the insufficiency of binary narratives – whether roseate/lachrymose, assimilation/marginalisation, or Jewish/Arab – to capture the lived experiences of North African Jewish communities and their descendants.

What emerges most clearly from this analysis is that effective engagement with Maghrebi Jewish memory requires a multilayered approach that balances institutional resources with community agency. The Sephardic experience serves as a crucial bridge between Jewish and Middle Eastern studies, challenging both Eurocentric and nationalist historiographies. Algerian Jewish stories illuminate the entanglements of colonial dynamics that continue to shape contemporary French debates around immigration, citizenship, and cultural belonging. Rather than seeking simplistic reconciliation or pursuing a revanchist stance against Ashkenazi-dominated narratives, the most promising curatorial approaches create spaces for embodied, reflective nostalgia while acknowledging the unresolved tensions of postcolonial memory. Through these processes, the intergenerational transmission of Maghrebi Jewish heritage becomes not merely an exercise in preservation but an active site of cultural reimagining and creative possibility.

This study also highlights the productive feedback loops between scholarship and critical heritage practices. The curatorial experiments examined here demonstrate that exhibitions themselves function as forms of knowledge production, not merely as vehicles for displaying existing research. When curators, artists, scholars, and community members collaborate across generational and communal divides, they create new possibilities for understanding the complex legacies of colonial encounter beyond the constraining frameworks of national belonging. The post-memory generation is increasingly engaging with the Middle East turn in Jewish Studies through physical and imaginative returns to ancestral homelands as forms of autoethnography that grapples with the tensions of heritage, as Berliner would have it. Similarly, as I have attempted to demonstrate, curatorial practices are never neutral but always implicated in questions of agency and power. When minority communities gain greater control over the representation of their heritage – as is at least partially the case for the grassroots initiative Dalâla – new possibilities emerge for dealing with the complexities of interrupted transmission that institutional frameworks can struggle to accommodate. But even then, the grassroots initiative cannot speak beyond itself. The future of Maghrebi Jewish heritage thus depends not only on continued scholarly attention but on creating spaces where community agency and valorisation can flourish and generate alternative archives that challenge established historiographies and point towards more nuanced understandings of Jewish, Muslim, and Mediterranean entanglements.

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Open-Source Sephardism: Heritage Re-Inscriptions of Haketia in Virtual Worldly Commons

Pedro Antunes

Abstract:

Haketia, a hybrid Judaeo-Spanish trans-language suppressed under imperial rule in the Maghreb, is being actively reanimated through digital heritagisation practices amongst dispersed communities of speech. How do digital heritage practices enable the postvernacular transformation of Haketia from suppressed vernacular to an active tool of cross-cultural coalition-building? Drawing on virtual ethnography of the eSefarad online platform, this study examines how such platforms operate not as static preservation but through processes of 'trans situ' heritagisation, where cultural elements are exchanged across multiple sites, temporalities, and modes of presence. The analysis traces Haketia's transition to postvernacular performance, where using the language becomes a conscious cultural enactment that forges virtual communities across historical rupture. Rather than representing continuous transmission, these digital practices are marked by inventive reconstruction and purposeful reassembly, conceptualised here as 'open-source Sephardism' – a framework grounded in diasporism that privileges relational 'hereness' over territorial return. Through collaborative negotiation and cross-cultural coalition, this digital heritage practice fosters the revival of Judaeo-Muslim virtual worldly commons, demonstrating how minoritised vernaculars can be reactivated as living threads of diasporic connection that transcend traditional boundaries of heritage preservation.

Key words: Postvernacular Haketia, trans situ heritagisation, open-source Sephardism, digital heritage, diasporism

Introduction: Heritage activation of Judaeo-Spanish linguistic repertoires

In recent decades, the shift of heritage practices into digital environments has transformed how diasporic communities reassemble cultural memory. Minoritised vernaculars, in particular, carry affective and connective potential, binding memory, belonging, and the capacity to reimagine a precolonial shared world across distance. Within virtual spaces, these linguistic repertoires can be reanimated not simply as remnants of the past but as living threads of diasporic connection. Such reanimation operates through what Jeffrey Shandler (2006: 4) terms a 'postvernacular' framework, where a language's 'meta-level of signification' – its symbolic and affective value – is privileged over its daily communicative use. In this postvernacular mode, the very act of using Haketia becomes a significant cultural performance. The affective resonance of this process emerges in responses to platforms like eSefarad, where users encounter the language not as a medium of everyday communication but as a vehicle for diasporic connection that transcends

traditional boundaries of vernacular transmission. One reaction to an episode by 'Enkontros de Alhad' illustrates this:

> *Thank you very much. When I saw the channel, I cried. How good it is to find our roots. I'm Uruguayan, from Brazilian parents. I live in Santana do Livramento-RS, on the border with Uruguay. I practice Judaism alone; the nearest synagogue is 480 km away.*[1]

This comment captures the role digital platforms now play in reassembling dispersed heritage collectives. In the absence of an in-person Sephardic[2] community (traditionally referring to Jews of Iberian origin, expelled in the late fifteenth century and later dispersed across the Mediterranean and North Africa), @claudiodachi5829 found belonging and reconnection through this weekly virtual space. The overall ethos of eSefarad is to revive the diversity of Judaeo-Spanish languages and disseminate associated cultural knowledge. Founded in Buenos Aires in 2008 by Liliana and Marcelo Benveniste, the platform curates articles, events, Ladino language seminars, broadcasts, and a weekly newsletter.

Expressions like 'severely endangered' and 'in danger of being forgotten' frequently appear in Judaeo-Spanish heritage discourses, reflecting both the language's precarious status and the urgency for its preservation. Fernando Vidal and Nélia Dias's notion of 'endangerment sensibility' captures this cultural and emotional awareness of loss tied to global linguistic diversity (Vidal and Dias 2016). It helps explain why individuals engage in creating transnational, virtual speech communities (Morgan 2004: 3) – collectives shaped by shared memory, heritage-making, and affective connections. In this context, Judaeo-Spanish increasingly functions as a 'proxy' for a broader lost heritage, standing in for a once-shared Sephardic world that can no longer be directly accessed (Breithoff 2020).

Historically, 'Ladino' referred to a non-spoken calque used to translate Hebrew liturgical texts (Sephiha 1977). Following the 1492 expulsion of Jews from the Iberian Peninsula, spoken vernaculars gradually emerged amongst Sephardi communities across the Mediterranean – hybrid trans-languages created when Iberian Romance and Hebrew lexical elements were infused into local host languages. This hybridity produced distinct regional forms such as Haketia in North Africa and Judezmo in the eastern Mediterranean

1 Comment by user @claudiodachi5829 on Enkontros de Alhad (2021a). Translated from Portuguese by the author.

2 Whilst 'Sephardi' originally referred to Jews expelled from the Iberian Peninsula in 1492, it has since acquired a broader contemporary significance, encompassing diverse Jewish communities from North Africa and the Ottoman Empire. In postcolonial France, it became an umbrella category for Jews from North Africa, developed as an identity distinct from earlier classifications such as 'pied-noir', especially regarding repatriation (Zytnicki 2022).

(Bunis 2008; Stein 2003).[3] Today, what is commonly known or called Ladino often subsumes all these variants under a single heritage label, though their development was regionally specific. The tendency to treat them as interchangeable reinforces symbolic hierarchies within revitalisation discourse.

This article traces the digital heritagisation of Haketia as a process of revitalisation, drawing comparative insights with Judezmo. It examines the divergent trajectories and heritage politics of the two languages to ask several questions: what is the status of Judaeo-Spanish within heritage-making initiatives? What communicative value does it hold today? To consider these questions, I draw on poststructuralist linguistic theory and critical heritage studies, exploring how minoritised vernaculars are reactivated through digital platforms.

After a period of decline following colonial rule and suppression during the twentieth century, Judaeo-Spanish experienced a modest resurgence around 2000, when Rachel Amado Bortnick launched Ladinokomunita, the first online Judaeo-Spanish correspondence group (Held 2010), which was followed by the 'Ladino Culture Forum' on the Israeli portal Tapuz. These early digital communities marked the beginning of a shift towards web-based cultural engagement. A central aim of this article is thus to examine how digital heritage contributes to revitalising hybrid Judaeo-Spanish repertoires. Here I understand 'digital heritage' as a system of translation across temporalities and modes of presence, made possible through coded traces and shaped by metalinguistic and interpretive practices.

This article compares two major Judaeo-Spanish linguistic groups: Ottoman Jews, who speak the Oriental variety known as Judezmo, and Maghrebi Sephardim, particularly the Megorashim who settled in Morocco after their expulsion from the Iberian kingdoms. Its primary focus, however, is on the sociopolitical dimensions of Haketia's ongoing digital revitalisation. This variety developed along the Moroccan and Algerian coasts when Old Castilian and Hebrew lexical elements were infused into Moroccan Arabic (Darija).

A central concept for understanding this revitalisation is that of the speech community, particularly regarding new contexts that bring speakers into interaction (often virtually). The dismantling of Haketia-speaking communities in Morocco occurred under imperial rule, especially during the French protectorate (1912–1956). Although Morocco remained a monarchy, the sultan's authority was largely symbolic, and Jewish populations – retaining the legal status of *dhimmis*[4] – were subjected to assimilationist policies

3 Judezmo denotes a variety of Ibero-Romance languages that were developed in the eastern Mediterranean, including in Salonica, Constantinople, and Rhodes.

4 The *dhimmis* is an Islamic legal category applied to non-Muslim subjects under Muslim rule, granting them protected but subordinate status. However, French authorities undermined this by introducing a dual legal system: Islamic law for Muslims and French civil law for others.

(Schroeter 2018). The challenge for contemporary heritage activists thus lies in reactivating the language's use-value within a fragmented, post-imperial context.[5]

Given this historical rupture, I draw on Jacques Derrida's concept of hauntology to frame Haketia's digital revitalisation. Hauntology describes a condition in which something from the past persists as a spectral presence – neither fully present nor entirely absent. It names what is 'out of joint' with its time, marking what is 'no longer and what is not yet' (Derrida [1994] 2006: 30). From this perspective, Haketia's online re-emergence does not restore it to its former everyday contexts. Instead, it reactivates suppressed temporalities and fractured relationalities, producing spectral continuity that resists linear recovery. Digital heritage operates here as a medium of spectral translation, where language becomes iteratively re-inscribed through acts of memory, imagination, and affect. This reactivation also carries politics of reparation, particularly through the return of Arabic elements within ostensibly Ibero-European heritage.

I follow Marcyliena Morgan's (2004) emphasis on speech communities as formations sustained through language alongside shared values, historical consciousness, and cultural imaginaries. In Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation contexts, these communities are increasingly shaped through digital mediation, where prolonged interaction unfolds across distance, structured by affective presence, iteration, and memory. This shift aligns with Dana Diminescu and Benjamin Loveluck's (2014) concept of the 'e-diaspora', wherein diasporic communities actively construct belonging through digitally mediated practices. Such formations produce 'traces of dispersion' – hyperlinked networks of memory and interaction – through which collective identity becomes enacted and visible online. Ana Deumert's (2014) work on digital sociolinguistics in postcolonial contexts complements this framework by demonstrating how iteration, play, and memorial practices shape minoritised communities' online language engagement. Together, these perspectives frame virtual speech communities as historically entangled spaces where Haketia undergoes continual re-inscription rather than static preservation.

Through these practices, speech communities reanimate suppressed formations of imagination, transmission, and relationality – what Ariella Aïsha Azoulay (2019: 388) describes as 'persisting and repressed forms and formations of being in the world [...] preserved and transmitted over generations', conceptualised as 'worldly commons'. The activation of Haketia in

5 The category of contemporary heritage activists appears 'Enkontros de Alhad' episodes, notably Enkontros de Alhad (2023b). It describes a decentralised and engaged activism to defend Haketia and Judaeo-Spanish through digital media and multigenerational belonging. A related example is the 'Enkontros de Alhad' episode 'Terminolojia LGBTQIA+ en ladino' with Carlos Yebra López, which shows how such activism intersects with contemporary identity discourses (Enkontros de Alhad 2024).

virtual space thus becomes a project of rearticulating diasporic knowledge systems disrupted under French and Spanish imperial rule in the Maghreb, operating through continuous re-inscription beyond static archival apparatuses. The possibility of virtual accomplishment of these 'worldly commons' emerges through what Halberstam (2005: 145) describes as the appropriation of 'the real' that 'always exists elsewhere' – a generative desire that propels postcolonial reclaiming as aspirational becoming, acknowledging both the creative potential and complex entanglements these imaginings carry within present conditions. This reactivation raises crucial questions: How do these linguistic remnants rearticulate suppressed worlds? What political potential emerges from reviving the Arabic components of an ostensibly Ibero-European language?

Since 2000, digital platforms have played a central role in Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation, enabling its re-inscription within shared diasporic memory. My use of 'digital heritage' aligns with critical heritage studies in treating heritage as a performative and socio-technical apparatus that co-produces the very objects it claims to safeguard (Harrison et al. 2020; Vidal and Dias 2016). However, whilst critical heritage studies generally mobilise Derrida's notion of the archive, I extend this framework by drawing on his concept of 'grammé', which refers to the trace-based structure that underlies all acts of transmission, including oral ones.[6] This shift enables me to foreground the iterative, ephemeral nature of digital heritage systems, which rely not on material stability but on continuous re-inscription. Such dynamics enable new forms of diasporic belonging, particularly visible in the e-diaspora: virtual, transnational collectives sustained by shared cultural and linguistic memory (Diminescu and Loveluck 2014).

In Ladino revitalisation, platforms like eSefarad have enabled dispersed linguistic communities to organise through collaborative, dematerialised models of cultural transmission. This digitally mediated cultural labour unsettles territorial conceptions of diaspora, proposing instead more situated and participatory forms of belonging. Jacob Plitman (2018) describes this orientation as 'diasporism': a formation grounded not in the ideal of return but in 'hereness' – the organising principle of relational presence and 'a commitment to struggling primarily in the communities in which [one] live[s]'.[7] Following this framework, I adapt Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's (2005) notion of 'open-source Jewishness' to theorise digital heritage prac-

6 Etymologically the Greek word 'grammé' refers to a written letter or mark. In Derrida's usage, however, it designates the fundamental trace structure that underlies all signification - encompassing not only written and spoken language but the entire system of differences and relations between signs that makes meaning possible across any form of cultural transmission.

7 'Hereness' translates the Jewish Socialist Labour Bund's principle of 'doikayt', which Plitman quotes from *The Colours of Jews*, in which scholar and activist Melanie Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007) discusses the meaning of home.

tices grounded in collaborative participation and co-creation. However, by reframing this concept as 'open-source Sephardism', I extend Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's focus on identity actualisation into an explicitly political terrain. Drawing on Plitman's diasporism, Sephardism here designates not a stable ethno-religious identity but a dynamic repertoire of practices sustained by collective memory, iterative participation, and the reclamation of dismantled worlds. Rather than depending exclusively on inherited descent, this formation emerges through situated work and digitally mediated heritage-making processes.

Haketia's hauntology: colonial suppression and diasporic revival

Haketia developed over six centuries through contact between Sephardim exiled after the Iberian Inquisition and Arab, Judaeo-Arab, and Berber populations in North Africa. This primarily oral variant of Judaeo-Spanish emerged amongst Megorashim in Moroccan and Algerian coastal cities. With a core derived from medieval Castilian and Hebrew, its lexicon incorporated Arabic elements – some inherited from Iberian Arabic, others adopted during exile. Compared to their Ottoman counterparts, Moroccan Sephardim maintained more sustained Arabic contact, contributing to Haketia's distinctive hybrid form. Whilst Judezmo in the eastern Mediterranean – the variety spoken in the former eastern Ottoman territories – remained dominant amongst Ottoman Sephardim, Haketia reflects deeper integration with North African linguistic and cultural environments. Traces of Castilian and Portuguese vocabulary persist in Moroccan Judaeo-Arabic vernaculars today as a result of contact with expelled Sephardic communities (Chetrit 2014; Raz 2015).

Although broader Judaeo-Spanish decline began in the late nineteenth century, Haketia followed a distinct trajectory shaped by Morocco's colonial context. Spain's occupation of the Moroccan city of Tétouan in 1860, followed by the opening of Alliance Israélite Universelle (AIU) schools in 1862, initiated re-Hispanisation policies that further marginalised the vernacular. Spanish authorities elevated the status of the Jewish community, strategically exploiting their position as a merchant minority to serve as colonial intermediaries between Spanish authorities and the Muslim population.[8] Colonial authorities and local elites dismissed Haketia as corrupted jargon, causing it to lose prestige within both Jewish and imperial spheres. The AIU, influenced by Haskalah ideals, reinforced this perception by promoting French and Spanish as symbols of modernity and social mobility (Zytnicki 2017).[9]

8 This strategic positioning reinforced existing social stratifications within the Jewish community and fostered Hispanic identification, contributing to the breakdown of traditional Jewish-Muslim relations (Schroeter 2002).

9 'Haskalah' (Hebrew for 'enlightenment') refers to the Jewish Enlightenment movement that emerged in the eighteenth century. It advocated secular education, rationalism, and integration into wider society. It influenced modern

During the French protectorate, AIU educators supported an imperial 'regeneration' rhetoric that framed North African Jews as backwards. Simultaneously, however, AIU educational values and networks contributed to forging a distinct Moroccan Jewish national identity (Marglin 2011; Schroeter 2018).

As David Bunis (2008: 207) notes, later generations gradually shed Arabic elements from Haketia, adopting 'pure Castilian' or French instead. This shift reflected colonial dispossession and broader French strategies reinforcing hierarchies through intergroup division (Katz et al. 2017). The educational and professional opportunities provided through AIU institutions further separated Jews from the Muslim majority, granting them access to colonial administration and trade positions. These opportunities positioned Jewish-Moroccan identity within unequal imperial frameworks, contributing over time to the breakdown of Jewish–Muslim coexistence, culminating in the 1948 anti-Jewish riots and a large-scale Jewish exodus.

Colonial sovereignty imposed assimilation through education and legal structures, marginalising hybrid vernaculars in favour of imperial languages. Derrida's (1998: 40) concept of the 'incorporation of the Other's monolingualism' aptly describes how colonial regimes enforce linguistic homogeneity by absorbing plural identities into standardised norms. Central to this process is Derrida's (1998) notion of 'interdit', a pedagogical mechanism that privileges one language whilst actively suppressing others. In Algeria, the French colonial administration tightly controlled education and sought to assimilate Jewish communities through the 1870 Crémieux Decree, which granted them French citizenship. This policy curtailed the influence of the AIU, which played a more prominent role in Morocco's protectorate, where colonial oversight was comparatively less direct. As an Algerian Jew, Derrida himself inherited this project of French linguistic and cultural normativity. Despite differences in colonial systems, both Algeria and Morocco displaced Jewish hybrid vernaculars in favour of French, thereby undermining plural identities and long-standing traditions. After 1948, large contingents of Maghrebi and Eastern Jews migrated to Israel, where they were classified as Mizrahi. In this new national context, the imposition of Hebrew in state education accelerated the decline of Judaeo-Spanish variants, including Haketia (Refael 2015).

During the late 1980s and 1990s, Moroccan Jews in the Americas, particularly Montreal, initiated Haketia reclamation efforts, paralleling broader Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation in Israel through music, literature, and academia. Solly Levy, a former AIU teacher, played key roles in founding the Kinor Sefardi Choir and musical group Gerineldo, both using Haketia repertoires. In 1990, his weekly radio show *Tiempo de Sefarad en Haketia* preserved oral histories and folk tales, later compiled in *El libro de Selomó* (Levy

Jewish schooling systems and helped shape the cultural orientation of institutions like the AIU.

2008) and CD collection *La vida en Haketía* (Levy 2012). Meanwhile, the 1990s-2000s witnessed Judezmo revival in Israel through music, literature, and academia (Refael 2015), often facilitated by digital platforms explored in the following section of this article.

These diasporic heritagisation initiatives powerfully illustrate Haketia's shift into a postvernacular condition discussed above. The contemporary life of Haketia mirrors that of its sibling language, Yiddish, in its shift to a postvernacular condition distinguished by its profound connection to the shared desire to revive it. As Shandler argues,

> *[i]ncreasingly, speaking, reading, writing – even hearing – Yiddish has become an elective act. Relatively few Jews now use Yiddish because it is the only language that they have for communication with other Jews [...] Rather, those who use Yiddish [...] do so voluntarily, as communities, as families, and as individuals. (Shandler 2006: 24)*

Building on this symbolic value characteristic of postvernacular language use, the very act of using Haketia in this new virtual milieu is a significant cultural performance. Each utterance becomes more than just communication; it is also a meaningful act that, as Shandler's work suggests, actively forges community and enacts a renewed cultural identity in the present. Haketia's re-emergence today as a spectral identity and belonging marker can be understood through Derrida's hauntological framework. Whilst colonial suppression and the dispersal of the Sephardi diaspora across Europe, Israel, and the Americas initially marginalised the language, its return in fragmented, memorialised forms embodies a hauntological interplay between ontology and haunting, revealing how suppressed languages reappear as cultural spectres. These remnants act as forms of translation in the Derridean sense: 'an elusive spectre [...] a haunting of both memory and translation' (Derrida ([1994] 2006: 20). This parallels how digital heritage itself functions as a translation across temporalities and modes of presence. Stripped of its original meaning systems, Haketia survives as cultural residue from a once-shared Jewish–Arab–Berber world. From this perspective, the reinvention operates through what Halberstam (2005) theorises as 'realness' – the way minorities excluded from the domain of 'the real' appropriate its effects. The digital metalanguage through which Haketia is being re-performed embodies cultural authenticity, not through cultural transmission but through compelling enactment of belonging across historical rupture (Halberstam 2005). To examine these contemporary digital heritagisation practices, I employed a multisited digital ethnographic approach that draws on Christine Hine's (2000) methodology of virtual ethnography, which understands online environments as legitimate field sites where meaning is produced through

technologically mediated interactions, digital traces, and participatory infrastructures.

My analysis of cultural transmission on the eSefarad platform employed archival, observational, and participatory methods. I conducted digital archival research focusing on audiovisual materials. Between October 2022 and June 2023, I followed the weekly 'Enkontros de Alhad' Zoom broadcasts, systematically observing sessions and producing detailed ethnographic field notes. This allowed me to monitor the real-time Zoom chat to capture spontaneous and affective interactions that would otherwise remain unrecorded in archived recordings – such as congratulatory messages, emotional testimonies, playful uses of Judaeo-Spanish, and cultural questions. For my analysis, I selected representative examples based on recurring themes: challenges of cultural and linguistic transmission, the internal diversity of Judaeo-Maghrebi Sephardism, and debates over Haketia's linguistic status as a distinct language versus a marginal dialect.

In addition, I participated in an online introductory Judaeo-Spanish course taught by Liliana Benveniste (September–November 2023). These weekly Zoom sessions brought together students from diverse diasporic contexts, blending historical background with the acquisition of elementary language skills, such as sounds, a lexicon, and verbs. My involvement offered insight into learner motivations, teaching approaches, and processes of community formation.

Running parallel to my online research, I conducted in-person fieldwork in France, at the Musée des Civilisations de l'Europe et de la Méditerranée (Marseille) and the Musée d'Art et d'Histoire du Judaïsme (Paris), exploring the museums' collections on Western Sephardi material culture. Although I do not directly use this ethnographic material here, these investigations complement my analysis by providing a broader context for understanding Maghrebi Jewish identity and cultural transmission.

My engagement with this research stems from my position as a Portuguese scholar working on the Maghreb's hybrid Judaeo-Islamic heritage, rather than from a Jewish identity or community affiliation. This outsider position entailed limits – particularly regarding embodied knowledge and access – yet also allowed for a comparative lens on minoritised vernaculars and post-imperial heritage revitalisation. Drawing on Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's concept of open-source Jewishness, I approach digital heritage as shaped by shared cultural commitments and collaborative participation, rather than by an inherited identity. This outsider perspective proves particularly valuable when analysing postvernacular phenomena, as my position enables analytical distance from questions of authenticity and inheritance that might otherwise constrain examination of these performative cultural reconstructions. Whilst I cannot access certain lived dimensions of Sephardi heritage, this article contributes to understanding how digital

infrastructures foster new modes of cultural reassembly that virtually recapture millennial knowledges and cosmological taxonomies of a suppressed world (Azoulay 2024).

Open-source 'Sephardism': digital translations and reappropriations of Judaeo-Spanish

Founded in 2008 by Liliana and Marcelo Benveniste in Buenos Aires, eSefarad has become one of the most influential platforms connecting a global Ladino-speaking diaspora. Subtitled 'Noticias del Mundo Sefaradi' (News of the Sephardic world), the site curates diverse cultural and linguistic content, enabling dispersed users to engage with and contribute to the continuity of Sephardic cultural memory. Since its inception, the platform has expanded its communication methods considerably. Beyond its original news function, eSefarad now produces and broadcasts programmes, including live streams of Sephardic festivities, whilst maintaining a YouTube channel that archives all video content. Building on this success, the founders launched a weekly Zoom livestream called 'Enkontros de Alhad' (Sunday meetings), where transnational community members present projects and discuss Sephardic culture in Ladino:

> *The main idea was to create a meeting with speakers or non-native speakers of Judaeo-Spanish, where we could propose an activity that could be carried out in Judaeo-Spanish. Without explaining it in other languages, as is the case with other activities, we aimed to understand how many people could follow the programme in Judaeo-Spanish and how many ways of speaking there are.*[10]

As Liliana Benveniste explained, the goal was to create a space for Judaeo-Spanish interaction. What began as a static news website evolved into an interactive platform, with 'Enkontros de Alhad' spearheading this transformation as a pioneering virtual Judaeo-Spanish speech community. With over 200 episodes to date, the programme has become one of the most popular online forums for often self-reflexive discussion about revitalising Judaeo-Spanish language and Sephardic culture.

Regular presenters (Balabayas) include prominent scholars and cultural advocates: Jenny Laneurie-Fresco (Akí Estamos), Eliezer Pabo (Balkan Jewry history), and Devin E. Naar (Sephardic Studies Digital Library). Oro Anahory-Librowicz and Alicia Sisso Raz serve as key voices of Maghreb Judaism. Both are descendants of Sephardic Jewish families from Morocco – now residing in Canada and the United States of America, respectively –

10 Interview conducted with Liliana Benveniste in Enkontros de Alhad (2021c).

and remain committed to revitalising the Haketia language whilst promoting Moroccan Jewish culture.

Within this speech community, scholars have developed digital methodologies to revitalise and preserve Judaeo-Spanish. Bryan Kirchen, a scholar of Romance Languages and Literatures, launched a project entitled 'Documenting Judaeo-Spanish', which offers a web platform featuring transcribed documents in Solitreo script, translation tools, and a custom Solitreo font (Kirchen 2020). Similarly, Carlos Yebra López, a sociolinguist specialising in Ladino, has created digital audiovisual archives of recordings of heritage speakers and contributed to developing the Judaeo-Spanish variant in the UTalk learning app. These discussions often converge on digital projects that document heritage speakers across generations, build web archives, and develop tools to analyse Judaeo-Spanish cultural and linguistic features.

Alongside developing this online speech community of cultural and linguistic heritage experts, eSefarad organises Ladino language courses. I began my ethnographic research on Ladino's digital heritagisation processes during the language course I attended in 2022. The course strongly emphasised contextualising language formation processes, particularly koinéisation – where contact between closely related languages fosters interaction, leading to the development of new language varieties. Although the community in the language classes is different from the main speech community in 'Enkontros de Alhad', online language learning also presupposes 'community' formation. Following Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's notion of 'communities of practice' (Lave and Wenger 1991), I suggest that learning Ladino requires individual participation in group communication, thereby re-embedding the language in a new social context – in this case, virtual and transnational. These learner communities also reshape the language itself as they appropriate it through tentative and playful ways of speaking within and beyond their learning groups.

Whilst less central than 'Enkontros de Alhad', these language classes unite students with different mother tongues and ethnicities, creating shared learning spaces for Judaeo-Spanish. In this context, Judaeo-Spanish serves primarily as a medium through which members share knowledge, negotiate meaning, and develop common understandings. As Ana Deumert (2014) argues, online language engagement by minoritised communities often operates through playful, affective, and iterative acts that challenge dominant linguistic hierarchies.

As I was the only Portuguese participant and lacked proficiency in modern Castilian Spanish, which most of my peers possessed, some colleagues wondered how I could follow the lessons. As the course progressed, I found Old Castilian basics easier to grasp than Modern Castilian ones. This stems partly from Portuguese nasal vowels but also because Portuguese retained more Old Castilian features, also preserved by Eastern Sephardic communi-

ties. In contrast, Modern Spanish has undergone more systematic simplification and updating.

The class included students from Argentina, Colombia, Costa Rica, Portugal, Turkey, and Uruguay, all with distinct motivations for enrolling. Some sought to reconnect with cultural heritage, whilst others – like myself – were researchers needing Judaeo-Spanish proficiency to interpret documents or conduct interviews. These communities of practice thus transcend traditional ethnic or religious boundaries by uniting Sephardic and non-Jewish individuals from diverse backgrounds committed to learning and safeguarding Judaeo-Spanish.

Together, the expert discussions on Judaeo-Spanish variants in 'Enkontros de Alhad' and during the digital Ladino classes enabled by new technologies operate as forms of what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2005) calls 'open-source Jewishness'. Drawing on the ethos of open-source software, she describes digitally mediated connection modes that are reimagining Jewishness through collaborative engagement with declining knowledge systems, prioritising shared interests over institutional affiliations.

Whilst Kirshenblatt-Gimblett highlights interest-driven participation, Plitman's concept of 'diasporism' foregrounds a more politically situated mode of diasporic belonging (Plitman 2018). At its centre lies 'hereness': a principle of relational presence, embodied attachment, and shared futurity rather than geographic proximity or territorial return ideals. In Plitman's terms, hereness entails critical awareness of Israel coupled with commitment to building Jewish cultural and political life in one's inhabited places. On platforms like eSefarad, hereness manifests through iterative digital heritage practices: storytelling, linguistic exchange, and collaborative knowledge-making. Whilst eSefarad remains institutionally neutral towards Israel – a stance that aligns with its self-presentation as a non-partisan news channel – the diasporism it fosters nonetheless enables individual participants to articulate critical perspectives on nationalist and colonial politics. Rabbi Baruj Garzon, for instance, reflects on moving beyond 'sealed' or defensive Judaism towards a more open Sephardic tradition rooted in familial spaces, everyday cultural practice, and dialogic relationality. Extending Plitman's framework, Julie E. Cooper (2023) suggests that diasporic Jewish communities can act as coalition partners in broader justice struggles. Digital heritage platforms are thus not merely archival but generative spaces where Sephardic identity is reassembled through collective enactment – a dynamic, future-oriented re-inscription of the Maghrebi worldly commons in virtual space.

The heritagisation of Haketia as restorative translation: reassembling Judaeo-Arab 'grammé'

To understand digital linguistic revitalisation as an iteration of the 'worldly commons' (Azoulay 2019), this section examines tensions underlying the reassembly of Judaeo-Spanish linguistic diversity. I highlight how using Ladino as a unifying element has hierarchised and minoritised the Haketia variant. Although this revitalisation project appears driven by a common cause – reconstituting linguistic heritage as collective engagement in repairing pre-imperial, pan-Iberian culture – it remains entangled in the political history of French imperial rule in Morocco. How can we locate Haketia's Arab component in recent print and digital re-inscriptions of Ladino's broader revitalisation project? What sociopolitical potential does this shared heritage imply?

Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation, initially driven by grassroots civic collectives in diasporic contexts like Canada, has been appropriated by state institutions. Like nineteenth-century nation-building projects that standardised vernacular languages, these institutions replicate logics of tutelage and national language standardisation (Yebra López 2021). The Akademia Nacional del Ladino, an Israeli academic organisation affiliated with the Spanish Royal Academy, draws on a rhetoric of national cultural diversity to prolong colonial dominance over previously minoritised sub-ethnic groups like the Sephardim. As Carlos Yebra López (2021: 100) notes, these institutions ultimately 'entail a centripetal process of re-standardisation and officialisation [that] continues to pose a severe threat to the autonomy and survival of Ladino and Ladino-speaking minorities worldwide'. The transition from unofficial, community-based heritage preservation to national institutional spheres creates a paradox: normalising interlinguistic hybrid repertoires into standardised language.

This institutional dynamic becomes evident in eSefarad's framework, where debates frequently explore Haketia's cultural and linguistic specificity, particularly in 'Enkontros de Alhad'. One notable episode, broadcast on 19 February 2023 and titled 'El Prencipito in Haketia', focused on the translation into Haketia of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's *The Little Prince*. During the discussion, renowned philologist Yaacov Bentolila – a corresponding member of both the Spanish Royal Academy and the Akademia Nacional del Ladino – questioned not only the endeavour's purpose but also whether an oral language could sustain literary translation. Situating this act within broader Sephardic cultural revitalisation contexts, he raised critical concerns about its cultural and linguistic implications (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a).

These reflections, though far from consensual, raise important questions about the aims for and outcomes of Judaeo-Spanish revitalisation whilst prompting broader consideration of how such initiatives contribute to the evolving Sephardic e-diaspora. Bentolila directly questioned Alicia Sisso

Raz on the legitimacy and effectiveness of translating into a dialect with no historical written standard:

> *Let's imagine* The Little Prince *was written not eighty or ninety years ago but 200 years ago, and you wanted to translate it for speakers of Haketia. How would you do it? […] I think you would translate it into Ladino because when something was written in literature, in our communities […] it wasn't written in Haketia but in Ladino […] After all, the Haketia was a vernacular language used orally […] Would it be the Haketia of this translation? (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a: 9:25–11:53)*

For Bentolila, since Haketia is an oral dialect, the sociolinguistic study of its evolving language structures for translation purposes would be impossible, as translators lack access to records that would allow a comparison of linguistic transformations and their respective social uses. With his hypothesis, Bentolila criticises perceived presentism in oral language translation: translators of foreign literature into present-day Haketia cannot access and interpret morphosyntactic and lexical structures used historically for comparative purposes. However, despite a lack in written documents, this does not mean that Haketia was never written. Evidence from letters sent by Moroccan Sephardic Jewish immigrants in Manaus, Brazil, to families in Tétouan attests to written forms of Haketia (Carneiro 2021).

Furthermore, the distinction positioning Ladino as a proper language and Haketia as a minor, informal genre reflects logocentric presuppositions that equate writing with permanent reason or metaphysical presence (Derrida 1997). This logic devalues grammé, Derrida's term not for conventional writing but for the trace-based structure underlying all acts of inscription, including so-called oral transmission. Therefore, grammé refers here to the iterable mark through which meaning is produced and circulated, regardless of medium. The social classification between 'oral' and 'written' forms thus collapses, since oral languages are structured by arch-writing: the system of traces and repetition making all language possible. As Derrida (1997: 316) writes, grammé names the very condition of possibility for any language, whether poetic, pictographic, ideographic, or phonetic.

On the other hand, for Bentolila the translatability of European literature into Haketia becomes understandable when consciously intended to serve a higher linguistic social purpose, which he compares to Hebrew:

> *The aim of translating [Saint-Exupéry's work] into Haketia was not to make it accessible. That was not the aim, so what is the other aim? […] I'm thinking, for example, of the first literary translations that began [to be made] in Hebrew when the language started to be revitalised. The works of Tolstoy, Cervantes,*

> *and French authors were translated [...] I don't think those who started reviving the Hebrew language needed these translations; they could read them in the original or in the translations they were familiar with. You could say these translations were made not for the sake of the work but for the sake of Hebrew, to revitalise the Hebrew, to give depth to Hebrew, to improve Hebrew. That's what these translations were for [...] to enrich Hebrew. (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a: 13:45–15:20)*

By comparing the role translations played in the emergence of modern Hebrew within Zionism's political project of creating a national culture with the current process of revitalising Haketia in diaspora contexts, Bentolila conflates two opposed processes. The historiography of the re-emergence of modern Hebrew shows that the process was driven largely by written forms — particularly the standardisation of the grammar, the script, and the lexicon — although rabbinical literature also reflects genealogies of oral transmission (see Kuzar 2001). In contrast, the revitalisation of Haketia operates mainly through oral repertoires shaped by vernacular memory, affective transmission, and community-based storytelling.

Moreover, Bentolila's perspective frames Hebrew's emergence as Israel's national language within a 'revivalist' ideological framework aligned with the political ideal of national restoration of a mythical homeland. This hides the involvement of multiple imperial powers and colonial practices in creating the new nation state. This institutional perspective exemplifies what can be understood as a statist agenda for language revival, which stands in tension with the diasporic approach that underlies the contemporary digital practices around Haketia.

By contrast, the heritage revitalisation of Haketia occurs within the context of repairing processes of linguistic prohibition that ultimately led to the exile and diasporic dispersal of most of Morocco's Jewish population. Therefore, extending Bentolila's reflections on the political role of language to the postvernacular framework outlined earlier in nation-building processes, we can situate the ongoing digital revitalisation of Judaeo-Spanish as part of a unifying movement. However, rather than serving the nation state's attempt at cultural homogenisation, Ladino itself represents a diverse expression among multilingual groups whose current speech communities, aided by digital heritage systems, are constituting themselves as a global Sephardi e-diaspora.

Also invited to the same programme on *The Little Prince*, Oro Anahory-Librowicz, specialist in Moroccan Jewish-Spanish romance, responded to Bentolila's question. To underline Haketia's contemporary value for postcolonial redress, she drew on her family's experience of minoritisation and stigmatisation in the use of Haketia in Morocco:

> *What happened to Haketia when it faced modern Spanish [...] first of all [Morocco] was not yet [fully] under a Moroccan protectorate [...] in the middle of the nineteenth century, during the Spanish–Moroccan war, 1858 [...] and especially later, with the official establishment of the [French] protectorate, 1912, Haketia was impoverished because it faced this, let's say, robust, modern Spanish. And you'll remember in Tétouan, for example, people were ashamed to speak Haketia! You couldn't talk Haketia in the street [...] The Spaniards despised you for your way of expressing yourself: What is this? It has no head and no feet [it makes no sense]! And so it became a language only spoken at home. (Enkontros de Alhad 2023a: 17:42–18:50)*

Thus, contrary to the Hebrew example, the ongoing creation of Haketia lexicons and practices of standardisation and the transcription of oral speech into writing, alongside translation and literary creation, serve primarily to safeguard a rich cultural heritage shaped by conviviality within ethnic and religious difference. The 'endangerment sensibility' (Vidal and Dias 2016) towards language loss intertwines with ongoing digital revitalisation practices, which in turn connect with affirming cultural expressions of a precolonial world marked by millennial relations amongst Jewish-Spanish, Jewish-Berber, and Arab-Muslim populations.

Therefore, the performativity of Haketia's grammé — the traces of meaning inherited from previous communication systems, understood as inscriptions of differences — lies in the interlinguistic hybridity that constitutes it. The digital heritagisation of Haketia represents a remarkable process of reassembling the shared Castilian Spanish, Moroccan Arabic (Darija), and Hebrew lexicon in a world marked by monolingualism and postcolonial rhetorics, which continue to haunt inter- and intra-ethnic social spheres. By iterating or re-inscribing it in print and in audiovisual and digital media networks, one actualises it with new meanings and enhances its cultural fabric of difference, potentially awakening worldly commons in the globalised Mediterranean.

Judaeo-Spanish digital heritage proxies: generative metalanguages

'Sintoy el viento en mi ḥala', by Mercedes Dembo Barcessat (2021)

Voloy con la ḥala destapada	I fly with my face uncovered
para cruzar el puente;	to cross the bridge;
deshar atrás la tostina	I undo behind me the toast
que me quema ḥatta los huesos.	that burns even my bones.
Levoy mi corassón abierto	I carry my open heart
con mi nesamá descubierta	with my *nesamá* (soul) uncovered,
mi rizos al viento danzan una samba.	my curls dance a samba in the wind.
Sobre hoĵas de laranja	On leaves of *laranja* (orange),
voloy fera del mundo.	I fly outside the world.

In these verses, Mercedes Dembo Barcessat captures the essence of diasporic longing through a poetic language that forms part of a growing literary corpus by Jewish-Moroccan authors who have adopted graphic writing norms in Haketia whilst retrieving sensorial memories of Moroccan landscapes. It plays metaphorically with the author's recollections of personal transformation, alluding to Barcessat's own exile experience and sensational return to her homeland through remembrance.

The exile experience, conveyed by the first line, 'Voloy con la ḥala destapada' (I fly with my face uncovered), suggests movement and freedom, but also vulnerability, where the Arabic word 'ḥala' also signifies 'condition' or 'fate'. Words like 'corassón' (heart) and 'nesamá' (soul) allude to the poet's inner connection to her cultural roots, reshaping home through aggregates of sensational words – each deriving from different languages: Arabic, Spanish, and Hebrew.

At the end of the poem, Barcessat provided a Jewish–Moroccan glossary featuring Arabic and Hebrew words that appear in her poem as a complement to her poetic composition, thereby re-inscribing the Arabic component in Haketia's contemporary iteration, which was suppressed during its re-Hispanicisation.[11] Its online dissemination through platforms like eSefarad demonstrates how digital technology became integral to contemporary Haketia literary practice, transforming not only how diasporic heritage is preserved but also how it is creatively reimagined.

11 'Nesamá' is a Hebrew word (נשמה) meaning 'soul' or 'breath', cognate with Arabic 'nafs' (نَفْس). 'Laranja' derives from Arabic 'nāranj' (نارنج), from Sanskrit nāraṅga, meaning 'orange' (the fruit).

Cultural materials produced, shared, and archived by Maghreb Sephardic individuals – transcribed poems, Solly Levy's autobiographical folk stories in Haketia, Mercedes Dembo Barcessat's poetry – primarily serve as what Bruno Latour (1986) calls 'immutable mobiles': stable, transferable objects that can carry knowledge across different contexts whilst maintaining their essential properties. Functioning as 'bundles of figures' or collected objects – such as texts, maps, models, scientific instruments, or collections – these digital materials mobilise different worlds, enabling knowledge transfer from specific locations to different contexts or geographies. The stability, mobility, and adjustability of these texts function as mediators of knowledge. Epistemologically, this heritage process represents a reclamation of linguistic sovereignty, where the act of glossing becomes a form of cultural re-emergence against historical erasure.

Building on Latour's concept of 'immutable mobiles', heritage conservation scholar Esther Breithoff developed the notion of 'ex situ proxies' to describe how cultural materials, combined with data about them, come to represent broader cultural diversity beyond their original contexts (Breithoff 2020: 121). This approach proves particularly relevant for understanding the efforts of language preservation, where records collected 'in situ' – such as recordings of a dying language as spoken within a household of native speakers – are stored and preserved in off-site repositories. Etymologically derived from the Middle English 'procuracie', the term 'proxy' thus denotes something authorised to act on another's behalf.

This proxy function, operating within the postvernacular mode analysed throughout this article, applies to Carlos Yebra López's documentation process amongst native Judezmo speakers for the UTalk language app (as mentioned earlier). However, what proves particularly interesting in eSefarad is that much of the mobilisation of Judaeo-Spanish idiolects is generated within the platform itself. The site primarily gathers speech community specialists in these variants alongside content – poems, songs, literary translations, or artwork – produced by current speech communities.

The notions of in situ and ex situ are therefore destabilised here, since revitalisation mainly occurs amongst Sephardi diasporas in Argentina, Canada, or Israel. This dynamic, which transcends the simple binary of field site versus archive, can be understood as a form of 'trans situ' heritagisation, where cultural elements are transferred and exchanged between speakers across multiple, simultaneous sites, both online and offline. The eSefarad webpage thus functions as a proxy that acts on behalf of the common heritage cause of safeguarding and disseminating Judaeo-Spanish. Simultaneously, it generates cultural material pertaining to 'places' that no longer exist or whose milieus have only recently been recreated by cultural associations in diasporic contexts. Its collaborative heritage ethos can thus be better understood as an open-source 'sephardism'. This dynamic circulation of linguistic

and cultural fragments resonates with Diminescu and Loveluck's (2014) notion of 'e-diaspora' as a networked trace of dispersion through which communities generate and sustain collective memory online.

Following Derrida's (1997) work, the digital heritagisation of Judaeo-Spanish varieties involves linguistic playfulness at the grammatological level, despite constraints from new lexicons and graphic norms, particularly in Haketia. This appears in how writers compose their referenced world through personal memory and poetic reassembly, as demonstrated in the poem above. Such compositional process reveals a deeper paradox: web-based writing functions both as heritage language documenting endangered varieties and as technical code that distances itself from those very languages. This complex linguistic interplay recreates the Jewish-Muslim worldly commons (Azoulay 2024) that imperial powers previously dismantled.

Digital convivência: re-articulating heritage across difference

By tracing the political history of Haketia's suppression in Morocco, this article demonstrates how the processes that drove Haketia's suppression – interdiction and stigmatisation, to think with Derrida – continue to haunt contemporary heritagisation efforts. Crucially, some of the main protagonists of its revival have also experienced the long-term generational effects of imperial policies that exploited pre-existing animosities between Jewish and Muslim populations in the Maghreb as a tactic of colonial governance, thereby exacerbating them. Therefore, this analysis contributes productively to the framework of the 'imperial nation state', as theorised by Katz, Leff, and Mandel (2017), within the broader Jewish imperial turn. Within this framework, the imperial nation state governed through contradictory logics, promoting equality and universalism domestically whilst simultaneously operating through ideologies of inequality based on racial and religious difference in imperial contexts. From this perspective, the minoritisation of Haketia's Arabic component (Bunis 2008) and its current hierarchisation as a dialect of lesser relevance than Judaeo-Spanish spoken by Judaeo-Ottoman communities (Enkontros de Alhad 2021b) emerge as collateral effects of French imperial rule in the Maghreb.

However, despite – or perhaps because of – this tacit minoritisation and hierarchisation, cross-cultural and cross-linguistic coalitions have emerged. Through digital platforms, Haketia endures as a hybrid repertoire rooted in coexistence and mutual recognition. In the context of renewed ethno-nationalist violence, such as the Israeli state's genocidal assault on Palestinians, such practices are not merely heritage preservation but acts of ethical refusal – affirming pluralism, memory, and solidarity against exclusionary logics. Where vernacular languages depend on unbroken intergenerational cultural transmission within stable speech communities, its postvernacular

re-performance operates through purposeful acts of reassembly, collective negotiation, and reinvention that forge new possibilities for belonging across historical rupture.

Given the distinctive practices and epistemological specificities of digital heritage systems involved in Ladino's revitalisation, these communities may be understood as constituting an e-diaspora. As Diminescu and Loveluck (2014) and Deumert (2014) remind us, digital spaces are not merely archives but dynamic arenas where diasporic socialities and linguistic forms are continuously reimagined through iterative, affective practices.

The organising principle of 'hereness' (Plitman 2018), grounded in presence across difference, is here reconfigured through digital heritage practices. Virtual co-presence converges with a temporal axis, where Judaeo-Spanish family languages' heritage is enacted as an iterative act of remembrance and resistance against the suppression of a once-common world. Through trans-languaging acts and collaborative cultural labour, these speech communities, whilst enacting shared memory, iterate a millennial history of *convivência*.

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Reflections on Translating, Curating, and Collaging the Wandering Jew

Anoushka Alexander-Rose

Abstract:

This piece offers a review of the 2024-2025 travelling exhibition 'The Wandering Jew', collecting the author's reflections as translator and curator alongside ethnographic insights. Whilst this special issue considers the agency of minoritised groups as moveable and mobilised subjects, I play with these two characteristics to consider mythical itinerancy as both a punishment and an avenue for creative expansion. For this I draw on the benefactory figures of Georg Simmel's 'The Stranger' and Leonid Livak's 'The Helper'. Situated within a dominant narrative of European Christianity, the legend of the Wandering Jew exemplifies fundamental questions related to Jewish cultural heritage and how it may be seen through the immateriality of memory, drawing on the empowering potential of the literary and artistic imagination particularly via methods such as collage and erasure poetry. This article includes reflections on a workshop I hosted at Limmud Festival, a Jewish community event, in 2024. I invited participants to cut up existing textual and visual representations to remake the Wandering Jew, following a tradition of using artistic practices to beautify hateful images. I examine the potential of these reappropriative practices to invoke feelings of identification and ownership.

Key words: Wandering Jew, curation, diaspora, ethnography, reappropriation

Introduction

There is something idiosyncratic about the legend of the Wandering Jew which, both in creative iterations and in colloquial reclamation, strays far and wide from its origins, crossing temporal, formal, and spatial borders. The myth, a product of medieval Christian oral tradition, depicts how an old Jewish man denied Jesus brief respite on his way to the Crucifixion. For this, the alleged and so-called Wandering Jew received a dual punishment: first, he must wander the earth without a home, and second, he will only find salvation at the Second Coming. He is thus cursed to itinerancy and immortality. This legend has been reproduced over centuries, with the Wandering Jew historically serving a didactic function 'as a living embodiment of the memory of the Passion, he is a Christian relic' (Lampert-Weissig 2024: 24; see also Hasan-Rokem 2009). In these origins and subsequent reincarnations up until the nineteenth century (as well as within Nazi propaganda and recurring again in the more recent rise of the far right), the Wandering Jew has traditionally been deployed to rationalise hostile attitudes against Jews as vagrants and degenerates, undergirded by their purported refusal of Christianity.

However, since then, countless painters, sculptors, and writers – particularly those of Jewish origin themselves – have divorced the Wandering Jew from these troublesome roots to reframe him as a paradigmatic nomad, a symbol for their own experiences of persecution. Simultaneously, Jews contemporaneously and dialectically associate with this cursed figure to relate their own diasporic existence (however comfortable or steady it may be) to a historic or even nostalgic legacy of exile and situate their Jewishness beyond national borders. In 2024 I curated a (fittingly) travelling exhibition on the literary and artistic history of the Wandering Jew which journeyed in 2024-2025 from Southampton to Birmingham, London, Huddersfield, Glasgow, and Bournemouth. I ran a series of public engagement events for various audiences at each venue (a combination of academic and community spaces) seeking to capture reflections and creative responses to the legend. This article combines autoethnography – outlining how and why I arrived at this project – with ethnographic reflections on a collage workshop I hosted at Limmud Festival in 2024. Between these, I also describe the exhibition itself and investigate some key theoretical and creative approaches.

Defining the Wandering Jew

In the process of curating, I was led by the following questions: is it possible or productive to create a working and illustrative definition of the Wandering Jew? Any attempt at a comprehensive list of 'Wandering Jews' would prove futile, as the mythic figure resists typology: his name, physical appearance, age, behaviour, and even gender are constantly in flux. Thus, without an original or definitive source (since the myth was populated via the oral tradition, and only first recorded in writing in full in the sixteenth century), how can we measure whether subsequent adaptions of the legend should be included, and who gets to decide? Indeed, many iterations of the legend rewrite its historical roots, situating the Wandering Jew's travels within specific Jewish temporalities as a product of 'galus' (the concept of diasporic exile, or waiting for Messiah, from the Hebrew Bible) rather than a Christian curse.[1] Can Jewish agents use this referent to merely describe their diasporic movements, be they forced or not, or must association with the Wandering Jew require itinerancy framed as punishment, melded with a crossing of temporal and historical borders? Is there space to facilitate innovative lenses, such as re-gendering or incorporating new geographical sites of non-Western (or non-Ashkenazi) histories and experiences, and would these reframe the Wandering Jew as a more inclusive figure representing Jewish movement beyond Christian Europe? Or does such modernising deviate too far from the origins of the myth, rendering it diluted and universalised?

1 Whilst the standard spelling is 'galut', I use the Yiddish/Ashkenazic variant 'galus' as this is the form communicated to me through my childhood and education and thus relates to my own particular diasporic epistemology.

Moreover, when a subject or agent relates to the Wandering Jew in its more contemporary and idiomatic guise (as a figure representing the general phenomena of Jewish migration), oblivious to its antisemitic roots, is there still an implicit capacity for radical reappropriation? Absorbing lessons from studying the myriad representations of the Wandering Jew, can we find other myths which possess the capacity for reclamation? These may include the Berber warrior queen Al Kahina (see Everett 2025) or the masked characters depicting ancestral spirits from the realm of Ginen in Haitian Vodou (see Gordon 2021). By which I mean, have similar figures embodying curses of immortality and exile emerged from comparative borderlands of religious or cultural tension, and how are these understood and utilised within their respective diasporic communities today? And, finally, in what ways can interactive and creative practices – such as translation, curation, performance, collage, and erasure poetry – negotiate painful legacies and initiate a kind of healing which prioritises empowerment over the need for apology and redress?

Translating Vladimir Nabokov's Agasfer

My own journey with the Wandering Jew was equally divorced from its origins as situated in Jewish/Christian encounter, instead arriving from the direction of literary studies. Whilst I had been aware of the figure as a representation of Jewish nomadism as it is vaguely referred to from within community discourse (it is often used, largely uncritically, in the vernacular to describe any Jewish person who travels, whether forced or by choice), I encountered the legend in earnest through research for my undergraduate dissertation on Vladimir Nabokov and philosemitism. I investigated a passing reference to 'Agasfer', one of the names for the Wandering Jew, in a dramatic prologue Nabokov wrote under the pseudonym Vladimir Sirin (so as not to be mistaken for his then more famous father, Vladiminir Dmitrievich Nabokov). It was written in 1923, in the author's first years in Berlin, performed only once, and then published in the Russian émigré journal *Rul'*; it has not been reproduced since. I translated the text and wrote about it for my master's thesis, for which I undertook further research into the legend as wider context. Particularly surprising to me were the Christian roots of the Wandering Jew, who I had always assumed to be a Jewish character from some kind of Midrash,[2] and the extent to which non-Jewish writers had adopted the legend as a motif for universal themes of movement and memory. Although I did not realise it at the time, my translating Nabokov's 'Agasfer' – a romantic verse which follows the Wandering Jew across historical and geographical sites in search for his beloved – was a creative act of reclamation. Nabokov's version of the Wandering Jew is informed by Romantic era traditions which present a

2 Rabbinic interpretations or exegesis of biblical text.

melancholy hero detached from his Jewishness (such as in works by Pushkin and Byron). Whilst I brought the legend back into, and through, the Jewish imaginary (situating myself in the good company of cultural disseminators such as the Yiddish revivalists), I also found myself excluded from the text. At a translation workshop where I had brought an early draft for peer review, my lack of cultural familiarity with references to the New Testament was exposing and even humiliating, as if my exclusively Jewish education deemed me unqualified for the role of textual mediator. Although allusions to Judas, Satan, and Mary Magdalene felt alienating, I recognised – as if transported back to my primary school *kodesh* classes[3] – God's promise to Abraham invoked in the poem's final lines. Like Agasfer, I felt a sense of triumph in rewriting these:

> *I am Agasfer. One moment in the stars, next moment in the dust*
> *I wander. The whole chronicle of the earth*
> *is a dream about me. I was and ever will be.*
> *Let sounds pour out from all sides!*
> *I rise, I yearn, I grow stronger … My love*
> *fills up the whole sky! …*
> *O, music of my wandering, the waters*
> *and cries of centuries, come to me … come to me …!*
> *(Alexander-Rose 2020: Appendix)*

The palpable sense of triumph which I felt when rewriting and translating the text motivated my decision to develop a travelling exhibition which would facilitate further empowering creative agency within myself and others. I planned to track the evolution of the legend through literary and artistic representations across cultures and contexts and sought to reflect an emerging trend in scholarship related to the legend which, whilst relatively sparse, is keen to reclaim the Wandering Jew from its antisemitic roots. Noting that George K. Anderson's formative work offers a largely non-critical survey study, prioritises non-Jewish depictions of the legend, and ends in the nineteenth century (Anderson 1967), a new monograph titled *Instrument of Memory: Encounters with the Wandering Jew* by Lisa Lampert-Weissig (2024) highlights and unpacks the ambivalence of Jewish representations into the twenty-first century. She is guided by the prolific work of Galit Hasan-Rokem who, in scholarship spanning from the 1980s until today, explores the legend as a product important Jewish-Christian co-production (see, for example, Hasan-Rokem 2016). I was inspired by these rejections of lachrymose narratives and aimed to educate, but not linger, on the medieval Christian

3 The term used to describe Jewish educational curriculum (which includes study of the Torah, religious practice, and history) in Jewish schools.

antisemitic context which fashioned the Wandering Jew. Instead, I used the exhibition to investigate how both Jewish and non-Jewish writers and artists have, over centuries, presented the figure as evidence of the richness of exilic cultural production and even as a model for intercultural understanding.

The travelling exhibition

The exhibition consists of ten pop-up panels, each just over two metres tall, which can be erected in a series along a single wall or in a curved formation within a room. The panels include a combination of text and images under a themed header, as well as captions and footnotes for referencing purposes (Fig. 1). The first introduces the exhibition alongside an illustrative quote outlining the myth and the reproduction of 'Flight', a linocut which was commissioned specially from a Jewish London-based printmaker and sculptor, David Hochhauser.[4] The next eight panels follow the legend of the Wandering Jew chronologically and thematically. First, 'The Making of a Legend' situates the figure in its original Christian context and offers visual and textual explanation to the variety of names by which he is called – Wandering Jew, Eternal Jew, Agasfer/Ahasver/Ahaseurus. 'A Romantic & Gothic Hero' follows, drawing on eighteenth-century literary and artistic examples which adopted the Wandering Jew as a melancholic figure, divorced from his Jewish context. The exhibition then turns to its main focus, Jewish representations of the legend. 'The Eternal Jew' showcases how the Yiddish cultural revival, in poetry and drama, rewrote the myth's temporality, placing the Wandering Jew in the period of the Second Temple. Building on this, 'A New Wave' takes examples from the turn of the twentieth century when Jewish artists and writers imbued the legend with new relevance as they faced an onslaught of antisemitic persecution and forced migration across Europe. In 'Rewriting Origins', I focus on creative agents for whom the Wandering Jew was particularly resonant as it spoke to their own hybrid or ambivalent identities, for example following apostasy. Having focused on art and literature, 'The Wandering Jew on Screen' considers the legend as represented both in film and exhibition spaces. In particular, Joseph Goebbels' travelling exhibition 'Der ewige Jude' (1937–1938) motivated my own curation as a distinctly radical reclamation of his corruption of the legend for Nazi propaganda. 'After

4 For the exhibition, the artist offered the following commentary on the piece: 'The anthropologist Edmund Leach suggests that boundaries offer unique opportunities and scope for creative thought, representing critical moments of insight. The Wandering Jew of Europe has crossed countless boundaries in his centuries of exile and has become well acquainted with them. In 'Flight', the Wandering Jew is peripatetic, like a bird, and it is at the climax that his wings and his eyes open to look down on the landscape below. After a fleeting look at some novel insight into the cultural scenery that denies him space, he looks on for his next branch upon which to perch'.

the Holocaust' displays how Jewish artists and writers have returned to, or reimagined, the Wandering Jew after rupture. Whilst some see the ghettos and camps as simply just one of many anguished experiences this figure is cursed to endure, other imagine the twisted reprieve of Nazi atrocities, which allow the Wandering Jew his long-awaited salvation.' 'An Evolving Legend' presents new approaches to the Wandering Jew which respond to politics (in particular, Zionism) or re-gender the legend. The final panel, 'Translating Agasfer', offers an excerpt from my translation of Nabokov's poem as a way of signalling the roots of the exhibition, in addition to a conclusion speaking to the wider project message.

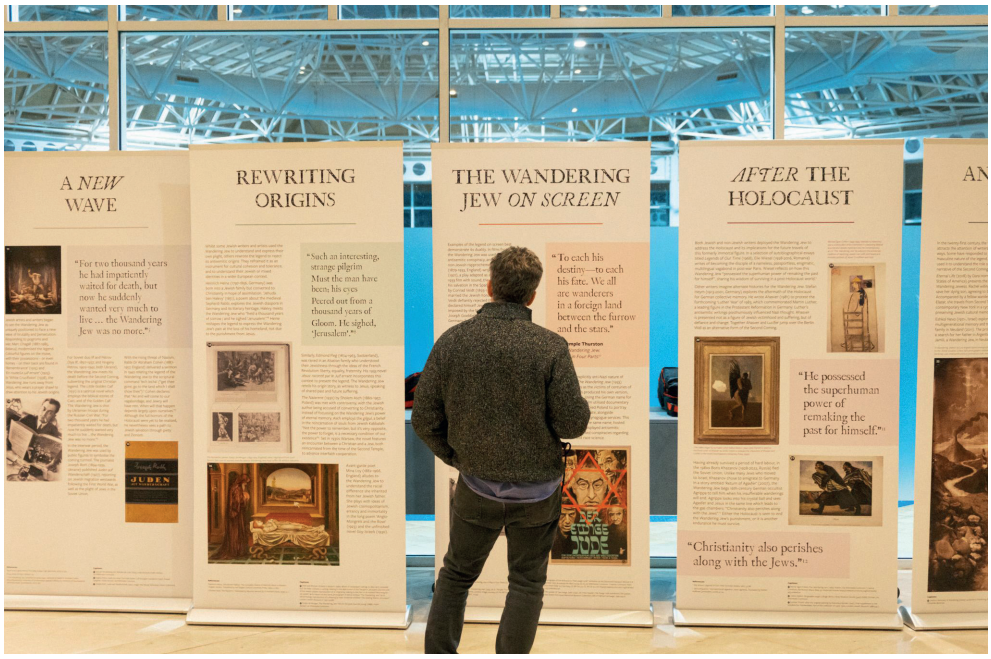

Figure 1. 'The Wandering Jew' travelling exhibition at Limmud Festival, 23 December 2024. Photo by Richard Mukuze.

Theorising the Wandering Jew

This presentation of the Wandering Jew is informed by various theoretical approaches. I was particularly drawn to Georg Simmel's idea of 'The Stranger', who 'comes today and stays tomorrow […] the potential wanderer', and enjoys the privilege of 'nearness and remoteness', a distant perspective on the society to which he does not belong (Simmel 1950: 402). Simmel understands that 'to be stranger is naturally a very positive relation; it is a specific form of interaction' and draws on the figure of the trader (classically a European Jew), who is required to import outside products (Simmel 1950: 402). 'The Helpers' from Leonid Livak's 'generative model of "the jews"' play a similar role as 'meek and defenseless do-gooders who persist in their secondary role of a

litmus test for the religious or secular virtues of the Gentile actor(s) playing the Subject' (Livak 2010: 11). The Wandering Jew is the exemplary 'Helper' in his proselytising potential as witness to Christ; according to Livak (2010: 50), his 'testimony [is] all the more valuable because it emanates from the enemy'. Both lenses demonstrate how the figure of the Wandering Jew may be framed as a positive interlocutor, an exemplary other or so-called 'model minority', yet Livak (2010: 38) warns against such Judeophilic 'wishful thinking'. In recognising a tradition of exclusionary and reductive imagery, Jewish reimaginings of the legend are emboldened with even greater semantic power, for example in presenting the Wandering Jew not as a witness to the Passion but as a chronicler of Jewish history. His itinerancy is not a curse but a fundamental element of collective Jewish diasporic experience and his salvation is not dependent on the Second Coming but instead reframed through national or religious aspirations. Moreover, Hyam Maccoby's (1982) theory of the 'Sacred Executioner' rewrites the temporality of the Wandering Jew as a descendant of Cain, both mythic figures who are punished for their sins yet afforded special privileges of divine protection and additional resilience.

More aptly for this special issue on cultural heritage, the wider notion of 'collective memory' can be applied to the Wandering Jew. First introduced by sociologist Maurice Halbwachs as a way to explore how memory is constructed, shared, and transmitted by groups, it was taken up by the historian Pierre Nora to build the concept of *lieu de mémoire* or 'sites of memory'. He outlines how these are 'simple and ambiguous, natural and artificial, at once immediately available in concrete sensual experiences and susceptible to the most abstract elaboration. Indeed, they are lieux in three senses of the word – material symbolic, functional' (Nora 1989: 18–19). Lampert-Weissig (2024: 11) applies Nora's theory to the Wandering Jew in that he becomes a site of memory, bringing together 'the biblical past, the messianic future, and the present day together in one figure'. Thus, in addition to historically playing the role of Christian relic, the Wandering Jew can express traditions of Jewish rebellion and lamentation, his dual punishment speaking to cycles of catastrophe and resilience.

The metamorphising and reclamatory potential of the legend means it can come to represent a borderless immaterial cultural heritage which suitably responds to transitory Jewish experience. Treatment of the Wandering Jew, a minoritised subject par excellence, can be mobilised through the fact of his geographical mobility to empower via the artistic and literary imagination. He may be resituated in the Second Temple period as a figure of rebellion, whose exile is naturally embedded in the Jewish experience rather than in punishment (as with the Yiddish poetry of Uri Zvi Greenberg [1896-1981] and Esther Shumiatcher-Hirschbein [1896-1985], and in the 2018 novel *Eternal Life* by Dara Horn), rewriting the temporal limitations of the legend. Others imbue the Wandering Jew with much longed-for agency, particularly

in his relationship to Jesus: Marc Chagall's 'White Crucifixion' (1938) depicts the Wandering Jew's escape as salvation; Boris Khazanov's 'Return of Agasfer' (2007) reunites the pair as they both meet their fates in the Holocaust; and Michael Sgan-Cohen fuses Biblical sources with Kabbalistic motifs and imagery of the Crucifixion in 'The Wandering Jew' (1983). Some writers see themselves in the Wandering Jew, as if he spoke to their own enmeshing of Jewish and Christian identities, such as with Mina Loy's 'Anglo-Mongrels and the Rose' (1923) or Heinrich Heine's 'Jehuda ben Halevy' (1851). Others identify absences in the legend which they seek to engage with through creative practice: Stephen Berkman uses glass-plate photography to imagine 'A Wandering Jewess' (2020), modernising Chagall's artistic legacy and re-gendering the legend. Looking outwards even more, Leah Gordon collects oral histories and photographs of the Jacmel carnival in Haiti, Kanaval, where a troupe performs the figure 'Jwif Eran' as a voice advocating for justice, resisting class structures, and speaking to the alienating experience of diaspora (Gordon 2021; see also O'Hagan 2010).

The travelling exhibition was jointly funded by the Jewish Historical Society of England and the German History Society and produced as part of my role as Outreach Fellow for the Parkes Institute for the Study of Jewish/non-Jewish Relations at the University of Southampton. The latter instilled this project with a distinct strategy both to appeal to Jewish audiences and to enhance the wider public's understanding of intercultural entanglement. Across the academic year 2024/2025, the exhibition has travelled from the University of Southampton to Limmud Festival (an annual cross-generational and cross-denominational communal gathering for British Jews), the German Historical Institute, the Holocaust Centre North, the British and Irish Association of Jewish Studies Conference in Glasgow, and the Bournemouth Hebrew Congregation. In addition, I hope to display the exhibition at Anglican sites in the United Kingdom as a way of confronting contested heritage. The figure of the Wandering Jew offers a unique avenue through which to critically and sensitively approach historic Christian antisemitism whilst highlighting interfaith rapprochement. My practice, and the exhibition itself, does not call for apologies or remedy in sites which may feel burdened by their association with past injustices. Rather, I actively seek to exhibit there to invite members of the British Jewish community into spaces from which they have been structurally excluded. That some of these sites were in part financed by anti-Jewish taxes, as with Westminster Abbey, further compounds ambivalence especially around feelings of belonging, whilst simultaneously making visible a legacy of cultural entanglement.[5]

5 In medieval England, heavy financial burdens were placed on Jews, including ever-increasing taxation and seizing of bonds. Licoricia of Winchester was an infamous Jewish businesswoman who was prolific and influential in English society until her murder in 1277. She has since been immortalised in a statue by Ian Rank-Broadly and is an object of much discussion regarding

Creation and recreation

Having introduced the legend and my own journey to it, investigated theoretical approaches, and outlined the exhibition as a whole, I now turn to a particular case study and offer ethnographic reflections to showcase the potential of creative responses.

Limmud Festival is an annual event which describes itself as a celebration of Jewish life, learning, and culture, with over 2,000 attendees from within the British Jewish community and abroad.[6] In addition to having the exhibition on display for the duration of the festival, I contributed to the programme with a session entitled 'Rethinking the Wandering Jew'. Beginning with a brief summary of the legend and an introduction to the evolution of artistic and literary representations, I addressed critical approaches to my own translation and the curation of the exhibition. Then, I explained how reappropriation ('to take back or reclaim something for one's own purposes', as defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary) has been deployed in visual and textual art practice to 'turn an artifact of hatred into something beautiful' (Hawley 2019) or imbue formerly passive or marginalised subjects with creative agency. In particular, I drew on examples which use collage, erasure, and blackout poetry. Collage, from the French *coller* (to glue), was formalised as a modernist art technique in the early twentieth century, creating new work by assembling together different forms. Incorporating text, erasure is 'the art of leaving out' (Dillon 2006) in which found poetry is created by cutting out, marking, or covering (in the form of blackout) existing words. This literary version of collage was developed within the anti-art Dadaist movement that arose in response to the First World War. Both visual and literary practices continue to resonate in the contemporary art world in which assemblage increasingly inhabits non-establishment, political, and activist spaces.

For example, Faith Ringgold's 'Matisse's Model (The French Collection, Part 1: #5)' (1991) is a quilt painting in which her own alter ego, Willa Marie, is depicted in 'bold and unapologetic visibility' (as stated in the artwork label at the exhibition) as the courtesan from Edouard Manet's 1863 'Olympia', remaking this canonical image. In addition to rejecting the racial and gendered biases of the 'white male modernist gaze', the label suggested that Ringgold's 'stance takes on further conceptual weight by granting these often-anonymous subjects a meaningful personal narrative of their own'. Arthur Jafa's 'Ex-slave Gordon' (2017) animates and humanises the infamous two-dimen-

the contestation and representation of Jewish heritage in Britain. Following the death of her husband, David of Oxford, in 1244, Licoricia was forced to pay a high inheritance tax. This was collected to contribute to the construction of the shrine to Edward the Confessor in Westminster Abbey, a fact not addressed at the site itself. See Reva Berman Brown and Sean McCartney (2004: 16).

6 For an ethnographic investigation into Limmud, see Taylor-Guthartz (2025).

sional and voyeuristic photograph of escaped American slave 'Whipped Peter' by reproducing the image in relief made of vacuum formed plastic. Jafa (2020) describes that he was 'forced to articulate the complexity of an image that is both horrifying and attractive'. Together, Ringgold and Jafa demonstrate models for reappropriating, reclaiming, or reworking formerly exclusionary or especially difficult subjects.

These artistic methods – collage and erasure – can also be situated in attempts to represent and navigate the Jewish imaginary. Such practices can be subversive, and even *chutzpadik*.[7] In *Judaism in Music*, Richard Wagner (1910: 30-31) criticised how the 'Jewish composer makes a confused heap of the forms and styles of all ages and masters [...] [with] no passion of a nature to impel him to art-creation'. Amidst the accusations that Jewish creative practice is inherently unoriginal, lacking in artfulness, and reliant on the commodification and degradation of existing work, some may choose to deliberately enter this maligned position, working solely with the material of others to create a self-assured and emancipatory assemblage. Collage's charge of degeneracy is not limited to Jewish artists, as with the example of Kurt Schwitters whose abstract works, which bring together found objects and mixed media, were included in the Nazi 'Entartete Kunst' (Degenerate art) exhibition of 1937. Understanding the semantic potential of collage and erasure as unashamed models of diasporic, or resistance, art informed my own approach in developing the exhibition which involved the selection, ordering, and assembling of a collection of material which included both derogatory and reclamatory imagery and text. As curator I was able to reconstruct and direct the narrative, rewriting the Wandering Jew fully cognisant of competing historical legacies (including one which deemed my creative practice 'degenerate').

Other pertinent examples of this include works by Rebecca Katz and Tom Phillips. Katz describes how 'the physicality of finding images, tearing them out, and making something new with them feels very powerful' (Vaynberg 2021), with reference to her collage 'Anti-Jewish Laws in Medieval Europe' (2021), which repurposes imagery from the Birds' Head Haggadah. The Jewish figures in this fourteenth century manuscript are unusually drawn as birds with beaks: whilst established as a way of avoiding laws against aniconism, others have understood the illustrations to draw on Judeophobic tropes', and Katz plays with this ambivalence to treat the subject of the exploitation of Jews.[8] Phillips' *A Humument: A Treated Victorian Novel* displays how collage can be used alongside blackout poetry to navigate difficult subjects (Phillips [1980] 2016). The mixed-media altered book reconstructs

7 From the Yiddish *chutzpah* (audacity, confidence).

8 Other visual and textual invocations of the bird motif, particularly in reference to the Wandering Jew, can be found in Michael Sgan-Cohen's mixed media 'The Wandering Jew' (1938), Bernard Malamud's short story 'The Jewbird' (1963), and David Hochhauser's commission 'Flight' (2024).

W. H. Mallock's 1892 *A Human Document*, in which the plot revolves around a love affair made excusable by the fact that the woman's husband is Jewish, fortified by historic tropes of male Jewish sexual perversion, effeminacy, and sterility. Rachel Hawley (2019) states how, '[f]or Phillips, Mallock's bigotry is key to the mission of *A Humument*. In reshaping the text and covering the rest with art, he is able to turn an artifact of hatred into something beautiful'. This is most explicit when Phillips revises the temporality of the novel, applying the imagery of the Holocaust in an act of eisegesis. Through blackout poetry, he constructs over a background of grey stripes and a yellow star the verses 'ask, and ask no longer to sing the lament of the Jews, wear a used star for the day had been killed; The theatre never again' (Phillips [1980] 2016: 87), and positions the lines 'at ten o'clock such awful news to be done. off with the children at Vienna death to the delicate! pleasant show ended, all burst into despondency, they could take over', in front of a bloody swastika (Phillips [1980] 2016: 153). Depicting instances of genocidal persecution and totalitarianism through blackout poetry, Phillips directly invokes the physical violence of cutting as well as the existential violence of covering up or, literally, blacking out the text and its historical reality.

Collage in practice

Having presented these examples and explained the practical and conceptual elements of collage and erasure poetry, I invited attendees to engage in these practices inspired by their own reflections on the Wandering Jew. I selected and reproduced key sources from the exhibition, specifically focusing on traditional representations and images from Joseph Goebbels's 1940 antisemitic propaganda film and exhibition *'Der ewige Jude'*, alongside a pile of old copies of National Geographic magazines (chosen for their focus on material which relates to adventuring, the environment, wandering, and the natural world). Whilst the creative part of the session was time limited, attendees produced a range of collages responding to the exhibition ephemera, stimulus from the National Geographic magazines, and their own interests.

One collage, titled 'We are all wanderers', used images of wild animals alongside the Wandering Jew, incorporating text from an article such as 'picked off ticks and other parasites', 'zigzagging the country', and ending with 'I still needed a powerful, hopeful image' (Fig. 2). Imagining the Wandering Jew as a migratory wild beast certainly resonated with how this cursed figure has been constructed and depicted as a threatening stranger (as well as more troubling traditions which animalise and dehumanise Jewish people). Yet the creator of the collage rejected the idea of the Wandering Jew as a lonesome character, instead placing him amidst a community which offers him resilience.

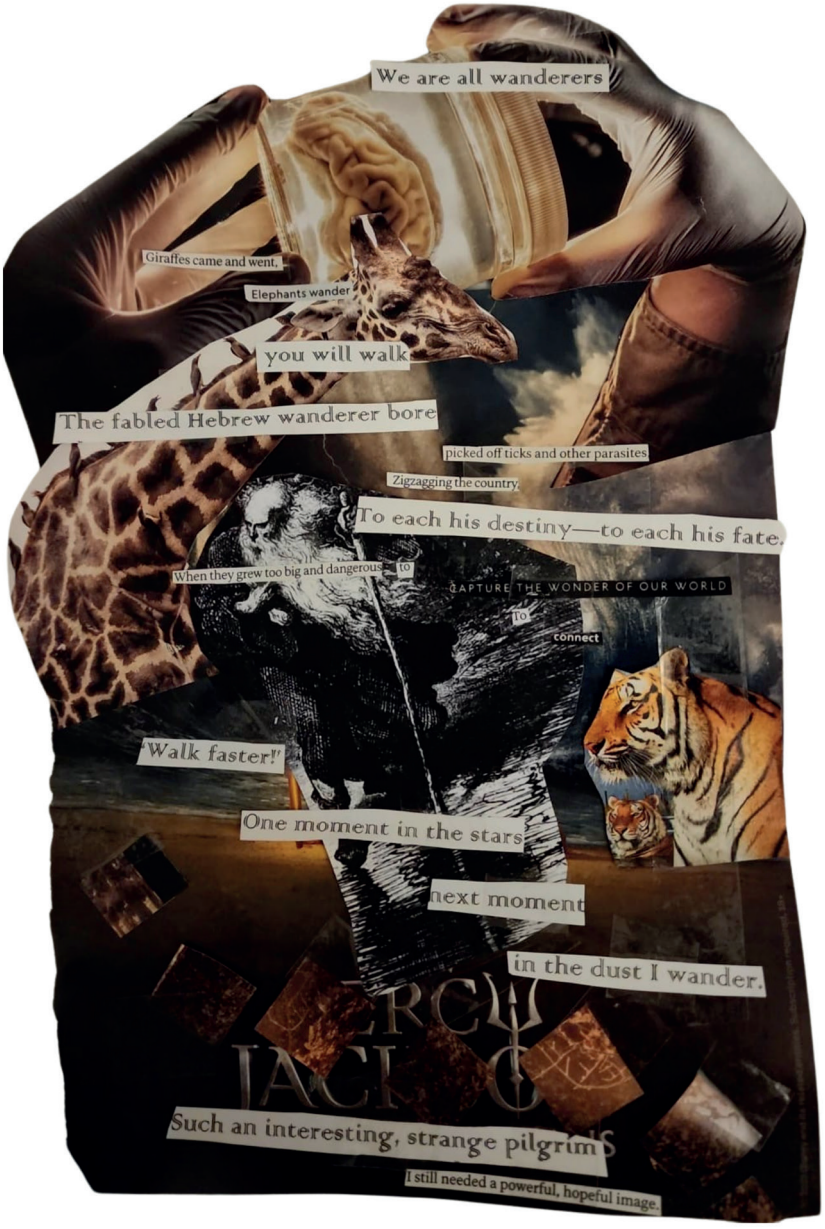

Figure 2. 'We are all wanderers', collage by Limmud Festival participant, 22 December 2024. Photo by Anoushka Alexander-Rose. Reproduced with the kind permission of the participant group.

Another participant took a comic approach, drawing a swastika on Goebbels' film poster and cutting it out in a way that it could be opened to reveal an

image of the Wandering Jew, using levity to work with troublesome imagery (Fig. 3). I found this example particularly potent as it aligned with my own strong feelings in reclaiming the exhibition space from Goebbels, and I appreciated the creator's *chutzpah* in taking control of this incendiary propaganda.

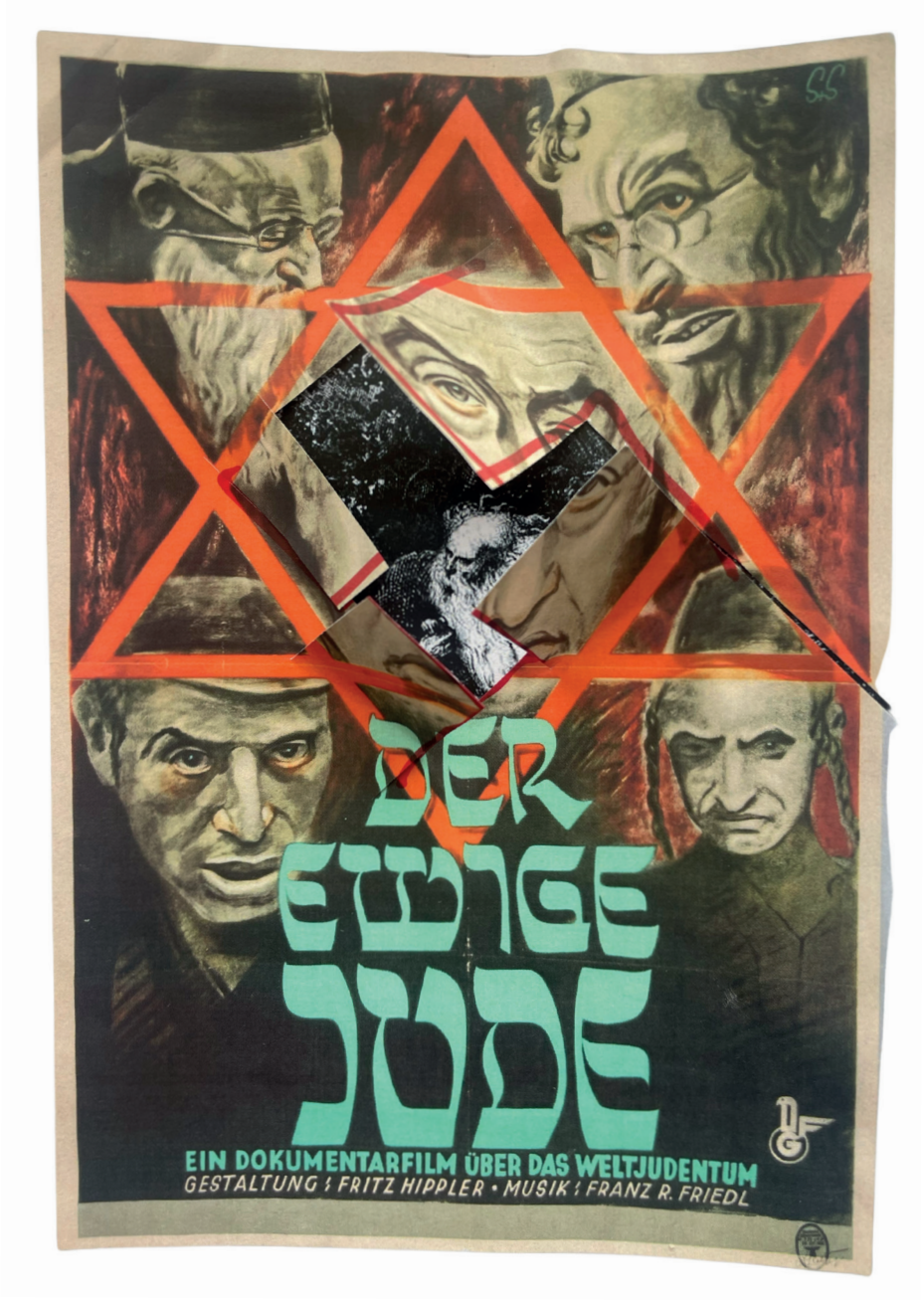

Figure 3. 'Der ewige Jude', collage by Limmud Festival participant, 22 December 2024. Photo by Anoushka Alexander-Rose. Reproduced with the kind permission of the participant group.

Another attendee was inspired to re-gender the legend, in a collage titled 'Are We Born to Wander?', which formed a set of fallopian tubes out of flowers (Fig. 4). This piece evokes explicit reproductive imagery, querying the traditional singularity of the Wandering Jew (as an older man) and situating the legend in a softer, even pastoral, setting. It also asks broader questions about artistic or mythic creation and recreation (recalling Wagner's critiques about Jewish unoriginality), and about inheritance: is nomadism a natural and inevitable Jewish tendency, and if so, is the notion of curse made redundant?

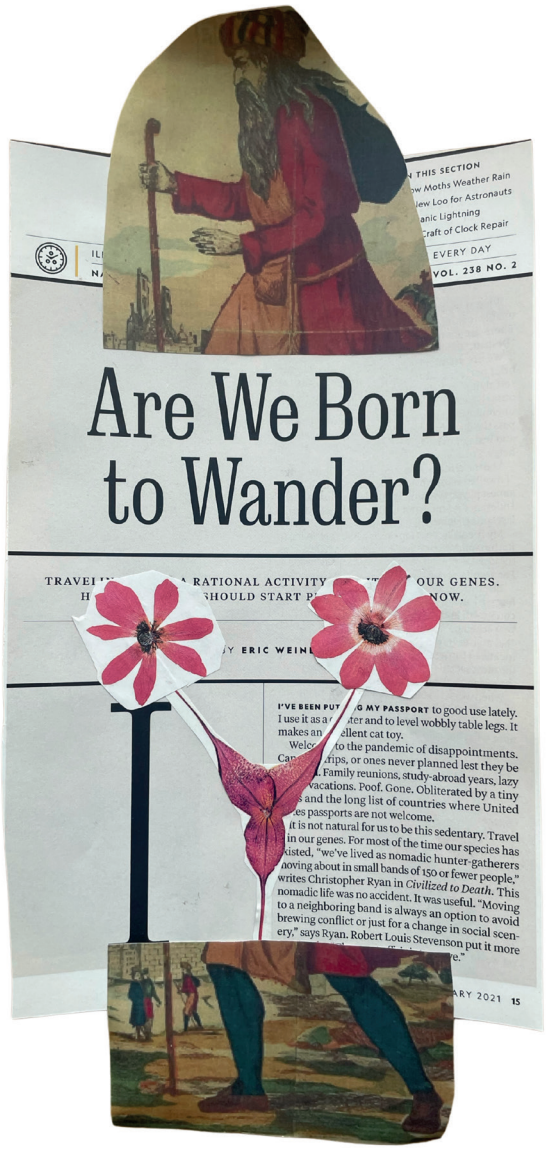

Figure 4. 'Are We Born to Wander?', collage by Limmud Festival participant, 22 December 2024. Photo by Anoushka Alexander-Rose. Reproduced with the kind permission of the participant group.

These examples demonstrate how, from within an audience of Jewish attendees of mixed ages, there is rich and diverse capacity for a creative reclamation of the Wandering Jew. In addition to cutting up and using explicit antisemitic imagery, others indicated their interest in making the Wandering Jew applicable to their own experiences, showcasing the longevity and metamorphic capacity of the legend. Not only was the workshop empowering, but it was also enjoyable, and attendees were keen to continue producing their collages. It was key, too, that the audience was entirely Jewish, as this afforded attendees a comfortable space, particularly those who were interested in working with taboo, such as parodying Nazi propaganda. Nevertheless, I am keen to develop similar creative workshops which relate to wider myths with mixed audiences, to explore participants' responses and their artistic outputs.

Future problematics

As evidenced throughout the ten panels of my travelling exhibition, creative depictions of the Wandering Jew seem inexhaustible, whether they adhere to, ignore, or challenge the origins of the legend. This collection of iterations tells a wide representational history of refusal, rapprochement, and reclamation. Panels four to eight illustrate how Jewish artists and writers have navigated their own captivation with the legend, both responding to its resonance and manipulating it to suit the particularities of their experience. Across all examples, the Wandering Jew remains enduringly malleable, the boundaries of the myth and the figure itself constantly redrawn to respond to new contexts, challenges, and needs. Certainly, the Wandering Jew can be utilised as a figure to encourage intercommunal cohesion as an exemplary of cultural entanglements, specifically amongst Jewish and Christian contexts. As evidenced by the Limmud Festival workshop, much more can be done to problematise and modernise the legend. Beyond simply informing audiences about the antisemitic roots of the Wandering Jew, it is possible to facilitate agential responses drawing from a variety of traditions of creative practice, a crucial link between academic study and public reception. These may adapt the Wandering Jew to suit contemporary experience or dispatch the figure to travel to neglected sites of heritage and history across the globe, challenging the imbalance towards narratives of European Jewry. What is clear is the vast capacity for the legend of the Wandering Jew to relate to Jews in the diaspora and, more widely, universal themes of migration, memory, and history. Drawing on my own experience as a translator and curator, I have found engagement with this mythic figure to evoke both personal and broader questions about Jewish art as embodying exile, resistance, and dynamic creative activity. In his immortality and itinerancy, the Wandering Jew can become a pillar of immaterial cultural heritage.

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The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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Afterword: Jewish Agency and Iridescence in Heritage-Making Processes

Sacha Kagan

Abstract:
The afterword reflects on the various contributions in this special issue of *Ethnoscripts*, which explores the dynamics of contemporary Jewish agency in the context of Jewish cultural heritage. It emphasises the complexities and tensions that arise as Jewish subjects engage with their heritage, highlighting negotiations within communities, intergenerational dialogues, and the interplay between State and minority interests. The afterword revisits several matters discussed in the contributions, such as post-vernacularity, counter-heritagisation, and State and national narratives and policies. It highlights dimensions of critical reflection and attention to complexity. It argues that Jewish heritage should not only be revived and enlivened but also critically engaged with, fostering a dialogue that recognises its complexities and contradictions across different contexts and historical narratives. This text introduces the concept of iridescent heritage, which articulates heritage as dynamic, multifaceted, and shaped by the interactions between subjects, heritage objects, and interpretive frameworks. This idea moves away from fixed and flat conceptions of heritage towards a more processual and complex understanding of its meanings. The afterword suggests the explanatory resonance of a conceptualisation of iridescence with the insights from several contributions in the special issue.

Key words: Jewish agency, post-vernacularity, queering, complexity, iridescence

Introduction

The contributions gathered in this special issue of *Ethnoscripts* articulate several processes through which the agency of contemporary Jewish subjects is activated and contributes to heritage-making. This goes not without tensions and unfolds through negotiations amidst communities, across generations, and between State-related and minoritarian interests.

The agency of Jewish individuals and communities manifests in their interactions with heritage sites and practices, as evidenced by the contributed texts, which critique the representation of Jewish history in institutional frameworks and call for more participatory approaches. The contributors illustrate various tensions, such as those between grassroots activists and heritage professionals, intergenerational differences, and the contrasting priorities of Jewish communities in Europe and the United Kingdom (UK) regarding what constitutes significant heritage. The resulting complexity of Jewish cultural heritage reveals itself as iridescent and questions the limitations of institutional practices of heritagisation.

Jewish agency enlivening heritage

The contributions in this volume highlight the agency of various contemporary Jewish subjects in their relation to Jewish cultural heritage and its institutionalisation across Europe.

One level of agency is found in Egorova's study where Jewish subjects in the UK express themselves as users of Jewish cultural heritage sites and tools. They articulate their wishes and criticisms towards museum and heritage organisations and initiatives. Egorova's interviewees address a glaring silence on Jewish history in museal and heritage-site representations of English medieval history and the relative invisibility of Jewish heritage even at recognised Jewish cultural heritage sites (except for those already seeking it out). They are only mildly swayed by media tools supposed to discretely aide the discoverability of Jewish cultural heritage and find that a more visibly 'observable materiality of the built environment' in terms of its Jewish cultural heritage would be preferable.

Everett's text discusses several recent exhibitions in France, illustrating the known limitations of museal practices with an 'exhibition's limited space for contemporary voices' when framed within 'traditional museum frameworks structured around chronological, artifact-based narratives'. In contrast, he takes the case of a grassroots-initiated festival where 'embodied, participatory experiences' flourish and whereby Jewish individuals and communities obtain a greater degree of agency. This observation highlights the cruel lack of such practices in museums. Despite a century of advocacy by critical museum studies and half a century of attempts at 'new museology', such efforts are still meeting top-down backlash at many museums (Davis 2011: 61-64; Coffee 2019). However, whereas Everett finds no museal cases of the curatorial changes he advocates for and whilst he argues that 'exhibitions necessarily contain narratives within the constraints of western time', some promising efforts at queering museology have been developed around the world (Sullivan and Middleton 2020). They demonstrate there is no such 'necessity' – but rather a tenacious curatorial conservatism dominating the field.[1] Queering approaches to museum work, as practiced at other museums, could and should inspire future reforms at Jewish museums. With this in mind, Everett offers a compelling plea for a reformation of museal curatorial practices to open up more spaces of possibility for Jewish agency, as when he posits that an 'effective engagement with Maghrebi Jewish memory requires

1 Everett discusses 'a shift in inclusive practices from institutional to participatory frameworks', highlighting the Dalâla festival – which as a festival is of a different nature than the museum exhibitions discussed in the text. Everett compares them as 'curatorial practices'. Through a transversal comparison that stresses embodiment and dynamic forms in musical practice in contrast to intellectualism and fixed forms in traditional museography, Everett raises a valid desideratum to be directed at museum curators.

multilayered approaches that balance institutional resources with community agency'.

Nevertheless, even within the constraints of current museal curatorship, Everett points out that exhibitions also function for their (Jewish) visitors as 'sites where these tensions between fixed categories and nuanced dialogue play out in material form'. The possibility to open up the polysemic potential of curated exhibits speaks to their iridescence, which even the most rigid interpretative and didactic frames cannot fully extinguish in the experience of creatively minded visitors. (I come back to iridescence later.) However, the question remains whether and to what extent such a potentiality was actualised at the discussed exhibitions.[2]

Specific cultural-creative techniques can help stimulate the agency of exhibition visitors and, more generally, of Jewish subjects in their encounters with heritage, as illustrated in Alexander-Rose's contribution, which presents techniques of reappropriation such as collage and montage (as well as the erasure of certain prior elements when reclaiming a problematic figure). With workshops where participants can apply such reappropriation techniques around the figure of the Wandering Jew, Alexander-Rose explores how, '[b]eyond simply informing audiences about the anti-Semitic roots of the Wandering Jew, it is possible to facilitate agential responses drawing from a variety of traditions of creative practice'.

Jewish agency in shaping Jewish heritage is found to venture beyond a close focus on heritage objects, unfolding 'a process-oriented practice of confronting, narrating, and conversing with the past over time', as Becker explains in her text about the work of Jewish lawyers engaged in the process of post-Shoah (non-)restitution of looted art. Becker describes how, through critical dialogue, museums that own looted art can be enticed to forms of restitution besides the return of artworks, for example restituting an art-loving Jewish family's 'story to history' by having the museum tell the story of that Jewish family's ownership – and loss – of the artwork. For Becker, such efforts contribute to 're-inscribing those who were purposefully erased from history into our lives and keeping them alive through collective memory'.

The contribution by Antunes stresses how the agency of Jewish subjects restores life to Jewish linguistic heritage through practice: the text accounts for the efforts of the eSefarad online platform to revive the contemporary practice of Sefardic (Judaeo-Spanish) languages, specifically of Haketia. Antunes observes here the 'destabilisation' of 'ex situ' heritagisation. Conventionally, heritage professionals would transfer elements of an endangered language from 'household[s] of native speakers' to an 'off-site repository' such as a language archive. Instead, platforms like eSefarad are disrupting

2 Such a question could be tentatively answered by qualitative 'visitor studies' by social scientists, which to my knowledge have not been conducted in this context.

the simple dichotomy of 'in situ' original practice vs 'ex situ' heritage preservation. Jewish practices of post-vernacular language revival (Shandler 2005) initiate what we call in this special issue a 'trans situ' heritagisation process (echoing my coinage of 'trans situ' artistic intervention [Kagan 2012]), where elements get transferred and exchanged between speakers, whether vernacular or post-vernacular locutors, in their various living contexts across the world and online, through online media mobilised as vehicles of interaction more than as repositories or archives – as Antunes's study reveals.

A post-vernacular language holds deep cultural value to its locutors. Although it is no longer one's native language of everyday communications and no longer holds a whole community together in everyday life, it is redeployed in various cultural and artistic practices.[3] It is consciously brought back to life by its locutors. This is not just a matter of terminology but helps to stress the importance of focusing on the hiatus, the break in the vernacularity, the losses and reconstructions, the inventiveness, and the relation of such a reactivated language to the other everyday languages in the Jewish subjects' immediate context. Attention to post-vernacularity further leads to reconsidering questions of interpretation and belief of authenticity in the transtemporal resonances of a minority language as heritage in present practice (also allowing Antunes to take some 'analytical distance from questions of authenticity and inheritance'). When we consider these questions through the lens of queer theory, we can identify them as questions of the performed 'realness' (Halberstam 2005) of practiced post-vernacular Jewish languages. This allows a deeper focus on contemporary Jewish agency within a diasporic and communal interest in minority languages. At the same time, attention to post-vernacularity may also allow a critical look at the imaginings of a 'precolonial world' by some heritage activists (as reported by Antunes). Such an imagination is not without its own issues: one cannot 'strip out' colonial histories to recover an imagined position of innocence. Imaginings of the precolonial, coming from the postcolonial condition, are fraught with their own complex entanglements with the white colonial context. Last but not least, attention to post-vernacularity helps avoid the pitfall of being party to a mythologisation of long-durational Jewish sustainability by clinging on to claims of vernacularity, inheritance, and originalist authenticity.

Moving a few steps further from what is canonically considered as Jewish cultural heritage, Crowdus exemplifies how contemporary Jewish creative arts function as futures-oriented and agency-fostering cultural produc-

3 A language may be simultaneously vernacular and post-vernacular. For example, Yiddish in the twenty-first century is both post-vernacular for a number of Jewish subjects, especially in North America, and vernacular for others, as for certain Haredi communities (also in North America). This points to yet another interesting area for investigation in terms of Jewish inter-agency: the boundaries and exchange zones between vernacular and post-vernacular contemporary practices of such a language.

tions that reclaim a Jewish heritage at the local level for contemporary urban Jewish subjects. With its discussion of a gangsta rapper in Germany, the case study demonstrates how a musician counters the imagery of Jews as victims, otherwise omnipresent in the German context. Crowdus describes a 'counter-heritagisation' of Jewish heritage at play in Dimitri Chpakov's rap album *Yellow Bar Mitzvah*, which allows more 'Jewish pride' and thus may encourage its Jewish audiences to feel more empowered. As Crowdus notes, this gangsta rap will work for some Jewish people, whilst it will be a turn-off for other Jewish subjects, especially those who are queer and feminist and who, in present-day Germany, are 'searching for alternate forms of heritage-making through which to exercise agency and create heritage. They are doing so in a way that mobilises their own futures-oriented, existential concerns. This stands in contrast with the dominant memory culture'. In my own research with queer Jews in Germany, interviewees pointed to more appealing alternatives than the macho imaginary of gangsta rap in its usual guises – which, with few exceptions, is heavily and simplistically heteronormative. Dimitri Chpakov is not one of these exceptions but a genre-typical apologist of real and enacted physical violence, cultivating the self-image of an egotistical macho and perpetuating toxic masculinity. Far from this kind of direction, my interviewees find inspiration mostly across the Atlantic, for example in the Jewish punk bands Schmekel or the Shondes in the United States of America, or in the transgender pop icon Dana International in Israel. Back in Germany they are inspired by the eclectic post-Soviet genre-crossing music of Yuriy Gurzhy and his various bands and projects (from Rotfront to the Jukrainians – queer-friendly if not queer). Looking more widely at contemporary Jewish cultural production in Germany, some interviewees also found inspiring queer Jewish examples in the works of Sasha Marianna Salzmann and Debora Antmann.

Tensions and negotiations

Several contributions in this volume describe tensions between professional agents of heritage and Jewish agents. These are mostly tensions between museum and heritage professionals and more grassroots actors and organisations. The cases discussed in the contributions (for example, in Everett's text) sometimes articulate tensions between the agency of single Jewish expert academics or artists and that of various Jewish communities and sub-communities, which may themselves be partly at odds with each other. By looking at how the heritage of Judaeo-Spanish and Hebrew languages have been revived and how linguistic heritage is managed, Antunes illustrates tensions between nationalist projects and minoritarian diasporic approaches in heritage revival. (I come back to the special issue's discussion of the Nation State later.)

Ravvin's text points to tensions between heritage professionals and local non-Jewish communities. He shares a personal account of how the take-over of a Jewish cultural heritage site by heritage professionals drove out pre-existing (if tenuous) community-based embeddedness and contributed to alienate the 'protected' heritage from its immediate surroundings whilst striving to save and preserve it. Ravvin narrates how, in the Polish village of Radzanów, well-intended heritage professionals have been '[r]removing the [synagogue's] purpose as a library [and] downgraded it to a shell, a tomb'. This is a typical account of professionalisation driving out grassroots attachments.[4] The institutionally based efforts and incentives from heritage organisations fail to connect with the local Polish community's own sense of meaningfulness. The result feels like a superficial partial preservation in the face of a wider destruction of the site's pre-war atmosphere. Ravvin witnesses how the preservation of a synagogue contrasts with the disappearance of other architectural traces of a formerly Jewish site through the removal of the small single-storey wooden houses around the central square: 'the fuller sense of a pre-war Jewish village that I had encountered a few years earlier was fading from view'. In this story, Ravvin considers his possible agency as the only Jewish agent on site, whilst other Jewish subjects are discussed as active elsewhere in the country, especially in Warsaw and at a few sites that attract most Jewish tourists. Ravvin points especially to the dwindling of one form of Jewish agency as negatively affecting Jewish cultural heritage in Poland (notwithstanding the laudable success of the POLIN museum in Warsaw): namely the recent decline in 'philanthropic efforts' by descendants of Jewish survivors (from abroad) and the decrease in their touristic flow of pilgrimage to formerly Jewish ancestral places in Poland.

Tensions may arise between different generations – though the texts speak there less of tensions than of negotiations and differences. Generational differences are considered in some of the contributions. In her discussion of contemporary Jewish subjects' 'turn towards agency in the post-Holocaust world', Becker stresses how second- and third-generation descendants of victims do not define themselves in terms of victimhood and thereby unlock their agency when working on familial and societal Jewish heritage from the twentieth century. As noted earlier, Crowdus shows how younger generations find new forms of cultural practice that allow a meaningful connection to their Jewish heritage. Everett discusses later generations, in the case of Jews of North-African descent in terms of 'postmemory' (after Marianne Hirsch). He points out how 'the post-memory generation engages differently with heritage', with 'active reimagining'. He especially shows, with the case of the Dalâla festival, 'spaces where interrupted transmission becomes a site of cre-

4 Concerning the motivation of the local community, this may also be a case of what economist Bruno Frey (1997) called the 'crowding out' of 'intrinsic motivation' through the intensification of 'extrinsic motivation'.

ative possibility rather than merely a wound to be healed'. This is a process that does not happen without tensions, frictions, and negotiations with earlier generations, with other minorities, and with State-related institutions: '[d]ialogue – both intergenerational (intra-familial) and intercommunal (Maghrebi Jewish–Muslim) – does not always begin in mutual recognition; it may be preceded by resistance or rejection'. At the same time, though, we should not forget that every generation actively re-imagines memories. Remembering is an act of 'continually recreating the past' (Hinton 2015: 354) and memories 'can never be recovered in an unmodified form within the constraints of the present' (Hinton 2015: 363). First-generation witnesses, too, re-imagine their own memories as days and years go by and as the lived experience continues to evolve, unavoidably affecting the act of remembering. The difference between the generations lies rather in the degree of acknowledgement and explicitness of their reimagining: first-generation witnesses can still claim that they memory is 'directly' sourced from the event; and they may be burdened by societal expectations that mystify their memory. Both prevent them from overtly engaging in actively re-imagining their memories – unless they are artists or writers, in which case society grants them more creative license.

The special issue highlights a number of 'processes of negotiation' – between grassroots initiatives and those projects that come from State-controlled or primarily State-funded organisations such as museums and heritage organisations; and more broadly hermeneutic negotiations between various agents that eventually allow us to delve beyond binary conceptions of Jewish cultural heritage. For example, the contributions illustrate intercommunal and transcultural exchanges, frictions, and dialogues that delve beyond a simplifying binary of antagonism vs consensus. Elements of cultural heritage that are situated at the 'borderlands of religious or cultural tension', such as the originally anti-Semitic and Christian figure of the Wandering Jew, can be creatively negotiated, as Alexander-Rose exemplifies with the long history of the various Jewish re-appropriations of the Wandering Jew.

The juxtaposition of Egorova's UK-based study with other, more continental-European cases also suggests a specific contrast between the UK and continental Europe in terms of both State-based/institutional Jewish cultural heritage and Jewish responses. For example, Egorova's interviewees stress the importance of certain former synagogues as heritage sites when they perceive past 'Jewish communities' endeavour to state through an architectural landmark their rights and achievements, their success at integrating into the mainstream society coupled with a desire not to lose their specificity'. Egorova's interviewees wish for a higher visibility of formerly Jewish architectural heritage sites in the country, which they perceive as comparatively less developed in the UK than on the continent. This contrasts with the situation in continental Europe where heritage professionals of several countries have developed a quasi-obsessive passion for the preservation of former syn-

agogues as Jewish cultural heritage whilst contemporary Jewish subjects are more interested in other areas and dimensions of a living Jewish heritage, feeling at odds with what they perceive as a fetishism of dead Jews.

The rhetorical and intellectual art of cultivating tensions around one's heritage and mobilising these tensions towards critical reflective insights is also in itself a cherished aspect of one's Jewish heritage – at least for the subjects in my own empirical research (Kagan and Crowdus forthcoming). The latter cultivate a sense of Jewish criticality which is rooted in Talmudic heritage, branches out into Critical Theory, and (for some of my interviewees) influences contemporary queer theory and artistic research. This critical Jewish tradition may be a much more academic and elitist cultural form than the activation of Jewish agency through the Jewish pride of a gangsta rapper, but this makes it no less relevant for a significant number Jewish subjects.

Jewish heritage and the Nation State

Yet, one dimension that is only partly and indirectly considered in the contributions to this special issue on tensions and negotiations of difference is the State. One finds across several contributions the presence and agency of some State-related institutions and discussions of nationalist discourses and ideologies and of colonial legacies of European States; but one finds no close discussion of the State apparatus, as in the workings of governmental cultural institutions steering museal and heritage organisations from the top or in the roles of political parties and organisations. It is all well and good to 'conceptualise the state as a fluid structure with distributed agency rather than as a stable and monolithic entity', as the special issue's guest editors express in their introduction; but if this claim is put forward to avoid further describing the workings of such a fluid State, especially in relation to its upper echelons, then 'fluid' and 'distributed' do not have sufficient explanatory power.

Given this caveat, the contributions do shed light on the 'political-cultural interactions between dominant and subaltern groups', as the guest editors intended. Crowdus draws attention to recent research (Ross 2024) that examined how State-supported efforts at preserving Jewish cultural heritage in Germany is 'part of the national *Erinnerungskultur* (memory culture) [...] in the service of non-Jewish subjectivities'. Everett, focusing on Maghrebi-Jewish heritage as represented in French museums, calls for curatorial approaches that would 'challeng[e] both Eurocentric and nationalist historiographies' to 'create new possibilities for understanding the complex legacies of the colonial encounter beyond the constraining frameworks of national belonging'.

Antunes considers the logic of instrumentalisation of minority heritage by Nation States, for example in how Israel 'draws on a rhetoric of national cultural diversity to prolong colonial dominance over previously minoritised

sub-ethnic groups'. He discusses the political context of the heritagisation of Jewish languages, caught in between nationalist projects, whether in Israel or in other countries, and diasporic Jewish minority communities. The heritagisation is caught between a '"revivalist" ideological framework aligned with the political ideal of national restoration of a mythical homeland', the various involvements of imperial powers, and attempts at decolonial reparation through alternative ways to heritagise minority languages that are motivated by an 'endangerment sensibility' and that instead revive 'conviviality within ethnic and religious difference'.

The special issue of course does not discuss all problematic aspects of the relation between the Nation State and history. For example, the Polish Nation State, especially in the years under the nationalist government led by the Law and Justice party, engaged in a negationist policy silencing voices that would point to a history of Polish anti-Semitism.[5] Polish nationalists push all the blame of anti-Semitism on to the Germans and the Shoah, for earlier periods on to the imperialist Tsarist regime in Russia or for the period since the Second World War on to the Russian Soviets. Polish nationalist narratives suppress accounts of complicity of Poles under such regimes, especially before the First World War, of anti-Semitism in interwar Poland, and of anti-Semitic crimes committed in Poland since the Second World War (including the Kielce pogrom of July 1946 and the 'anti-Zionist' campaign of 1968, which resulted in the expulsion of most remaining Jews from Poland, as mentioned in POLIN's permanent exhibition).

The iridescence of Jewish cultural heritage

In the research project on 'Queering Jewish Cultural Heritage in Europe' that Miranda Crowdus and I conducted from 2022 to 2025, we developed the concept of 'iridescent heritage' to think about Jewish cultural heritage (Kagan and Crowdus forthcoming). Perceiving and analysing heritage as iridescent steers it away from fixed determinations and towards complex processes that include contradictory and multilayered intersectional developments. Iridescence stresses the dynamic and complex multiplicity of interpretations and meanings of heritage, which keep shifting, as do the contextual relations of living subjects to cultural heritage. The notion was previously deployed in queer museum studies to point out how, under a queering perspective, heritage reveals itself as 'multifaceted, complex, contradictory and shifting' (Sullivan and Middleton 2020: 33). As a concept that highlights the relational ontology and epistemology of cultural complexity, iridescence 'thwarts

5 As a descendant of Eastern-European Jews who fled from Polish and Lithuanian regions of the then Russian Empire to France shortly before the First World War, I am especially sensitive to this point. And as argued by interviewees in my own research, the public memory of the Shoah often overshadows earlier anti-Semitic crimes in modern Europe.

fixed determinations by insisting on the constantly processual and relational co-constitution of things and subjects' (Kagan forthcoming). I am focusing on a triangular relational dynamic of iridescence between

(1) a *queering subject* who engages with heritage things, with other subjects, and with various discourses and other modes of access to heritage things;

(2) a *heritage thing* that has a number of dimensions and layers (with both so-called tangible and intangible dimensions),[6] which may be highlighted and start shimmering through once examined in a certain light (that is, seen through certain interpretive lenses or in relation to certain discourses and other modes of access) and when engaged with by the queering subject;

(3) a number of *interpretive lights*,[7] which are more or less hegemonically normative and have the potential to inform the subject and facilitate encounters between the queering subject and the iridescent heritage thing.

Iridescence does not originate in one of the three – the thing, the subject, or the interpretive light – but emerges from the relational dynamic between them.

I find several characterisations of this iridescence in the contributions to the special issue. The concept of iridescence articulates what Egorova's text evokes about the perception of the material world as a 'relationship between a perceiving subject and a world of material objects', resulting in what Egorova describes as a diversity of ways in which we perceive landscapes, turning sensory environments into sites of contestation. Complementing and adding to the previous notions of 'dissonant' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996) or 'difficult' (MacDonald 2009) heritage that Egorova's contribution mobilises, my conceptualisation of iridescent heritage is taking a more constructively and reparatively relational orientation to qualitative complexity. It means acknowledging dissonant and controversial experiences of heritage as productive. A heritage that is acknowledged and valued for its iridescence will be more likely to unfold its reparatively queering effect and thus 'unsettle the host versus migrant dichotomy', as suggested by Egorova, allowing for a deeper feeling of resonance between people and heritage sites, which Egorova discusses as 'ambience'. Ambiance could be understood as a search for a latent cultural resonance in the triangular relation between subjects, heritage objects, and history, when such resonance is felt as a latency, a potential-

6 I explicitly use the term 'thing' instead of 'object' or 'item' following Tim Ingold who conceptualises 'things' as gathering agency through the meshwork of life, 'to insist that the inhabited world is comprised not of objects but of things' (Ingold 2010: 4). 'No longer a self-contained object, the thing now appears as an ever-ramifying web of lines of growth' (Ingold 2010: 12). A thing is 'a certain gathering together of the threads of life' (Ingold 2010: 4).

7 My discussion of 'lights' (Kagan forthcoming) is grounded in Didi-Huberman's and Zagury-Orly's conceptualisations of the light of fireflies endangered by the dominant light of floodlights.

ity. The geography of ambiance that Egorova envisions as 'a more prominent part [...] of the background environment' for contemporary migrant communities in the UK may then constitute what I defined elsewhere, drawing on Jose Muñoz, as a 'space of potentiality' where orientations towards desired futures can emerge (Kagan 2022).

The history of Jewish people in Algeria before, during, and after the French colonisation, as discussed in Everett's contribution, is one of many richly iridescent examples of Jewishness as a complex identification: ethno-racially multilayered, in which various Jewish groups and individuals are entangled in a range of forms of indigeneity, non-whiteness and whiteness, and processes of assimilation to and othering from white colonial hegemonies. They relate to a variety of possibilities for postcolonial situatedness, marked by ambivalences and contradictions rather than conveniently simple identities.

The iridescence of heritage is especially striking in Alexander-Rose's text, with the ambivalence of the figure of the Wandering Jew from a medieval Christian antisemitic myth. First turned by artists into a 'paradigmatic nomad', the figure was then recuperated by modern diasporic Jews as a symbol for a 'historic legacy of exile'. They rewrote the figure in Jewish terms 'as a chronicler of Jewish history. His itinerancy is not a curse but a fundamental element of collective Jewish diasporic experience', thus loosening this figure from its original Christian framing. Alexander-Rose's own curatorial work highlighted many facets of that figure. She inquires further into the figure's potential for queering, 'such as re-gendering or incorporating new geographical sites of non-Western [...] histories and experiences' to extend its relevance beyond Europe. Seeing such elements of shared heritage as iridescent invites us to ask further questions of them, besides situating them as 'borderlands of religious or cultural tension', as Alexander-Rose does. An iridescent thing has surface properties that can diffract and unfold meanings in a variety of ways in its interplay with various interpretative lights and hermeneutic subjects. Over time, it is as if the iridescent thing would be gathering new qualities at its reflecting surface, variably absorbing and reflecting/re-emitting the new interpretative lights that touch it and the new subjects that encounter it.

Alexander-Rose raises the question whether a figure such as the Wandering Jew, iridescently contrasted between its anti-Semitic roots and its Jewish reappropriations, can be radically reappropriated at all if these dark roots are ignored. Or in other words, does the Wandering Jew need critically wondering Jews? Besides the pun, my answer would be a resounding yes, pointing to the triangular relationality of iridescence: an iridescent heritage can only shimmer and critically enlighten in its rich complexity if the subjects that relate to it strive towards a literacy of complexity. This is something that Edgar Morin called a systems sensibility, which he likened to a musical ear and which I further conceptualise as an 'aesthetics of complexity' (Ka-

gan 2011: 235-240). The point here is not to leave heritage to those with the supposed expert knowledge of its roots and ramifications but to encourage all to explore heritage in its living, shimmering complexity (however little, or much, their own initial knowledge may be historically informed) and in relation to their own evolving positionalities.

What if time itself iridesces? What if different timescales iridesce in resonance with different spatial scales? What if we work with temporalities that indeed offer hybrids of linear and cyclical times? What of interferences of different temporal scales, resonances between the distant and not-so-distant past, lived experience and memory, and imagined futures? The discussion of a 'spectral dimension' of heritage in Antunes' text may then be critically informed by the concept of iridescent heritage. The past can feel 'spectral' in the ontological and epistemological context of a linear temporality, but what about Jewish temporalities where the past is anyway not supposed to be bygone? When past times are understood as iridescent from the outset, when they are expected to iridesce in the present, is their presence spectral? Do they not then feel spectral because we filter them through a modernist and genealogically Christocentric lens that has come to nearly dominate everyone's epistemic framing of temporality?

Conclusion

The contributions in this special issue examine the importance of contemporary Jewish agency for a living Jewish heritage. They illustrate a range of tensions, conflicting priorities, and complex processes of negotiations beyond binary conceptions. Together, the contributors demonstrate that Jewish cultural heritage can be vibrantly enlivened and evolving when it allows for Jewish agency, marked by a series of negotiations and re-imaginings that allow for both personal and (inter-)communal processes of identification beyond predetermined identity assignations.

This afterword suggests complementary perspectives to the insights given by the contributors. It discusses the notion of post-vernacularity in Jewish languages, also deployed by Antunes: the revival of vernacular languages, such as Judaeo-Spanish languages, illustrates a shift from simple preservation to a more dynamic engagement that incorporates cultural creativity and reflects the contemporary lived experiences of Jewish individuals. The afterword also addresses counter-heritagisation: examples like Dimitri Chpakov's gangsta rap illustrate a form of cultural production that challenges dominant narratives of victimhood and emphasises empowerment, though responses to specific cultural formats and values vary amongst different Jewish communities and individuals. Regarding the State and national narratives, the afterword critiques that the role of State institutions in shaping heritage narratives has only partially been examined. Whilst several contributions in

the special issue assess the influence of nationalism and colonial legacies, I suggest than an exploration of how the power dynamics at the political level affect Jewish heritage may be also insightful.

The special issue highlights how histories of migrations relate to the transnational quality and richness of Jewish heritage. The texts contribute to an understanding of Jewish migrations and other transnational movements as 'agentive capacities', from the Jewishly re-inhabited myth of the Wandering Jew to the long-term presence and movements of Jewish subjects and cultures across Europe, in the Maghreb, and across the Mediterranean region.

The exchange between different regional and generational Jewish perspectives, and the possible frictions this could lead to between them, should be seen as constructively enhancing the agonistic iridescence of Jewish heritage, as nourishing critical Jewish thinking. Jewish heritage should not only be preserved and enlivened but also critically engaged with, fostering a dialogue that recognises its complexities and contradictions across different contexts and historical narratives. An iridescent heritage tells tales of a complex conviviality rather than flattening convivial sociabilities into a linear scale between irreconcilable antagonisms and consensual concord.

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Book Review:
Garcia, Angela (2024) The Way That Leads among the Lost. Life, Death, and Hope in Mexico City's Anexos. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux

Alessa Junghans

Angela Garcia's *The Way That Leads among the Lost: Life, Death, and Hope in Mexico City's Anexos* is a work that intricately weaves together ethnographic research, personal memory, literary craft, and political testimony. In her multilayered narrative, Garcia opens new perspectives on ethnographic writing and deliberately explores the boundaries between scholarship, literature, and individual experience. As an anthropologist and daughter of a family shaped by addiction and poverty in New Mexico, she guides the reader into the world of the *anexos* – often clandestine and controversial drug rehabilitation centres – which have emerged as an ambivalent response to a pervasive crisis. Garcia's account reveals that anexos are not clearly defined institutions but rather social formations born out of necessity and improvisation. They occupy abandoned spaces in the interstices of urban life, marked by hierarchy, ritual, and control, but also by care, community, and the attempt to bring order to lives fractured by addiction and violence. At the heart of their function is their role as a last resort for families, especially mothers in marginalised communities, seeking to protect their children from escalating drug and gang violence and addiction.

Garcia does not remain a mere observer in her depiction; she integrates her own biography, vulnerability, memories, and traumas as an essential part of her analysis. The book stands as a remarkable example of autoethnographic research that radically shifts the boundaries between field and self, science and literature, analysis and testimony, as well as between objectivity and subjectivity. Its relevance lies not only in the empirical depth and analytical acuity with which Garcia describes life in the shadow of the drug war but especially in how she makes storytelling itself the subject. She combines rich everyday descriptions with unflinching reflections on violence, care, gender, migration, and the role of mothers and women in the context of Mexico's drug war. Her writing is anything but detached and analytical; it relies on narrative storytelling, literary compression, and stories inscribed in bodies and biographies. Ethnographic analysis thus becomes a form of 'witnessing' (p. 92), of co-suffering and co-narrating, which leaves the reader deeply moved.

The book opens with a scene emblematic of Garcia's approach: the mother Hortencia has her son Daniel picked up by so-called 'servers' (p. 3), men

who forcibly bring people into the anexos. It is a decision shaped by fear, love, helplessness, and violence. Garcia portrays this scene not with detachment but as a listener, witness, and someone who herself grew up with the ambivalence of care and violence. From the outset, it becomes clear: hope and despair, protection and control, as well as closeness and pain, are both institutionally and within families inextricably linked to the context of Mexico's drug war. Mothers become agents of contradictory actions, where protection can also mean harm and care is accompanied by coercion. This entanglement runs as a central motif throughout the book.

In Chapter 1, Garcia recounts her entry into the field: originally travelling to Mexico City to study the urban 'Health City' megaproject, she is drawn to the world of the anexos through personal encounters and biographical resonances. The violence of the drug war, the militarisation, and the omnipresence of death and disappearance form the backdrop against which anexos emerge as ambivalent shelters. Garcia reflects on her position as a citizen of the United States of America, the daughter of an addict mother, and a researcher with 'the luxury of doing whatever' (p. 19). Rather than pursuing her original research agenda, she makes the deliberate decision to engage deeply with the complex and painful realities of the anexos. Throughout the chapter, Garcia skilfully interweaves her own experiences of depression, childhood, and marital problems with the stories of people in the field.

The second chapter focuses on the materiality and symbolism of the spaces: the small rooms of the anexos, the *cuartitos* (p. 47), in the *vecindades* (poor neighbourhoods) become metaphors for social confinement and existential compression, but also for community and resistance. Garcia links the history of Mexican urbanisation, the politics of the *guerra sucia* (p. 49), the 1985 earthquakes, and neighbourhood transformations with the biographies of the residents. Particularly moving is her depiction of daily routines, endless cleaning, and the pervasive sense of repetition and stagnation – what residents refer to as the *lo mismo* (p. 73) – which paradoxically creates space for collective healing. Garcia uses the description of these spaces to reveal the entanglement of history, politics, and everyday experience. The *cuartitos* are places of confinement and solidarity. They reflect poverty, violence, and precarity, but also resistance and cohesion. She also powerfully connects these spaces to her own biography: the rooms where she sought refuge as a child become mirrors of the *cuartitos* and the anexos.

Chapter 3 begins with the 2013 massacre at the 'Heaven' club, located in one of Mexico City's safer neighbourhoods, and the disappearance of thirteen youths from Tepito, a historically stigmatised and resilient *barrio* (neighbourhood) in Mexico City, using it as a starting point to analyse the normalisation of violence and disappearance in Mexico. Garcia shows how relatives, especially women and mothers, become political actors by publicly naming and telling the stories of the victims. She links this collective mourning to

literary and artistic practices (for example, Sara Uribe's *Antígona González*) and reflects on ethnography's role as testimony. By reclaiming grief, mothers and activists transform mourning into a powerful act of resistance against dehumanisation, and ethnographic storytelling becomes a political practice that makes the invisible visible.

Chapter 4 centres on the mother figure as a symbol of care, suffering, resistance, and ambivalence. Garcia portrays women who bring their children, partners, or themselves to anexos to protect them from violence, addiction, and poverty. She analyses the gendered dimension of care work and the structural overburdening of women in contexts of precarity, migration, and institutional failure. Particularly striking is her description of the 'Casa Dolorosa', an anexo for women in Ecatepec, a populous but rather marginalised municipality on the outskirts of Mexico City, serving as a refuge from femicide and domestic violence. Garcia shows that care work in Mexico (as globally) is gendered and associated with immense physical, emotional, and economic costs. The decision to place a child or partner in an anexo is never clear-cut; it is shaped by guilt, hope, fear, and love. The 'ethics of ambiguity' (pp. 198, 216), referencing Beauvoir and Dufourmantelle, becomes a central category for understanding mothers' actions. Garcia makes it clear that in a world of state failure, there are no 'right' decisions, but only attempts to survive, protect, and love.

Chapter 5 focuses on the central therapeutic and social ritual of the anexos: the *desagüe* (pp. 154–169), a form of public, often violent self-humiliation and testimony. Through dense observations and precise descriptions, Garcia illustrates how residents of anexos are compelled to confess their deepest traumas, guilt, and wounds in front of the group. This process oscillates between catharsis, re-traumatisation, and collective healing. She details the course of a *desagüe*, describing how the atmosphere in the room becomes increasingly agonising for everyone involved. Particularly moving is Garcia's reflection on her own sense of feeling overwhelmed during the scene: 'And sometimes I was simply unable to stomach the horrific images and purposefully blanked out. But the atmosphere of the room got beneath my skin, literally. I began developing rashes on my arms and scratched at myself at night, unable to sleep' (p. 156). The reader is convincingly shown that these practices can be both healing and destructive. It becomes clear that the recurring *desagüe* rituals foster a unique intimacy and growing understanding of others' suffering. Through this practice, physically felt connections emerge amongst participants; connections that can foster community but also perpetuate existing structures of violence.

Chapter 6 expands the view to the transnational dimension of the anexos, showing how their practices and institutions spread through migration into Mexican communities in the United States, where they take on new forms. Garcia offers vivid insights into the *cuarto y quinto paso* groups (p. 172) in

California, which practice intense, often cult-like rituals of confession and healing. She herself participates in one such *experiencia* (p. 172) and reflects on the limits and possibilities of self-healing, community, and vulnerability in the context of migration, precarity, and violence. This reveals how the longing for belonging and healing manifests in exile through collective rituals and new forms of community.

The final chapter and epilogue bring together the book's central themes, placing life in the 'gray zone' (p. 206) – a sphere of moral and existential ambiguity – at the centre.[1] The anexos become spaces where life under conditions of emergency becomes visible, and where violence, care, hope, and grief coexist. Garcia concludes with a reflection on the limits and possibilities of care, community, and healing in contexts of violence and precarity. She advocates for an anthropology that is aware of its own situatedness, affective involvement, and responsibility, and that understands storytelling as a form of political and ethical practice. The book ends with the insight that anthropology is not just observation but always also participation and compassion and that storytelling must be seen as an act of recognition and hope.

Garcia's portrayal of the gray zone as an in-between space is, in my view, one of the book's most powerful dimensions. She describes this space not only analytically but also emotionally as a place of survival, uncertainty, and moral tension. I found this ambivalence deeply affecting, especially since Garcia offers no easy answers and leaves the reader with open questions. The search for structural causes or clear responsibilities remains deliberately incomplete; instead, the book centres the complexity and layered nature of social relationships. Garcia refrains from definitive explanations, which is both the strength and the challenge of her ethnographic testimony. In this tension, the book's societal relevance unfolds, as it becomes clear how closely human relationships, responsibilities, and dependencies are intertwined – not only in Mexico but wherever state structures fail and informal networks fill the gaps.

I was also deeply impressed by Garcia's sensitivity to the significance of objects and spaces in the everyday life of the anexos. By repeatedly focusing on seemingly insignificant details – worn-out chairs, locked doors, improvised altars, shared meals, and the tightness of the rooms – Garcia evokes a tangible sense of the anexos' emotional and social landscape. One feels how relationships, power, and vulnerability are condensed in materialities and how the seemingly insignificant suddenly becomes meaningful for understanding the everyday lives and realities of the anexados. Garcia demonstrates a unique sensitivity to the unspectacular and shows how important it is to take the inconspicuous seriously in ethnographic work.

1 The notion of the 'gray zone' originates from the writings of Primo Levi (1988), a Holocaust survivor and author.

Beyond the vivid and evocative descriptions, it is striking that the book's methodological approach remains largely open and deliberately departs from classical ethnographic procedures. Garcia avoids systematic accounts of field access, data collection, and analysis, opting instead for a dense, literary-reflective engagement with her research field. She moves between participant observation, autobiographical colouring, and literary compression without clearly separating or systematically reflecting on these layers. This openness creates a strong sense of proximity to the field and makes the ambivalences of the gray zone palpable, but it also carries risks: the boundaries between observation and identification blur, and Garcia's own biography repeatedly comes to the fore. The lack of an explicitly stated methodological foundation is part of the literary concept, but it raises the question of how much the book primarily reflects the author's subjective experience.

Nevertheless, it is precisely Garcia's writing style, structure, and creative execution that makes her work so remarkable. Her approach aligns with an anthropological discourse increasingly concerned with how anthropological knowledge can have an impact beyond academic boundaries. It is not just about analytical precision but also about public accessibility and the societal relevance of ethnographic writing. Paul Stoller (2023), for example, advocates for a sensuous, narrative ethnography that draws on techniques from literature, film, and poetry to convey complex social realities to a broader audience. Garcia fulfils this ambition in her work: her writing style opens access to the book's themes in a way that is understandable and relatable not just to academic readers but also to those outside the scholarly world.

In my view, Garcia's style is not merely a literary device but an expression of a stance. She does not write *about* the people she encounters but *with* them. Her language is poetic, fragmented, often painful, and always respectful. Notably, the voices of the anexados, mothers, padrinos, and migrants are heard – sometimes in long quotations, in dialogues, or in contradictory narratives. At the same time, Garcia remains critical of the practices she describes, repeatedly highlighting the ambivalence of the anexos. The dangers of coercion, abuse, and cult-like structures are openly considered.

In a time when violence, precarity, and insecurity are on the rise globally, *The Way That Leads among the Lost* is a book of utmost relevance and urgency. Garcia's work makes a significant contribution to contemporary medical and political anthropology, particularly in the field of critical addiction and violence research in Latin America. The book stands in the tradition of ethnographies that go beyond simple dichotomies of victim and perpetrator to centre the gray zones of social practice. Garcia's approach is closely related to works like João Biehl's (2005) *Vita: Life in a Zone of Social Abandonment* or Philippe Bourgois' (2003) *In Search of Respect: Selling Crack in El Barrio*, which also show how marginalisation, state failure, and informal care networks give rise to new forms of community – and new forms of violence.

More recently, anthropology has increasingly confronted the effects of precarity, neoliberal policies, and state withdrawal (see Das 2015; Allison 2013). Garcia's book expands this debate by offering a perspective on Mexico and the anexos as spaces where global dynamics of violence, care, and exclusion converge in particularly intense ways.

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Book Review:
Agnieszka Pasieka (2024) Living Right. Far-Right Youth Activists in Contemporary Europe. Princeton: Princeton University Press

Radosław Kawałek

Living Right: Far-Right Youth Activists in Contemporary Europe was released just a few months before the 2025 parliamentary elections in Germany and the presidential elections in Poland, which witnessed a significant increase in the number of far-right voters. The growing popularity of the far-right and the dichotomisation of European and American society has already caught the attention of social scientists, who delivered books such as the well-read *Strangers in Their Own Land* (Hochschild 2016) or the already widely discussed *Something Between Us* (Pandian 2025) just recently published. Pasieka's book fits into the ongoing discussion surrounding the attempts to understand people on the 'other' side of the barricade, by exploring why they are drawn to radical nationalist communities and where anthropology fits into this endeavour. The monograph is the result of a multi-year project and fieldwork which consisted of attending events and meetings and 'hanging out' with radical nationalist groups in Italy (mainly with the Lealtà Azione), Poland (Obóz Narodowo Radykalny), and Slovakia and Hungary (Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement).

Each chapter of the book begins with an introductory vignette, rendering the mood and the theme and bringing to the reader's attention the important phenomena. In the introduction and Chapter 1, Pasieka sets the scene of the book by emphasising the international aspect of the national movements and explaining the concept of far-right activism. From the initial pages, the author is open about the moral, practical, and scientific dilemmas she faced during her fieldwork; in a sense, this also makes her book one about fieldwork itself. Chapters 2 and 3 concentrate on the history and political implications of fascism, which both play a crucial role for each community as a source for values and a foundation for identity building. This is also where the author explains the concept of 'vicarious resentment' (p.102), through which the activists perceive themselves as working and acting on behalf of others. Chapter 4 might be of a particular interest to anthropologists. Here Pasieka discusses how radical nationalists use culture and anthropology to repeat and prove racist ideas about differences and capabilities of peoples and races. The activists set against the idea of the liberal 'lost Western man' (p. 143), believing that to be a good citizen is to have the courage to be politically incorrect (thus

not fit into the mainstream liberal politics) and live life in accordance with national culture and religion. In Chapter 5 and 6, Pasieka showcases the diversity and heterogeneity of the right-wing communities and their members. This is where her quest for breaking open certain assumptions and commonsensical understandings (Pasieka 2019) is most evident in the way she demonstrates the group dynamics and the female engagement, together with the activists' perception of their communities. In these passages, the reader learns that far-right spaces are perceived as places where one can develop, find community, and discover a sense of purpose. In the conclusion, the author looks back at her research while recounting her last days in the field and her reflections about the overarching questions she raised in her work. She closes with an exploration of the relationship between liberalism and fascism and delves deep into the role that anthropology and ethnographic fieldwork play in those debates.

Living Right is a captivating ethnography which delivers on what it promises. Through the author's compelling storytelling, vivid descriptions, and self-reflection, the reader gets a glimpse into the life of far-right activist groups and their activities. But Pasieka manages to achieve more than an intriguing piece of literature. Her book stands out from others in the way she approaches the people she studied in terms of activism and humanity, without reducing them to their political views. Throughout the monograph, readers face and engage with individuals, their respective histories, motivations, and opinions, which challenge the homogenous perspective on the European far-right. Many readers could be appalled by some statements, quotes, or actions of the people described, but Pasieka's quest was not to convince people to side with the far-right activists but to show their humanity and diversity, as well as their virtues and blemishes.

That said, I feel the book fails to address one important element, namely proper contextualisation and consideration of the impact activist groups have on society. At many points in the book, readers are presented with blatant anti-Semitism (p. 135), the glorification of Nazis (p. 53), and racism (p. 129), to which the attendees of events and the activists are often exposed. Through *Living Right*, one comes to discover that what draws people to the Obóz Narodowo Radykalny, the Lealtà Azione, or the Sixty-Four Counties Youth Movement is sometimes a search for community or a project to engage with, which is why it is imperative to properly understand the implications of becoming a member of such groups. The common strategy of radical-populist movements (Kallis 2013) entails breaking taboos, expressing sentiments that may generally be deemed politically incorrect, and moving certain narratives into the mainstream and public discourse, which has a real-life impact on politics and political debate. Although the Obóz Narodowo Radykalny has not grown in the past years and is not a new creation as such (p. 6), its work and that of other similar groups has a troubling impact on politics and social

life (Mazurczak 2020). For instance, on 19 July 2025, demonstrations against immigration took place throughout major Polish cities, marked by fearmongering and xenophobic slogans. The Obóz Narodowo Radykalny proudly claimed that it initiated this movement (Biuro prasowe ONR 2025). It is fundamental for the anthropological researchers to stay faithful to the aims of the research project and fair towards their informants, which is expressed in striving to paint an unbiased picture. This may be especially challenging in this context because of the common perception of far-right activists as violent and evil, however, it is equally important to present the bigger context and overarching stories.

My critique notwithstanding, Pasieka stayed true to her research participants and to herself as an anthropologist and as a person. *Living Right* is a book that will appeal to anyone striving to understand fascism, international movements, the concept of a 'good life', and what the attraction of the far-right in Europe might be. Moreover, her exploration of the topic of fieldwork and studying the 'people we don't like' opens up the discussion for questions worth confronting.

Declaration of conflicting interests

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Rezension:
Sieferle, Barbara (2023) Nach dem Gefängnis: Alltag und unsichtbare Bestrafungen. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag

Ana Gietl

In ihrer 2023 erschienenen Ethnographie *Nach dem Gefängnis: Alltag und unsichtbare Bestrafungen* gibt Barbara Sieferle einen empathischen Einblick in das Leben hafterfahrener Männer in Deutschland und hinterfragt damit die selbstverständliche Rolle des Gefängnisses als Strafpraxis moderner Staaten.

Zu Beginn umreißt Sieferle knapp die Geschichte westlicher Strafpraktiken und gibt einen Überblick über die bestehende Gefängnisliteratur. Sie greift dabei die Gegenwartsdiagnose eines ‚Zeitalters des Strafens' auf. Sie reflektiert ihre Methodik, gibt einen Überblick über ihre zweijährige Forschungszeit, hinterfragt und begründet die verwendete Form der Anonymisierung mithilfe von zusammengesetzten fiktionalen Figuren und erklärt, was ethnographische Methodik überhaupt ist: ein Mitererleben von Lebensrealitäten. Der Rest des Buches arbeitet einzelne Teilaspekte des Lebens hafterfahrener Männer mit großer ethnographischer Nähe auf: Die Entlassung (Kapitel 2), die Begegnung und den Umgang mit Stigmatisierung (Kapitel 3), moralische Selbst- und Fremdpositionierungen (Kapitel 4), die prekäre ökonomische Situation (Kapitel 5) und einen durch Arbeitslosigkeit bedingten Überschuss an Zeit (Kapitel 6). Schließlich ordnet sie das Beschriebene analytisch ein (Kapitel 7 und 8) und resümiert die zentralen Erkenntnisse (Kapitel 9).

Sieferle zeigt dabei: Um das Leben nach der Haft zu verstehen, muss man sich zunächst mit Gefängnisaufenthalten an sich beschäftigen (Sieferle 2023: 25-26). So sind Häftlinge beispielsweise mit extremer Fremdkontrolle konfrontiert. Diese Kontrolle hat nicht nur eine (offensichtliche) räumliche Dimension, sondern auch eine zeitliche: Tage und Aktivitäten sind minutiös durchstrukturiert – als Gefangener[1] weiß man so ganz genau, wo und wann man in drei Jahren frühstücken wird (S. 128). Es ist außerdem nicht unüblich, dass mit einer Inhaftierung der komplette Abbruch der meisten oder sogar aller sozialen Kontakte einhergeht und damit auch der Verlust der damit verbundenen sozialen Rollen als Freund, Vater oder Arbeitnehmer. An ihre Stelle tritt eine neue Rolle, eine erzwungene, gesellschaftlich als mo-

1 Ich gendere bewusst nicht, da Sieferle ausschließlich mit inhaftierten und hafterfahrenen Männern geforscht hat. Inwieweit die Ergebnisse auch auf Frauen und nicht-binäre Menschen übertragbar sind, wird weitere Forschung zeigen müssen (S. 206 Fn. 53).

ralisch schlecht bewertete: die ‚des Gefangenen' (S. 93-94, 138-139). Die soziale Isolierung wird institutionell gefördert: Durch strenge Besuchszeiten, ein Handy- und Internetverbot und teure Telefonkosten (S. 105) – aber auch durch starke Rituale der sozialen Markierung als ‚krimineller Anderer', als die Sieferle Gerichtsverhandlungen interpretiert, sowie dem damit einhergehenden Stigma (S. 148-149).

Es verwundert also nicht, dass inhaftierte Männer mit ihrer Entlassung oft große Erwartungen verbinden. Möglichst schnell soll möglichst viel nachgeholt werden, das der normativen Vorstellung einer ‚Normalbiographie' entspricht: Ein neuer Job, ein:e neue:r Partner:in, eine neue Wohnung, ein neuer Freund:innenkreis (S. 49-50, 132, 139). Doch diese Erwartungen werden oft enttäuscht. Sieferle arbeitet die starke Stigmatisierung heraus, mit der hafterfahrene Männer konfrontiert sind, und die es ihnen häufig unmöglich macht, einen Job oder eine Wohnung zu finden (S. 59, 61-62), die aber auch die Suche nach Freundschaften oder Partner:innen stark erschwert (S. 64-65, 146). Ihre Protagonisten berichten, so häufig auf ihre Haftstrafe reduziert zu werden, dass soziale Zurückweisung zur erwarteten Regel wird und vorurteilsfreie Interaktionen zur begeistert nacherzählten Ausnahme (S. 65, 70, 163). Doch nicht nur Stigmatisierung erschwert hafterfahrenen Männern das Leben: Wie oben erwähnt, brechen durch die Haft oft soziale Kontakte ab – das erschwert Job- und Wohnungssuche zusätzlich. Durch die lange Isolierung von der Außenwelt fehlt es frisch entlassenen Männern außerdem häufig an Erfahrung mit neuen Technologien und anderem Wissen zur Bestreitung des Alltags (S. 52, 56-57, 162). Schließlich schränken institutionelle Rahmenbedingungen die Männer ein: Strenge Bewährungsauflagen, verbunden mit Überwachung und dem Risiko der erneuten Inhaftierung (S. 46-48); die Unmöglichkeit, während der Haft in die Rentenkasse einzuzahlen – trotz Vollzeitjob im Gefängnis (S. 68); sowie eine komplizierte Bürokratie, bei der Bewährungshilfe und Sozialarbeit nur unzureichend unterstützen (S. 57). Insgesamt sind die Männer somit davon betroffen, was Pierre Bourdieu einen Mangel an sozialem, kulturellem und ökonomischem Kapital nennen würde (S. 104-105).

Diese Erfahrungen, die Männer nach ihrer Entlassung häufig machen, beschreibt Sieferle mit einem Begriff aus der Ritualforschung, dem des ‚liminalen Zustands' (S. 58). Ursprünglich 1909 eingeführt von Arnold van Gennep und in den 1960ern von Victor Turner aufgegriffen und weiterentwickelt, beschreibt ‚Liminalität' im eigentlichen Sinne den mittleren Zustand eines Übergangsrituals, bei dem frühere soziale Rollen schon aufgegeben, aber neue noch nicht vollständig angenommen wurden (Thomassen 2009). Auch Sieferles Protagonisten finden sich in einem Übergangszustand ohne klare soziale Rollen wieder. Mit der Entlassung sind sie keine ‚Gefangenen' mehr, sie schaffen es jedoch oft auch nicht, die sozialen Rollen einzunehmen, auf die sie mit der Entlassung gehofft hatten. Sieferle zeigt, dass die Unsicher-

heit dieses Zustands den haftentlassenen Männern einen Alltag verwehrt, eine vertraute und als unproblematisch wahrgenommene Lebenswelt (Sieferle 2023: 51). Ganz im Sinne des ursprünglichen Konzepts der Liminalität, versuchen die Männer diesen Zustand mithilfe von ritualisierten Handlungen zu beenden: etwa mit einer symbolischen Aufräumaktion, einer Feier im Park oder dem Unterschreiben eines Mietvertrags (S. 144-146). Doch nicht immer sind diese Rituale erfolgreich, teilweise wird die liminale Phase zum Dauerzustand (S. 229-230 Fn. 5). Sieferle begründet das mit der fehlenden Institutionalisierung dieser Praktiken. Im Gegensatz zu den Ritualen der Verurteilung und Inhaftierung gibt es in Deutschland keine weit verbreiteten, gar staatlich durchgeführten Rituale der Entlassung, durch die ehemals inhaftierte Menschen wieder eine anerkannte soziale Position einnehmen könnten. Sie bleiben damit markiert als ‚gefährliche Andere' (S. 148-149).

Fängt also „die eigentliche Strafe erst nach der Entlassung" an, wie Sieferle resümiert (S. 159-160)? Angesichts der vielfältigen sozialen Ausschlüsse, die haftentlassene Männer erfahren, ihrer prekären ökonomischen Situation und einem Katalog an staatlichen Einschränkungen, macht sie diese Schlussfolgerung durchaus plausibel. Gesetze und Gerichte gehen von einer quantifizierbaren ‚Menge' an Strafe aus, die bei der Verurteilung festgelegt wird – sei es ein Geldbetrag oder eine Haftdauer. Sieferle stellt diese interne Logik des Rechtsstaats infrage, indem sie zeigt, dass Strafe das Leben von verurteilten Menschen über das angesetzte Maß hinaus prägt – nämlich auch nach der Entlassung aus dem Gefängnis.

In dieser Ethnographie dürfen wir das Leben mehrerer Männer über fünf Jahre hinweg begleiten[2]. Dabei mangelt es zwischen grundsätzlichen kulturwissenschaftlichen Überlegungen nicht an erfrischenden Anekdoten und heiteren Momenten. Ausführlich nacherzählte Situationen mit genau protokollierten Dialogen muten fast literarisch an und erstrecken sich teilweise über mehrere Seiten. Hier wäre allerdings eine methodische Erklärung, wie diese Genauigkeit zustande gekommen ist, schön gewesen, zumal Sieferle berichtet, ausschließlich handschriftliche Notizen gemacht zu haben (S. 206-207 Fn. 55). Ansonsten zeichnet sich die Ethnographie durch ein hohes Maß an Reflexivität aus: Sieferle schreibt über ihre eigenen Vorurteile zu Beginn der Forschung (S. 59-60); ihr Verhältnis zu ihren Protagonisten und ihre Verletztheit, als sie das Gefühl hatte, ein Mann versuche die Forschungsbeziehung zu ihr ökonomisch auszunutzen. Sie reflektiert auch ihre Einsicht, dass sie durch Vorträge, Artikel und zuletzt dieses Buch monetär von ihren Forschungsbeziehungen profitiert (S. 118-119). Sie benennt patriarchal geprägte Dynamiken zwischen sich und ihren männlichen Protagonisten, verliert aber nie ihre Einfühlsamkeit und bezieht diese Erfahrungen gekonnt auf größere soziale Strukturen. Sie schafft es außerdem, trotz aller Hindernisse,

2 Nach den angesetzten zwei Forschungsjahren hielt Sieferle den Kontakt zu den Männern weiterhin aufrecht (S. 165).

mit denen ihre Protagonisten umgehen müssen, deren Handlungsmöglichkeiten als eigenständige Akteure hervorzuheben, etwa durch die Beschreibung von informellen Handels- und Informationsnetzwerken (S. 107-108).

Wie bereits anklang, hat Sieferle ausschließlich mit haftentlassenen Männern gearbeitet – mehr Diversität wäre hier sicher spannend gewesen. Ursprünglich geplant war wohl auch die Forschung mit Frauen und nicht-binären Personen, das scheiterte allerdings an praktischen Gründen im Zusammenhang mit der Covid19-Pandemie (S. 206 Fn. 53). Auch begrüßt hätte ich Vergleiche mit Konflikt- und Strafpraktiken außerhalb von Europa und Nordamerika. Um die Alternativlosigkeit der westlichen Vorstellung von Strafe als gewollte Zufügung von Leid infrage zu stellen, bleibt ihr so lediglich ein etwas evolutionistisch anmutender Verweis auf eine unspezifische Welt vor der Antike (S. 20-21).

Insgesamt liefert Sieferle hier aber eine angenehm lesbare, sehr empathische Ethnographie, der es nicht an theoretischen Überlegungen und genauer Methodik mangelt. Sie trägt damit auf wertvolle Weise zur bestehenden Gefängnis- und Gefangenenforschung bei.

Erklärung zu Interessenkonflikten

Der/die Autor:in erklärte, dass hinsichtlich der Forschung, der Urheberschaft und/oder der Veröffentlichung dieses Artikels keine potenziellen Interessenkonflikte bestehen.

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Nachruf auf Prof. Dr. Jürgen Jensen (1938-2025)

Joachim Otto Habeck

Am 6. Juni 2025 verstarb Prof. Dr. Jürgen Jensen, der sich um das Institut für Ethnologie der Universität Hamburg besonders verdient gemacht hat. Mehrere Personen, die ihn gut gekannt haben, arbeiten derzeit an einem Nachruf. Ich selbst habe diesen Nachruf verfasst, da ich im Rahmen meiner Recherchen zur Geschichte des Instituts mit Jürgen Jensen in Kontakt kam und ihn auch persönlich kennengelernt habe. So war mir am 26. Januar 2018 ein mehrstündiges Interview mit ihm vergönnt. Jürgen Jensen hatte zuvor mehrfach über seinen Lebensweg erzählt, unter anderem in einem Gespräch mit der damaligen Studentin Serpil Erwakal im Sommer 2001 (Erwakal 2001; vgl. Dracklé 2001) und einem Interview mit dem Bochumer Kollegen Dieter Haller am 2. November 2007 (Haller 2007). Jürgen Jensens akademischer Nachlass umfasst einige Schriften, in denen er über seine eigene Rolle berichtet (Jensen 1999), die Aufgaben des Fachs und des Hamburger Instituts beschreibt (Jensen 1992a, 1992b, 1995) oder seiner Wahrnehmung der Geschichte des Fachs Ausdruck verleiht (Jensen 2009, 2013). Seine fachlichen und pädagogischen Perspektiven erschließen sich auch aus weiteren Publikationen, wie ich weiter unten darstellen werde. Wenngleich ich selbst nicht bei ihm studiert habe, ist es mir möglich, aus meinen Gesprächen mit einigen der damaligen Studierenden sowie aus unveröffentlichten Quellen (Akten der Universität Hamburg) über Jürgen Jensen zu berichten.

Geboren wurde Jürgen Jensen am 3. Januar 1938; er wuchs in Berlin-Wilmersdorf auf. Sein Studium an der Freien Universität Berlin absolvierte er von 1957 bis 1965 bei Prof. Dr. Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch und dem damaligen Assistenten Wolfgang Rudolph. Beide, so berichtete Jensen, hätten sein Interesse an der US-amerikanischen Kulturanthropologie und dem Funktionalismus Thurnwaldscher Prägung geweckt; auch mit der britischen Fachtradition machte sich Jürgen Jensen früh vertraut (Erwakal 2001; Haller 2007).

Die Promotion als Abschluss des Studiums war in jener Zeit die Norm. 1965 wurde Jürgen Jensen auf Grundlage seiner literaturbasierten Dissertation „Kontinuität und Wandel in der Arbeitsteilung bei den Baganda“ promoviert (die Arbeit wurde 1967 veröffentlicht). Jensen konzipierte seine Studie zur alters-, geschlechter- und schichtenbezogenen Organisation von Arbeit als einen Beitrag zur Forschung über „Akkulturation“; in seinem Fazit konstatierte er ein intrakulturelles Spannungsverhältnis in der Wertung des Phänomens Arbeit (1967: 284). Aus heutiger Sicht ungewöhnlich ist die Tatsache, dass die Dissertation den Weg zu einem DFG-Antrag und zur eigenständigen

Feldforschung ebnete – nicht umgekehrt. Seine erste, knapp anderthalb Jahre währende ethnographische Feldforschung fand 1966-1967 auf den Buvuma-Inseln (Uganda) statt; im Zuge dieser und weiterer Aufenthalte in der Region (1970, 1972, 1974-1975) entstand später die Habilitationsschrift (s.u.).

Nach seiner Rückkehr von der ersten Uganda-Reise nach Berlin bewarb sich Jürgen Jensen erfolgreich auf die vom damaligen Ordinarius Hans Fischer ausgeschriebene Assistenzstelle am damaligen Seminar für Völkerkunde (dem heutigen Institut für Ethnologie) der Universität Hamburg. 1968 trat Jürgen Jensen seinen Dienst an. In die ersten Jahre seiner Tätigkeit fielen die Ämtertrennung des Ordinariats von der Direktion des Museums für Völkerkunde (Jensen 1999: 38) und die durch studentische Proteste initiierte Hochschulreform (vgl. Habscheidt 2013). Die in den 1970er Jahren den Studienalltag bestimmenden Auseinandersetzungen zwischen Marxismus und Kritischem Rationalismus stellten Fischer und Jensen vor große Herausforderungen; beide versuchten, den Konflikt zu schlichten (vgl. Habeck 2021: 163-165).

Unter Hans Fischers Ägide, aber doch weitgehend auf eigene Initiative konnte Jürgen Jensen in unermüdlicher Kleinarbeit die Hochschulleitung davon überzeugen, dem Seminar für Völkerkunde zusätzliche Mittel zur Verfügung zu stellen. Unter anderem wurde dies möglich durch seine Mitwirkung an der Ausgestaltung der Lehre und Verwaltung des neugegründeten Fachbereichs für Kulturkunde und Kulturgeschichte (dem heutigen Fachbereich Kulturwissenschaften). Wie Jürgen Jensen mir erläuterte, ergab sich mit dem Weggang der Wissenschaftlichen Mitarbeiterin Reinhilde Freise im Frühjahr 1977 die Möglichkeit für eine Überleitung einer Assistenzstelle in eine Professur. Allerdings gelang es erst durch das Einlegen juristischer Mittel, diese Professur auch dauerhaft zu sichern. Jürgen Jensen erhielt sie im Herbst 1979, also im Jahr nach dem Abschluss seiner Habilitation 1978.

In seiner Habilitationsschrift befasste sich Jürgen Jensen mit den rapiden Veränderungen in der Siedlungsgeschichte der Buvuma-Inseln, einschließlich einer Phase der von den Kolonialbehörden verordneten Evakuierung aller Bewohner:innen 1908/09 angesichts der grassierenden Trypanosomiasis bzw. „Schlafkrankheit“, welcher viele Menschen zum Opfer fielen (vgl. Soff 1969). Nach 1921 kam es zu einer Wiederbesiedlung der Inseln (Jensen 1980: 14). Jürgen Jensen erwähnte im Gespräch mit mir, er habe anhand mündlicher Überlieferungen erforscht, wie Residenz- und Deszendenzregeln vor bzw. um 1900 gestaltet waren. Auffällig ist, dass der Begriff „Akkulturation“, der in der Dissertation noch so präsent war, in der Habilitationsschrift nahezu keine Erwähnung mehr fand. Stattdessen präferierte Jürgen Jensen nun den Begriff des Kulturwandels zur Rahmung der von ihm angestrebten „verhaltensorientierten Theorie des Deszendenzverhaltens“ (1980: 319). Die Kennzeichnung des 1980 erschienenen Buches als „Band 1: Theoretische Grundlegung und 1. Hauptteil“ deutet darauf hin, dass Jürgen Jensen einen

zweiten Band verfassen wollte – diesen mit Fokus auf die Besiedlungsgeschichte in den späteren Jahrzehnten unter Kolonialherrschaft. Zur Erstellung des zweiten Bands kam es allerdings nicht.

Die 1970er Jahre waren nicht nur geprägt durch die Feldforschungen, sondern auch durch Jürgen Jensens ausdauernde Bemühungen um zusätzliche Professuren am Seminar für Völkerkunde. Die Zahl der Studierenden nahm ab 1975 rapide zu; die Räume des im Keller des Museums für Völkerkunde untergebrachten Seminars waren seitdem überfüllt. Jürgen Jensen biss sich in akribischer Kleinarbeit durch die fremde Materie der Kapazitätenberechnungen und konnte argumentieren, dass der geltende Curricularnormwert im Fach Völkerkunde von 2,1 auf 3,4 anzuheben sei. Mit Erfolg: am 28. April 1980 beantragte der damalige Sprecher des Fachbereichs, Martin Warnke, beim Planungsstab des Präsidenten „die dringende Zuweisung einer neuen Professorenstelle an das Seminar für Völkerkunde“ (Bd. 140 der Akten im Archiv des Fachbereichs). Mit Hans Fischer und dem frisch berufenen Jürgen Jensen erhielt das Seminar für Völkerkunde nunmehr eine dritte Professur, auf welche im Frühjahr 1982 Beatrix Pfleiderer berufen wurde. Es kam noch eine vierte Professur hinzu. 1989 besetzten Studierende der Ethnologie das Institut, um gegen die weiterhin unzureichende Lehr- und Betreuungssituation zu protestieren – eine Aktion, die Jürgen Jensen bei seinen Verhandlungen mit dem Präsidium in die Hände spielte. Auf diese vierte Professur wurde Frühjahr 1995 Waltraud Kokot berufen.

Zwar waren nicht alle der damaligen Studierenden von Jürgen Jensens Lehrmethoden beseelt, doch war es sein Verdienst, die Idee des Feldforschungspraktikums zu formulieren und Lehrveranstaltungen dieser Art ab 1971 durchzuführen (Jensen 1992b). Die ersten Reisen dieser Art führten in den Westen Irlands; diejenigen, die damals daran teilnahmen, haben die dortigen Aufenthalte in lebhafter Erinnerung (vgl. Habeck 2021: 177-179). Darüber hinaus berichten mehrere der damaligen Studierenden von Jürgen Jensen als einem außerordentlich belesenen Dozenten mit breiter fachlicher Expertise, die ihnen den Zugang zu den Schlüsselwerken der britischen und US-amerikanischen Anthropologie ermöglichte. Vielfach ist davon die Rede, dass Jürgen Jensen den Studierenden üblicherweise sehr viel Handlungsfreiheit in der Konzeption ihrer Hausarbeiten und Unternehmungen gab. In der Laudatio von Dorle Dracklé anlässlich der Pensionierung von Jürgen Jensen Ende März 2001 findet sich der Satz, den Jürgen Jensen häufig geäußert hat und der manchen der Studierenden in Erinnerung geblieben ist: „Ja, gut, dann machen Sie mal“ (zit. n. Dracklé 2001: 165).

Für einige Publikationsvorhaben verließ Jürgen Jensen sich auf die Hilfe von Studierenden. Sylvia Träbing (-Butzmann) bearbeitete die „Ethnographischen Aufzeichnungen (1891-1916) des Missionssuperintendenten Theodor Meyer von den Nyakyusa (Tanzania)“ (Meyer 1989) sowie einen Teil des umfangreichen Manuskripts von Joseph Busse, welcher eine ethnologische

Ausbildung am Hamburger Museum erhalten hatte und – ebenfalls als Missionar – in den 1930er Jahren im östlichen Afrika arbeitete (Busse 1995). Jürgen Jensen fungierte als Herausgeber eines weiteren Teils von Busses Manuskript, der von Philipp Prein bearbeitet wurde (Busse 1998). Ein Karton mit Akten aus Jensens bzw. Busses Nachlass befindet sich nach wie vor im Institut für Ethnologie; eine genaue Sichtung steht noch aus.

Während der ersten Jahre der Herrschaft Idi Amins in Uganda (1971-1979) war Jürgen Jensen dort noch mehrmals auf Feldforschung; aber die politische Situation veranlasste ihn, sich auf eine andere Forschungsregion zu fokussieren. Im Jahre 1984 verbrachte er zehn Monate in Trou-d'eau-douce, einem Dorf auf Mauritius. Die Erträge jener Zeit sind unter anderem in *Sociologus* und in den *Ethnoscripts* veröffentlicht (Jensen 1988, 2008). Offenbar war das Engagement in Mauritius aber nur von kurzer Dauer. Jürgen Jensen berichtete später, dass die Reisen per Flugzeug „gesundheitlich [...] nicht mehr opportun" gewesen seien (Erwakal 2001: 127). In der Retrospektive scheint die Forschung auf Mauritius zwar nicht allzu ergiebig gewesen zu sein, aber sie markiert einen Übergang zu einem größeren Interesse an religiösen bzw. spirituellen Aspekten.

In Jürgen Jensens Spätwerk manifestiert sich die Hinwendung zu Ritual und Magie in noch größerer Deutlichkeit. Rekonstruieren lässt sich, dass er aufgrund mehrfacher Urlaubsaufenthalte gemeinsam mit seiner Frau Helga in der Stadt Finale Ligure die Motivation verspürte, sich verstärkt mit ethnographischen und kulturgeschichtlichen Forschungen in Ligurien zu befassen. Die entsprechende Programmatik hat Jürgen Jensen eigens in einem Aufsatz (1992c) formuliert. Insbesondere die Pfarrbibliothek der Gemeinde San Giovanni Battista in Finale Ligure muss für ihn eine Schatzkammer gewesen sein. Bei der Sichtung der Bestände aus dem 17. und 18. Jahrhundert fand er „kirchliche Ritualbücher aus dieser Zeit, deren hauptsächliche Inhalte Gegenstände einer Kategorie betreffen, wie sie in der Ethnologie für zahlreiche Kulturen feldforschungsmäßig erhoben und in kulturhistorischen Disziplinen quellenmäßig erschlossen wurden und weiterhin werden: Rituale zur Bekämpfung böser übersinnlicher Kräfte" (Jensen 2007: 1). Die auf dieser Grundlage entstandene 160-seitige Monographie zeigt Jürgen Jensens umfassende Reflexionen zu sozialwissenschaftlichen Ritualtheorien; so offenbart sich hier ein anderer, sehr distinkter Bereich seines Denkens und Schaffens.

Charakteristisch für Jürgen Jensens Spätwerk sind zwei Manuskripte, die er als Repliken zu fachgeschichtlichen Beiträgen verfasst hat. Die erste Stellungnahme im Umfang von sechseinhalb Seiten bezieht sich auf den Überblick zur Fachgeschichte der Ethnologie von Martin Rössler (2007), von Jürgen Jensen im Dezember 2008 fertiggestellt. Allerdings ist unklar, ob sie in irgendeiner Fachzeitschrift publiziert wurde – jenseits der Online-Ausgabe im vom Cristian Alvarado kreierten Forum „Ethnologie im Natio-

nalsozialismus“ (Jensen 2009). Eine weitere Stellungnahme von 23 Seiten Länge wurde ebendort 2013 hochgeladen: Jürgen Jensen setzte sich darin kritisch mit dem Buch von Dieter Haller (2012) auseinander (Jensen 2013). Was beide Stellungnahmen vereint, ist die Unzufriedenheit des Emeritus gegenüber der Lehrmeinung, die bundesdeutsche Ethnologie habe in den 1950er und 1960er Jahren ein isoliertes Dasein gefristet und internationale Debatten kaum rezipiert. Hier schließt sich der Kreis zu den Reminiszenzen seines eigenen Studiums an der Freien Universität Berlin, wo Jürgen Jensen insbesondere durch Sigrid Westphal-Hellbusch und Wolfgang Rudolph für die *Cultural Anthropology* sensibilisiert worden war.

Jürgen Jensen zeigte in diesen beiden nach seiner Pensionierung verfassten Stellungnahmen auch eine gewisse Ungeduld gegenüber der fehlenden inhaltlichen Auseinandersetzung mit den Werken der Vorgängergeneration. Dass er von anderen als sehr belesen wahrgenommen wurde, war bereits erwähnt worden. Nach seinem Ableben galt es, seine Bibliothek in der Wohnung in Hamburg-Eppendorf zu sichten – leider konnte der Bestand nicht als Ganzes gesichert werden, doch bot die Aufteilung am 21. September 2025 die Gelegenheit des Wiedersehens mit denjenigen, die sich mit Jürgen Jensen verbunden gefühlt haben. Einige seiner ehemaligen Studierenden haben den Entwurf dieses Nachrufs gelesen und ihn kommentiert. Ich danke namentlich Astrid Wonneberger für Anregungen und Korrekturen. Mein Dank für weitere Kommentare gilt auch Julia Pauli, meiner Kollegin am Institut für Ethnologie; Eckart Krause von der Arbeitsstelle für Universitätsgeschichte der Universität Hamburg; sowie den Studierenden des Lektürekurses zur Fachgeschichte der Ethnologie (Wintersemester 25/26).

Erklärung zu Interessenkonflikten

Der Autor erklärte, dass hinsichtlich der Forschung, der Urheberschaft und/oder der Veröffentlichung dieses Artikels keine potenziellen Interessenkonflikte bestehen.

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