

**TRADITION IS DEAD, LONG LIVE TRADITION:
CRITICAL APPROACHES TO POSTVERNACULAR YIDDISH CULTURE**

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ABSTRACT

This study takes up the position that postvernacularity is the vernacular of the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene, creating the space for a subjective, relative, and contingent relationship with Yiddish cultural practices, and that this context necessitates that critical thinking be integrated into the pedagogy and transmission of cultural practice. The study also hypothesizes that code-switching and the juxtaposition of fragments is a central strategy in contemporary creative practice and Jewish identity formation. Previous literature on the Yiddish cultural revival has focused on ethnomusicological and linguistic transmission. Through interviews, observation, and autoethnography, this study takes an entangled and interdisciplinary approach, focusing on the experience and creative practices of artists who were first immersed in Yiddish culture through festivals and events. Chapter One frames the study, contextualizing the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene against the backdrop of the klezmer revival. Chapter Two focuses on the cohort of artists interviewed for this study, showing how they transform tradition through cultural practice, put tradition to work in their activism, and build community and social infrastructure around a shared affinity with Yiddishkayt. Chapter Three offers insights into the ways that participatory performances at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat experiment with and model methods of engaging with tradition and strengthening diasporic collectivity. Chapter Four examines the Yiddish cultural imaginaries that are employed by artists in the process of world-

building. Chapter Five discusses the creative interplay between individual and community in Yiddish culture as illustrated through Yiddish dance, and examines pedagogical and curatorial strategies that create space for many voices within the structure of the community. This study illustrates the impact of curated cultural spaces, pedagogical strategies, participatory performance, and artistic projects on the evolution of traditional cultural practices. Festivals of Yiddish arts and culture emerge as primary spaces in which Yiddish cultural practices are transmitted, new work and networks are instigated, and community values are fostered through shared practice. A key finding of this study is that contemporary Yiddish cultural practice, pedagogy, and curation lifts up the heterophonic qualities of the scene by intentionally making space for a diversity of individual expressions within community settings.

DEDICATION

דאָ איז מיין היים / Do iz mayn heym / Here Is My Home

English original by Si Kahn

Yiddish tradaptation by Michael Alpert

Good friends from whom we now must part,
Where are we bound?
Your singing voices lift my heart;
Here is my home

Come darkness, come light
Where are we bound?
Come morning, come night
Here is my home

For those who sing in harmony,
Where are we bound?
Can learn to live in unity
Here is my home

Come darkness, come light...

If we can join ourselves in song,
Where are we bound?
Our hearts will live when we are gone
Here is my home

Come darkness, come light...

The spirit that finds music here
Where are we bound?
Will sing forever in the air
Here is my home

Nu, libe fraynt, me fort shoyn op
Avu, avu?
To heybt a kol mit harts un kop
Do iz mayn heym

Say khoyshekh, say kayor
Avu, avu?
Say morgnroyt, say shkie-klor
Do iz mayn heym

In aynklang az me zingt zikh oys
Avu, avu?
Kumt akhdos shoyn fun dem aroys
Do iz mayn heym

Say khoyshekh, say kayor...

Farbindn mir zikh mit eyn klang
Avu, avu?
Blaybt tomid undzer harts-gezang
Do iz mayn heym

Say khoyshekh, say kayor...

Undzer negine, zingeray
Avu, avu?
In velt vet tomid klingen fray
Do iz mayn heym

נו, ליבע פֿרײַנט, מע פֿאַרט שוין אָפּ
אָווו, אָווו?
טאָ הייבט אַ קול מיט האַרץ און קאָפּ
דאָ איז מיין היים

סיי חושך, סיי קאַיאָר
אָווו, אָווו?
סיי מאָרגנרויט, סיי שקיעה־קלאָר
דאָ איז מיין היים

אין איינקלאַנג אַז מע זינגט זיך אויס
אָווו, אָווו?
קומט אַחדות שוין פֿון דעם אַרויס
דאָ איז מיין היים

סיי חושך, סיי קאַיאָר...

פֿאַרבינדן מיר זיך מיט איין קלאַנג
אָווו, אָווו?
בלײַבט תמיד אונדזער האַרץ־געזאַנג
דאָ איז מיין היים

סיי חושך, סיי קאַיאָר...

אונדזער נגינה, זינגערײַ
אָווו, אָווו?
אין וועלט וועט תמיד קלינגען פֿרײַ
דאָ איז מיין היים

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As I will describe in the following chapters, the Yiddish cultural scene is a space where practice, creativity, research, scholarship, pedagogy, and play are entangled. The interviews I conducted for this project were generative conversations rather than only points of data collection. In addition to these interviews, many other conversations led me to the ideas I've included here. I want to extend a *groysn dank*, my heartfelt thanks, to my mentors, peers,

colleagues, and students who have joined me in this critical conversation over the years, helping me to untangle ideas, guiding me towards resources, and sharing their wisdom and wit.

When I first attended KlezKanada's Summer Retreat in 2001, I was deeply moved by the culture and community I found there. I didn't realize that the course of my life was about to change and that Yiddish culture would become a home, a practice, a career, and a research focus. Michael Alpert and Jeff Warschauer, then co-Artistic Directors of KlezKanada, invited me to join the KlezKanada faculty as a dance teacher in 2006 and to take on the coordination of the scholarship program in 2007. I thank them for seeing that I had something to offer to the Yiddish cultural community long before I saw that for myself and for their friendship, collegueship, and moral support to this day. It is a gift to have mentors who become colleagues and dear friends. Sandy and Hy Goldman, dedicated champions of KlezKanada, embraced me as a member of the family; I am so grateful for their love and trust over the years.

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In 2018 I joined the board of the Country Dance and Song Society (CDSS). For almost a century, CDSS has run dance, music, and song camps for families and for adults. Although oriented towards different folk traditions, these camps are similar to Yiddish arts and culture intensives in many ways, most especially in the intergenerational communities that form in the camp environment. The opportunity to engage deeply with the big picture questions and governance of CDSS was an unexpected and valuable extracurricular extension of my PhD experience. I want to thank the members of the CDSS board and staff during this time, especially Katy German (Executive Director), Gaye Fifer (Board Present 2018-2024), and Joel Bluestein

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NOTE ON THE SPELLING OF YIDDISH AND HEBREW WORDS

When first used I have italicized Yiddish and Hebrew words and added the translation in parentheses or, in the case of longer explanations and quotations, in a footnote. Subsequent uses of the same word throughout the dissertation are treated as regular text and not italicized. When speaking English, many, if not all of these words, are incorporated as borrowed words rather than translated; for example, I would ask a friend “Do you want to come over for shabes dinner?” rather than “Do you want to come over for dinner on the sabbath?” Yiddish is written in the Yiddish *alef-beys* (alphabet). Usually called the Hebrew or Jewish alphabet, this script is common to most Jewish languages (Hebrew, Yiddish, Ladino, etc.) although there are variations in the way the alphabet is employed. Jewish languages are written in transliteration when included in texts of non-Jewish languages or, increasingly, to provide access for those who do not read the alef-beys. Yiddish is written phonetically and standard orthography of Yiddish words as well as standard transliteration of Yiddish into English is relatively recent in the history of the language, emerging only in the early twentieth century. Indeed, as is often the case with imposed standardization, “standard” still depends on with whom you are speaking. However, YIVO orthography and transliteration have become the most commonly used systems in academia and publishing.¹ For the purposes of this work, I have chosen to use YIVO standards for all Yiddish transliteration.

¹ See <https://yivo.org/yiddish-resources-at-yivo>.

This means that some words, especially those that are commonly used in English, may look different to readers. For example, “kh” is used instead of “ch” for the letter כּ (*khes*), the guttural consonant that begins *khale* (a type of bread). A basic guide to YIVO transliteration and pronunciation can be found at <https://www.yivo.org/yiddish-alphabet>.

Reflecting their pronunciation in the Yiddish language, in most cases I have used the standard Yiddish spellings for Hebrew words, for example *Shabes* instead of *Shabbat* (the Jewish day of rest). Exceptions to this include cases where the word is used in a quotation (whether from an interview or text), as part of a title, or in a context specific to modern Hebrew. In those cases, I have used the spelling which is in the original text, reflects the interviewee’s pronunciation, or makes the most sense in context. Very occasionally, following the example of the online Yiddish studies journal *In geveb*, I have chosen to use the more common English spelling of a Yiddish word when it aligns with a North Americanized popular understanding of the concept.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

In the Beginning

In 2003 my father asked me if I wanted to join him at KlezKanada, a week-long event celebrating Yiddish culture held in a retreat setting in the Laurentian mountains. Hy and Sandy Goldman, two of the original co-founders and the volunteer force behind the event, had invited him to come and see what they were all about. Twenty-one-year-old me resisted: “I don’t play an instrument,” I told my dad, “I don’t speak Yiddish, I’ll be the only person there under fifty.”² He countered by suggesting that it would be a chance for us to spend a week together – a rare occurrence – and I finally agreed. We drove to the retreat with Sandy Goldman and during that drive she told me that she had placed me in a cabin with other participants my own age rather than with my father. She dropped me off at my cabin; I have a visceral memory of being the only one there, sitting in the sun on the wooden steps of the cabin looking out over the lake and waiting somewhat nervously . . . for something to happen. As the other young women in my cabin began to arrive, I realized that I really wasn’t going to be the only younger person at the retreat. From that moment until the end of the week, I didn’t see my dad much at all; I was too busy

² Twenty years later, as Artistic Director of the organization, I still hear these same hesitations from would-be participants of the Summer Retreat. A central challenge is how to communicate the experience of retreat to new participants.

falling in love with a community and a culture. It turned out not to matter that I didn't play an instrument; I attended Yiddish dance and song workshops, immersing myself in material taught by Michael Alpert, Walter Zev Feldman, Adrienne Cooper z"l,³ and Joanne Borts – all performers, scholars, and teachers of what is commonly called the “klezmer revival.” As I danced, I felt my body as Jewish for the first time and as I sang (even as I struggled to wrap my tongue around some of the sounds) I felt as though I had found my Jewish voice. In the humour around me, I suddenly understood my father's wit in a new light, placing it within a cultural context. I felt at home. It was my first experience of feeling Jewish beyond simply knowing that I was Jewish. I am often asked how I got involved with Yiddish culture and KlezKanada. This is a common interview question, especially for anyone involved with Yiddish who defies popular stereotypes of Yiddish by being “young.” I've told this story so often over the years that I've come to think of this first KlezKanada experience as my Yiddish origin myth. The week was life-changing, setting me on an unexpected course into the cultural landscape of Yiddishland.

Along with interviews, field notes, and critical theory, this dissertation draws upon twenty years of participating, studying, teaching, creating, and organizing in the Yiddish cultural scene. I weave my own experience into both my observations and case studies. I contend that “postvernacularity” is a defining property in the contemporary relationship of the secular-leaning

³ Used after the name of a deceased individual, z"l is an honorific that stands for “in blessed memory.”

Yiddish community to Yiddish language and culture. Starting from this understanding, I argue that critical pedagogy concerning ways we “do heritage,” work with fragments, and cultivate a heterophonic community of many voices is increasingly important in cultural spaces. In this introductory chapter I define terms and introduce concepts that are key to the chapters that follow. In the first section, I will sketch the Yiddish cultural landscape, introducing the concept of postvernacularity, providing background and history to situate the contemporary context of this study, defining the participant group that formed the interview base for my research, and locating them in the landscape. I will also engage with the ghosts in this work, touching upon loss and life in the context of contemporary Yiddish culture. In the second section I will consider the role of the fragment to contemporary Yiddish cultural creation. I will discuss the relationship of ethnographic research to the “cultural storehouse” of material drawn upon in such work, consider a methodology of fragments that centres juxtaposition as a creative practice, and position critical thinking and pedagogy as integral to this approach. Third, I will lay out the methodologies and lenses of analysis for my research, considering “entanglement” as a methodology within Jewish intellectual and cultural practices. I will close by locating myself and my goals in this research.

Sketching the Landscape: Postvernacularity and Yiddish Culture

In the broadest strokes, “Yiddish culture” can be understood as encompassing the diverse linguistic, cultural, and religious traditions of Eastern European Yiddish-speaking Jews, also called Ashkenazi Jews. One of many Jewish languages spoken around the world, the Yiddish language emerged around 1000 AD, in the Rhine Valley.⁴ Yiddish, which is written in the *alef-beys* (the Hebrew alphabet), brought together elements of ancient Hebrew with the surrounding languages of the time, predominantly Middle High German. As Jewish communities moved east and north, Yiddish speakers incorporated elements of the languages around them; the language includes Semitic, Germanic, Romance, and Slavic components as well as examples of fusion between elements (Shandler, *Yiddish*, 23). As Eastern European Jews fled from persecution or emigrated from Europe, other regions of the world became rich centers of Yiddish culture. Many major works considered to be part of the Yiddish artistic cannon were written, sung, and performed in cities such as New York, Montreal, Buenos Aires, London (England), and Melbourne. As I will outline in Chapter Four, the first conceptualizations of a Yiddishland emerged at this time as an international community of Yiddish letters. The language also became increasingly affiliated with political movements, variously as a language with which to reach a

⁴ Many scholars have attempted to trace and historicize the Yiddish language, arriving at varying theories of emergence. Max Weinreich’s *History of the Yiddish Language* is generally accepted as a go-to reference on this topic. Jeffrey Shandler’s more recent *Yiddish: Biography of a Language* provides an excellent summary of the life of the Yiddish language, and includes discussion of other theories.

wide population of Jewish workers, a language of solidarity, and a language of secular and cultural Jewishness. Between 1939 and 1945, half of all Yiddish speakers in the world were killed in the systemic murder of the Jewish people by the German Nazi Party, a genocide known in Yiddish as the *khurbn* (destruction), in Hebrew as the *Shoah* (catastrophe), and in English as the Holocaust (Shandler, *Yiddish* 177).⁵ This added a new level of significance to post-war Yiddish language and culture, transforming it into a reminder of what had been so violently wiped out in the Holocaust. Many refugees and emigrants, fleeing persecution in Europe in the late nineteenth century and first half of the twentieth century, chose to leave their language and customs behind, assimilating more fully into their new countries. It should be noted that, according to Jeffrey Shandler, the “trope of Yiddish as dying predates the Holocaust by decades” (*Yiddish* 79). Even before the Holocaust, some advocates of the *haskole* (Jewish Enlightenment movement) repudiated Yiddish as a barrier to intellectualism and full assimilation in modern society. Post-war, in the nascent State of Israel, Hebrew was made the national language and Yiddish was actively and sometimes violently discouraged (see Rojanski). The cloud of meta-meaning around the language and culture became a dominant signifier and a tension was born between seeing the culture as “not modern enough” and resisting change because of nostalgia and memorialization.

⁵ It is important to state that other groups were also persecuted, imprisoned, or systematically murdered during this time, including Roma and Sinti people, people with disabilities, homosexuals, political prisoners, as well as other groups believed by the Nazis to be an ideological threat, biologically impure, or racially inferior.

This roughly sketched scene sets the stage for a Yiddish cultural renaissance. I want to highlight, however, that this scene is not black and white and that there was never a complete cessation of Yiddish cultural development. To present post-war Yiddish culture as a binary of living and dying is to erase, for example, the Jewish writers who were creating new works in Yiddish and the Jewish musicians still playing *klezmer* (Eastern European Jewish dance music) at weddings even as attitudes towards Yiddish language and culture shifted.

In the following chapters I refer frequently to the “Yiddish cultural scene.” Sometimes called “Yiddishland,” a term with which I will engage more closely in Chapter Four, the Yiddish cultural scene is loosely made up of performers, teachers, scholars, activists, cultural workers, and audiences who participate in Yiddish cultural activities, whether socially, professionally, or as students. Such activities might include festivals, concerts, language classes, workshops, artistic and scholarly research, and beyond. In his research on cultural scenes, Will Straw suggests that the word scene “designates particular clusters of social and cultural activity without specifying the nature of the boundaries which circumscribe them” (412). I appreciate the intentionally indistinct edges of the term as my experience of cultural communities is that they elude definition. This is certainly true of the Yiddish cultural scene; as you examine it, it reveals itself as a cluster of scenes with fluid boundaries. Indeed, a central emergent theme of this research is the heterophonic quality of the scene, with many voices (sometimes discordant) coming together. The scene is also international, although some of the clusters are geographically specific to

varying degrees. The international nature of the scene reflects those who move between geographical locales: touring artists, participants traveling to take part in workshops or events, and participants in online events. The Yiddish cultural scene is sometimes described as secular to differentiate it from Yiddish-speaking *Haredi* (strictly orthodox) communities, which tend to be relatively insular and have their own activities. In Haredi communities, “Yiddish serves to maintain boundaries from the outside, secular world” (Margolis, “Culture in Motion” 7). I use instead the qualified-but-still-imperfect term “secular-leaning” to describe the way the Yiddish cultural scene as a whole leans to the secular in its activities but encompasses a wide range of religious observance among those who participate. While there is certainly interaction and crossover between the secular-leaning and Haredi Yiddish communities, the communities are different enough that they are usually discussed separately.⁶

These chapters take up the position that postvernacularity is central to understanding and creation in contemporary Yiddish culture. I contend that the postvernacular is, in fact, the vernacular of the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene, creating the space for a subjective, relative, and contingent relationship with Yiddish cultural practices. Jeffrey Shandler coined the term “postvernacular” to describe a shift in Yiddish language use and meaning, highlighting the increasing use of Yiddish in contexts where Yiddish is no longer the language of everyday life.

⁶ Naomi Seidman’s 2023 podcast “Heretic in the House” provides a good introduction and conversation about the relationship between Haredi and non-Haredi communities.

Referring to an expansion in the meta-level of the language, Shandler emphasizes that the postvernacular heralds a “privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish” (*Yiddishland* 4). The use of Yiddish in such a context is always a choice. This means that the fact that something is said in Yiddish is often as, or even more, important as what is said; the action and the context for the action is as significant as the content.

In suggesting the postvernacular as a lens, Shandler resists the binary of whether Yiddish is dead or alive by changing the question and asking, instead, how our relationship to Yiddish has changed. Despite important work on the changing nature of Yiddish usage and transmission (see Margolis, Shandler, among others), the dead/alive binary is exhaustively perpetuated by popular media whose reference to the trope is not limited to the Yiddish language. Reporting on this repetitive framing, writer and linguist Michael Erard asks how the media conversation around these languages might be reframed. Instead of falling back on the tropes of “the threatened way of life, the pragmatic native speaker, . . . the languages as precious treasures,” what if we shifted the conversation to the fluidity and resilience of language, as well as towards the ways in which language and language revitalization bring people together (Erard)? Although he does not name it as postvernacularity, Erard is suggesting that journalism should focus on the ways that languages are being used in culture-making, a shift away from the living/dying binary and towards postvernacular understanding. Shandler argues that the idea of Yiddish as dying actually expresses “the sense of a breach in Jewish cultural or social continuity at its most elemental level”

(*Yiddishland* 183). While this feeling of breach, to which I will return shortly, is embedded in contemporary Yiddish culture, the conviction that Yiddish is dying ignores emergent cultural practices. The circular argument over whether Yiddish is dead or alive fails to acknowledge contemporary experiences of Yiddish – which can look very different from pre-war Yiddish culture – as a form of continuity. Looking at Yiddish through the lens of the postvernacular challenges the “simplistic notion of continuity as sameness,” both linguistically and culturally (Shandler, *Yiddishland* 185).

When I teach about the postvernacular, I encounter resistance to the concept that seems to stem from a misunderstanding of the term and is mostly dispelled through discussion. It is commonly misunderstood as being anti-vernacular, permissive of “lazy” engagement with the language (e.g., not bothering to research usage, meaning, or context), not “authentic,” or representing a superficial engagement with Yiddish through the usage of popularized words like *shlep* (carry) whether in speech or on a tote bag. Some hear the concept of postvernacular as reinforcing that Yiddish is dying. In his book *Survivors and Exiles: Yiddish Culture After the Holocaust*, Jan Schwartz laments that “the post-vernacular use of Yiddish, and in some cases promotion of its culture, has resulted in a watered-down, pale version of the original” in the same breath as admitting that “it nevertheless has ensured that the Yiddish cultural heritage continues to be circulated, reviewed, and accessed” (251). For Schwartz, postvernacular Yiddish can only memorialize the vernacular. However, Shandler shows that non-vernacular languages, code-

switching, and translation have always played a vital part in Jewish life (*Yiddishland* 23). Jews in the Pale of Settlement (a geographical area of the Russian Empire in which Jewish residency was permitted), for example, might have spoken Yiddish at home, studied religious texts and prayed in Hebrew and Judeo-Aramaic, and shopped at the market in the local non-Jewish language, whether that was Russian, Polish, Ukrainian, or Lithuanian. Far from being anti-vernacular, postvernacularity always exists in relationship with the vernacular. As Jewish memory scholar Marianne Hirsch says of her term “postmemory,” the “post” can be understood as an addendum. Like a Post-it note, the prefix “adheres to the surface of texts and concepts,” identifying continuity with a shift (*Generation of Postmemory* 5). In addition, a changing relationship to Yiddish language use long predates the Holocaust as Yiddish-speaking Jews moved around the world as refugees and immigrants. Indeed, Shandler notes that the development of Yiddish language pedagogy itself is a response to postvernacularity as Yiddish language education was recognized as important in the face of changing and reduced vernacular usage (*Adventures in Yiddishland* 61).

After my first experience at KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat, for example, I pursued language acquisition. This decision reflected the emphasis placed by postvernacular culture on education. That summer, Adrienne Cooper had advised me that if I wanted to really sing Yiddish songs, I had to learn the language. Extrapolating from this, I came to believe that if I wanted to engage with Yiddish cultural practices – from leading Yiddish dance to organizing Yiddish

festivals – I should have at least some understanding of the language in which these practices are rooted. I participated in the 2006 Steiner Summer Internship Program,⁷ a paid language-focused internship at the Yiddish Book Center, and in 2007, The Uriel Weinreich Program in Yiddish Language, Literature, and Culture at YIVO Institute for Jewish Research. By the end of the YIVO program, I could hold a relatively interesting conversation in Yiddish. At the time of writing, I have not maintained my fluency but I continue to engage with Yiddish language and culture as a producer, dance leader, and academic. Through language study, my understanding of cultural history and context became more detailed and nuanced. At the same time, postvernacularity as a lens felt freeing to me, giving me permission to work with and in Yiddish culture even though I was not pursuing full fluency with the language.

Shandler suggests that “as a response to the demand for a new ordering of language, culture and peoplehood,” postvernacularity opens up a space for reconceptualizing memory in generative ways and observes that it is in performance “that postvernacular Yiddish is manifest most extensively and provocatively” (*Adventures in Yiddishland* 193, 128). His introductory example of this is two academics who meet at a Jewish studies conference, held in English, and greet each other in Yiddish. It was this performance lens that first drew me to the concept of postvernacularity and the question of how I was personally performing my Jewish identity was an

⁷ Now called the Steiner Summer Yiddish Program.

early catalyst for this research. However, my experience has taught me that without an introduction to performance theory, the word performance is often heard outside of academic spaces as false or ostentatious. The use of the word performative in relation to social activism, while useful, has reinforced this. Perhaps Shandler's use of a performance framing here contributes to the misconstruction of postvernacularity as "inauthentic." To help re-ground what performance means in the context of the postvernacular, I want to connect Shandler's argument to anthropologist Laurajane Smith's reconceptualization of heritage as an act, which I will be discussing in more detail later as a methodology for this work. Offering a framework that shifts the way we think about the term, Smith suggests that looking at heritage as something we do reveals motivations and tensions, as "cultural and social meanings and values are identified, reaffirmed, or rejected . . ." in the process ("Doing' of Heritage" 70). Postvernacular Yiddish as a lens insists that we step back and ask questions about what we are doing when we engage with Yiddish language and culture. I want to repurpose two questions asked by performance studies scholar Rebecca Schneider as she troubles the separation of "still" and "live" photography: "Can we think of the still not as an artifact of non-returning time, but as situated in a live moment of its encounter that it, through its articulation as gesture or hail, predicts? And if so, is it not live – taking place in time in the scene of its reception?" (*Performance Remains* 141). Is not Yiddish language and culture live in every moment of encounter?

In my interviews for this study, I have heard that Yiddish, as a language, holds a range of emotions and meanings for my colleagues in the scene. For some, the language itself is the cultural practice. For others, learning some Yiddish enriches their practice. In each interview, however, I heard that they are conscious of the various ways that they learn, access, and use Yiddish. For the most part, the colleagues I interviewed had either studied the language intensively or thought that they should study the language. Those that grew up with more exposure to the language also chose to study it in a more formal way. Language study is seen as an important part of Yiddish cultural creation. Brooklyn-based klezmer musician Michael Winograd remarked in an interview for the Wexler Oral History Project that if the community has a code, you should make an effort to learn that code (2011). As violinist and co-founder of the Klezmatics, Alicia Svigals, recently wrote: “My wish for Queer Yiddishism going forward is that the postvernacular Yiddish at its heart continues to be enriched by substantive study and knowledge of the language, and scholarship about the culture” (“Queer Yiddishkayt?”). As I will illustrate when I define and situate this group in the next section, this cohort of Yiddish cultural workers is fluently postvernacular in their approach to cultural creation, performance, and pedagogy.

Situating the Study: A Yiddish Cultural Festival Cohort

Defining the Cohort

Every year at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat we take a group photograph of the scholarship program recipients and a group photograph of the faculty. I have been in many of these photos over the years, eventually moving from the scholarship group into the faculty group. I return again and again to the scholarship photograph from 2003 (see Image 1.1). In this image, sixty-two people are posed outdoors on a sunny day in front of stepped wooden seating. There is bright green grass in front and darker green shrubs behind. The people are arranged into four rows, with the back two rows standing and the front two rows seated. There is a range of ages, from children to adults, but everyone looks young. Many of them hold instruments, and most of them are smiling. Some are laughing or making faces at the camera, and, at least to my eyes, the smiles and laughter look genuine rather than posed. This photograph is from my first year at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat (I am in the second row from the top, ninth from the left). The experience was profound, both in the moment and for the way that it has changed my life in the years since. There, in that one photograph, are many people who are now colleagues and close friends. As I scan the group in this image, I can identify at least twenty people who have gone on to perform and/or teach at a major Jewish festival. At least eighteen of them have since gone on to teach, as a faculty or fellow, at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat.



Image 1.1. Participants of the KlezKanada Scholarship Program at KlezKanada’s 2003 Summer Retreat. Photo © David Kaufman, 2003.

Because KlezKanada was my entry point into the Yiddish cultural community, my journey through Yiddishland has included watching this group – myself included – grow into leaders, mentors, and organizers in the Yiddish cultural scene. Looking at the 2003 KlezKanada scholarship photograph, I see an image of the cohort around which I focused my research for this project. I use the word “cohort” to mean a group with a shared characteristic. In medical research, a cohort study follows a group with a common characteristic over a long period of time. It is important to me to define the cohort group of this study because, as I will continue to emphasize, the Yiddish cultural scene is made up of many voices and an analysis of the entire scene is too expansive for one study. I wanted to focus on a group that I did not see reflected in other studies: the group of which I understand myself to be a part. In order to understand the

varied relationships to Yiddish culture and identity that I see my friends and colleagues exploring and performing, I needed to understand what our common characteristic is as a group and to have some way of referring to this group once defined. While not every chapter centres the group as a subject, the theory and pedagogy that I propose draws upon my experience, observation, and interviews with this cohort.

Not everyone I interviewed for this project is in the 2003 KlezKanada Scholarship Program photograph. Some arrived in the scene a bit later. Some simply weren't there that year. The cohort in the photo is retroactively formed in my memory – we weren't all friends and colleagues when it was taken. I look at that photograph now and I see our future bodies, an idea that comes from Harvey Young who considers the way that bodies contain the possibility of their future selves and that we read these possibilities in old photographs (see *Embodying Black Experience*). The photograph is representative of a much larger peer group, roughly made up of everyone who has been (or, who might have been) a scholarship recipient at KlezKanada over the past twenty years. This means that the group has fuzzy boundaries: it cannot be defined neatly by age or generation, it is not discipline-specific, it crosses national borders, and, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, it relies to some extent on self-reflexive inclusion. The people I interviewed range across Generation X and Millennial demographic delineations (which are, of course, similarly invented generational groups) and criss-cross geographically specific scenes. They aren't

all klezmer musicians and they aren't the first to embrace postvernacular Yiddishkayt.⁸ What is the best way to define a cohort that is constantly shifting and changing? It feels a bit like looking at a tide pool, where the water seems calm but refreshes each time a wave washes over it. What, then, is the common characteristic of this cohort? The throughline that defines this cohort of Yiddish cultural workers is that they are the first group for which their Yiddish cultural education was significantly defined by their experiences at festival events such as KlezKanada, KlezKamp, Yiddish Summer Weimar, and KlezFest St. Petersburg. For ease of reference, I will refer to this group as the "festival cohort" throughout this study. When citing the work and interviews of individuals in this cohort, I will be using first names.

The cultural workers whom I interview and discuss in this research work with materials that they consider Jewish. I differentiate this from Jewish artists working with any materials, although the two are not always mutually exclusive. This differentiation comes up repeatedly in scholarship about Jewish art. Performance studies scholar and key figure in the Yiddish cultural renaissance Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jewish history scholar Jonathan Karp point to "The Jewish art question" as a "vexing but unavoidable problem of what makes a work of art Jewish" (3). Similarly, Rebecca Rossen differentiates between Jewish dance and dancing Jewish

⁸ *Yiddishkayt* translates literally as "Jewishness." However, today, the word is usually used to refer to the worldviews, traditions, culture, language, and arts associated with the Yiddish language or rooted in Eastern European Jewish culture.

(3). Here, I am interested in the Jewish cultural practices with which the artists engage in their work and pedagogy. In their book *New Jews*, David Shneer and Caryn Aviv describe themselves as “professional Jews” who are concerned with Jewishness in their professional lives as scholars, studying Jewish history and sociology (xiii). My interviews are all with artists who might also be called “professional Jews,” although some of them might not describe themselves as such, and some of them are not Jewish at all. However, they all teach, study, or make work with cultural practices that they understand to be Jewish, becoming the professionals to whom people bring their questions about Jewish culture and identity.⁹

Cultural Context: The Klezmer Revival

This festival cohort must be situated within the larger context of what is commonly called the “klezmer revival.”¹⁰ The klezmer revival was a resurgence of interest and research in klezmer

⁹ My interviews with the festival cohort defined the shape of this study. I originally proposed including a chapter on policy, including looking at the economics and politics of funding for events in the Yiddish cultural scene. However, the emphasis that emerged from the interviews with the festival cohort was on identity formation, approaches to Yiddish art making, and community building through Yiddish cultural practice. My hope is that future iterations of this research will expand to include a material analysis of the infrastructure of the scene, including interviews with funders and fundraisers. Such an analysis should examine, among other aspects, where motivations for funding and contemporary cultural practice align and where they are in tension.

¹⁰ The term “klezmer revival” is, in itself, worthy of discussion. According to Dr. Walter Zev Feldman, the use of the word “klezmer” to describe the music genre emerged in the 1970s as the result of the musicians and researchers of the form needing a name to define the music they were learning and playing (*Klezmer* xiv). The word “revival” is contested, as some feel as though it falsely positions the music and culture as previously dead. While I lean towards agreeing that “renaissance” (or another word) might be a better descriptor, I have used the term “klezmer revival” here because it is the more recognized term and is used by the individuals I interviewed and most of the scholars referenced.

music and Yiddish song starting in the 1970s.¹¹ Much has been written about this period within the Yiddish cultural scene that places it within the context of Yiddish culture in the twentieth century, mostly from an ethnomusicological perspective (see Feldman, Slobin, Netsky). Mark Slobin's edited volume *American Klezmer* provides an excellent summary and analysis of the experience from the perspective of American musicians and scholars who were central to the movement. Magdalena Waligorska's ethnographic study *Klezmer's Afterlife* adds an important European perspective of the musical revival, complementing a story that is often American-centric in its telling. These two texts help to bring the experience of the practitioners to the forefront of the conversation. These practitioners created a significant body of scholarship including books of klezmer music and Yiddish song and new recordings of living masters of the klezmer tradition as well as new bands, new ethnographic collections, personal re/collections, academic and ethnomusicological studies, and new catalogues of previously hard-to-access archives. For example, from the early 1970s, Yosl and Chana Mlotek published a column of Yiddish songs that, after eventually being collected into a series of volumes published by The Workers Circle, became the most commonly available resource for learning and teaching Yiddish

¹¹ The klezmer revival can also be situated in relation to other folk "revivals" of the 20th Century, such as the American, Irish, and British folk revivals. In the past thirty years, these various movements have been well-documented in both academic and non-academic literature. For an initial introduction to the framing of "folk music," see Mark Slobin's *Folk Music: A Very Short Introduction*. For a diverse set of readings on folk movements, see *City Folk*, by Daniel Walkowitz, *Balkan Fascination* by Mirjana Lausevic, and *Time Out of Time: Essays on the Festival*, by Alessandro Falassi.

song. In the same period the YIVO Folksong Project led by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett collected thousands of Yiddish songs. Musicians circulated the old recordings they found and artists of all disciplines sought to learn from living bearers of the tradition. On their recordings, newly-formed bands, including the Klezmer Conservatory Band, Kapelye, Budowitz, Adrienne Cooper and Zalmen Mlotek, The Klezmatiks, and Brave Old World (to name only a few), variously strove to recapture old sounds, reinterpret repertoire, and create new Yiddish music – often all within the same album. This period of renewed interest in klezmer and Yiddish culture also led to a body of foundational scholarship, much of it ethnomusicological, including texts from Mark Slobin, Walter Zev Feldman, Lee Ellen Friedland, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Joel Rubin, Hankus Netsky, and Henry Sapoznik.

While called the “klezmer revival,” the movement intersected with and added momentum to a resurgence of interest in other disciplines such as Yiddish literature, language pedagogy, visual arts, and theatre. In addition, the movement was tied to multiple impulses from the beginning. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett situates the klezmer revival as the result of the traumatic rupture caused by the Holocaust and uses an argument of changing sensibilities vis-a-vis Jewish culture to frame the resurgence of interest in klezmer music (“Sounds of Sensibility” 129–164). Mark Slobin refers to these movements of Jews in search of sense of Jewish identity as an “identity cavalcade” in which “klezmer became a marching band for the secular wing of the movement of celebratory reaffiliation” (“Introduction” 5). Placing the klezmer revival within the

context of “the ethnic-identity or ‘roots’ movements of the 1960s and 1970s,” Alicia Svigals suggests that:

Three movements in particular have emerged that address the needs of Jews who reject the assimilationist model of the previous generation, but who haven’t felt an affinity for, or haven’t felt satisfied by, the Israel-centered alternative, and who want to create a new, strong sense of Jewish identity and community. (“Why We Do This Anyway” 211–212)

Svigals identifies these three movements as “the one that discards the culture and keeps the religion, the one that discards the religion and keeps the culture, and the one that uncritically embraces both” and places the klezmer revival within the second, the secular Yiddishist movement. Svigals goes on to describe the revival as a “true descendent” of the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in the way that it approached musical sources as cultural artifacts (215).

Brooklyn-based singer and poet Sarah Gordon remembers spending time at YIVO when she was growing up, because her mother, singer and activist Adrienne Cooper, worked there. Many artists worked in the archives, on research or projects, or in administrative roles, making YIVO a key hub of activity for the klezmer revival.¹² “Many of these people who are incredibly involved in the Yiddish music and cultural scenes today and are now seen as the people who really started the revival were there hanging around,” remembers Sarah, “It was part academic

¹² See Cecile Kuznits for a comprehensive history of YIVO.

warehouse, part amazing cultural institution, and also this great community clubhouse as well” (2019, 2011). New York theatre artist Jenny Romaine describes working at YIVO at that time as a space of solidarity and diversity. Jenny told me that the environment was very diverse, because the collections were in so many languages and dealt with such a wide mix of subjects: “There was this thing about having survived the war – it was the model of the big tent, of Yiddishland. Why someone who is a total *frumy*¹³ can hang out with a queer avant-garde theatre artist and be ‘in the pocket.’ We agree to disagree, we’re not the same. But we have this shared body of material that we want to interpret” (2007). Working at the archive, Jenny went on, felt like an invitation to make things and that making was part of the ongoing process of understanding the collections in the archive. “I was doing all my other theatre work on the side,” Jenny remembered. “I would go to work [at YIVO] for six hours a day and then go to my other job. But when you spend six hours a day for x years working on collections, it changes you” (2007). The Yiddish Folk Arts Program, usually called KlezKamp, was born out of this mixture. It was an immersive program of Yiddish culture that ran for thirty years and was the inspiration and model for many other Yiddish cultural events. Co-founder of KlezKamp, Henry Sapoznik, writes that the camp was about transforming what they were learning at YIVO into action: “Instead of waiting for people to

¹³ The Yiddish word *frum* means religious.

discover and institute and utilize its vast resources, KlezKamp would go out and find them, creating an easily accessible dynamic bridge to the institute” (“KlezKamp” 178).

KlezKamp, itself inspired by other folk arts camps, inspired and served as a model for other intensive Yiddish cultural events. While there is now a rich ecosystem of festivals, language programs, and other educational and celebratory spaces, the people I interviewed refer most often to KlezKamp, KlezKanada, Yiddish Summer Weimar, and Yiddish New York, which I will introduce briefly here. My experiences at these events also informs my study.¹⁴ KlezKanada, which I will introduce in much more depth in Chapter Three, was founded in 1996 by a group of Montreal Yiddishists. Inspired in part by what they had heard about KlezKamp, they created a summer event in the Laurentian Mountains which has grown in size, scope, and reputation and continues to this day. Yiddish Summer Weimar (YSW), founded in 2000 by American musician Alan Bern, is a multi-week program of workshops and concerts in Weimar, Germany (“About YSW”). YSW is structured around short intensive workshops: “a deep dive for a week into song, a deep dive into instrumental, a deep dive into dance” (Lurje 2020). Participants can attend for one workshop or several.¹⁵ Yiddish New York (YNY) was first held in 2015, growing out of the question asked by many long-time KlezKamp faculty when the event ended its thirty-year run the

¹⁴ I had originally planned for Yiddish Summer Weimar and another German event, Shtetl Berlin, to be central to my fieldwork. A number of factors, but mostly the sudden and all-consuming arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, necessitated a change of plans.

¹⁵ For example, I spent five weeks at Yiddish Summer Weimar in 2009, writing the bulk of my Master’s thesis from a hostel room.

previous year: what are we going to do in December? Or, in the words of Michael Winograd: “What the hell are we going to do over Christmas?” (Winograd).¹⁶ Although it claimed the same week of the year and drew many KlezKamp faculty and participants, YNY was immediately different in that it attempted to implement the KlezKamp workshop model within the context of an urban festival rather than a retreat. Being located in New York also provides YNY with the potential for a rich network of local partnerships and collaborations. I can think of no other city that comes close in terms of the production of contemporary Yiddish culture in terms of number of artistic and social events and educational and research opportunities. Arguing that New York is a “centre of the Jewish Universe,” Caryn Aviv and David Shneer suggest that New York “is where Jewish identity and memory are manufactured, performed, reinvented, contested, and then circulated through the world” (138). They cite Jeffrey Shandler, who considers how both Jewish presence and Jewish absence make New York part of the history of Jewish ‘home’ (141). Yiddish New York sits firmly in this space of absence and presence, of celebration and re-animation.

When considering the Yiddish cultural scene, these festivals of Yiddish music, arts, and culture emerge as primary spaces in which Yiddish cultural practices and memory are transmitted. Abigail Wood, writing about cultural transmission through Yiddish song, notes that

¹⁶ I spoke to one Yiddish New York staff member who told me that they had little to no experience of Christmas because every year since a very young age, they had spent that week of December at KlezKamp. Ironically, one of the best Christmas parties I ever attended was during the one year that I participated in KlezKamp. Someone found an artificial Christmas tree, already decorated, in a closet of the hotel and smuggled it up to their hotel room where carols were then sung late into the night.

these immersive spaces foster “a community with a shared base of Yiddish cultural literacy” that has tangible effects beyond the specific event itself (Wood 8, 41).¹⁷ While KlezKanada, Yiddish Summer Weimar, and Yiddish New York are currently three of the largest and longest-running Yiddish cultural events, they are part of a larger ecosystem of Yiddish cultural and educational programs. These range in size and mission, from weekend retreats that focus on workshops to large urban performance-oriented festivals to multi-week Yiddish language programs. Some are focused specifically on Yiddish cultural expression; others celebrate Yiddish culture as well as different forms of Jewish cultural expression found around the world. The transnational landscape of events grows each year, with programs on almost every continent although with greater density in North America and Europe.¹⁸

¹⁷ The links between the retreat or “camp” experiences of the klezmer revival and two other types of North American summer camp experiences remains an under-researched area of the klezmer revival. First, there is the Jewish summer camp experience, in particular Yiddishist, socialist, and communist camps such as Camp Kinder Velt, Camp Naivelt, Camp Boiberik, Camp Kinderland, and Camp Kinder Ring. Not only do descriptions of these camp experiences sound similar to descriptions of the immersive cultural retreats of the klezmer revival, but many participants of the klezmer revival (both faculty and students) attended these summer camps. While these lines of connection deserve more research, there is a strong body of research on the role of Jewish summer camps in shaping American Jewish culture, including Sandra Fox’s book *The Jews of Summer: Summer Camp and Jewish Culture in Postwar America*, Ester Reiter’s book *A Future Without Hate or Need* (which includes a chapter on how summer camps helped to shape Jewish leftist politics in Canada), and David Koffman’s article “Playing Indian at Jewish Summer Camp: Lessons on Tribalism, Assimilation, and Spirituality.” Second, and perhaps even more directly analogous, the immersive spaces of the klezmer revival exist within a landscape of other family, intergenerational, and adult folk camps including the East and West Coast Balkan Music and Dance Workshops (generally called Balkan Camp), and music and dance camps run by the Country Dance and Song Society, Ashokan, and other organizations. In particular, Balkan Camp has been cited as an inspiration and model for the creation of KlezKamp. A comparative study of these folk camps and their role in the various American folk revival movements has yet to be undertaken.

¹⁸ There is currently no comprehensive and up-to-date list of these events.

Also central to the emerging revival was an emerging body of work and community around what would come to be called “queer *Yiddishkayt*.” In her 1998 article entitled “Why We Do This Anyway,” Alicia Svigals points to a “growing ‘Queer Yiddishist’ movement . . . who bring a queer radical sensibility to Yiddishism” (216). She goes on to explain: “In fact, among progressives of all stripes, gays in particular have found a home in the new secular Yiddishist environment from the start, surprising each other and everyone else with our unexpectedly large numbers at KlezKamp and the YIVO summer program, and on the staffs of YIVO and the National Yiddish Book Center” (216). There is no doubt that queer Yiddishkayt has shaped the contemporary Yiddish scene. Sarah Gordon describes the queer Yiddish culture at YIVO when she was growing up and explicitly credits the vibrancy of today’s Yiddish scene to queer artists:

The fact that we have a thriving Yiddish scene is thanks to generations of queer Yiddish artists and academics who created (and create) spaces and space for Yiddish to grow and thrive. The Klezmatics are synonymous with queer Yiddishkeit [sic], from gay verses of Ale Brider, to their album *Shvaygn=Toyt* [Silence Equals Death], they have acted as a model of what it is to take traditional material and proudly proclaim its queerness. (Qtd in Kafrissen, “The Queer Yiddish Musical Canon”)

In a follow-up article in 2021, Svigals notes with delight that “Queer Yiddishists have been fruitful and multiplied.” Looking back on her own involvement with the Yiddish cultural scene and on the “explosion of queer Yiddishist cultural production,” Svigals reflects that the queering of

Jewish culture is, in part, a tactic of writing queer Jews back into a culture that has often excluded them: “Queer yiddishkayt aims to radically re-include us” (“Whither Queer Yiddishkayt?”).¹⁹

In literature about the klezmer revival, some scholars describe the waves of the revival in terms of generations.²⁰ I have increasingly found generational delineations to be insufficient, as they miss cultural complexities. The generations of the klezmer revival don’t necessarily line up with age brackets, and generational lines are further muddled by the fact that intergenerationality is highly valued in the scene and mentor/mentee relationships blur as artists collaborate on projects. I want to set aside the term “generation” in favour of “genealogies” or “lineages.” I find it useful to look at waves of participation that are connected intergenerationally. These lineages, often marked by student-teacher relationships and centres of learning (for example KlezKanada, KlezKamp, or Yiddish Summer Weimar), are important to understanding the transmission and performance of cultural practices. Mentorship plays a vital role in the Yiddish cultural community and mentorship lineages can often be felt, seen, and heard in an artist’s work. Michael Winograd told me that, listening back to his own music, he can hear the phases he went through. We discussed how the growth process of making the music your own usually includes being “aesthetically derivative” (2019). I experience lineage in an embodied way. When I lead a

¹⁹ See also Richard, Shandler, Shneer, Wood, among others, for more discussion of the role of queer Yiddishkayt in contemporary Yiddish culture. In Chapter Four, I will return to queer Yiddishkayt in relationship to world-building strategies.

²⁰ See, for example, Strom 191-93.

bulgar, one of the most common Yiddish dance styles, I feel as though I am channeling my mentor Michael Alpert through the movement of my leading arm. When I dance the *zhok*, another dance in the core repertoire of Yiddish dance, I can hear my mentor Walter Zev Feldman reminding me of the way the heartbeat rhythm should express itself through my upper body not just through the footwork.

An essential ingredient of the klezmer revival was the set of intergenerational relationships formed between artists, scholars, and culture bearers who, whether born in pre-war Europe or in an immigrant community, had learned their craft at a time when Yiddish culture was still one of their vernacular languages. Some of these relationships were familial, as revivalists worked closely with family members to document their experience and knowledge. Other relationships began as part of ethnographic research, as researchers sought out living “exponents of the tradition in various stages of its contemporary development” (Alpert, “All My Life” 73). In many instances, however, an ethnographic connection quickly transformed into an ongoing mentorship and beyond. As Michael Alpert wrote of Ben Bazylers z”l: “Our relationship was not limited to that of informant /researcher but was also performer/performer, senior/junior, immigrant /native, “uncle/nephew,” and more” (“All My Life” 75). Dave Tarras z”l, Bronya Sakina z”l, German Goldenshteyn z”l, Arkady Gendler z”l, and so many others, became mentors, friends, and chosen family to the artists and ethnographers who met them.

Depending on when they became involved in the Yiddish cultural scene, the festival cohort may not have had the opportunity to meet or work with these pre-revival culture bearers. The leading figures of the klezmer revival have in turn become mentors to this cohort. Adrienne Cooper was a mentor, advisor, and champion of many of the colleagues I interviewed. Her ethos of committed research, new creation, social and political course-charting, and institutional world-building is strong in the festival cohort who had the privilege to know her, study with her, and work with her before she passed away in 2011. Jenny Romaine's name also comes up over and over when people tell me how they became part of the Yiddish cultural community. "Jenny became my Yiddish cultural mentor," Brooklyn-based musician Ira Temple told me, "I remember understanding Jenny's role within the scene and understanding why I had been drawn into the scene through Jenny. Jenny is the person who comes [to KlezKamp, KlezKanada, or Yiddish New York] every year and does something totally wildly imaginative that nobody here has ever thought of before . . . and just kind of shifts the perspective" (2019). Though much of the mentorship happening within the community is informal, some organizations have set up more formal systems as well. KlezKanada's scholarship program is, in part, designed to bring students who might not normally have access to mentorship into contact with mentors. The Center for Traditional Music and Dance (CTMD) in New York City facilitates mentorships through the Mentoring and Professional Development Program, a grant partnership program offered by the Folk Arts Program of the New York State Council on the Arts and New York Folklore.

It is also clear, however, that the transmission of cultural practice within the Yiddish community has become increasingly horizontal. Rebecca Margolis points to “horizontal succession” as a way of understanding Yiddish linguistic culture in “post-Holocaust era” Canada (“Culture in Motion” 58). Margolis refers to Jeffrey Shandler’s argument that Yiddish culture now proceeds through “cohort generations” (*Yiddishland* 190). It is now more often a peer-to-peer transmission, rather than a vertical grandparent-to-parent-to-child relationship (or, as Shandler puts it, “an unbroken succession of biological generations”) (190). Elsewhere, Margolis writes that “concepts of expertise have shifted significantly over the last three decades from native-born speakers to teachers, researchers, musicians, and others who have deliberately sought out ways to acquire fluency” (*Yiddish Lives On* 191). Age as a marker of knowledge and expertise has decreased in importance as the generations of artists who were born into and raised in a Yiddish vernacular environment have died. When I teach Yiddish dance, it is not uncommon for me to be one of the younger people in the room (even after fifteen years of teaching), an experience shared by my peer group as we “graduated” into teaching positions. A “queer model for cultural continuity,” Margolis notes, “. . . suggests alternative genealogies for transmission: among cohorts with shared interests, teacher to learner, singer to student, or among peers” (*Yiddish Lives On* 190). In an illustration of horizontal transmission, Ilya Shneyveys commented that one of the ways he learned to teach klezmer was through teaching the musicians that he wanted to play with (Shneyveys 2019). The increasing prevalence of horizontal transmission and intergenerational

collaboration makes the concept of lineage particularly useful when studying participation and development.

The klezmer revival is a backdrop to the work I discuss in the following chapters. Are we still in the era of the klezmer revival? In a conversation with Michael Alpert, he expressed that he feels we are still “reviving” (2023). Conversely, Yiddishist writer Rokhl Kafrissen challenges the ongoing characterization of “revival,” arguing that

[the] word “revival” does little to help us understand today’s innovative, challenging and, yes, authentic creativity based in and inspired by Yiddish culture. . . . When does a revival become something else? After 25 years? 35? How many centers, institutes and festivals does it take to transform a revival into something permanent? When will we finally start using the word “continuity” to describe the now decades-long ferment of Yiddish culture?

(“Revival”)

In promotional footage captured at KlezKanada’s 2022 Summer Retreat, scholar and artist Ozzy Irving Gold-Shapiro expresses the feeling that we are now in a post-revival era:

I really think we’re past the revival and we are just being enculturated into the Yiddish world right now and anything we make is of and from and by this world by being in it.

And gathering [at the KlezKanada Summer Retreat] is really the moment when we can actually live in the culture and what we make here comes from the culture. . . . (Gold-

Shapiro)

When I began this research, I expected to find a significant shift in the way that Yiddish culture is transmitted and performed, and with that shift, a resulting change in the traditions themselves. I asked, “how is my cohort of Yiddish cultural workers doing things differently from our mentors?”

What I have found is that the shifts are not so much defined by generation or cohort but by shifts in the broader landscape. For example, information is vastly more accessible. Political boundaries have shifted, with many barriers to research in Eastern Europe falling away or at least easing, making it possible to engage with archival resources that were previously difficult to access. We no longer have to lug around reel-to-reel recorders when we travel to interviews (simply pulling our phones out of our pockets and hitting record leaves us with more-than-decent audio quality).

Further, the Internet has become a vast source of information (and misinformation), a site on which to find archival resources and also community. But, in part due to the intergenerational makeup of the cultural scene, a quality that is valued and pursued with intention, these shifts in the landscape affect the greater community rather than one cohort and I perceive an effort to bring everyone along. While the question about whether the Yiddish cultural scene is still “reviving” or is “post-revival” has no definitive answer, the act of asking the question opens opportunities for intergenerational community dialogue about continuity and transformation.

Changing Points of Reference

The klezmer revival and wider Yiddish cultural renaissance has produced an impressive amount of serious new scholarship on the history of Yiddish language, literature, theatre, music, and beyond.²¹ While there has been significant scholarship on the klezmer revival itself (see Slobin, Feldman, Netsky, Rubin, Waligorska, and others), it has been overwhelmingly focused on the music. Until relatively recently, little in-depth analysis had been published on the spaces and practices of the contemporary Yiddish cultural community. Scholarship on contemporary Yiddish cultural practices included discussion of festival environments, such as KlezKamp, KlezKanada, and Yiddish Summer Weimar, but usually within the context of a specific practice (music, song, language, etc.) rather than analyzing the events and communities themselves. Since I first began to write about the scene as an undergraduate, this has begun to change, with research that reflects the multi-faceted nature of transmission and community in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene. Rebecca Margolis addresses the klezmer revival and growth of the Yiddish cultural scene in her work on Yiddish language transmission in Canada (*Yiddish Lives On*). Abigail Wood illustrates that Yiddish song has become a primary vehicle for cultural

²¹ These works are too numerous to list, however, in connection to the field of performance studies, it is worth mentioning several important contributions. The scholarship of Jeffrey Shandler and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, referenced throughout this dissertation, has provided a backbone to my own research. The work of Nahma Sandrow, especially *Vagabond Stars: A World History of Yiddish Theater* published in 1996, set the stage for new scholarship on the history and literature of the Yiddish theatre, including the contributions of Joel Berkowitz, Barbara Henry, and Debra Caplan. The work of Sonia Gollance, referenced in Chapter Five, draws upon literary sources to better understand the histories of embodied Jewish dance and theatre.

literacy and highlights the role of the festival environment in this process. Through her blog and regular columns in Jewish media, New York-based writer Rokhl Kafrissen has become known for her commentary on the Yiddish cultural scene and its relationship to mainstream North American Jewish institutions. Since 2015, the online Yiddish studies journal *In geveb*, with its collection of peer-reviewed scholarship, interviews, blog entries, new translations, satirical articles, and more, paints a much fuller image of the Yiddish cultural landscape than previously available from a single source. Scholarship written in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as Rebecca Margolis's article "Forays into Digital Yiddishland," provides new insights into community values through an analysis of online Yiddish language spaces. Though mostly unpublished, there is a growing body of student research on the Yiddish cultural scene in the form of undergraduate, masters, and doctoral research, particularly on topics pertaining to music, literature, and/or queer Yiddishkayt. That said, much of this research remains discipline-specific rather than examining the broader theoretical approaches to pedagogy, curation, and artistic practice at play in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene. In addition, as far as I'm aware, there is no scholarship that specifically draws upon the experience of the festival cohort.

As introduced above, a defining feature of the festival cohort is that our growing up in relation to Yiddish culture was rooted in the immersive festival environments that were created as part of the klezmer revival. While some of us grew up in Yiddish-speaking or Yiddish-oriented households, for others cultural learning and transmission occurred within a festival setting.

Closely related to this positionality, several people that I interviewed pointed out that our cohort has different reference points than the klezmer revivalists. Sarah Gordon highlighted this when she brought up our relationship to source documents: “[For us] there isn’t this thing of discovery” (2019). We are a step removed from mentors who grew up embedded in the culture we study. “We do not have as much access to ‘true native speakers,’” noted Sarah, which means that “our primary sources tend to be one down” (2019). What Sarah means by “one down” is that many of our primary mentors were able to interview and study with – and often to form deep friendships with – Yiddish speakers, musicians, dancers, etc. who were born pre-war and who were embedded in vernacular Jewish life. As this pre-war generation dies, our reference points shift. As cited previously, the cultural workers who were part of the klezmer revival did a tremendous amount of footwork starting in the 1970s. Sarah added:

I feel like people were trying to figure out and categorize and codify what they were seeing and we are functioning off of [that work]. There were a lot more books published when we were doing this. The Mlotek books are all out there, *The Essential Klezmer*, *The Compleat* [sic] *Klezmer*. You know, all of these books are there – whether or not you want to critique them or not, they were there for us. So, I think that there’s a very different relationship to source documents. The ease of information-finding is kind of amazing for us, with the internet. (2019)

Close listening to recordings has been a key aspect of the klezmer revival from the start, but it has never been so easy to gain access to the recordings themselves. Archival collections are becoming more accessible every day as they are digitized and made publicly available online (see YIVO). We also have access to a circuit of festivals and workshops, many of them founded and taught by artists of the klezmer revival. “There’s pros and cons to not having been revivalists,” Michael Winograd mused, “there was such a spark that they had when they did that kind of stuff that we didn’t have” (2019). Because of the depth of the cultural gap at the time of the klezmer revival, there was a sense of discovery that was seemingly endless – and there were few interpretive guides to help them figure out what they were finding. Michael wondered if the increasing accessibility was a double-edged sword: if everything were online, he suggested, “You would deny people – young people, old people, anyone who gets into it – the experience of tripping on something and saying ‘holy shit’” (2019).

I want to pause and think through this experience of “discovery,” a word used by myself and by many of the colleagues that I interviewed. When I was in the Steiner Summer Yiddish Program at the Yiddish Book Center in 2006, we unpacked and sorted hundreds of boxes of Yiddish books shipped from Mexico and Argentina. Sometimes we would come across traces of the lives of those who had owned these books – a leaf pressed inside a novel, a postcard left as a bookmark, a *talis* (prayer shawl) bag, a set of *tfiln* (phylacteries). In an interview I gave for the Wexler Oral History Project, I described the experience of unpacking boxes in the warehouse as

the most effective part of the program for me, referring to a sense of discovery and inspiration as we sifted through the contents: “Ever since, I’ve wanted to create a piece of theatre based on one of the boxes of papers” (2011). I was drawn in by these objects and their untold stories. The warehouse was bursting with theatre simply waiting to be imagined into being. Those boxes felt like a warehouse of metaphors for what I was experiencing with Yiddish culture. Coming to the scene with little context, everything I came across was new to me and opened upon a possible story.

Yiddish song writer and translator Daniel Kahn told me: “I was into political folk songs and . . . the darker side of modern poetry and songwriting balladry . . . in English. And so, when I discovered this whole beautiful world of it in Yiddish, it was like this unseen world. It was like discovering a secret attic of all of this stuff” (2009). Michael Winograd remembers listening to old recordings for the first time and feeling as though he was the only one who had heard and learned those tunes: “To me it was my discovery. And that’s what got me excited” (2019). The feeling of “discovery” that is described here seems to capture an important moment of creative energy that is bound up with finding out about something previously unknown. While almost everyone relayed a story of discovery, they also pointed to the ways in which, as discussed above, the festival cohort has a different relationship to source documents from that of the previous generation. By the time that I was an intern at the Yiddish Book Center in 2006, the Center was already declaring its mission of rescuing Yiddish books a success. While books were still arriving,

a new state-of-the-art facility was planned to hold the already-sorted books and the focus of the Steiner Summer Yiddish Program was shifting away from a work-oriented program that processed incoming books, and towards an educational program. Just a few years later, ten thousand books were made available for free online.

The word “discovery” carries problematic overtones. Within the context of ethnographic research, “discovery” carries a history of colonial hubris, deeply implicated in violent resource extraction and appropriation. The word can also obscure ongoing presence and labour. Without due diligence, “discovery” can evolve into an under-researched or appropriative approach to cultural engagement or production. However, as I interpreted it in the interviews I conducted, the word reveals a disconnect with Yiddish culture in the world around us. In this context, it represents the finding of something – a cultural practice, an object, a lyric, a cadence, a story – previously unknown to us personally. Perhaps we should be using the word *oysgefinen* (to find out) instead, one of the words for “discovery” in Yiddish. Because of the double rupture of the Holocaust and assimilation, many of us are growing up outside of a Yiddish context and so learn about these materials from a positionality that is outside rather than inside the practice. After one of my Yiddish dance workshops, a Jewish participant of Ashkenazi background came up to me and said excitedly, “I didn’t know we had our own dances!” Having grown up with Israeli folk

dances as the de facto Jewish dance form, this individual was experiencing Ashkenazi movement practices for the first time.²²

How might we better describe this moment? What is it that is happening that prompts us to use the word discovery? To pull from the stories above, the words “inspired,” “resonant,” “unseen world,” “secret attic,” and “excited” stand out to me. I hear a description of an embodied experience of connection. There is a moment of connection, a spark of recognition, that we experience as “discovery” because we are removed from the context. Ideas roll back and forth between the object (whether material or immaterial) and myself, building to the impulse to learn more and to create. As that energy builds, my whole body buzzes with the creative potential of the connection. Philosopher Jean Baudrillard might describe this experience as the “kinetic energy” of the fragment, an energy which propels ideas along their own trajectory (“Pataphysics” 2). Philosopher Walter Benjamin might describe the energy as the spark that occurs when a fragment of history comes into contact with the present moment. I want to pin this idea of a spark and return to it later, as Benjamin’s conceptualization of the “dialectical image” offers a model for understanding both this spark of energy and a method of working with fragments.

It is pedagogically important to create space for people to experience something for the first time. What my colleagues and I are describing as “discovery” is a key part of a learning

²² See Aviv and Shneer for a summary of the rise of Israeli culture within mainstream North American institutions.

process, an excitement that impels one forward. I connect this expression of “discovery” to what theorist Jane Bennett describes as “wonder” or “enchantment.” For Bennett, the experience of wonder is an energizing experience of being alive that sometimes serves as a catalyst for change (*Enchantment* 159). There is an element of possibility in the moment of wonder. It has been my experience that we need to hold space for this stage of cultural engagement and education and that there is a community generosity when it comes to this process. The first time I attended KlezKanada, a new friend and I performed an a cappella arrangement of “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” at the cabaret. A Yiddish swing tune that reached mainstream popular culture, “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” became such a hit that it also became a cliché. I remember being excited to learn that the song was written fully in Yiddish before the translation that mixed Yiddish and English became a hit. It seemed to express the very sort of melding of interests and cultures that was compelling to me. I didn’t know enough about the history and context at the time to understand that the song has always represented this juxtaposition of cultures. Now, years later, when I hear certain Yiddish standards performed at the KlezKanada cabaret, it signals to me that the singer is likely either new to the Yiddish cultural scene, consciously engaging with nostalgic hits for a specific purpose, or performing satire. However, when we sang “Bay Mir Bistu Sheyn” fully un-ironically at the cabaret in 2003, I felt supported by the community. Everyone applauded and no one told us that they’d heard the song in Yiddish a million times before. This willingness to make space for the experience of discovery or enchantment is pedagogical strategy at a community level and

involves a relinquishing of power. In order for the community to welcome newcomers, this pedagogical strategy must be ongoing.

On Loss and Rupture

In this research and writing process, I spent some time skirting around that sense of breach described by Shandler in his framing of postvernacularity because I find that the cultural conversation which also contains joy and life and growth is too often dominated by narratives of loss. At the same time, I frequently use language that refers to loss, ghosts, and breaks in the transmission of cultural practice. I want to take the time to explicitly address rupture, but also, importantly, to address my hesitancy around the conversation.

Working with Yiddish culture, whether in research, creation, performance, or pedagogy, demands an understanding of the persecution and genocide of Eastern European Jews, a history dominated by the pogroms in the Russian Empire of the late 1800s and the Holocaust. A significant body of the historical songs and literature centre around and respond to these traumatic events and many important archival collections were created as acts of cultural salvage during and after the Holocaust. While often overshadowing other narratives, as outlined earlier, persecution was not the only factor that led to dramatic change in the Yiddish world. At the same time, I feel as though we can get so caught up in narratives of loss that we do not bring the same intentionality to conversations about where we are now and where we want to go next. For some,

even many, this sense of loss has become such a defining characteristic of the culture that they cannot see past it to the vibrancy of contemporary Yiddish culture. Berlin-based Yiddish singer Sasha Lurje told me that sometimes, after programs that prominently feature new Yiddish songs or poems set to new Yiddish music, people come up to praise the songs but bemoan that there are no new Yiddish songs (2021). Reflecting on this, Sasha and I wondered whether loss has become the dominant anchor for the culture in the public imaginary for both Jews and non-Jews. Unfortunately, mainstream media coverage (Jewish and non-Jewish) of Yiddish culture tends to reinforce this. It is as though the media is caught in a loop where the only story – published again and again – is that of someone saving Yiddish language/song/food/culture from the brink of death.²³ This mainstream focus on loss as a framework for Yiddish culture makes it challenging to shift the conversation to more productive frameworks.

I find Marianne Hirsch’s concept of “postmemory” helpful in framing the responses that Sasha experiences. Postmemory describes a relationship of subsequent generations to the “personal, collective, and cultural trauma” of the generations before. In Hirsch’s understanding of transmission, these experiences are mediated “not by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation” (*Generation 5*). The traumatic memory is altered in the process by the

²³ The Yiddish studies journal *In geveb* has satirized this phenomenon on a number of occasions, including in articles such as “Loshn of the Living Dead,” and “Yiddish Revival Declared a Success.” Most recently, building off my mention of the phenomenon during a talk at YNY 2023, a participant made a Mad Libs version of the “same astonished article” (S. Schneider).

transmission and mediation but retains some qualities of the trauma. Hirsch coined the term to describe the “transactive, transferential processes – cognitive and affective – through which the past is internalized,” often “without fully being understood” (*Generation 31*). While Hirsch focuses her framework around familial transmission, she shows how the “resonant aftereffects of trauma” are also transmitted intra-generationally through what she calls “affiliative postmemory.”

The centrality of the Holocaust to the Jewish experience of the last century means that postmemory reverberates beyond the confines of individual families. Just as Laurajane Smith argues that acts of heritage reveal the motivations and priorities of the actor, Hirsch suggests that the images, stories, songs, etc., that we select to be “points of memory” usually “tell us more about our own needs and desires, our own fantasies and fears, than about the past to which they supposedly bear witness” (*Generation 22*). Perhaps this is one reason that loss continues to be such a strong anchor vis-a-vis Yiddish culture. In more recent work, Hirsch notes that “amid the aesthetics of loss and mourning,” the challenge is to also activate memory in a way that repairs and transforms, making “space for memories of resistance and the anticipation of change” (“Connective Arts” 175). What might be learned from analyzing the fears behind resistance to change? Hirsch’s suggestion that there is an aspect of postmemory that is about guarding the past prompts me to ask whether the future is seen as a threat to remembering (1).

I have felt a strong internal resistance to centering loss in this dissertation. In part this is a resistance to the repetitive media narrative. Although it might seem to boil down to semantics,

the living/dying binary indicates changing understandings and attitudes towards transmission. Do we engage with culture differently if we think of it as alive rather than dying? I would argue that we do. Critiques of *March of the Living*, for example, suggest that the event aggressively focuses on a narrative of loss in Poland (and by extension, the former Pale of Settlement) in order to lift up Israel as a haven, all while ignoring contemporary Jewish life in Poland.²⁴ However, my resistance also stems from the fact that my personal experience of Yiddish culture has been one of finding a culture and community that feels like home. I hear this experience echoed back to me over and over by my interviewees, from participants that I have worked with at KlezKanada over the past fifteen years, and in the Yiddish dance workshops I have taught around the world. One of the many reasons I appreciate postvernacularity as a lens is that it complicates the narrative around loss and authenticity. I am deeply committed to thinking forward in the Yiddish cultural scene; I want to consider where we are now and where we are going. This particular story is about how we engage with the cultural practices we have, we are given, and we uncover: what we make with it and how we share it.

At the same time, it is not my intention to downplay or disavow the experience of rupture, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett has referred to it, that has, in part, led to the Yiddish cultural

²⁴ See Gruber, among others. *March of the Living* is a Zionist educational project and heritage tourism trip that centres around a march from the Auschwitz to Birkenau death camps on Yom HaShoah, Holocaust Remembrance Day, followed by a trip to Israel that coincides with Israeli national holidays.

renaissance (“Sounds of Sensibility”). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett emphasizes rupture as a key “why” of engaging with Yiddish culture. The process of finding something is bound up with losing something; the process of repair is bound up with rupture. While I think that aspect of the impulses I’m tracking – for example, exploring traditional cultural practices through performance – are found in cultures that have not experienced rupture to such an extent, I cannot discuss Yiddish cultural practices today without referring to the constant interplay of absence and presence that is part of the work. Jonathan Boyarin writes that “Jewish living-with-loss, the Jewish mode of holding one’s own in a foreign land, is a model for postwar, postcatastrophe writing and thinking” (“Yiddish Science”). I interpret living-with-loss as being about living.

As we discussed my writing, one of my dissertation committee members asked if I could see how many ghosts were present in my writing, even as I resisted writing about loss. I’ve thought long and hard about this comment and have come to feel that living with ghosts doesn’t have to equal living-in-loss. Many of these ghosts were activists; they were thinking forward and imagining change in the world. I think they would be delighted that we refer to them as we move into the future. To return to Rebecca Schneider’s troubling of “still” and “live,” our moments of encounter with these ghosts trouble the binary of loss and continuing presence. We live in a critical relationship with absence that should simultaneously acknowledge the ways it continues to define the culture while also acknowledging that – through hard work, dedication, and creativity – the culture is in a time of presence and growth. Can you grapple with the presence of

ghosts in this work, I'm asked? Yes, that is part of working with Yiddish. But I have a returning question: can we grapple with the vibrancy of contemporary Yiddish cultural creativity beyond a framework of loss and memorialization? Mark Slobin has suggested that the klezmer revival offered a "safe place for visiting the European past" (*American Klezmer* 23), but I wonder if this is still the case for the festival cohort. Food writer Leah Koenig, interviewed for this project, suggested to me that our changing relationship to the narrative of loss is opening more space for this questioning as well as for creative interpretations:

Our generation, we're not as bound by the history, we're second and third generation immigrants. So, we're a little bit freer to go back and say what are the things I want to explore here? Because I'm not bound by the heaviness of the immigration story. So, there's a lot more joy and discovery than in previous generations. (2019)

The Yiddish tradition is no longer withheld from the artist, to use a phrase borrowed from the work of Jalal Toufic (12). Indeed, there are an ever-increasing number of pathways into and through the tradition(s). We should, as Jonathan Boyarin writes about the Yiddish language, begin with an awareness of the fragmentation of the traditions and "encourage the possibilities of the various fragments." ("Yiddish science")

Towards a Methodology of Fragments

“You can’t really apprentice with living klezmer musicians from that time,” Ilya Shneyveys observed in our interview, “but you can apprentice with all the recordings and just immerse yourself” (2019).²⁵ A musician from Riga, Latvia, now living in Brooklyn, Ilya told me how he returned home from his first klezmer festival experience at KlezFest St Petersburg with a CD-ROM filled with thousands of MP3 files: hours, even days, of klezmer music and Yiddish song. He described his experience of learning from those files as “artificial immersion” (2019). Variations on this story were repeated by other artists, both in interviews and informal conversations. Eleonore Weill, a French musician also living in Brooklyn, told me that by the time she first came to New York from France, she had read all of the books she could find about klezmer and Yiddish music. In New York she found herself suddenly meeting many of the scholars and musicians whose work she had studied. I, too, immersed myself in recordings. I traveled directly from my first experience at KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat to Edmonton, Alberta, to start my undergraduate degree in drama at the University of Alberta. I felt very far away from the scene I had newly found and compensated by listening to Yiddish music on repeat. Even as a non-musician, listening to recordings gave me a way into that world from afar and formed the

²⁵ In his reference to “that time,” Ilya is referring to the late nineteenth and early to mid-twentieth century.

base of my Yiddish cultural education. I integrated song fragments into school projects whenever I could, building my Yiddish cultural identity on poetic lines of song text.

The process of working with fragments is central to the performance and pedagogy of Yiddish culture today. When it comes to my own cohort in the Yiddish cultural sphere, I would go a step further and argue that juxtaposition is a creative strategy and that the process of working with fragments is an important part of Jewish identity formation. As the artistic practices, performances, and methodologies discussed throughout this study draw upon these creative strategies, I will use the following section to examine the fragment. I will briefly discuss the creation of cultural archives, introduce several theoretical approaches to understanding and working with fragments, and lay out an argument for the importance of critical thinking in such work. In a 2005 lecture paper Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett calls for research into emerging models of Jewish self-definition.²⁶ She describes a shift towards Jewish identity that is increasingly heterogeneous, layered, and “open-source” in its modes of construction (“New Jews” 6). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points to the “recombinatory possibilities of digital music technologies” as

²⁶ While this call for research came in 2005, most formal research into North American Jewish youth engagement still focuses on what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points to as mainstream models of Jewish engagement, including religious or community affiliation and connections to Israel. While there is engagement with these research themes, it is usually driven by individual research and accompanied by frustration that the mainstream Jewish identity somehow persists in ignoring what the authors see as dominant trends. Journalist Rokhl Kafrissen, for example, dissects the 2013 Pew survey of Jewish Americans and points to the chasm between the concerns and values of the survey writers and the people being surveyed. Kafrissen lambasts the creators for “the breathtaking state of delusion and arrogance in which the institutional Jewish bubble functions and why they would write a survey with so little interest in who or what we are” (“What Does It Mean To Be Jewish”).

“a model for new Jewish social practices and ways of thinking about them as well as about oneself” and suggests that we are seeing the equivalent of this artistic process in the making of Jewish identity (“New Jews” 7). As an example, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett uses Josh Dolgin, a Montreal-based artist who, under the name “Socalled,” remixes and samples Yiddish records and personal recordings in the creation of new works and whom I would include as part of the festival cohort. Marianne Hirsch also points to such artistic practices in her work on postmemory, highlighting artworks that draw together photographic fragments into the form of albums through assembly and display (Generation 228). As I look across the festival cohort, I see Jewish artists searching for materials and, finding fragments, using them not only to create new work but as access points and building blocks towards new ways of understanding their relationship to Jewish heritage. If we are apprenticing through recordings, as Ilya suggests, what critical models might provide us with strategies we can use in synthesizing fragments in performance, pedagogy, self-understanding, and community-building?

A Cultural Warehouse

What is a “fragment” and where does it come from? What are those elements that are, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, being recombined? I use “fragments” to describe materials removed in some way from the cultural context in which they were formed. These may include physical and digital materials stored in institutional archives, letters found in attics, songs learned

from your grandmother or in a festival workshop, the recorded interview clip that was transformed into the annual Backwards March at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat (see Chapter Three), a 15-second YouTube video of someone's Jewish wedding, those MP3s that Ilya Shneyveys studied so closely, and a video clip of Ukrainian-born singer Bronya Sakina teaching my dance mentors Michael Alpert and Walter Zev Feldman (among others) how to dance a *sher* (a Jewish square dance). In her book *Destination Culture*, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us that "we make fragments" through the process of collecting, defining, and categorizing, "transcrib[ing] what we cannot carry" (19, 30).

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Jewish ethnographers, including S. An-ski, Moyshe Beregovski, and Sophia Magid, began to conduct sweeping expeditions to document Jewish cultural, religious, social, and artistic practices. These expeditions were motivated by several factors, including documenting Jewish practices at a moment of socio-political change, developing Jewish historiography, and the attempt to define a Jewish nation at a time of European nation building (see Safran, Gottesman, Feldman, and others). They sought to collect Jewish arts practices such as folk songs because, as Jordan Finkin writes, they understood that these practices served "as a, if not the, cultural storehouse – not only of concepts, imagery, tropes, and emotions, but also of language, rhythm, rhyme, sounds, and music" (101). It is a storehouse that reveals the rich pluralism of Jewishness. And yet, the collection of Jewish folklore was driven by two ostensibly incompatible purposes. On the one hand, as Annette Werberger argues,

collecting Jewish folklore was part of “the European attempt to produce tradition and traditionality” as an exercise in nation-making (140). Across Europe, folklore was being put to use to “build” cultural identity. Jewish ethnography during the time of the An-sky expeditions was tied to a drive to establish a Jewish cultural identity that was outside the religious framework, a “project of modernity, which is intimately linked to such factors as nationhood, progress, and science” (140). On the other hand, Jewish ethnography also revealed the diversity of that Jewish religious framework. In their introduction to *Writing Jewish Culture: Paradoxes in Ethnography*, Andreas Kilcher and Gabriella Safran point out that while liturgy inscribes the exceptionalism of the Jewish people, Jewish folklore takes a non-exceptionalist approach (6). In his influential work *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*, Yosef Yerushalmi claims that the collective memory “derived from the folklore and mythology” is “of limited relevance” because Jewish culture was molded by elites rather than peasants (xxxiv). Conversely, Nathaniel Deutsch describes Jewish customs as the spinal cord of Judaism, showing how integral *minhagim* (customs) were to Jewish life and religious practice. The diversity of *minhagim* across the Jewish diaspora demonstrated a diversified religious practice that both followed the mandates of Jewish faith and responded to the surrounding local cultural context (Deutsch 287). Importantly, while *minhagim* showed religious dedication, they “also revealed important parallels with the folk cultures of surrounding peoples” (287). As the cultural storehouse of folklore reveals, Jewish practices have tended to be

messily entangled with the practices, languages, and lives of the non-Jewish communities and histories around them.

The messiness of this memory space does not fit well into attempts to modernize or enforce ethnocentric solidarity through unity, and so practices that do not conform to the dominant ideology have often been pushed to the sidelines. The cultural heritage elevated in the exercise of empire and nation building was intentionally reductive, a manipulated selection from a landscape of diverse and overlapping cultural practices, designed to perform a unique claim to national identity. Simultaneously, in the name of refinement or enlightenment, local customs were often set aside. Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett comments that “the attempt to reform Jewish life by repudiating customary practices” created “a large domain of cultural trash,” the value of which we have today reclaimed as “folklore” (*Destination Culture* 160). Perhaps it is this messiness that makes Jewish folklore so appealing to artists. It is a treasure trove of material that reveals myriad ways of being and doing Jewish.²⁷ This metaphorical cultural storehouse continues to be invaluable to researchers and presents a myriad of what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as “recombinatory possibilities” for contemporary artists (“New Jews”). Jenny Romaine described

²⁷ This section is adapted from text published in a chapter in the *Dybbuk Century*, 2023.

how her experience of working as a music archivist at YIVO was instrumental in shaping her artistic process:²⁸

Our montage theory of history, our montage theory of culture. Our collage theory. I see Weinreich as being three cheers and a half for the fragment.²⁹ You don't have to have the answer. You make the answer. I see that as being a natural invitation, when you work at an archive, to make things. (2007)

Contemporary ethnographers and ethnomusicologists continue to add their own research to this storehouse. *Yisker bikher* (memorial books), created to remember towns destroyed in pogroms or by the Nazis, collected memorials, stories, customs, maps, and more, becoming part of the storehouse as well. Post-war ethnographic projects, such as the lifelong work of Ruth Rubin and later the YIVO Yiddish Folk Song Project, designed by Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, collected thousands of Yiddish folk songs. It was no longer possible to conduct ethnographic projects that were embedded in the pre-war Eastern European Jewish communities where many of these songs were written. Instead, the ethnographic sites were and are diasporic sites and the collections should be read through that lens. Whereas An-ski might ask "What do you sing when," Rubin might ask, "What songs do you remember singing when. . . ?" The cultural storehouse of

²⁸ To add another layer of mentorship to this, Romaine described how, through another program, she came to work with Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and how it was that experience that brought her to YIVO (2007).

²⁹ Uriel Weinreich, who founded YIVO in 1925.

“folklore” collected by folklorists and ethnographers not only reveals the diversity of historical Jewish cultural practice but also offers multiple ways of being Jewish in the present and pathways for resisting attempts to reform or silo Jewish identity. These are tools that, as will be discussed in Chapter Two, many people in the Yiddish cultural scene are explicitly seeking.

Juxtaposition as Practice

My broad use of the term “fragment” includes materials in institutional archives and libraries, but also fragments outside of the institution – some uncollected, some deemed unworthy of institutional holding, some embodied and harder to hold in a box of files. It might be easiest to use the term “archival materials,” and yet the very idea of an “archive” is itself more slippery and hard to hold than the western institutional understanding of archival materials would have us believe. Diana Taylor’s conceptualization of “archive” and “repertoire” is useful here. For Taylor, the “archive” and the “repertoire” are not specific collections or defined practices but modes of transmission. The archive is memory transmitted through supposedly enduring materials (paper, film, digital files, etc.). The repertoire is embodied knowledge transmitted through embodied actions, a process that requires live presence. Western epistemology privileges writing – and thus the archive – as a form of knowledge and memory transmission. However, while the archive often purports to hold a higher degree of permanence due to its form, it is important to recognize that it is highly susceptible to change, corruption, and

manipulation, and that many embodied practices have endured long after archival forms have been destroyed (19). For Taylor, then, to refer to “the archive” is to refer to that which is transmitted through tangible or textual materials. This conceptualization of “archive” is certainly useful as Jewish culture has historically valorized the role of the book and of book learning, and Jewish ethnographic research and archiving have been key to preservation and transmission of Jewish culture through the Enlightenment period, the Holocaust, and the assimilationist periods after World War II. While Taylor sets the archive and repertoire up as a continuum, her work is frequently interpreted as setting them up in binary opposition to one another. Using the words “remains,” Rebecca Schneider troubles this perceived binary by considering the ways in which performance leaves traces and the archive itself performs. Archives, she suggests, privilege loss but also the persistence of material texts (103). In a statement that reminds me of Laurajane Smith’s reconceptualization of heritage as an act, Schneider suggests that performance can be an act of remaining and a “means of re-appearance” (101). Schneider also argues that we are not comfortable with “considering gestic acts (re)enacted live to be material trace” (39). The privileging of “literature over overature” means that the live body is not usually accepted as an archival record (39). Perhaps this is because embodied knowledge is seen as harder to capture and control. Somewhere along the way, did we stop trusting our bodies as systems of knowledge?

The favouring of concrete media as recorded archive is tied up with conversations about what it means to “save” cultural traditions. Working in the folk and heritage sector, including in

the Yiddish cultural scene, I have encountered a resistance to change that is framed as loss of tradition but is tied to the idea of static practices. Does the process of saving and archiving trap the fragments into an unchanging state? The process of “saving” can lead to a narrowing of cultural space, as ethnographers and archivists make choices about what to document, what to archive, and what to feature or share from that process. As fewer songs are sung, the diversity of voices is slowly reduced, until a single song is mistakenly understood to be representative of an entire world. Taylor also notes that the process of archiving can itself result in the crystallization and disappearance of embodied practices by marking them as necessary for saving (24).

Ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin reminds us that klezmer has a “concentrated canon” due to a lack of research before 1939. Slobin notes that the concentrated canon can expand as archives are found and/or processed but limits his definition of a canon to historical sources by not discussing the impact of newly composed works (*American Klezmer* 3).

The artists and scholars discussed in the following chapters are expanding the cultural space through their work with fragments. However, as part of this, they must learn to assess the fragment itself and to reflect on the lenses through which they are doing that assessment. In her work on postmemory, Marianne Hirsch observes an archival impulse in the artistic frameworks mobilized by artists engaging with memory in their practices (228). Hal Foster coined the term “archival impulse” to describe what he saw as a trend in visual art practices, an artistic impulse “to make historical information, often lost or displaced, physically present” and “connect what

cannot be connected” (Foster 4, 21). Importantly, the trend that Foster points to is not focused on creating or recreating wholes. Instead, the focus is on creating relationships between fragments that call out for human interpretation to find “new orders of affective association” (21). “These artists,” Foster writes, “are often drawn to unfulfilled beginnings or incomplete projects – in art and in history alike – that might offer points of departure again” (5). Familiar sources can be disturbed, and obscure sources can be “retrieved in a gesture of alternative knowledge or counter-memory” (4).³⁰ Foster notes that visual artists working with archives in this way frequently favour the installation as format, using “its nonhierarchical spatiality to advantage” (4).

I have found a more developed articulation of these ideas in Walter Benjamin’s philosophical writing on fragments. In his long-time research on the Paris arcades, Benjamin pursued the idea that the beginning of understanding was to be found in the juxtaposition of material and temporal references. Rather than present an uncontested singular history of Paris in the nineteenth-century, he strove to create an “image of that epoch” as “a semantically dense iconic simultaneity” (*Arcades x*, Rampley, “Archives” 102–103). His vast, ever-expanding and ever-incomplete archive of fragments collected for this study was by no means limited to the

³⁰ Writing about the archival turn, critic and curator Cheryl Simon suggests that the impulse can “also be interpreted as a late-stage manifestation of postmodernist appropriational practices; the turning inside-out of the institutions of modernism, if you will (102).

arcades themselves and included quotations, literary references, published histories, and photographs. He valued “the rags, the refuse” and “‘detritus’ of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life” (Eiland and McLaughlin qtd in Benjamin ix), a value that brings to mind Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s reference to “cultural trash.” As he arranged and rearranged these fragments, Benjamin developed his idea of the “dialectical image” which, at its simplest, involves a simultaneity of seeing that replaces linear conceptions of history. For Benjamin, the “dialectical image” meant a moment of clarity that comes from the meeting of an historical fragment with the present moment of the reader: “what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill” (*Arcades* 462). Benjamin proposed that the spark, or flash of understanding, that arises fleetingly from the dialectical image captures a critical moment when the status quo can either be preserved or altered. Grounded in Marxist thought, his methodology of “literary montage” was conceived as an antidote to historical essentialism, in which the linear progression of historical “facts” is taken as a catastrophically uncontested status quo (*Arcades* 473). Benjamin’s arcades project is often described as failed or incomplete, but for me the unfinished quality of the work itself contains one of its key teachings: that no one telling of a story can ever be complete. To retain fluidity – to be open to future recombinations – the way that Benjamin imagined it, the literary montage must be always open to new fragments and ideas. If not, the montage runs the risk of assuming a fixedness that is counter to the intention of the project. He argued that uncritical historiography

that promotes a universal and un-entangled understanding of history was revisionist and obscurantist (*Arcades* 485). Benjamin's embrace of the fragment included an acceptance of brokenness, where "wholeness" represents a continuity of history that he is vehemently against.

Benjamin's thinking was influenced by his life-long friendship and correspondence with Gershom Scholem (1897–1982), an academic scholar of *kabole* (Jewish mysticism). Scholem writes about fragments in his work on messianism in the Lurianic tradition³¹ of *kabole*. One idea within this tradition holds that God formed vessels through which to manifest his divine light in the world in "forms appropriate to their function" (Scholem, *Messianic Idea* 45). The vessels "could not contain the light and thus were broken." In consequence, the light dispersed and, while some light returned to its source, other sparks of light were scattered into the world and cannot return to their source (to which they yearn) without support (*Messianic Idea* 45). Scholem explains that the next stage of this process is one of reparation through our acts and deeds: "By amending themselves, the Jewish people can also amend the world, in its visible and invisible aspects alike" (*Messianic Idea* 46). This beautiful image of gathering scattered shards of light as a pathway to redemption resonates with Benjamin's turn towards collecting fragments for the purpose of catalyzing a redemption from the status quo. It is important to note here that, although Scholem's influence on Benjamin's writing is clear, Benjamin's own messianic hopes

³¹ A school of thought developed by Isaac Luria (1534–1572).

seem likely to have been closer to the secular messianism of Jewish socialist and communist movements of the time and their utopian pursuit of freedom from oppression for all humanity.³² There are sparks flying all over the place, with sparks of divine presence to be gathered, and sparks of understanding flashing up as we juxtapose historical fragments.

Judith Butler takes up Benjamin and Scholem in *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*, her book on Jewish ethics and politics. Butler points out that the human is a necessary part of the sparking up, both in the writing of the trace or fragment and in the reading: “Some bearer is needed. . . . [W]ithout that bearer there is no flash of similarity” (109). Butler also emphasizes the act of translation that occurs upon human reception of any resource, which means that any fragment “undergoes a set of changes in the process of being drawn upon” (8). This process of translation is one that I shall return to and examine in the following chapters. Translation, an act which inherently includes interpretation, is itself a central aspect of Jewishness and yet there is a constant tension around this core tenet; interpretation is key and yet change is often still resisted. The presence of the bearer and the intrinsic act of translation are then a necessary ingredient to the sparks that flash up as fragments are juxtaposed with one another. Is Butler suggesting that the human act of translation and interpretation, which “opens a

³² This idea is taken up in more detail in Chapter Three. See Jonathan Boyarin’s *Storm from Paradise* and Judith Butler’s *Parting Ways*.

chasm within the very presumption of historical continuity” (11), is itself the spark described by Benjamin?

I want to make a non-linear jump to the word *klezmer*, which means a Jewish musician in Yiddish but, since the 1980s, has come to refer to a genre of Jewish music.³³ It is commonly understood that the Yiddish word, in turn, comes from the Hebrew word for musical instrument *klei-zemer* (Feldman 62). Respectively, *klei* and *zemer* mean “vessel” and “song.” Scholem notes that the Hebrew word *klei* can mean an artisan’s tool as well as a container (*Sabbatai* 32). Here we have a second Jewish metaphor of vessels, again shaping and carrying an immaterial substance. Extending this comparison of metaphors, I turn to the trope that klezmer music contains the laughter and the tears of the Jewish people; in the *krekhts* (a musical ornament in klezmer music) of the clarinet or violin, we can hear a laughing and/or sobbing voice. Perhaps we might say that a vessel of song is also a vessel of soul. In this case, is the *klezmer* (here meaning a Jewish musician) one who carries and expresses the Jewish soul? If the shattering of vessels of light, as described by Scholem, is a shattering of essential soul, we have here another shattering of soul: traditions of Yiddish music and song were disrupted and fragmented, and then, in another gathering, the fragments of these traditions are collected and assembled by artists and scholars in the Yiddish culture scene. In this metaphor, we become both vessel and gatherer. Scholem

³³ See Feldman, who provides a detailed historical account of the use of the word.

describes how the vessels shaped to hold divine presence were not merely containers but integral to the manifestation of the divine for “the vessels colour and shape the light” (*Sabbatai* 33). The light is translated through the vessel. As we gather shards of song, what sparks flash up in the juxtaposition of fragments as they are translated through us?

Throughout this inquiry I carry forward this line of thought from Benjamin, Scholem, and Butler: What does repair look like in a cultural sense? Jonathan Boyarin suggests that “history must awaken . . . one’s yandes. (The untranslatable term yandes signifies not only a sense of one’s ethnic identity but also an active and ethical engagement in the world in conformity with one’s awareness of Jewish experience)” (“Yiddish Science”). How are culture bearers assembling fragments in a continual re-shaping of a world they live in and the world they want to live in? Is this spark something that can be fostered intentionally? How do we, as artists, teachers, and organizers, create spaces where people can experience these moments of connection? When and how do these acts of assembly rub up against mandates of recovery that trap fragments into what Benjamin would call a historical continuity?

As a form of questioning and as a method of research, ethnographic methodologies create, collect, and arrange fragments.³⁴ As summarized earlier, Jewish ethnographic projects were and continue to be instrumental in creating cultural storehouses from which culture bearers

³⁴ I would argue that this is the case even when the ethnographic aim is otherwise.

draw in the research and development of their work. Ethnography also has the potential to resist hegemonic memory by doing what performance studies scholar and ethnographer Dwight Conquergood describes as “reconfiguring texts and performances in horizontal, metonymic tension” (40). Conquergood suggests that a “promiscuous traffic between different ways of knowing” opens spaces for rich individual engagement with memory and identity. This code-switching between ways of knowing is a key approach to cultural practice in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene. Jonathan Boyarin links Jewish ethnography to an ethics of questioning. He suggests that, though questioning is not a practice unique to the Jewish people, “Judaism is extraordinary in the great emphasis it places on the desirability of all . . . Jews participating in the process of interpretive meaning production” (*Storm* 71).³⁵ Though he sees it as traditionally tied to religious interpretation, Boyarin extrapolates that an ethics of questioning is relevant to his own search for Jewishness. This raises the question of who gets to define those practices. Is Jewish

³⁵ Yerushalmi emphasizes that interpretation was deeply embedded in Jewish tradition and a key part of amplifying the values of memory held by religious practice. It was the rabbinical authorities who were responsible for the “ongoing exploration of the meaning of the history bequeathed to them” (17). Debate and interpretation became so integral to religious practice that it was, in turn, included in printed texts, creating new layers of liturgy to be interpreted. Yerushalmi notes that this interpretive practice was done with “remarkable sensitivity” which, I would argue, points to the value placed on the practice of interpretation itself.

cultural memory contained by religious practice or does it contain religious practice?³⁶ Boyarin suggests that “the ethnographic study of Jews is one way to constitute Judaism.” For Boyarin, “living Jewish lives in a non-Jewish world necessarily entails constant reflection on cultural differences” and ethnography is “a particular form of the technique of producing differences that constitutes culture” (67). Boyarin’s understanding of ethnographic practice is at odds with the way that Jewish ethnographic projects are so closely linked to preservation in the public eye where loss has become a primary narrative. However, it underlines the importance of searching for evolving ways of understanding identity and sits well with Benjamin’s remonstrance that “in every era the attempt must be made anew to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it” (*Arcades* 255). This does not mean that the tradition must be radically transformed, but that an ethics of questioning – critical thinking, in other words – helps to keep us from accepting the catastrophe of the status quo.

I approach critical thinking as an integral part of working with fragments, and thus to contemporary Yiddish cultural practice. I understand critical thinking in this context to be a

³⁶ Yerushalmi differentiates between religious practice as memory and historiography as memory, and describes a tension between the two for Jews in the modern era. He puts historiography in counterpoint with memory, commenting that the Jewish drive to develop modern historiography during the *haskole* meant to “functionally repudiate premises that were basic to all Jewish conceptions of history in the past” (89). That is, to explore Jewish history and Jewish identity is to question the authority of, and often to go against, the religious text (93), which functionally and philosophically represented the Jewish history until that point. For Yerushalmi, the choice for Jews in the modern era “is not whether or not to have a past, but rather-what kind of past shall one have” (Yerushalmi 99). This assertion provides additional context to the discussion of assembling fragments in the process of Jewish identity formation.

practice of questioning and analysis that is, among other qualities, self-reflective (what lenses am I bringing to this work?), evaluative (what do I need to know as I interpret this fragment?) and inquisitive (who benefits from my interpretation? What power structures am I resisting or reaffirming?). As access to materials increases, so too does the likelihood that those materials, whether found in an archive or on social media, are consumed without additional context. The sheer volume of fragments is overwhelming and ever increasing as institutional archives digitize and make their collections accessible online, additional research is conducted, and original work produces new fragments. Even “contextualization” is an unstable idea, as fragments may be accompanied by incomplete, semi-accurate, or inaccurate framing that is misleading at best and harmful at worst. At its best, contextualization reflects the point-of-view of the framer. I want to briefly invoke philosopher Jean Baudrillard here, who questions whether the fragmentation of knowledge resulting from digitization has brought us to the point where all meaning is lost and cannot be reclaimed (“Pataphysics” 2). Critical thinking as an integral part of contemporary Yiddish cultural practice brings us back from the precipice Baudrillard warns us of. In insisting on critical thought as a part of cultural practice, am I insisting on a practice alienated from otherwise embodied traditions? Valdimar Hafstein’s interesting look at the self-reflexivity of “folklorization” and “heritagization” suggests that Western society is at a point where we are perhaps over-ascribing meaning in the process of turning everyday life into folklore and, in the process, alienating ourselves from our own cultures (“Intangible Heritage”). However, in the

context of the postvernacular where there is already a distance to be traversed, I hold that, far from alienating us from cultural practices, critical thinking generates strategies for re/contextualizing and recombining fragments without cultural insensitivity or harmful appropriation. Without critical thinking, we obscure motivations, unite or simplify that which resists a single identification and is complex, ascribe origin and authenticity to that which has no single origin point and no one way of being. Since history is not a linear fixed event, we need to resist simply rewriting it into a *different* linear simplicity. A critical process of working with fragments makes visible the seams. Theatre and political philosophy scholar Gabe Levine points to the value of the fissure in an assembly of fragments because the cracks in between the fragments reveal the work of assembly (62). Via Benjamin, who describes the work of the translator as “painstakingly gluing together the pieces of a broken vessel,” Levine draws a parallel with the work of those who would be cultural translators, assembling elements of tradition (63).

We seek affinities between fragments, building stories from what we encounter or seek out. In working with fragments as artists and scholars, we humanize them, interpreting them and synthesizing them through our own experience and understanding. I see it as the responsibility of Yiddish cultural organizations to teach critical thinking skills alongside technique. There is an increased need for teaching research skills and analysis: how to think critically about the fragments presented with little to no context or incorrect information. We should not be telling

participants how to assemble fragments, but we should be giving them the skills with which to do so in thoughtful ways, making informed choices with a broader knowledge of context.

Methodology and Analysis

Methodology

I approached the data collection for this project through qualitative interviews, ethnographic observation of the Yiddish cultural scene with a focus on KlezKanada's Summer Retreat, and a practice-as-research approach in which I analyze my own experience as a participant, teacher, and organizer in the Yiddish cultural scene. All research involving participants went through a rigorous ethics review process at York University, which was revised to include COVID-19 safety protocols.

The chapters that follow draw upon a set of nineteen interviews with colleagues in the festival cohort, as well as several mentors. The interviews were conducted between June 2019 and June 2023. Interviews were mostly held in person before March 2020, when COVID-19 restrictions prompted a switch to interviews conducted over Zoom. The conversations ranged from thirty minutes to ninety minutes depending on the setting, with interviews conducted over Zoom tending to be shorter. They were recorded on my phone or through the Zoom interface. Initially, my interview subjects were all located within the festival cohort (defined earlier in this chapter) and were selected for their widespread involvement and/or leadership in the

international Yiddish cultural scene and/or their involvement in specific projects that I followed as case studies. As my research progressed, I widened my initial set of interviews to include several individuals who have been mentors to this cohort. In these cases, the individuals were selected because they contributed important context and insight into specific projects or avenues of inquiry. While I do not directly cite every interviewee, each conversation has contributed to my understanding and analysis of the Yiddish cultural scene. I have included a full list of these interviewees in Appendix A, along with a list of questions that guided my first set of interviews (Appendix B). As the research progressed, I set aside this list in favour of more targeted questions. Because the Yiddish cultural scene is very interconnected, the colleagues I interviewed are also friends. These interviews were usually conversational, a dynamic that I encouraged as a way to offset the inherent strangeness of conducting formal interviews with people who are close friends. I've known some of them for two decades, watched others arrive in the scene, hired some, worked for others, awarded some scholarships to KlezKanada. What are the ethics of interviewing your friends? I have no easy answer to this question, however it is important to me that I represent them in a way that feels honest and true to their perspectives. As required by York University ethics protocols, I obtained verbal and written informed consent from all interviewees. In addition, I chose to run all quotations and references past them for approval before the final draft of the manuscript was submitted. This is a more intimate way of keeping them included in the

conversation. Everyone was given the option of anonymity at the time of the interview and when reviewing quotations. All interviewees chose to be identified by their real names.

In addition to this set of interviews, I draw upon three other interview sets: interviews conducted as part of my undergraduate and masters research (2007, 2009), interviews from the Wexler Oral History Project (2011-2015), and interviews conducted by other researchers in which I am the interview subject (2011-2022). These other interview sets made it possible to include voices that I wouldn't have otherwise had the capacity to include and to listen back to my own thinking as it has changed (or not) over the past twenty years.

I began the work of this dissertation with the expectation that ethnographic methods would be an important part of my methodology. With my professional, academic, and social lives so closely entwined with this scene, I cannot pretend to don what ethnographer Ruth Behar calls the "cloak of academic objectivity" (11). Deeply moved by Behar's work on vulnerability in anthropological practice, I began to identify more closely with autoethnographic methods using my personal experience as a bridge into my analysis of the Yiddish cultural scene. "The burden of the autoethnographer," suggests *The Handbook of Autoethnography*, "is to make meaning of all the stuff of memory and experience – how it felt then and how it feels now" (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 54). In addition to interviews and personal fieldnotes collected during the research period, I reflect upon twenty years of personal experience and observations. As the researcher, I am highly "visible in the data" (Adams, Jones, and Ellis 72). The impossibility of distance necessitates other

critical strategies of analysis. As I proceed, I ask: with what filters do I see the world and my work (Behar 14)? Am I seeking affinities and connections or projecting my experience onto others?

Who am I serving through this work, and why?

There is a high level of integration between practice and research within the Yiddish cultural scene. It is a community in which it is common for internationally-renowned performers to also be active scholars, university professors, or archivists (for example, Michael Alpert, Joel Rubin, Lorin Sklamberg), and for academics to regularly teach at cultural festivals (for example, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Jeffrey Shandler, Mark Slobin). Likewise, many of the participants at programs like KlezKanada, Yiddish New York, and Yiddish Summer Weimar are artists engaged in serious archival research, grad students from Yiddish studies, Jewish studies, music, or performance studies who are both engaged in cultural study and sometimes conducting their own research, or clergy pursuing professional development. As a brief illustration: during one KlezKanada Summer Retreat I found myself struggling to navigate a decision regarding my doctoral program, and found counsel right across the lunch table in the form of two Chairs of different prominent Jewish studies departments. All of this means that practice and research are integrated in this community in an unusually close way. In part, this has to do with the work necessary for creating the renaissance of Yiddish culture we are seeing today. There is also a relationship between cultural expectations around education, economic background, and privilege in the North American Ashkenazi Jewish community.

Although my focus has shifted, my academic research has been tied to my work as an artist and producer in the Yiddish cultural community at the undergraduate, masters, and doctoral levels. This means that my practice has been part of my research – and vice versa – for twenty years. My academic lenses have informed my conversations in the Yiddish scene, whether formal interviews or not, and those conversations have shaped my reading of critical theory. Over the course of this doctorate, I have adapted my own teaching tools in response to my observations, experience, and research, introduced workshops and convened conversations that directly address challenges I observe, and approached program curation in a way that responds to the community through the lens of my research. This fluid back-and-forth relationship between practice and research is central to my methodology, and I draw upon my experience of this integrated practice throughout this dissertation. An example of integrating practice and research is a series of “Critical Yiddishland” workshops I began facilitating in 2021. Critical Yiddishland sessions are scheduled within the context of cultural intensives and framed as Jewish text-study sessions with excerpts from academic texts replacing religious texts. I facilitate the reading and discussion of the texts, unpacking terms and ideas and making connections with the creative work the participants are doing in other sessions of the program (be those instrumental repertoire classes, Yiddish song-writing workshops, or burlesque performances at the cabaret).

Approaches to Analysis

As I have read, interviewed, and reflected, I have consistently returned to three approaches to analysis, all of which resist definitive answers: entanglement, heritage as doing, and embodied understanding.

Throughout this research, entanglement has been my primary lens of analysis. I came to this methodology through the articulation of entanglement as a metaphor of memory by Gregor Feindt et al. in “Entangled Memory: Toward a Third Wave in Memory Studies.” In cultural memory studies, memory is frequently described as being fragmented. This fragmentation is framed in different ways – usually either as substance or as conception. As substance, the loss of cohesive cultural memory is mourned by scholars such as Pierre Nora, who suggested that “there are lieux de mémoire, sites of memory, because there are no longer milieux de mémoire, real environments of memory” (Malkin 24). In its conception, there is a shift in the way that we conceive of memory, moving away from a linear understanding where events are situated as points on a line and towards a cultural space where memory is simultaneous and entangled.³⁷ Understanding memory as entangled means taking as a given that memory is always plural and heterogenous, that all interpretations of the past convey the social/political frames of the actor, and that interpretations will vary over time and will not all always be equally visible (Feindt et al

³⁷ In her excellent historiography of memory studies, Astrid Erll notes that the evolving field of memory studies tracks with changing notions of history in academia (3).

32–33). The shift towards an entangled, intersectional, and dynamic understanding of memory helps to address the question of, in Marianne Hirsch’s words, “how to account for contiguous or intersecting histories without allowing them to occlude or erase each other” and to counteract the tendency to see fragments as static or immobilized at the moment of their collection (*Generation* 20). Feindt et al stress the importance of mnemography – studying the shifting routes, roles, and interplay of the dynamics of memory in order to better perceive the changing symbolic interpretations, which are more revealing than fact-based histories (34, 31). As the dynamic elements of memory speak to each other, mnemography is a dialogic practice. Artistic forms – such as songs, melodies, and dances – may signify a memory (often, as in the case with songs, a specific memory is encapsulated in the form itself) and also the process of remembering. Individual interpretation exists in a social context (Feindt et al 30); the individual act of memory (the selection, development, setting, and performance of the form) is always in conversation with collective memory (the social pre-conception and reception of the form) and “the present thus forms itself in the junction between the space of experience and the complementary horizon of expectation” (29).

Entanglement as methodology has been approached from different directions. Returning to Walter Benjamin’s arcades project, I see him exploring similar ideas in his approach to fragments, developing the understanding that memory is subjective and contextual rather than, as he would say, “continuous,” and that the fragments he was collecting could be assembled and

reassembled in an ever-changing array of meaning. In educational research, an emerging rhizomatic methodology applies Deleuze and Guattari's concept of the rhizome to educational research (Sellers and Honan 145). A rhizomatic methodology opens onto complex and non-linear interconnections, resisting binaries and separations (Clarke and Parsons 37). In her edited volume on Canadian performance, Heather Davis-Fisch also describes a rhizomatic approach as one of several "methodological and theoretical alternatives to historicism" employed in the book (20). For Davis-Fisch, these "multiple, multi-dimensional, and multidirectional systems" map directions of research that are in motion, with any one line of inquiry connecting to any other line of inquiry. Ric Knowles draws upon a rhizomatic approach as well, exploring "meshworks" as a metaphor for the interconnectedness of the Toronto intercultural theatre community.

I also see entanglement as a methodology employed in Jewish thought. A layered and dialogic approach is a central tenet of Jewish learning, built into Jewish texts and Jewish religious memory. The margins of the core text are places of subjectivity, my colleague Avinoam Stillman told me. In some texts, several narratives run simultaneously down the page, with a central text, a commentary on that text on one side, and a commentary or analysis on the commentary on the other side (see for example Rashi). These voices in dialogue teach that active reading is required, with questioning and commentary a necessary part of the study. As discussed earlier, a study of Jewish minhagim reveals a multiplicity of interpretation.

The process of wrestling an entangled analysis full of fragmented, overlapping, layered, rhizomatic conversations into some sort of linear format has been a struggle. Perhaps finding the order of a written text is always a struggle and yet almost every paragraph I write seems to belong in three places simultaneously. At the same time, entanglement as methodology supports my practice-as-research-as-practice approach and my positionality as practitioner, pedagogue, producer, and researcher. Rather than force an artificial distinction between these positions, entanglement creates the space for me to speak from a place of integrated praxis, pulling on the many threads of experience, conversation, research, and analysis.

I take a second lens of analysis from Laurajane Smith's reframing of heritage as doing (briefly introduced earlier in relationship to the postvernacular). The last few decades have seen a shift in the critical understanding of heritage, moving towards understanding heritage not as a thing, or static concept, but as a process, an act, a performance. It is an act in which, to repeat a quotation, "certain cultural and social meanings and values are identified, reaffirmed, or rejected. . . ." (Smith, "The 'Doing' of Heritage" 70). If heritage is a process, then all heritage is intangible and, by thinking about heritage as intangible, "We open up a wider conceptual space within which to reconsider not only the nature of heritage but also how it is used, and the work that it does in society" (70). The idea of heritage as doing suggests a reflectiveness on the part of the practitioner, an active engagement of asking questions and making choices about what aspects of cultural practice are being revitalized and cultivated, and what aspects are being left behind.

Recognizing heritage as a process must include understanding memory and identity as entangled, always plural and heterogenous, always interpretive. No two people will have the same experience of a fragment, a performance, or cultural event. Far from expecting them to have a singular experience, how might this framing of heritage as doing help cultural workers hold space for multiple – and often conflicting – experiences? Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes heritage as a mode of cultural production and also stresses the importance of studying heritage as a “metacultural phenomenon,” seeking to understand how heritage interventions “change how people understand their culture and themselves” by changing “the fundamental conditions for cultural production and reproduction” (*Destination* 131–76; “Intangible Heritage” 169–171).

Lastly, I have sought to include an understanding of embodied experience in my analysis. I was not fully aware of the ways I was bringing embodiment into my writing until my supervisor drew my attention to it. Attention drawn, I have worked to lean into embodied description as I feel that I bring embodiment to my analysis in a way that is missing in most other ethnographic and historical research about the Yiddish cultural scene, including research where dance is being analyzed. In her summary of the “corporeal turn” in Jewish studies, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett provocatively asks what a more embodied, sensuous, and affective approach to studying Jews and Jewish culture would look like (“Bodies” 177)? She notes that resistance towards “a concern with the body” in Jewish studies tends to reflect an anxiety about an interdisciplinary approach through which Jewish history, religion, and culture are analyzed, drawing from methodologies in

the fields of feminism, gender and sexuality, diaspora, and postmodernism studies (“Bodies” 172). In addition, she notes that much of the attention paid to the body and emotions has been in the context of pathology and trauma. These two points are striking to me in particular because first, an interdisciplinary, feminist, queer, diasporic approach to Yiddishkayt and Jewishness is exactly what emerges in this study and, second, because I activate the body in relationship to celebratory spaces and evolving cultural practices. In using embodied experience as a lens of analysis I try, as Kirshenblatt-Gimblett suggests, to “attend to the emotional dimensions of Jewish life . . . in ways that would rethink the mind (thought)/body (feeling) binary” (“Bodies” 177). In doing so, I also draw upon the discipline of dance ethnography in which the researcher should carefully describe not only what the body is doing from the outside but what the experience of the body is from the inside. The experience of the body from the inside is subjective, of course, but no less part of the dance. Although I do not see this research as being about dance, nor a work of dance ethnography, my life as a dancer and my work as a Yiddish dance teacher informs the way I participate in a cultural practice or event, and the way I observe people around me. Finally, as dance studies scholar Anthea Kraut reminds us, archival evidence rarely divulges an embodied reality (14). This leads to an invisibilization of the affective qualities of a performance (both for the performer and the viewer). Thus, it is important to me to include embodied experiences, including my own, of the Yiddish cultural scene in my research and record.

Situating Myself

I approach this work both as an insider and an outsider. Yiddishland has been a social and professional community for me since 2003. As an insider, I am ideally placed to approach this project. In roles that range from teacher and facilitator to producer, I travel frequently to Jewish festivals and events across North America and Europe. In these roles, I am often part of or near to decision-making processes around programming and policy. Touring with other artists, I am surrounded by conversations about what we do, and why we do what we do. These conversations extend into my practice, the workshops I teach, and the events I produce. As I became involved in the Yiddish cultural community, however, I often felt as though I came to it as an outsider, without the framework that many of my new peers shared. Though in some ways I identify as a “professional Jew,” I still feel as though I constantly waver along the line of insider/outsider. I grew up in arts spaces but, for the most part, not in Jewish spaces. Although I am Jewish by birth, Jewish cultural practices were not part of my day-to-day education and life when I was a child. I sometimes joke that my childhood Jewish experience was encompassed by occasional summer Shabes potlucks on the beach where we sang songs by Leonard Cohen. While my father played klezmer music, I did not learn the songs, prayers, and practices common to my peers who grew up in North American conservative or reform movements. Because of my lack of familiarity with these aspects of Jewish practice I sometimes still feel disconnected in Jewish spaces. When I first attended KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat in 2003, the newfound experience of

deeply rooted cultural connection changed my artistic, professional, and social life. Even as Yiddishland became home to me, the sense of insider/outsider remained, influencing my research inquiries as I asked how I was, myself, performing Jewish identity.

In December 2022, I stepped into the role of Artistic Director at KlezKanada. As Artistic Director, I work with the Executive Director to co-create a vision and direction for the organization as a whole, as well as curating and producing the program for the Summer Retreat and events throughout the year. I am in a position where I can bring together my work as a scholar, artist, and producer into a programming vision – an exciting location of intersecting praxis! Before accepting the role, I considered if and how it would change my positionality in relation to this research as it was already challenging to navigate my own subjectivity. I feel instead as though the role has helped to clarify my goals and intervention; I now actively use my research in my work as Artistic Director. However, even as the two roles of curator and scholar enrich each other, I also find it more difficult to separate them when I need to. Increasingly, there are days when I look at my notebook, scanning across my list of notes and reminders, and struggle to differentiate between my dissertation and KlezKanada notes and to-dos.

My work is situated in an unusual position for Yiddish cultural scholarship. This research considers the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene and is forward facing. It is situated as close to “now” as I can get, responding to performances and events that occurred during the research and writing period. I do not think of myself as a historian, though I certainly do historical research as

part of my artistic and academic process. I am not a musicologist or ethnomusicologist, nor do I directly study Yiddish language and literature. Instead, the intervention is in the process and reconsideration of community. I see this work as serving the Yiddish cultural community by suggesting tools for creation, pedagogy, and community building as we continue to work with Yiddish culture. The themes, practices, and community that form the content of this dissertation are so entangled with my life that I cannot position myself as objective observer. On the other hand, my positionality as insider/outside is an opportunity to approach my analysis with love and my critiques with goal of supporting the community in its growth. I have found aid, support, wisdom, and inspiration in the work of cultural practitioners from other traditions. Many of us are asking the same questions within our specific contexts. While this research is specific to the Yiddish cultural scene, I hope that it can be helpful to cultural workers in other scenes as well – particularly those that centre around cultural practices that engage with tradition.

Following a methodology of entanglement, I have tried to offer the interventions and findings of this study while reaffirming the diversity of opinion amongst the interviewees and wider community. This study is, to my knowledge, the first to draw specifically on the experience of the group that I have defined as the festival cohort. I extend Jeffrey Shandler’s concept of postvernacularity to a cultural landscape, showing how the festival cohort brings a critical intentionality to the way they engage with Yiddish cultural practices and Jewish identity. They expand Yiddish cultural space through their work with cultural fragments, mobilize collective

myths towards world-building practices that are socially and politically engaged, and build transnational community through the creation of temporary social infrastructure.

In the sections that follow, Chapter Two provides a conversation with the festival cohort. I bring voices into conversation with each other to discuss the ways we understand our relationship to tradition and our role as culture bearers. In Chapter Three, I discuss the Backwards March, an annual community performance at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat, situating the practice in relationship to diaspora and looking at the creative and socio-political possibilities of juxtaposition and spaces in-between. In Chapter Four, I analyze the ways that the concepts of *shtetl* and *Yiddishland* are activated in the Yiddish cultural scene by discussing two interdisciplinary art projects, Daniel Toretsky's *Floating Shtetl* and the Yiddishland Pavilion, from curators Yevgeniy Fiks and Maria Veits. In the concluding chapter, I discuss my approach to Yiddish dance pedagogy, making the leap from the dance floor to community building.

CHAPTER TWO: LIVING AND CREATING WITH YIDDISH CULTURE

In her interview for the Wexler Oral History Project in 2010, the beloved singer, teacher, researcher, organizer, and activist Adrienne Cooper z"l was asked what her advice might be to future generations working with Yiddish culture. She answered that she hoped they would be “bold and fearless.” “What I’d like future generations to know,” she said “is that this culture belongs to them, that they have a right to take it, to explore it, to create something of their own.” It will take courage, she observed, because there has been a break in transmission so that cultural literacy now takes more work and commitment. Acknowledging the responsibility involved in the undertaking, she added, “It is a crazy project to try to live and create something of this culture. . . . And I wish for them that kind of courage and recklessness, you know, to just throw themselves at it and to own it. Because the culture needs them” (2010). The Yiddish festival cohort, defined in Chapter One as the first cohort of Yiddish cultural workers to come to Yiddish through festival environments, are one of the future generations called to by Adrienne Cooper. If, as anthropologist Laurajane Smith suggests, we consider heritage as a form of doing that reveals something about the doer, what do we learn about the desires and motivations of the Yiddish festival cohort by examining their relationship with traditional cultural practices (70)? How are they, as Cooper wished, living and creating something of this culture?

This chapter builds upon the historical and theoretical background offered in the introduction and sets the stage for the following chapters by analyzing three central, and interconnected, characteristics of the festival cohort that emerged through my research interviews. These are: an entangled understanding of “tradition,” a commitment to socially-engaged cultural practice, and a dedication to fostering the social and professional infrastructure of the community. The first section of this chapter will examine how, through cultural practice, this cohort resists static and singular understanding of “tradition” and embraces a playful yet rooted and researched approach to traditional cultural practice. Next, by analyzing the work of Tsibele, a klezmer band from Brooklyn, I will look at how politically-engaged artist-activists in the Yiddish cultural scene transform traditional cultural practices and materials into tools for radical change-making in the struggle for a more just world. Finally, I will examine the ways that artists and scholars are seeking, finding, and creating what they describe as a “home” in the Yiddish scene as they establish core values through shared forms of cultural practice and cultivate social infrastructure based on those values. Each section illustrates how the festival cohort embraces an ethics of expansion in relation to tradition, carrying forward the work of the klezmer revival in re-expanding the canon and community of Yiddish cultural practice. I suggest that this ethics of expansion is part of the resistance to singular narratives: it is hard to be reductive about history while seeking to expand the repertoire.

This chapter is a conversation between friends. While the fragments of the conversation are drawn from interviews, any of these exchanges might have happened (and do happen) off-tape, whether over coffee or across a table laden with holiday food. For this reason, I use first names to refer to the artists referenced and quoted. In this case, I am weaving our voices together in conversation after the fact. Even as I highlight the characteristics listed above, I want to emphasize that the conversation is entangled and resists singular narratives, pushing back against the insistence on overarching conclusions that is so often part of academic discourse. I have aimed to identify resonances between conversations and to propose theoretical frameworks through which to interpret what I hear, see, and feel.

Recipes for Working with Tradition

When asked to define the word tradition, Brooklyn-based Yiddish singer Sarah Gordon, drew upon a plant analogy: “To me, tradition is something that’s rooted in the past that continues to grow. . . . I think tradition is the thing that is the grounding part of culture and art and music and life – all of those things” (2019). Sarah was not the only one to use a metaphor to describe tradition; it is a concept that is hard to pin down without analogy. Musician and singer Eleonore Weill (France/Brooklyn) turned to food: “It’s like [a] salad bowl. The same green base, but then you add different toppings. Or chocolate cakes, of course, but with different toppings.

You have the recipe. It's the common recipe that's passed from generation to generation to generation from your great, great, great, great grandparents. But each time you add a new line of 'what about doing it with this'" (2019).

From the Latin *tradere*, which means "to give," "to deliver," or "to hand down," the word tradition resists a singular meaning. In scholarship, definitions of the word are slippery at best and this slippage illustrates changing attitudes towards the idea and the varied conceptual tasks assigned to the concept. Historically, tradition as a self-conscious concept emerged at a time when, as anthropologist Nelson Graburn writes, people became increasingly aware of societal change and, along with it, "the possibility of the inability to hand things down" (6). In those historical situations, the cultural practices and processes of transmission previously taken for granted were given a name – tradition. This rising awareness of change and continuity had two sides. On the one hand, "tradition was the name given to those cultural features which, in situations of change, were to be continued to be handed on, thought about, preserved and not lost" (Graburn 6). On the other hand, from the European Enlightenment era, tradition was seen as something to leave behind in favour of rationalism, "progress," and science. In his book, *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings*, Gabriel Levine describes how self-proclaimed modernizing forces positioned tradition as a static concept in opposition to progress as a justification for projects of nationhood, colonization, and urbanization (41). At the same time, claiming, naming, and performing a set of traditions – a process that often included changing those traditions

through heightened performances of such – was a key strategy in the construction of European nationalism (see Levine, Gottesman, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Graburn). Graburn points to these conflicting forces and argues that modernity, usually seen as a break with a past way of being, is bound up with concepts of tradition both in the way that it imbues new practices with authority by naming them as traditions and in the way that the forces of modernism become fascinated with preserving the past. He notes that Christianity, as a proselytizing religion, found itself flipping from one side to another of the binary: “Christianity may have thought itself progressive, but it was also a ‘pre-modern tradition’ that was very much threatened by scientific rationalism” (7). This illustrates that even within the fabricated tradition/modernity binary there has always been narrative slippage.

The notion of tradition as static, it turns out, is a loud narrative but not the only story. Folklorist Dan Ben-Amos observes that folklorists came to understand tradition and modernity as “mutually complementary social and cultural phenomena” much earlier than social scientists (101). If “tradition is a self-conscious category,” modernity is likewise a category that self-consciously constructs the idea of a then and now, a modern and pre-modern (Linnekin qtd in Ben-Amos 116). Observing rather than attempting a definition, Ben-Amos notes that the meaning of the word tradition is often taken for granted but is far from fixed. He identifies seven variations in the way the word has been used in folklore studies: tradition as lore, as canon, as process, as mass (material), as a synonym of culture, as “*langue*” or a system of knowledge, and as

performance (“The Seven Strands of Tradition”). Through these variations, tradition maintains a relationship to the past and present, and sometimes to the future. “Accept, to begin,” writes folklorist Henry Glassie, “that tradition is the creation of the future out of the past” (395). In this way, conceptualizations of tradition mirror those of cultural memory, which is understood to draw upon the past through the lens of and in response to the needs of the present (see Erll).

Glassie positions the character of tradition as one of continuity but not sameness in that people are continuously and intentionally creating their present by drawing upon their past. In this sense, he argues that “Historians need tradition. For one thing, it would wean them from their obsession with rupture, free them from the need to segment time into trim periods, and enable them to face the massive fact of continuity” (396). This somewhat impudently-expressed reasoning pushes back against the binary of static versus fluid. In fact, Glassie suggests that the opposite of tradition “is not change but oppression,” particularly when power perverts or prevents the development of tradition (396). This contrasts with the characterization of tradition as oppressive, a frame that is propagated through pejorative sketches such as the internet meme that reads: “Tradition is just peer pressure from dead people.” Reinforcing the tradition/modernity binary by situating tradition as something static that resides in the past and is imposed upon us, this meme ironically reveals a projection from living people rather than from “dead people.”

If, instead, we consider change as a constant characteristic of tradition, we open the space to ask critical questions about that change. For example, if tradition is canon: Who gets to define that canon and how does that canon expand or contract over time? What is included in the canon and, importantly, what isn't included in the canon? How does the process of canon formation contribute to group identity formation? And who is included and excluded in that process? Any codification of cultural practice, as anthropologist Aaron Glass emphasizes, encodes only the visible and the observable. Here, I arrive at key questions vis-a-vis tradition: Who gets to define what is understood as tradition or traditional and who does not? When does that process concentrate and when does it expand the canon? Writing about the uses to which the idea of tradition is put, Glass examines the way that ethnographic processes are part of a feedback loop of codification and revival for the Kwakwaka-wakw First Nations peoples on the North West coast of North America. "Ethnography tends to codify and 'entextualize' what were fluid practices, thereby turning process into product," Glass observes. The process of codification results in a crystallization of these practices which are then laid out ready for a revival based on the limited canon delineated in the text ("Intention of Traditon" 280). Glass highlights the importance of observing "the ways in which people invoke concepts of tradition to negotiate, validate, contest, and control contemporary cultural transformations" (282). Here again, as with Laurajane Smith's work on heritage, we have a reminder to pay attention to how a concept is being used and defined. Glass points out that, while the concept of "traditional" is increasingly

understood to be a social construction, recognizing cultural practices as continuously changing destabilizes arguments about authenticity and origin which can undermine the legal battles that Indigenous peoples are too often forced to participate in to establish their right to cultural identity and land rights (281). In times of contested identity, Glass observes, communities are more likely to attempt to exert control over what is understood to be tradition and traditional. The static nature of tradition is a “retroprojection” because the illusion of a stable past can serve to authenticate present practices and legitimate group identity (Glass 281, 296, 299).³⁸

In the ways that my interviewees think about tradition and their place within tradition, I hear a resistance to singular narratives that pushes back against static notions of origin and authenticity. Instead, their reflections embrace change and ask questions about what it means to safeguard something that is constantly changing.³⁹ Leah Koenig, a food writer and cookbook author based in Brooklyn, showed me how Eleonore’s recipe analogy is an accurate reflection of how Jewish food has evolved and transformed. Leah said that one of the main things that people get wrong when thinking about Jewish food – just as with other cultural practices – is that they assume that it is static. They don’t see Jewish food as changing, but rather that “it’s just the same [thing] that your *Bubbe* [grandmother] and your Bubbe’s Bubbe, and your Bubbe’s Bubbe’s

³⁸ In my work as a cultural producer I have observed that retroprojections around tradition are formed surprisingly quickly. It isn’t unusual, for example, to hear a participant at KlezKanada refer to an event (whether formal or informal) as something that always happens when in fact that event has only taken place once or twice before.

³⁹ For a range of contemporary perspectives on shifts in enactments of Jewishness in performance in Canada, see *Jewish Performance*, a special issue of the Canadian Theatre Review, edited by Laura Levin and Belarie Zatzman.

Bubbe always made and that's it" (2019). Nostalgic attachment combined with misunderstanding means that "if you go outside of those boundaries then you've ruined everything" (2019). Leah went on to explain that this is an unrealistic understanding of Jewish food history. For one thing, it fails to take into consideration the movement of people, which seems ironic since migration is so embedded in Jewish liturgy and history. "Jewish food has to evolve or it will die," Leah emphasized. "Jews move places, and all of a sudden, an Ashkenazi Jew is living in Mexico City and they have all of these chilies that they never used before. They have avocado, and they have cilantro. And so those ingredients find their way into the traditional dishes in a really organic and beautiful way. And that story happens over and over and over – and has throughout history" (2019).

Leah's cookbooks showcase and celebrate the rich pluralism of Jewish food. She observed that the silos around Jewish food are slowly breaking down, crediting, in part, increased access to information about global food cultures: "... there was just no awareness that there was life beyond *tzimes*⁴⁰ and brisket, if you were Ashkenazi, or life beyond *Chraime* – the Moroccan spiced fish and tomato dish. It was more siloed. I think the approach today is a lot more cross-cultural within Jewish tradition, which is exciting" (2019). In her introduction to *The Jewish Cookbook*, a compendium of over 400 recipes from around the world published in 2019, Leah

⁴⁰ *Tzimes* is a sweet and savory side dish made with root vegetables, such as carrots and sweet potatoes, and often including dried fruit.

writes: “My own definition for Jewish cuisine . . . is that it includes any dish that holds cultural, sacred, or ritual significance to the Jewish communities (and their friends) that cook and eat it. What that looks like in practice is not the same today as it will be tomorrow” (12). The way Leah describes it, innovation is inherently part of tradition: pitting tradition against innovation creates a false binary. Instead, this history of change is part of the tradition. In other words, rather than the history being Bubbe’s *blintzes* (a rolled and stuffed thin pancake), the history is that Bubbe’s blintzes are a bit different every time.

When we understand tradition as static, we participate in a paradox of remembering and forgetting. “Memory is a process that depends crucially on forgetting,” says performance studies scholar Joseph Roach (2): forgetting can smooth over the changes or provide the basis for resistance. To resist what is seen as a break in tradition, you have to forget that tradition is a long history of breaks. The tradition that is currently taken as sacred is only the most recent evolution of a long trajectory. Roach suggests that “the relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure” (6). Judith Butler also emphasizes the change that is inherent to tradition when she writes that “tradition is itself established through departing from itself, again and again” (*Parting Ways* 8). She goes on to argue that the very process of drawing upon tradition as a resource for understanding and constructing the present results in that change (8). Roach proposes the term “surrogation” for the process by which change occurs through performance in the transmission of cultural practice. Surrogation is a constant and ongoing filling of vacancies,

whether “actual or perceived,” in the social fabric of a community (2). Roach’s classic example is “The King is dead. Long live the King!” The king exists as both a “body natural” – a corporeal body capable of decay – and a “body politic” – which is immortal (38). The idea of the king is ongoing, even as the body of the king is replaced by a different body. The surrogate, the replacement, is never perfect. It cannot mimic the original exactly. And so surrogation must involve change. The surrogate may strive for un-interruption, but change is always a part of the process. Roach emphasizes that “in the place that is being held open there also exists an invisible network of allegiances, interests, and resistances” (39). Returning to the Yiddish community, the gap that opens between the performed (the “original”) and the reperformance (the “surrogate”) is a space where artists are bringing intentionality to the way they make change. That invisible network is becoming visible because artists are discussing their motivations and strategies not only with each other but also with their students and audiences. Tradition is dead; long live tradition.

In the metaphors used by those I interviewed, tradition is a thread that links the changes together. Tradition is the body natural, the individual adaptation and interpretation of the recipe, and the body politic, the recipe that is handed down and slowly evolves as interpretations become part of what is passed on. Leah placed her work within this process:

I think that what I do is just part of the story that’s been happening throughout history. It just so happens that, for us in the 21st century, contemporary food means using bright

flavours, using global flavours, using food from the farmers market, having an emphasis on freshness, having an emphasis on vegetables and things like that. So I take those things and I bring them to the recipes in the structures that have come before. Maybe I'll take a matzo ball [a dumpling made from the meal or crumbs of a matzo, a specific type of unleavened bread] and I'll brighten it with lemon zest. And maybe I'll throw some shitake mushrooms that I've sautéed with onions into the mix and make something that is both familiar and structurally the same, but plays flavour wise. (2019)

Illustrating how “the tradition is the evolution,” Leah told me about gefilte fish. Gefilte fish is a staple of many Ashkenazic Jewish festival meals. “Gefilte” means stuffed in Yiddish, and Leah told me that, historically, gefilte fish were just that. You opened up the fish, took out all the insides, processed them, and then stuffed it back into the skin and sewed it up “so it looked like a fish and then you roasted or poached that . . . and then you would serve that and slice it” (2019). Today, at least in North America, when most people think of gefilte fish, they think of patties, or quenelles, possibly made by hand but just as likely out of a jar. “Both are incredibly valid as a dish,” Leah emphasized, “but they’re completely different. There’s nothing too “gefilte” about gefilte fish today” (2019). Jeff Yoskowitz and Liz Alpern, the founders of the Brooklyn-based culinary company Gefilteria penned a “Gefilte Manifesto” to capture their own Jewish food aspirations. “We’ve come to see,” they wrote in their first cookbook, “that the wisdom of the Jewish cooks from the Old World and the knowledge they brought with them and applied to their kitchens in

North America, offers incredible insights that should inform how we all cook today” (3). Here Leah, Jeff, and Liz manifest the recipe metaphor of tradition in their work, carrying forward an underpinning concept and adding their own ingredients. In addition to research and writing, all three perform their approach to tradition through cooking workshops, speaking engagements, and television appearances. When someone invariably points out that Leah is “doing it wrong,” she gently offers: “I didn’t do it wrong. I did it differently” (2019). Here again is the tension between tradition as repetition without difference and repetition with difference. Contrary to the meme that framed tradition as peer pressure from dead people, the pressure to amplify set ideas about Yiddish culture comes from the living and reveals their own understanding about the past and present.

It is easy to get trapped into using the word tradition in ways that contradict ourselves. For example, Leah described how she often ends up saying “I know this is not the traditional way to do it but here’s why I chose to do that” even though she sees tradition as evolving (2019). One strategy employed widely by scholars, artists, and organizations alike is to use the term “living tradition/s” to differentiate from static forms. This is a useful distinction even though it is somewhat redundant and simultaneously reinforces a dead/living binary. Another strategy I have employed in my teaching has been to separate “traditional” from “historical.” For example, when I teach dance, students sometimes ask me how the dances were done “traditionally.” Usually, students are really asking how dances were performed at a specific period of time, although often

the question references an amorphous idea of a static pre-Holocaust past reified into the term “historical” or “authentic.” To this end, “historically” is a more accurate way to describe a period-specific cultural practice but should be further qualified by a time period if possible. I also find that the question about how dances were “traditionally” performed is linked to a sense that the individual wants to dance more “authentically.” Here again, by shifting to the word “historical,” we can open up a conversation about how traditions shift and what tradition looks like as we carry forward these dance forms in our contemporary bodies. Authenticity, as sought after by my dance students, invokes a bounded narrative in which someone (whether the state, the museum, UNESCO, or the Jewish Federation) defines what and who is correctly interpreting a practice. The reification of folk traditions as authentic is a selling point, whether you are selling a national identity or tickets to a dance performance.⁴¹

Another example from my dance classes illustrates the impossibility of authenticity in cultural practice. As a Yiddish dance artist and leader, I understand my practice as pulling from the past into the present. We move in contemporary bodies that are socialized by the world around us; our bodies are not the same as they were fifty years ago, let alone one hundred years ago. We are wearing different fashions and different shoes, have eaten different foods, and are moving across different types of surfaces. We cannot be historical bodies, but we can draw upon

⁴¹ See Kraut on the work of Zora Neal Hurston, and Glass on legal fights of the Kwakwaka-wakw to reclaim sovereignty.

historical practice through our bodies. I problematize the concept of authenticity by encouraging my students to consider how the past is drafted into the present through many layers. I began to study Yiddish dance with Michael Alpert and Walter Zev Feldman when I was in my early 20s. I remember Michael Alpert demonstrating women's dance style. He had danced with Bronya Sakina when she was in her 80s. She was a beautiful dancer and her body was the beautiful dancing body of an older woman. This meant that I was a young woman learning women's style as embodied by a middle-aged man's body who had learned from an older woman's body. How then was I to interpret these gestures in my own body? How, I imagined, might Bronya have danced as a young woman? Would her centre of balance have been different? What range of motion would she have had in her arms? Would she have taken bigger steps? Somewhat later, videos of Bronya dancing were shared with me; although the film allowed me to see Bronya herself, she was still mediated, now by the film upon which she was captured.

Interpreting historical style is a navigation of layers. In my style, I can feel the layers of mediation as a series of intentional and conscious choices about interpretation. For example, when I lead a *bulgar* (a specific Yiddish circle dance) and I feel my energy dropping, I channel Michael Alpert's active but fluid energy in my leading arm and that intentionality reinvigorates my whole body. My body has changed in the twenty years since I began to learn Yiddish dance, and that has changed my own interpretation of the movement. I have a better understanding of the way that the posture we can observe in videos of Bronya and others is centred, and how to

achieve that grounded stature by imagining an extension that reaches down through the spine towards the floor. I can feel the very process of transmission as I add my own layers and teaching techniques to the repertoire that I now pass on. Since I began to teach Yiddish dance, social understandings of gender have also shifted; most students in my workshops are not looking to dance a gendered style. Because of this, when I do reference “women’s” or “men’s” style, it is only in the context of a historical form. Those elements of style become part of the larger movement vocabulary that any student can draw upon. When we consider the layers of mediation, the tension between the historical body and the contemporary body, the new contexts and spaces we now dance in, our changing understandings of gender and gender power dynamics, and the tempo of the music, we destabilize a static understanding of “authenticity.” The choices made by the dancer as they navigate these layers are the ingredients to the recipe for traditional Yiddish dance.

Having observed this intentional destabilizing of the “authentic,” I asked the artists I interviewed whether they felt a sense of responsibility towards cultural practices and materials in their work and teaching. Eleonore Weill told me: “I feel very responsible, [for] knowing exactly how it was, and in detail, [so] that I can make it something different. And then, if I change something, it’s conscious, and it’s aware, and I know I’m choosing to do that” (2019). Here she highlights the sense that a rigorous understanding of historical cultural practice and context is necessary for the recipe metaphor. What I heard is that the more engaged with the cultural

practice artists became, the more they felt it important to understand the practice within its historical context and development. While people expressed that it is vital to the continuation of the culture to make it their own, they also emphasized that a sense of rootedness is also important, meaning that experiments with cultural practice should be grounded in an understanding of the history, context, and development of that practice. Zoë Aqua articulated her approach to tradition as a multi-directional movement: “. . . to me, it’s that feeling of always moving backwards and moving forwards at the same time” (2019). Leah Koenig told me she thought that, without this sense of rootedness, it was possible to go too far, taking the recipe past recognition: “For me, it’s always important that there be some kind of touchstone. You have to be able to recognize it. You have to be able to honour the tradition, honour what came before, honour the history, before you can play around. You can’t just wrap a matzo ball in bacon and call it a day” (2019).⁴²

In discussing ideas of tradition and authenticity in the Yiddish cultural scene with the Yiddish festival cohort, it became clear that this group is highly self-reflective in their approach to cultural practice. Research is widely considered part of the practice and questions, process, and values alike are discussed openly and often – both in professional and personal settings. The critical awareness of positionality within the process of cultural performance and pedagogy is an

⁴² Leah is making a joke here to emphasize her point. Bacon is *treyf* (not kosher) and is often used to represent the ultimate forbidden food for Jews.

indicator of the postvernacular fluency of the cohort. This critical awareness stems from several factors including the high level of cross-over between artistic and academic modes of engagement in the community, and the changing nature of our reference points (as discussed in the introduction). Many of our teachers and mentors were embedded in the cultural revival of Yiddish music which led to the experience of the revival being transmitted to us along with the cultural practices themselves. For example, we learned how Adrienne Cooper taught Yiddish songs in Russia at a time when, after the dissolution of the USSR, Jews in Russia had been isolated from many of their own cultural practices. Her daughter Sarah Gordon told me: “Mom was there from the beginning . . . she re-taught them their things. She would fill up her suitcase with Mlotek⁴³ books from the *Arbiter Ring*⁴⁴ and redistribute them. And so much of the Yiddish revival there is very clearly a result of that” (2019). In this way, we were taught Yiddish song alongside stories of the ethnographic projects through which those songs were collected as well as models for pedagogy that had transformed the cultural landscape. Self-reflexivity is also a strategy for keeping the work grounded in an individual’s lived experience. This helps performers resist simplistic cultural clichés by emphasizing the entangled nature of tradition.

Having considered the way that the Yiddish festival cohort approaches the idea of tradition, I will turn to considering how they carry this ethos into the ways they live and create in

⁴³ *The Yosl and Chana Mlotek Yiddish Song Collection.*

⁴⁴ *Der Arbiter Ring* is the Yiddish name of The Worker’s Circle.

the Yiddish cultural scene. In the next section, I will look at the klezmer band Tsibele, which showcases an expansive approach to Yiddish cultural tradition through the explicitly political orientation of their performances. With an explicit commitment to cultural literacy, the band integrates archival materials, original compositions, and storytelling into their calls for social change.

Vos iz vikhtik: Yiddish Culture as an Instrument for Social Change

In 2017 the Brooklyn-based klezmer band Tsibele began to sell sew-on patches that read “*Mir veln zey iberlebn.*” This translates to “we will outlive them.” The story, as Tsibele tells it in performance, is one of resistance during World War II. Lined up at the edge of their own graves and ordered by the Nazi soldiers to dance and sing, the people of Lublin put new words to a familiar song. Chanting “*mir veln zey iberlebn,*” they danced in the face of their own death.⁴⁵ Struck by this story, band member Ira Temple⁴⁶ created a participatory anthem for Tsibele to perform. On their Bandcamp page, they speak to their use of the slogan in this way:

⁴⁵ In a handout they include with patches, Tsibele cites Eliezer Berkowiz’s book, *With God in Hell*, as the source of this story. The song referred to in this story is “Lomir Zikh Iberbetn, Ovinu Shebashomayim,” which can be found, along with reference to Berkowiz, in *The Yosl and Chana Mlotek Yiddish Song Collection*: <https://yiddishsongs.org/lomir-zikh-iberbetn-ovinu-shebashomayim/>. In performance, Tsibele has linked their chant to another better-known folk song with a similar name: “Lomir zikh iberbetn,” found at <https://yiddishsongs.org/lomir-zikh-iberbetn/>. In a video from their album release show at Jalopy Theater in Brooklyn on November 7, 2017, Ira notes the combination of these two songs and jokes about conflation of sources being a common occurrence in the folk process (Tsibele 2017).

⁴⁶ Ira requested that I use Ira’s name instead of pronouns.

Our resistance song comes from that night.

It's not uncomplicated. So many of us did not, have not, outlived.

But this is a slogan of determination.

It's a love note to every person working to make the 'we' who will outlive them bigger and fuller and stronger. (tsibele.bandcamp.com/merch)



Image 2.1. Iron-on patch reading “*Mir veyn zey iberlebn*” (We will outlive them), created and sold by the band Tsibele. Photo © Avia Moore.

In the wake of the 2018 shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh, PA, sales of patches surged, with “mir veyn zey iberlebn” becoming a rallying cry in “the subsequent national conversation about white nationalist violence” (Aqua 2019). Violinist Zoë Aqua reflected: “It’s a very strange feeling to be selling these at times like those. . . . It’s positive to be providing

something that people gain strength from, but definitely strange and sad to have to deal with this violence to begin with” (Tsibele, “Badges”). Ira added: “It felt really good to put so many envelopes in the mail to so many people who were looking for connection. In addition to the patches we’ve sold, we’ve given dozens to be used by security teams in marches and demos – in Pittsburgh for example and in New York. We’ve also heard that security at the Highlander Center, which was recently targeted for arson by white supremacists, uses our badges as identification” (Tsibele, “Badges”).⁴⁷ As cultural critic Rokhl Kafrissen points out, these badges (as well as a “new generation” of Yiddish stickers, shirts, and more) trouble earlier analyses of Yiddish wearable kitsch (see Shandler’s *Adventures in Yiddishland*) in the way that they foreground “radical (mostly left) politics” (Kafrissen, “World of Our Stickers”). It was this little badge that led me to interview members of Tsibele as part of this project. Individually and as a group the band is an example of artists intentionally using Yiddish language and culture in their social and political activism.

Formed in 2015, and composed of female and non-binary musicians, Tsibele is Zoë Aqua (violin, voice), Eva Boodman (trumpet, voice), Zoe Guigueno (bass, voice), Ira Temple (accordion, voice), and Eleonore Weill (wooden flutes, hurdy gurdy, voice).⁴⁸ The band aspires to

⁴⁷ Highlander Research and Education Center provides leadership training for grassroots social justice movements in Appalachia and the Southern USA (Highlander Center).

⁴⁸ I interviewed Zoë Aqua, Ira Temple, and Eleonore Weill for this research. As I did not interview Zoe Guigueno, all references to Zoë are to Zoë Aqua. At the time of writing, the group is inactive but not disbanded.

a complex and rich sound, like the layers of the onion, the root from which it takes its name.

“Tsibele is roots,” Zoë told me, “We’re all about roots music, and also onions doing this unseen labor of women’s work and adding flavour and depth” (2019). As a band, they try to work democratically and collaboratively, making decisions together. It is not seamless; they all agree that they don’t always agree. “It’s been interesting to figure out how that democratic system can work and still be productive,” Zoë remarked (2019). Zoë, Ira, and Eleonore all stressed how important it is to them that they prioritize finding their own sounds and their own stories as individuals within the group. Their musical backgrounds are varied, from “more formally experimental” to classical training that “drills down really, really deep” to jazz and brass. “So all of this is happening in this brew,” Ira said, adding that the group hopes that their differences feed into a collective strength (2019). As they were forming, Tsibele rehearsed regularly and sought out different kinds of opportunities to play so that they could figure out who they were as a band (Aqua 2019, Temple 2019). “We developed this repertoire that was kind of half dance party, half . . . this more art music stuff, lyrics, satire, more political, all this different stuff,” Ira recalled, “And I remember really feeling like they informed each other and really liking that” (Temple 2019).

The band creates the structure for a space where they can each bring new material, whether original material or source material that they find interesting and want to explore. Zoë explained that the person who introduces the material usually takes the lead in arranging, but that there is still room – and the invitation – for input from the other members of the band

(2019). Band members have different approaches to working with source material: writing a new melody to existing text, adding their own touch or new lyrics to an existing song or melody, or building a song around a story (as in the case with “Mir veln zey iberlebn”). Ira observed: “I think that, at its best, our world has this thing, which is a willingness to use old tradition to make new tradition” (2019).

Eleonore told me she feels the band strives to find the ways that the stories become their own. They want to be aware of the world around them, and not be stuck in the past. She said that her own approach to the music has changed. Whereas she used to be “obsessed” with the ghosts that are part of the heritage, she now wants to explore how the material can be a message for here and now, including beyond the Jewish community:

When we choose songs to arrange or texts to put into songs, or when I choose even traditional Yiddish songs or klezmer, for me it’s important that it can be something very wide and open. And that can tell the story of anyone in New York, or that could be a message that’s important for anyone in the world. (2019)

In the choosing of messages, the members of Tsibele are passionately political; the work of the band reflects their anti-fascist position. “Not everybody has exactly the same politic,” noted Ira, “But there’s a sort of a shared politic, and there’s a shared set of political experiences. And there’s different political communities that we’re adjacent to, and there’s a desire to create something that is relevant to the people that we know and care about, and work with, and struggle with”

(Temple 2019). In particular, members of the band are adjacent to political communities that fight for racial justice, anti-Zionism and Palestinian rights, Queer and Trans rights, and anti-fascism. Zoë, Ira, and Eleonore have all been part of the Rude Mechanical Orchestra (RMO) at times. A “radical marching band,” the RMO supports “people and communities working for social justice” through performance (RMO, “About”). Ira described the brass band culture of RMO as being “on the spectrum of usable culture, movable culture, culture that is part of a community” (2019).

Several members of Tsibele also have deep connections to a *Purimshpil* put on each year by the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee for the Jewish holiday of Purim.⁴⁹ This long-running project is supported by Jews for Racial and Economic Justice (JFREJ) and the New York Worker’s Circle and “has become a political-carnival institution” in the overlapping political and Jewish communities it engages (Levine 74).⁵⁰ The *Purimshpil* builds and strengthens partnerships between JFREJ and other allied organizations and offers a “rare time when we get to see our political partners as multidimensional people, coming from cultural strength and resourcefulness” (Nepon). Tsibele members are inspired and influenced by their involvement with projects like the RMO and the Aftselokhes *Purimshpil*. In fact, finding out about this

⁴⁹ Purim is a Jewish holiday that remembers the biblical story of Esther. The holiday is a raucous one and often marked by a “*purimshpil*” which is a play that retells and comments upon the story.

⁵⁰ For an in-depth analysis of the Aftselokhes Spectacle Committee’s *Purimshpil*, see Chapter 2 of *Art and Tradition in a Time of Uprisings* by Gabriel Levine.

Purimshpil was a turning point in Ira's relationship to Jewish culture: "it was this place where there was Jewish culture that was queer and political and immediate and so vibrant, and actually world-creating – actually creating a place that was so encompassing and rich that it showed that another world was possible" (2019).

The perceived affinity between Yiddish culture and political action has a rich history. In the "Political Affiliation" chapter of his book *Yiddish: Biography of a Language*, Jeffrey Shandler outlines some of the ways Yiddish language and culture (especially songs) have been used to political ends. In an effort to mobilize Jews across Eastern Europe and immigrant communities, political organizers turned to Yiddish because it was the language of the Jewish masses. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, this tactic was employed by Jewish organizers across communist, socialist, unionist, and anarchist causes (to name a few), as well as by Zionists even as Zionism embraced the idea of adopting a modern Hebrew as the preferred language of a future Jewish state (Shandler, *Yiddish* 150). In the early twentieth century, Yiddish language advocates also gathered around the language as an ideology, a movement that will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Three. This Yiddish ideology was increasingly grounded in diasporic principles which placed value on the places where Jews lived and the languages they spoke (Shandler, *Yiddish* 153, 154).

Recently, scholars have turned their attention to the intersection of Yiddish and anarchism before 1930, a history obscured by the rise of the more widely accepted Jewish labour

movement. In 2019, YIVO hosted a conference entitled “Yiddish Anarchism: New Scholarship on a Forgotten Tradition” (YIVO, “Conference Schedule”). In an interview with *Jewish Currents Magazine*, Anna Elena Torres and Kenyon Zimmer, conference presenters and editors of *With Freedom in Our Ears: Histories of Jewish Anarchism*, point out that Yiddish anarchists focused their work through Yiddish language and cultural production rather than simply using Yiddish as a medium for communication (*Jewish Currents*, “The Lost World of Yiddish Anarchists”).⁵¹

Linking the political affiliations of Yiddish to postvernacularity, Shandler writes that “In the decades since the Holocaust, Yiddish has emerged as a political voice in new ways, involving a variety of populations, ideologies, and agendas as well as different ideas of the language’s symbolic value” (162). Among other motivations for studying Yiddish, Shandler suggests that, for activists, learning and/or using Yiddish functions as a way to “forge a symbolic bond with earlier progressive activists” (163). Activated in a diverse set of contexts – from memorialization to protests to pedagogical spaces – this political-infused Yiddishkayt has been kept central to the Yiddish cultural scene, particularly through Yiddish labour, partisan, and resistance songs which are widely taught, sung, and performed. Jewish summer camps, particularly those run by socialist,

⁵¹ Torres’ 2024 book, *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish: Anarchism and Yiddish Literature*, examines the ways that anarchist thought shaped modern Yiddish literature.

communist, and Yiddishist organizations in Canada and the United States played a role in transmitting these songs as anthems.⁵²

Tsibele's concert at KlezKanada's 2019 Summer Retreat illustrated how they transform Yiddish song into a conduit for political commentary and solidarity building. After an opening instrumental medley, the first song of their set was "Vos iz vikhtik" ("What is Important"), a contemporary neo-Hasidic song by Ephraim Wachsman. Ira sang the first verse and then translated the Yiddish text over continued instrumentalization from the other band members. The Yiddish text lists things that are important and beautiful: shabes, a good week and a good month, reading a page of Talmud, having good reasoning and sharp insight, the stories of the *tsadikim* (those considered righteous, often spiritual masters), a good heart, a warm Jewish song. Each verse ends with the reminder that one should not mix up what is important and what is not. Ira's translation style for this piece was conversational. Ira added commentary to the translation, drawing upon practices of analysis and interpretation that are central to Jewish text-study. "That's a joke," Ira noted with a laugh to the audience after singing the text that translates to "it's really bitter to have skewed reasoning but it's really sweet to have that portion of bitter herbs that you eat on Passover" (Tsibele 2019). Translating a line as "what's important is what lasts and what's

⁵² "Camp Kinderland at 100," a podcast episode from *Jewish Currents*, provides an excellent introduction to this cultural history. For a more in-depth look at the development of Jewish summer camps in North America, see Sandra Fox, *The Jews of Summer: Summer Camp and Jewish Culture in Postwar America*.

not important is what disappears with time,” Ira drew a connection to KlezKanada’s work of cultural transmission and the 2019 Summer Retreat theme of “Untold Stories,” asking “Really? . . . I feel that really doesn’t fit into the theme of KlezKanada right now . . . why am I singing you a song that tells you exactly the opposite thing?” After three Yiddish verses, Ira switched to commentary in the style of newly-written English verses:

What’s important is so often untranslatable,

What’s important is content that’s relatable,

It can feel important to behave correctly,

There’s just so many times that I don’t live objectively.

*Vos iz vikhtik and vos iz nisht, me tor nit vern tsemisht.*⁵³

Some guy who wrote the Talmud, he was something of a dunce,

He said that hearing women sing was just like looking at their cunts.

That’s the reason, on paper, that women’s voices

Don’t appear in public when certain people have choices

⁵³ This is the ending line of each of the previous Yiddish verses and translates as “What is important and what is not, one should not get mixed up.”

But if you're not following *halakha*,⁵⁴ you don't have any excuse – at all! for booking all – male show after all-male show, it's [boring and it sucks].⁵⁵

[Commentary over vamping] It's so funny to say that from stage! I'm like, but I'm on stage. And then I'm like, I feel like I've had a lot of good conversations with people after this song and I'm really grateful.

What's bitter is a movement nobody can dance to.

What's sweet is a relationship where no-one wears the pants.

What's awkward is when people try to guess my gender

[Long pause instead of final line of verse, as people laugh and cheer].

So what would a mediocre white man do,

What would you do if you never had been through,

Every single fucking time that someone doubted

A fresh idea that you had sprouted.

What's important is hearing women sing –

⁵⁴ *Halakha* is the Jewish law according to Jewish scripture.

⁵⁵ Cheering drowns out the final word of the text in the video. I texted Ira to fill in the missing words.

It's really an important thing.

[Ira gestures to the audience and they join in to sing a wordless verse of the song: “dai da dai, yai da dai” etc.] (2019)

The English “mis-translation” of the song intervenes in a conversation about gender representation in the Yiddish cultural scene, especially in terms of performances of klezmer where women and non-binary artists have been historically under-represented at festivals and events.⁵⁶ Ira's version both extends the neo-khasidic questioning of the Yiddish verses and pushes back against an orthodox world view in which women's voices are restricted.⁵⁷

In our interview, Ira worried about the potential for tokenization, that Tsibele might be invited as a performance of gender inclusion rather than as part of an actual culture shift. By this, Ira means that hiring an all-female/non-binary band can be a way for a festival or organization to demonstrate that they are progressive. On the one hand, said Ira, “Yes, employ us. That's how the world shifts actually. Because work is socializing . . . and it socializes the people who see that, and the actual economy of what's happening is really real.” On the other hand, Ira didn't want to perform as though “everything is fine” in a situation where everything is not fine, for instance

⁵⁶ In an informal conversation about the performance, Ira used the term “mis-translation” to refer to the English verses.

⁵⁷ This is primarily a reference to the Talmudic prohibition of *Kol Isha* that restricts women from singing in the presence of men.

where the band is the only example of gender equity at an event (2019). I suggested to Ira that bringing Tsibele can also be a proactive statement that an organization knows there is equity work to be done, such as in the area of gender representation. Michael Winograd, KlezKanada's Artistic Director from 2017–2021, made the choice to open the festival with Tsibele because he was committed to working on issues of gender equity. Opening the festival with Tsibele was part of setting the tone for the whole week. Representation has a significant effect on cultural tradition. At a recent Yiddish cultural event, a young woman in her 20s expressed surprise when she saw a large all-male band performing. As someone who came to the scene in the last five years, she told me that her experiences of the musical traditions were ones that lifted up women and non-binary artists. Because many artists and organizers have worked hard to redress and transform the male-dominated industry, the all-male band struck her as unusual.

Ira told me about a time the band was hired to perform in Tucson, Arizona. They couldn't understand the significant financial investment the organization was making by bringing Tsibele all the way from New York.

When we got to Tucson we understood that they were in the midst of a culture shift in their institution. And the young people in the institution needed to show that it was possible to make politically engaged, but grounded culture. As soon as we got there, we understood completely why they had [brought us]. (Temple 2019)

Many Jewish institutions are grappling with such cultural shifts, often initiated by emerging Jewish leaders from within and without the institutional framework who call on the institutions to be more inclusive and argue that social justice is ingrained in Jewish ethics. For example, such shifts may look like greater gender diversity in leadership and representation and the affirmation that non-binary and trans individuals belong in Jewish religious, institutional, or cultural life. Alternatively it could also manifest as an increased willingness to engage in open and respectful dialogue around Israel. Because Tsibele names such topics in their work, an invitation to perform hopefully demonstrates a commitment to the process of change on the part of the organization. This means that people do sometimes hire them as a statement that what the band represents is of value to the audience whether as provocation or reaffirmation.

Organizers have to be willing to “make material commitments to culture change” (Temple 2019). While this may equal financial investment, it may also look like taking on the responsibility of dealing with any pushback. To be seen as political artists can be fraught in Jewish spaces. This is especially the case when those politics are explicitly or potentially read as expressions of anti-Zionism or critique of the State of Israel. In 2014, a Brooklyn rock band, The Shondes, had their invitation to perform revoked by the Washington Jewish Music Festival (WJMF). The band responded with an open letter, writing that the festival had cited past comments on Israel made by individual members of the band and “apparently the mere presence of those who don’t share their views is intolerable” (Oberman and Solomon). Off the record, I

have been told that other artists were asked by the WJMF to sign contracts agreeing that they would not say anything political. Although “Solomon clarified that the Shondes intended their performance to be a concert, not a rally, and offered her word that they wouldn’t mention the [BDS movement] boycott onstage,” the WJMF did not change their position. Solomon was not shy in condemning this as censorship: “This cancellation is part of a pattern of institutions trying to control Jewish discussion on Israel.” This Shondes incident was raised in several conversations in relation to Tsibele because Tsibele was also invited to an event where the contract included a clause agreeing to refrain from saying anything onstage that might be construed as political.⁵⁸ Ira and I agreed that this was most likely related to a concern that artists expressing anti-Zionist politics could jeopardize private funding for the festival from conservative donors. The heightened sensitivity around the issue means that other expressions of anti-fascism – such as, for example, speaking about decolonialization, decrying white supremacy, or even such non-specific language as “freedom” – become proxies for anti-Zionism even if they aren’t intended that way by the artists. “I think it’s really dangerous. [Our] material isn’t about Israel. Do you know what I mean?” Ira told me (2019). Although the contract clause is most likely an attempt to censor criticism of Israel, the expansive language of the clause felt painful because of its blanket approach to the idea of the political:

⁵⁸ The event name is withheld in this case to protect ongoing professional relationships. In the example of the Shondes, the incident is reported publicly online and so the event name is used.

Once I got to the festival, I cried about it. Because I felt like as a queer person, as a gender non-conforming person, my existence is political. And the expansive language of the statement . . . [was] not just that you can't say anything that's political, it was that you can't say anything that could be conceived as political . . . And so especially that was very triggering for me, and made me feel extremely, just deeply unwelcome. (Temple 2019)

As Tsibele's rendition of "Vos iz vikhtik" argues, the very representation of female and queer bodies onstage is itself political. These troublesome contract clauses demonstrate that festival organizers recognize that artistic performances carry power. "To me, when you divorce culture and politics, it's such a wound, you know?" reflected Ira (2019). I suggest that it is impossible to separate culture and politics. As American folk revivalist Pete Seeger expressed it, any time you gather people together you affect the body politic ("On the Music of Politics"). That said, artists who intentionally reference political causes from the stage, whether in song or as commentary, are seen as "political" in a way that other artists are not.

Watching the 2019 Tsibele concert from the back of a very crowded room, I was moved, not only by the artistry of their performance but by their presence as an all-female and non-binary band and as all former participants of KlezKanada's scholarship program. At the same time, I felt frustrated by the capacity limitations of the room as there were people who I wished could watch the show who weren't able to. The opening night concert is often held in a smaller cabaret space rather than the concert space (which, at the 2019 venue, was a giant gym) because it

feels more intimate and cozier for a welcome event. On the first night, as many people are still arriving, it feels good to have the space full. On the other hand, it does mean that not everybody can fit into the room. With older participants seated in the front, many younger participants were crammed to the back and drifting away because there wasn't enough space for them. As the coordinator of the scholarship program at the time, I wanted these participants to see Tsibele perform because they represented the qualities I hoped scholarship students would learn at KlezKanada. In the program's orientation session, I used to speak to the ways scholarship participants can create the change and model behaviour that they want to see in this community (Moore, "Field Notes" 2019). This little speech arose from watching the scholarship participants creating change at KlezKanada, and in the community, over the past fifteen years. Tsibele both illustrates and models this change, in part by increasing diversity in onstage representation. It also felt important, however, that Tsibele was playing to the demographic breadth of KlezKanada rather than just to "young folks." If they were only playing to the scholarship set, I wrote in my field notes, they might really just be playing to the converted. Perhaps it was the wider audience demographic who needed to hear and see this band of strong female and non-binary artists on stage explicitly invoking anti-fascist activism.

Tsibele's set continued with a mixture of instrumental medleys, mostly new compositions by members of the band, and songs, including Yiddish folk songs, new settings of Yiddish poetry, and new Yiddish lyrics. Throughout, they referenced their artistic lineages, honouring mentors,

including Jenny Romaine and Ethel Raim, and bringing their sources, such as Moyshe Beregovski and Ruth Rubin, into the conversation. Ira introduced a song by I.L. Peretz⁵⁹ as being about hope, something that is nice to include among their repertoire of “dark songs,” and then translated one of the lines as “. . . You can imagine that there will be not only new stars but new suns, Not only in our lives but also on our graves. . . .” Ira paused to give effect to the ironic juxtaposition of hope and graves. Arranged for accordion and all five voices in harmony, the modern setting overlapped spoken and sung lines of text. Introducing a suite of her new compositions inspired by Transylvanian music, Zoë Aqua described her motivation for adding Yiddish lyrics to one of the pieces: “I wanted the lyrics to be about my sense of conflict when I’m there; of loving that part of the world but also being sad about how anti-immigrant Hungary is. The translation of the words means: over fences, over the sea, through the desert, across the country, over border, beyond the edge.”⁶⁰ After this medley, Eva directed the audience’s attention to an action being organized in protest of a new immigrant detention centre being built near Montreal by the Canadian federal government. Throughout the concert, the band members wove in their personal stories and influences. Eleonore Weill, born and raised in France, included a spoken French translation in her setting of the poem “*Oyfn barg shteyt a boym*” (On the hill stands a tree) by Aaron Zeitlin

⁵⁹ I.L. Peretz (1852-1915) was a Polish Jewish writer who is considered to be one of the three fathers of modern Yiddish literature, along with Mendele Moykher Sforim (1835-1917) and Sholem Aleichem (1859-1916).

⁶⁰ Yiddish lyrics by Corbyn Allardice.

(1898–1973). She also played the hurdy-gurdy – an uncommon instrument in klezmer music – in some of the pieces, including a Yiddish dance set. “This is a hurdy-gurdy,” Eleonore told the audience, “Apparently, [the word] means uproar and confusion. That’s pretty real right now in the world.”

Tsibele began their closing medley with another reference to the theme of the 2019 Summer Retreat and to the thematic artwork I had created for that year, a golden key with violin f-holes and a keyhole in the bow and the keys of a wind instrument along the shank.



Image 2.2. Artwork for KlezKanada’s 2019 Summer Retreat. Image © Avia Moore, 2019.

Introducing a song about a worker’s revolt collected by ethnographer Beregovski, with new music by Eleonore, Ira said: “We were thinking [that] a key unlocks a drawer that has a song in it, a key unlocks a filing cabinet, a key unlocks a door that a person is behind, it frees the captive. . . . The

theme of the song is that the key to a prison is a bomb [a cheer from part of the audience].”⁶¹ After the Beregovski song, the band transitioned into “Mir veln zey iberlebn.” The song was chant-like, with the one line repeated over and over instead of a chorus and verse structure. Then, the voice lines dropped out and, against ongoing vamping from bass and violin, Ira commented: “We accidentally wrote a movement anthem a couple years ago.” Ira went on to say that, in the USA and around the world, we are fighting the rise of white supremacist fascism and that singing this song with audiences is part of an active cultural resistance against fascism and neo-Nazism.

And we need to fight! We’re really grateful to have this story and to have people to sing this with and to have people to work with – people who are artists and people who aren’t artists all working together – in this fight. And we’re really excited to be here with you all at KlezKanada this week doing a lot of different types of work including the work of fomenting cultural resistance [to fascism]. (Tsibele 2019)

Ira then told the story of the song (shared at the opening of this section) and taught the line of Yiddish. “Do you want to sing with me?” Ira asked before teaching the melody, “if you

⁶¹ This is a good example of a song choice that is not about Israel but where the lyrics, which are an anti-capitalist cry for a worker’s revolution, might be heard by Zionist audience members as anti-Zionist advocacy. As I write this footnote, the State of Israel is engaged in prolonged and devastating warfare in the Gaza strip following the violent Hamas attack on Israel on October 7, 2023. I can’t help but wonder how this song choice and introduction would have resonated in a room today. Another line of the song is a vow to free the people with dynamite. Recently, in an informal conversation about this chapter, Ira told me that, in the wake of October 7, 2023 and the subsequent siege of Gaza, Ira has worried that “mir veln zey iberlebn” could be militarized. Thus far, neither of us has seen the phrase put to use in the discourse.

don't that's also fine." Ira laughed and then said quietly but still into the mic "it's not," and the audience laughed. Ira taught the tune and we began to sing together. As the lyrics repeated, members of the band and audience added lines of harmony. The instruments dropped out and the voices continued, the whole room singing "Mir veln zey iberlebn, iberlebn. Mir veln zey iberlebn, iberlebn." There is a collective "we" here, invoked by the lyrics and by singing together, but also room for an individual interpretation of what it is we are outlasting. Tsibele invited the audiences to raise their voices against fascism and neo-Nazism but beyond that did not define a specific fight, which created space for individuals in the audience to conjure their own activist causes as they sing.

Tsibele performs a longstanding tradition of politically-infused Yiddishkayt, situating themselves within a lineage of artists and activists using Yiddish language, song, and literature to convey their message. Integrating their thought process into their concerts, sharing their research and questioning with the audience, and citing their sources, inspirations, and mentors, the band reveals a connection to cultural practice that is rooted and expansive. At the same time, they demonstrate an approach to tradition that is thoughtful, playful, and multi-voiced. In other words, Tsibele illustrates that understanding traditions is a vital part of making them our own. A strength of the Yiddish cultural scene is that it creates physical and shared space for the flourishing of many ways of engaging with Yiddish traditions of cultural practice and for expanding those traditions both through research and transformation. This expansive approach

to multi-voiced community and tradition is one reason that many people have found what they describe as a sense of “home” within the scene.

Yiddish Culture as Home

During my first research interview with Yiddish singer Sasha Lurje, she was rolling out dough, pressing it into a baking pan, and filling it with cabbage. A Latvian cabbage pie came together on the counter before me as we chatted. Other friends, all part of the Yiddish cultural scene, came into the kitchen looking for wine glasses or serving spoons and joking to the microphone in the process. Some of these friends had sat down with me in previous weeks and months for an interview; at one time or another most of them have been interviewed by someone about their involvement with Yiddish culture. While the overlapping voices make it challenging to transcribe the conversation later, this interview, as well as others conducted in social settings, captures the ways that our cultural practices move fluidly between personal and professional. When, for example, we gather for a social meal, we might test a recipe for Leah Koenig’s new cookbook. Leah observed that the personal and professional aspects of her life are “wonderfully seamless.”

Our play and our work – the boundaries between the two are just kind of hard to tell sometimes. And often the play that we’re doing together is work based, but not like we’re sitting down to have a meeting. You know, there’s a jam session happening and Jake

[Shulman-Ment] is teaching Yoshie [Fruchter] a new song . . . [Or] sometimes, we just go to the beach and like . . . (2019)

“Eat bread and pickles,” I chimed in. Living in Brooklyn, especially south of Prospect Park, a trip to Brighton Beach and/or Coney Island is an easy and regular outing. On such days, we get off the subway, stock up on pickles, bread, and cheese at Tashkent Supermarket or Brighton Bazaar, Uzbek and Russian grocery stores respectively. Then, as Leah writes in her article about the Brighton Bazaar, “We head to the beach where everything gets flecked with sand but somehow still tastes good” (“Brighton Bazaar”).

The Yiddish cultural scene functions as a site of work, of avocational interest, and also as a home. In interviews and observations, it came up repeatedly that people find a home in Yiddish culture, a place where they feel they can and do belong. Eleonore Weill expressed it to me in this way:

To me, klezmer and Yiddish were really a home. It felt like home because it was both my mom [as a Jewish person] and my dad, as a musician. It was a combination of both of my parents in an abstract home. . . . It was dreamy, because that’s what I was looking for since I was a kid. I grew up with no family around, I felt extremely like an exile. And so feeling that – it was [the] first time in the life [that there was] a community that I could belong to. (Weill 2019)

Ira Temple recalled a comment that Zoë Aqua made when she first began to play klezmer seriously: “She got her first taste, and she came to me and she [said], my soul needs to play klezmer” (2019). Stefanie Brendler, a Seattle-based accordionist and brass player, told me: “When I first went to KlezKanada . . . I was such a fish out of water, but I knew that it was the water I needed to be in” (2019). Each of these quotations expresses a sense of vulnerability that I have heard from many people over the last fifteen years of being part of this scene.

Home is a big and abstract idea and so I want to pull upon a number of threads in an attempt to understand what interviewees mean by saying that they found a home in Yiddish cultural tradition and in the Yiddish cultural scene. First, part of that home-seeking includes a search to redefine Jewishness in our own terms.⁶² Second, and building upon the first, as an affinity space where language and cultural practice are the connecting element, the Yiddish cultural scene offers a home community that holds space for many ways of engaging with Yiddish culture and with Jewish identity. Third, this sense of feeling at home in the Yiddish world has motivated artists to engage in home-making, strengthening the social infrastructure of the scene by fostering existing communities and starting new Yiddish festivals, series, and events.

Seeking Alternatives

⁶² This is not a new search; ongoing redefinition is part of the history of Jewish religion, culture, and community.

“I could imagine a world,” Ira Temple told me as we discussed how Ira came into the Yiddish cultural scene, “in which I never regained any connection to Jewish community” (2019). I want to set this expression of disillusionment against mainstream Jewish institutions in North America, such as large long-standing synagogues, The Jewish Federations of North America (JFNA), and Jewish community centres, who are questioning why young North American Jews are increasingly not affiliated with institutional Jewish life (see Rokhl Kafrissen’s analysis of the Pew Research Centre 2013 survey of Jewish Americans). A 2005 culture-focused analysis of young adult Jews in New York City, which drew data from a 2000–2011 National Jewish Population Survey (USA) as well as from interviews and observations of local events, found that young NY Jews are seeking an alternative “to an institutional world they see as bland, conformist, conservative, and alien” (Cohen and Kelman 6).⁶³ What surveys such these usually fail to capture are the many ways that Jews are engaging with Jewishness outside of synagogues, JCCs, and Federation buildings. This includes long-standing relationships with Jewish institutions (albeit not necessarily framed around membership) such as the KlezKanada, YIVO, and the Yiddish Book Center. Of the people I interviewed, many described a sense of distance from what they considered mainstream North American Jewish institutions, even as they spoke warmly about

⁶³ For background on the development of Jewish institutions outside of Israel, in particular those beyond the synagogue, see *New Jews: The End of the Jewish Diaspora* by Caryn Aviv and David Shneer. As part of their analysis, Aviv and Shneer look at the relationship of Jewish institutions to the foundation and support of the State of Israel.

their engagement with Yiddish institutions. Some grew up in that world and came to question some of the values they were taught, some were made to feel unwelcome because of their gender or because of their social and political beliefs, some (including myself) grew up far from an organized Jewish community. Ira moved away from the Jewish institutional space in which Ira grew up in part because “the attitude towards anybody who had any sense of questioning around Israel was that they were not part of Jewish community” (2019). Ira’s sense of Jewish identity was, from an early age, tied to an education that taught about past trauma through the lens of the Holocaust and centralized the place of Israel in the Jewish experience (2019). As Ira’s politics evolved, Ira came to feel as though there was no space for questioning in the synagogue, and, by extension, in the Jewish community. “I can’t pray with people who are actively participating in enemy creation in this way. That makes me feel horrible,” Ira emphasized.⁶⁴

Finding Cultural Identity through Yiddish Cultural Practice

Many Jews and non-Jews who find a home in the Yiddish cultural scene feel as though it is an alternative diasporic Jewish community where there is space for them to be themselves.

Michael Winograd said that this struck him very early on when he was a teenager at KlezKamp:

⁶⁴ What Ira refers to as “enemy creation” is the us-versus-them positioning that pits Jews’ freedom and self-governance against the freedom of other groups. This positioning usually centres victim narratives and emphasizes difference. In this case Ira is specifically referring to the way that the Palestinian people are situated as the enemy by some Zionist narratives.

What was very clear to me as a young person at KlezKamp was that, along with being a cultural hotspot, . . . it also served as a community for people. . . . Especially to a lot of people who were culturally Jewish but didn't fit into the mainstream or didn't fit into how their parents or their families or their friends, [or] their own communities – their version of what it meant to be an active person within Jewish scenes and Jewish communities. And this provided an alternative. It's not for everyone, obviously, but it did provide an alternative for a lot of people who didn't feel so at home in their other [communities].

(2019)

This alternative Jewish space, where Yiddish culture is the connecting element, offers different pathways for developing a sense of Jewish identity.

Several artists who I interviewed described how their Yiddish-related work contributes to their sense of Jewish identity. In the Yiddish cultural scene, they have developed (or re-found) a sense of cultural identity that they did not experience elsewhere and this, I suggest, is one of the reasons that participants describe themselves as feeling at home in the scene. Michael Winograd recalled having conversations with his family about the different ways they participate in Jewishness: attending synagogue services, joining a JCC, playing Jewish music. "I get my Jewishness from this," Michael said, describing how he finds his Jewishness not in attending synagogue but in performing, writing, and producing Jewish music (2019). "The work that I do connects me so strongly to my sense of who I am," said Leah Koenig, observing that studying,

writing about, and teaching about Jewish food is one of the ways she thinks through her own evolving relationship with Jewish identity and practice (2019). Zoë Aqua recalled that when she moved to New York she felt disconnected from a sense of Jewish community. “It was hard for me to find [Jewish communities] that I had something in common with or wanted to be a part of,” she said. “I was recognizing that . . . I do want to have some sort of Jewish observance or Jewish component in my life, and that when that’s not there, I feel like something’s missing.”

Participating in the Yiddish cultural community has helped her fulfill this missing component (2019). For Ilya Shneyveys, who grew up in Latvia, becoming involved with the Yiddish community fundamentally altered the way he understood Jewish identity. Ilya noted that, because of the Soviet context, there was little to no family transmission: “there wasn’t this knowledge that we passed through generations. So, you know, I didn’t have that connection to my past.” As a post-Soviet Jew, he observed, “I was always, in a way, a victim of stereotypes” (2019). Although it wasn’t the motivating factor, through playing Jewish music, Ilya built that connection to his past.

This echoes my own experience of Jewishness, albeit in a contrasting cultural context.

When I was growing up, Jewishness was something we occasionally ‘did’ when I was at my father’s house, rather than something that I felt defined me. It was at KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat that I first connected to any sense of Jewish identity in more than a superficial way. At the Summer Retreat the ways of “doing” Jewish through Yiddish language, song, dance, and music, and the community that gathered together around those practices across difference, resonated so

deeply that, for the first time, I wanted to explore my Jewish identity further. Certain childhood experiences made sense in a new way; I remember taking in the language use around me, full of creative word play, and understanding my father's sense of humour as having developed from a shared Jewish American cultural context. This sense of unexpected familiarity contributed to my feeling at home in ways that I had not experienced before in relationship to Jewishness because I grew up geographically removed from a large Jewish community, and certainly not in proximity to a Yiddish cultural community. I identify with Ira's description of how engaging with Yiddish cultural practices made Ira's relationship to Jewish identity "infinitely richer" (2019). Ira told me that finding the Yiddish scene, where value is placed on research, questioning, and personal expression, "has just provided me so much joy" (2019). Ira does not feel as though experiencing Jewish identity through Yiddish culture is the end of a journey but rather that it has led to a growing interest in the ways that different Jewish worlds are interconnected.

The Yiddish cultural scene is sometimes accused of not being inclusive of other Jewish traditions and of contributing to a normalization of Ashkenazi descent as a dominant Jewish mode of religious and cultural practice. Simultaneously, participants in the Yiddish cultural scene report experiencing ways in which their interest in Ashkenazi-specific cultural practices is sometimes derided, suppressed, or laughed off by other Jews of Ashkenazi descent. For example Ashkenazi pronunciation of Hebrew (e.g. in religious prayers) has been overwhelmingly replaced by modern Hebrew pronunciation; I have heard from participants at KlezKanada's Summer

Retreat that they would like to learn Ashkenazi pronunciation but struggle to find a place to learn. Indeed, the work of cultural specificity pushes back against notions of a Jewish normative, explicitly making space for the reclamation of a diversity of Jewish traditions. While it is also important to have events that showcase a diversity of Jewish heritages, such events struggle to move beyond a spectator model or to offer opportunities to study each culturally specific practice at an advanced level. Deep engagement with cultural work requires culturally specific spaces where participants can immerse themselves. Importantly, fostering culturally specific spaces, such as spaces of the Yiddish scene, does not equal the expectation that these spaces will be a home for everyone. Conversely, culturally-specific engagement is seen by many participants as a path to solidarity with other cultural groups, including Jewish cultural communities of Sephardic and Mizrahi descent.⁶⁵

While I have previously described the Yiddish cultural scene as secular-leaning, there are a wide variety of levels, styles, and approaches to religious observance. Many events organize their schedule, and other logistical details, to be as interdenominational and inclusive of all levels of religious observance as possible. However, as Brooklyn-based cantor and Yiddish dance leader, Sarah Myerson pointed out, while there is religious diversity, areas of religious engagement are sometimes less hybrid than other parts of the Yiddish scene. Because they are often planned by

⁶⁵It is also important to note that these broad categories of Jewish descent include many different groups with their own linguistic, religious, and cultural practices.

(or so as to be inclusive of) the most observant members of the community, the organized religious activities such as daily services tend to represent the more religious side of the continuum. This means, for example, that these spaces have not always been welcoming of women. “I think there’s an understanding of how you could be in this world and be not-religious, anti-religious, or very frum,”⁶⁶ Sarah observed, “but if you’re at all in this sort of grey zone in between, it can be a little challenging to figure out how you navigate that” (2019). While Sarah felt immediately at home in the Yiddish community culturally, she was surprised by the tension between secular and religious in the scene, often marked by a separation between culture and religion: “It never occurred to me that there would be a separation between culture and religion the way that I’ve experienced now a lot with people who identify very strongly in the cultural sphere, or people who are religiously engaged that know nothing of the cultural heritage. For me, it was all intertwined” (2019). While you might play both violin and clarinet, or make theatre and music, it is less common to actively engage with both the cultural and religious worlds. “I didn’t see those areas as being in conflict – between cultural engagement and religious engagement,” Sarah reflected, “but the deeper that I’ve gotten into this sort of klezmer world in particular, I realized how much people are sort of one or the other” (2019). As Sarah and several other interviewees pointed out, secular cultural practices are enriched by studying the ways they grow

⁶⁶ *Frum* is a Yiddish word that means religious.

out of or intersect with religious cultural practices (for example, klezmer and cantorial music, or Yiddish dance and the movement vocabulary of Ashkenazi liturgy). Sarah wants to find ways to bridge that gap through her work without people feeling like they are being pressured towards religion or secularism (2019).

In part, this separation between culture and religion stems from a reaction to being excluded from religious spaces in the past. As Michael Winograd noted, staunch secularists are a significant faction of the community and, particularly through the socialist and communist Yiddishist communities, played a large role in carrying forward Yiddish language and culture after World War II (Winograd 2019). However, Sarah pointed out that this separation exists outside of the Yiddish cultural scene as well, where religious institutions “that are crumbling under their own emptiness” are disengaged from the “living people who are interacting in this culture” (2019). Sarah told me that her mission in life is to “connect these disparate communities more, to bring the resources of the places that need people to the people who need the resources” (2019). By this Sarah does not mean that everyone should be practicing religion and culture. Rather, that there is potential for learning, resource sharing, and mutual aid when we bring people together in shared spaces to learn from each other culturally-engaged, religiously-engaged, anti-religious, and non-Jewish communities.

In considering the tension between culture and religion in the Yiddish cultural scene it is also important to emphasize that not everyone who finds a home here identifies as Jewish.

Although this is an aspect of the scene that I have not emphasized in this study, non-Jewish artists and scholars played key roles in the klezmer revival and continue to be central to performance, scholarship, and pedagogy in the scene today. Non-Jewish participants come to the scene in a variety of ways including through an interest in klezmer music, academic study of Yiddish language or literature, political activism, Queer community connections, or through a partner or friend who is part of the scene. This is one area where there is great variation depending on geographic location: the Yiddish cultural scene in Europe has a higher proportion of non-Jewish artists, organizers, and participants than the scene in North America.

Just as there are a variety of orientations towards Jewish identity and religious observance in the Yiddish cultural community, the political alignments are similarly diverse. As summarized in the section on political activism above, there is a significant historical overlap between Yiddish cultural practice and leftist politics. I have discussed how some who are uncomfortable with uncritical support of the State of Israel or who position themselves as anti-Zionist have found community in the Yiddish cultural scene. However, it is important to note that many contrasting political opinions, including varied and complex attitudes towards Zionism, exist within this ecosystem and are sometimes a source of tension and pain. Ira reflected that while Yiddish has historical connections with both Zionist and anti-Zionist movements, what feels important in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene is that alignment is not enforced (2019).

From the inside, the Yiddish cultural community feels, to many, very welcoming.

However, I recognize that I am deeply embedded within the community and that makes it hard to see any sharp edges.⁶⁷ Interviewees shared with me their perception that those who demonstrate commitment by being willing to “hang out for long enough” become part of the community. “I think that there’s a big acceptance of whoever wants to be in it,” Sarah Gordon observed. “But it also means that you’ll be loved really hard and critiqued really hard. And that’s just what it is” (2019). Like any family, there are squabbles and ruptures. People who come to big events like KlezKanada or Yiddish New York for the first time sometimes perceive cliques and report that this makes it hard to join in. Increasingly, organizers in the community are working hard to recognize and address these challenges by formalizing previously informal community values and encouraging a culture of care through community guidelines, orientations, and other activities that promote inclusion.⁶⁸

The Yiddish festival cohort has experienced and come to expect that, in the Yiddish cultural scene, they can curate their own approach to Jewishness, politics, and cultural practice. Indeed, pluralistic identity is welcomed. This includes those with intersecting identities, as well as

⁶⁷ Interestingly, this is true of many academics and journalists writing about the community; we too blur the lines between social and professional. Journalists writing about the renaissance of Yiddish culture from the outside very often fall into the media loop described in the Introduction, where the only story is that of saving Yiddish culture, because they are lacking critical context.

⁶⁸ KlezKanada, for example, introduced a set of written community guidelines in 2019 to supplement an existing conduct policy. These guidelines, which emphasized the diversity of participants, were developed by staff and participants and since have evolved and expanded each year.

those who come from non-Jewish backgrounds. Eleonore told me that she felt like an outsider growing up and that, as she studied, she felt pressured to pick one interest: Occitan music, or Early Music, or klezmer . . . but not all three. “I felt like in the klezmer, Yiddish community that was the first place that I could be my entire self, even if it was a weird combination,” she said, “they could all meet together and it was ok, it was not crazy. Or [at least] it was fine” (Weill 2019). I have felt this too; in the Yiddish cultural scene my combination of artist/teacher/scholar/organizer is not so unusual as it is in other communities, where my long list of occupations is often met with confusion or laughter. I appreciate that Eleonore qualified her statement; I have found that the chaotic and contradictory nature of our patchwork identities is embraced with humour, and even encouraged, as part of the community ethos. “Anyone, and any tradition, is like a Harlequin costume,” Eleonore reflected:

We are all made of many different diamonds. Klezmer and Yiddish could be giant diamonds of the same colour but . . . our identity is also made of different diamonds of different colours. But that’s what we can embrace. And the community has people like Zilien⁶⁹ who is [from] Reunion Island – he is very deep in the klezmer scene, but he has the Reunion. . . . And you can embrace that. And that’s why our community, I love it so much (2019).

⁶⁹ Eleonore refers here to clarinetist Zilien Biret.

The diamond patterns that emerge and shift, to build on Eleonore’s metaphor, relate back to the recipe metaphors for traditions. Individuals draw upon their own diamonds – their experiences, diverse backgrounds, and emerging interests – as they create with Yiddish culture, participating in a process of what critical theorist Jonathan Boyarin describes as “knitting together patches without obliterating seams” (Boyarin, *Storm from Paradise* xi). Sarah Gordon and Daniel Kahn provided an illustration of this during another concert at KlezKanada’s 2019 Summer Retreat when they sang a Yiddish translation of “I Shall Be Released,” a song written by an artist they introduced only as “Robert Zimmerman.” Robert Zimmerman was the birth name of Bob Dylan, who changed his name in the early 1960s.⁷⁰ The concert, which they lovingly and self-ironically referred to as their “folky folk” program, combined American Yiddish songs with Americana songs, drawing threads of connection between the spheres of Yiddish folk and protest songs and the music of the American folk revival. Before Daniel became known for his work with Yiddish song, he wrote and sang songs more reminiscent of Woody Guthrie than of Mordkhe Gebirtig.⁷¹ Although Sarah and Dan’s varied influences are implicitly present when either

⁷⁰ Introducing the artist with his birth name and singing the song in Yiddish translation is an implicit provocation to consider whether the song might have been written in Yiddish if not for the cultural disconnect wrought by the Holocaust and the American Jewish immigration/assimilation story.

⁷¹ Mordechai Gebirtig (1877-1942) was a Polish-born Yiddish poet and songwriter.

performs Yiddish folk songs, bringing these song worlds into conversation with each other also creates space to acknowledge those aspects of their identities and diverse cultural influences.⁷²

Creating Social Infrastructure

From early on in the klezmer revival, the blending of social and work spaces was part of incubating the cultural renaissance. During the 1970s and 1980s, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research felt like a “community clubhouse” where the artists worked together but also dreamed together, hosting dance parties and collaborating to make new art out of the materials they found through their work in the archives (Gordon 2011, 2019). Adrienne Cooper worked at YIVO at that time and so her daughter Sarah Gordon grew up in that space. As we discussed our social/work scene, Sarah reiterated how that time at YIVO mirrored our own cohort group today, saying “they were young, and they were freaks, and they were hanging out all together as well.” The collaborative social space fostered a chain of relationships that created another world (Gordon 2019).

Ilya told me that, for many years, Yiddish festivals were the highlights of his year and that he sought, consciously and unconsciously, to create the festival experience outside of the festival. This took him from Latvia to Berlin, and eventually to New York: “Most of this community does

⁷² Some of Dan’s recent albums have continued to explore his non-Yiddish language influences more explicitly, with Yiddish translations of Leonard Cohen, Bob Dylan, and Tom Waits.

not exist outside of a festival context for me, except it kind of does . . . that’s why I was living in Berlin. That’s why I’m living in New York next door to all these other klezmer musicians” (Shneyveys 2019). Ilya pointed to the spaces of musical exploration held open by the festivals – especially formal and informal jam sessions – as environments where “the music really lives” because you are engaged in musical conversations rather than playing through set arrangements (2019). Not limited to jam sessions, festival environments also open up “in-between” spaces: the breaks between workshops, the walks between venues, the time hanging out backstage. These gaps are where the culture thrives, where together people work through new ideas, play with what they’ve learned, and dream up projects.

Because he couldn’t have a festival that lasted all year, Ilya tried to carry that feeling forward into bands and jams. While living in Berlin, he co-founded a now longstanding series of klezmer jam sessions in 2016, which eventually led to a festival called Shtetl Berlin (Shneyveys, Lurje 2019).⁷³ I suggest that, in addition to fostering the musical experience of the festival in a year-round setting, this is an example of the ways that the feeling of being at home in Yiddish culture motivates the creation of new cultural spaces. Sasha Lurje, who has also been part of the Shtetl Berlin team from the start, explained that “we wanted to create space for Berlin artists to get together and do stuff in Berlin” (2021). Shtetl Berlin was created as an intentionally local

⁷³ Shtetl Berlin was originally called Shtetl Neukölln, named for the neighbourhood of Berlin where the events took place and where many of the artists lived.

space by and for the growing community of Yiddish cultural workers who are based in Berlin but who are oriented towards the international Yiddish cultural scene, mostly performing at festivals and events outside of Berlin. The community was built by people who brought their experiences at other festivals (as faculty, organizers, or volunteers) to their vision and goals for the event.

However, as Sasha emphasized:

. . . it also primarily grew out of a jam session. I think that's a very big difference. It grew out of: let's go to this neighbourhood bar and play some tunes, because we all live around the corner. . . . Even with the intense classes, even with a concert, we tried to create a feeling of a jam session in the neighbourhood bar. (Lurje 2021)

A proliferation of events – jam sessions, micro-festivals, and more – likewise show that artists are extending that sense of a home in Yiddish culture by fostering local community around cultural tradition, both in person and in digital spaces: Queer Yiddish Camp (online), Klezmer on Ice (Minnesota), Seattle Yiddish Fest, KlezKolorado, KlezCummington (Massachusetts), KlezFest North (England), Friling Fest (Austria), DC Klezmer Workshops, to name just a few. These community-building projects are hyperlocal in relationship to the larger Yiddish cultural scene, focusing on geographic regions or areas of affinity. It is clear that, having found a home in Yiddish culture, community members are building the houses they wish to live in. Recently, coming across the work of Eric Klinenberg, I was struck by the idea that festivals in the Yiddish cultural world function as temporary social infrastructure, especially for the artists involved. In

Palaces of the People, Klinenberg argues for an investment in social infrastructure, systems such as libraries that support and shape social interaction. Communities and neighbourhoods with better social infrastructure, he shows, are healthier and have more resilience when it comes to change and hardship (5). At every size, Yiddish cultural festivals provide more than a performance venue; festivals are where many relationships begin and are renewed, materials are shared, and support networks are formed. Thinking about the festivals of the Yiddish scene as a network of social infrastructure can help us support the health of the community as a whole. In the early twentieth-century, Yiddishists began to promote the idea of the Yiddish language as a territory, an alternative to a state-oriented homeland. The concept of a Yiddishland, which first appears at that time, will be discussed in depth in Chapter Three. However, it is worth noting that today, this idea still flourishes, as the Yiddish cultural scene functions as a shared home built around the hearth of postvernacular Yiddish culture.

Conclusion: “Practicing” Yiddishkayt

Around me, the Yiddish festival cohort is taking on the project of living and creating with Yiddish culture and transforming it into something of their own. They are approaching the work with awareness, defining and vocalizing their values. Joseph Roach writes that performance, as it is implicated in memory and transmission means “to bring forth, to make manifest, and to

transmit” and, “though often more secretly, to reinvent” (xi). To this cohort, conscious interpretation and reinvention is part of performances of tradition.

In each section of this chapter, I have illustrated a relationship to Yiddish culture that emphasizes and values critical entanglement. The Yiddish festival cohort understands tradition as entangled, simultaneously “plural and dynamic,” with shared cultural practices interpreted through the perspectives of each individual (Feindt et al 35). They resist singular and static narratives around origin and authenticity and embrace change that is contextually rooted and navigated with intention. They bring self-reflexivity to the ways that they create and perform Yiddish cultural practices. As Eleonore Weill suggested, for this cohort, tradition is “a way of functioning in the world that’s passed from generation to new generation” but requires continual remaking to maintain its relevancy (2019). In this way tradition might be understood like storytelling, a framework through which we structure and make sense of the world around us. The interplay between different languages and different ways of knowing that is part of the history of Yiddish culture and is a key feature of cultural post-vernacularism is central to the ways these cultural workers use Yiddish cultural practices and Yiddish materials (such as song) as tools towards their artistic and social goals and, such as in the case of Tsibele, as tools for social and political activism. This code-switching is made possible by a commitment to cultural literacy and often accompanied by a sense of playfulness and a self-awareness of the ways that they are intervening in the cultural narrative.

As they share their own relationship with Yiddish through performance, scholarship, and pedagogy, this cohort also become advocates for the culture itself. The role of artist as activist and/or advocate came up frequently in my interviews, as well as in the Wexler interviews where a recurring question posed to the interviewee is whether they consider themselves activists for Yiddish. Whereas in the section about Tsibele we saw artists using Yiddish in their social and political activism, artists are also considering the ways they champion the language and culture through their work. “I consider myself an advocate,” Sarah Gordon told Christa Whitney, director of the Wexler Oral History Project (2011). She goes on to consider activism as something that moves towards a goal, whereas she is an advocate “for people being able to find a way to connect to culture and things being open enough for anybody who wants to feel like part of a community” (Gordon 2011). Daniel Kahn described himself as a cultural smuggler: “Someone asked me if I was a cultural ambassador for Yiddish. . . . If there was an embassy somewhere for Yiddishland . . . I wouldn’t work there. . . . I like being a smuggler more than an ambassador, you know? Like smuggling Yiddish into other contexts where you wouldn’t expect to encounter it” (2011).

In interviews with the Yiddish festival cohort, I observe a commitment to fostering welcoming and pluralist communities. They explicitly value the space to be and do different kinds of Jewish and they strive to create spaces where people can connect to Yiddish culture in different ways. As with other observations, it is important to emphasize that pluralism is not the sole

purview of this cohort. Indeed, the values I heard reflected back in interviews are indicative of lineages both within and beyond the Yiddish cultural community. For example, the work and influence of the queer Yiddishkayt movement is tangible and visible in the ways that the community relates to each other, holds space for and celebrates difference, and re-tells stories. Writing about the politics of community art-making, theatre scholar Honor Ford-Smith argues that communities are always full of internal differences and that the idea of unity can be strategic in the way a community situates itself (97). Pluralism can also be strategic, however, and I suggest that the Yiddish cultural community feels like home to so many in part because of the ways they acknowledge and celebrate hybridity.

An ethics of questioning helps to cultivate this critical entanglement. Through performances and workshops, research is modelled as an essential part of artistic and academic practice across artistic and academic disciplines. Ira described this value warmly, as “a love of research and a love of a good story and a love of how things are connected to other things.” Linking back to the previous chapter and Jonathan Boyarin’s suggestion that Jewish ethnography is connected to the search and interpretation of what it means to be Jewish, this ethics of questioning connects to the self-reflexivity with which artists are approaching their work in Yiddish culture. Boyarin jokes that he is a “practicing Jew” but doesn’t expect to ever “get it right” (*Storm from Paradise* xiii). At its best, the Yiddish cultural scene encourages people to engage

critically with practice and practicing, learning and deepening cultural practice as well as different ways of relating to Jewishness and to Yiddishkayt.

CHAPTER THREE: WHEN BACKWARDS IS FORWARDS

It's a Friday evening at the end of August. Over 400 people have traveled from around the world to spend a week together at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat, an annual multi-day immersive event that has become one of the world's principal destinations for studying and celebrating Yiddish culture. It is the end of four days of workshops, concerts, dancing, and late-night – very late-night – socializing. Participants begin to gather by the lakeshore. Many have prepared for *shabes* by changing their casual camp clothes for slightly more formal camp clothes.⁷⁴ As we gather, some begin to unpack instruments. Then someone starts to play, usually a member of faculty on clarinet or trumpet. Moving together we begin to walk backwards, playing and singing a *nign*, a wordless melody. If we are lucky enough to have sun, everything is, as one participant described it, “gold and gorgeous” in the early evening light (MacLellan). If it is raining, the instruments stay in their cases and we sing in the rain. This is the Backwards March, a beloved annual KlezKanada tradition that has come to represent the work that we do at the Summer Retreat.

In this chapter, I will look at how collective performances such as the Backwards March create a sense of bracketed space at KlezKanada that is both separate from and refers back to the

⁷⁴ The weekly day of rest in the Jewish week, *shabes* (commonly written in Hebrew as *shabbat* or anglicized as “the Sabbath”) starts on Friday at sundown and lasts until Saturday at sundown.

everyday. The overlap of different times and locations opens up a productive space in which participants devise, try out, and rehearse cultural, social, and political models for the world beyond the bracketed space. In the first section I will introduce diaspora as a lens of analysis, focusing on Daniel Boyarin's articulation of diaspora as a situation of doubled consciousness, and consider the ways that cultural practice can constitute diasporic time and space. I will also review the concept of heterotopia, as one of the other theorizations of othered space that has helped me unpack the role of festivals within the larger Yiddish cultural scene. In the second section, I will analyze the Backwards March, discussing the background and development of the tradition and looking at the practice as a study of space and a study of time. Using the Backwards March, I will think about the ways we assemble, move together, and adapt. Concluding the first part of this chapter, I will return to the larger setting of the Summer Retreat to consider how sites of collective performance/s become primary sites of transmission, identity building, and cultural change. Finally, in a section that is itself bracketed by the experience, I will reflect on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on KlezKanada and its participants, considering how virtual spaces changed the ways we gathered when we were forced to move programming online. Referring back to the analysis in the first half of the chapter, I will ask how virtual environments extend, alter, or strain the productive nature of diasporic time and space.

KlezKanada was founded in 1996 by a group of Montreal Yiddishists, including Dr. Hy Goldman, Sara Mlotek Rosenfeld z"l, and Jack Wolofsky. In creating KlezKanada they were

inspired by what they had heard about KlezKamp, a Yiddish camp held each December in a hotel in the Catskills (New York). Since that first year, KlezKanada's Summer Retreat has been held at a leisure facility located in the Laurentian Mountains, about an hour and a half drive from Montreal.⁷⁵ For years KlezKanada was run primarily by the dedicated volunteer efforts of Hy and Sandy Goldman. Eventually, they began to add staff to help them manage artistic programming and then administration. The event grew in size and reputation, bringing in a large faculty of internationally-recognized artists and scholars and drawing participants to Quebec from around the world. In 2019, the largest edition to date, the Summer Retreat hosted over 450 participants.⁷⁶ KlezKanada's Summer Retreat is part of an ecosystem of events in the Yiddish cultural scene. Although the Backwards March is a tradition practiced at the Summer Retreat, the social and pedagogical theory I draw from it applies (in varying degrees) to other settings in the Yiddish ecosystem.

I first attended the Summer Retreat in 2003 and have worked for KlezKanada in one way or another since 2006. In addition to being on the faculty as a Yiddish dance teacher, I have worn many different hats over the years: Scholarship Coordinator, Administrative Director, Artistic Coordinator, graphic designer, and Artistic Director. I was part of the core organizing team for

⁷⁵ Until 2022, the Summer Retreat was held at a Jewish summer camp called Camp B'nai Brith. In 2023, the event was moved to a leisure centre called Plein Air Lanaudie. In 2024, the venue moved to a facility called P'tit Bonheur.

⁷⁶ This number includes faculty and staff.

the COVID-19-necessitated digital editions of KlezKanada in 2020 and 2021. In December 2021, I stepped into the role of Artistic Director for the organization, becoming the first woman, and first Canadian, in the role.⁷⁷ Suffice to say, KlezKanada has been central to my personal and professional life for over twenty years.

Even before the beginning of my tenure with KlezKanada, festival spaces felt like home to me. Thanks to my father and step-mother's work as a musical storytelling duo, I grew up with a backstage pass in my pocket. Inside borders, often marked out with bright orange plastic fencing, I had what felt like a free run of every storytelling festival, folk festival, and children's festival we attended. As I have moved between cities and countries throughout my adult life, I notice that I often feel most at home in festival environments. Even in their impermanence, they have been stable spaces in my life. When I began to work in those environments, first teaching then also producing, it felt familiar and natural, an unplanned but obvious progression.

In this research, I have drawn on the significant body of scholarship that deals with the idea of the festival. This scholarship is interdisciplinary, but most frequently located in anthropology, heritage studies, music, theatre, dance, and performance studies, and arts management.⁷⁸ Festival studies scholars often attempt to differentiate between different kinds of

⁷⁷ In addition, I am also the first Artistic Director at KlezKanada for whom music is not the primary discipline.

⁷⁸ Recently, festival studies has emerged as its own area of scholarship, pulling on these diverse disciplinary strands. Laurent Sébastien Fournier provides a comprehensive summary of this academic field in his essay "Traditional Festivals: From European Ethnology to Festive Studies."

festivals – particularly between religious holidays and non-religious celebrations, and between traditional festivals centred around community and modern spectacles centred around the individual – while simultaneously showing how they are connected (Destination 66, Fournier 13). Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, differentiates between “traditional feasts and fêtes that honor a religious anniversary, event, or personage” and festivals that “re-enact, re-present, and re-create” (Destination 66). The latter type “derives its celebratory tone and environmental approach to staging from the joyful events associated” with the former (Destination 66). KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat complicates these categories through, among other things, its turn towards education and by moving beyond reiteration towards cultural creation. In addition, unlike a heritage site where audiences find themselves in the midst of a simulated historical environment, the Summer Retreat does not attempt to re-enact the past as it was. Instead, the work is to educate and inspire about what might be and what can become. Some of my colleagues, indeed, insist that KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat should not be called a festival at all; because it breaks from the dominant North American model of a performance-oriented festival, they argue, it is confusing to refer to it as such.⁷⁹ In engaging with festival studies, I have found that the work on sites of heritage and ritual contribute most to the conversation. It is also useful to consider KlezKanada and other Yiddish cultural festivals in the ways that they function

⁷⁹ This is one of the reasons that the event is called the Summer Retreat.

as sites of heritage – as well as how they flip the script – especially in light of Aviv and Shneer’s assertion that spaces of heritage are becoming a central part of identity formation in today’s globalized world, replacing religious institutions as cultural spaces and places of pilgrimage (Aviv and Shneer 72).

The Summer Retreat is structured around concurrent educational workshops throughout the day (both hands-on workshops and talks) with concerts, dancing, and participatory cabarets in the evening. The quality of the week and the shape of the programming is further defined by the lake with its wooden docks, the immediacy of the rolling green mountains, and the rustic accommodation. Participants swim between workshops and gather on the dock to sing up the sunrise on the last morning. The weather frequently shows up, semi-ironically, on the post-festival evaluation surveys. In late August, the nights are usually crisp if not downright freezing. On bright mornings, mist rises off the lake as participants sit drinking coffee in the sunshine and slowly unwrapping their many layers of warm clothing. The residential setting of the week and the packed program make it an immersive experience: participants eat together, learn together, and dance together. The primary language of KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat is English, although when you walk around the site you hear Yiddish, Russian, French, as well as other languages, and many participants choose to study Yiddish during the day. Postvernacularity is the vernacular of the week. As with learning any vernacular, immersion is key to fluency. In a time when Yiddish is not the mainstream linguistic or cultural vernacular and immersive opportunities are scarce,

KlezKanada's Summer Retreat offers a hyper-concentrated site of immersion in postvernacular Yiddish culture. Like KlezKamp before it, and along with events like Yiddish New York and Yiddish Summer Weimar, the Summer Retreat creates space for oral transmission in the era of the archive.

The immersiveness of the environment can be intense – the word “overwhelming” was used by many of the people I interviewed to describe their first experience at a Yiddish cultural festival. Ilya Shneyveys recounted his time at KlezFest St. Petersburg to me: “You know, it’s St Petersburg in the summer so there’s a lot of mosquitoes. And I remember going to bed at night, after . . . jamming half the night, and then lying there. And there’s all these mosquitoes flying around and singing *doinas* in my ear” (2019).⁸⁰ Zoë Aqua recalled her first experience of KlezKanada in much the same terms: “I definitely had horrible insomnia. I just couldn’t sleep for the whole week because I had so many tunes in my head” (2019). I remember the affective experience of my first time at the Summer Retreat vividly as well, even as the specific moments have blended together with those of other years. Like Ilya and Zoë, I didn’t sleep much those first few times at KlezKanada. I felt overwhelmed by the love and passion in the people I was meeting, constantly between laughter and tears as I was caught up in the music and dancing, and slightly hysterical at the feelings that were sweeping over me. The relationship between the immersive

⁸⁰ A *doina* is a type of instrumental melody that is part of the klezmer repertoire.

nature of KlezKanada and the affective response of the participants is circular. The 24/7 intensity of the week – which, frankly, is as exhausting as it is exhilarating – certainly heightens my own emotional response when I am there. Heightened emotions then add to the intensity of the experience. The strength of the affective response can be surprising to new participants, washing over them like a wave and contributing to the sense of being transported to somewhere or somewhere else.

KlezKanada's Summer Retreat temporarily re-structures space. Participants at the Summer Retreat describe it as a week apart from the time and space of their day to day. Not simply another location, but a space that is somehow other. "It feels like time just moves differently" (Gordon 2019). Festivals are frequently theorized as bracketed spaces, "their boundaries discernible in time and space (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, *Destination* 61). The separation between the space of the festival and the space of the day-to-day is an important distinction in the relatively new field of festival studies, although most scholars, even when they attempt to define the two spaces, admit that there is crossover (Alcedo). Over the years, as I've reflected upon the bracketed space of the Summer Retreat, I've applied a number of theoretical approaches, looking at the experience as a heterotopia (Foucault), site of heritage (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett), vortice of behaviour (Roach), carnival space (Bakhtin), and third space (Bhabha and Soja). However, while I started this research focusing on the concept of heterotopia as a lens for understanding the space of Yiddish festivals, I have moved towards considering the time and space of Yiddish

cultural festivals through the lens of diaspora. Increasingly, it has felt useful to employ concepts that are already embedded in the life of the Yiddish culture community towards a critical understanding of community performance. In the next section I will introduce the main conceptual frameworks that I draw upon in my analysis of the Backwards March and the overarching Summer Retreat.

Doubled Cultural Locations

I arrived at diaspora as a mode of analysis through two words, each representing a big idea: *doikayt* and *jetztzeit*. *Doikayt* literally means “here-ness” and it expresses an ideal and aspirational state of being “here,” or, in other words, being rooted in the place where you are. Yiddish literature scholar, Madeleine Cohen, describes how “both in the realm of politics and cultural production, *do’ikayt* [sic] encourages a connection to the Here, where one lives, including its histories. But it also includes a demand to change, to improve that Here” (2).⁸¹ The term is today most commonly associated with *Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund* (The General Union of Jewish Workers), usually referred to as the Bund. The Bund was a secular Jewish socialist movement and political party that emerged in Russia in the late nineteenth

⁸¹ Although not interviewed for this project, I situate Madeleine Cohen within the festival cohort defined for this study. She was a fellow intern when I participated in the Steiner Summer Program at the Yiddish Book Center in 2006.

century as “the outcome of an encounter between the new Jewish working class and a group of young Jewish intelligentsia who were attracted to various forms of Marxism and socialism” (Blatman). The party was particularly active in Russia and Poland in the first half of the 20th century, growing to have chapters worldwide. Scholar of Bundist history, David Slucki, writes that the Bund developed a “decentralised, extraterritorial idea of nationhood, one that insisted that Jews were not bound by territory or the state, but by history, language, and culture” (Slucki). It is notable that Zionism emerged as a political movement at the same time as Bundism, and doikayt is often contrasted with “there-ness,” the “Zionist emphasis on a ‘return’ to the ancestral biblical homeland in the Land of Israel” (Seelig). However, while now associated with the Bund, Cohen shows that, the principle of doikayt “existed and can be found in many aspects of Yiddish culture and politics in the period” (6). As she reminds us, “the reality of the Jewish political landscape of the early twentieth century” was that “political and social movements were developing, dividing, and reconverging” (9). In fact, Cohen’s research shows that the term itself did not gain popularity among Bundists until the immediate post-World War II period and has only since become a “shorthand for their historiographers” (4).

Doikayt can also be understood to contain “between” in addition to “here” because “it is not associated with one specific location or place, but rather with any and all places where Jews live and struggle” (Cohen 15). Cohen also argues that doikayt, and its root word *do* (here), contains a temporal reference as well as a spatial one (1). In describing what she calls the “poetics

of doikayt,” Cohen suggests that this quality of “between” “creates the space for dialogue, heteroglossia, and culture understood as interaction and not as static object” (19). Linked as it is to political positionality, doikayt is an active state, not a passive one; the concept is frequently activated in relationship to the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene because of the ways it promotes diasporic identity as situated locally (in any locality) but connected through Jewish culture. Jeffrey Shandler writes that “Through the principle of doikayt . . . Bundists asserted the right and the value of Jews to live wherever they found themselves and, while engaging in modern, international socialist activism, to maintain a distinctive secular culture, marked by their traditional vernacular” (“Imagining Yiddishland” 128–129). Because the vernacular marker of the distinctive community of the Bund was Yiddish, Shandler claims that “In its very articulation, doikeyt [sic] implicitly invokes Yiddishland.” If, as I suggest, postvernacularity is the new vernacular of the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene, then postvernacular Yiddish culture becomes one possible marker of the distinctive secular Jewish culture of today’s doikayt.⁸²

Jetztzeit, as conceptualized by Walter Benjamin, translates literally to “now-time” or the “time of now.” In Thesis XIV of “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin writes: “History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled full by now-time [Jetztzeit]” (*Illuminations* 261). Benjamin describes jetztzeit as highly charged time,

⁸² Postvernacular Yiddish culture is only one possible marker because doikayt is today invoked in diverse ways, including by Jewish activists who may gather around other markers of secular Jewish identity.

comprising “the entire history of mankind in a tremendous abbreviation” and containing the potential for a dialectical leap between past and future that has the subversive power to transform the present, explosively wresting it from the catastrophic status quo of a historic continuum (Benjamin qtd in Löwy 99, Löwy 87). Benjamin scholar Michael Löwy, who unpacks the concept of *jetztzeit* in his book *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History,'* explains that “*jetztzeit* comprises all the messianic moments of the past, the whole tradition of the oppressed is concentrated, as a redemptive power, in the present moment, the moment of the historian – or of the revolutionary” (100). Benjamin’s messianism, at once theological and secular, is rooted in both Jewish theology and Marxist critique, and demands the redemption of the oppressed through “a salvation that is not mere restitution of the past, but also active transformation of the present” (Löwy 34). As I will return to, this secular messianism is a task that we ourselves perform in the present. *Jetztzeit* occurs in the moment when, as discussed in Chapter One, juxtaposing fragments of different ideas produces a flash of understanding. “The present revolution feeds on the past,” Löwy writes, and this quotation of the past can “be a tremendous source of inspiration, a powerful cultural weapon in the present battle” (88, 89). In *jetztzeit*, the potential is not in an isolated moment but in the momentary constellation of relationships between the present moment and the past and future. Like *doikayt*, the potential of *jetztzeit* requires active intervention. Although not explicitly connected historically to *jetztzeit*, I would argue that *doikayt* likewise expresses the social and political potential of “here” in

relationship to many “theres.”

When I brought the juxtaposition of these terms to my colleague Tal Hever-Chybowski, historian and director of the Paris Yiddish Center, he pointed me towards rabbinical scholar Daniel Boyarin’s brilliant definition of diaspora as a

synchronic cultural situation applicable to people who participate in a doubled cultural (and frequently linguistic) location, in which people share a culture with the place in which they dwell but also with another group of people who live elsewhere, in which they have a local and a trans-local cultural identity and expression at the same time. (*Traveling Homeland* 19).

Tal also introduced me to the idea that diaspora can be understood as temporal as well as spatial in that the time we move in is situated relative to other times. With this framing, we can understand both *doikayt* and *jetztzeit* as diasporic ideas because both rely upon the consciousness of a doubled location.

The definition of diaspora as a local and a trans-local cultural identity is part of an intertwined body of work from Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin that lays out what Jewish studies professor Shaul Magid calls a “vision for a robust diasporism” (D. Boyarin,

“Conversation”).⁸³ The Boyarins build upon and depart from the rapidly growing field of diasporic studies. As Caryn Aviv and David Shneer write, there has been a proliferation of literature about diaspora both within and beyond the context of Jewish studies. A full review of diasporic theory is beyond the scope of this chapter; the Boyarins, Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, and James Clifford all provide a critical analysis of the field in their work on the subject. However, as I build upon Daniel Boyarin’s articulation of diaspora as a state of doubled consciousness, I want to highlight a couple of areas where the discourse resists essentialist applications of the concept. James Clifford tracks the semantic expansion of the term itself, illustrating that this is yet another concept where, rather than attempt a rigid definition, it is perhaps most useful to analyze what it pushes up against and how it is articulated.⁸⁴ Of importance to this chapter, entangled discourses of diaspora unsettle both trauma and nationalist relationships to homeland as necessary features.

A number of theorists, including Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and the Boyarins, push

⁸³ Daniel and Jonathan Boyarin are brothers. In a demonstration of interconnected community, Jonathan’s son Jonah Boyarin was another fellow intern when I participated in the Steiner Summer Program at the Yiddish Book Center in 2006.

⁸⁴ Articulations of diaspora push up against Jewishness and Jewish history in that the Jewish diaspora is frequently referenced as a model of the concept. Clifford suggests that the Jewish diaspora should be taken as a nonnormative rather than definitive model (306). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that even as we move away from centering the Jewish experience in diaspora discourse, it is important to note that that position is not one of privilege; Jews have been a primary site for modeling social pathology (“Sites of Dispersal” 340). Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin also emphasize that removing the Jewishness from the study of diaspora risks simplifying the Jewish diasporic experience to one in which the State of Israel is central, and sidelining Jewish experience (again) in academic discourse (*Powers of Diaspora* 33).

back against forced displacement and the trauma of departure as a precondition for a diaspora. This argument is accompanied by a discursive separation between the ideas of exile and diaspora. Often treated as synonyms, these are “distinct concepts within Jewish culture and history” (Howard Wettstein in Aviv and Shneer 17). While exile includes the sense that one is living in a state of things “not being as they should be,” diaspora suggests “absence from some centre – political or religious or cultural – [but] does not connote anything so hauntingly negative” (Aviv and Shneer 17). Daniel Boyarin argues that, while trauma is frequently part of the record of a diasporic situation, it is not a necessary element; “many diasporic cultural formations . . . were formed not out of trauma but voluntary migration for many other purposes or even simply produced out of secondary connections between scattered communities” (*Travelling Homeland* 17).⁸⁵ Recently I have heard *doikayt* defined as centering “this-placement” as opposed to “displacement.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett notes that hypermobility also changes the ways that diaspora is constituted, as “staying put” is no longer normative and technology can have the effect of collapsing “sites of dispersal” (342). Daniel Boyarin argues that the Babylonian Talmud shows a Jewish diasporic culture where rabbinical educators traveled voluntarily between locations and diverse communities. He suggests that the Babylonian Talmud can be understood as a portable

⁸⁵ There is a resonance here with my suggestion in Chapter One that, while a traumatic history has shaped the contemporary Yiddish cultural experience, it does not follow that trauma drives all contemporary engagement with Yiddish culture.

homeland and that talmudic study, interpretation, and commentary – engagement with that book – constitutes the diaspora (*Traveling Homeland* 5, 8, 15). In this way, the Jewish diaspora is “constituted by a book and its culture, not a lost homeland” (16). This argument removes the existence of a static centre from the definition of diaspora, because the book is a homeland that can and does move, shifting the locus of the community gathered through it. Importantly, this means that the local and translocal pointed to by Boyarin are “oscillating” rather than fixed locations; the translocal is not necessarily a homeland or site of pilgrimage (82, 20). This is a reorientation of centre and periphery.⁸⁶ Unfixing the idea of homeland also unfixes the desire for a return to that homeland, another characterization that appears in some definitions of diasporic communities.

In the latter half of the twentieth century, the idea of diaspora was transvalued by mainstream Jewish institutions, positioned in relationship to the State of Israel, and mobilized – usually in the context of a declared but imagined solidarity – as a mechanism of financial and political support for the state (see Aviv and Shneer, as well as Jonathan Boyarin *Powers of Diaspora* 17). This positioning (that aligns with Zionist ideology) is reflected in essentialist definitions of diaspora in wider scholarship, for example in the assumption that diasporic communities always seek to return “home.” Both Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Boyarin

⁸⁶ Boyarin states “there is no centre” which I read as no fixed geographic centre seeing as how he goes on to suggest the Talmud as a travelling homeland which sounds very much like a shifting centre (*Traveling Homeland* 17).

note a subsequent transvaluation, one that repositions diaspora as, in Boyarin's words, "a positive resource in the necessary rethinking of models of polity in the current erosion and questioning of the modern nation-state system and ideal" (Boyarin *Powers of Diaspora* 5, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, "Spaces of Dispersal" 339). Daniel Boyarin invokes a process of redefinition as having the potential to "be the beginning of a new political vision" (*Traveling Homeland* 3). The Boyarins situate Zion and the messianic return to Zion as a mythic notion rather than a contemporary nation-state and use the concept of diaspora as "a theoretical and historical model to replace national self-determination" (Boyarin and Boyarin in Aviv and Shneer 17). Daniel Boyarin illustrates this with a Talmudic argument that Zion moves with the spirit of the Jewish people, more of a reflection of that spirit than a fixed geographic location (*Traveling Homeland* 35). The separation of Zion from a geographic homeland allows for a "Zion without Zionism" (Aviv and Shneer 17). Aviv and Shneer observe that the embrace and celebration of diaspora as a base of secular identity offers an alternative to state-based Jewish identity (16–17). However, Clifford reminds us that, although nation states are "traversed and to varying degrees, subverted by diasporic attachments" diasporas aren't inherently anti-nationalist and, while generally not separatist, can themselves get caught up in "antinationalist nationalisms" (307). Clifford observes that diasporic communities have an entangled relationship to nation and nation-state and form "alternate public spheres," forms of community consciousness and solidarity that maintain identifications outside the national time/space in order to live inside, with a difference" (308). As

I described in Chapter Two, there is a wide range of positions with the Yiddish cultural scene in relation to nationalism, and Zionism in particular. Jonathan Boyarin writes that the powers of diaspora “confront” the attempt to fit the world into non-overlapping segments, compelling us to study the overlap (*Powers* 9). This would mean that, in an example of practice of doikayt, the interaction between diasporas is also part of the engagement with the local.

The Bund, although concrete in its approach to the liberation of Jewish workers has also been read as an example of the “secular utopian movements” that emerged in Ashkenazic communities in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Carlebach). Cohen argues that although Jewish political movements of the time might “balk at the claim that their ideology was only future-oriented or only elsewhere-oriented,” doikayt both encourages a connection to here and now and calls to improve the conditions of the here and now: “Do’ikayt insists that this change cannot wait, and will not be easier anywhere else” (2). Into this socialist pursuit of freedom from oppression has been read a secular messianism. Judith Butler speaks to this secular messianism in her discussion of the work of Walter Benjamin in her book *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism*. Although, as discussed in Chapter One, Benjamin’s thinking was influenced by Gershon Scholem, Butler shows a theoretical departure from Scholem’s understanding of “the messianic as implying a return of the Jews to the land of Israel” to interpret Benjamin’s “alternative form of the messianic” (or “countermessianic view”) as within a framework of exile without the expectation of return (*Parting Ways* 123). “This is a

messianism, perhaps secularized,” writes Butler, “that affirms the scattering of light, the exilic condition, as the nonteleological form that redemption now takes” (123). Through her discussion of Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt, Butler argues that the diasporic condition necessitates that we pay attention to the ways that our well-being is entangled with the well-being of our neighbours, writing: “As scattered and diasporic, Jewish life becomes concerned with the ethical relation to the non-Jew and considers cohabitation to be not only a historical exigency, but a fundamental task of Jewish ethics” (153). Invocations of doikayt in the contemporary Yiddish cultural community and in other Jewish scenes (that may not identify with the Yiddish cultural scene but usually overlap to some degree), implicate this secular messianism in their demand for solidarity and mutual support between oppressed groups (see, for example, the work of Tsibele in the previous chapter). Key to doikayt is the tenet that our safety and freedom is tied up with the safety and freedom of others.

Invocations that mobilize the concept of diaspora in this way require the identification of a diasporic community. Self-identification is a tenet of contemporary Jewish diaspora as it is constituted in North America. Jonathan Boyarin notes that diasporic communities increasingly articulate themselves as such (*Powers of Diaspora* 27). It is important to see this self-identification within the larger and long context of Jewish movements (Bundism, Zionism, anarchism, etc.) and also to note that this self-identification is not unified. For example, some identify as part of a diaspora in relationship to Israel as a Jewish homeland, others identify as diasporic as an

alternative to Zionism (although, of course, the rejection of Zionism is still evidence of a relationship to the state), and still others identify on a continuum between these two.⁸⁷ Jonathan Boyarin notes the difference between diasporic ties that are created through memory and those created through release from state (*Powers of Diaspora* 24).⁸⁸ While the self-identification as part of “a diaspora” can give rise to an imaginary and universalizing sense of unity, the Yiddish cultural scene is an example of a diasporic community where all of these modes of diasporic self-identification are at play, sometimes in tension but often overlapping and even supporting each other (*Powers of Diaspora* 25).

I suggest that in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene, the body of cultural practices that are understood as Yiddish culture function in place of or sometimes alongside the Talmud as the traveling homeland. I use “alongside” here as, again, it is important to note that the Yiddish cultural scene is by no means uniformly secular and many participants study and interpret Talmud as part of their Jewish religious and cultural practice. Daniel Boyarin positions the concept of diaspora as a lens through which to describe and analyze particular modes of Jewish

⁸⁷ Jonathan Boyarin also reminds us that, although diasporic self-identification in relationship to Israel as a homeland often references the Holocaust or positions itself as anti-Zionist, Jewish history has no one stable homeland or one-time cut off event and the diasporic condition long predates the traumatic disconnects of the Holocaust (*Powers of Diaspora* 27).

⁸⁸ By “release from state,” Boyarin means strengthening Jewish identity that is not oriented around the existence of a Jewish state. I see a correlation here to the way that individuals, groups, or movements identify themselves on a continuum of centre and periphery in relationship to mainstream culture. I’m reminded, for example, of a musician in a klezmer band from Israel who told me that they wouldn’t play klezmer if it was popular in Israel; they chose klezmer because they felt that it represented the periphery.

cultural practice, in particular cultural hybridity and creativity, reading the diasporic condition of a doubled cultural location “as the source of the particular kind of creativity that empowers Jews and other diasporic peoples” (*Travelling Homeland* 66). Movement between dispersed communities meant that stories, teachings, and traditions moved back and forth and a sense of collective identity arose from the “shared enterprise” of interpreting the religious teachings (*Travelling Homeland* 64). If, as Boyarin asserts, the shared practice of talmudic study and interpretation can constitute Jewish diaspora, then the shared practice of Yiddish cultural study and interpretation constitutes the diasporic nature of the Yiddish cultural community. Boyarin suggests the polysystem as a model, where different cultural systems “interpenetrate and modify one another:” “when the polysystem includes . . . local and trans-local systems at once, we have a diaspora” (*Travelling Homeland* 106). The doubled cultural location is a way of knowing, not simply a reference to geographic locations (*Traveling Homeland* 100); many stories and jokes rely on this kind of doubled knowledge (69). As Shandler points out in his articulation of the postvernacular, code-switching has long been a vital aspect of Jewish life. The diasporic condition requires both conscious and unconscious code-switching between dispersed and diverse modes of being Jewish, and between Jewish and non-Jewish life. Doikayt and jetztzeit, as sites where we experience the spark of social and political potential, are located at the intersection of local and translocal. But importantly, these sparks are not passive and require the active participation of the individual at that intersection; the call to action occurs in their interpretation of the

relationship between here/there and now/then.

I have found a number of other concepts helpful in thinking through how KlezKanada's Summer Retreat – as well as festivals more generally – temporarily re-structure space for participants. In particular, I have previously written and spoken about the Summer Retreat as a heterotopic space.⁸⁹ Heterotopia are counter-sites, spaces that exist separate from but in relation to the space around them. Introduced by Michel Foucault in his 1986 essay, "Of Other Spaces," the concept of heterotopia has since been explored and expanded by other scholars. While the cryptic nature of Foucault's description has led "others to use the term in vague and divergent ways," theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins suggests that it is the nature of heterotopic spaces to be flexible and that therein lies the potential of the concept ("Introduction," *Theatre's Heterotopias*). In outlining the principles of heterotopic space, Foucault uses spatial metaphors, describing the characteristics of these "counter-sites" as a landscape – a heterotopology – rather than as an exact science (24). As Foucault draws the landscape, he highlights the properties of heterotopias. Heterotopia are constituted in every culture but not restricted to any universal form (25). Their function can shift, refashioned by society. They are "capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible," a trait Foucault explicitly links to the theatre (25). They often open onto "heterochronies," alternate orderings of or breaks with

⁸⁹ I presented excerpts of an early version of this chapter at the 2022 WJSA and IFTR conferences.

traditional time (26). They always have a boundary that, while penetrable, requires some form of entering/leaving (26). Finally, “they have a function in relation to all the space that remains” (27).

Festivals are often cited as paragon of heterotopic space. Indeed, they manifest more than one of the traits outlined by Foucault – for example, the property of defined boundaries. As Kirshenblatt-Gimblet notes, the boundaries of festivals are discernible. Two brief examples, one in place and one in time, will illustrate that demarcation. As the child of performers, I attended many festivals when I was growing up. In my memory, where countless festival sites blend together, the physical boundaries of these events were always marked by that temporary orange plastic fencing. Within that fencing, I wandered as I wished whereas outside of that boundary I would have been expected to be accompanied by a parent. Even as a child I understood that the orange fence designated a change of environment. To illustrate festival boundaries marked by time, I refer to another photograph from KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat, taken in 2005 on arrival day (Image 3.1). In the picture, my friend Becky Khitrik and I are sitting outside on a wooden bench with our backs to the camera. The scene is calm; the photo recalls a moment when we are waiting for something to begin. We were both scholarship participants that year and arrived way too early, before most other faculty and participants. As other people slowly began to arrive, we watched the Summer Retreat manifest around us. It felt as though each moment of arrival caused the space around us to shift. In fact, because it is held in a rented venue, the act of arriving at the site as participants is what makes that venue transform into the retreat. In each of these instances,

the festival is marked out in space and time. As I wrote earlier, many participants describe an alternate ordering of time as part of their experience of the Retreat. I am not the first to apply the concept of heterotopic space to KlezKanada; in her book on Yiddish singing in North America, ethnomusicologist Abigail Wood argues that Yiddish “music camps are a consummate form of heterotopia, secluded places of intensely enacted community life where physical distances between participants are virtually eliminated while the conceptual distance from the outside world is heightened” (8).



Image 3.1. Waiting for participants to arrive at KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat. Unknown photographer, 2005.

While I’m not suggesting that diasporic time and space is necessarily heterotopic, like

Boyarin's definition of diaspora, Foucault conceptualizes multiple synchronous and sympatric⁹⁰ spaces that refer back to each other. In Foucault's statement that western society has entered an "epoch of simultaneity . . . of juxtaposition," I am reminded of Walter Benjamin and his commitment to juxtaposition as the beginning of understanding (22). In his brief outline of what might constitute heterotopic space, Foucault, like Benjamin, provides a framework for theorizing on the relationship between – suggesting that we consider the juxtaposition of different kinds of spaces in Western society. This relationship between spaces is the aspect of heterotopia most taken up by other theorists, who have extended Foucault's original sketch. For cultural geographer Kevin Hetherington, heterotopias are "spaces of alternate ordering" that, similar to laboratories, are sites where different models of societal ordering can be tested (Hetherington 9). This articulation grounds my understanding of the concept and reflects the way it is commonly activated by theatre, performance, and festival scholars today. As theatre scholar Joanne Tompkins writes: "Heterotopias do not simply exist in the delineation of such an alternative space: rather, their power is derived from being read against a context of a real or actual world"

⁹⁰ To borrow a word from biology, as Foucault did with heterotopia, I suggest sympatric, which means to occur in the same area as distinct species, especially without losing identity.

(Chapter 1).⁹¹ Tompkins is most interested in the social and political potential of heterotopia created through theatrical performance, suggesting that by harnessing the “world-making” potential of theatre, artists can demonstrate possible realities (“Introduction”). Referring back to Hetherington’s metaphor of laboratories, “theatre provides an experimental zone in which different ‘worlds’ can be constructed and tested” (Introduction). This potential for experimentation and modelling is what makes heterotopia a useful concept for thinking about KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat, where performances contribute to the heterotopic quality of the space and rehearse and model interventions in the world around us.

The Backwards March

Let’s return to the opening image of the chapter: the participants of KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat are walking backwards together, playing and singing a nign – yay day-day-day, yay day-day-day, yay day-day-day day-day-day day-day-day. . . .⁹² We process backwards, so we walk slowly along the gravel road. There’s some good-natured bumping into each other involved.

⁹¹ Tompkins notes that she was drawn to the concept of heterotopia because she wanted to investigate the complex intersection of “actual and imaginary” spaces that occurs in theatre, but that, despite the fact that space is an indispensable element of the theatrical event, she could not find the language to do so (Introduction). Foucault singles out the theatre as an example of a heterotopia but refers only to the capability of the physical stage itself to juxtapose “several sites that are in themselves incompatible” by hosting “one after the other, a whole series of places that are foreign to one another” (25). In *Theatre’s Heterotopias* Joanne Tompkins digs deeper into the relationships between the space/s of presentation, the space/s presented by the production, and the “actual world beyond the theatre” (Chapter 1).

⁹² The diphthong here is pronounced /aɪ/ as in the word “bye.”

On the edges of the crowd, some participants take on the role of redirecting those who are aimed off the path or towards obstacles. As we move from the gathering point by the lake up the sloping road, the procession becomes spread out and, as the group spreads out, so does the music. Because there is no single conductor, the tempo stretches and breaks. The front of the crowd may be playing the nign a whole phrase ahead or behind the back of the crowd. If you move back and forth through the crowd rather than with it there is a point at which you travel through the tempo break, like walking through a time machine that skips over only a beat or two. If you stand in that juncture, the cohesiveness gives way to cacophony. As the procession reaches the designated stopping point and the crowd coalesces again, the tempos find their way back into unison. People start to dance, joining hands in a line and winding their way through the crowd. When someone “calls” the tune, the Backwards March nign comes to an end. Someone else begins to sing a new nign and the energy shifts away from instruments and towards voices. Some drift off towards religious services, others link arms and continue to sing together. Shabes – the Jewish day of rest – is here.

At the 2001 edition of KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat theatre artist Jenny Romaine led a workshop on Yiddish processional walking. Jenny wanted to explore the ways that Jews move together. In her interview for the Wexler Oral History Project, she describes how “the question came out of a professional problem.” With a background in processional theatre, in part shaped by many years working with Bread and Puppet Theater, Jenny was being asked to create “large

Yiddishist parades.” She recalls that “the collaborations were exciting and spectacular but were not drawing on Yiddish dramaturgy” (Romaine, “Backwards March”). The workshop at KlezKanada was intended to learn from and draw upon models that could address this imbalance. As part of the workshop, folklorist Itzik Gottesman shared an interview he had collected with Arye-Leibush Laish, a Yiddish writer and singer then living in Israel. Laish recalled how, in the 1920–30s all the Jewish members of his village of Stănișești (Romania) would gather by the river on Friday evening and walk together toward town playing a melody to usher in the Sabbath (Gottesman).⁹³ Facing the sunset, they would proceed backwards into the village so as not to turn their back on the Sabbath, or the Shabes Queen.⁹⁴ When they reached the shul (synagogue), they would put down their instruments and begin the evening prayers. Frank London, trumpet player and co-founder of the Klezmatics, adapted the melody collected from Laish so that it was easier for all of the participants to learn and play. During the week Jenny and Frank went around to every workshop at the Retreat and taught the melody. In a sound recording taken by a participant in 2001, you can hear a rehearsal right before the first procession in which Jenny tells the story and Frank leads the whole group through a practice of the melody (Wynberg).

⁹³ A short recording of Laish speaking to Itzik Gottesman about this tradition can be heard at <https://yiddishsong.wordpress.com/2014/09/22/arye-leibush-laishs-backwards-march-nigun/>

⁹⁴ The Shabes Queen is the female manifestation of God who arrives on shabes. She can also be read as an anthropomorphic manifestation of shabes (Wexler).



Image 3.2: Jenny Romaine introducing the first Backwards March at KlezKanada's 2001 Summer Retreat. Photo © Josh Dolgin, 2001.

The Backwards March has since become an integral part of the week at the Summer Retreat. Twenty years on, we no longer rehearse the performance; even the melody is mostly taught informally, learned by ear by participants during jam sessions or during the procession itself.⁹⁵ As a participant I find the tradition meaningful and playful. As a performance studies scholar, I find the Backwards March fascinating. While it is unlikely that the procession in Stănișești was conceived by the participants as a performance, the annual procession at the Summer Retreat should be analyzed as a participatory performance. It was conceived from within a theatre workshop, the story and form taught, rehearsed, and staged. “What a delight and

⁹⁵ The melody is usually taught to the children's program and the beginners' ensemble.

opportunity to stage something so ingenious with the whole intergenerational community,” Jenny reflects, “The ‘Backwards Walk’ was an ethnographic re-enactment. It was live art in real space” (“Backwards March”). A complex study in space and time, the procession references, alters, and takes up space. In this section, I will consider how this participatory performance opens up a space of *jetztzeit* and *doikayt* by bringing together multiple times and locations and, in doing so, functions as a model for how the Yiddish cultural scene relates to history, cultural practice, and community.

The Backwards March references the town of Stănișești (as it was in the 1920s and 1930s), linking Summer Retreat participants to a different time and location. During the procession, we are simultaneously aware of pre-war Stănișești, the physical surroundings of the twenty-first century venue, and the heightened temporary space of the retreat itself. In Boyarin’s diasporic terms, we are aware of the local and trans-local. However, the referencing is not straightforward. Does the link hold if participants are not aware of the context of the tradition? In 2006 I remember Jenny outfitted as the Shabbes Queen and explicitly relinking the two spaces. Writing about this same moment, clarinettist and cantor Becky Khitrik recalls:

At the front (or, rather the back) of the procession, walked a woman robed and crowned, the Shabbes [sic] Queen. “Why do we walk backwards?” one asked her. “Woe to the person who turns their back on the Shabbes,” the Queen dramatically replied. “And why do we sing this song?” “Because, in the 19th Century, the people of the Stanisesti [sic]

Shtetl, which is now a part of Romania, sang this song. We do this in their memory.

(Wexler 2)

It was important, Jenny told me at the time, to stay grounded in the stories that we use or reference in our creative work. It is the reinforcement of a simultaneous awareness of the local and translocal through performance, written context included in the brochure, or other means, that makes the Backwards March a diasporic event. Complicating this referencing even further, while the Backwards March began in Stănișești, it was re-imagined by Jenny, Itzik, and Frank for the Summer Retreat and, since 2001, it has now become a marker of the retreat. Of all the aspects of KlezKanada, the Backwards March has probably received the most attention; it has been discussed in academic papers at every level, non-academic publications, on radio shows, in documentaries, and beyond. While it is occasionally used in other settings, such as Friday night services at egalitarian synagogues, it is introduced into those settings by KlezKanada participants. Similarly, the tune is often inserted into jam sessions, again usually by KlezKanada participants. When not everyone in the jam session will know the context and history of the tune, the tune is referential for those who have been to the Summer Retreat and it is not uncommon to see those participants start to walk backwards together or begin to sing along.⁹⁶ For these participants,

⁹⁶ For better or worse, many words have been put to the simple tune over the years. One set of lyrics, created by faculty members Sruli Dresdner and Lisa Mayer for the Summer Retreat kids program has proved sticky because a generation of children grew up singing it at the Retreat: “KlezKanada, KlezKanada, we come with a smile and we leave with a tear. We hope to see you again next year, in KlezKanada.”

when it is enacted elsewhere, the primary reference is back to KlezKanada rather than back to Stănișești. This referential slippage follows a shift in diasporic reference in which contemporary Yiddish culture refers back to Eastern Europe as a translocal reference rather than to Zion.⁹⁷

The Backwards March, as created by Jenny, Frank, and Itzik, builds upon what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett might call an ethnographic fragment. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett writes that festivals, like other heritage sites, depend on displaced cultural artifacts and performances to construct and populate the space. She calls these displaced artifacts “ethnographic fragments,” suggesting that the removal of the fragment from its local contexts fundamentally alters it. Here she is referring to intangible artifacts such as songs and stories, as well as tangible objects such as cups and saucers. Through this removal and repeated performance, these artifacts “take forms that are alien, if not antithetical, to how they are produced and experienced in their local settings . . .” (*Destination* 64). It is these fundamentally altered re-enactments that are experienced by the festival audience (*Destination* 69). This creates what Kirshenblatt-Gimblett refers to as a “bifurcated gaze” where the gaze, and experience, of the visitor is split between two worlds – the world of the everyday and the world of the performed space (*Destination Culture* 50). In a heterochronic space, the bifurcated gaze can also refer to a split experience of time. I find this displacement of artifacts returns us to Foucault through a parallel with the origin of the word

⁹⁷ I have referred to this shift elsewhere as a secondary diaspora or a diaspora squared (Moore, *Fragmented Memory*).

heterotopia in a way that is useful, if unintentional; the term “had originally been used to describe the medical situation in which an organ is displaced from its usual location or position in the body” (Tompkins, “Chapter 1”). The very displacement of the cultural artifacts lends itself to heterotopic landscapes. The Backwards March is fundamentally altered by its removal from its local context. The story of the Backwards March, as told by Arye Laishe (then by Itzik, then by Jenny, and then by me, and so on) is of a procession moving through the village of Stănișești, Romania. Now the procession moves through KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat, a temporary space constituted once a year in Quebec, Canada. However, unlike an exhibition where the fragment is displayed and neatly labelled, the Backwards March, as it exists at KlezKanada, is intentionally re-imagined for the community and the setting.⁹⁸ Jenny Romaine’s version of re-enactment is focused on world-making rather than historically-oriented reproduction. She uses her workshops as creative labs through which to tackle a problem, such as exploring models for Yiddishist parades. “The Backwards March is almost the epitome of everything we’re trying to do at KlezKanada,” asserts Frank London; “[it’s] about taking our history and studying it and making informed choices and yet creating something new that we internalize that is ours and that lives on in the future” (KlezKanada 2021 Backwards March). The Backwards March has an

⁹⁸ In the wake of this re-imagining, is the local context for this new version of the Backwards March still Stănișești or is it now KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat? I would argue that KlezKanada has already become the new home of the ethnographic fragment, illustrating the unfixedness of local and translocal.

ethnographic fragment at its centre, but illustrates a situation where the re-enactment or display of that fragment has been transformed, through critical and creative intervention, into a community performance that rehearses social transformation.

Time also gets messy during the Backwards March. We perform an ethnographic fragment from our historical past with our contemporary bodies and identities. While moving backwards, we carry our futured bodies and the futured tradition forward with us. We wear all of these times on our bodies. It is a moment when past and present are in intimate proximity or, as Rebecca Schneider evocatively describes it, when the past is brought “to the very fingertips of the present” (2) through the bodily labour of engaging with memory. Schneider is writing in the context of historical re-enactments and, while the procession does not fit neatly into this category, Schneider’s investigation into “a more porous approach to time” is still useful in thinking about the Backwards March (6). For Schneider, “before and behind cannot be plotted in a straight line” because our performances of the past are “mutually disruptive” acts; we pull the past into our present and, because our understanding of the past is always an incomplete and changing construction, our present disrupts the past (22, 15). This disruption can be read as an example of Walter Benjamin’s “new configuration between the present and the past” that opens up the potential of *jetztzeit*. Indeed, Schneider might almost be pointing to the potential of *jetztzeit* when she asks whether these moments of temporal slippage are “moments when the past flashes up now to present us with its own alternative futures – futures we might choose to realize

differently” (180)? It is in the moment of *jetztzeit* that we make informed choices about alternate futures.

As the local and translocal references to space and time come together in the Backwards March, I want to point to a local that is mostly missing. That is, the Summer Retreat as positioned within the provincial, national, and Jewish community landscapes of Quebec and Canada, and upon Indigenous territory. Finding, as my colleague Evelyn Tauben puts it, “the Canada in KlezKanada,” has sometimes been a challenge. Although it grew out of the strong Yiddishist community in Montreal, the shape of the Summer Retreat was influenced by the American and European artists who taught there. To some extent, the Summer Retreat has engaged with its national location through programming about Yiddish and Jewish culture within the political and social histories of Quebec and Canada. However, there has been less awareness of our positionality as we take up space on and move across unceded Indigenous land. Participants express the feeling that KlezKanada is a diasporic home but the possibility of a neutral or unoccupied gathering space is a colonial fantasy. We gather together to create that home on land that sits at the intersection of four nations: Algonquin, Anishinabek, Atikamekw, and Kanien’kehá:ka peoples. Among the very few scholars surveying Jewish/Indigenous engagement in Canada, David Koffman argues that Canadian Jewish history must be seen as part of the colonial story (103). “Settling and unsettling” are intertwined in this history as many Ashkenazi Jews arrived in what is now called Canada having been persecuted and displaced in Europe but,

in their ascent as part of the project of multicultural modernity, were connected to the displacement of First Nations (88). Koffman notes that, in Canada, there has been a rise of Jewish interest in Indigenous issues that coincides with the Truth and Reconciliation report (2015) and with increased debate over the relationship of the State of Israel and Zionism to colonialism. As Rebecca Schneider argues, “what has happened in a place is always happening” (26). In situating ourselves as a diaspora, and especially in situating the Backwards March as an example of *doikayt*, we need to grapple with our relationship to the land we traverse. In its commitment to locality and to working in solidarity with local partners towards mutual support, a diasporic approach to culture should insist on a reflexive approach to place. At the same time, such work needs to be critical in order to avoid what Koffman describes as “discursive colonialism (94).” Koffman points out that Canadian Jewish authors have looked to Indigenous authors as models of resistance but also mythologized Indigenous life as they “work through Canadian or Jewish issues” (92-93), relegating Indigenous culture to a lost past.

Settler positionality has not gone undiscussed at the Summer Retreat; a project commissioned for the twenty-fifth anniversary of the retreat in 2020 chose to work with themes along these lines.⁹⁹ However, this positionality requires more critical engagement and calls for

⁹⁹ “*Vu bistu geven*” (*Where Have You Been*) was a commissioned collaboration led by songwriter Geoff Berner and Jenny Romaine, with Sadie Gold-Shapiro, Rachel Lemisch, Simone Lucas, and Ira Temple (2020 KlezKanada Brochure). The project included interviews with Kanien’kehá:ka historians and cultural leaders, playful self-reflexive inquiry through storytelling, and original songs.

extended research, analysis, and creative intervention. This is research waiting to be done, ideally in collaboration with Indigenous and/or Indigenous-Jewish artists and educators. What can we learn from Indigenous activists who have fought and continue to fight for language and culture, while moving beyond an extractivist approach to resources and towards collaboration and mutual uplift?¹⁰⁰ Diasporic space should not be seen to hover over top of the local setting. Rather, doikayt asks of us that we consider our engagement with the local setting, but through a culturally specific rather than assimilationist lens.

In examining the procession as a metaphor for our relationship with history, I want to nestle it next to another metaphor – that of the angel of history. It is not my aim to force these two ideas into one metaphor by a point-by-point comparison. Rather I hope that through reading them side-by-side, each might offer something to the other. Walter Benjamin famously described the “angel of history” in Thesis IX of “On the Concept of History:”¹⁰¹

... an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon

¹⁰⁰ See Dylan Robinson and Yvette Nolan, among others, on appropriation of Indigenous methodologies as resource extraction.

¹⁰¹ The two volumes I have referenced for this text, *Illuminations* and *Fire Alarm*, give different titles to the text: “Theses on the Philosophy of History” and “On the Concept of History” respectively. I have chosen to go with “On the Concept of History,” even when referencing *Illuminations*.

wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (*Illuminations* 257–258)

For Benjamin, this angel of history is focused on from whence it has come but moving steadfastly away from that place. Judith Butler highlights that the angel is moving “forward, that is, backward, in time” (93). The angel is moving backwards into the future, progressing backwards. With its eyes on the past, it holds onto the insight that the “‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule” (*Illuminations* 257). Jonathan Boyarin focuses on the storm blowing from paradise rather than the image of the past: “Part of the import of Benjamin’s image is the lesson that we are always once again being driven out; in some sense we have always just lost paradise, hence we are always close to it” (*Storm from Paradise* xvi). In his reading of the angel of history, Boyarin suggests that both the gap from and the proximity to the past are emphasized and that “we need constantly to be interrogating and recuperating the past, without pretending for long that we can recoup its plenitude” (*Storm from Paradise* xvi). Recalling Benjamin’s injunction that juxtaposition is the beginning of understanding that can help us wrest ourselves away from the catastrophe of the status quo, Boyarin notes that this relationship to the

past and to memory/forgetting calls for juxtaposition and multiplicity in order to articulate it. It is an entangled relationship. Boyarin interprets the catastrophe as forgetting; we look on in horror as we forget the past (2). And yet, it is clear that we are drawn to the past as well. In the world of traditional arts and culture, our relationship to the past is fraught even as we celebrate, steward, and re-imagine cultural practices that are usually understood to be rooted in those pasts.

In KlezKanada's Backwards March, two metaphors become not one but entwined. As we look backwards, we see beauty as well as wreckage. We welcome shabes without turning our back on the Shabes Queen. Jenny Romaine interprets this to mean that, just as you shouldn't turn your back on royalty, "walking backwards is in homage to the sort of spiritual energy that's coming into the world" (MacLellan). Rather than moving towards and/or away, we are moving into shabes with shabes as it arrives, welcoming it with honour into our week. In describing the procession, Romaine refers to shabes as "a time of rest and doing things that really reference what it's like to live in paradise" (Romaine in MacLellan, see also Heschel 19). Whenever I reread Benjamin's fragment, I question whether the storm of progress is blowing from the past or the future. The location of paradise is not clear, particularly when religious messianism speaks of a paradise to come with the coming of the messiah, and secular messianism pursues a better world for all in overturning of the status quo. So, in the Backwards March we move into the paradise of shabes while still moving continually away from the paradise of Eden. Likewise, we move into the future with a caring and critical engagement with the past. In its relationship to the past, the

Backwards March is an example of how the past can be carried into the future through juxtaposition. We look backwards with intention, consciously drawing upon the past to shape our present and future.

While I think it would be a stretch to say that the pedagogical strategies of KlezKanada are designed to wrest ourselves away from the catastrophe of linear history, a central goal of the Summer Retreat is to teach critical strategies for working with the past. Jewish theologian Abraham Joshua Heschel wrote that shabes is a “a palace in time which we build” (15). We have to actively construct this time in order to set it apart from our weekdays. The Backwards March is the sign that shabes has arrived at KlezKanada and, with it, a shift in energy. While this shift varies depending on religious observance, it marks the end of formal workshops and the beginning of a relaxed and freeform day. For observant participants, shabes brings religious services and the observance of a day of rest when work is not permitted; depending on the degree of observance, this may include not playing instruments and not activating electricity. Participants are asked to be respectful of the diverse approaches to observance. Sebastian Schulman, the Executive Director of KlezKanada from 2017–2022, notes that for many participants the procession not only marks shabes at KlezKanada, it also marks “that week off at the end of the summer from the year entire” (MacLellan). A returning scholarship participant described KlezKanada as “the shabes of the year” (Lewis-Weigens). On shabes we rest and consider the week behind and the week ahead. It is a sacred day, and set apart from the rest of the

week. For many, KlezKanada holds this space in the year: sacred and set apart from the day-to-day. However, like shabes, it is a palace in time that we have to carefully build and maintain. The Backwards March is an embodied demarcation of both the weekly shabes and the shabes of the year. Speaking about the Backwards March in the context of Stănișești, Romaine comments: “in our normal life we walk forwards so if you’re trying to mark the difference between one period of time and another, what an ingenious way to do it by walking backwards” (MacLellan). Here again, I see a reflection of heterotopic space in the symbolic importance of the passage or entry. We walk backwards to transition into shabes. Walking backwards helps us reiterate the space of KlezKanada, the shabes of the year.

Through their collective assembly, participants create a temporary centre for a dispersed and diverse community who have gathered together from around the world. This temporary centre is, like Heschel’s articulation of shabes, constructed in time, in part through the power of collective performances. As Sebastian Schulman recounts, the procession illustrates how, through performance, a group of people who may have started the week as strangers are connecting as a community and “singing one song” (MacLellan). For many in this community the co-created week of the retreat offers a “shabes of the year.” “For some of us,” Sarah Gordon commented, “it’s a way to anchor our year and our time” (2019). Events like the Summer Retreat have become rituals in the community calendar for many participants, functioning as additional or alternative Jewish holidays in the way that they mark out the cycle of the year. Historically, the religious

rituals of the Jewish year were part of re-engaging the individual within the collective memory of the Jewish people (Yerushalmi 42).¹⁰² In a secular-leaning context, KlezKanada's Summer Retreat re-engages returning participants with Jewish cultural practice and community. The Summer Retreat is something that we work towards and work out from. "That time is super important to synthesize and decide what's useful for you now and what can be on the back burner," Sarah noted (2019). In preparing for the intensive week-long workshops, we explore new areas of repertoire, compose, arrange, and choreograph new materials, and expand our models of pedagogy and performance. During the week we share work and gather materials, expanding our skills, learning repertoire, and building networks – all of which we take back into the rest of the year. Our faculty and participants return to their home communities excited and energized, carrying history, context, technique, and repertoire with them. In this way KlezKanada helps to seed and strengthen communities around the world. The retreat is a decentred centre in that its architecture of time and place is built by the very gathering of those who participate. When the community redisperses, the centre is also diffused, only to be built (the same but different) in another time and place when people gather for a different event. In his work on surrogation,

¹⁰² Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi distinguishes between Jewish memory and the history of the Jewish people. He argues that, until the 16th Century – as the Enlightenment era began to take hold – "while memory of the past was always a central component of Jewish experience, the historian was not its primary custodian" (xiv). Instead, Jewish memory was to be found in religious practices: codified in religious text, interpreted and "amplified" by the rabbis (17), and reiterated through ritual and recital (11). Memory was about faith, and the practices that affirmed faith, rather than historical contextualization (13). Activating memory as part of religious practice was part of ensuring the future promised by the belief system.

Joseph Roach argues that certain sites – coffee houses, for example – draw people together and, in doing so, create audiences and performers. Because of the audience gathered together, watching each other, these “vortices of behaviours” become sites where social behaviour is performed and thus reproduced. Because no performance can be the same twice, the process of surrogation means that the vortex of behaviour becomes “a centre of cultural self-invention through the restoration of behaviour” (28). The sites that Roach refers to become vortices of behaviour through their density of usage; because they gather people together, the temporary centres formed by KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat and other similar events can also be read as such sites.

In assembling and moving collectively, our bodies take up space in a different way than we do as individuals. I am reminded again of Pete Seeger’s assertion that every time we gather together for any reason, we affect the body politic. Jenny Romaine has suggested that the Backwards March is a way of “holding space with the body” (MacLellan). Assembled bodies perform the assertion that they have the “right to appear” in the ways their physical presence disrupts the quotidian space (see Butler *Notes* 24). In the Backwards March, participants at the Summer Retreat perform an anti-assimilationist assertion of presence. They take up space with their bodies Jewishly,¹⁰³ bodies that were historically persecuted and denied space, and they take up space with their Yiddishkayt, a set of cultural practices still too-frequently dismissed by

¹⁰³ I say Jewishly here rather than Jewish bodies because not all participants are Jewish but all are participants in a Jewish space.

mainstream North American Jewish communities as belonging only to a culture of memory and commemoration rather than an evolving contemporary Jewishness. This taking up of space is a different activation of Schneider's assertion that performance is an act of remaining.

In thinking through the Backwards March as an assembly, I'm influenced by Butler's book *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*. Butler invokes Arendt in her discussion of how space is "created through plural action" (*Notes* 73). This assembly only happens in the gaps between bodies; the "the action emerges from the 'between,' a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and differentiates" (77). Butler shows that public assembly demonstrates alliance rather than unity. She emphasizes that she uses the word alliance to refer to "the structure of our own subject-formation" (68), an assemblage that foregrounds the complex relationality between "my various cultural vicissitudes" internally and how we are "related to others in ways that are essential to any invocation of this 'I'" (68). Like the diasporic condition, this alliance, that can exist within a single subject or in a group, insists upon "an ethics of cohabitation" (68, 70).

Although Butler unpacks alliance and assembly within the context of political demonstration, her interpretation is useful as I think about the Backwards March, as well as other ways that we assemble at the Summer Retreat, for example in song. In the Backwards March, the assembly brings different aspects of self and community together. This returns us to the previous chapter, in which I described the Yiddish cultural scene as holding the space for many ways of being and doing Jewish and many ways of connecting to Yiddishkayt. The Backwards March

reiterates that space through collective performance as we consciously choose to process together in alliance. This is not the same as being unified. Indeed, a strength of KlezKanada is that it does not insist on a singular worldview. As Butler reminds us in her introduction, “there is no possibility of ‘the people’ without a discursive border drawn somewhere” (5). Although we walk together as a community, the Backwards March complicates a singular “people” through entangled alliances. The “we are here” asserted in this assembly reiterates a Jewish space, but it also reiterates an entangled Jewish space with room for “I am here” and “I am also here” and “I, with ‘my various cultural vicissitudes’ (68) am also here.” Of course, at the Summer Retreat, the Backwards March takes place in semi-private space rather than a public square or street as in the protests analyzed by Butler. There is less risk involved in asserting presence, though it should be noted that an increase in acts of antisemitism in Canada and the US has led some participants to express concern about attending the retreat. This also changes the role of the assembly; instead of performing outwards it performs in towards the community participating. However, this assembly – as well as the larger and longer gathering within which it takes place – serves as a rehearsal or model for assembly and alliance in the rest of our lives, beyond the boundaries of the Summer Retreat.

Bring all of these ideas together, I suggest that the collective performance of the Backwards March, as well as the setting of the Summer Retreat within which it is practiced, 1) opens up a space of juxtaposition that leads to cultural creativity and hybridity; 2) creates a

temporary centre for dispersed community; and 3) rehearses strategies for effecting change outside the boundaries of the event by modeling other ways of being in the world. These three outcomes are bound up with each other.

I see the following modelled:

First, the Backwards March models a productive tension between forwards and backwards in which a doubled cultural location in time (or heterochronic location) grounds a critical approach to traditional cultural practice and pedagogy. Jenny Romaine observed that “we are learning about the past and the present at the same time to help us shape a story about what’s happening to us now that is very grounded in Yiddish materials, whatever they may be” (2021).

In our interview Zoë Aqua told me that when she first started to learn to play klezmer music, she was obsessed with the idea of sounding “authentic.” She told me that her approach started to change when “I talked to one of my friends who is a jazz player, and he’s like: what are you doing to move the genre forward? And I was like, that’s a good question!” (2019). This inspired her to start to compose klezmer melodies. “But then,” Zoë recalled, “I remember also talking to Deb Strauss around the same time and she was like: Well, what are you doing to move the genre backwards? I was like, that’s a good point” (2019).¹⁰⁴ In turn, this conversation prompted Zoë to think about the through lines of the music tradition and consider how the ideas of forwards and

¹⁰⁴ Deborah Strauss is an acclaimed klezmer violinist. She has been a member of many high-profile klezmer revival bands and has taught and mentored a generation of klezmer violinists.

backwards can inform new work in the field that is rooted in an in-depth understanding of form, history, and context. To embrace both the forward and the backward movement, as Zoë Aqua articulated, is a challenge, but it is a productive challenge. Interestingly, Ilya Shneyveys spoke to the same challenge but through the inverse experience. “I didn’t really care for old stuff in the beginning,” Ilya told me, “I cared more for how to make it sound like rock or some sort of weird stuff. And it took me a few years to realize that actually what I need to do is to learn how to how to play it the most traditional way. And then to do weird shit with it” (2019). In his comments at a memorial for Adrienne Cooper, former director of YIVO and publisher of the *Forward* Samuel Norich observed that cultural transmission should involve pulling in opposite directions: “That was the way Adrienne performed a song. She learned what it had meant but she brought something of her own to it. That’s how she taught others to perform” (Engelhardt). This productive tension between forwards/backwards is a strategy of *jetztzeit* where the intentional juxtaposition of research and interpretation sparks creativity.

Second, but closely linked, the Backwards March models a postvernacular approach to cultural transmission and creation that centres careful research and study, critical thought, translation, code-switching, and – importantly – a sense of play. The space opened through performance creates an opportunity for the community to actively explore, create, and perform a relationship to cultural practice that is grounded in history, makes informed choices, and turns it into something for the present and future. This re-affirms an approach to tradition that is local

and translocal in terms of both place and time – a “now” and “here” that is in dialogue and continuum with “then” and “there” rather than simply idolizing or rejecting them.

Third, the Summer Retreat models a diasporic approach to the formation and care of self and community, in which a doubled cultural location in place encourages hybrid identities, a plurality of voices, and solidarity across difference. Judith Butler leans into this in her analysis of the Jewish ethics of relating beyond ourselves but I would suggest that at the Summer Retreat we invoke the intersection of local and translocal and the concept of *doikayt* within community as well. Through pedagogy and performance, participants study and rehearse strategies of translation that require ethical engagement with the other-than-self. The Backwards March is a moment of intersection where, in all our different ages, backgrounds, and ways of thinking and being in the world, we practice collectivity. During the procession, we move and sing together in unison despite the fact that that we may not be united (and may indeed be in conflict) in our understanding of what it means to be Jewish or the ways we engage with Yiddish culture. In assembling, participants model a community that embraces different ways of being and doing Jewish.

Fourth, the Backwards March models an approach to transition and change that studies the past, challenges the status quo, and carries forward and adapts the traditions that help us to structure our connections to each other and our understanding of the world around us. Jenny Romaine suggests that the Backwards March, which marks a moment of transition in an

embodied way, has the potential to model transition in our lives. “We have to change radically right now,” Romaine teaches, “the only way out is to go deeper into our collectivity. We just have to be together. And again, it’s backwards. You’re not leading with where you have control. You’re leading into the unknown” (KlezKanada, *Backwards March 2021*).

Fifth, the Summer Retreat models the cultivation of enchantment. I use the word enchantment here to conjure Jane Bennett, who defines it as an experience of being alive that is so strong, the wonder of it can evoke a personal sense of care towards the world, or a need to make change. For Bennett, “to be enchanted is, in the moment of its activation, to assent wholeheartedly to life – not to this or that particular condition or aspect of it but to the experience of living itself” (159). Bennett suggests that we can cultivate and pursue the experience of enchantment. Returning to Heschel’s idea of shabes as a “palace in time we have to build,” enchantment might be the feeling that the world is as it should be – even if only for a moment. The experience of shabes inspires us to seek that experience in the rest of our year.

The collective performances at KlezKanada, as exemplified by the Backwards March, foster doikayt and jetztzeit as methodologies of Yiddish creative practice, identity formation, and cultural transformation. However, the performances are not a deferment of practice as only a rehearsal of the future, nor are they memorials, as only a re-enactment of heritage. Heschel also writes that “The Sabbath is not for the sake of the weekdays; the weekdays are for the sake of Sabbath. It is not an interlude but the climax of living” (14). This does not negate the role of the

retreat as a model or suggest that we shouldn't practice ways of moving together as an act of world-building. The practice of here and now – of *jetzzeit* and *doikayt* – that we experience together, or build together, gives us an example of both worlds, of now and what is possible.

Interlude: Le-koved-19

In Hebrew and Yiddish, *le-koved* means “for the sake of” or “in honour of.” Although I found it difficult to see silver linings during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, it felt important to add this section for the sake of reflecting on what the pause necessitated by the global pandemic meant for the Yiddish cultural community and the events that make up the Yiddish cultural landscape. This section was drafted during the second wave of Toronto COVID-19 lockdowns, and revisited post-lockdown when most events had returned to an in-person format.

KlezKanada's leadership team made the decision to move the 2020 Summer Retreat to a digital format on March 18, 2020, very early after the first lockdowns began. When I saw the name of the board chair on my phone display during the first wave of pandemic cancellations, I knew why he was calling. The economics and logistics of producing the retreat meant that, even if the threat of the virus passed swiftly and it was safe to gather together by August 2020, we would not have time to recover in terms of planning and registration. Even as I felt the blow emotionally, I recognized that I would have to include the moment in my dissertation. My notes from that day are fragmented, moving between logistical plans for the virtual Summer Retreat

and anxiety over the future of the scene.

It is this linchpin of our year – we prepare for it, and we prepare from it. It drives forward relationships, projects, and a whole global community. It models a world we create outside of camp. By shutting down the live version of it, what do we model ourselves on?

(Moore, *Field Notes*)

If the event functions as a linchpin of our year, what happens when you pull the linchpin out? As part of the core team that re-imagined KlezKanada into an online event, I found the process intellectually intriguing, frustratingly hard, and heartbreaking.¹⁰⁵ The leadership team recognized an opportunity to offer programming with a global reach but I questioned why we were trying to transpose the program into a digital environment – should we create something entirely different? Would it be possible to create any approximation of the intimacy and cohesiveness that manifests at the Summer Retreat? Would we be able to spark the sense of enchantment that is so central to the experience?

In this section, I reflect on KlezKanada's shift to online programming in 2020 and 2021, a process entangled with my own experience of the COVID-19 pandemic. I will consider how online programming temporarily reconfigured the ways that participants gathered, communicated, and performed, asking how the virtual intervenes in the creation of diasporic

¹⁰⁵ While I was part of the core team, the move to digital programming during the first two years of the COVID-19 pandemic predated my position as the Artistic Director of KlezKanada.

space and how the social and political potential of juxtaposed spaces persists, shifts, or fails to materialize. I have called this section an interlude in relation to the rest of the chapter because the experience itself felt separate from the world we knew, and the lasting effects remain to be understood.

In 2020, the holiday of *pesakh* (Passover) fell in early April, soon after lockdowns were implemented around the world. The holiday marked the first foray into COVID-19-era large-scale online programming in the Jewish community. Because it occurred so early in the pandemic, these online *seders* (ritual holiday meals) attracted the attention of the mainstream media. While most of the gatherings were small and privately organized, the sheer number of online gatherings was noteworthy. On April 8, 2020, I was able to attend a seder “in New York” for the first time in several years; friends participated from across four countries. I was surprised and charmed by how the evening captured some aspects of the in-person gathering. In particular, I found it similarly chaotic to our in-person seders, starting out structured and, with each glass of wine, slowly unraveling into friendly disarray. On April 12 a live-streamed third seder event organized by Rabbi Avram Mlotek featured performances from many friends and colleagues from the Yiddish community.¹⁰⁶ It was well-orchestrated, with the artists and clergy on zoom and the video live-streamed on Facebook. 1000+ viewers kept up a steady flow of comments under the

¹⁰⁶ Third seders, which emerged as part of secular (and often socialist) Jewish life in early twentieth-century America, are community events that usually reimagine the seder ritual through a lens of relevant social and political context.

Facebook livestream. These early online events set a tone of community engagement for subsequent events to build upon. In the third seder Facebook comment thread an alumni of the KlezKanada scholarship program commented that this was some of the best live-streaming content she had ever seen and, if this is what the Yiddish community could achieve digitally, she felt less sad about KlezKanada being cancelled (Moore, *Field Notes*). I felt more conflicted. On the one hand, in a moment when we could not be together in-person, I was grateful for the possibility of forging connections digitally. On the other hand, there we all were, staring at our screens. “Next year in person,” Rabbi Mlotek told the viewers as the third seder ended.¹⁰⁷ I wrote in my notes: “I am exhausted by that kind of connection even while I love to see folks when I see them online. But I feel a deep loss of the live, the breath, the dancing together in one space, the subtlety of body language, the closeness of an unmediated voice. Far from easing my mind about our cancellations, I feel a crushing sadness” (Moore, *Field Notes*). In retrospect, I see how I was mourning the loss of the live even before being *oysgezoozt*, the feeling of exhaustion we have come to call Zoom-fatigue. That said, the early reconfiguration of *pesakh* seders around the world into online formats stimulated conversations about how to reconfigure other rituals, events, and social gatherings.

How do you walk together when you’re apart? As we planned the 2020 digital edition of

¹⁰⁷ The *pesakh* seder ritual includes the wish that we meet next year in Jerusalem.

KlezKanada's Summer Retreat we knew that there were certain rituals of the week that we had to include but would have to approach in creative ways. For many returning participants, a Summer Retreat without the Backwards March would not have felt complete. And yet how could we create the joyous sacred cacophony of sound and the juxtaposition of then and now that is the feeling of the event? The limitations of our technological platforms, although they improved rapidly in those first months, meant that unmuting and playing together over Zoom was not an option.¹⁰⁸ Michael Winograd put out a call for participants to submit videos of themselves playing, singing, walking, and dancing the Backwards March nigun. He received over eighty submissions which he and filmmaker Magdalena Hutter edited together with archival footage. To add a real-time element to the initial stream of the video, participants were invited to join via Zoom and play or sing (muted) along with the video. The gallery view of Zoom participants was then streamed next to the edited video as a diptych.¹⁰⁹ While I did not submit a video to contribute to the edit, I did participate in the Zoom call. I walked over to Toronto-based curator Evelyn Tauben's backyard and we joined via Zoom. Evelyn had two monitors set up outside, one with the Zoom call and

¹⁰⁸ Dan Blacksberg described experimenting with and pushing the limits of the online platforms during the early pandemic, including unmuted improvisation. While he found it interesting, he also pointed out that experiments with format were often hard to implement in practice because of the inconsistency of connection speed, comfort with the technology, etc. (*COVID Panel*).

¹⁰⁹ The 2020 Backwards March can be found on the KlezKanada YouTube channel:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFnJ7Ns9mWM>
A version of the video side-by-side with the Zoom gallery can be found on Facebook:
<https://www.facebook.com/klezkanada/videos/764822484436767>

one with the Facebook feed. During the event, we watched multiple moments in time simultaneously: the edited videos sent by participants, the archival footage (which, oddly, meant seeing myself at multiple ages and outfits in one video), the Zoom gallery, and the out-of-synch streaming of the videos on two monitors. While the intention was that participants on Zoom would play along with the video, participation instead tended towards waving at friends and an active behind-the-scenes chat window that was not visible to the Facebook livestream. In addition, there was also a real-time Facebook comment thread next to the livestream. Finally, there was the in-person experience of standing physically distanced with Evelyn in her backyard, walking in place rather than backwards so that we could continue to see the video on the monitors. In this iteration, we did not turn our backs on the community represented on the computer screens. All of this meant that the digital Backwards March did invoke multiple times, spaces, and conversations, but in very different ways than the in-person Backwards March.

In 2021 KlezKanada once again hosted a fully virtual Summer Retreat. Instead of repeating the Backwards March project from the previous year, Michael Winograd chose to produce a mini-documentary about the Backwards March. Featuring interviews with Jenny Romaine, Frank London, and Itzik Gottesman as well as with a number of long-time faculty and participants, this mini-documentary functions as an explicit relinking of tradition and context much as Jenny described to me in 2006 as a necessary part of the project. The 2021 Backwards March took the digital opportunity to have a deeper discussion about how the procession

represents the ethos of the retreat, linking not only the ethnographic fragment to the ongoing tradition, but also to the goals of the Summer Retreat itself.

In 2022, the KlezKanada board and staff made the decision to return to an in-person Summer Retreat. This coincided with my first year in the role of Artistic Director. In 2022 and 2023 we limited participant numbers in order to provide the safest in-person environment we could, capping the total number of participants at 200 and 250 respectively. Because we returned to in-person programming and thus an in-person Backwards March, the virtual events of the 2020 and 2021 remain as outliers to the evolving tradition. The performance was both temporary in that we have since returned to the in-person tradition and lasting in that it was created in a format that persists in video archives. While I have argued that the annual Backwards March has moved beyond historical re-enactment, the 2020 Backwards March performed a virtual version of the event in lieu of the event itself. More than the annual in-person Backwards March, these videos (particularly the 2020 edition) do attempt to recreate something. However, they aren't attempting to recreate the procession in pre-war Romania but rather the experience of walking backwards together at the Summer Retreat.

“Why do we walk backwards?” Jenny asks in a video of the 2006 procession. “Why why why?” several children in the crowd echo back to her (Weigens). Understanding the “why,” both on the individual and organizational level, was key to translating the Backwards March into a new environment, rather than trying to match it as closely as possible to the in-person event. This

was also true of the larger program. Why have a virtual program rather than simply cancelling the retreat for the year? It became clear to me that there was no one answer to the “why” and that different reasons were motivating different members of the KlezKanada team. I also heard a variety of answers from colleagues in other organizations. However, several key motivations emerged: first, to provide work and visibility to artists who had suddenly lost all of their gigs; second, to keep people connected in some form of community during a time of extreme isolation; third, to use the pause in other activity as a moment to engage with research and study or new creative projects (*COVID Panel*). These motivations shaped the configuration of the virtual spaces of the Yiddish cultural scene, especially in 2020.

When the decision was made to move KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat to an online format, most of the faculty had already been hired. This affected the way that Michael Winograd and Sebastian Schulman, KlezKanada’s Artistic Director and Executive Director respectively at the time, approached programming in 2020: they focused on programming that featured the faculty we had already hired for the in-person event. As Sebastian told me, this meant that they had to mostly reconfigure the event within the model of the in-person event (*COVID Panel*). Conversely, both Philadelphia-based trombonist Dan Blacksberg and London-based violinist Ilana Cravitz described how the online format made it possible to hire a larger and more geographically diverse faculty for Yiddish New York and LIKE (London International Klezmer Experience) because the cost was lower and how this affected their programming (*COVID Panel*). This was

also true of later virtual programs for KlezKanada.

Another answer to “why” was the desire to create spaces for connection. This drove the configuration of the 2020 Backwards March, with its spliced-together procession, Zoom gallery, and comment threads. Patrick Farrell, a Berlin-based accordionist who is part of the Shtetl Berlin organizing team, recalled thinking “Okay, we’re still here . . . let’s try to see if we can do something that’s goofy and fun and silly. The main reason for doing anything was to have fun and try to keep people a little bit connected because everything was feeling so isolated” (*COVID Panel*). Patrick organized a virtual jam session which, like the 2020 Backwards March, was an edited video featuring people playing the same tune. Dan remembered being struck by how strong the connections throughout the global Yiddish community were, connections that had been less visible when everyone is busy at live local events. One of my roles was to institute an online version of KlezKanada’s popular scholarship program. Having coordinated the program on and off since 2007, I understood the formation of the scholarship cohort itself to be one of the most valuable aspects of the program and I felt that the network of peers, collaborators, and mentors was at stake. My strategy was to add elements to the program in the form of required sessions that grouped scholarship students loosely into cohorts based upon the interests declared in their applications. My aim was a functional cross between conference-style working groups and the picnic tables at camp where participants gather and mix at meals. A number of new participants later shared with me that these “online picnic tables” helped them feel as though they

were part of the community and connected them to the social activity that was happening around the edges of the formal programming, particularly across the many text message conversations between different groups of friends and colleagues that sprang up on various platforms (Zoom, Facebook Messenger, WhatsApp, iMessage, etc.). Patrick described those group chats as taking the place of “sitting in the back of the *shul* and *kibitzing*” (*COVID Panel*).¹¹⁰ Like the pesakh seder I attended in April 2020, I found that these chats resonated unexpectedly with the in-person experience, where it is impossible to keep up with every conversation. These chats wove and intersected with each other just as the conversations do when we are together.

Other online configurations were motivated by the unexpected window of time opened by the cancellation or deferment of other work. For example, Brooklyn-based violinist and archivist Eleonore Biezunksi told me that she thought she’d take the opportunity to study the Yiddish writings of ethnographer Moyshe Beregovski. She posted on social media to see if anyone wanted to join her, expecting one or two people to be interested. Instead, a reading group materialized, attended by researchers and musicians from a range of backgrounds, including senior scholars in the field (*COVID Panel*). In a similar vein, *The Kiselgof-Makonovetsky Digital Manuscript Project*, a digital humanities project organized by the Klezmer Institute, was propelled forward by major community engagement during this time. It is likely that the success of the project was tied to the

¹¹⁰ The word *shul* means synagogue. The verb *kibitz* means to chat or make small talk.

increased availability of the community to participate during the COVID-19 lockdowns (*COVID Panel*). Eleonore Biezunski described how these projects were a reminder that participatory scholarship is “an incredibly powerful way to generate knowledge” (*COVID Panel*).

These motivations, as well as others, led to a tremendous burst of online activity in the secular Yiddish scene. In an article about this digital explosion, Yiddish studies scholar Rebecca Margolis emphasizes that the secular Yiddish language scene was already “firmly ensconced in the digital age,” and had long made good use of listservs, online Yiddish classes, and digital resources (Margolis, “Forays” 74). She notes that the phenomenon of friendships that ““exist exclusively in a virtual capacity or [are] kindled at in-person Yiddish gatherings but nurtured via digital technologies” predated the pandemic (77). Margolis argues that “the normalization of online engagement and new platforms for digital sociality in the secular Yiddish subculture offered a linguistic and cultural haven during the crisis of the pandemic” (73) resulting in “the realization of a virtual Yiddish-based community” (77).

My personal answer to “why” rested in the idea of KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat as a key ritual of the community calendar and, importantly, in celebrating what we had, while at the same time appreciating the beauty of the things we are missing and acknowledging the feelings of loss around their absence. In a planning session for one of my workshops, I wrote down, “celebrate the yes in the year of no.” The work of finding yeses in a year of nos felt like an important exercise. A body of scholarship is emerging about the possibilities of virtual performance to

connect performers and audiences across distance and, for obvious reasons, many people responded to the experience of creating or attending virtual performances and cultural events during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. I confess that I have found it difficult to identify with some aspects of this work which often extols the potential of virtual performances. If theatre and performance studies is sometimes critiqued for a fetishization of the live, the scholastic turn during the pandemic was a love affair with the virtual (*On Tap*).¹¹¹ It is important to name the ways the challenges and failures of virtual programming as well, while acknowledging that these will not be the same for everyone.

It was early in this process that I realized how much of my work – in its many manifestations as dancer, leader, organizer, teacher, scholar, and beyond – is about bringing people together. As Western society has increasingly become screen-bound (beginning well before the pandemic), the work of bringing people together in person has taken on increased importance and significance for me. I realized that I’m not personally passionate about organizing events and art for the Internet. An integral and irreplaceable part of a live event is the atmosphere of being in a space with other people. While I recognize and appreciate the power of the Internet to bring people together across distance and to provide alternative models for

¹¹¹ The use of “live” here refers to in-person events. I have tried to avoid using the word “live” to indicated in-person events because many of the digital events and workshops I describe here are also live in that they are synchronous. In addition, live-streaming platforms have complicated the use of the word.

socializing from within a state of isolation, I don't want to spend my life in front of the screen. For this reason, although there were bright moments along the way, I found the process of planning the virtual Summer Retreats heartbreaking. The shift from lakeside to screenside depressed me and this feeling only intensified as the months wore on. Despite the incredible richness of online offerings pouring from my networks, I became increasingly exhausted and frustrated by the answer to everything being "let's put it online." For a time, we did not know to what extent these virtual events were stopgap measures and to what extent they would become an important and vital part of the festival infrastructure. Throughout 2020 I grappled with fears over whether my cherished in-person spaces would return at all. As in-person cancellations and postponements rolled on, I wondered whether it might be harder to justify the financial cost of the in-person Summer Retreat experience after investing so many resources into online models.

I thought I was prepared for a multiplicity of feelings during the week of that first virtual Summer Retreat but I was not prepared for the tension between alone and together that I experienced. There was a vast gap between being in a digital environment full of chatter and programming and being completely alone in the house.¹¹² When I closed my laptop after teaching

¹¹² In deciding where to be physically located during the week of the 2020 Virtual Summer Retreat, I had to consider the necessity of stable high-speed internet and private space. I also decided that I wanted to be in the same time zone as the retreat schedule. This would make communication with the team and attendance at the morning and evening events easier.

a workshop or attending an event, the silence and aloneness pounded in my ears.¹¹³ I have referred elsewhere in this chapter to the intensity of the festival, an intensity which means that the Summer Retreat can be an emotional rollercoaster at the best of times. I can only refer to my own experience, but I know from years of listening that my experience in this is not unique. My emotions run close to the surface and the lack of sleep helps them spill over easily. However, at the in-person event I'm surrounded by the emotional and professional support of friends and colleagues. In 2020, the rollercoaster was still there but the physical hugs were not and this lack intensified the isolation. While I find virtual spaces to be vital spaces of connection, necessary during the pandemic and useful post-lockdown, and while I have experienced funny, interesting, and thoughtful performance in online formats, I have not experienced the transference of embodied presence and touch that I see claimed in recent scholarship about the potential of virtual performance. Instead, I have found the sense of my own isolation intensified, almost the opposite of experiencing touch. I recognize that, for many, telematic performance has and continues to fill an essential role. However, for myself, the awareness of my body as outside the

¹¹³ During this time, I had an informative experience at another event, the annual Youth Traditional Song Weekend. While I have long wanted to attend the weekend, their first virtual event (in 2021) was the first time I was able to participate. While I purchased a pass to the full weekend, I found that I didn't want to attend much because the experience left me lonely. Singing on zoom, in a group where everyone is muted except the song leader, cannot begin to approximate the experience of singing in a group. When I tried to sing along, all I could hear was the resounding absence of the group. And so, I stopped singing along, which meant that singing was no longer the reason to participate in the song weekend. At the same time, I could see that long-time YTS attendees were sustained by being together in the virtual environment. Just as for KlezKanada participants, being together in community is an important part of their year, and the online event was performing the purpose of connection for those attendees.

space of connection, means that the telematic attempt at presence falls short of its goal.

Sita Popat, writing (pre-pandemic) about experiments that incorporate digital “sprites” (projections made up of connected lines with behaviour that changes depending on the movement of the operator) into dance performance, describes how they found that operators experience a projection of self through the manipulating of these sprites, reporting a “lived body is experienced beyond the confines of the desk” (Popat and Palmer 135). I’ve been following Popat’s work on this project and on Virtual Reality as a rehearsal and performance tool incorporated into new writing on the ways that the experience of creating theatre during the COVID-19 lockdowns will have lasting effects upon the industry. And for good reason. I attended a lecture demonstration of this research at a conference in 2009 and had the opportunity to try the tool. At the time I was struck by the researchers’ suggestion that, among other uses, the digital sprites had the potential to bring artists with limited mobility into the performance space. What I found particularly exciting was that the tool projected presence within a physical space and interacted with other bodies. However, in a surprisingly cartesian binary, what I fail to see in assertions of telematic presence is a conversation about the embodied self in relationship to the projected presence.

During that first virtual Summer Retreat, I never stopped being aware that my body was alone. Indeed, far from experiencing a local and translocal where I was simultaneously in embodied and virtual space, my isolation restricted my experience to a confined local. When I

taught or led sessions, I tried to project togetherness, actively seeking connections with participants through Zoom. I encouraged participants to reach to the edges of their boxed Zoom selves to see if they could hold hands with each other. But, for myself, I must admit that I failed and that the attempt, often enjoyable for the sense of play involved, only emphasized the lack of touch and connection in the room I stood in. In addition, in an increasingly (and, during the lockdowns, suddenly fully) digital world, many of us are discovering that we are having physical and emotional health issues related to only interacting online. From repetitive strain injuries to lack of touch, the shift to fully online lives took a toll on our bodies. In discussions about the possibilities of digital performance environments, this toll needs to be a part of the conversation.

In the Yiddish cultural scene, the move online had the unexpected effect of flattening out differences between programs. For those of us who tour, each festival and community has a unique flavour even as they sometimes blend together in memory. With so much crossover between faculty and content in the Yiddish cultural scene, the venues and geographical environments are a significant part of what defines each event. Without that element of local, I did not feel as though the virtual Yiddish New York (YNY) was particularly unique from the virtual KlezKanada Summer Retreat. In-jokes were carried through from the cabaret at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat to the cabaret at YNY. The YNY virtual sing-alongs felt very "New York" to me, because I could see Sarah Gordon on the recognizable porch of Ilya Shneyveys and Sarah Myerson. And yet, that New York porch sing-along was also a part of KlezKanada. As

mentioned above, events were able to hire more globally because the barriers of travel time and cost was removed. This was also true for participants and meant that the participant groups of different events had even more crossover than usual. In fact, the digital events actually emphasized the cohesiveness of the community. When the differences fell away behind the screens, we were left with the similarities. This shifted the balance between local and translocal towards the latter, as the local qualities of each program were muted. The local was retained only through the participants but, even there, was mostly invisible (often literally blurred and muted).

While the 2020 virtual Summer Retreat reached a far greater number of individuals than the average in-person retreat, this number fell drastically in 2021 and continued to fall. Although people still request online programming, that demand does not actualize into attendance. As it becomes increasingly cost-prohibitive to provide online programming, the balance between cost and impact becomes trickier to navigate. Dan Blacksberg pointed to an over-saturation of online programming as one factor of falling attendance (*COVID Panel*). Other factors include the online fatigue and a return to in-person options. Applications for KlezKanada's scholarship program, which fell dramatically during the two years that the retreat was only held virtually, redoubled after the retreat was again in person. In 2020, a number of regular scholarship participants wrote to me to say that they would not be applying for the program that year. These participants indicated that the in-person experience was an integral part of why they attend and/or that they did not want to spend a week online. For those whose work was shifted online, the digital version

of the Summer Retreat did not offer the break or escape provided by the in-person version. This highlighted that the difference between the time and space of the day-to-day and the event was lessened, if not removed. In my own experience, I noticed that the anticipatory pre-festival feeling was missing from my experience of festivals. I no longer experienced the sense of arrival, of transitioning into another space. When I can be in my home, and log on or off of the platform at any time, the formality of the beginning falls away and, instead, I feel as though I am going to yet another zoom meeting.

When the decision was being made to cancel the in-person event and consider a digital iteration, KlezKanada's founder, Hy Goldman, immediately said: "What an opportunity to try something new!" (Moore, *Field Notes*). Hy, in his mid 90s, embraced the challenges by looking at the possibilities. It took me longer to embrace the possibilities and, as I've shared above, I have a mixed critique of the process and the results. However, looking at this moment through the theoretical lenses of this chapter, it is notable that for a time this digital Yiddishland (as Rebecca Margolis has called it), did foster an environment where participants experimented with and practiced alternative ways of being in ourselves, in community, and in the world. In some ways, the online space rehearsed the festival space. The virtual space of the 2020 Summer Retreat felt to me like a holding zone, a space to practice in, until we could meet again in person. At that time, we were uncertain when we would be able to meet in person again and, especially at the beginning of 2020, there was a strong feeling of collectively trying to make the best of a bad

situation.

What lessons can we carry forward into both our in-person programs and future online events? Three areas stand out to me as community shifts that arose from the pandemic-necessitated digital turn and were modelled by online community gatherings: an awareness of and commitment to outreach and accessibility, an increased openness to the reconfiguration of community spaces, and a move towards participatory scholarship.

While not named as a primary motivation for online programming, many organizations and events were tremendously successful in reaching a far larger and wider audience than usual. More work should be done on this trend but my sense is that this success was more due to the digital moment – with everyone feeling trapped at home and looking for ways to ease the isolation and boredom – than to an increase of marketing outreach. Over 900 people attended at least one event during the week of KlezKanada’s 2020 virtual Summer Retreat.¹¹⁴ This means that the organization reached two to three times as many participants as when we were at full capacity in 2019. A fundamental success of the digital program was that it provided increased access to KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat. This was true across events as well; Margolis highlights the “accessibility, inclusiveness, and broad reach” of the reconfigured programs (“Forays” 79). The initial sense of collective solidarity around safety generated by COVID-19 safety measures (or

¹¹⁴ This number does not account for multiples in one household, as families and roommates often attended together from one sign-in.

lack thereof) around the world and the obvious increase of accessibility engendered by online programming, such as reduced fees (made possible by reduced overhead) and the removal of travel time and cost, stimulated further accessibility initiatives. The increased reach of these programs shone a light on how we, as KlezKanada, and as a larger community, have not always worked hard enough to make our events widely accessible nor widely known. The outreach aspect of this was brought home to me during an online sing-along when someone wrote in the comments, “I haven’t heard these songs since the 40s.” If this is true, it reveals that the Yiddish cultural scene is not doing a good job at outreach because the songs being sung at that sing-along are sung frequently in the scene. While this is partly due to the way that mainstream Jewish institutions control the narrative, it is also partly an issue of outreach. The extended reach of early online programs and successes around accessibility during this digital turn have pushed KlezKanada, as well as other organizations, to step up our commitment to increase the financial, physical, and programmatic accessibility of in-person events, reach out to a broader audience, and include those who cannot attend the in-person events. This necessary work was modelled by the successes of the virtual space.¹¹⁵ The reconfiguring of educational and community spaces, brought on by necessity during the lockdowns, illustrated that flexibility and creativity in the way

¹¹⁵ Organizations are also faced with the challenge of balancing the needs of participants who are ready to opt in to physical closeness and the needs of participants who opt to maintain physical distancing. I can attest to the heartbreak of each extreme, though of course it is a continuum not a binary. Some community members feel hurt and abandoned, left behind by the return to in-person programming. Speaking for myself, I am motivated to work for safer spaces of gathering as an antidote to the physical and mental pain of isolation.

that we approach longstanding programs was beneficial to the development of the scene. As a space of performance and pedagogy, nothing could be taken for granted because processes, tools, and styles of communication were constantly in progress. I hope that we can bring this interrogative pedagogy – where we do not take for granted that we understand each other or the needs of the community – back to in-person spaces.

The online Yiddish cultural spaces built during the early pandemic were diasporic, with a strong sense of collective identity fostered through the shared enterprise of participatory scholarship, as well as solidarity in the face of a world-wide crisis and the need for connection in a time of isolation. These diasporic spaces opened onto a moment of social and political potential and that moment saw significant cultural creativity and growth. However, as online fatigue grew and the possibility of in-person gatherings began to return, the sense of online collectivity began to wane (*COVID Panel*). As participation in online programs fell away, so did the potential for change. The potentiality of spaces of juxtaposition – of the local and translocal time and space – requires active engagement to produce sparks; the conditions set up the potentiality but that potentiality will fall short without the translator.

CHAPTER FOUR: CRITICAL MYTHOLOGIES

In this chapter, I will examine two concepts that are frequently activated in the Yiddish cultural community in the process of art making, scholarship, community building, and beyond: the “*shtetl*” and “Yiddishland.” Briefly, the word *shtetl* translates from Yiddish as “town” but, as will be discussed, it has taken on a much larger set of meanings in relationship to Jewish life in Eastern Europe in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. The term “Yiddishland” refers to a conceptual Jewish space defined by a relationship to Yiddish language or culture. Both of these terms function as imaginaries, important to the ways that artists, teachers, scholars, and participants understand their relationship with Yiddish culture. I understand these imaginaries as instructive myths from which, as Daniel Boyarin reminds us in relationship to fictional stories in liturgy, we can learn “a great deal of truth” (*Traveling Homeland* 9). My use of the word myth is not at all negative. Myths, philosopher Richard Kearney tells us, are “stories people told themselves in order to explain themselves to themselves and to others (3). What does it add to the conversation to name a concept – such as “*shtetl*” or “Yiddishland” – as a mythology? Identifying our individual and collective mythologies opens up the opportunity to examine and learn from their construction and, in doing so, make decisions about how we tell them and build upon them going forward. Not only can we learn from the stories we tell, we can – and should – consider and learn from the context in which they are told, our motivations for telling them, and the ways

that they are used in world-making. Jeffrey Shandler reminds us that it is necessary to examine the ways “the vital role that the imaginary can play in modern Jewish culture, especially in its ability to redress extensive rupture, displacement, and loss with liberating possibilities for cultural creativity” (*Yiddishland* 58). In this chapter I will argue that for our mythologies to have liberating possibilities, we must think about them critically.

In order to frame why critical mythologies are instructive and constructive, I will draw upon theories of literary and queer world-making, principles of nationalism and diaspora, and the idea of meshworks. I will look at how each term is situated historically, how the conceptual space of the term has evolved, and how it is activated in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene. Two art projects from 2022 offer a starting place from which to engage with these concepts. First, I will consider the *Floating Shtetl*, an installation created by Daniel Toretsky as part of the 2022 KlezKanada Summer Retreat. Second, I will look at the Yiddishland Pavilion, a “guerrilla pavilion” curated by Yevgeniy Fiks and Maria Veits for the 2022 Venice Biennale. Throughout my analysis of these projects, I will argue that we need to cultivate a critical dialogue around these concepts in order to better understand how cultural mythologies are utilized in creating contemporary Yiddish culture.

Shtetl Imaginary

In 2022, I invited Daniel Toretsky to create an installation artwork at KlezKanada’s

Summer Retreat and to lead a participatory workshop that intersected with the installation. An artist and architect originally from Washington, DC, Daniel has attended the Summer Retreat regularly with his family since he was a teenager; before that his family also attended KlezKamp. Over the past several years, Daniel has explored ideas of Jewish space through his artwork. His installations blend world-making, magical realism, and apocalyptic futures together through a lens of futurity. Daniel's early spatial experiments were on a personal scale, for example a *Tiny Periscope Sukkah* to fit into his small balcony-less Brooklyn apartment.¹¹⁶ In 2021, curator Evelyn Tauben invited Daniel to create an exhibit for Fentster, a Toronto window gallery. Co-presented by KlezKanada and entitled *Tower of the Sacred and Ordinary*, this installation asked several KlezKanada community members to describe the elements of Jewishness that they would wish to be remembered in a Jewish future.¹¹⁷ Daniel wove these stories into layered drawings that were installed in a tower modelled on a European-style spice box, a ritual object used during *havdole*.¹¹⁸ In the fall of 2021, Daniel created an installation for The Jewish Museum of Maryland. He described this piece to me as an “altar for diasporic, politically divergent young Jews” that encouraged participants to name the elements of Judaism they wanted to distance themselves

¹¹⁶ A *suke* (or *sukkah*) is an outdoor structure built during the Jewish festival of *Sukes*. A *suke* is required to have a roof through which one can see the stars. During the festival, meals are taken in the *suke* as a reminder of the dwellings Jews lived in after their exodus from Egypt. Using the concept of a periscope, Daniel's *Tiny Periscope Sukkah* tackled how one might approach building a *suke* when one has no access to outdoor space.

¹¹⁷ For images of the *Tower of the Sacred and Ordinary*, see <http://fentster.org/#/tower/> and <https://www.tsimsum.org/filter/all/The-Tower-of-the-Sacred-and-Ordinary>

¹¹⁸ *Havdole* is a ritual that marks the end of the *shabes*, the Jewish day of rest.

from.¹¹⁹ “It’s almost like the dark inverse of the [*Tower*],” Daniel mused. Whereas the *Tower of the Sacred and Ordinary* asked “[what] are these moments of Judaism that they would carry forward?” the altar, entitled *We Would Come Home, But You’ve Locked the Door*, asks “what are the moments of Judaism you’re trying to actually leave behind” (2021)? Here again, as in the last chapter, a productive tension between forwards and backwards emerges.

When I first invited Daniel to create work for the Summer Retreat, I hoped that we might exhibit the tower and the altar and commission a third piece for the series that would be built at camp as part of a workshop. While it proved financially and logistically prohibitive to bring the first two pieces, the themes of the commissioned piece still resonated with the other two artworks. From December 2021 to August 2022, I worked closely with Daniel as he created a vision for the installation and developed a structure for the workshop. For this project, he proposed an installation on the lake. He wanted to build a cardboard shtetl on one of the existing floating docks at the central beach of Camp B’nai Brith.¹²⁰ This dock was a gathering place and highly visible in the way past participants visualize the Summer Retreat; it appears in almost every participant photograph of the lake from 1996 to 2022.

As Daniel talked about what the idea of a shtetl meant to him, I heard him describing a

¹¹⁹ For images of *We Would Come Home, But You’ve Locked the Door*, see <https://www.tsimtsum.org/filter/all/We-Would-Come-Home>

¹²⁰ Camp B’nai Brith Montreal served as the venue for KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat from 1996-2022.

mythological shtetl: “this is a place where things may have been shared more freely, where there was more of a barter economy, where neighbours helped one another and lived around Jewish laws.” When I gently pushed back against this idealized description of a shtetl, he suggested “a shtetl is already this abstract vessel of memory. . . . We can project onto it, as Jews, any kind of notion of the past, whether its romantic or realistic or pretty dark. . . . I think, depending on how you frame the shtetl and the world of the shtetl, it can have very particular political implications” (2022). Daniel’s naming of the shtetl as an abstract vessel of memory points to the broad conceptual space occupied by the small word. Before I examine the installation and workshop that Daniel created, I want to take a step back and place his use of the word shtetl within contemporary scholarship on the concept.

There is no lack of scholarship to draw from; increasingly researchers have turned towards showing how our various shtetl imaginaries have been constructed over the past two centuries. In his book *Shtetl: A Vernacular Intellectual History*, Jeffrey Shandler outlines the meanings that the word holds for different groups and the way those meanings continue to shift and change. Embracing a methodology of entanglement rather than the false binary of historical vs mythological meaning, Shandler traces the vernacular definition and the investment of meaning of the word and concept from historical and geographically-specific usages through its evolution into a “discursive object” and a symbolic space (*Shtetl* 26). He notes that in academic study, historians tend to try to “correct” the usage, showing that the myth is not based on

historical reality. Conversely, the humanities tend to examine the conceptual meaning of the word. While there is wide gap between the historical and current meanings carried by the word, Shandler suggests that, in addition to better understanding the word contextually, it is particularly interesting to address the unfixed and changing usage of “shtetl.” While we should work to unpack the historical and geographic contexts surrounding the development of the shtetl imaginary so that we can understand our own activations of the concept, trying to stabilize a concept that was never stable is a task best left to the wise men of Khelem.¹²¹ What we can do is trace the ways the concept has been activated. Shandler argues that the unstableness of the word is its enduring interest and that the varied and changing usage of the word reveals the changing vernacular contexts in which it is used.

Both David Roskies and Israel Bartal, professors of Jewish literature and history respectively, remind us to pay attention to which details were suppressed and which remain in depictions of the shtetl, and to ask why. The answer to that rejoinder is not straightforward, as popular imaginings of the shtetl are the result of multiple waves of literary remembering driven by changing motivations. Bartal traces the Jewish literary tradition of describing small town Jewish life to the *Haskole* (Jewish intellectual enlightenment), when “authors created a fictional

¹²¹ In Jewish folklore, Khelem (more commonly written as Chelm) is a shtetl of fools. Stories range from jokes to parables. While Chelm is an actual city in Poland, which once had a sizeable Jewish population, the folkloric town has little resemblance to the city.

‘city’ that was presented as the archetype and embodiment of every aspect of Jewish existence” (180). This was a form of literary criticism, a “bitter maskilic rejection” in which “the profile of this shtetl was drawn to suit all those aspects of Jewish life that the maskilim considered to be flawed and in need of reform. . . .” (180).¹²² Bartal writes that eventually, with geographic, temporal, and psychological distance, rejection gave way to nostalgia and the two impulses “mingled to create an ambivalent blend” (180). In his comprehensive historical summary of the word, Shandler shows how, as the distance from the shtetl (both in space and time) increased, so too did the symbolic meaning: “Immigrants’ personal ties to individual towns yielded to shared engagements with representations of generic *shtetlekh*” (*Shtetl* 44, 39).¹²³ This process was inflected by ethnographic expeditions that collected Jewish folkways, the violent destruction of *shtetlekh* in antisemitic pogroms, and the depiction of the shtetl in avant-garde Jewish art that recoloured and reshaped the landscape, imagining “deformed extensions of a crippled landscape” (*Shtetl* 33–36). The horrific destruction of Jews in the Holocaust wiped away many remaining vestiges of Jewish life in these towns, thus literally removing the touchstones of the shtetl so that no original remained (*Shtetl* 44). As Roskies comments, “the physical destruction of the shtetl may have quickened the need to fix its contours on paper. . . .” (“Introduction”). According to Bartal, the “literary image of the shtetl obliterated the historical facts and distorted the

¹²² *Maskilim* were proponents of the *haskole*, the Jewish intellectual enlightenment.

¹²³ Plural of shtetl in Yiddish. When used in English, the plural is often shtetls.

geographical maps” (183). In an example of a postvernacular meaning shift, the word is frequently carried through linguistic shifts in the Yiddish form, rather than translated (“the shtetl my family came from” rather than “the small Jewish town my family came from”).¹²⁴ This transposition into English rather than literal translation emphasizes the “affective significance” of the word (*Shtetl* 39). Because of this, the word gains a different meaning in English (and other languages) than it does in Yiddish, although it retains the value of the diminutive (*Shtetl* 1–3). Roskies writes that his own work on the shtetl began as a response to idealized references. Referring to one such publication, Roskies writes sardonically:

In its 1960s reincarnation, *Life is with People* became an adolescent romance for third-generation American Jews, the kind of popular fiction one reads when searching for one’s identity. It told of a life that was anti-bourgeois, simple, down to earth. What’s more, because this life seemed to stand still, it did not require any knowledge of history or geography. . . . (Roskies, “Introduction”)

Roskies turned his attention towards developing a better understanding of these towns within their historical and geographical contexts, for example by overlaying city records over memory maps drawn by Jewish Holocaust survivors. He thus painted a picture of towns that, for example, had both synagogues and churches, revealing what Israel Bartal calls “complex histories of

¹²⁴ Roskies claims that *Life is With People* introduced the word shtetl into common American Jewish English.

Jewish-gentile relations” (Roskies, “Introduction”, Bartal 187). Bartal observes that “it is hard to reconcile the historical material with the literary depiction of ‘all Jewish towns’” and points out that autobiographical accounts often differ from fictional accounts in this regard (183). Because authors so frequently “banished gentiles from their ‘mythical map’ of the shtetl,” the image of all-Jewish towns, cut off from any outside influences, remains pervasive in contemporary references to the shtetl (87).

I want to highlight here how early the mythologization of the shtetl began. Current shtetl imaginaries build upon close to two hundred years of fictive, poetic, and painterly depictions of the Jewish life in Eastern Europe which, until relatively recently, remained the most widely available lens onto this world. Considering that artwork so often draws upon the stories we tell of ourselves, it is no wonder to me that new works of art, including performances, also build upon these depictions and that this process is cumulative. For those unfamiliar with Eastern European Jewish culture (and probably for many of those who are familiar), perhaps the most familiar depiction of the shtetl is the stage and/or film set of the musical *Fiddler on the Roof*. This representation has become so deeply embedded in popular culture that it may be the only visual reference people have.¹²⁵

As Shandler, Roskies, Bartal, and many others show, this image has been constructed over

¹²⁵ See Solomon, *Wonder of Wonders: A Cultural History of Fiddler on the Roof*.

a long period through the conflicting influences of belittling rejection, memorialization, and nostalgic longing. The huge variety of ways that people use the word “shtetl” can be read as an example of doing heritage, where our usage of the word can reveal our hopes, motivations, strategies, and naiveties for engaging with Jewish culture. For example, here are two contrasting usages of the concept. First, architect Allen Moore intentionally quoted the idea of the shtetl in his design for the Yiddish Book Center in Massachusetts: “From the outside, the complex really does look like a shtetl: a cluster of modest wood structures with shingled, stacked gable roofs and horizontal planked red cedar siding” (Shaw). Moore explained that he “was particularly intrigued by the vernacular roof lines of the venerable wooden synagogues of Russia and Poland, almost all of which were destroyed in the Holocaust” (Shaw). As Daniel Toretsky commented when we discussed it, the resulting architecture brings to mind a Marc Chagall painting. Second, an online press called *Shtetl* launched in 2023 with the aim to be an independent free press that is “for, by, and about *Haredi* [Ultra-orthodox] Jews” (*Shtetl*, “Announcement”). In a religious community where leaders attempt to tightly control access to information, the board and editors of *Shtetl* “envision a world where Haredi people can learn about events that are relevant to their lives without the filter of community leaders and gatekeepers” (*Shtetl*, “Vision”).

While there are many other instances to draw from, I find these two examples interesting because they arise out of different communities and foreground different priorities in their activations of the shtetl imaginary. The Yiddish Book Center draws upon a nostalgia for that-

which-is-no-longer in their shtetl architecture. This ties into their founding mission to *save* Yiddish books. Valuable in scope and impressively successful, this early mission positioned the shtetl as lost and the architecture is a visual reminder of the Yiddish Book Centre as saviour. It is worth noting that, having essentially declared its mission of saving Yiddish books a success, the Yiddish Book Center has significantly shifted its focus in the last 10–15 years, turning towards digitization, documentation, and education. The *Shtetl* free press, on the other hand, brings to mind the way that tight-knit Haredi communities often live in neighbourhoods where almost everyone is Haredi, with an internal community infrastructure. Editor-in-chief Naftuli Moster references this in a somewhat more historically-nuanced key, in his hopes that “the website will show that just like those small Jewish villages, the Haredi community is not monolithic” (Kalish). The press’s use of shtetl thus manages to invoke the myth of the all-Jewish town, the map of difference that is missing from the memorialized village map, and, perhaps unintentionally, something of the early maskilic rejection in their aim of opening a space of critique.

Shandler suggests that shtetl is sometimes used in ways that are “emblematic of a certain kind of Jewish place, community or sensibility” (*Shtetl* 4). Returning now to Daniel’s project, I would add that this usage is often aspirational, imbuing a project or space with qualities drawn from shtetl mythology. When Daniel Toretsky described the mythological shtetl to me, he was world-making through the lens of the shtetl. With his *Floating Shtetl*, Daniel engaged critically with the mythology as a process of actively re-imagining the communities that we want to live

within.¹²⁶ While drawing upon the shtetl myth, this re-imagining is forward facing rather than regressive. Daniel drew inspiration from the stories and style of Moacyr Scliar, a Jewish-Brazilian writer (introduced to him in a class from Yael Halevi-Wise at a previous Summer Retreat):

I'm inspired by the work of Moacyr Scliar . . . whose magical realist stories depict a small city inside a large bear, a vast ocean contained in the yard behind a row house, a railroad in an upstairs hallway, and a Jewish autonomous state suspended from hot air balloons over the Amazon rainforest. Often drawing from Jewish and biblical folklore, the portability, ephemerality, and compactness of these microcosms subtly underscore the enduring power of diaspora and affirm that Jewish identity can be established in the margins, across borders, and without upholding settler colonialism. (18 Nov 2022)

Daniel imagined a modern-day version of Noah's Ark in which Noah was an Amazon worker.

Faced with the rising sea levels of climate change, he builds himself a floating shtetl from Amazon boxes.

Daniel spent the two weeks before camp preparing the cardboard installation for the dock, which was assembled at camp. This took the form of a 12'x12' square plywood structure supporting four rows of 2D cardboard village landscapes, positioned in layers that ascended in

¹²⁶ In a more recent project, Daniel describes himself and his collaborators as "diaspora futurists" (2024). They are using this phrase to separate themselves from a Jewish future rooted in Zionism. However, interestingly, Roskies points out that the longing for a mythical shtetl turned some towards Labour Zionism, as they saw in the shtetl an example of segregated Jewish life with Jewish-forward institutions "that furthered the close interaction of Jews with other Jews" and saw the possibility of rebuilding such an environment "within a secular polity" (Roskies).

height. The cardboard was painted a solid bright golden yellow, drawn over with black sharpie to define the buildings, trees, and occasional animals of the village.

The drawings within the floating shtetl are based on a map by Larysa Bolnik of the town Jonava in Lithuania. Bolnik based her map off the memories of Holocaust survivors who had lived in this shtetl before it was destroyed by the Nazis. . . . It is archived in memory books that compile stories, photos, and maps of the towns. My fantastic resource is the ‘Atlas Map Pamieci,’ a collection of 200 shtetl memory maps published by the @brama_grodzka Museum in Lublin, Poland. For the floating shtetl, I isolated lots of illustrations from Bolnik’s map and rearranged them into a square then roughly translated the illustrations to the tiny shtetl model, and then to the full-scale installation. (Toretsky, 19 Nov 2022)

Daniel and I discussed how he could turn his concept into a workshop where the participants would have agency to co-create the story, rather than simply build out Daniel’s concept. While Daniel had led participant engagement for his projects before, he had not approached a 4-day workshop in the way he would need to at the retreat. We went over pedagogical approaches including generative exercises drawn from devised theatre practices.¹²⁷ Daniel ran with this and developed a fast-moving generative introductory session for his class that included: an exquisite

¹²⁷ See description of *How to Get Started*, a devising workshop I teach as a starting point to working with fragments. I discuss this workshop in Chapter Five.

corpse exercise framed as drawing a *golem*,¹²⁸ drawing maps to geographically anchor the stories (but done with eyes closed to simultaneously challenge the precision of borders), and a storytelling exercise focused on combining scales, juxtapositions, and resonances. In his workshop, participants developed cardboard dioramas that would (in the original scheme) connect to the installation via long ribbons. In this way, the *Floating Shtetl* would retain a map-like quality, with the stories of the dioramas mapped onto different parts of the shtetl (the synagogue, the church, the market, the oxen, etc.). As part of the same visual world as the shtetl, the dioramas would also be painted bright yellow. Daniel wanted his workshop participants to engage in world-making, imagining future communities and placing those stories within the floating-shtetl-as-map.

Flexibility is key to projects at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat. In conversations with the site management, we decided that the installation would only be on the dock for the last day-and-a-half of camp in order to limit the possibility that it would be swept away by the wind and end up in the middle of the lake. As the week proceeded to be rainy and windy, Daniel and I kept checking in about the plan and looking anxiously at the weather forecast. We finally decided to install the *Floating Shtetl* on the dock for only the last day at camp. We had originally envisioned that the installation would be on the dock during the Backwards March. In our plan, we would

¹²⁸ An element of Jewish folklore, a *golem* is a humanesque figure made out of inanimate material but animated by a human through the use of a spell.

gather by the lake as we always did and, as we sang and walked backwards up the hill, we would be facing the *Floating Shtetl* on the lake, glowing against the sky. As we revised our plan, we came up with the idea that we could carry the *Floating Shtetl* in the Backwards March itself. The structure became part of the procession, carried by a group of eight people. Daniel told me that he was worried about asking people to help him move or carry the shtetl around. In the moment, however, people were eager to take part (2022). Participants of Daniel’s workshop carried their creations in front of them, hung around their shoulders with ribbons.



IMAGE 4.1. *The Floating Shtetl* installed on the dock at KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat 2022. Photo © Avia Moore, 2022.

When we debriefed about the project in October 2022, Daniel reflected that the central storyline had not come through in the installation of the *Floating Shtetl*. At the same time, his attachment to that storyline had faded while other metaphors came to the foreground. The narrative that emerges is context dependent, especially as the original storyline was not broadly shared beyond the workshop participants. Daniel observed that the stories created for the dioramas ended up being less grounded in the cardboard shtetl than he had hoped they would be but, because of colour and because of the way the class was structured, they still felt like part of the same “urban fabric” (2022). Even though I was personally aware of the Noah’s ark narrative, that fell away for me in installation. During the Backwards March, I saw a portable homeland carried joyfully by the people who created it. For me, this was not a vision of shtetl carried into exile, but a representation of the home we create when we come together in diaspora. Located near the beginning of the procession (i.e., they started first), the *Floating Shtetl* formed a backdrop should one turn around and face up the hill. In the story told by Arye Laish, the people of Stănișești walked backwards into the town, laying down their instruments when they reached the shul. When we reached the top of the hill, the structure was set carefully down and participants stepped into the framework, playing their instruments inside the installation. As we set down our instruments, we danced and sang in front of the *Floating Shtetl*.

For some, the shtetl became a metaphor for the community itself. In the week after the retreat, images of the installation were posted on social media, along with reflections about the

project and the week of the retreat. Judy Barlas, a participant from the DC area, connected her experience of carrying the *Floating Shtetl* to the way the community supported each other, including through the pandemic lockdowns:

I was determined to walk up that hill [despite an ankle injury]. So, as instructed, I headed down towards the lake. And there was our floating shtetl. Which needed to be carried up the hill. Backwards. And suddenly I really, really wanted to be part of that project. So sure, I said, I'll help. And then there I was, walking backwards up the hill, the leading edge (in front because I was in back [of the shtetl] – it does make sense) and denying that I needed to be relieved. All the way. I did it all the way. Another way that THIS year I felt very much a part of everything. . . .

And we did it.

We got our shtetl safely up the hill.

Together.

Just as we safely pulled off a week together, in person, thumbing our nose at the *Mageyfe* [plague] as we played and sang and hugged and rejoiced in being together and alive.

(2022)

One of the takeaways here is that, at least for some, a version of “shtetl” exists that is shaped by

their experiences at events like KlezKamp and KlezKanada.¹²⁹ In describing these environments as shtetls, participants add another layer of meaning to the word. A critical approach becomes necessary here as part of the modelling exercise, preventing us from sinking into a retrotopic idealism or “pseudo-retroversion,” a term used by Jewish studies scholar Naomi Seidman to describe translation “back” into an original that did not exist. Daniel Toretsky grew up attending these events every year, sometimes with more than one event per year. It makes sense that, in addition to literary references, his vision of “shtetl” is influenced by his experiences of these spaces that are community-oriented, relatively isolated, and highly-but-often-in-selective-ways Jewish. But this experience isn’t limited to younger participants. As discussed in Chapter Three, KlezKanada’s Summer Retreat serves as a world-making exercise, where participants experiment and rehearse ways of being together and participating in Jewish space and, in some cases, as an experience that motivates participants to seek out or build such spaces.

Is it inherently dangerous to hold onto a mythical past as a source of warmth? The future, sociologist Zygmunt Bauman suggests, has shifted from the fantasy of progress to an unstable and dangerous prospect. The years during which I have written this dissertation have held climate disasters around the world including in my home province of British Columbia, a global pandemic that we are still living with, economic recession and inflation, the onset of multiple

¹²⁹ I have heard the word shtetl used to describe KlezKanada, Yiddish New York, Yiddish Summer Weimar, and beyond.

horrific ongoing wars, etc. It is easy and perhaps comforting to imagine that the past held a stability that is threatened by this catastrophic future. And yet, Bauman warns, the past that we imagine is an impossibility. It is a construction that rises out of a yearning for the stable and the known. When that myth is referenced as an argument against change *without* a critical lens, it has the potential to be harmful, activating what Bauman calls a “retrotopia” (6). A retrotopia is manifest when a past era is positioned as a golden age to which society should aspire to return.¹³⁰ Bauman cautions against the tendency to look back to the past through utopian-tinged glasses, for the paradise-past that we see therein is an historical revisionist fantasy. Retrotopic yearning glosses over inequity, negating the pain and suffering of that time. We can see this in current politics as other eras are held up as examples, whether the newly technicolour 1950s, the new deal policies of FDR, or Soviet iconography put to use in the service of contemporary North American leftist movements. It is not only right-wing extremists that construct fantasies of the past. The association of Yiddish with leftist politics means that Yiddish is sometimes framed as inherently leftist, obscuring entangled political histories of those who spoke, sung, wrote, or lived in Yiddish.

I find Bauman’s articulation of retrotopia useful for two reasons. First, there is a widespread assertion and assumption that the Yiddish cultural scene is driven by nostalgia only,

¹³⁰ Bauman also draws upon the metaphor of the angel of history suggesting that the angel has taken a U-Turn and that now, instead of being blown into the future while facing the past, the angel is being blown into the past facing the future. I’m not sure that a U-turn is necessary for Bauman’s argument, as this fantasy past is bought into only because of the catastrophic forgetting of history.

clinging to that which is lost. Second, while there are common references in the community that are indeed mythological constructions, these are not always motivated by a passive nostalgia and often reflect that a more complex relationship with the past is at play. It is an oversimplification to assume that nostalgia is always saccharine and oriented towards the past. I have previously written about how nostalgia can sometimes be activated in ways that motivate restoration through innovation, suggesting that “in the construction and performance of cultural communities and individual identities, active nostalgia is a catalyst and transformative force, inviting a productive analysis of the self in relationship to cultural traditions” (Moore, *Fragmented Memory* ii). Here I want to turn instead to theories of world-making to argue that mythologizing can be a part of what Sandra Jovchelovitch and Hana Hawlina describe as “how communities of imagination build collective futures” (131). Making the connection between utopian thinking and world-making, Jovchelovitch and Hawlina position utopian thinking as an essential process through which humans build upon the past, reflect upon the present, and consider the future (136, 138). They argue that utopian thinking that enables and justifies totalitarianism and repression tends to be “static and monological in [its] all-encompassing view of a future without tension and contradiction” while utopian thinking that is “multivoiced, polemic and contested” presents an opportunity for “collective imagination that is tightly linked with social change and world-making” (130–131). This polyphonic approach is not present in retrotopic thinking, which silences intersectional analyses of the past. They suggest that utopian

thinking that, to use Judith Butler's words, imagines an ethical relationality and responsiveness to those outside our "immediate sphere of belonging," is "not hegemonic, characterized by collective representations and suppression, but composed of diverse, polemic representations that compete and are contested in the public sphere" (Butler, *Parting Ways* 5, 23, Jovchelovitch and Hawlina 146). This is a hopeful suggestion and hope could perhaps be argued to be naive or non-critical. However, I follow performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz in his claim that "hope is spawned of a critical investment in utopia, which is nothing like naive but, instead, profoundly resistant to the stultifying temporal logic of a broken-down present" (*Cruising Utopia* 12).

Surveying the emergence of queer world-making in academic discourse, Hailey Otis and Thomas Dunn situate Muñoz's scholarship as central to contemporary world-making theory, emphasizing in particular the relationship between world-making and performance. They explain that Muñoz's foundational theory of disidentification

advocated for minoritarian subjects to disidentify with one world and perform a new one as an act of survival. . . . Said otherwise: disidentification is a refusal to either totally assimilate within a structure or completely oppose it; rather, to disidentify is to work "on, with, and against a cultural form." (Muñoz in Otis and Dunn)

The process of performing a new world as an act of survival is imaginative and playful; queer world-makers code switch, subvert expectations, and remix tradition. Philadelphia-based Jewish writer and performer Ezra Berkley Nepon examines such strategies in their book *Dazzle*

Camouflage, about theatrical strategies of resistance and resilience in queer Yiddishkayt and Radical Faerie culture, noting that

These artists resist assimilation, but it's not about rejecting tradition. Instead, they demand the right to dialogue with their traditions. . . . These artists remix traditional stories, rituals, and aesthetics – recycling and re-arranging the historical fragments (or we could say “queering” them) into newly relevant, evolving culture. The pieces are fragmented because our world is imperfect. Our histories need this retroactive healing power, this practice of rearranging our attention, as much as our futures need the new ways of perceiving that our remixing can generate.

I have previously highlighted the importance of queer Yiddishkayt to the formation and shaping of the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene. This has impacted performance and pedagogy throughout the scene, perhaps especially in North America. Embedded to the extent that not all participants may be aware of them, queer world-making strategies can be found in practices and re-imagined collective traditions such as the Backwards March at KlezKanada's Summer Retreat (see Chapter Three). “Marching backwards,” says Jenny Romaine, who led the re-imagining of the Backwards March for the context of the Summer Retreat, “that's queer” (Nepon). The Backwards March queers time in and with our bodies by, in the words of Muñoz, “stepping out of the linearity of straight time” (*Cruising Utopia* 25). Importantly, Jenny also pointed towards the relationship between diaspora and world-building, suggesting: “world-making is actually an

essential part of the diasporic Jewish experience. Everywhere we have gone we've had to build worlds. And if you want to have a Jewish experience within your new home, then you have to build a world" (2021).

The *Floating Shtetl* plays with shtetl mythologies as an act of world-making. Indeed, in the backstory for his initial concept, Daniel imagined the cardboard shtetl as a literal act of survival built by a modern Noah to survive the rising waters of climate change. The world-making of the project relies upon a critical praxis that brings together research, installation, workshop space, and collective engagement. In their survey, Otis and Dunn illustrate how, in addition to performance, queer world-making is tightly woven with praxes of scholarship, pedagogy, and rhetoric: all productive sites for imagining, experimenting, and enacting queer worlds. As I have pointed to in earlier chapters (see Chapter Two in particular), research, interpretation, pedagogy, and performance are tightly integrated in the Yiddish cultural scene. This methodological entanglement promotes a critical approach to myth-making because it centres a polyphonic and interpretative approach that shows us how our stories have been shaped in order that we may thoughtfully shape our future stories. Pointing to the work of Queer studies scholar Benny LeMaster, Otis and Dunn remind us that the worlds we imagine are "born of one's own creation but also 'shaped by institutional expectancies.'" Jovchelovitch and Hawlina similarly stress that, in order to have "transformative influence," utopian thinking cannot be divorced from the conditions of the societies in which we live. It is the responsibility of leadership (whether as

performer, teacher, scholar, or organizer) in the Yiddish scene to provide tools for participants to analyze their own construction of cultural imaginaries. They must ask, for example: what is it that we are trying to find or reclaim in our constructions of the shtetl? When we play with nostalgia, who is served by a revisionist history or mythology?

I observe that the Yiddish festival cohort provokes such analysis in their pedagogy and performance, often in playful ways. For example, at a 2019 concert in Toronto, Daniel Kahn referred to one of the songs in the program as creating “the warm fuzzy feeling of longing for a socialist utopia that never really existed” (Moore, *Field Notes*). This cohort tends to be mindful of the role of the historian and the performer in shaping facts to construct a vision of past and present and future and brings this awareness to the spaces in which they teach, create, and perform. I opened Chapter Two with Adrienne Cooper’s call to world-make with and within Yiddish culture. As a labour organizer and a creator of queer Yiddishkayt, Adrienne’s call to dream in Yiddish is imbued with injunctions towards multi-voiced, queer, hopeful, and strategic world-making, that echo the theories outlined above.¹³¹ One example of this can be heard in Adrienne’s reworking of the song “*Volt ikh gehat koyekh*” (“If I had the strength”), which has become anthemic in the Yiddish cultural scene. The English translation of the song, written by Adrienne’s daughter Sarah Gordon, is as follows: “If my voice were louder, if my body stronger, I

¹³¹ An annual award, created in 2012 to honour the memory of Adrienne Cooper, is aptly called the Dreaming in Yiddish Award.

would tear through the streets, shouting peace, peace, peace.” At Adrienne’s memorial, Yiddishist Michael Wex recalled:

This was a song that for a century or more was the sole possession of the people who liked to throw stones at cars who had the *khutspe*¹³² to drive past them on Saturday afternoon. The words mean, If I only had the strength, I would run through the streets and yell Sabbath at the top of my voice. What did Adrienne do with this song? She saw that the word, *Shabbos*, which is supposed to connote peace and harmony and unity, instead had been turned into a slogan for hatred and for division. The song that all of us should be singing had been taken away from us. And Adrienne, who could tolerate just about anything except lies and injustice, was determined to give it back to us, to get it back for us. This is the essence of what Adrienne did. . . . She only needed to change two Yiddish syllables to turn hatred into love and to take division back to unity. By changing *shabbos* to *sholem*, she didn’t change the song, she repaired it. She gave it its *tikkun*, what it’s supposed to be. (Engelhardt)

While the text of the song is written in the subjunctive, Adrienne understood that, in the singing, and in the raising of voices together, you are activating that strength to cry out for peace.¹³³

¹³² Although hard to define, the Yiddish word *khutspe* means confident audacity or nerve.

¹³³ In the last few years, I have heard many conversations about the subjunctive tense of the song as well as various attempts at rewriting the verbs to convert what is sometimes heard as a passive lament (“If my voice was louder . . . I would . . .”) into an expression of active doing (“Because my voice is loud . . . I will . . .”).

As Muñoz writes of hope in relation to world-building, “To participate in such an endeavour is not to imagine an isolated future for the individual but instead to participate in a hermeneutic that wishes to describe a collective futurity, a notion of futurity that functions as a historical materialist critique” (*Cruising Utopia* 26). By studying the entangled voices that have contributed to our contemporary shtetl imaginaries, we can resist retrotopianism and instead use the myth strategically to foster conversation and action about our collective futures.

This brings me back to the world-making of the *Floating Shtetl*. As part of the Backwards March, and then installed on the dock on Saturday morning, the *Floating Shtetl* became part of the shabes landscape at the 2022 retreat. Saturday was finally sunny and participants gathered on the docks to rest, swim, and sing together. The *Floating Shtetl* was more than a backdrop to this – it was part of the activity. A miscommunication about the size of the dock meant that the wooden structure was a bit too large, hanging over the edge of the dock. Although an accident of construction, this meant that people could swim out and climb onto the dock through the resulting gap. This activated the installation in somewhat unexpected ways with playful scenes unfolding within the structure as people jumped around and made up intentionally silly songs. At a quieter moment I swam the few meters to the dock and floated within the reflection of the shtetl in the water. With the sun high in the sky, the reflection of the bright yellow installation was vibrant and bright as well. From within the shimmering reflection, the built wooden structure was invisible and the different levels of cardboard blended together. I didn’t feel the need to climb

onto the dock; I felt immersed in the installation without leaving the water.

There is a tradition at the Summer Retreat of staying up all night on the last night of camp. The cabaret goes on later and later until eventually performances evolve organically into jamming. If the weather permits, those who are still awake move outside, perhaps to a campfire on the beach. As the sun rises, they gather by the water to greet the morning with song.¹³⁴ Daniel imagined the *Floating Shtetl* as part of this scene. Participant photos and videos show the mist rising around the cardboard village. The cardboard looks slightly wilted from a long and damp night, but to be fair, so do those standing on the dock. Daniel and helpers brought the *Floating Shtetl* in from the dock to the beach mid Sunday morning. Daniel cut the zip ties holding it together and laid the individual and moisture-warped cardboard pieces on the dock to dry in the sun. Many retreat participants took a piece home with them (with permission). I have two pieces of the *Floating Shtetl* on the wall of my apartment. I have encountered several other panels at the homes of friends and colleagues and seen others via social media. Into this dispersed installation of the *Floating Shtetl*, I read yet another metaphoric confirmation of the way that the community forms its own village when it comes together and how that village persists beyond the moment of departure.

Daniel Toretsky told me that he is inspired by strategies for creating Jewish space where

¹³⁴ This experience was an important part of my early years at the Summer Retreat but I must admit that I have not stayed up all night since taking on a larger organizational role.

there wasn't necessarily room for it before and finds rituals that "come from having to adapt to non-Jewish space" to be particularly meaningful (Interview 2021). He connected this to a sense of precarity in the world around him and suggested that portable Jewish spaces can function as ways to stabilize oneself or one's sense of identity. In the next section, I will look at the lines of connection between these Jewish spaces, forming the social and artistic landscape of what is – in another example of world-building – often referred to as Yiddishland.

Mapping Yiddishland

In the winter of 2022, I was invited by Yevgeniy Fiks to participate in the Yiddishland Pavilion project co-curated by himself and Maria Veits. Conceived as a "guerrilla pavilion" and an intervention into the nation-state framework of the Venice Biennale, the Yiddishland Pavilion included in-person events during the opening weekend of the Biennale (April 23–24, 2022), a slate of digital events that rolled out between April and November 2022, and hybrid digital artworks that were grounded in the site but could also be accessed – at least in part – from anywhere in the world. Yevgeniy and Maria asked if I would be interested in joining them in Venice, bringing Yiddish dance to the site of the Biennale. How could I resist an excuse to go to Venice in the springtime?

The Yiddishland Pavilion activated the word "Yiddishland," a word frequently used in the Yiddish cultural scene but, like "shtetl," not uniformly defined. Across definitions, it is used to

describe a cultural space and community that is challenging to explain. In the context of the Yiddishland Pavilion, Yevgeniy Fiks defined Yiddishland as “a contextual space” that, “in the context of the contemporary world map, which the Venice Biennale represents . . . intervenes with nationalisms, the business of national borders and putting up walls, with the business of militarism, with fervour and patriotic pride” (*What is Yiddishland*). Historicized, the term Yiddishland seems to point to several distinct but interconnected categories of use, including Yiddishland as nation, Yiddishland as lost homeland, and Yiddishland as cultural space. If, as Benedict Anderson famously argues, “Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined,” then considering the styles in which Yiddishland has been imagined might be revealing in relation to the ways the term is used today (6).

Yiddishland emerges as a term in the first half of the twentieth century. Tied to a community of speakers and writers (see Shandler), efforts to legitimize Yiddish were framed in nationalist terms. Efrat Gal-Ed describes how, as advocates of Yiddish language and literature strove to carve out a space for themselves in a rapidly changing Jewish linguistic landscape, Yiddishland became a “territory of the mind” (155). Jeffrey Shandler notes that “their ideological embrace transvalued the language” as “organized support for Yiddish became an ideology – secular Yiddishism – that endowed the language with political agency” (*Yiddish* 153). It is worth connecting this expression of Yiddishland to Benedict Anderson’s oft-cited treatise on the

concept of a nation as an imagined political community. Anderson places the rise of national consciousness within the “convergence of capitalism and print technology” as a historical framework. For Anderson, widespread availability of print media was part of a “fundamental change . . . in modes of apprehending the world,” that made thinking about the nation possible (46, 22). The printed word was central to the positioning of the Yiddish language as a “land;” Yiddish language proponents created what Shandler describes as an “alternate sovereignty” out of Jewish letters (*Yiddishland* 40). In adding “Yiddish” to the list of nations associated with the International PEN Congress in 1927, “the literature without a country became a Republic of Letters” (Gal-Ed 148). Gal-Ed notes that this use of the word Yiddish in English marks a shift from its sole meaning of “Jewish” towards its use as a more specific cultural expression. Shandler points to this as well, suggesting that “the separation of ‘Yiddish’ from ‘Jewish’ also has culturally liberating possibilities for imagining Yiddishland, which can become a locus of cultural alternatives to prevailing notions of Jewishness” (*Yiddishland* 48). In the 1930s, literary critic Baruch Rivkin used the term to suggest that Yiddish literature serves as a “non-territorial homeland for the Jewish people” (Glauber-Zimra). Rivkin imagined a multilingual, progressive, and egalitarian “pseudo-territory” that is built on the values of a cooperative society and “driven by the force of Yiddish cultural creation” (*Yiddishland* 48).

In the second half of the twentieth century, the way in which the term was used changed, taking on a nostalgic longing for a territory (Yiddish-speaking Eastern Europe) and culture

devastated by genocide and by the ongoing process of assimilation as Jewish refugees strove to adopt the language and culture of their new homes. For many, the assimilation became more intentional, driven by the desire to leave behind the culture they associated with the trauma of the Holocaust. Yiddishland became a way of referring to a lost or disappearing homeland and community of Yiddish speakers.¹³⁵ Amelia Glaser observes that, for some, in this period “Eastern Europe seems to have replaced the historical Jerusalem as a lost homeland. Eastern Europe is a recent homeland, a place that bears direct relevance to American Jewish culture through the experience of immigration” (“Idea of Yiddish” 261). Here we see the slippage between diasporic reference points that I note in Chapter Three. Daniel Boyarin’s reconceptualization of diaspora creates space for this substitution by allowing flexibility in the constitution of “homeland”; to review, Boyarin positions the Talmud as the homeland, unseating Palestine as the locus to which all Jewish thought is oriented.

These three categories of meaning – Yiddishland as nation, Yiddishland as lost homeland, and Yiddishland as cultural space – become increasingly layered and interconnected in contemporary usage. The way Yiddishland is used has continued to evolve, coming to loosely denote the network of people, projects, and events that make up the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene. After all, it is easier to say “Yiddishland” than “the contemporary secular-leaning

¹³⁵ Shandler includes the mapping of shtetls and communities in *Yisker-bikher* (memory books) as part of this memory work. (*Yiddishland* 44)

Yiddish cultural scene.” However, the term is most useful as an inward facing term, because it requires context and mostly holds meaning for those who position themselves as part of it.

Shandler argues that the idea of Yiddishland is an exercise in imagination because it requires resisting dominant narratives: “To conjure this homeland is to flout the language’s widespread association with marginality, mutability, or obsolescence, situating it – not only through one’s use of Yiddish, but through one’s convictions, and, indeed, one’s imagination – in a place of its own, in Yiddishland” (*Yiddishland* 32–33). Here, Shandler still explicitly connects the idea of Yiddishland to the Yiddish language and its speakers, suggesting that Yiddishland is “a place that comes into existence whenever two or more people speak Yiddish” (*Yiddishland* 57, 33). While this quotation was written in 2000, some uses of the term still focus on this language-oriented meaning. For example, Asya Vaisman Schulman, co-author of *In eynem: The New Yiddish Textbook*, has discussed Yiddishland as created in the Yiddish language classroom as students engage with every-day life – in Yiddish (*In eynem*). However, as I will discuss in relation to the Yiddishland Pavilion, the term Yiddishland is now being activated in relation to Yiddish cultural expression rather than only language use.

While I find the word tempting in its brevity as a descriptor for a community, the more I consider it, the more complex and paradoxical I find the term in relationship to the community it is most often being used to define. Therefore, with the historical background in mind, and with Anderson, Shandler, and others reminding us to pay attention to the ways in which communities

are imagined (albeit for different reasons), I want to bring a critical lens to the term as used today, analyzing its relationship to nation, borders, and networks, and seeking a definition that holds space for difference while activating networks of solidarity and support. I will approach this task via three of the Yiddishland Pavilion projects that were part of the opening weekend of the Biennale: Yevgeniy Fiks' *Yonia Fain's Map of Refugee Modernism*, *Pseudo-Territory* by Berlin-based artist Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson and Chicago-based artist and scholar Anna Elena Torres, and my own session of Yiddish dance, entitled *Take My Hand*.¹³⁶

Pseudo-Territory by Berlin-based artist Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson and Chicago-based artist and scholar Anna Elena Torres is, as the title suggests, a reflection on Rivkin's concept of pseudo-territory. How might we keep Rivkin's ideas about multilingualism and anti-nationalism mobile and responsive, they asked, bringing them out into the world to connect with other artists and across political projects (Torres, *What is Yiddishland*)? The artwork, which became the most highly quoted artwork of the Yiddishland Pavilion, is an augmented reality sculpture accessed through an app on the viewer's phone. The sculpture is formed from "different languages which spin and hover and float and interpenetrate each other as the letters spell out *kmoy-teritorye*, or pseudo-territory" in Hebrew, Yiddish, English and Proto-Canaanite alphabets (Torres, *What is Yiddishland*). The sculpture twists and revolves in space before the viewer, floating above

¹³⁶ Anna Torres was another fellow participant when I was an intern at the Yiddish Book Center.

whatever landscape the viewer inhabits.



IMAGE 4.2. *Pseudo-territory* by Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson and Anna Elena Torres as viewed within the German Pavilion at the 2022 Venice Biennale. Image © Yiddishland Pavilion, 2022.

In a panel presentation hosted by KlezKanada about the Yiddishland Pavilion, Anna Elena Torres pointed to Rivkin’s “spiritualized view of Yiddish literature” that engages with a “political imagination, not just beyond borders, but against borders” (*What is Yiddishland*). *Pseudo-territory* premiered on the opening weekend of the Venice Biennale, as part of the onsite program in Venice. Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson, Yevgeniy Fiks, and Maria Veits chose the steps of the German pavilion for the premiere, despite the fact that they had received “no answer whatsoever” from the German pavilion when they reached out to collaborate (Fiks and Veits 2023). Maria Veits observed that the negative response or lack of response to inquiries about collaboration felt very

politicized and particularly problematic in the case of the German pavilion. The 2022 German pavilion featured artist Maria Eichhorn, whose artwork, entitled *Relocating a Structure*, was an intervention into the architectural structure of the pavilion itself, stripping back layers of paint, brick, and flooring in an attempt to reveal the conditions and politics of its construction and expansion under the Nazi regime.¹³⁷ Viewing the virtual sculpture on the steps of and inside the German pavilion, the choice of site added an additional layer of significance to both artworks, complicating the tension between presence and absence.¹³⁸ The rust orange sculpture floated and revolved above a chasm in the floor of the pavilion. The juxtaposition also emphasized how the architecture of the building, and indeed, the map of the biennale itself, is another kind of pseudo-territory, an extension of the nation-state beyond geographic borders of the state. I found that the placement of the sculpture inside of Eichhorn's exhibit also highlighted the sculpture's relationship to absence and presence, which eludes the grasp much as the sculpture itself does. Does *Pseudo-Territory* signify what was lost, what remains, what is possible – or all of the above?

There is a distinct connection between the virtual reality sculpture and the diasporic notion of *doikayt*, discussed in Chapter Three. Although premiered in Venice within the German pavilion, the sculpture becomes manifest wherever the viewer chooses to view it (as long as

¹³⁷ For images of Maria Eichhorn's *Relocating a Structure*, see <https://www.labiennale.org/en/art/2022/national-participations/germany>.

¹³⁸ A video of the VR sculpture inside the German pavilion can be seen at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5Vs4u5gGQvI>.

internet and technology allow). At the same time that the sculpture can be summoned in every “here,” however, it exists in the “nowhere.” This resonates with an injunction from Jonathan Boyarin that, in relationship to Yiddishland, it is better to draw upon themes of diaspora and think of a “Yiddish nowhere land” (“Yiddish Science”). The prevalent use of digital spaces in the manifestation of Yiddish cultural space (pre, during, and post pandemic lockdowns) is an excellent reminder of the nowhere-ness of Yiddishland. Virtual spaces push against our understandings of “here” while also defining “nowhere” as a space of connection, theoretically accessible to anyone in the world with an open internet connection.¹³⁹ To reiterate from the previous chapter, online resources, events, and networks have become an important part of contemporary Yiddishland but are also (as Rebecca Margolis reminds us) an evolving extension of the “mediated networks” of Yiddish culture that have, over the past century, been used “to communicate, educate, impart a sense of community and engage speakers through activities that reach geographically dispersed populations” (“Forays” 72).

Amelia Glaser observes that “a renewed Diaspora pride” is increasingly part of the search for Yiddishland in the twenty-first century (“The Idea of Yiddish” 261). While Yiddishland is increasingly activated as a diasporic space, where does it currently sit in relationship to nationalist narratives? Does it really activate anti-nationalist ideals or does it amplify a different

¹³⁹ I say theoretically because the community has not fully examined the ways that digital access is not universal and content, even when available online, is still mediated by linguistic and national identity (for example).

kind of nationalism built on a false sense of unity within a diverse community? Many participants in the Yiddishland community actively push back against the idea that Jewishness is a single and united identity. I call this idea the myth of unity and it is pervasive at many different levels, even as it is impossible. Unity can be strategic; Caryn Aviv and David Shneer show how “the idea of unity is often mobilized to create a semblance of collective solidarity in response to historical persecution or in order to make Jews feel responsible for people with whom they may have very little in common” (20). Aviv and Shneer describe the way that this myth was – and continues to be – put to use in support for the State of Israel, forging a sense of solidarity in the cause of financing and reinforcing the cause of the state (“Introduction”). However, Jews are not defined by one set of cultural practices, united by a shared approach to religious practice, nor represented by one skin colour, and the imposition of myths of unity lead to the oppression of people (and suppression of practices) who do not fall within the mainstream idea – whether held by Jews or non-Jews – of what Jewish people (as a singular group) look and act like. Writing about community arts practices, theatre scholar Honor Ford Smith shows how the idea of unity, as a strategic device, can lead to the dominance of some groups in a community over others and argues that it is necessary to affirm diverse and hybrid communities in order to make space for critical voices (97).

Cultural engagement amongst North American Jewish institutions is Israel-centred (see Aviv and Shneer for a comprehensive introduction to this phenomenon) and, as I have previously

pointed to, there is a common origin trope in the Yiddish cultural community that individuals end up in Yiddishland as part of their search for ways to identify as Jewish while distancing themselves from Israel. This story is oversimplified; the individuals of Yiddishland are certainly not unified in their relationship with Israel. However, Shandler argues that, “While imagining Yiddishland is not necessarily an anti-Zionist project, it does offer an alternative model of Jewish at-homeness, one that can exist not only instead of the State of Israel but also alongside and even within it” (*Yiddishland* 49). Shandler goes on to describe how historically, “As Jewish political movements evolved, Yiddishism increasingly diverged from Zionism” with cultural activities rather than land uniting Jews as a nation (*Yiddishland* 154). In Chapter Two I wrote about how, throughout my interviews for this research as well as in my experience in the Yiddish cultural community, I have found that individuals who are seeking a Jewish community that embraces a plurality of expression often find a home for themselves in Yiddishland. Feeling isolated or alienated from the communities that they grew up in as their politics change and expand, people seek a Jewishness that will include them. Plurality and dispersion are seen as strengths of Yiddishland, although at the same time the differences between subcultures are often elided in the very imagining of Yiddishland. Kenneth Moss lays out this contradiction in an *In geveb* article entitled “Yiddishist Myths, and the Myth Yiddish Studies Can’t Live Without:”

Arguably, “Yiddish culture” was nothing but a set of unusually divided, antagonistic, or even unrelated subcultures (including one that called itself “Yiddish culture” on Yiddishist

grounds), so on what grounds other than mere practicality do we group the study of these things into a single field? On mythic grounds, of course. The idea that there exists a single world of Yiddish-language culture is the one myth that Yiddish studies as a field must constantly both reveal and conceal. . . . (Moss)

The term Yiddishland is useful because of the diasporic, divided, and heterogeneous nature of Yiddish culture. The term helps perpetuate a myth of unity that Moss suggests is vital to the perseverance of the scene. It is, however, also necessary to expose the myth so that it is not used as a gatekeeping device, to limit the development of the scene, or to impose definitions of Jewishness on those who would participate.

In contrast to early usages of Yiddishland, the Yiddishland Pavilion activated the term to explicitly intervene in nationalist narratives. *Yonia Fain's Map of Refugee Modernism*, created by Yevgeniy Fiks, is an audio walk that narrates “the story of migrations, escapes, and creativity of the 20th century artist and Yiddish poet Yonia Fain (1913–2013)” (Fiks, *Yonia Fain*). The national pavilions of Ukraine, Lithuania, Poland, Japan, China, Mexico, and the United States are stops on the audio tour, mapping Fain’s experiences in each country onto the territory of the Biennale. The audio walk, narrated by New York-based Yiddish actor Shane Baker, is an exercise in imagining Yiddishland as it might be had history been different. In each location, facts about Fain’s life carry him into an imaginary future, the transition only marked by a passing line: “the war never happened” or “the memorial to victims of the Holocaust at the Jewish cemetery in

Mexico city was never built.” Instead of continuing his refugee journey, Fain lives out his life in each location, becoming part of a thriving modern Yiddishland and attending the “Yiddishland Academy of Fine Art” (Ukraine), exhibiting at the Chinese-Birobidzhan festival called “Shanghai-Khai”¹⁴⁰ (Shanghai), and representing his country at their national pavilion at the Venice Biennale (Poland, Shanghai). Other figures of Jewish literary, artistic, and political history are part of these lived-out histories, including Leon Trotsky who, later in this imagined future, reclaims his Jewish identity (Mexico).

These re-imaginings of Yonia Fain’s life story comment on how refugee artists like Fain often “do not easily fit the national art histories of the countries they are displaced from” (Fiks, *Yonia Fain*). Yevgeniy Fiks writes that, in creating the audio walk, he wanted to “claim artistic and historical justice for artists from the geographical and mental borderlands” (*Yonia Fain*). Onsite in Venice, the audio walk also interacted with the very present Ukrainian refugee crisis, as the February 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine occurred just two months before the opening weekend of the 2022 Venice Biennale. When I arrived at the airport in Venice, it was full of signs directing arriving Ukrainian refugees. As I walked through the Giardini, listening to the audio walk, I thought of my colleagues from Ukraine who were displaced, as well as those who were still in the country. If Yonia Fain had lived out his life in Ukraine, would his children be arriving in

¹⁴⁰ This is a play on the Hebrew word *khai*, is the number 18 and also means “life.”

Venice now as refugees? *Yonia Fain's Map of Refugee Modernism* engages with multiple ways of imagining Yiddishland. Fain, as written by Fiks, describes a world – various worlds – where Yiddishland has become the cultural territory outlined in the 1920s, participating as a nation in the international arts world. The listener, in contrast, has come to the audio walk via a guerrilla pavilion at a Biennale where Yiddishland is unheard of let alone recognized as a nation.¹⁴¹ Fiks nods to a nostalgic Yiddishland, a map of a past intellectual and cultural terrain, and to possible futures that might have been but, we are led to feel, will never be because the war did happen and the memorial was built. At the same time, the cognitive dissonance raised by the stories suggests questions about the place and role of Yiddish in today's cultural landscape: What does Yiddishland, dreamed of by a literary past and invoked by the Yiddishland Pavilion, look like in 2022?

Yiddishland, usually invoked in the twenty-first century as a counter-narrative, crosses borders and boundaries: political, religious, and ideological. But is it possible to delineate a group without engaging with the ideology of nationhood? Although it complicates the narrative around national belonging, Fiks' map still positions an emerging Yiddishland within a nation-state structure. Judith Butler argues that we cannot escape borders.

There is no possibility of “the people” without a discursive border drawn somewhere,

¹⁴¹ The difficulty that Yevgeniy and Maria had in securing collaborative partnerships with other pavilions (or even a response) emphasizes this point (Fiks and Veits 2023).

either traced along the lines of existing nation states, racial or linguistic communities, or political affiliation. The discursive move to establish “the people” in one way or another is a bid to have a certain border recognized, whether we understand that as a border of a nation or as the frontier of that class of people to be considered “recognizable” as a people. (Butler, *Notes* 5)

If Yiddishland delineates a group, what discursive borders does the term draw? Does the use of the term Yiddishland return the community to the varied nationalist tendencies that some of us are trying to escape? Yiddishland as “nation” is problematic when it engages with the concept of nationality and the nation state. Yevgeniy Fiks told me that, while he sees Yiddishland as manifest in imaginative dimensions and as attached to land, the onset of the war in Ukraine emphasized for him the tangible relationships with land. The conversation becomes more difficult, he observed, when you make it concrete (Fiks and Veits 2023). In 2021, a Wall Street Journal article highlighted this challenge in a short article about the newly-launched Yiddish course on the popular language-learning app Duolingo (Cherney). If you click on the French flag to learn French, the article asks, what flag do you click on to learn Yiddish? The editors of the Yiddish Duolingo course eventually chose a *komets alef*, the first letter of the Yiddish *alef-beys* (alphabet)

with the diacritic that gives it the sound “oh.”¹⁴² While the article is tongue-in-cheek, it re-emphasizes an outdated and problematic link between language and nation, showing us how difficult it is to disengage from the idea that “nation” gives legitimacy to language and culture.

In Chapter Three I suggest that, for those that self-identify as part of contemporary Yiddishland, the corpus of Yiddish culture has replaced the Talmud as a traveling homeland. To summarize the theory that I use as a framework for this statement, Daniel Boyarin argues that the Babylonian Talmud functioned as the home around which ancient Jewish diaspora was oriented. That the collective interpretation of a book and its teachings or a set of cultural practices might constitute a portable homeland is a compelling idea, particularly as an alternative model to state-as-homeland. I am not the first to suggest this: American Yiddish poet Abraham Reisen (1876–1953) similarly described the Yiddish language as a portable homeland and Daniel Boyarin suggests that Yiddish became the “vehicle for a diaspora” (Shandler, *Yiddishland* 40, *Traveling Homeland* 118). This resonates with the experience of the many friends and colleagues (discussed in Chapter Two) who describe finding a sense of home in Yiddish culture and the surrounding community and with the image in the first half of this chapter, where participants were carrying the *Floating Shtetl* on their shoulders during the Backwards March – a performance of culture as

¹⁴² It is worth noting that the *alef* is the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Most Jewish languages, including Yiddish, Ladino, and Hebrew are written in this alphabet. The alphabet varies slightly in the different languages and the use of the *kometz alef* (an alef with a diacritic that looks like a small T underneath the letter) generally points to Yiddish. It also calls to mind a popular Yiddish song that speaks to the rote learning of the alef-beys in *kheder* (Jewish elementary school). This song reference was intentional on the part of the creators (Cherney).

a portable home.

Like the word “tradition,” “Yiddishland” can only be understood as a metaphor, or in the way that Walter Benjamin approaches his history of the Paris arcades, through assembling a collection of images of an epoch. We must approach the term sideways, rather than head on. For example, I have already suggested that the Yiddish cultural community – Yiddishland – can be understood as a multi-sited scene, or a collection of scenes, using the work of Will Straw. Straw suggests that scenes are useful in “designating certain kinds of activity whose relationship to territory is not easily asserted” (412). Importantly, Straw’s use of “scene” designates “clusters of social and cultural activity” but not boundaries, allowing for constant fluctuation (412). To understand Yiddishland as a collection of scenes is to look at a wider landscape, that fluctuates at a local level but also in its lines of connection.

Alternatively, we might also make use of the historical term “landsmanshaft” to describe Yiddishland. The Yiddish term *landsmán* is used to refer to “someone from the same town or region as the speaker.” A *landsmanshaft* is a mutual aid society composed of people with this geographic connection. These societies were an important part of the social fabric of immigrant Jewish communities, for example in New York and Paris. Jonathan Boyarin points out that the identity as a landsman is dependent on the relationship between people: “By identifying an individual as his landsman . . . the individual immigrant socially establishes his identity. Without the second person, in fact, the shared identity can have no social reality” (*Landslayt* 33). I am

reminded again of Jeffrey Shandler’s anecdote about two Yiddishists greeting each other in Yiddish in the midst of a Jewish studies conference in an American city (*Yiddishland* 126). While Shandler uses the anecdote to highlight the performativity of the language use, we could also understand these Yiddishists as identifying each other as cultural *landslayt* (plural of landsman). This is a reformulation of the landsmanshaft in which the members are not necessarily from the same town but identify with each other through a shared affinity with the language or culture. Boyarin writes that “the creation and perpetuation of a shared identity may be viewed as the model for the various social and moral functions of immigrant mutual aid societies” (*Landslayt* 33). While not a single cohesive group, *Yiddishland* does often serve to support, uplift, and connect those who participate in its networks. In fact, Daniel Kahn, Psoy Korolenko, and Vanya Zhuk wrote an anthem in 2008 for The Klezmer Bund, an imagined union for *klezmerim* (klezmer musicians), and created stickers for those who wanted to join the union: “*Lebn zol der klezmer bund!*” (“Long live the klezmer union!”) (Kahn, *Private Message*).¹⁴³

¹⁴³ While the Yiddish word *bund* translates to “union” or “federation,” there is also an intentional association with Der Algemeyner Yidisher Arbeter Bund, a socialist organization with a wide sphere of activities. See Chapter Three for a brief overview of the Bund, as well as the YIVO Encyclopedia for further reading. <https://yivoencyclopedia.org/article.aspx/Bund>.



IMAGE 4.3 Logo for the Klezmer Bund. Artwork © Daniel Kahn, 2009.

Yiddishland might also be visualized as a mesh or network. This might be read in relation to Ric Knowles' insightful overview of ecosystems, constellations, net/meshworks, and rhizomes in his study of intercultural theatre in Toronto. In considering these theoretical tools from Baz Kershaw, Bruno Latour, John Law, Tim Ingold, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, among others, Knowles shows the social "realities explicitly enacted into being," assembled along webs of relationship (*Performing 8*). Knowles suggests – with hope – that a combination of these metaphors might help us understand performances as "*processes, circulations of energy in which previously marginalised cultures are seen to work together rather than against, constructing genuine, rhizomatic, and multiple interculturalities that respect difference while building solidarities*" (*Performing 8*).

Perhaps by applying a theory of meshworks to Yiddishland, in which smaller ecosystems are interconnected in ways that, to use Knowles' words, "respect difference while building solidarities," we can avoid falling into the trap of seeing Yiddishland as a unified whole and instead understand it as a landscape that includes different kinds of terrain. I prefer the topographic map drawn by relational lines of connection to the political map drawn by lines of separation. A topographic map resists political borders although it is not unaffected or unscarred by them. The lines of connection are lines of communication. Henry Glassie writes that lore links people together into groups, who then create lore, and so on in a "functional circle": "Epic and nation, myth and society, custom and community – all conjoin communications and groups. The group exists because its members create communications that call it together and bring it to order" (400).

In this way, I see Yiddishland not as a nation but as a shifting landscape within, on, and through which we move. Tug on any line or any point of connection and it affects other lines and points on the topographic mesh; areas of density form and disperse, mountains emerge or sink, and islands even sometimes break off and drift away. The nearer to the movement of the tug, the more the mesh is affected by that movement. These ripples may, in addition, create new lines and new points of connection.

Ending with a Dance: Embodying Lines of Connection

So far in these metaphors, Yiddishland appears as a conceptual space, rooted in language, nostalgia, or cultural engagement. Mediated through letters, recordings, or digital infrastructure, these networks are disembodied. At the same time, Yevgeniy, Maria, and I spoke about how we were surprised by the “strong attachment to physical space” demonstrated by the number of people asking where the Yiddishland Pavilion venue was. A number of people wrote to me saying that they were planning a trip to Venice to see the pavilion. Yevgeniy observed that this attachment “shows the way that physical space is considered a sign of legitimacy” (Veits and Fiks 2023).¹⁴⁴ We also spoke about how the relationship of the Jewish body to nation is relative. Maria observed that Ukrainians and Russians who are too Jewish in their countries of birth move to Israel and are suddenly considered as Ukrainian or Russian more than Jewish. I am prompted to ask: where is embodiment placed in Yiddishland?

My dance session, *Take My Hand*, was one of the only events of the Yiddishland Pavilion that foregrounded the bodies of the participants. Of the other sited events on the opening weekend, an intervention by Neue Jüdische Kunst entitled *Yarmulke of a Stretched String* was performed in-person outside of the Latvian and Ukrainian National Pavilions; Ella and Anna’s

¹⁴⁴ Yevgeniy Fiks and Maria Veits are currently planning the next Yiddishland Pavilion. They have been discussing whether this time they should have a physical venue in Venice or whether having a building would “reinforce the national divisions that the pavilion was challenging.” For Maria, having a fixed venue feels like a conceptual compromise because “the idea initially is too beautiful to land it very concretely and embody it in a physical form” (Fiks and Veits 2023).

Pseudo-Territory existed as a projected body, creating the possibility of form in a space of nowhere, and, if accessed onsite at the Biennale; and, if accessed onsite at the Biennale, *Yonia Fain's Map of Refugee Modernism* activated the body of the participant as they moved around the map of nations of the Biennale grounds. Other artworks in the Yiddishland Pavilion program included embodied aspects but were shared over a digital platform. As we developed the idea of the dance session, I considered the ways that a dance workshop might be part of the conversation of intervention cultivated by the guerrilla pavilion. In my description for the workshop, I wrote: "In a time when it often feels as though we have forgotten how to hold hands, Yiddish dance can act as a participatory social action that pushes against national boundaries and isolated individualism" (*Take My Hand*). While this referenced the isolation of the pandemic, it was also intended to conjure the escalating polarization of discourse, particularly online, and the rising fascism in countries around the world.

On the afternoon of Sunday, April 24 – during what felt at the time like a miraculous break of sunshine on a rainy day – I led Yiddish dancing on a wide gravel pathway of the Giardini, one of the two main ticketed sites of the Biennale. On one side, we were framed by trees and a canal. On the other side, the facades of the Polish and Romanian pavilions formed a backdrop of neoclassical architecture. I was joined by a group made up of other Yiddishland Pavilion artists and their friends and colleagues. Since COVID-19 safety was still a concern for

some, I handed out white handkerchiefs that we held to connect us instead of holding hands.¹⁴⁵



IMAGE 4.4. Avia Moore leading Yiddish dance as part of the Yiddishland Pavilion at the opening weekend of the 2022 Venice Biennale. Image by Shir Comay © Yiddishland Pavilion, 2022.

Although we were using white handkerchiefs between us instead of grasping hands, the circle of dancers felt physically connected. The white scarves stood out in the sunshine, amplifying our points of connection rather than diluting them. This intervention was not in collaboration with a particular pavilion and we had some concern that we might be asked to stop

¹⁴⁵ The COVID-19 safety protocol was necessitated by research ethics requirements at York University in winter 2022. I received a research grant to help fund the trip to Venice and was required to build in safety protocol. One wouldn't have known it was a point of concern in Venice where there were few COVID-19 safety protocols left in place.

by the site security.¹⁴⁶ This fact that our intervention was unendorsed made me nervous; in general, I am the type of person who likes to ask for permission first rather than forgiveness after. I could feel the anxiety in my body as we prepared to begin. However, we experienced no hostility and I relaxed as we began to dance. I felt small at first in the wide-open green space and against the looming backdrop of the national pavilion facades. Almost all of the dancers were new to Yiddish dance. I taught the dances as part of the session, although the focus was on the dancing rather than the teaching. This was intentionally a moment of unrehearsed dancing together. However, because of the public space we inhabited and especially because few members of the public joined us, we were performing participatory dancing for those around us. As we danced, we were joined by members of the public. While only a few members of the public joined us, I saw smiles whenever I looked around at those watching us. My experience of the 2022 Biennale was that it was not a site of active interaction between the audience and the art. Most of the art was view-only rather than interactive and only a few of the pavilions that I visited had interactive elements or live interpreters. I had the strong sense that our dancing bodies were seen as another exhibit in their day of viewing artwork. Maria reflected to me later that dancing together was “a beautiful ending to the . . . weekend. We were mostly using our heads, but not our bodies, and that was a good change” (Fiks and Veits 2023). Dancing Yiddish *freylekhs*, *bulgars*, and *zhoks*

¹⁴⁶ While countries own the inside of the pavilions, the building facades and outdoor spaces are owned and run by the Venice Biennale and subject to permissions of the larger organization body (Fiks and Veits 2023).

(three forms of Yiddish circle dance) in the controlled space of the Giardini asserted our right to appear Jewishly in public space, as discussed in the previous chapter. We danced on the wide gravel walkway, our circle filling the width of the path. In our plural action, as individuals connected together, we drew lines that connected and crossed the national borders performed by the Biennale.

Yiddishland as a landscape is formed by embodied acts of participatory social action. Contemporary Yiddishland is formed not of Yiddish literature but of people connecting over Yiddish literature (substitute language, music, song, etc.). It is not the pseudo-territory that is Yiddishland, but rather Anna Elena Torres and Ella Ponizovsky Bergelson working together to create artwork that forms the *pseudo-territory*. The hands we hold – these connections between people, and the art forms, scholarship, and institutions that they represent – draw and redraw the relational lines of Yiddishland.

CHAPTER FIVE: I TAKE YOUR HAND AND I DANCE TO MY OWN CADENCE

As a teacher of Yiddish dance, I begin workshops with a quotation from Bronya Sakina, a treasure of Yiddish song and dance originally from Southeastern Ukraine: “*Ikh halt dikh far dayn hant, nor ikh tants nokh mayn takt*” (“I take your hand but I dance to my own cadence”).¹⁴⁷ For me, this statement encapsulates the dual emphasis on community dancing and individual expression that defines Yiddish dance and my approach as a dancer, dance leader, and dance teacher. In Yiddish dance, the act of dancing together holds the possibility of and creates space for individual expression of rhythm, gesture, and story. Situated within the cultural context of Ashkenazi Jewish culture, this dual emphasis can be analyzed in relationship to other cultural dynamics, many of which have been more closely studied, such as heterophony in klezmer music, an approach to ensemble playing where several instruments simultaneously play differently ornamented versions of the melody. This dynamic tension between individual and community has emerged as a theme throughout my work and, increasingly, has come to guide my approach to cultural pedagogy and community leadership as well.¹⁴⁸

I have been teaching Yiddish dance since 2006 when I was first invited to join the staff at

¹⁴⁷ I quote Bronya via Michael Alpert, one of my mentors in Yiddish dance and culture.

¹⁴⁸ Sections of this chapter are adapted from my 2021 essay entitled “Take My Hand: Reflections on Cultivating Dancing Communities Through Yiddish Dance” in the *Oxford Handbook on Jewishness and Dance in Contemporary Perspective*.

KlezKanada.¹⁴⁹ Since then I have led Yiddish dance in Canada, the United States, England, Germany, Austria, Italy, Poland, and Russia. I teach workshops of all sizes, lead dance parties of hundreds of participants, and coach performers, choreographers, and emerging dance leaders. Most of my work as a leader falls into one of three categories: festivals (such as KlezKanada, the Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, or the National Folk Festival), dance workshops or dance parties organized by and for specific communities (such as the New York Klezmer Series), and private *simkhes* (celebrations such as weddings). What has emerged for me through this work is the understanding that my fundamental role as a Yiddish dance leader is to facilitate diverse communities dancing together.

In this concluding chapter I will situate my own pedagogical and curatorial strategies within the context of my broader research. In the first half of the chapter, I will discuss Yiddish dance, briefly defining and contextualizing the form within the klezmer revival, and examining the central dynamic between individual and community. I will draw upon eighteen years of teaching Yiddish dance around the world to address the pedagogical implications and opportunities of this dynamic, discussing how it guides my approach as a dancer, a leader, and a teacher of Yiddish dance in postvernacular cultural contexts. Extrapolating from the discussion of

¹⁴⁹ When I began teaching Yiddish dance, there were only a handful of Yiddish dance teachers and even fewer touring internationally. This has changed over the past two decades with many more people leading Yiddish dance at local events. That said, the number is still low enough that I know almost everyone personally, and the number of Yiddish dance teachers who tour remains small. In addition, there are more women and non-binary Yiddish dance leaders than when I first began to teach.

dance and dance pedagogy, I will consider Yiddish dance as a model for building multi-voiced community and how, as illustrated throughout this study, critical pedagogy is a necessary component for this work. I consider this dynamic as part of a methodology of entanglement that resists the uncontested and the singular by creating space for many voices – each with their own positionality and context – within the structure of the community. In the second half of the chapter I will discuss how I implement methodologies of entanglement from throughout this study in my work as a teacher, curator, and organizer in the Yiddish cultural scene. I have situated myself as part of the festival cohort that anchors the context of this study but, until this point, I have focused on case studies that primarily feature my colleagues. I turn to my own practice in this final chapter to illustrate how I carry forward the discussions of this study into my own teaching and curation practices and how, in turn, my own evolving artistic and pedagogical practices have shaped the ways I understand the Yiddish cultural scene as a whole.

Yiddish Dance in the Contemporary Yiddish Cultural Scene

What is “Yiddish dance”? The term itself is recent, emerging through the work of revitalizing the form as a widely accepted way to designate the “folk and social dance traditions of Yiddish-speaking Jews” (Gollance 104). Dance and literature scholar Sonia Gollance notes that “just as the English term ‘klezmer music’ was popularized during the klezmer revival, the term ‘Yiddish dance’ would not have been standard in the shtetl” (104). Indeed, although the term

“Yiddish dance” has become widely accepted, it is by no means universal. In his 2016 book, *Klezmer: Music, History, and Memory*, Walter Zev Feldman, acknowledged as a leading figure in the study and practice of Yiddish music and dance, uses only the term “East European Jewish Dance.” In England, it is more common to hear the form referred to as “klezmer dance.” By whatever name, like the music repertoire, Yiddish dance is made up of a motley collection of styles and forms. While many of the dances move in circles or winding lines, there are also solo forms, dances for two, and choreographed set dances. Yiddish dance includes dances that are uniquely Jewish in form, dances that were adapted to Jewish contexts from neighbouring cultures, dances commonly considered to be national dances of other groups, and popular “cosmopolitan” social dances of the day. Just as the Yiddish-speaking Jews of Eastern Europe spoke many other languages, including the languages of the non-Jewish communities around them, likewise their movement languages were not isolated or singular.

Dance historian and folklorist Lee Ellen Friedland notes that Yiddish dance traditions, particularly informal social community dancing and performance repertoire, did not fare well in the urbanization and mass migration of Ashkenazi Jewish culture. What remained, she suggests, became condensed and simplified, even as it continued to be centrally important to Jewish celebrations, particularly weddings. In North America, klezmer music and Yiddish dance were “felt to be part of an increasingly obsolete, religious-centered lifestyle” (“Tantsn” 78). American Jews were choosing to assimilate and, as Mark Slobin describes, “remnants of the past were either

carted up to the attic or subjected to various types of parody” (“Introduction” 19). In his ethnomusicological fieldwork, Hankus Netsky has documented a fear of shame or embarrassment at being seen as too Jewish in front of non-Jewish friends or employers during a wedding; the culprit for such exposure was seen to be klezmer music and Yiddish dance. Netsky adds that new popularity of Latin-style ballroom dancing also contributed to the drop in popularity of Yiddish dances at American Jewish celebrations. At the same time, the creation of the State of Israel brought with it the rise of Israeli dance which came to dominate the non-orthodox Jewish cultural imaginary as the dance of the (mythically unified) Jewish people, taught at summer camps, schools, Jewish Community Centres, and synagogues across North America and beyond. Israeli dances were also incorporated into the growing international folk dance movement.

In the initial revitalization of klezmer music that began in the 1970s, dance was largely sidelined. This early lack of investment has been well-noted by the key figures and scholars of the revitalization itself while, at the same time, the reasons for this disparity are rarely examined. The revitalization of klezmer music was driven by musicians; much of the early scholarship was undertaken through an ethnomusicological lens that privileged the music over the dancing. Mark Slobin notes that, in the context of the American revitalization of klezmer music, dancing was secondary: “Performers encourage the audience to dance, but neither musicians nor listeners have a clear sense of how to dance to the music. Audiences improvise and one sees every sort of

dance step from Israeli hora to rock gyrations. What was once a cultural knot has become untied, and the strands hang loose” (“Klezmer Music” 40). Henry Sapoznik also comments on the lack of interest in Yiddish dance, noting the impact that this has had upon the music itself: “With the disappearance of the dance tradition and the subsequent popularity of klezmer as concert music,” the tempos tended to increase and subtleties blurred (*Klezmer* 274). This is a process that compounds upon itself, for at break-neck speeds, it becomes much harder and thus less satisfying to dance the traditional forms. Feldman laments the lack of research on dance and its wider implications: “the fact that Jewish dance was not researched or revitalized with the same intensity as instrumental music in the key decades of the 1970s and 1980s (when many European-born traditional Jewish dancers were still alive) severely limits the possibility for holistic understanding of the music of the klezmer and the cultural expression of the Jewish community” (369). It is interesting to note that Feldman, who has been a key figure in researching and revitalizing Yiddish dance, still places emphasis on the music in this observation.

In the midst of this, however, there were notable exceptions. And it is these exceptions that eventually led to the ongoing revitalization of Yiddish dance. Slobin remarked in 1984 that some research was beginning and that “it would not be surprising to see a dance re-activation movement take place. . . . Only the activists are needed to convince the community” (“Klezmer Music” 40). The ethnographic dance research of Friedland, Jill Gellerman, Michael Alpert, and Feldman, among others, was fundamentally important to all that followed. Alpert, a leading

researcher, performer, and teacher of the klezmer revival who continues to be active in the contemporary scene, told me that, in imagining a holistic revitalization of Yiddish culture, he hoped to put the dance back with the music as part of creating a living Yiddish culture and community. Other dance leaders, myself included, have contributed to the revitalization of the form through research, pedagogy (in particular, mentoring and supporting emerging dance leaders), and practice.¹⁵⁰ Yiddish festivals have been integral to the ongoing revitalization of Yiddish dance, providing a space in which to re-centralize dance within the context of klezmer music and Yiddish culture, and to explore embodiment as an integral element of Jewish learning. The flourishing community dance culture at KlezKanada today, for example, is the result of many years of intentional work on the part of the dance faculty and the artistic directors. In addition, the dance culture at KlezKanada benefits from and feeds into Yiddish dance programs (past and present) at other festivals. However, Sonia Gollance points to the continued sparsity of research and publications on the dances themselves. Her meticulous scholarship turns to literary references to supplement the scarce primary sources available, pointing out that “dance descriptions in works of fiction can help us gain a greater understanding both of the cultural practice of Yiddish dance and the significance of Jewish dance in literature and popular culture”

¹⁵⁰ In addition to the dancers and scholars named above, I want to note the important research and pedagogical contributions towards the contemporary of understanding of Yiddish dance of other practitioners and academics, including Sue Foy, Eric Bendix, Deborah Strauss, Steve Weintraub, Andreas Shmitges, Sarah Myerson, Helen Winkler, Sonia Gollance, and Karen Freedman.

(103). Academically, work on Yiddish dance still tends to be music-focused and historically oriented. Elsewhere, I have intervened in Jewish dance scholarship by exploring the present landscape of Yiddish dance, rather than only the historical one (Moore, “Take My Hand”). It is important to consider Yiddish dance as a lived experience and as it functions in its current revitalization. What factors bear upon the way we program, teach, and practice Yiddish dance today? What happens when we consider Yiddish dance, not as an antiquated niche interest, but as a contemporary form of Jewish expression?

Thinking about Yiddish dance today, I find it helpful to draw upon theoretical frameworks from dance and heritage studies. Felix Hoerburger’s concept of first and second existence in folk dance is one such framework. Hoerburger suggested that, in order to understand a dance tradition, you needed to understand it at two different points. He described these as first existence and second existence (Qtd in Nahachewsky 17). A dance tradition in its first existence is unfixed and improvisatory; it exists “within a framework, not a definitive form.” He observes that the dances are an “integral part of the life of the community” and are transmitted by this group. Second existence results from the “conscious revival or cultivation of folk dance.” A folk dance tradition in its second existence is “no longer an integral part of community life”: figures and movements become more set and usually require teaching or leading (Nahachewsky 18). While Hoerburger’s framework is overly simplistic in its binary understanding of dance evolution, it nevertheless suggests a number of useful ways of understanding folk dance. In particular,

folklorist and dance scholar Andriy Nahachewsky highlights reflectiveness – “the participants’ greater self-consciousness about a previous stage of the dance tradition’s history” – as one of the key strengths of the framework (Nahachewsky 19).

Indeed, Yiddish dance, as it exists today, displays many of the markers of a dance tradition in its second existence or, as I suggest, the markers of a postvernacular dance tradition. It is the result of conscious cultivation following, as Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett puts it, “an experience of rupture” (“Sounds” 129). In postvernacular cultural contexts, Yiddish dance is most often taught and led in contexts where it is considered “heritage.” This is one of the reasons that the dances have become more set and less improvisatory. When approached through this lens, the dances can too easily be understood as historical forms, fixed in time. This can have the effect of limiting what is considered Yiddish dance and how it is danced. Understanding the dances as fixed forms shuts down the creative space for improvising, expanding, and innovating upon the forms. However, contemporary Yiddish dance is also self-reflective, particularly in pedagogical contexts; consider the example from Chapter Two of thinking through the layers of mediation between my dance style and the style of my teachers and my teachers’ teachers. Like klezmer music, however, with which it goes hand-in-hand, Yiddish dance is a living and evolving tradition. To use a popular wordplay from the American folk arts revival, Yiddish dance has deep roots, yes, but also changing routes. In addition, through persistent advocacy, Yiddish dance has once again become integral to the community life of the Yiddish cultural scene, particularly in

spaces like KlezKanada, Yiddish New York, and Yiddish Summer Weimar. There is resonance here with Laurajane Smith's argument that heritage is a process of doing, acknowledging a reflectiveness, a self-conscious act on the part of the practitioner. In the space opened up by this reflectiveness, we can ask questions and make decisions about what aspects of the dance we want to revitalize and cultivate and what aspects we might want to leave behind; why we want to focus on them; and what we want to achieve through the evolving tradition. Because the role of the leader is much more pronounced in postvernacular contexts, Yiddish dance teachers are in the position to proactively consider these questions and steward the evolving traditions.



Image 5.1 Participants dance the sher at KlezKanada's 2017 Summer Retreat dance ball. Photo © Avia Moore,

2017.

Let me transport you for a moment to a Yiddish *tantshoyz*. Literally translating to “dance house,” a *tantshoyz* is a dance party. There is a live klezmer band on the stage, and a dance leader to lead you through the dances. If I am the dance leader for the evening, I will likely start with a *freylekhs* set, the most dominant Yiddish dance genre. The step variations found within *freylekhs* are easy to pick up and can be applied in many of the set dances as well. I usually demonstrate three options: a walking step (as simple as walking down the street!), the addition of a heel scuff into the walking step for syncopation, and a triplet step (left-right-left, right-left-right). These can be mixed and matched by each individual dancer – both within the line and when dancing solo – in response to the music. We are holding hands in the circle, our joined hands at about shoulder height, our arms making a loose “W” position between each person. There is strength but not stiffness in the arms. The music calls for a controlled looseness, a lift and buoyancy that comes up from the floor through our heels and out through our arms. I lead the dancers in a circle, then in a line that snakes around the room, then in a spiral that winds its way into the circle and back out again. As I lead the line out of the circle, the dancers smile and laugh with each other in passing. As the evening progresses, I lead other dances, perhaps a *bulgar*, a *zhok*, a *sher*, and maybe a *waltz*. Calling a *sher*, a Jewish square dance descended from European quadrilles and danced with a partner in a set of eight dancers, is one of my favourite parts of any Yiddish *tantshoyz*. Like more commonly known American square dance forms, the *sher* has repeating chorus figures and

a set of figures that change slightly each time through the form. The sher that I call most often includes a section where one individual dances solo for eight counts in the centre of the square before turning with another dancer.¹⁵¹ As this repeats seven times, each dancer is given the opportunity to explore gesture and style with the full attention and support of their little circle. At KlezKanada's Summer Retreat, because of the size of the room and the crowd, I call this dance from the raised stage. From this vantage point, I can see the dynamic between individual and group unfold. Although dancers often find it awkward at first, they quickly expand to fill the mini-solos with gestures drawn from Yiddish dance (often learned in the workshops during the week), and also – importantly – from hip-hop, ballet, and free improvisation. These mini-solos are an opportunity to perform hybrid identities within the warm embrace of the community; we clap and cheer for each individual when they take their turn in the circle and, as the section ends, each group of eight joins hands to circle together, reforming as a group.

Heterophonic and Heterogestic Culture

Ethnomusicologist Walter Zev Feldman emphasizes that Yiddish dance “is the confluence of two radically different choreographic concepts: one mainly of Central European origin involving figures and fixed steps, and the other apparently created within the Jewish community

¹⁵¹ I learned this particular sher, often called “Bronya’s Sher” from Michael Alpert, who learned it from Bronya Sakina.

itself, based largely on gesture and improvised steps” (163). This duality is expressed through both stylistic and choreographic elements of the dance. While the improvisational mode of dancing is clearly understood in the context of solo dancing, many of the circle or line dances also hold space for individual variation. This dynamic parallels the heterophonic approach to ensemble playing found in klezmer music. Heterophony is the layering of texture upon a single melody line through ornamentation, register, tempo, etc. Alan Bern, a leading figure of the klezmer revival and the founder and Artistic Director of Yiddish Summer Weimar, writes that Yiddish instrumental music was historically “highly heterophonic” and emphasizes that “heterophonic ensemble playing requires a deep understanding of a melodic language, in order to differentiate acceptable variance from unacceptable clashes” (“From Klezmer”). This approach has roots in *davening*, the communal chanting of Jewish prayer, which ethnomusicologist Judit Frigyesi argues is the “fundamental defining aspect of [Eastern European Jewish] music aesthetics” (16).¹⁵² In her extensive work on practices of Eastern European Jewish prayer chant before World War II, Frigyesi emphasizes the heterophonic quality of the prayer service, in which “the performances of the participants are not coordinated, but produce a sound in which no voice is subordinated to another” (24). I want to highlight several of Frigyesi’s points. First, there

¹⁵² The Yiddish verb *daven* means to pray, and *davenen* (Yiddish) or *davening* (as often used in English) is the act of praying. However, as Frigyesi writes, the word “came to mean also a particular style of chanting, namely, the simplest and barely patterned recitation that Jews used in their daily personal prayers” (18). Frigyesi uses the Yiddish form of the word in her work rather than the anglicized form.

is a “contrasting force” at play between the structural demands of particular services and the praying style of each community.¹⁵³ Second, “the act of chanting provides personal space” through which the individual can bring their own emotion to the meaning interpretation of the prayer. She writes, “The basic melodic patterns of recitation can be used to create drastically different personal styles ranging from whispered words through intoned speech, melodic declamation, uniform or patterned singsong to veritable musical compositions” (18). Third, the practice of davening “belongs to everyone” and, while there is room for expression, does not require virtuosity. She explains: “It is allowed for one to be simple, for instance, to use the same melodic pattern over and over again. And one is allowed to modify the style, the rhythm, and the phrasing, any aspect of the basic davenen pattern in order to suit one’s physical possibilities and character” (22). Fourth, she argues that, “Jewish prayer is both individual and communal: every member of the community is supposed to pray independently for himself/herself, for the community, and for the Jews as a whole, and the community as a whole prays for each of its members” (24). Fifth, there is an interplay between the prayer leader and the congregation, in which the leader’s voice emerges from the heterophonic whole in certain sections. The result, writes Frigyesi, is a “multilayered and complex, and yet spontaneous and natural composition.

¹⁵³ In language that is reminiscent of Daniel Boyarin’s articulation of diaspora, Frigyesi also notes that the contrasting forces of heterophonic sound brings together “the ‘universal time’ of the Jewish liturgy on the one hand and with the ‘here and now’ of the community on the other. The community as a whole composes out, day after day, its momentary situation vis-à-vis the universal liturgical demand” (24).

But for each participant, ultimately, the piece is always what is composed in his or her mind” (26). This can be seen as a form of world-building; in the 2021 interview where she described world-making as essential to diaspora, Jenny Romaine pointed to prayer as a practice that creates Jewish space. I highlight these particular aspects because each one could be used to describe Yiddish dance. In looking at Yiddish dance through the lens of heterophony, I have sought for the right word to apply these ideas to dance and have come to *heterogestic*.¹⁵⁴ Why seek a new word? Heterophony is layered voicing – whether vocal or instrumental – as expression; I wanted a word that contained the embodied expression of dance.

What does a heterogestic approach to movement look like in Yiddish dance and in Yiddish dance workshops? My Yiddish dance pedagogy is two-fold: one track involves teaching dancers how to take care of the dancing community during the dance; the other track involves empowering dancers with the vocabulary and confidence to express their personal relationship to the dance through improvisation within the form without disrupting the ethos of community care.

Each dance form has its own structure, defined by the musical style and rhythm, the

¹⁵⁴ In seeking for the right word, I first looked at existing choreographic vocabulary in dance. Unsatisfied with existing vocabulary, I followed the example of heterophony and looked for root words in Greek and Latin. I considered heterochoric, building on the root of “choreographic.” This same root also leads us to “hora,” a common name for Jewish circle dances of various styles. However, I understand the improvisational variations within the dance form, including footwork, as part of a gestural rather than choreographic vocabulary. The choreographic elements are the pre-set and learned structures of the dance over which are laid the improvised stylistic gestural elements.

stepping patterns, and the form (circle, line, square, couple dance, etc.). I have found that, while learning repertoire is a crucial foundation for any folk dance class, in Yiddish dance it is only the beginning – the structure for gestural expression. The structural elements of the Yiddish dance repertoire are pan-European; many steps and figures are found in other cultural traditions. Exerting force upon the form are the style, tempo, and variations brought by the band and the dance leader (hopefully, but not always, working together), the setting (both in terms of context and spatial limitations), and the improvisations of the other dancers.

As in davening, the act of Yiddish dancing creates space for the dancers to bring their own personal style to the form. Some dances are solo forms, in which the dancer interprets the melody. Feldman teaches that the melodies particularly suited for solo dancing have a meaning that can be embodied through improvisation: “A melody with substance, a melody with content, could become corporeal. You could actually move your body to show the meaning of the melody” (*Khosidl*). Importantly, the group dances also hold space for personal expression. In relation to other European dance traditions, the rhythms and formal patterns of Yiddish dance are relatively simple and repetitive. Considering the development of the dance, Feldman notes that the circle dances “could be simultaneously embellished with considerable variation by individual dancers while maintaining cohesion within the line formation, but it never developed into the complex synchronized step patterns known, for example, in Balkan dance cultures.” Friedland claims that “the elements that enabled the performance of these pan-European forms to be recognized and

defined as Jewish dancing were exactly these extra movements that analytically constitute stylistic variation, rather than formal structure” (78). For example, the basic stepping pattern of the bulgar is six steps that move across the music: moving to the right, step on the right foot, cross in front with the left foot, step right on the right foot, lift the left foot, lift the right foot. Dancers can vary their footwork within the second half of the six-count step pattern as long as they do not disrupt the flow of the line. Common variations include replacing the second lift with a right foot stamp, replacing the lifts with a step that crosses over in front of the other foot, or replacing the lifts with a lean to the right and the left. These improvisational variations are a conversational response to the music; some variations work better at certain tempos, some variations respond to dynamic variations of the the band. Unlike many line or circle dances in neighbouring European cultures, where it is common for the leading dancer to perform improvisational flourishes, these variations may be incorporated by any dancer in the line. This means that each dancer can be in conversation with the music, as they feel it. In workshops, I teach steps and figures, but I also teach dancers to, as Bronya Sakina said, dance to their own cadence. I introduce gestural vocabulary, contextualize the dances historically, and complicate concepts of “authenticity” with questions such as the ones posed in Chapter Two about learning dance through layers of mediation. Teaching this dynamic also involves training in deep listening, so that the dancers learn to respond to the musical dynamics through their body. In turn, dance musicians who are attuned to the dance floor are in conversation with the dancers and respond to their energy.

An interesting consequence of this dynamic is that the heterogestic quality of Yiddish dancing does not necessarily lend itself to the visual cohesiveness often desired in dance performance. For example, during a dance workshop at KlezKanada's 2022 Summer Retreat, a participant asked me to give a demonstration of how I improvise in response to the music while dancing the bulgar and how that may vary from my neighbour in the line while staying within the structure of the dance. My dance colleague Sarah Myerson and I demonstrated, responding to the dynamics and tempo of the live band led by Michael Winograd. My experience of dancing with Sarah was that we were in rhythm together, responding to each other and to the music, sometimes dancing the same steps in unison, other times bringing in variations. After the demonstration, as the group responded, someone commented that it didn't look like we were in sync with each other. While we felt as though we were playing off each other and always still dancing in rhythm together, it wasn't necessarily read that way.

In videos of big dances at KlezKanada, the dancing can look, for lack of a better word, messy. However that isn't a reflection of how the dancers felt. That "messiness" is an expression of many voices dancing together and a reflection of the way that, to use Frigyesi's description of prayer chanting, the dancing belongs to everyone. She writes: "what matters here is not the outcome. It is less important how beautiful and musically precise the recitation sounds. Prayer chanting should reflect an intention, a spiritual need, a sense of longing and memory, and also the experience of a lived life" (18). Frigyesi notes that prayer chanting complicates the

ethnomusicological binary of participatory vs representational (28). Yiddish dance troubles the same binary because, while the individual dances with a performative intentionality within the participatory group, the personal performance is not necessarily directed towards the other members of the community. There are situations in which the dance is presentational, for example dancing in honour of the *khosn-kale* (the couple getting married) at a wedding, but, for the most part, Yiddish dance is a participatory form.¹⁵⁵ As we discussed the importance of intention and attitude to Yiddish dance style, Michael Alpert described to me how Warsaw-born klezmer musician Ben Bazylar (1922–1990) would say to him that one should dance so that God should notice you (2023). Dancing with honour and intention is, in itself, a form of spirituality.

The space for the individual comes hand-in-hand with a responsibility towards the group. While the community “expresses the ‘many,’” each person must cultivate an awareness and care of the larger group. Frigyesi writes that “In this heterophony one feels on one’s skin, so to speak, the clash of the ‘many’ and the ‘one’” (25). On a heterogestic dance floor one feels this tension

¹⁵⁵ It is worth noting that participatory forms of music, song, and dance often fall between categories of performance because they are not staged for an audience although an informal audience may still be present. Participatory forms may also be superseded in literature by staged versions even as the participatory form is more representative of the style due to the fact that staged forms are highly mediated. From an organizational perspective, these forms are often more challenging to explain to funders; grant rubrics are usually structured around presentation and audience reach. Nahachewsky has suggested that further defining the viewer could help to distinguish performances of folk dance, proposing the non-exclusive categories of reflexive (“each dancer focuses on his/her own kinaesthetic experience”), participatory (“the dancers’ attention addresses their interaction with each other”), sacred (“The message is intended for supernatural beings”), and presentational dance (“Performed for an external human audience”) as a possible framework (“Participatory” 4).

upon one's skin quite literally, as well as in one's muscles. Intention is necessary not only in the individual performance of the dance but in the way we take each other by the hand.

Increasingly, I have realized that my work as dance teacher needs to not only teach steps, style, and gesture, but also teach how we dance together.¹⁵⁶ That includes teaching fundamental skills, such how to hold each other's hands without hurting each other, how to not weigh down your partner, and how to ask for consent.¹⁵⁷ For example, we spend time holding hands in a dance position and practicing how to adjust handholds as the line changes formation. We discuss adjustments to make when you're dancing next to someone significantly taller or shorter than you, and how to check in with your fellow dancers to see if they have a physical restrictions that it would be helpful to be aware of as you dance together. When we join hands in a circle with our arms in a "W" position, dancers will often ask whether their hands should be over or under their neighbour's hands. In many folkdance settings, the standard hold is with the dancer's right hand palm up and the left hand palm down, sometimes described as the right giving and the left

¹⁵⁶ In teaching consent, I draw from other dance communities that are having conversations about what it looks like to feel safe on the dance floor, for example in contra dancing, swing dancing, blues dancing, etc.

¹⁵⁷ In 2015, Jenny Romaine, Hadar Ahuvia, and Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitsky led a workshop that explored ways to increase access to Yiddish dance – widening the invitation onto the dance floor to include those who, for any reason, might not want or be able to join the circles and lines. One of the things that Romaine heard from participants is that they sometimes stopped dancing because they were feeling pushed or pulled on the dance floor. Rooted in the rhythms, shapes, and gestures of Yiddish dance, the workshop explored a series of seated Yiddish dances. Each evening, the group placed chairs on the dance floor, actively making space for those who wanted to dance but needed (or wanted) to dance seated. "We were doing cultural work. Reclaiming joy for all participants in the room. The interventions on the dance floor were collaborations led by participants" (Romaine, Lang/Levitsky, and Ahuvia).

receiving. While having a standard hand hold is useful and efficient, it doesn't account for height, mobility or injury accommodation, etc. Therefore, instead of worrying about a right or wrong way to hold hands, I encourage dancers to approach handholds as a conversation with their neighbours, asking "does this feel okay?" This is a first point of connection, a moment where we verbally engage with each other. This work is based on the observation that we often forget to pay attention to how we're holding on to each other and can unwittingly hurt each other in the process. The process teaches skills for dancing together as a community with differences of mobility, energy levels, etc., where we need to be particularly aware of how we are sharing space together. I have found that workshop participants are grateful for the work around safety and comfort and feel empowered by it. I have seen the results in the evolution of a more inclusive and thoughtful dance floor. Teaching verbal consent over something as seemingly basic as holding hands paves the way for an awareness of non-verbal forms of checking in as well. Dancers may find that eventually a non-verbal check-in can accomplish the same thing. It is also a lesson that breaks down the idea that there is one right way to dance. Simply having just a conversation about how we hold each other's hands can help address that essential anxiety expressed around "am I doing it right?" This is an anxiety that is common, whether consciously understood as such or not. Having a conversation in which we ask "well, is it right for you and is it right for your neighbour?" tends to make a big difference in how people then carry themselves in their own bodies.

Finally, there is also an interplay between dance leader and participating dancers. I see the Yiddish dance leader as a facilitator, whose role may variously include getting the dancing started, keeping the dance floor moving, and communicating with the band. The dance leader is also a performer, modelling steps and style and, depending on the setting, dancing in honour of someone. In all of these roles, the dance leader at times emerges from the group and at times integrates themselves into the group. Although largely transmitted through the community, there is historical precedent for today's Yiddish dance leaders. Friedland points to the importance of the *tentser* (expert or star dancer) in leading the community in familiar dances and introducing new dances. “[A]s dance-hounds and enthusiasts they avidly pursued opportunities to learn new dance forms and styles,” she writes, and “as teachers they were instrumental in the transmission of new repertory to a larger community; as innovators they transcended old patterns by giving them vitality and variation; and as dance leaders they instigated many a freylakh [sic] and sher” (78). However, the relationship of dance leader and teacher to the community has changed over time; in postvernacular contexts the leader becomes a more necessary and central role.¹⁵⁸ There were always, Michael Alpert notes with humour, people who would be “showing what to do, or saying what to do, or pushing and shoving people around and guiding them” (2023). However, as

¹⁵⁸ Dance leader Eli Benedict, who grew up in a Haredi community, has spoken to me about this as a striking difference between Yiddish dance in contemporary secular vs Haredi contexts. He is currently working on scholarship that compares the development of Yiddish dance between secular-leaning and Haredi settings.

Alpert observed, we are now almost always leading in contexts where the teaching or leading is formalized or explicit whereas the leaders that Friedland describes would have been known as expert dancers but, at least in the nineteenth century, not identified formally as the leader of an event (2023).

I frequently lead dance in contexts where most of the participants have limited or no prior experience with Yiddish dance and, often, limited exposure to Yiddish culture in general. When I am leading Yiddish dance in a non-Jewish context, I must assume that the participants may be completely unfamiliar with Jewish culture or that their points of reference are, as I referred to in Chapter Three, limited to *Fiddler on the Roof* or Israeli folk dancing. This means that it has become the role of the Yiddish dance leader to teach the heterogestic practice of Yiddish dance, from fundamental forms, steps, and style, through to gestural vocabulary and improvisation. It is easier said than done, however. Through her interviews, Frigyesi concludes that the heterophonic practice of prayer chanting was not learned through any formal route: “People in the traditional community did not learn to daven – they davened” (22). To some extent this would have been true of Yiddish dancing historically as well; although some dances would have been introduced by dance teachers, the individual variations would have been learned informally and often unconsciously through imitation and repetition. The greatest challenge for the postvernacular Yiddish dance leader is to teach what was once learned through dancing, empowering dancers with the confidence to improvise within the form rather than strictly following the dance

leader.¹⁵⁹

Pedagogical strategies towards this goal must, more broadly, cultivate a *culture of dancing*. This means that, in addition to workshops that teach literacy of the form, events should intentionally build time for dance into everyday programming and cultivate emerging dance leaders. Since I first attended KlezKanada in 2003, the dance faculty and programming team have worked hard to strengthen the dance culture of the festival. When I first attended as a scholarship student there was always a fundamentals of Yiddish dance workshop on the schedule that was programmed so that no other workshop conflicted with it. All participants, particularly new attendees and scholarship students, were encouraged to attend the dance workshop at least once and this scheduling meant that they could do so without missing another workshop. Musicians were strongly encouraged to take the class and an emphasis was placed on the importance of learning to dance in order to better understand the music. This strategy can be seen as a direct consequence of the realization that Yiddish dance needed to be addressed alongside the music; the result was that the community as a whole began to gain a basic understanding of and comfort with the dance repertoire. As the festival grew in size and scope it became hard to keep the schedule as open during that period. The artistic leadership of KlezKanada and the dance staff (of

¹⁵⁹ While participants learn by imitating the dance leader, I have found that participants often mimic me so closely that if I make hand signals to the band or dancers, they repeat those signals rather than recognizing them as meta gestures.

which I was now a part) began to develop other strategies. Alongside the daily dance workshops – introductory classes as well as options to explore style, choreography, rhythm, and repertoire in more detail – we actively re-invigorate the dancing that happens each night by giving it time and space. The sit-down concerts each night were followed by dance sets and the late-night programming did not start until the end of the dance set. In 2008, we replaced one of the sit-down concerts entirely, instead featuring a dance ball. As a program highlight, this had the same effect as those early plenary dance classes, encouraging the whole festival onto the dance floor at the same time. In addition, workshops for dance leaders (which I will return to below) have resulted in a much larger set of people who feel confident to lead a line of dancers. These strategies have led to strong culture of community dancing. Instead of drifting away after the concerts, people stay for the dancing, filling the floor. I often see groups of participants initiate dancing during a concert or jam session, at moments when none of the dance staff are leading.

Workshops for new and emerging Yiddish dance leaders are an important part of building a culture of dancing. Participants arrive at these sessions with different goals: some want to be able to lead in informal settings, some are musicians in bands that play dance music, some are looking to lead or teach in paid settings. Depending on the group and the setting, I teach practical skills, share tips and tools from my own experience, work on music and dance recognition, and discuss the dynamics and choreography of the dance floor. This last point has become a key topic in my leaders' workshops; new dance leaders are often surprised to learn how

much of my attention as a dance leader is focused on the dynamics and larger choreography of the room while I am dancing. This is especially true when leading large groups. We discuss what patterns (circles, spirals, snaking lines, etc.) work well for different sized groups and different spaces; how the leader can transition between these patterns to keep the room moving and engaged; how to create space on the dance floor for dancers with different needs; how to demonstrate or model heterogestic dancing in a party setting; how to help to make sure that everyone who wants to dance is included and cared for. In workshops at KlezKanada, where there is nightly dancing, I will ask participants to co-lead in the evening and/or observe the dance leaders. The next day we will discuss what happened on the dance floor: what worked and what didn't work (and why), what they enjoyed, what frustrated them, what issues occurred on the dance floor that the dance leader needed to solve, what might the leader have done differently, etc. It has been fulfilling to watch these emerging dance leaders gain confidence and begin to lead – at KlezKanada, in their own communities, and beyond.

As noted in the introduction, Jeffrey Shandler points out that the development of Yiddish language pedagogy is a result of a changing relationship to the language and the shift towards the postvernacular. The same can be said of Yiddish dance: the need for and development of Yiddish dance pedagogy arises from the postvernacular context. The means that dance pedagogy needs to transmit not only knowledge of Yiddish dance, but also knowledge of how to teach and lead Yiddish dance. As I will explore below when I discuss the pedagogy of Yiddish cultural events, the

postvernacular context also demands that modes of transmission must be both research-based and embodied. The emphasis on leadership workshops and empowering emerging dance leaders has strengthened Yiddish dance culture; there are now often several capable dance leaders on the floor at large Yiddish cultural events. This means that, if I am leading a group of hundreds of dancers, I can look to those dance leaders for support. I now include conversations about how to co-lead Yiddish dancing. This is an opportunity to stop and think about what we're doing and how we work together: how are we supporting each other and how are we supporting the dancers? For example, if we are dancing the bulgar with a big group (especially a big group in a small space), shorter lines of dancers move more fluidly through the space. I will look to other leaders in the room to split the longer lines and lead shorter lines. On the other hand, if I am leading a long line of dancers in a freylekh, it is frustrating to have another dance leader break the pattern I have been building on the floor by splitting the line. Therefore, when I discuss co-leading in dance workshops, we have a conversation about how to be productive and supportive of each other rather than disruptive. I am reminded of the work of Deborah Tannen, who offered the term "cooperative overlap" to describe the conversational style of Jewish New Yorkers. While conversational overlap is construed as attentive to those who employ it, it is construed as inattentive to those who are not used to the style. On the dance floor, interruption can be supportive or disruptive depending on the context. As dance leaders, we should aim to overlap supportively, co-leading with respect.

I have outlined the heterogestic nature of Yiddish dance and the ways it mirrors the heterophonic qualities of Eastern European Jewish prayer and music. I have come to see a heterophonic/heterogestic approach, at the heart of which is a productive tension between individual and community, as the core dynamic of the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene as a whole. My experience, gained from two decades of teaching Yiddish dance, has demonstrated that Yiddish dance can teach foundational community building skills – both explicitly and implicitly. Explicitly, Yiddish dance workshops teach consent, close listening, and community care, as well as cultural literacy, confidence, and improvisation. Implicitly, Yiddish dance provides a metaphor and model for how we can build a community of cultural practice that creates spaces for individuality and different ways of being and also cares for the community by taking the time to teach how we can be together as a multi-voiced group. In full recognition that I am dealing in metaphors, when I watch the *sher* – described above as part of the *tantshoyz* – from the stage, I see the constant forming and reforming of community as each individual is drawn from their corner of the group into the centre of the group and encouraged to shine, before the group reforms by taking hands in a circle. In Yiddish, the word for “point of view” is *kuk-vinkl*, which translates literally as “look-corner.” The *sher* draws people from their established corners to share their individuality, engage in dance conversations, and join hands in community.

Dance models this community dynamic through different senses, bringing concepts from

our head into our bodies. In situations where we struggle to connect intellectually, dance demonstrates that if we hold each other with care, we can prevent injury. The embodied prompt to listen and care for each other is harder to dispute or resist than the intellectual one. We can use dance pedagogy to help create spaces for deeper listening, using our bodies to model offer and response. There is a dance in the Yiddish dance repertoire called a *broygez tants* (dance of anger).¹⁶⁰ Historically performed by the mothers-in-law at a Jewish wedding, the *broygez tants* is a dance of disagreement and reconciliation. It is one of the few specifically presentational dances that have entered the common Yiddish dance repertoire, and is often taught in workshops. I use the *broygez tants* to teach dance as conversation and also to illustrate the affective qualities of gesture and posture. The way we hold our bodies can affect our emotional state of being. For example, folding your arms across your chest feels different than opening your arms in a gesture of welcome. The first is protective, but also tends to pull the shoulders forward and down into a posture that is restrictive, constricting the breath, raising and tensing the shoulders, and directing energy inwards. The second opens the diaphragm, allowing breath to deepen, releases tension, and extends energy outwards from our heart. When I perform openness in a *broygez tants*, the physical shift in my body affects an emotional shift in my attitude towards my dance partner so that I am not only performing reconciliation but fully experiencing a feeling of warmth and

¹⁶⁰ While translated here, this dance is always referred to by its Yiddish name.

openness as well. It would be naive to suggest that learning to hold hands in a dance, to sing together, or to be a sensitive musician, is an easy solution to fundamental differences of opinion or values. As Alpert noted, it is possible to bring people together across different politics through dance. However, Alpert also recalled a musical colleague from the scene remarking that participants can “have a great time playing together, and leave hating each other as much as they did when they got there” without having gained any understanding or empathy for each other (2023). This is why a critical pedagogy that explicitly draws connections and provides community-building tools is an important part of cultivating a multi-voiced community of cultural practice.

Pedagogies of Entanglement

Thus far this chapter has drawn upon my work and experience as a Yiddish dance teacher and leader. I am proposing that cultivating the heterophonic/heterogestic nature of postvernacular Yiddish cultural practice is key to pedagogy, curation, and community-building in the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene and that methodologies of entanglement serve this approach. In the following section, I will speak to the ways I try to incorporate methodologies of entanglement into my work as a teacher of devising practices, as a curator of a festival, and as an organizer in an ecosystem. By considering pedagogies of entanglement in the context of my own work, I aim to bring together ideas from across this study, linking a heterophonic/heterogestic

approach to working with fragments to the conceptual spaces of *jetztzeit* and *doikayt*.

To start, I offer the following example of a workshop that playfully introduces participants to a methodology of fragments. This workshop draws on devised theatre methodologies and generative exercises that start from the maxim: “These people, this place, this time: what do they create?” (Williams).¹⁶¹ In starting any process, we ask what we each bring to the room and we start from there. We then begin by looking at the images we create by juxtaposing our personal, historical, literary, and philosophical fragments. In addition, by encouraging participants to see their own experience, skills, and knowledge as material, adding their own fragments to the generative process, the process is entangled, bound up with spatial and temporal context as well as with personal experience.

I first developed this workshop in 2021 when I was on faculty at the first edition of *Generation J*, a newly created program at Yiddish Summer Weimar with the goal of engaging 18-35-year-olds in Yiddish culture. I led a multi-day performance workshop, offering tools to the participants in the development of new work from materials that they brought in, whether a Yiddish song lyric, an historical document, or a single Yiddish word. At the second edition of *Generation J*, in May 2022, I condensed the week-long workshop into a single 90-minute session

¹⁶¹ This starting place for the devising process is drawn from the methodology of David Williams, an English theatre maker, dramaturg, and scholar who led the MA in Devised Theatre at Dartington College of the Arts when I was there as a student.

entitled “How to Get Started” which began with the question “What emerges when we juxtapose ideas and fragments?” The syllabus for this session was as follows:

- Introduction. I start with a brief outline of devising as a process and emphasize that the workshop focus is on discovery rather than on “getting it right.”
- Exercise One: Found Poem. In this exercise, participants gather fragments of text. While in some situations they will have resources with them, I also provide sources (song books, magazines, poetry books, etc.). Once each person has collected several fragments, they work in groups of two or three to combine those fragments into a poem which is shared with the group.
- Exercise Two: Five Points Exercise. In this exercise, adapted from a book on mask technique, the facilitator identifies five points on the playing space – for example the four corners and the centre point of the square (Wilsher 97). Four to six people participate while the other participants watch; it is in watching that the power of the exercise first becomes clear. I ask the participants to order and remember the numbers 1-5 in their heads. I then identify the five points in the playing space by number and ask them each to go and stand by the chair that matches the first number in their personal sequence. On cue, all performers then move to their next point in the sequence, and so on. At first this is done neutrally, without intentionally interacting with or ignoring the other participants on the playing space. After two to three cycles, I stop and ask those watching to describe what they saw. Usually, they describe stories beginning to emerge from the stage pictures that are created at each point. As the exercise progresses, I drop the cuing and prompt them to

move in different ways and to acknowledge and respond to each other. I offer points of concentration to help with this, such as “everyone watch x as you move through the space.” Depending on the group and time-limitations, I invite participants to add text (for example, their found poem from the earlier exercise) and gesture (for example, gestures learned in a Yiddish dance class) at set points in their five-point journey. I offer the Five Points exercise as a technique for quickly adding movement and flow to a process of juxtaposition. “Visual chords” appear almost immediately, creating openings for further exploration (Wilsher 93). It is easy to get stuck talking about how to put elements together. Adding movement and the element of randomness can get us out of our heads and nudge us toward new possibilities, with a fluid combining/recombining of chosen elements. This exercise can be adapted in an unlimited number of ways to suit the group (experience of participants, comfort with each other, size of group, etc.), the goal, and the materials or themes you are working with.

- Exercise Three: Collage.¹⁶² For the “final project” of this short session, I assign a group collage project. For this project, participants are given twenty minutes to pick a topic and create a short (approximately three minutes) performance that must include the following elements: one or more phrases from a song (at least one of these must be sung); a list; a sound effect; a repetition of a word or phrase; a proverb (in any language); a definition; a gesture. After twenty minutes,

¹⁶² This exercise is adapted from an assignment created by Jan Henderson for Drama 240 at the University of Alberta, 2006.

the groups gather to watch each piece and reflect on the overall experience of working within the framework of collage.

These three exercises work well as an introduction to creating new work from fragments, layering elements in intentional and unintentional ways. I have noticed that devised theatre exercises consistently surprise participants who are new to them, even those with a background in creative work. Participants are most surprised by what they can create within a very restricted time frame when using a simple structure of juxtaposition. As an individual or group collects together its fragments in a dialogical process, the performance emerges from the conversation between elements. In the context of a 90-minute workshop, the resulting performances lean towards the playful and absurd but are richer and more complex than the participants expect. For example, one participant created a solo collage around her favourite Yiddish word, *poyle royle* (snail), and wove in her personal relationship to Yiddish as a language teacher by presenting the performance as a mini language lesson. She defined the word, explored its sound through repetition, listed translations in other languages (some familiar and some new to her), and taught the audience to pronounce it. In doing so she positioned Yiddish in a contemporary linguistic landscape, emphasized the embodied aspects of learning a language, and referenced our affective

relationship to the languages we use and encounter.¹⁶³

While the short pieces created in a time-constrained situation may be lighthearted, the workshop is designed to prompt participants to pay attention to the ideas that emerge, whether intentionally or unintentionally, when you juxtapose fragments so that they can grab hold of those ideas and build upon them. Throughout the workshop, I pull on many threads that participants can consider and untangle at their leisure: narrative voice/s, linearity, deconstruction, etc. This adds intentionality to the ways that the participants approach their materials and directions to explore when using these tools in their own practice. The spark of juxtaposition is still the beginning of understanding, although I shift from the “dialectical” here as this process is one of dialogue, experimentation, and negotiation. When facilitating a generative creation process, I watch for those sparks to help guide the process – when understanding flares up, as Benjamin might say, we move into that space. My experience has taught me to trust this process even when it is frustrating and slow. Because, like most creation, it is slow much of the time. Not every fragment speaks to us, even when we thought it might, and not every juxtaposition sparks a generative space.

Widening the lens, immersive events in the Yiddish cultural scene illustrate how

¹⁶³ This participant was new to theatre and described the workshop as out of her comfort zone. In addition to creative strategies, she told me that the process gave her confidence by helping her to understand how performance is part of her role as a teacher.

juxtaposition can serve as a much broader pedagogical structure through content (materials and context), activation and embodiment, and critical connections. In the role of Artistic Director at KlezKanada, I aim to build upon this structure as it plays out at the Summer Retreat. The hands-on workshops, concerts, talks and discussions, and facilitated participatory social activities (cabarets, sing-alongs, dance parties, etc.) of the Summer Retreat form a montage of postvernacular Yiddish culture in North America. The programming always includes workshops that build foundational vocabulary of practice and teach historical context and development, as well as workshops that encourage participants to create new work from that vocabulary; however each year the curation of faculty, performances, and workshops highlights different “quotations” and juxtapositions. For example, 2022 programming highlighted cantorial music, 2023 featured a cluster of programs on film and filmmaking, and 2024 had a disciplinary focus on Yiddish theatre. This ever-changing montage is experienced by the participants as a holistic experience made up of diverse elements. Participants may seek out fragments, for instance attending a class that focuses on a particular repertoire. But they may also stumble across them, unexpectedly moved by a text in their Yiddish literature class, or walking past a classroom where a song is being taught and finding themselves drawn in by the sound or by a lyric.

The pedagogical emphasis of the Summer Retreat is on the participatory activation of cultural practice. While some material is presented through lectures, most workshops are hands-on: through playing, singing, dancing, painting, performing, and beyond, the participants learn

content and context by *doing* it. It is a space where we teach participants to actively embody or re-embody fragments. Although the fragments themselves may have become easier to find online, the nuances of embodiment, context, and connection can still be elusive and the Summer Retreat offers an opportunity to learn with the body.¹⁶⁴ This emphasis on doing has been an important part of the renaissance of Yiddish culture; the artists who led the klezmer revival modeled early on that the reactivation and transmission of Yiddish cultural practices required not just research but living those practices.

Looking at the Summer Retreat program as a space of juxtaposition highlights the importance of pedagogies that teach participants how to research, contextualize, and synthesize the materials taught. My experience as part of the festival cohort has been that the teachers who have been part of the klezmer revival all integrate these goals into their workshops, sometimes simply by teaching from their own experience of learning the techniques, material, and history. Jenny Romaine, for example, described her workshops to me as structured labs within which participants learn how to tackle a problem (2021). This, in turn, drives my curatorial strategy, prompting the inclusion of workshops that teach research methods, theory, and critical thinking skills, as well as tools for community building, and facilitated spaces where participants can share and discuss experiences, ideas, and challenges that they encounter in the Yiddish cultural scene.

¹⁶⁴ In some disciplines – Yiddish dance for example – it remains particularly challenging to find, evaluate, and interpret non-text-based resources without prior experience.

In 2021, I began facilitating a series of workshops I call “Critical Yiddishland.” These sessions are scheduled within the context of cultural intensives and framed as Jewish text-study sessions with religious texts replaced by excerpts from academic texts, for example an excerpt from Jeffrey Shandler on postvernacularity. The goal is two-fold: first, I want to continually bring academic and artistic discourse into conversation by taking the time to unpack what may be perceived as inaccessible texts. Second, I want to offer frameworks that will help participants to think critically about their work. I facilitate the reading and discussion of the texts, unpacking terms and ideas and making connections with the creative work the participants are doing in other sessions of the program (be those instrumental repertoire classes, Yiddish song-writing workshops, or burlesque performances at the cabaret).

These pedagogies of entanglement resist binaries, reductive understandings, and narratives of authenticity. Because there are so many concurrent programs, no one participant will experience the same montage of the Summer Retreat. In addition, everyone at the retreat will encounter perspectives, approaches, and interpretations of the material that differ from, and potentially challenge, their own experience.¹⁶⁵ The late-night cabaret offers an illustration of the above. The cabaret is an inclusive performance space that is oriented towards participant

¹⁶⁵ That this is unavoidable is backed up by my experience of reading the evaluations for the Summer Retreat for the past fifteen years in which participants, sharing their experience of every aspect of the retreat, consistently offer directly conflicting feedback.

performances, although anyone at the retreat may share, including faculty, fellows, and staff.

Usually hosted by a member of the faculty, the cabaret features everything from long-rehearsed musical numbers to newly-composed songs to improvised skits; all levels and all disciplines are encouraged. The cabaret is perhaps the most unpredictable space at the retreat, varying wildly from act to act in terms of material, form, continuum of serious to tongue-in-cheek, age and number of performers, etc. For example, a single cabaret line up might look like: a family band ranging in age from five to eight-five; a Yiddish translation of Waltzing Matilda sung by an Australian participant; a poem about our connections with our ancestors; a labour activist anthem framed as resistance against the rise of right-wing political parties around the world; a song and skit about the previous day's dinner, the premiere of a set of new klezmer tunes composed and arranged during the previous year; a virtuosic rendition of a sorrowful Yiddish lullaby on the musical saw; a Yiddish dance-informed burlesque performance. In short, if one can stay up late enough, an evening at the cabaret challenges any one notion of Yiddishkayt by hosting a space that is radically supportive of different approaches.

Teaching participants to make critical connections between elements allows them to nourish the sparks that fly up between fragments. As a space of educational inquiry, the connections between elements and between fragments are forged not just by the facilitators but by the participants, both actively and passively. For this reason, it is important to intentionally build in the spaces of productive “in-betweenness” where participants can pursue self-directed

learning, synthesize materials and ideas for themselves. At the Summer Retreat, the cabaret offers one such space but others are even less formal, including meal times, afternoons on the lakeshore, and participant-led jam sessions that happen semi-spontaneously in every corner of the site. Culture is formed when people come together. While festival organizers may try to curate a group experience, the individuals and their actions and reactions to each other also act upon the space. A central role of the organizers and faculty is to make sure the space is open for participants to create worlds and to respond to that world-building without feeling threatened by change. The stories told, the jokes cracked over and over, the memories recalled, and the values and dreams shared become embedded into the evolving traditions of cultural practice cherished by the community.

Because Yiddishland is an imagined space, the materialization of tangible community at festivals can sometimes feel rather magical. The networks of Yiddishland, however, take hard work to organize and maintain. Early definitions imagined a Yiddishland that grew out of and rested upon a landscape of Yiddish literature; contemporary Yiddishland is formed by relational acts between people, and dependent upon an infrastructure of gatherings. In Chapter Two I introduced Eric Klinenberg's concept of social infrastructure as the systems that shape and support social interaction and suggested that Yiddish cultural festivals serve as the social infrastructure of the Yiddish cultural scene. I would further argue that, because the Yiddish cultural scene as a whole is made up of gatherings, each event with its own voice, style, emphasis,

and priorities, we should approach the social infrastructure of Yiddishland as a heterophonic ecosystem and ask how we can support it as such.

Although a full survey of the key (and peripheral) organizations in Yiddish cultural renaissance since the 1970s has yet to be written, there can be no doubt that organizations and events such as YIVO, KlezKamp, KlezKanada, Yiddish Summer Weimar, Krakow Jewish Culture Festival, KlezFest London, Yiddish New York, and so many more, have shaped and supported what we understand to be Yiddishland today and contribute in very active and ongoing ways to the health of the scene. “When social infrastructure is robust,” writes Klinenberg, “it fosters contact, mutual support, and collaboration among friends and neighbors; when degraded, it inhibits social activity, leaving families and individuals to fend for themselves” (5). As I have written about in the previous chapters, festivals and events support artistic development, community building, and cultural transmission. Klinenberg situates social infrastructure as “the physical conditions that determine whether social capital develops” (5). These spaces foster “local, face-to-face interactions.” In the case of Yiddishland, “local” often relates to the affinity space as much as to the surrounding community, although the shifting location of Yiddishland does create, strengthen, and extend geographically local networks. This is an area of study which deserves more attention. The network of Yiddish cultural festivals should be placed in conversation with festival studies scholarship, examining how each individual event as well as the larger network functions in relation to the international ecology of performing arts festivals.

If Klinenberg had written his book during or after the COVID-19 pandemic, it surely would have extended the concept of social infrastructure to digital spaces. Rebecca Margolis and Toronto-based Yiddishist freygl gertsovski¹⁶⁶ have both written about the role of online spaces in connecting and strengthening Yiddishland. “It was the structured spaces that facilitated opportunities for connection,” freygl suggests about attending an in-person edition of Yiddish New York, going on to describe how those structured spaces were recreated online both formally (through programming offered by institutions) and informally (through WhatsApp groups) (gertsovski). freygl argues that the digital infrastructures of Yiddishland helped to flatten hierarchies and increase access to social capital: “It means a lot to me, as a non-academic without access to institutional mentorship like in a student-professor relationship, to be connected to these informal networks of support” (gertsovski). The addition of digital social infrastructure, existing pre-2020 but expanding rapidly at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, increases access to the landscape of Yiddishland.

Large established events not only function as mainstays of the community’s social infrastructure, they also play an important role in seeding local communities which host smaller workshops, jams, concerts, and social spaces. As examined in Chapter Three, heterotopic spaces open an opportunity for participants to experiment with ways of creating and being in

¹⁶⁶ freygl (fae/faer) spells faer name with lower case letters.

community-oriented cultural spaces. This is a two-way relationship: individuals or groups attend a festival to build their skills and networks and then return to their own locales where they share and disseminate that knowledge and experience through concerts, workshops, and sometimes by starting a local series or event. My experience has been that, as the local community grows, additional members of the community then choose to attend a centralized festival to expand upon their knowledge and networks. While it would be another study – and an important one – to compare development, goals, and values across local programs, the relationship between points of social infrastructure is clear. Michel Foucault closes his introductory text on heterotopias with the whimsical observation that “the ship is the heterotopia par excellence” (27). As “a floating piece of space,” he writes, the ship is the “greatest reserve of the imagination” (27). I envision festivals as cultural shipyards, building vessels of possibility with navigational tools of critical thought which are then sent out into the sea of the community to inspire and incite change. While the ship is strengthened and restored in the shipyard, that is only one point in the journey.

Larger and more established organizations in this relationship have a responsibility to support local communities. For one thing, the goal of revitalization and renaissance of Yiddish culture, which is a core tenet of these programs, should engender a collaborative rather than competitive approach. In addition, organizations should self-reflectively problematize the centralization of educational models in the Yiddish cultural scene. In terms of financial cost of

attendance and travel, time and scheduling, and accessibility, programs such as KlezKanada's Summer Retreat, Yiddish New York, Yiddish Summer Weimar, etc., are not an option for everyone.¹⁶⁷ While it is the responsibility of organizations to prioritize increased access to their programs, organizations can also mitigate issues of accessibility by supporting regional programming. This may include financial support but, importantly, it can also look like leadership development, mentorship and coaching, cross-promotion, etc. Finally, by engaging with and supporting local communities, institutions become active participants in the changing cultural landscape. Just as the traditions of cultural practice taught and celebrated in these settings are *living* traditions, so too should institutional policies be *living* policies, responding to and supporting the needs and values of their community members.

When we create a practice from fragments, we must pay close attention to the expression of each fragment and to the sparks that flash up as they are brought together in juxtaposition. When we create a community of practice, we need to nurture personal expression but also cultivate caring and thoughtful ways of coming together. From classroom, to festival, to ecosystem, these approaches:

¹⁶⁷ There is significant financial cost involved in attending the larger centralized events, including travel, registration fees, accommodation for urban events, etc. In addition, participants must also be in a position to take a time off of work or school in order to attend (often a full week). Other barriers may include a challenging physical site for participants with limited mobility and/or a lack of other accessibility accommodations. While increased accessibility has been a central focus at many events over the last few years, certain aspects of the physical site are more difficult to control or change, such as particularities of the rented venues.

1. Forward entangled ways of knowing, encourage code-switching, and cultivate juxtaposition as a creative strategy;
2. Advocate cultural fluency and critical thinking skills as necessary to a cultural practice that extends forwards and backwards at the same time;
3. Hold space for a multi-voiced Yiddishkayt, offer tools and strategies for strengthening collectivity, and support a broader social infrastructure.

The relational acts between people working, playing, and engaging with Yiddish cultural practices form the shape of the Yiddish cultural scene. Frigyesi writes:

The culture emerges from practice: how its elements are used, how they cohere and interact, what they mean for the community, and how through their assemblage as a whole is created. It is this wholeness that is experienced as culture and aesthetics. In the end, explanations, terms, and structural analyses are able to disclose this wholeness only in a discouragingly incomplete manner. (Frigyesi 29)

Any one person or practice cannot begin to illustrate the scene as a whole for that whole is a multi-voiced, entangled, and ever shifting assemblage.

In the ways we choose to be together as a community, we define our ongoing heritage. For me, in bringing together communities through Yiddish dance, heritage is community activism. It is important that this activism create space for many kinds of Jewish experience. Because the forms of Yiddish dance create space for individual style and improvisation within the embrace of

the community movement, I believe that Yiddish dance can work on breaking down simplistic truths and reductions about a singular Jewish experience, historical or otherwise. When the music begins and I reach out my arms to encourage dancers to join me in the circle, my heart fills as the line of dancers grows and extends, hand by hand. I feel the same joy when someone begins a song and one by one voices join the melody, filling out the sound. I experience this as a gathering together – in which we are the fragments gathered together through dance – and I am reminded of the sparks of light that we collect in an effort to heal the world and of the sparks that flash up between fragments brought together in juxtaposition. For the hands grasped by neighbours in a dance juxtapose us as individuals in a group; it is up to us to interpret and express the energy that sparks up between dancers.

POSTSCRIPT: THE WAYMARKERS OF THE POST-REVIVAL

In the preceding chapters I have argued that the postvernacular has become the dominant vernacular of the contemporary Yiddish cultural scene and that this new vernacular is deeply committed to cultural fluency. While reflecting a changing relationship to language and cultural practice, the “post” of the postvernacular does not denote a cessation of language and culture. To reiterate Marianne Hirsch’s framing, the post of a concept (postvernacular, postmemory, postcolonialism, etc.) functions like a sticky note that adheres to and transforms the ideas. It seems appropriate that I end this dissertation with its own sticky Post-it; the post of this postscript indicates continuation. When I embarked upon this project, I asked how the festival cohort was doing things differently than their mentors. As I have noted, I have found a broader shift in the landscape that was not delineated by generation. I also asked whether we are now post-revival. Perhaps here, too, the answer lies in the “post.” The “post” of post-revival contains both the ongoing nature of the klezmer revival and notes the shift in the landscape. The post reminds us that this revival is not a return to the vernacular Yiddishkayt that existed in the first half of the century but a process of both repair and world-building.

If we are post-revival, what are the markers of that continuation-with-change? These sticky “posts” also function to mark shifts or points. The markers are not fence posts that keep people in or out, but waymarkers that we follow, climb over, erect, repair, strengthen, and move.

What are the posts of the current landscape that tell us how far we've come and mark where we might be heading? These markers can also be seen as shared values in the Yiddish cultural scene that are forged and fostered through cultural practice.

Over the previous chapters I have noted the following markers in the current landscape of the Yiddish cultural scene. First, an embrace of postvernacular culture with a commitment to research, cultural literacy, and critical thinking. The postvernacular as vernacular emphasizes (and delights in) code-switching between ways of knowing, and embraces the fragment, using juxtaposition as a creative strategy in the creation of new work and the formation of Jewish identity. The second marker is an intentionality and care around the ways we steward and instigate change. This is a cultivation of tradition as a set of living and evolving practices with an awareness that transmission is inherently a process of change and that we can thus be thoughtful, creative, and daring in the ways we think about continuity. This brings us to a third marker, an ongoing emphasis on the spaces that emerge between local and translocal space and time. This emphasis is seen in creative practices that seek to move both forwards and backwards and engage with the diasporic condition. Fourth, I see practices of world-building that draw upon rooted Yiddishkayt to imagine and activate diverse ways of being, and being Jewish, in the world. Increasingly, this world-building is interdisciplinary. Indeed, one argument for describing the scene as post-klezmer revival is that it is no longer as klezmer-centric. Dance, food, visual art, theatre, and beyond, are blossoming in a holistic cultural environment. These practices of world-

building bridge creative practice and community building, strengthening and extending the social infrastructure of the Yiddish cultural ecosystem. And the fifth post marks a commitment to multi-voiced Yiddishkayt in which care of the community goes hand-in-hand with space for individual voices. This includes a recognition that, in the contemporary context, a heterophonic and heterogestic approach to collectivity requires deliberate teaching. Here again we find code-switching between ways of knowing but this time those ways of knowing represent every individual in the community.

As waymarkers, these values are sometimes aspirational. It is not my intention to present the Yiddish cultural scene as without conflict. Far be it! However, we can learn a great deal about a community and their relationship to cultural practice by understanding their aspirations. In her study of Eastern European Jewish prayer, Judit Frigyesi proposes that we “consider East European Jewish music to be a cognitive process and not merely a sonic object” (15). With this she argues that we must look beyond the conceptualization of Yiddish music as a repertoire that has been preserved (or not) and study the “conceptual rules” from which the practice is generated. Extending this to the way we understand Yiddish culture more broadly, I would argue that the values cultivated through shared practice can be seen to function as conceptual rules because they become guides in the evolution of those practices and in the development of new work.

Among other strengths, a process-oriented approach means that, when we study living

traditions, we can take into account changing values and look at how those become integral to the practice even as they continue to evolve. Over the past year, I have worked with the KlezKanada leadership team towards a new strategic plan for the organization. As part of this process, we have been drafting a new mission, vision, and set of values. These too are posts, markers that guide the work of the staff and board. This process has included gathering data through extensive focus group interviews, analyzing community surveys, and long leadership discussions about the history, present, and future of the organization. Working on this institutional visioning project concurrently with my dissertation has reinforced for me the importance of supporting living traditions with living policy. It is clear how the practices and values that have grown out of the klezmer revival and the contemporary Yiddish cultural community have shaped KlezKanada as an institution even as KlezKanada – and especially the Summer Retreat – has played a pivotal role in shaping the scene itself. It is our responsibility in turn to amplify those values through our guidelines, policies, and programs while creating the space for ongoing change.

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APPENDIX A: LIST OF INTERVIEWEES

Interviews 2019–2023

Listed by last name or group name. Contributed as part of the interview process, all artist

biographies are in their own words.

Michael Alpert

Michael Alpert has been a pioneering figure in the renaissance of East European Jewish music and Yiddish culture since the 1970s, and is a National Heritage Fellow of the United States – the US’s highest honour in the traditional and heritage arts. Multi-instrumentalist, singer, ethnographer, scholar and educator, he is internationally known for award-winning performances and recordings with Brave Old World, Itzhak Perlman, Khevrisa, Kapelye, Socalled, Daniel Kahn, Ukrainian-American bandurist Julian Kytasty, and others. A native Yiddish speaker and bridge to East European-born Jewish musicians, Alpert is a traditional Yiddish singer and composer of new Yiddish songs. He is credited with reintroducing the traditional sekund style of rhythmic/chordal violin playing to contemporary klezmer music, and with vital primary research and teaching in the reintroduction of Yiddish traditional dance. His own ethnographic fieldwork recordings were recently acquired by the US Library of Congress.

Zoë Aqua

Zoë Aqua is a violinist, educator, and composer. She was awarded a Fulbright research grant for the 2021–22 and 2022–23 academic years to study Transylvanian folk music pedagogy in Cluj, Romania. In 2022, she released an album of original compositions recorded with Eastern European musicians entitled *In Vald Arayn* (Into the Forest). Zoë is a co-founder of klezmer bands Tsibele and Farnakht, and served as the full-time understudy for the Klezmatics' Lisa Gutkin in the Broadway production of *Indecent*. An in-demand teacher known for her warm and accessible style, she holds two degrees in music education.

www.zoeaqua.com

Eléonore Biezunski

Interviewed as part of Festivals Respond to COVID, a group interview on organizing events online during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Eléonore Biezunski is an award-winning Parisian singer/violinist now living in NYC. An avid collector of Yiddish music, she co-founded and is a member of Ephemeral Birds, Yerushe, Lyubtshe, Shpilkes, Shtetl Stompers, and Klezmographers and has collaborated with a large number of well-known Jewish performers in New York and abroad. Her recordings include *Yerushe* (IEMJ, 2016) and *Zol zayn* (2014). She won a Bubbe Award in 2021 for her song “Tshemodan” in the category Best New Yiddish Song. As YIVO’s Sound Archivist, Eléonore has

coordinated the *Ruth Rubin Legacy* website. She is also a member of the Klezmer Institute's *KMDMP* and *Klezmer Archive Project*. She has a PhD from the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales in Paris and has published several academic articles about Yiddish music and Yiddish theater. She is a recipient of a NYSCA Folk Arts Apprenticeship. She appears in several documentary films about Yiddish culture and music.

www.eleonorebiezunski.com

Dan Blacksberg

Interviewed as part of Festivals Respond to COVID, a group interview on organizing events online during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Appearing everywhere from West Philly basements to Carnegie Hall, trombonist, composer, and educator Dan Blacksberg connects people, sounds, and cultures in respectful and vitalizing ways. Acknowledged as one of the foremost practitioners of klezmer trombone and a respected voice in jazz and experimental music, Dan creates music inside and outside known genres, from danceable klezmer melodies on *Radiant Others*, to classic free-jazz inflected blasts with the Dan Blacksberg Trio, to genre-busting projects like his Hasidic doom metal band Deveykus. He has performed and recorded with artists such as klezmer masters Elaine Hoffman Watts and Adrienne Cooper, and experimentalists like Anthony Braxton and extreme doom metal band The Body. He is a highly in demand teacher at klezmer workshops all over the world, and has been an

adjunct faculty at Temple University. He also makes the *Radiant Others Klezmer Podcast*.

www.danblacksberg.com

Stefanie Brendler

Stefanie Brendler is a Seattle-based multi-instrumentalist (horns, accordion, keyboards, vocals, loop pedal), composer, visual artist, translator, storyteller, and union stagehand. The founder of Seattle's premier klezmer brass band Shpilkis, Stefanie is also a member of Brivele [see below].

On occasion, Stefanie will play solo under the moniker Stef on a Clear Day. Despite the constant toil under capitalism, heteropatriarchy, and nationalism, Stefanie's artistry reflects the joys of life as a queer Jew. From orchestral French horn to punk rock, bombastic brass street bands to intimate chamber folk, Stefanie has performed and recorded with: Tin Tree Factory, Bucharest Drinking Team, The m9, Yellow Hat Band, Seattle Rock Orchestra, Infernal Noise Brigade, Movitas Marching Band, Your Heart Breaks, and Kimya Dawson.

www.stefaniebrendler.com

Brivele

Band interview with Stefanie Brendler, Maia Brown, and Hannah Hamavid.

Brivele is a Seattle-based ensemble who braid together Yiddish song, anti-fascist and labor balladry, folk-punk, and contemporary rabble-rousing in stirring vocal harmony. In Yiddish,

Brivele (בריוועלע) means “little letter.” Like letters, songs travel – through time and over borders.

Brivele journeys into the archives of Yiddish anti-fascist musical tradition, bringing together anti-authoritarian satire, mournful remembrances, and the disguised political commentary in folk ditties and theatre classics. Their songs are a correspondence: our ancestors’ voices speak clearly and uncompromisingly, sometimes sweetly, to our present moment.

www.brivele.com

Ilana Cravitz

Interviewed as part of Festivals Respond to COVID, a group interview on organizing events online during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Based in the UK, Ilana Cravitz is a violinist specialising in historically informed performance of klezmer and baroque repertoire. Ilana was the co-founder of the London Klezmer Quartet and has been a guest artist with many bands, including Klezmer Klub, Oysland, She’koyokh, and the US ensemble Isle of Klezbos. She specializes in leading and playing for klezmer ceilidhs (barn dances). Ilana has toured extensively, performing at classical, folk and world music festivals and venues in the UK and internationally. Ilana re-established the UK’s international Klezfest in 2015 at the invitation of the Jewish Music Institute, directing the festival for two years. She has also been the artistic lead for KlezNorth, and in 2020 set up and ran an online festival – the London International Klezmer Experience (LIKE). She has since developed LIKE into a brand which so

far has appeared on publications, productions and workshop events. As a teacher, she has introduced hundreds of people of all ages to klezmer, and recently set up the framework for a National Klezmer Youth Ensemble, NKYO. Her unique and practical book, *Klezmer Fiddle* – a how-to guide, is published by Oxford University Press.

www.ilanacravitz.com

Patrick Farrell

Interviewed as part of Festivals Respond to COVID, a group interview on organizing events online during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Patrick Farrell is a United States-born, Berlin-based accordionist, pianist, composer, and bandleader. A long-time klezmer, he is a regular teacher and performer at many Yiddishland festivals throughout Europe and North America. Farrell is an organizer of Shtetl Berlin, a grassroots Yiddish cultural festival and organization in Berlin, and the related Neukölln Klezmer Sessions. His most recent recorded release is “Nem may vort” from 2022, a collection of newly composed Yiddish song duets with singer Sveta Kundish.

www.pattysounds.com

Sarah Gordon

Sarah Mina Gordon is a fourth-generation Yiddish folk singer. Sarah has recorded and

performed with Frank London's Klezmer Brass All-Stars, The Klezmatics, Daniel Kahn, and others; she fronts Yiddish Princess, a rock band. Daughter of legendary Yiddish singer, Adrienne Cooper(z"l), Sarah grew up immersed in innovative Yiddish culture. Dedicated to making new Yiddish art, she has collaborated with Michael Winograd, Frank London, Alicia Svigals, and The Klezmatics to write Yiddish songs which are sung around the world. Her song, "Ekhod/Who Knows One," is internationally known and has been taught and performed at festivals from California to Krakow. Sarah is also an educator – teaching third grade at Brooklyn Friends School for over a decade and designing and leading Yiddish culture programs for children and adults.

Leah Koenig

Leah Koenig is the author of seven cookbooks including the acclaimed *The Jewish Cookbook* and *Modern Jewish Cooking*. Her newest cookbook, *PORTICO: Cooking and Feasting in Rome's Jewish Kitchen* was a 2023 National Jewish Book Awards finalist. Leah's writing and recipes can be found in *The New York Times*, *New York Magazine*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *The Washington Post*, *Food & Wine*, *Epicurious*, and *Food52*, among other publications. She also writes a weekly newsletter, *The Jewish Table*, which shares recipes and stories from the world of Jewish food. In addition to writing, Leah leads cooking demonstrations and workshops around the country and world.

www.leahkoenig.com

Sasha Lurje

Sasha Lurje is a Riga-born and Berlin-based Yiddish singer performing and teaching across the world. Her experience in traditional song, various vocal techniques, and genres adds up to a wide range that creates great performances. Her work includes projects ranging from Yiddish progressive rock with her band Forshpil to cabaret with Semer Ensemble, Helsinki Yiddish Cabaret, and Cabaret Yitsh, from traditional Yiddish music expression with her trio Lebedik to historic recreations with Yale University project *Songs from the Testimonies*. Sasha is a co-founder of Berlin Yiddish culture festival Shtetl Berlin and Seattle Yiddish Fest, has performed and taught Yiddish singing throughout Europe and North and South America, and has been a longstanding artist and faculty member at Yiddish Summer Weimar.

www.sashalurje.com

New Yiddish Songbook Project

Project interview with Zoë Aqua, Adah Hetko, Rosza Lang/Levitzky

In 2021, Yiddish composers and cultural creatives Zoë Aqua, Adah Hetko, and Rosza Daniel Lang/Levitzky were working on a collection of new Yiddish songs: the first songbook to present the fruits of the last forty years of Yiddish cultural revitalization. The collection will highlight, in particular, the important contributions of women (trans and cis) and nonbinary artists in the

recent flourishing of new Yiddish song. Its title – *Oysters of Yiddish Song* – is a tribute to the ground-breaking Yiddish song collection *Pearls of Yiddish Song*, edited by Eleanor and Joseph Mlotek, and a pun on the Yiddish words for “treasure” (oytser) and “strange/queer” (oysterlish).

Sarah Myerson

Sarah Myerson is an ordained cantor (Master of Sacred Music & Diploma of Hazzan, Jewish Theological Seminary) actively working to connect Jewish egalitarian-religious with Yiddish secular/cultural communities. Her love of klezmer music and background in folk dance drew her to study and teach Yiddish dance. Since 2008, she has led Yiddish social dancing at weddings, B’nei Mitzvah and other events, taught Yiddish dance workshops and private lessons in the USA, Canada, Mexico, Europe, Israel, and Australia. Sarah also coordinated the Yiddish Dance Workshop for YSW (2018, 2019) and will coordinate the Yiddish dance program for Yiddish New York 2024. Sarah has studied Yiddish language through immersive and semester-long programs in New York and Israel. She has taught Yiddish song workshops with Ethel Raim and others at YNY and UCLA, and coaches private students. Sarah writes and performs new music, for example with Ilya Shneyveys as Jewish spiritual music duo Shekedina.

www.cantorsarahmyerson.com

Jenny Romaine

Jenny Romaine is a director, designer, puppeteer, and co-artistic director of the OBIE winning Great Small Works visual theatre collective. She is music director of Jennifer Miller's CIRCUS AMOK and teaches and directs in theaters, schools, parks, libraries, museums, prisons, street corners, and other public spaces, producing work on many scales. Jenny was a sound archivist at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research for thirteen years and for several decades has drawn on Yiddish/pan-Jewish primary source materials to create art that explores diaspora consciousness. Her projects include *Muntergang and Other Cheerful Downfalls* about Yiddish puppeteers Zuni Maud and Yosl Cutler, *The Sukkos Mob* (featured in the film *Punk Jews*), an annual community Purim Shpil with the Aftselakhis Spectacle Committee, *Vu bistu geven? / Where Have You Been?* a Quebec-based adventure parable that asks questions about diasporic Jewish relationships to land, *Bobe Mayses – Yiddish Knights and Other Impossibilities* with the Other Music Academy (Weimar/Berlin), *Spaghetti Ramadan*, and more. Romaine was the first recipient of the Adrienne Cooper Dreaming in Yiddish Award (2014).

www.greatsmallworks.org/jenny.html

Sebastian Schulman

Interviewed individually and also as part of a group interview on organizing events online during the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Sebastian Schulman is a writer, editor, and literary translator from Yiddish, Esperanto, French,

and Russian. His original writing and translations have appeared in several anthologies and more than a dozen literary journals across North America, including *Two Lines*, *Words Without Borders*, and *ANMLY*. Schulman's translation of Spomenka Stimec's Esperanto-language novel *Croatian War Nocturnal* was published by Phoneme Media/Deep Vellum in 2017. He has held leadership positions in several Jewish cultural organizations, including as the Executive Director of KlezKanada, and currently serves as the director of special projects and partnerships at the Yiddish Book Center. He lives in Montréal, Québec (Tiohtià:ke).

Ilya Shneyveys

Originally from Riga, Latvia and now based in Brooklyn, NY, Ilya Shneyveys is an accordionist and multi-instrumentalist, educator, composer, arranger, and producer of Yiddish music. With expertise spanning from traditional klezmer accordion to experimental and fusion projects, Ilya performs and teaches at Jewish festivals around the world, in venues ranging from your local synagogue catering hall to Carnegie Hall. Ilya is a founding member of Berlin's Neukölln Klezmer Sessions and Shtetl Berlin and a frequent faculty member at Yiddish Summer Weimar. His notable projects and collaborations include Forshpil, Alpen Klezmer, KaraYam, Caravan Orchestra and Choir, Dobranotch, Shekedina, Michael Winograd, and The Klezomatics. Ilya has received multiple awards for his work, including the 2014 RUTH World Music Award at TFF Rudolstadt, the 2017 Shimon-Peres-Prize, and the Eiserne Eversteiner Preis in 2017.

www.ilya.shneyveys.com

Evelyn Tauben

Evelyn Tauben is a curator, producer, and writer based in Toronto. She is a leader in the field of contemporary Jewish art and culture with 20 years of experience in museums, galleries, and arts organizations including the Smithsonian American Art Museum, the Renwick Gallery, the National Museum of American History, the Philadelphia Museum of Art and the Koffler Centre of the Arts. Tauben's range of curatorial experience includes developing exhibitions for non-traditional and multi-use spaces. In 2016, she launched the artist-run window gallery, FENTSTER, which features site-specific installations connected to the Jewish experience, extending her deep interest in democratizing art and animating the urban landscape with contemporary art. Tauben has curated content for festivals including the Ashkenaz Festival (Toronto), KlezKanada (Montreal) and Le Mood (Montreal) and presented at conferences in Poland, New York, Montreal, Indianapolis, Toronto, and England. Tauben's writing has been published in the award-winning book *Graphic Details* (McFarland, 2014), *The Forward*, and *The Canadian Jewish News*, where she contributed a regular arts column.

www.evelyntauben.com

Ira Khonen Temple

Ira Khonen Temple is a multi-instrumentalist, music director, and embedded cultural organizer living in Brooklyn, NY. Recent credits include accordionist for *Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish* off Broadway, and music director of *Indecent* at the Weston Playhouse, Great Small Works' *Muntergang and Other Cheerful Downfalls*, the Aftselakhis Spectacle Committee *Purimshpil*, and Zoe Beloff's *Days of the Commune*. Ira is a founder of the radical-traditional Yiddish music group Tsibele. Ira creates music that is a doorway between past, present, and possible futures. Working with people of diverse ages and backgrounds, Ira develops new Jewish culture that is politically fresh, relevant, and un-nostalgic while building connections between languages, communities, and time periods.

www.iratemple.com

Daniel Toretzky

Daniel Toretzky is an artist, musician, and architect based in Brooklyn. His sculptures, built environments, and urban interventions use participatory design to explore Jewish identity, diaspora, inequality, and climate change. Toretzky's work is often informed by probing Ashkenazi Jewish rituals, heritage, and history with humour and a spatial focus. Many of his projects embrace Jewish cultural and religious rituals, while interrogating structures of power within the Jewish diaspora. Daniel Toretzky is a graduate of the architecture department at Cornell University. Since then Daniel has worked as a museum exhibit designer and is currently pursuing

an MFA at the New School. In his current work, Daniel is exploring the exhibition tropes of natural history museums and how they can be disrupted to build public agency for combating ecological destruction. Daniel performs with the brass and klezmer bands Bris Baby, the Hungry Marching Band, and Mrs. Toretzky's Nightmare.

www.tsimtsum.org

Eleonore Weill

French vocalist/multi-instrumentalist Eleonore Weill is acclaimed for her soulful interpretations of Yiddish, East European, and French traditional musics. Hailing from a musical family in Southern France and now based in Brooklyn, Weill performs and records in a variety of ensembles, from klezmer to Romanian and Occitane folk musics. In addition to her acclaimed socially-conscious Yiddish music ensemble Tsibele, she performs internationally with Frank London, the Baroque Music Center of Versailles (C.M.B.V.), Joey Weisenberg and the Hadar ensemble, Midwood, Orchestre National de Toulouse, Les Saqueboutiers, Miqueu Montanaro, and many others. She has additionally received commissions for composition and performed with theater companies such as Doppelskope, Bread and Puppet, Ensemble Oneiroi, and Great Small Works. She has performed for audiences on a diverse range of stages including Lincoln Center, the Palace of Versailles, the Hammerstein Ballroom, Symphony Space, the Brooklyn and Philadelphia Folk Festivals, as well as at leading international Yiddish festivals including Yiddish

New York, the Ashkenaz Festival (Toronto), Kleztival (São Paulo), KlezKanada (Quebec) and Yidstock (Massachusetts). With performance degrees from France's National Conservatories in Paris and Toulouse, Weill holds a Master's in ethnomusicology from the Sorbonne and Columbia University. Performing on recorder, wooden flutes, piano, accordion and hurdy-gurdy, Weill's music is informed by her conviction that traditional songs have great power to create social change.

www.eleonoreweill.com

Michael Winograd

Clarinetist Michael Winograd is one of the most respected and versatile working musicians in klezmer music today. While based in Brooklyn, he spends much of his time on the move, performing and teaching music around the world. He is one third of the Yiddish Art Trio, twenty percent of the Tarras Band, co-founder and director of Sandaraa, and fearless leader of The Honorable Mentshn. Winograd has recorded and performed with SoCalled, Budowitz, Frank London, the Klezmer Conservatory Band, and many others. In his spare time he produces records, composes music, and plays synthesizer in the Brooklyn based metal band Yiddish Princess. Michael is a co-founder of the Yiddish New York festival and was the Artistic Director of KlezKanada from 2017-2021.

www.michaelwinograd.net

Yiddishland Pavilion Interview

An interviewed with curators Yevgeniy Fiks and Maria Veits.

The Yiddishland Pavilion is a hybrid online-offline project aimed at tracing and developing Yiddish and Jewish discourse in contemporary artistic practice. Its activities unfolded in Venice, Italy and online between April and November 2022. At the 59th Venice Biennale, *The Yiddishland Pavilion* took place in a dialogue and collaboration with national pavilions of countries with histories of Yiddish-speaking Jewish migration. Yiddishland is an imaginary country/land/space/territory connected through Yiddish language and culture. *The Yiddishland Pavilion* analyzes the erosion of global political constellations, practices collective remembrance, condemns war and occupation, and documents consequences of migration and politics of exclusion that target “Otherness.” Curated by Yevgeniy Fiks, a Moscow-born New York-based artist, author, and organizer of art exhibitions, and Maria Veits, an independent curator, researcher, and co-founder of TOK, a female curatorial collective.

www.yiddishlandpavilion.art

Interviews 2007–2009

In addition to the interviews listed above, I have drawn from the following interviews conducted during my MA (2009) and my BA (2007).

Michael Alpert

See above.

Daniel Kahn

Detroit-born expat troubadour, songwriter, translator, and multi-instrumentalist Daniel Kahn combines English, Yiddish, German, and Russian in a radical mix of klezmer, folk, cabaret, and punk. His groups include The Painted Bird, Brothers Nazaroff, Semer Ensemble, and The Unternationale. He was the original Perchik in Folksbiene's hit *Fiddler on the Roof in Yiddish* and Yosl in *Amerike*. He played Biff in NYR's *Death of a Salesman*, the Badkhn in the Netflix series *Unorthodox*, and was featured in Carnegie Hall's *From Shtetl to Stage*. The Ashkenaz Foundation named him the inaugural Theodore Bikel Artist-in-Residence, in 2018 he received the Chane and Joseph Mlotek Award for Yiddish Continuity, and in 2024 was honoured with the Adrienne Cooper Dreaming in Yiddish award. He has been on the faculty at KlezKanada, KlezKamp, Yiddish New York, Yiddish Summer Weimar, and Shtetl Berlin, which he co-founded.

www.paintedbird.de

Jenny Romaine

See above.

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

The following questions provided a starting point for my early interviews. However, although I used these questions as a guide, I allowed the conversations to develop naturally and, followed the topic threads even as they veered away from this structure.

Background

Can you describe the role of Yiddish culture in your childhood?

If not through family/community, can you tell me the story of how you began to engage with Yiddish cultural materials in your work?

Cultural Practice

Can you help me understand the ways you use Yiddish materials in your work?

Do you feel a sense of responsibility towards the materials you work with?

Do you feel that this sense of responsibility affects the way you make your work/perform?

Has this shifted in the time that you have been working with Yiddish cultural practices?

Has the response to your work differed between Jewish and non-Jewish audiences?

Have you experienced any resistance or push-back to your work?

Do you feel as though there is a difference between the way our group creates, compared to our teachers?

Do you feel as though the role of the artist has changed in relationship to Yiddish culture?

Materials

What kinds of materials and resources do you seek out?

Do you engage with archival or historical materials as you create your work? Where do you find these materials? How do you access them?

The Role of Festivals

Can you describe your first experience at KlezKanada (or similar event)?

What stood out for you about that experience?

What led to you attend that festival?

How did that experience affect the way you thought about your own Jewish identity and practice?

Can you describe the way the space of KlezKanada feels?

How would you describe the relationship between KlezKanada and not-KlezKanada?

Community

Can you describe the community of Yiddish artists that we are a part of?

How would you describe our community of peers?

How do you feel about the term Yiddishland?

Definitions

How do you use the term tradition?

What does the word tradition mean to you?

Do you feel as though this differs from the common perception?

Policy

Can you tell me about a time when you felt either supported or put-down by a Jewish institution?

Do you consider yourself affiliated to any Jewish-oriented institution? How do you feel about this affiliation? What is the value of affiliation to you?

Especially if not affiliated, what is your relationship with (other) mainstream Jewish institutions?

Have you sought or found support for your work from organizations or grants?

What changes would you like to see in Jewish institutional policy?