

Chapter 3.

“Let’s Start with the Big Ones:” Numbers, Thin Description and the Magic of Yiddish at the Yiddish Book Center.



Figure 6. The Yiddish Book Center’s Harry and Jeanette Weinberg Building.

To enter the Yiddish Book Center’s gorgeous facility, visitors open a heavy set of wood doors and walk through an entryway upon which can be read a slightly altered version of the famous

quote by Yiddish linguist Max Weinreich: “Yiddish is magic—it will outwit history.”¹ Passing through another set of doors, they are welcomed by a docent, usually an older retiree, or a work-study student from one of the area’s colleges within the region’s five-college consortium. After perhaps a bit of small talk, they are shown to a small room with a flat-screen television embedded into one wall. The room’s other walls, each painted in deep, matted shades of blues and reds, display museum panels that briefly summarize the Center’s historic work of Yiddish book rescue, and its current institutional projects. Surrounded by these panels are three rows of comfortable, upholstered wood benches, the kind that a religious institution in a different context, might have used as pews.

After the visitors get situated, the docent starts *Bridge of Books*, the short video documentary of the Center’s history—the efforts of its charismatic founder, Aaron Lansky, to rescue the world’s Yiddish books before assimilated Jews, unable to grasp their value, or aging Yiddish organizations unable to survive as their membership bases eroded, could throw them away. “Books were our portable homeland,” Lansky passionately explains. “Books define our national identity. We call ourselves, ‘*Am ha’Sefer*’: the people of the book,” he continues as images of the Book Center’s building, Yiddish print-blocks, and pictures of old Yiddish books flash across the screen (Ball 2001).

The film addresses visitors as if they are hearing this story for the first time. But for many of them, the organization’s narrative is already a familiar one. Aaron Lansky’s *Outwitting History* won a National Jewish Book Award, and dramatically increased the Center’s popular exposure, and that of Yiddish more generally. Followed by a speaking tour that took Lansky to synagogues, Jewish community centers and cultural institutions the release of *Outwitting History* also accompanied the public launch of the organization’s eponymous “25th Anniversary Campaign.”² By the summer of

¹ The quote is usually relayed as, “Yiddish has magic, it will outwit history.”

² *Outwitting History* was published in October of 2004. In a December 2004 letter to members, Lansky writes: “Last month, I announced ‘Outwitting History,’ a historic \$25 million campaign in honor of our 25th Anniversary” (Lansky 2004b:2).

2006, the Center was already planning construction of a new building wing which, completed in 2009, provided new classrooms and offices, a performance hall and a state of the art, climate controlled book-storage facility.³

As revealed by the memoir's subtitle, Lansky's best-selling narrative starts not only with books, but also with numbers. From the vantage point of its readers, a decision actually to visit the institution represents an opportunity to see an abstract, numerical representation of Yiddish books take on material form. A range of desires and expectations are embedded in that transformation—from the number to the book object. The association of Yiddish with the Holocaust, the emotional discourse of “millions” in Jewish life, and the much analyzed desire of American Jews to reconcile their historical accounts with the Eastern European Jewish past, all potentially imbue a visit to the Center's collection. In addition, over the course of the organization's history, a number of these visitors would have sent their own books or, as more recently is the case, their parents' and grandparents' books to the Center. Thus we can begin to have a sense of the different ways that these particular numbers have become involved—intimately—in the social life of Yiddish.

Numbers and Economies of Affection

These connections, between numbers and affective realms of intimacy, desire and expectation, suggest an alternative ideological basis for the power of numbers within institutional discourse and practice, one that differs markedly from how scholars usually theorize them. Dominated by a focus on “dry” disciplines like demography and statistics, scholarship on numbers has emphasized ideological opposition between numerical ways of knowing and realms of emotion and sentiment. As Shaylih Muehlmann notes in her own critical examination of numerical authority

³ See, Lansky (2006:2). The plan for the building was first discussed in membership letters as a climate controlled library; over time, it became more ambitious in scope.

within the practices of NGOs in Northern Mexico's Colorado River Delta, the association of numbers with dispassion has underwritten their power throughout the history of western modernity: "The idea that numbers are universal, objective, and neutral mathematical truths that cannot differ cross-culturally," Muehlmann writes, "is a defining feature of our age" (2012:340, see also Urla 1993). In their analyses of a variety of social projects associated with "modernity" including, for example, population management, the commodification of natural and symbolic resources, state-led development projects, and language revitalization, the authority of numbers is closely linked by scholars with connotations of dispassion, objectivity, and neutrality.⁴

In discussions of endangered languages in particular, numerical knowledge has played an especially powerful role. Jane Hill, for example, has identified enumeration as one of the central organizing themes of the rhetoric of endangerment that surrounds projects of linguistic maintenance and revitalization. This appears in the discourses of professional linguists and heritage institutions like UNESCO, which continuously call, "for more accurate enumeration of languages and their speakers in order to plan more precisely for action..." (2002:127-128). Similarly, Jacqueline Urla's account of the use of statistics in the Basque language revival movement highlights how the perceived objectivity of numerical knowledge is constitutive of the powerful role statistics play in the production of both ethno-linguistic identity and its attendant cultural politics (1993).

But if this scholarship has connected the power of numbers to connotations of objectivity and empirical precision, it has less rigorously analyzed the affective dimensions of an equally

⁴ On numbers and numerical disciplines in relationship to governmentality and population management see: Hacking (1982), Foucault (1991), Deleuze and Guattari (1991), Inda (2006); and commodification see for example, Muehlmann (2012); On state development, and relatedly, state violence, see Gupta (2012); On language maintenance and revival see for example, Dobrin et. al. (2009), Hill (2002), Urla (1993), Moore et. al. (2010). The articles cited here that analyze the centrality of numerical discourse to the rhetoric of endangerment are especially relevant for the argument being developed; in particular, they bring out the connotations of scientific objectivity that give numbers their power, while also pointing to the passions and anxieties these discourses are intended to inspire.

prevalent and ideologically informed quality of numbers—specifically, the “thinness” with which numbers describe their objects. I draw on the notion of “thin description” here in contrast to Clifford Geertz’s famous discussion of ethnography as “thick description” (Geertz 1973). Where thick description aims to distinguish fine-grained differences among semiotic phenomena by embedding them in an historical and social analysis, numbers operate by abstracting and eliding those contextual differences so that elements may be enumerated.⁵ Numbers appear to transcend any particular context or perspective in part because of their thinness, and are thus treated as objective and universally valid mediums of description. But that very thinness also makes numbers powerful indices of a range of affective dispositions that are “deeper” or more “thickly layered” than numbers themselves—a sense of mission, a call to action, a feeling of belonging.⁶ In the Book Center’s numbers of Yiddish books, numbers hold out *something else*. First and foremost, a collected book; but beyond that, a bond with ancestors or the possibility that Yiddish, in written form, will be passed down to future generations.

The investigation of numerical thinness in particular should be seen as part of a broader concern among scholars with how thinness (sometimes real, sometimes imagined) seems increasingly to structure the experience of public culture within a mass-mediated world. As Ted Porter observes about the relationship between thinness and thickness in the social sciences: “thinness is, if not the natural state of things, an appealing modern project” (Porter 2012:212). For ethnographers, such projects can be especially vexing. As much as contemporary anthropologists are

⁵ For a discussion of whether Geertz himself pursued this vision of ethnographic research see, Roseberry (1982).

⁶ For a discussion of missions pursued at the intersection of numerical knowledge and book practice (in this author’s case, the publication and circulation of large numbers of bibles), see Engelke (2010). In an alternative approach from the focus on American non-profit institutions, a number of anthropologists have sought to challenge hegemonic Western assumptions about the essentially rationalizing nature of numerical knowledge by documenting and analyzing alternative numerical ontologies across culture. See for example, Urton (1997), D’Ambrosio (2006).

rightfully critical about the reifications of “authentic” otherness that can structure claims about the thinness of modern life, they have generally been committed to the project of thick description. These commitments are often clearest in ethnographies of public and mass-mediated culture, which are frequently critiqued because, as Walter Armbrust notes, “they tend to be ‘thin’” (Armbrust 2004:73)⁷ Determining how to approach thinness ethnographically can thus be its own methodological, analytical, and even ethical challenge. John Jackson’s recent book *Thin Description* (2013), for example, draws on ethnographic work with the African Hebrew Israelites of Jerusalem to highlight how claims about the thickness of ethnographic description can underwrite a sense of definitiveness to anthropological research in ways that foreclose other accounts. As the people and communities anthropologists study become increasingly adept at representing themselves to global publics, across a range of media forms, so too should anthropologists reconsider the authority often attributed to thickness, like the authority scholars in other disciplines might attribute to thinness. (Jackson 2013).

The Book Center’s numbers make visible the highly entangled and mutually constitutive relationships between the thin and thick qualities of numerical description, especially when considered against the backdrop of epistemological assumptions and debates about thinness and thickness described by scholars like Porter, Armbrust, Jackson and others. Since its founding in 1980, the organization has cultivated a national, primarily American Jewish public of members, volunteers, students, and of course, financial donors. Portions of that public have donated their own parents and grandparents Yiddish books; some have named the Book Center as a benefactor in their

⁷ The quality of thinness is central as well to Andrew Shryock’s observations, in the same volume, based on his analysis of the representational practices of ACCESS: “The undeniable ‘thinness’...” of the organization’s informational material, “is found in diverse media of multicultural display, and it is best understood, to use Andreas Glaeser’s term, as a ‘reduction’ that facilitates representation. Thus, in museum exhibits, what the ‘visitor’ can know about Arab American immigration history, work, politics, religion or family life must be garnered from less than three hundred words of explanatory text per topic, plus photo captions” (2004b:303-304).

wills; still others are invested in the Center's mission to train new generations of young students to read, write, speak and identify with Yiddish. Put differently, over the course of the Center's three-and-a-half decade history, it has not only collected books, it has also accrued a multiplicity of expectations, hopes, and affective attachments from its public. These people invested in the institution, its collection, and its famous mission of cultural rescue. When they visit the Center, then, they frequently come with different expectations about what a Center for Yiddish books is and what its responsibilities should be to the text artifacts it has collected—responsibilities that the Center, as it pursues different projects with Yiddish books, is not always able to fulfill. In this context, the value of numbers at the Center lies not with their capacity to precisely and objectively describe their object, but instead in their ability to encompass and facilitate the broad range of “thicker” or “deeper” desires that have endowed the Center's books.

The ethnography of numbers of Yiddish books within this American Jewish cultural institution offers an alternative ethnographic focus from the bureaucratic and biopolitical contexts in which numerical cultures are usually analyzed. But such an institutional context, I would suggest, highlights the affective dimensions of numerical power. In a pattern germane to American non-profit cultural institutions more generally, which increasingly depend on private donors, philanthropists and family foundations, the Yiddish Book Center banks, both literally and figuratively, on its ability to generate an emotional identification with the institution and its grand mission. The Center actively promotes affective attachment. The decline of the North American population of secular, native Yiddish speakers has meant that contemporary patrons of Yiddish institutions and cultural projects outside the Ultra-Orthodox world increasingly consist of people whose primary means of engaging with Yiddish are affective as opposed to communicative or literary. As Jeffery Shandler has observed about the Yiddish Book Center specifically, the scale of the Center's collection in comparison to its possible readers means that most people who confront

the Book Center's Yiddish books do so affectively; that is, "with the nose as much as the eye" (2006a:176).

For the organization to capitalize on these kinds of touching encounters, numbers play a critical role in mediating the relationship between what I call the economy of affection among the Center's public and the political economy of cultural production. That is, numbers mediate between the array of affectively laden transactions that circulate in relationship to Yiddish and financial deals that support cultural institutions like the Center. In the thinness of their description, numbers help facilitate and maintain a broad range of emotional possibilities and desires that inevitably represent resources for the organization. I refer to this as the "the magic" of Yiddish at the Book Center. It allows numbers to encompass a diversity of affective investments. Producing that magic, as I will show, has become an implicit, ongoing object of numerically-based culture work at the Book Center. After all, not everyone who visits the Book Center always sees, or is willing to see, the cultural values or future possibilities of so many numbers of Yiddish books. Some people just see large numbers of objects. Others come seeking particular values—for example, their actual grandparent's books—that may be hard to identify among so many text artifacts. Thin description at these moments can appear *too* thin—saturating books less with the "thickness" of emotion or the depth of their accessible content than with a cold, impersonal logic of financial calculation. As such, if Yiddish books are to be imaginatively saturated with the full range of values so many have invested in them, both the Center and its public must collaboratively partake in the interactional work of making thin description meaningful.

Clearly, this chapter's aim is not to provide an exhaustive analysis of numbers within the Book Center's history and contemporary context. Nor should thin description be understood as the only, or even primary project of the institution. The Center has pursued, and continues to pursue, a variety of educational, translation and cultural projects to educate its public about Yiddish language,

history and culture. But alongside these projects, the Center cannot forego its numbers of collected books. Those numbers remain critical to the passions of its Yiddish public.

Making Yiddish Books “Count”

From “National Yiddish Book Exchange” to “National Yiddish Book Center” to “Yiddish Book Center,” “the book” has stood at the literal and symbolic center of the institution’s identity. But, as I arrived at the YBC’s headquarters on a frigid 2011 winter morning to begin my fieldwork, the value of the collected objects that have been so central to the YBC’s fame, had become somewhat a matter of ambivalence. As I began reconnecting with employees I had met during the summer of 2010, I learned that the Center had over the course of years been shrinking the staff assigned to work with collected Yiddish books. At that time there was and as I write this chapter remains, a single librarian assisted by part time volunteers (often college students) responsible for all work conducted at the Center with Yiddish originals: unpacking boxes, sorting materials, preparing collected items for storage, and, more rarely, selling copies of books (each priced at a flat rate of \$8 for members and \$12 for non-members).

A number of different developments precipitated these shifts. By 2007, the Center had completed most of the large-scale, labor intensive transfer of its entire collection of Yiddish books out of its Holyoke Annex; by 2009, after the construction of the Center’s new wing, the feeling at the institution was that the collection was more or less at home—to quote one letter to members—where the books would, “be safe forever.”⁸ Secondly, the rate of book collection had gradually

⁸ Thus a December 2009 letter informs its public that the Center, “also opened the doors to the Kaplan Family Building and completed ‘The Great Shlepenish,’ the epic transfer of our core collection of books from the 19th-century mill building where they’d been stored for years to a secure, climate-controlled repository beneath our Amherst headquarters where they’ll be safe forever” (Lansky 2009:1). In fact, according to a letter sent nearly two years earlier, the transfer from Holyoke seems to have been completed by 2007 (Lansky 2007:1). The books that were transferred

slowed and, while no one could provide me with an exact date that new and unique titles stopped regularly appearing, I was informed that the vast majority of what the Center receives today are copies of items already in its possession. Thirdly, a number of staff admitted a general concern that, as the Center's own public aged, collected Yiddish books and thus the Center's own historic salvage mission would not spark the affective and thus the concomitant financial investment that it once did. And finally, like other institutions that traffic in paper books, once the Center managed to digitize its collection, it became much easier for those who could read them to download the titles they wanted—a service the center has thus far offered free of charge to individual users. Against this backdrop, the very artifacts, those priceless treasures, in and through which the Center had cultivated the investments of its large, volunteer public had become increasingly detached from the actual labor involved in transmitting the content “inside”—that is, from the labor of creating a “bridge of books” between the generations.

These were, of course, different circumstances from the early years of the institution. For most of the first two decades of the Center's existence, prior to the emergence of affordable book-digitization technologies, each Yiddish object salvaged was both a material link to the past and a material impetus for Yiddish to be studied and read in the future. For a donor, collector or volunteer sorting books at the Center, helping to parse through its collected materials simultaneously imbued each object with possible, readable futures. Even if the Book Center's staff and volunteers could not read the content of a given book, to run a hand over its cover, to recognize the passing of time in its smell, to marvel at handwritten notes in its margins, or struggle to make out its author's name, implicitly connected them to the possibility that someone else, an anonymous other, might actually *read* in the future from the very object imbued with the ancestors' tears.

to the Kaplan building in 2009 seem more likely to have come from the rented warehouse run by a separate company into which books were moved in 2007.

In its public discourse, the Center has not shied away from these changes. In fundraising letters, for example, the organization has over the last decade often described its collection work as having been completed; that it has, as one letter informs its members, “largely succeeded in our initial mission: Yiddish books are safe” (Lansky 2008:1). But at other moments, the YBC makes a point to emphasize that book collection continues alongside the Center’s others activities. “Yes, we still collect Yiddish books,” a museum panel in the video room described above reminds visitors. “We receive boxes, we deploy zamlers (volunteer collectors), and we’re always ready to race off at a moment’s notice whenever Yiddish books are in danger.” Similarly, as I spent more time at the Center, the individual volunteers I met helping to sort collected books, or the intermittent “volunteer weekends” and other similar one- to three-day events, seemed to project the message that there remained important work to do with Yiddish originals.

Understandably then, alongside efforts to diversify its projects, the Center still routinely validates the power of an experience with Yiddish books. To better understand how these experiences were actually produced, I sought out those directly involved in the transformation of personal collected objects into Yiddish treasures. That is, I sought out zamlers. The collection practices of zamlers represent key interactive contexts through which individually owned books are formally transformed into treasures of the Jewish people, and thus objects of Book Center stewardship. Thus, even as collection has faded in importance within the Center, zamlers offer an illustrative window into how the organization imbues books with value.

As a designation for the role of Book Center collector, the term zamler’s roots in the history of the YIVO Institute rhetorically links collection to a legacy of prewar Jewish cultural and linguistic salvage. For the Center’s zamlers and donors during collection trips, their personal, embodied participation within the context of Aaron Lansky’s institutional mission adds layers of individual investment into Yiddish, affectively “thickening” the grand, ethno-national narratives embodied in

their roles. As noted in chapter two, nearly every zamler I interviewed mentioned that their trips to collect Yiddish books generally accompany end of life periods for book owners and their families. This fact accords with (and sometimes echoes) Lansky's own accounts of book-salvage throughout the history of the Center, in which scenes of collection often transpire as people prepare themselves for their own passing, or the passing of their loved ones.

Even when giving books to zamlers lacks emotion, the interactive contingencies of collection itself tend to invest books with such potential. As described to me in interviews, the trips are often quite brief, lasting somewhere between fifteen minutes to an hour. The zamlers themselves, as I witnessed on collection trips and heard in interviews, rarely make it past the foyer of the generally suburban homes in which collection today most often occurs. Mirroring the social norms associated with the outer, more public realms of these homes, the brevity of these interactions means that zamlers may only scratch the surface of a story behind the books (or even determine if there is a story to tell at all). Given the real possibility of encountering people who have recently lost loved ones together with the Center's rhetoric that links book donation to end of life processes zamlers frequently spoke of preparing themselves to enter an emotionally charged situation. Alex, for example, a middle-aged doctor living within a suburb of a major American city imagines himself as a "superhero," swooping in quickly and efficiently with boxes and tape to safeguard precious Yiddish books, assuring his donors that their donations will be given "a good home." Others explicitly see "zamlering" as an opportunity to perform care for the elderly by caring for their material Yiddish things.⁹ Sarah, who was trained in gerontology, describes her personal

⁹ The term "zamler" comes from the Yiddish verb *zamlen*, or "to collect." By attaching the suffix "ing" to "zamler" (or, at other times, to the Yiddish verb's base *zamel*) Book Center volunteers modify the Yiddish word according to English rules of morphology. In that capacity, "zamlering" seems to iconize in its very linguistic form the ideology embodied in the practice itself—that collecting books on behalf of the Center can be performed regardless of a participant's level of Yiddish proficiency. To the extent that it was frequently the language of "zamlering" and

investment in zamlering as an extension of her work with families confronting end-of-life issues. “I can’t express enough my role as a caretaker for these donations, as a kind of safe transport,” she would tell me, reflecting on the difficulty families can experience as they determine how to part with the belongings of their loved ones.

Not all donors or zamlers are this passionate about Yiddish books or their owners. Another zamler, an active volunteer in his community, described his work on behalf of the Center as similar, “to any other volunteer job,” that he does. But when such zamlers go to collect books from donors, they cannot assume that the donor feels similarly detached—especially in light of the possibility that book donors may have recently lost loved ones. This is why, as Glen explained, echoing other zamlers I interviewed, “I always try to dress nicely,” as he represents the Book Center to people who may be in mourning. The reverse is also true: donors cannot assume that zamlers are not highly invested and passionate about Yiddish revitalization. And for both parties, generally meeting cities and states away from Amherst, neither knows for certain the precise value of what they are collecting in such terms as the rarity of a particular volume, its provenance, literary value and future uses, or its worth for the Center and the world of imagined others who need books. In other words, with the underlying possibility in mind that books might indeed be personally connected or useful to someone else, the investment of Yiddish books with value does not depend on the active, intense investment on behalf of each individual. Indeed, such an investment can unfold even out of an uncertainty about what to do with these objects now that a parent or grandparent no longer needs them or has passed away. As one donor explained to Sarah as we arrived at the donor’s suburban home to receive a small collection of vintage Yiddish records, she wasn’t entirely sure her mother owned the objects she sought to donate. She had discovered them amongst her mother’s things in

“zamlered” that the volunteers I interviewed used, I follow these linguistic practices in describing their experience.

the attic, while moving her into hospice. But her family had owned a Jewish retirement home, so perhaps when it had closed, the records had somehow ended up in a box of her mother's items. Yet, as the donor went on to explain, the records *could* have belonged to her mother, or *might* be valuable in some way to someone else.

With the value of books, the motivation for donation, or the possible futures of donations left so open in these interactions, the narrative and rhetoric of the Book Center itself helps to endow meaning. Indeed, zamlers are familiar with the Center's history and mission, and have generally read *Outwitting History*. Sarah, for example, got involved collecting books after attending a program at the Book Center in the 80s. She even met the charismatic Aaron Lansky in person. Thus, when zamlers come to a house, they come equipped not only with boxes and tape, but with the narratives and implicit meanings of what Yiddish books meant to the ancestors. Those narratives provide relatively stable meanings and roles, thereby providing context for what might otherwise be a meeting devoid of it.

If reifying the identity of each book as a treasure, though, is constitutive of this stability, the context the narrative implies leaves open and ambiguous the precise value that books might have to all of the proximate and distant others who are imagined as party to these exchanges. Thus as Aaron Lansky suggests about what might be recoverable through the salvage of Yiddish books: "they had so much to tell us" (Ball 2001). But who precisely "they" are and where and what the thing is about which they had so much to tell remains undefined. Do valuable stories belong to the books' donors or their authors? Was a book within the Center's collection valuable because it was *actually* held and read by the Yiddish speaking ancestors, or perhaps a book-donor's actual parents or grandparents? Or was it valuable as a catalyst for new readers? Perhaps books embodied another quality altogether? Mirroring the unanswered questions in zamler encounters about the history of books, these queries

are themselves unresolved in the institution's rhetoric; within the conceptual space of that openness, the visitor is allowed, even invited, to fill in answers.

If conditions of collection help produce that openness, they do so through the valuation of Yiddish books according to their numerical qualities. In interviews with zamlers, among vague memories of individual trips or observations about the decreased rate of collection over time, the iterative nature of book collection stood out, subsequently producing and reproducing the identity of each Yiddish book as a treasure. "I've been doing this for 20 years," Sarah told me, "and there have been so many other life changes that I've gone through, but collecting books has been something that's stayed the same."¹⁰ Or, as Walter explained, after a collection trip to the home of a recent widow who had decided to donate her husband's books: "I always make sure that every donor knows their books are important." He does this, he explained, regardless of the titles or condition of what they are actually donating.

Able to "count on" the value of each Yiddish book, counting itself can become an affectively laden act of Yiddish rescue. By adding them incrementally to the overall, numerically defined collection, zamlers participate in the work of "saving Yiddish." Thus Alex, another zamler, in an expression of his, "appreciation and love for the Yiddish language," literally keeps a count of the number of Yiddish text artifacts he collects on behalf of the Center: "I'm now approaching the milestone of reaching—of having zamlered—," he corrects himself, "1,000 books and 1,000 pounds of books. I'm probably in the 800 some odd pounds of books, and roughly eight some-odd-hundred books and magazines as well as a few sheets of music and some newsletters and things like that."

Counting and even weighing for Alex is hardly emotionless in its routine nature; rather, as Alex gives books, he also keeps numbers—that is, he literally measures his individual contribution to

¹⁰ To clarify, Sarah is speaking about the nature of individual collection visits; all zamlers noted that collection has become increasingly infrequent over time.

the Center's salvage project, and by extension the larger Jewish project of cultural and linguistic rescue. Not all zamlers keep such accounts; but neither is he the only one I met who does so. His accounts reveal the objects' quality of enumerability, which enables zamlers to invest themselves and others in the Center's work and its array of possible meanings. Like Walter, who makes sure his donors know that each book is of value, or Sarah, who endows her work of caring for elderly Jews and their families by caring for Yiddish books, the nearly interchangeable identities of books allows zamlers to invest themselves in the Book Center's work of transforming Yiddish from an object of inevitable decline into one that can be literally "passed on" across the generations.

As so many enumerable treasures, each one valuable regardless of its material condition, content, or provenance, we can thus also see within these rituals of collection a multiplicity of values, hopes and expectations which Yiddish books index for donors and zamlers. At the moment of collection, it is not always clear—even to donors and zamlers themselves—whether a book's value lies in its materiality or its content; rather they are valued at once as personally treasured material objects, sacred artifacts of the Jewish people, and carriers of potentially irreplaceable Yiddish content. The capacity of these artifacts to hold such an array of values emerges out of the social and material conditions of the collection process. The lack of familiarity that marks the encounter between zamlers and donors reinforces the perduring ambiguity about the precise reasons that an object is being donated and the explicit expectations about what will be preserved, passed down and inherited in the process. Like the Center's rhetoric, in which the exact meaning of "the Yiddish book" remains open for interpretation, so too must these collection missions leave open the precise reasons that Yiddish books are valuable. In the conceptual space of that openness, Yiddish books can become saturated with any number of different desires, possibilities, and expectations.

Thin Description and the End(s) of the Book

In spite of this multiplicity of investment, the very conditions of collection and the ultimate goals of the Center have, in fact, constrained what it is actually able to fully preserve in and through its Yiddish books. Despite, for example, the emotional investment of a zamler like Sarah, the Center's goal of collecting as much as possible as quickly as possible has not facilitated the preservation of historical connections between Yiddish books and their actual, previous contexts of use and ownership. The Center has not generally, for example, kept records of who donated which book, or (with few exceptions) kept, as an archive might, collections from particular donors intact.

Rather, from its earliest years the work of creating "a bridge of books" at the Book Center rested upon the alienability of Yiddish from the material things in which the language was materialized. "We were never as interested in the book object itself, as we were in its content," one staff member opined to me. Priority was ultimately placed on the animation of Yiddish within books. As the Center explains on its website: "We never envisioned the Yiddish Book Center as a *genizah*, a static storehouse for old books. Rather, our goal from the outset was to place old volumes into the hands of new readers. We've drawn on our vast duplicate holdings to distribute books to students and scholars and to establish or strengthen collections at more than 600 research libraries in twenty-six countries" (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(f)). These processes naturally entail the redistribution and recirculation of Yiddish books, goals that have inevitably made preserving records or even the material indices of actual collections difficult.

Nowhere in the history of the Book Center is the prioritization of content over the material qualities of Yiddish books clearer than in the institution's initial efforts to digitize its collection of individual titles. In 1997, after years of collecting vintage books and sending collections of duplicates to university and national libraries, the Center drew on funds raised from the Righteous Persons Foundation and other private donors, to establish the "Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library." The initial funding was slated to cover the cost of digitizing around 12,000 of the Center's roughly

15,000 unique titles. However, because the YBC began digitization when the technology was generally more expensive and less advanced, the company to which the Center outsourced its work, the Pitney Bowes Management Services Company, had to split each volume down its spine in order to feed the individual pages through the scanner. (The Center only digitized books for which it had copies and has since adopted digitization methods that do not require book disarticulation at all). As former Book Center vice-president Nancy Sherman was quoted in a *USA Today* article about the initial scanning project: “We had to destroy the books in order to save them forever.” ... She said, “We've realized that our mission wasn't just about collecting books. It's about preserving them” (Associated Press 2002).

Understandably, efforts by the Book Center to preserve Yiddish by recirculating and even dematerializing artifactual Yiddish books has not quelled the desires among the institution's public for the materiality of the Yiddish original. Frequently, at the Book Center, while conducting ethnography, or striking up conversations with visitors about what they valued about the institution, I would end up hearing Lansky's narratives of book collection expressed back to me. “Nobody wanted this stuff,” one older Book Center donor and Yiddish enthusiast explained, incredulous that assimilated American Jews failed to recognize the value of Yiddish books, “Aaron went down in the rain, to dumpsters, to save them! Can you believe it?!” “My favorite part,” explained another woman, “was the ‘designated eater,’” referring to the rotating individual among Lansky's young friends assigned to eat the large portions of food which Lansky recalls being fed in the kitchens of immigrant-generation Jews during his collection trips. Another interviewee describes having been at the “famous incident” in which Aaron and his friends picked books out of a New York City dumpster that, as this interviewee reflected, “Aaron uses in every fundraising letter.”

This last interviewee is right. These stories are, in fact, famous. The stories of book rescue have become, for many American Jews, part and parcel of the story of Yiddish. They are shared

scripts that the Book Center's public—most of whom are non-Yiddish speaking or reading American Jews—tell themselves and each other about the language. Thus, even as the Center ultimately decided to, “destroy the books in order to save them forever,” for many individuals who ritualize, tell and retell the story of the Center, the magic of Yiddish—its ability to outwit history—still cleaves to the paper book and its material contingencies: the adventure story of young, passionate Jews who travel by moving van to post-industrial urban areas to salvage the Yiddish past at the last minute; the physical work of boxing, moving and storing Yiddish books; the kitchens of elderly Jews; the ancestors' tears absorbed into acid-yellow, paper pages.

When I encountered visitors at the Center, I often met people in search of both the actual books the Center had salvaged and the deeper values the books were assumed to index through their materiality. They sought evidence of a book's past, its intimate histories, or the possibility that one's donated book would be read in the future. But, particularly in light of the Center's material practices of book collection and processing, I soon learned that a desire for these “deeper” phenomena could only be met through thin description—the treatment of Yiddish books as *so many* interchangeable objects. The following interaction, drawn from my fieldnotes, characterizes just how instrumental thin description is to cultivating these desires:

“You know I've never been here before.” A middle-aged visitor tells Mark. Mark is preparing to lead a tour. It's springtime, and also Hampshire College's admitted-students day, so the Center is starting to receive more visitors after a long, slow winter. “We're up here for a wedding, but my father has been a member for a long time. He donated 4,000 books here you know.” Mark and I raise our eyebrows, impressed. Only a few months ago, we had helped move roughly 1,200 books from the house of a Yiddish writer in the Bronx. We thus had a sense of what is involved in that kind of transport. “Hold on,” he said, reaching into a pocket for his cell phone, “that's actually him. Hello? Hi dad, mhm, ok.”

The visitor looks over to Mark. “He wants to know how his books are doing.” Mark looks back at the visitor, searching for the right thing to say. “He says he wants to talk to someone who can check on them,” the visitor continues, handing the phone to Mark before either of us can give an answer. I search the visitor’s face for some sign of irony: a wink, a wry smile, a nod of understanding about the unreasonableness of his father’s request. Nothing.

“Hello?” asks Mark into the cell phone. The family and I watch. “Hello?” he asks again, “are you there?” he turns back to the visitor apologetically, “I think the signal got cut off,” he explains, handing the phone back. Mark steps back, relieved, to start the tour.

At drinks later in a local Amherst bar, I asked Mark about the incident: “that was terrifying,” he said, laughing into his beer at the prospect of embarrassment on his part and the potential disappointment on the part of the guest, at having to inform them that his family’s actual books were unaccounted for. “It must have been an act of God,” he continued with an ironic laugh, “that the call was dropped.”

Mark hyperbolically describes his potential for discomfort as “terrifying;” but, leading such tours, he generally has little to fear. Most of the time, in fact, his tours meet praise and astonishment at what the institution has accomplished. If this particular exchange threatened to break down into disappointment or awkwardness, it is because Mark is rarely asked to give such a *thick* account of the histories of particular Yiddish books—the exact places from which they came, where they might be found in the Center, where they might have been distributed, and who may or may not be reading them. That visitor, unlike other visitors, had not yet learned to see, within the thousands of Yiddish books before him, those of his father.

As I spent more time at the Book Center, walking with visitors as they wandered between shelves of vintage books, I saw how other individuals, unlike Mark’s visitor, seemed more comfortable with, and even embraced a valuation of, Yiddish books according to their identities as

interchangeable objects. These visitors accepted the collection's "thin description." As they browsed through the rows of industrial metal shelving units that line the Center's main floor, they often searched for signs of previous affective connection, like those described in Book Center media: hand written inscriptions, dedications, book plates and ephemera tucked into the pages of Yiddish books. The pleasure of discovery, as I learned through interviews with Book Center staff, eventually motivated a decision to leave pieces of ephemera in books for visitors or buyers to discover. Of particular value are experiences of personal "connection": a found book stamped with the seal from a visitor's hometown public library, a copy of a title one remembers from a father's or grandfather's shelf, a book published in the same Eastern European city from which one's relatives escaped. In these ways, precisely because any book can potentially enclose a personal, emotionally valuable sign of connection, each book can potentially be "one's own."

Similar relationships adhere in the dedication of shelves. As Morgan, a staff member, explained to me, the possibility of seeing one's dedicated shelf has often motivated people to visit the Center and possibly contribute further to it. "Of course," she jokingly remarked to me in a low voice, putting an outward-facing open palm next to her mouth as we walked through the Center's main floor, "everything but the light switches here have a name on them!" But experiences at shelves in particular, she went on to emphasize, can be "very emotional for people." Another staff member, Allison, describes how she cried when she walked into the Center to interview for a position and saw the name of her grandfather inscribed on a shelf. "Lots of people cry when they see it [their shelf] for the first time," she told me, echoing Morgan's sentiments. But, "after almost a decade working here," she admitted, "the impact is lost on me." In fact, she sometimes finds herself surprised at her own sense of surprise, when she sees others cry at their shelves, knowing that she once had the same response. What books fill up a dedicated shelf does not generally matter in these affectively loaded rituals of visitation. With books able to function as substitutes for other books,

the potential of a single book to index a rich, emotionally laden history of use is distributed to each element, each “unit,” on a shelf. As one tearful, middle-aged visitor nostalgically expressed at the sight of her shelf: “This is as close as I’m going to get to my grandmother’s shtetl.”



Figure 7. Yiddish books on display.

These rituals of visitation clearly convey the degree to which the production of emotional connection depends upon the thin description of Yiddish books. As one couple from New York explained to me as they conducted genealogical research on the Book Center’s lone public computer, positioned amidst stacks of artifactual Yiddish books: “Sure, we could have done this from home, but for us it’s a kind of pilgrimage. My father,” continued the older gentleman of the couple, “came over from Ukraine, and donated his Yiddish books here, *so I like to think that they are around me while we’re here*” (my emphasis).

This gentleman’s comments capture perfectly the attitude toward books that Mark’s visitor missed while roaming through the stacks. One must “like to think” that the meanings of one’s own,

particular books can be seen within so many interchangeable objects. As his words reveal, the visitor knows full well that the books in the stacks are likely not his father's actual books. The material objects in front of him, rather, are materialization of numerical scale—of the numbers of Yiddish books that the Center has collected—into which he must be willing to see his father's actual contribution. That is his role within the production of the Book Center's magic.

For a non-profit organization that depends on volunteerism by a number of individuals, facilitating that magic is a critical part of institutional labor. The desire by a visitor or volunteer to participate in the institution's activities, or to be inspired by them—however small or atomized—is always potentially bound up in the larger political economy of non-profit cultural production. Donation of a parent's book today can lead tomorrow to membership. As Morgan was well aware, a decision to be a member, dedicate a shelf or participate in a program can eventually produce a larger financial donation down the line. Cultivating and transforming what might begin as a single, emotional experience at the Center into more extensive, emergent chains of exchange forms the lifeblood of cultural organizations like the Yiddish Book Center.

At the Center, the relationship of Yiddish books to this broader network of exchange most clearly appears in the institution's material practices of circulating the identificatory information associated with a book donation. As boxes are opened and books are integrated into the Center's numerically defined collection, the donor's name, address, and other identifying information is recorded and checked against the Center's membership database to determine if the donor is already a paying member. If the donor is not, his or her information is entered into the database, and the form letter acknowledging the gift includes a pitch for membership and additional informational material, thereby formally integrating the act of book donation into a broader fundraising apparatus.

In contrast, judging from interviews and participation in book sorting practices, the Center rarely maintains association of donors with their book donations. In some cases, such as when

books are mailed in anonymously, there are simply no relationships to track. But even when markers of a donation's previous contexts of use accompany donations, a good deal of variation exists in how those materials are handled. When letters accompany donations, it was explained to me, the staff read them to determine anything "notable" about the donation so that the form letters sent back to donors can be, "a little more personal." From that point on, what happens to the actual, mailed letters seemed to depend on the staff member or volunteer doing the "processing." One individual explained that she has, "tried to keep the letters [with the books] when they come with them," to preserve "their context." But another, in a point reiterated by people I spoke with, explained that the Center does not usually keep the letters at all because, as she rhetorically emphasized, "you don't keep your old birthday cards either, right?" The exceptions to this latter interpretation of Center policy, in 2011, rested in three manila envelopes dug out of a file drawer upon my request, containing roughly 150 letters spanning three decades that were kept because, they seemed interesting (though when I asked why they seemed remarkable, staff who understandably do not regularly consult these letters, could not produce criteria).

Given the value of intimate connections to books together with the Center's inability to document those connections, it is not surprising that the institution also implicitly encourages the apprehension and appreciation of books for their thin, numerical identities. Not far from where I met the woman confronting her grandmother's shtetl, visitors can read an information panel that explains that the books on display are just a small fraction of larger numbers, "less than five percent," according to the panel, of volumes salvaged by the Center since 1980. "Several hundred thousand more," the panel continues, "have already been integrated into the permanent collections of 500 major university and research libraries around the world." Those books that are not among the "5%" on the main floor, or those in university or research libraries, are divided between two cold storage facilities: the Lief D. Rosenblatt Library, an on-site facility open to the Center's visitors,

and a rented, off-site cold-storage facility located within driving distance of the Center and inaccessible to visitors. Because the storage company arranges to pick up the books—stored in stacked cardboard boxes and loaded onto pallets—most staff have never visited the facility.

Throughout the Center’s history, books have naturally traveled among these different sites. This plays havoc with various attempts to categorize the collection in particular ways beyond its identity as an assemblage of interchangeable objects. Thus even the most minimal of classificatory systems can be upset by the interchangeability of books. For example, those books that are on display at the Center, on the main floor and in the Rosenblatt Library, are organized alphabetically according to author’s last name. With some exceptions, there are no sections for books on particular topics or even more general divisions such as “fiction” and “non-fiction.” Instead, when I was conducting fieldwork in 2010 and 2011, and at the time of writing this chapter, a series of large, elegantly printed block Hebrew letters adorned shelves on the first floor, to mark which authors’ names could be found on those rows of shelves. However, as books are reorganized, sold or donated, the actual books on any given shelf and even the shelving units themselves have to be reorganized and relocated. In the summer of 2010, for example, when the Center decided to set up an exhibit space on the main floor, the Yiddish books and their shelves had to be cleared away. This also had the effect, of course, of reorganizing the books and shelves that remained. Such efforts at reorganizing the institution’s physical space have made it so that the Hebrew letters that marked the shelves could no longer be depended upon to correspond to the books actually found there.

This pattern holds true with a variety of other metacultural designations of value on display at the Center. For example, during the summer of 2011, the Center installed a series of informational panels and small exhibits throughout its first floor stacks. These panels, named the “Unquiet Pages” exhibit, were placed alongside and between the shelves of collected, artifactual Yiddish books. Each panel discussed some element of Yiddish literature, history, or culture. One panel was on Soviet

Yiddish, another on Women Poets and Writers, and so forth. But like the visitor who sees his own family's books while visiting his shelf, the books by women writers, from the former Soviet Union, or otherwise, have to be imagined into the collection. The books actually on display adjacent to or underneath these panels do not correspond to these categories.



Figure 8. Shipping boxed books to storage.

Even the numerical descriptions themselves, expressing the proportion of books that can be found (or imagined to be found) in different areas of the Center's holdings "strain" to describe the objects to which they refer. Because, as one panel explains, "[t]here's no way to know," how many more books the Center will collect, it follows that it is in fact impossible to confirm whether the 5% of books on the main floor are *actually* 5% of the total collection. In a similar vein, the actual number of books collected tends to vary across the literature and rhetoric of the Center; at certain moments,

the numbers of books collected are set at “1.5 million,” at others, “over a million,” and still others “countless.”

Paralleling the lack of correspondence between books and their alphabetical markers, or books and the categories described in the Unquiet Pages exhibit, the accuracy of these reported numbers hardly matters. Under or “behind” these metacultural distinctions, the majority of Yiddish books at the Center circulate between different locations of storage. To be sure, the Center’s lone librarian knows where to find most titles among those available on site (particularly those most frequently requested), and the Center has maintained a limited number of special collections (such as its “David and Sylvia Steiner Yizkor Book Collection”). However, the more general movement of books through the Center’s facilities mirrors the way in which most visitors will approach Yiddish books—first and foremost according to their identity as materializations of the Center’s numbers.

In this sense, the difficulty of ensuring that a given category corresponds to paper book-objects can be understood as an artifact of institutional accommodation to the variety of values that people imagine into Yiddish books. That artifact represents not the absence of a system of categorization of its collection, but rather an informal manner of valuation that exists in tension and alongside other efforts by the institution to impose meaningful order. Thus on tours of the Center which I attended in 2011, tour guides routinely promoted an openness about how books should be categorized, handled and valued by refusing to reduce the Center to any particular kind of book-related institution. “So what is this place,” tour guides would routinely ask, “it’s not a library, or a museum, or an archive, or a school... but it has components of all of these.” The Book Center does not limit itself to modes of engagement with books that would typify these institutions; it understands that some visitors will expect a museum, others an archive, and still others a school. It is not by organizing books strictly according to the norms of any of these institutions that the Center has best been able to encompass the range of values and expectations that its public maintains; it

achieves that end by the collection's thin description in which its collected artifacts are apprehended as "Yiddish Books"—one million, over a million, or "countless" in number.

The Magic of Yiddish and the Future of Depth at the Book Center

"This month we'd like to tell you about a number of new projects in the works, a number of exciting programs, and an inspiring set of numbers. Let's start with the big ones: as you probably know, we've collected well **over a million Yiddish books** in the 30 years since Aaron Lansky began this effort. What's more, we posted our first Yiddish books online in 2009, and so far they've been **downloaded a quarter million times!** Right now, we're collaborating with the Jewish Public Library of Montreal to digitize **1,000 hours of audio books** and **1,500 reel-to-reel recordings** of interviews with major Yiddish writers, and we're in the process of scanning another **4,500 Yiddish books**. More than **900 people** have signed up for our popular online language-learning series, a Shmek Yiddish, at least **77** have enrolled in our Jewish Metropolis online course which begins next week, and we'll soon welcome nearly **80 scholars** for a working conference on Translating Yiddish Literature."¹¹

As I have sought ethnographically to illustrate in this chapter, when people visit the Center's Yiddish books, they come looking for a variety of forms of value that are "deep" or "thick" in nature. Some seek out the depth of an emotional connection to ancestors; others desire a materialization of the memory of an actual parent or grandparent; still others value an act of witnessing a Jewish language in the process of revival. Given the voluntary nature of participation with the Book Center, it benefits from encouraging and honoring the broad range of expectation and values that people might invest in Yiddish books. At the same time, though, not all engagements with Yiddish books are always understood by the Center's public as of equal value, or equally likely to emerge from so many numbers of collected Yiddish originals. Understandably then, even visitors who themselves engage nostalgically or emotionally with Yiddish books still often expect the Center

¹¹ An e-mail update from the Yiddish Book Center. See, Silnutzer (2011, bold in the original)

to facilitate “deeper” encounters with Yiddish—encounters able to move beyond the “thin” surface of the book-as-number toward the acquisition of its actual content.

In these exchanges, the production of value—the magic of Yiddish at the Book Center—can often be a matter of “playing the numbers.” Walking through the Center with one middle-aged man, carrying a single copy of his recently deceased father’s Yiddish book, I could sense his discomfort about the numbers of books that surrounded him. “There are so many copies,” he exclaimed, as his eyes ran over the shelves before him, taking account of the probability that his father’s book would have a readable future amidst the crush of volumes. When, at the end of his visit, I asked if he wanted to donate his book, he balked, seeming to reconsider the odds that his father’s book would be read: “Maybe I’ll just hold onto it,” he replied.

Especially after the Center digitized its titles, the odds of a donated, artifactual Yiddish book being read can appear even more unfavorable than in the Center’s earlier years. In this context, the institution has sought, in a sense, to balance its semiotic accounts—to produce possibilities of literacy and education on other fronts and through alternative mediums. In 2011, for example, Aaron Lansky published a series of mission statements for the Center in subsequent issues of the *Paken Treger* declaring a shift in mission and detailing a broader expansion of the institution’s priorities to encompass cultural education, language learning, and translation (Lansky 2011a, 2011b). To be sure, this is hardly the first time the Center has sought to emphasize that education in and about Yiddish is its ultimate goal.¹² But since 2010, the Center has been especially decisive and unequivocal about its new direction. “Saving a million Yiddish books was just the beginning,” the

¹² It is difficult to put an exact date on when this transition took place, or even if it was a transition at all. Indeed, from the Center’s first years, the organization consistently emphasized to its membership that books were conduits for other values that would develop in and through its collection work. I discuss this matter further in the next chapter.

Center’s mission reads on its website. “Our priority now is to advance knowledge of the content and literary and cultural progeny of the books we’ve saved” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(k)). As the above e-mail update suggests, one should, “start with the big ones,” but today, the Center seeks to invest its public in new numbers as well—numbers of downloads, of audio material being digitized, and of eager participants traveling to Amherst to attend conferences.

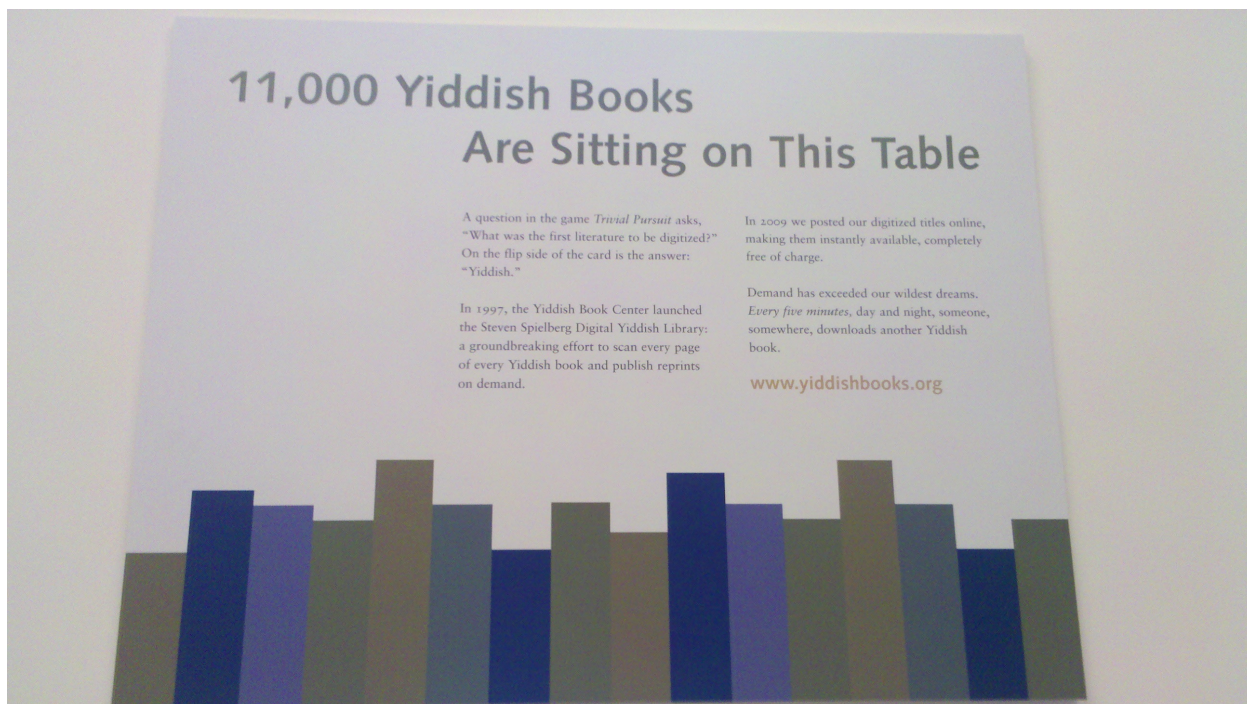


Figure 9. Some of the Yiddish Book Center’s “new numbers.”

For an institution that has captured the imagination of its public by iteratively and collaboratively producing a broad range of valuable possibilities through the thin description of emotionally saturated Yiddish books, these developments raise important challenges to how Jewish culture is produced at the Yiddish Book Center. On the one hand, with the ability to create endless digital copies, the kinds of values that Yiddish originals index can seem increasingly circumscribed. Beloved originals become collectable objects for emotional, sentimental, and nostalgic identification

while the possibilities of being read in the future seem increasingly remote. But, on the other hand, downloads and educational programs do not offer possibilities of rescue, witnessing and display, mourning and emotional investment in the way so many collected, artifactual Yiddish books have. The effects of these shifts on the affective economy of the Book Center remain, at this point, in process: how (and indeed, whether) the Center and its public will maintain the affective power of its Yiddish originals, or whether it will successfully and sustainably produce emotional investments in its new initiatives remain open questions at the Yiddish Book Center.

During my own period of ethnographic research at the Center, these shifts in affective economy appeared in the difficulty that staff sometimes had explaining to visitors why it keeps so many copies that seem increasingly unlikely to be read. This was brought home to me one afternoon as I, together with a Book Center staff member, accompanied a Jewish day school teacher and his students on a tour. As his students roamed through the Center's Lief D. Rosenblatt cold storage facility, looking over the copies of alphabetized Yiddish books, taking them off and putting them back on shelves, and trying to sound out their titles, their teacher skeptically engaged the staff member.

"To a certain extent, I'm not sure I see the point," the schoolteacher told us, as his students excitedly wandered through the climate controlled room. "Now that the books have been digitized, why do you need so many extra copies? And they are growing old and decaying anyway. I just don't see the reason for keeping so many extra books."

"Well," the Book Center employee contested, "you simply don't know what people will want in the future."

"Do you think they should be thrown away?" I asked, "what about the cultural associations of Jews with books?"

“Well, but then the only reason to keep them is because we want to avoid something. And we do throw books away, we throw holy books away, we bury them. If you think about it,” he went on, “packing lots of books into cold storage is a lot like burial.”

The visitor sees only “so many copies,” I would argue, because he divests himself of his role within the collaborative relationships that create the “magic of Yiddish” at the Book Center. The Center employee, who reminds him that, “you simply don’t know what people will want in the future,” does not so much provide him with an answer than encourage him to endow the objects in front of him with readable and hence valuable futures. The lack of recognition on his part of this potential, “now that the books have been digitized,” is especially striking in light of the awe, fascination and wonder of his own middle-school-aged students in the face of so many Jewish things. Even with this spectacle before them, their teacher sees only so many numbers of Yiddish books without a sense of potential that they might be valuable to others—*even the very students he’s brought to see the Center’s collection*. Overwhelmed by the numbers of books, and thus what he sees as an impossibility of their future readability, he is unable or unwilling collaboratively to invest them, along with the Book Center’s staff member and myself, with their potential value. He does not care about numbers.

Feeling Yiddish Magic

Like stage magic, as Andrew Shryock observes about non-profit culture work, the staging of public cultural displays depends on the obfuscation and concealment of their process of production (Shryock 2004b:285-286). If made public, those backstage zones of intimate culture work threaten to expose the fact that the products themselves are not transparent representations of the real but instead self-conscious “manipulations” by interested experts—experts who, especially in non-profit settings, must always take account not only of reality, but also of interested donors. It is the intimate

zone of culture work, I would suggest, that the schoolteacher's moral account about the lack of value embodied in so many interchangeable Yiddish books, housed and displayed within a state of the art cold storage facility that surrounds them, threatens to put on display.

Indeed, this critique, at times, rose to the surface. Standing on the loading dock I, together with Eli, a former Steiner intern who had travelled to Amherst for a conference, prepared to help a middle aged woman and her elderly mother unpack a donation of Yiddish books from her car. As they handed us their books we listened attentively to the stories of the older woman's husband who owned them, and his passion for the Yiddish language. Eli, at one point, stopped to admire the cover of one of the books the younger of the two handed him, noting what excellent condition it was in. "Come on," the older woman replied, her frank tone altering the interactive frame of our conversation, "I know what the Center would *really* like, is my money." By asking her to participate in the consecration of the inherent value of Yiddish books, we were in her eyes asking her to cross over into the realm of the unreal, of the magical. Perhaps she's critical by nature, or maybe she simply lacked energy for the enchanted footing on which she felt our interaction was keyed. But whatever the motivation of her comments, their edge lies in their capacity to strip away inherent value from books, if only manifested in their smell, thus revealing instead the cold calculation of financial interest.¹³

¹³ The language of "stripping away" seems a particularly apt way of capturing the performative effects of the visitor's critique. The frank, collusive tone of her discourse, which figuratively 'cuts through' the affectively laden grounds of our conversation, also denies the possibility that any quality inherent in salvaged paper books could underwrite their inherent value. Like Marx's critique of the fetish, the logic of which is built on a moral (and Eurocentric) prohibition against attributing inalienable value to things (value ideologically reserved for people), this visitor's discourse functions according to what Latour calls the "purification" between subjects and objects (1993). Her appeal instead to money is illustrative of this purification; money, as Keane (2010) observes in a critical examination of this ideology, is "no object." Rather, within the culture of capitalism, it is a purely abstract, symbolic representation of value. Just as one should scorn loving engagements with interchangeable units of money, the visitor suggests, so too does her discourse imply a parallel hermeneutics of skepticism about the inherent value of loving books.

“He’s selling a feeling!” Sarah explained to me about Aaron Lansky, as we ate lunch at her favorite suburban kosher Chinese restaurant after completing our zamerling pick-up. “That’s really what the Book Center does, it sells a feeling. There are a lot of smoke and mirrors going on—but it’s legitimate! People get a sense of what is going on at the Book Center and they just *want* it, they want to *eat* it they want to *consume* it!” As facilitators of those feelings, I would suggest, volunteers like Sarah *do* feel for so many numbers of Yiddish books—they care. And arguably, they *must* care. For a non-profit like the Yiddish Book Center, which relies on volunteer giving among a national, non-local base of members and private donors, cultivating a broad range of desires, values and expectations, and channeling them into an investment in the institution represents an important component of its work—including its ability to fund programs designed to teach students the linguistic competencies necessary to (among other things) read Yiddish books. Thus even if people like the visiting school teacher do not “see the point” of collecting, storing and displaying so many Yiddish books, the Center must also think about those other—like donors, zamlers, visitors, and even the teacher’s own students—who do. Numbers, in the thinness of their description, constitute a central medium for harnessing these feelings. They are part and parcel of the particular bridge the center seeks to build between the generations, and thus, it hopes, to “outwit history.”

Chapter 4.

“A Huge Yiddish Family!”: Homemaking, Abstraction and the Energy of Youth at the Yiddish Book Center.

...Yiddish had finally found a home.”¹



Figure 10. Looking down onto the stacks.

¹ Aaron Lansky. From *Bridge of Books*. See, Ball (2001).

“Hey Josh!” I turn around in the Atkins market, a locally owned Amherst grocery where many of the Yiddish Book Center’s summer students buy lunch during their break between classes. Evan, a program participant, stands behind me in line. “I’ve been looking for you,” he tells me, “I have something ethnographic for you. Earlier today, I was walking through the stacks, and I realized: I feel like a book on a shelf!” After his Yiddish language class, he explained, he had been wandering through the institution’s main floor: the large, open room at the center of which stands rowed metal shelving units of collected Yiddish books. There he found himself the object of the Center’s visitors’ gaze—a cohort that consists primarily of middle aged and elderly American Jews. Evan is in the early years of college. He has yet to decide upon a major, and as of now, he reads Yiddish only at a beginner’s level. Yet regardless of his own conception of self, within the fleeting exchange of intergenerational glances, he finds himself shot through, like the books that surround him, with Yiddish.

As a window into the symbolic and material conditions of youthfulness at the Yiddish Book Center, Evan was right: his observations are indeed ethnographically illuminating. Particularly as the Center’s work of book salvage has declined, young people like Evan have become increasingly central to the institution’s transformations of donor wealth into a future for Yiddish. Just as the Center originally sought to endow books with readable futures, ideally by young college and graduate students, Evan’s comparison of his self to a Yiddish book renders his own undetermined future in Yiddish terms. In the brief flash of glances he exchanges with his silent, older interlocutors standing on the balcony above him, Evan becomes a Yiddish possibility. What he has to offer those visitors in that moment, I will argue, is his youthful energy for Yiddish. Through these exchanges the Center and its young program participants offer the possibility that the Center’s public’s *generous gifts* (to use the parlance of philanthropy) will portend a Yiddish, and also American Jewish, future.

The dynamic and creative reengagement in anthropology with exchange theory, and particularly the work of Marcel Mauss, has spurred renewed attention by ethnographers to gift-based forms of exchange like the ones described above (Mauss 1990). In particular, anthropologists have challenged Mauss's classic distinction between market-based exchange and the gift economy (Weiner 1992, Appadurai 1986, Graeber 2001). The boundaries between the two, scholars have shown, are not so clear. Throughout an object's social life (say, that of a Yiddish book or an objectified Yiddish student) it may undergo transformations from being a commodity, a gift or a resource (Appadurai 1986). Moreover, where Mauss saw the gift economy as structuring "archaic" societies, scholars today have detailed the array of "modern," institutional contexts (Simpson 2004, Kravel-Tovi 2014, Foster 2008, Adloff 2006) in which exchange relationships help constitute socio-institutional relationships. Kravel-Tovi (2014), for example, has shown how state-organized conversion in Israel mutually constitutes the Jewishness of the state and the Jewishness of the convert through an array of exchanged documents, experiences, and performances that are enacted across the field of Jewish conversion. Kravel-Tovi theorizes these exchanges as the giving and receiving of "bureaucratic gifts," going on to show the central role they play in constituting conversion in Israel not only as a process of change, but also of exchange (2014). The exchange of bureaucratic gifts thus structures Israel's state-based biopolitical project of conversion. David Graeber has elsewhere productively reframed the distinction between gift economies and market economies by describing more "open" and "closed" forms of exchange that cut across both realms (Graeber 2001). Theoretical tools like Kravel-Tovi's "bureaucratic gifts," or Soumhya Venkatesan's (2011) notion of "inalienable commodities," (to describe the intersubjective relationship between craft-makers and consumers in India that render commodities not wholly inalienable from their producers) reflect in their language the broader effort to deconstruct the classic binaries entailed in Mauss's original meditations on the gift.

A number of theoretical debates have emerged from these scholarly engagements—for example the possibility of a “free gift” and such a gift’s concomitant ethical dimensions (Venkatesan 2011, and see also Derrida 1994) or the question of its alienability (Weiner 1992, Graeber 2001, Gregory 1980). To engage all these questions is beyond the scope of this chapter. I do not focus here, for example, on the hierarchical relationships between those who partake in the making and exchange of youthful energy. Instead, I focus on the question of how institutionally mediated projects are in part constituted through the giving, receiving and reciprocation of gifts. In Kravel-Tovi’s work, for the state to successfully mediate conversion as a biopolitical project, both the bureaucratic agents of the Israeli State and converts require each other for their own Jewish identities. The latter need the former in order to receive an authorized Jewish identity. But the conversion agents, too, require the appropriate performances by the converts in order for the Jewish state to function as an authoritative arbiter of Jewishness. In the case of the Yiddish Book Center, the project of mediating intergenerational inheritance, that is, of transforming the philanthropic donations of its public into Yiddish cultural value depends upon mutual relationships of reciprocity between a primarily older public of largely Jewish donors and the young students who attend its programs. All parties to these exchanges that transform the philanthropic donations of the Center’s public into Yiddish cultural value require the others. The younger students need the financial resources of the older donors to produce the material and social contingencies of Yiddish studies. The donors, for their part, require the energies of young, devoted Yiddish students in order to transform their wealth into a future for Yiddish. And the Center, if it is to remain a mediator of intergenerational gifts (as opposed to a “static storehouse” for Jewish books), needs both the youthful energy of young students and the donations of older generations of donors who trust it to ensure that their funds are directed in desirable Yiddish, and American Jews, directions (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(f)).

To describe these relationships of exchange ethnographically, this chapter focuses on the Center's metacultural work (Urban 2001) to cultivate, objectify, and ultimately circulate the energy of its young students to the institution's wider public. By focusing primarily on the Center's Steiner Summer Program, I describe and analyze the role that the practice of intimacy by students and the Center plays in the cultivation of youthful energy. Specifically, I depict the "affective labor" performed by both Center staff and by students to foster an episodic youthful context. In this 'Yiddish home' intimacy directed between peers and to the symbolic object of Yiddish can be cultivated.² I then extend the analysis of this description from the previous chapter to the form of these exchanges. I emphasize the importance of the brevity of these exchanges, iconized in the flash of glances detailed above, to the successful objectification and circulation of youthful energy within Center rhetoric and representational practice. Through these practices of homemaking and objectification, I argue, the Center works to foster intergenerational relationships of inheritance.

According to the concept of abstract kinship theorized in the introduction, these relationships do not exist between any embodied, individual "owner" and individual "inheritor" of Yiddish. Instead, the "displacement" (Shryock 2004a) of these relationships into abstract categories of "giver" and "receiver" enables the exchange of these intergenerational gifts. These gifts of

² Broadly conceived, affective labor has been theorized as labor intended to induce or alter the emotional and affective experiences of subjects. See for example, Hardt (1999). Anthropologists have analyzed affective labor in contexts as diverse as the emergent culture of volunteerism currently reframing citizenship in northern Italy (Muehleback 2011), personal training in the U.S. (El-Annan 2014), the role of poetics and performance in practices of place making in Lisbon, Portugal (Grey 2011), and call centers in Bangalore, India (Mankekar and Gupta Forthcoming). Its significance as a phenomenon has been historically connected by scholars to the decline of Fordist means of production and the emergence and diversification of the service economy. These are transformations usually (and often too broadly) encompassed under the framework of "neo-liberalism." In general, anthropologists have called for a greater attention to the relationship of affect to transformations in economy (see Richard and Rudnycky 2009). Even though they do not all employ the analytical framework of affective labor, many of the scholars reviewed in chapter one writing on care work and consumption have also productively theorized these connections.

Yiddish cannot be transmitted or received by any particular set of individuals.³ As Evan realized as he felt himself transformed into an objectified Yiddish subject, these exchange relations do not produce social ties that connect particular kin. Rather, as an abstract heir, as one Yiddish student among others who will cycle through the Center's programs, students like Evan offer *time* to the Center's wider public.

Time, as Bourdieu famously pointed out in his critique of Levi-Strauss's "mechanical model" of exchange, is a critical element of the gift (Bourdieu 1977). Within the time-lag between giving and receiving lies the uncertainty about reciprocation and the possibility that the receiver will fail or refuse his interpellation as party to exchange (see also, Bourdieu 2000). In the case of students like Evan, a college freshman still in the process of determining the objects of his devotion, he may very well refuse such interpellations; he might, in other words, turn out much less "Yiddish" than the book to which he compares himself. But where Evan may opt out, another student potentially opts in and enacts the desirable future of possible Yiddish (and indeed Jewish) returns. Abstraction, in this sense, "saturates" time with Yiddish possibility, thus keeping alive possible future enactments of other Yiddish and Jewish "homes" in which the Center is just that—a *Center* within a wider array of episodic Jewish engagements.

The Value of Youth at the Book Center

Since its inception, the quality of youthfulness has played a central symbolic role in the Yiddish Book Center's rhetoric and culture work. The institution's earliest fundraising letters and publications, materials directed first and foremost to its older public of potential members and

³ In using the concept of displacement to theorize social roles related to inheritance, I am borrowing and extending Shryock's concept, which he uses to analyze how social roles associated with host-guest relationships in Jordan are extended from private homes to public domains in connection with an emergent tourist economy in the country. See, Shryock (2004a).

donors, substantively bear this out. In a 1985 issue of the Center's *Paken Treger* magazine, no more than five years after the institution's founding, Aaron Lansky tells his readers that even though, "saving Yiddish books," was what constituted the majority of the institution's work, it was only a "first step." "Our real work," Lansky explains in a section lifted and printed in large bold letters, is, "building a bridge between the generations, saving a culture from extinction and revitalizing our own lives as Jews" (1985:2). Young devoted people who, like the collective indexed by Lansky's "our lives," are implicitly Jewish embody that mission in the Center's media. A 1989 issue, for example, profiles "The Interns," a reference to the cohorts of young, college-age volunteers who each summer traveled to the Center to assist in the physical labor of unpacking and sorting its books (Glick 1989:22). The article offers readers a photograph of each intern and a short description that lists name, university, and the title of the fellowship received from the Book Center. "Ethan Seidman of Wesleyan University," the article informs its readers, "received the Milton and Florence Gilman Fellowship." The author describes how, "[d]espite dust, humidity and temperatures in the 90s, our four Summer Interns managed to schlep, sort, and shelve almost 200,000 Yiddish Books." Andy, another intern, "found this heavy work," to be, "a time of discovery, excitement and falling in love," with Yiddish. "Every morning," he described, "I climbed four flights of stairs with my fellow workers. I opened the door of the warehouse and a waft of dusty, stale air filled my lungs. Not the best way to start a morning. But I would ignore it and head for the *shins*." (Glick 1989:22).

Even in the Center's discourse about its adult education programs, rhetoric describing the energy embodied in Andy's work looms large. A 1984 *Paken Treger* article entitled, "Sunrise, Sunset: Young Teach Old at Elderhostel," recaps the adult education program in the following terms: "Although the young teachers found themselves exhausted, their 'older' students pushed right on" (1985:8). Employing the hyperbolic style typical of the genre, staff fill the pages of Book Center media with the language of energy. The 1988 Summer Program in Yiddish Culture, covered in a

1989 *Paken Treger* shows a group-photograph of participants from all ages, but primarily elderly and middle aged Yiddish enthusiasts. Entitled “*Sizzlin’*” the article details how, “record hot temperatures were surpassed only by the energy of the staff and the enthusiasm of the participants!” (1989:10). As with the young people described above, the elderly participants themselves become prototypically young in and through their enthusiasm for Yiddish language and culture. In their energy lies a future life for Yiddish.

Today, in keeping with the publishing industry more generally, there are simply fewer projects requiring “heavy work” with Yiddish originals. Even its historic project to digitize its entire collection is coming to an end. To help speed this process, in 2011 the Center acquired a scanner from the Internet Archive, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization focusing on preserving and promoting access to digital collections. Where volunteer collectors and volunteer students sorting books at the Center had been instrumental to its collection efforts with actual, vintage copies, the diversification of textual materiality from paper to digital books has entailed forms of expertise and corporate knowledge beyond the Center’s organizational capacity. The Internet Archive hosts the Center’s Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library, for example, and deals with the technical management of the collection.

In response to the diminishing possibilities entailed within Yiddish originals, the Center has responded by diversifying its collection work and extending it further toward digital mediums. It has recently sought to organize and remaster Yiddish language audio-materials, for example, recordings of Yiddish authors reading their works, and interviews with Yiddish writers. Its online “Wexler Oral History Project,” also continues to grow. Eclectic in its scope, the Wexler project targets diverse audiences, extending the boundaries of what constitutes a Yiddish story. “In the past four years,” the Center’s website describes, “we’ve recorded more than 450 interviews, stories told by people of all ages and backgrounds; *bobes* (grandmothers) young activists, Yiddish language students and

professors, musicians, grandchildren of Yiddish writers, native Yiddish speakers, and non-Yiddish speakers” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(c)). In the rhetoric about the project, the Center rhetorically ties the collection of digitally recorded stories to the salvage narratives that originally grounded the Center’s fame; “Not every Jewish story,” one flier encouraging visitors to record an interview notes, “ends up in a book” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(j)).

Across all its projects, though, the Center expresses the core of its new agenda in terms of “education.” Education consists of training new generations of Yiddish scholars and translators, but it also includes providing exposure to and work experience within the more amorphous realm of Jewish “culture.” As one employee of the Book Center explained to me, in an impression that is telling though by no means official, “Basically, Yiddish at the Book Center today means Jewish secularism.” In transmitting this kind of “Yiddish,” youth remain central. Regardless of the content that makes up Jewish secularism, the form that organizes many of these endeavors is that of the immersive youth program described in the introduction: the Steiner Summer Program, Tent workshops, “great Jewish books program” and so forth.

There is no requirement that the participants in these programs actually be Jewish by the standards of descent accepted by any Jewish denomination.⁴ Yet judging from the demographics of Jewish studies courses in American universities from which many participants come, family names of students, and my own ethnographic work at the Center in 2010 and 2011 as well as during subsequent visits and interviews, the majority of the participants within these programs tend to come from Jewish backgrounds. According to a recent “impact evaluation” of the Tent program, for example, 140 of 169 respondents identified as Jewish, with 16 not identifying as such and 13 not

⁴ According to Jewish law, Jewish identity is inherited matrilineally. This is the standard definition accepted by most Jewish denominations. However, the more liberal denomination of Reform Judaism, for example, has accepted descent through the father’s family as well. This latter definition also happens to be the one employed by Birthright Israel to determine who can attend tours.

responding to the question (Belzer 2015:3-6).⁵ That the presumed audience for these programs is mostly Jewish also clearly appears in Center rhetoric and informational materials. For example, even as the Center asserts the openness of its programs to all participants, it makes sure to address questions about Jewish practice like Shabbos observance and kashrus. In the online “Frequently Asked Questions” section about the Great Jewish Books program, the Center ensures its readers that:

The Great Jewish Books Summer Program offers a pluralistic Jewish environment, in which a wide range of cultural and religious practices are celebrated and respected. Past participants have identified as everything from secular/cultural to Orthodox—and everything in between. On Shabbos, we enjoy a festive meal together, and we make time for blessings and prayers both before and after the meal for those who wish to participate or listen. (We do not attend formal Shabbos services.) All students are invited to share their experiences with and reflections on Jewish traditions with the group. (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(e))

For an institution that seeks to promote itself as a “lively place” for Yiddish, and a “bridge between the generations,” and within a wider fundraising climate in which Jewish youth are central, educational programs like the ones described above offer the Center an important resource for institutional revivification. The importance of youth, in this sense, should be understood within the context of an institution that, founded over three decades ago, has itself “aged.” Lansky began his Yiddish salvage mission at 23, discursively positioning himself as a kind of surrogate Yiddish heir to the individuals and families who donated to him their Yiddish books. But today Lansky is a parent with his own children. In addition to the aging of its founder, the Center’s process of routinization

⁵ Tent was originally designed in consultation with Michael Steinhardt, the Jewish mega-donor also responsible for pioneering Birthright Israel. According to Josh Lambert, the current academic director at the Book Center, early media and promotional materials described Tent as being “for Jews” in their twenties. However this requirement was dropped before the beginning of the first program (email communication, April 22, 2015). Today, promotional materials maintain that Tent is, “for anyone, ages 21 to 30, who’s curious about the connections between Jewishness and modern culture” (Tent n.d.).

underlines the need for new infusions of young Yiddish devotees. The full-time staff at the Center, when I was there, tended to reflect in its composition the demographics of the American non-profit sector more generally.⁶ The administrative, program and development staff appeared mostly female and predominantly white. While they ranged in age, most were in or entering middle age. Judging from interviews, employees often came to the Book Center from histories of work experience and passions drawn as much from their background in graphic design, publishing and fundraising, as from an interest in Yiddish. To be sure, though, over-generalizing here about the precise identities of staff would be a mistake. Like many non-profits, in a fact that was repeated to me by numerous former employees I interviewed, the Center's employment practices have historically been marked by a high rate of turnover. Thus the precise make up of the staff, and their precise titles and roles, have historically shifted every few years.

Actual young Yiddish devotees generally appear most consistently within the Center's programs, and concomitantly embody its youthfulness. Program participants recognize the value that is placed on their youthfulness within the Center's broader political economy. Emilia, a graduate of both the Steiner summer program and the Center's fellowship program, explained that, "basically, my job is to be the young abstractly attractive face of the Yiddishist future." Another former fellow and Steiner alum echoed Emilia's comments when he differentiates himself from a colleague who was, "just really the kind of stereotypical Book Center person," because he was so, "enthusiastic about everything."

The Steiner Summer Program

⁶ Women make up the vast majority of the non-profit workforce, though that pattern is not reflected in higher paying positions of leadership. Studies estimate that women make up roughly 75% of non-profit sector jobs. See, Lennon et. al. (2013:121-131).

Among all the Center's programs aimed at youth, the longest standing and most developed is the Steiner Summer Yiddish Program. The program in its current instantiation evolved out of the aforementioned internship program in which young people like Andy describe their process of "falling in love." Individual components of the program change yearly, but generally speaking, it brings together 18 college and graduate-school age Yiddish students for seven weeks of immersive Yiddish language and culture classes. Students study either beginner or intermediate Yiddish in the mornings, break for lunch, and then attend a Yiddish history and culture class in the afternoon. Prior to 2011, these classes were supplemented by an internship program, in which participants would help with some aspect of the institution's work: unpacking book donations, or packing up books for storage, guiding tours of the institution, or assisting with the Center's oral history project. More recently, however, the program has become fully academic in nature. Professional instructors teach language classes—often PhD. candidates or full-time faculty in Yiddish studies or related fields. And while Lansky once taught the history and culture classes, today a series of visiting professors and Yiddish folk artists lead them. The summer also includes a Yiddish "adventure" of sorts, in which the group travels to New York City to visit Yiddish sites of the past and present.⁷ Previous trips have included a tour of the Lower East Side and of the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Boro Park, the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, and get-togethers with prominent Yiddish academics, artists and activists in New York City.

Students are able to earn college-level credit for their classes. This makes the Book Center's program not unlike those run by YIVO in New York City or the Vilnius Yiddish Institute in Vilnius Lithuania. But what perhaps most distinguishes the Book Center's program, aside from its location away from key contemporary and historical Yiddish centers like New York and Vilnius, is that each student is fully funded. In its earlier years, prior to my own ethnographic fieldwork at the institution,

⁷ Institutional records reflect that in earlier summers students had travelled to Montreal.

students even received stipends to offset the cost of living (a practice that has recently been reinitiated for intermediate Yiddish language students). In addition to subsidizing the students' Yiddish studies, the Steiner program tends to recruit undergraduates. This further distinguishes them from programs like YIVO or the Vilnius program, which tend to draw higher-level graduate students, many of whom are pursuing Yiddish as part of an academic career path. In comparison to the Center, these other programs historically have contained a larger proportion of non-Jewish European graduate students from countries like Germany or Poland.

Since 2006 David and Sylvia Steiner have underwritten the summer program.⁸ David Steiner is a New York City real estate mogul whose family runs the eponymous Steiner Equities Group. Among the company's projects, Steiner Equities is best known for the aforementioned 200-acre Steiner Studios complex at the Brooklyn Navy Yard, an economic centerpiece within the much-publicized gentrification of Brooklyn. Steiner boasts a long history of involvement in Jewish philanthropic and institutional service. In addition to his involvement with the Book Center, he was previously the President of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee or (AIPAC), and has contributed to a range of Jewish institutions and causes (Wiener 2011, 2012). Other philanthropists help supplement the program, allowing each student to be paired with a donor or foundation that financially subsidizes the cost of that student's time at the institution. The Book Center frequently lists its summer students in its *Paken Treger* magazine, along with the names of their philanthropic sponsors.

In exchange for these monetary gifts to the students mediated by the Center, students offer in return their youthful energy and still emergent future of Yiddish engagements. That is, as beginner and intermediate students, they often arrived at the Center with a surplus of desire and intellectual

⁸ According to a staff member, the Center began circulating new promotional materials for the program bearing Steiner's name in the winter of 2006 (email communication, April 23, 2015).

capacity for Yiddish studies, but reasons and concrete projects often still in the early stages of development. To be sure, most students with whom I spoke mentioned kinship-based connections, whether sentimental, or intellectual, as at least partially motivating their interest in Yiddish. But interviewees articulated a wide variety of motivations. One student, a former ba'al teshuva named "Mordkhe," had previously begun a *smicha* (rabbinical ordination) program with the Ultra-Orthodox community of Chabad Lubavitch in Crown Heights, but decided to leave the program. Yiddish study offered him alternative prospects for Jewish community and identification as he negotiated his own relationship to Jewish observance. Other students have academic interests for which they need the language. Many students had more inchoate motivations, and often understandably struggled to define precisely their reasons for engaging with something to which they were newcomers. "I don't know," Sofia, a former Steiner student, told me about her reasons for learning Yiddish, "for some reason I've always wanted to study Yiddish. So when I went to college, it was important to me that Yiddish classes were offered." "I wanted to take a language," Mary, a non-Jewish student from a large, public university told me, "but I didn't want to go to class five times a week!" With classes meeting only three times a week, she explained, Yiddish seemed like an excellent fit. Now, that same student is considering graduate work in Yiddish studies. For other, more politically minded students, the association of Yiddish with a working class politics, queer culture or an alternative, non- or even anti-Zionist form of Jewish identification informs their attraction.

Like the breadth entailed in the project of "thin description" described with Yiddish books in the previous chapter, so, too, does the range of possible motivations and potential future engagements that might emerge from the application of youthful energy to Yiddish constitute the object of value that the young students possess. In this context, inchoate and relatively undefined answers like those given by Mary or Sofia illustrate the value of youth within the institution's relationships of exchange: they make clear that the precise value that will develop out of their

current engagements has yet to crystalize. At times, Center rhetoric reiterates the value of undefined future endeavors lying latent in the productive capacities of young students. Thus, to draw on one telling example, at a 2012 event for the Steiner students attended by current and future donors, a representative of the Book Center explained to the gathered crowd that, “what these students show us is that Yiddish can be as meaningful to someone who wants to be a singer or an advertising executive or a comic strip artist as it is to someone who has an interest in studying history or literature.” The potentiality of these youthful energies that this Center employee articulates, I would contend, is what Emelia recognizes when she describes her job as being “the abstractly attractive face of the Yiddishist future,” or what the above Book Center fellow sees in the “enthusiasm” of his colleague.

As embodiments of youthful energy, but generally with few opportunities in their own lives to have previously studied Yiddish, students look to the Book Center to provide them with what they require. They need not only books but also Yiddish classes, professional guidance from Yiddish and Jewish studies scholars, peers with whom to study, and a physical context in which to cultivate their Yiddish capacities. The funders, for their part, by and large cannot transmit Yiddish to their own children. But by facilitating the guidance, peer groups, and spaces for Yiddish cultivation by young students, those funds are transformed by the Book Center into conditions in which Yiddish can be passed down to kin in , to quote Emilia, “the abstract.” In the “Jewish environment[s]” each summer session fosters, new cohorts offer eighteen new possibilities for Yiddish returns on those donations: that is, for Yiddish to be given as a *generous gift*.

Evaluating Yiddish Potential

The first step in these transformations is to determine the students who will have the opportunity to inherit Yiddish. Like any process of evaluation, creating student cohorts

fundamentally involves an act of distinction. In a comment that captures the priority placed on finding potential participants whose Yiddish engagements will distinguish them from others, one staff member explained to me that ultimately, “the Center wants leaders.” But, it would be a mistake, Book Center staff warned me, to delineate too precisely the particular qualities, political dispositions, or identities of the potential leaders the Center seeks to bring together for the summer program. Sitting at lunch with a number of Book Center staff who read applications, I was warned against too sharply specifying the kind of person for whom Center staff are searching: “The people reading the applications aren’t always the same,” I was told by one staff member, and so, “each person is going to read applications differently.” This articulates with the broader employment practices of the Steiner Program, whose staff has historically been composed not only of permanent employees, but also of temporarily contracted Yiddish teachers, administrators and Jewish studies scholars who are hired on a summer-to-summer basis. In this context, teasing out a precise ideology, identity, or set of beliefs held by a student is difficult.

Given prioritization on finding leaders, stereotypical, stock answers to application questions about why, for example, a student wants to study Yiddish, provide evaluators with very little useful information about the applicant. This may, at first blush, seem ironic; the Center, after all, routinely mobilizes imagery and discourses of Yiddish nostalgia in its own representational practices. But students, it seems, are expected to offer something more. As a Book Center employee explained to me about a recent pool of applicants whose files she had just finished reading: “Something like three-fourths of the applications have something to do with grandparents. It actually gets kind of aggravating to read.”

At the same time though, these comments reflect the broader pattern of exchange, articulated through this and previous chapters, underwriting the distribution of responsibility for Yiddish knowledge that marks the affective and political economies of the institution. A *zamlar* or

financial donor to the Center may provide a collection of books, volunteer a weekend or make a financial contribution out of emotional motivations. Thus Sarah, the zamler from the previous chapter, once corrected me for attributing what she felt was too much individual importance to her own role in Yiddish salvage by explaining that her work is, “really like a one night stand with the people you meet...like a one night stand with Yiddish.” In contrast, if the summer program offers cohorts of students the opportunity to “fall in love” with the language, the staff reading applications hope to find students ready for a deeper, one might even say more serious, engagement with the language.

Everyone I spoke to involved in evaluating applications did seem to agree upon the importance of academic transcripts and letters as measurements of student potential. Whatever one’s commitment to Yiddish as expressed in their own, subjective answers to application statements, criteria like grades and professors’ evaluations about academic prowess provided relatively objective accounts of the intellectual capacity of students to do the work.⁹ The emphasis placed on this value was mirrored on the evaluation sheets of applicant phone interviews and applications to which the Center staff granted me access. In anonymous hand-written comments on the margins of these materials, observations about a student’s history of language study, or particularly positive comments that a referee made about the student’s academic strengths are noted affirmatively. Also notable, though, are evaluative comments that are less strictly “academic” in nature, focusing rather on qualities relevant to a student’s social skills. Thus, evaluators often noted whether an applicant seemed articulate and socially at ease on these otherwise sparsely marked forms. Across application year, one can read notes about the “enthusiasm” or “energy” a student might bring to the program and to Yiddish. One reader during the mid-2000s describes a student who is “definitely in” as, “very strong socially,” while another worried about a different student’s “flat affect.” One evaluator during

⁹ I was not granted nor did I seek access to university transcripts or personal recommendations.

the early 2000s felt that an applicant's counselor experience in the Reform Jewish movement's summer camps indicated that the applicant would fit well in the summer program. These comments reflect a value that one staff member conveyed to me in 2013 when she noted that building the Yiddish peer group was not only a matter of evaluating individuals, but also of forming a group that will get along with one another. Alongside evaluating a student's intellectual capacity, this entailed, she described, looking for signs of how a student might be good for "group fit."

Certainly, such notes about applicants' social skills are not ubiquitous. It also seems clear that readers evaluate these skills not at the expense of other qualities and attributes but alongside them. Moreover, multiple people read applications each year, and the aforementioned staff rollovers have meant that the group of evaluators can vary from year to year; different readers inevitably accord different levels of significance to such qualities. Yet, reading applications and interviews for a student's social skills is highly significant, I would suggest, in that it constitutes part of a wider ensemble of practices intended to ensure that the context in which Yiddish is studied is a *pleasurable* one. In this regard, reading applications for students' social skills can be understood as part of the broader affective labor of the institution, akin to arranging living quarters for students, managing the logistics of travel schedules, and helping to smooth over any conflicts and problems that might arise for students over the course of the session. This labor is constitutive of the Center's pedagogical approach. At the most basic level, by ensuring that group dynamics are enjoyable the organization hopes that students' Yiddish studies in the present spark a desire for subsequent encounters with Yiddish in the future. When donors fund the Yiddish Book Center's programs, an important component of what they subsidize is the affective labor required to create such pleasurable Yiddish contexts.

As a quality of that pleasurable experience, the comfort of the Book Center reverberated across discourses of both students and visitors regarding their experiences at the Center. "It's [the

Center] really warm,” one student remarked in an oft repeated description of the affective “feel” of the institution. Visitors, too, frequently commented on the Center’s “comfortable” and “unpretentious” atmosphere. Often the comfortable aesthetics of the Book Center distinguished it, in the eyes of students, from other secular Yiddish institutions. Thus, on the 2011 annual trip to New York City, students noted the comparatively “cold” feeling of the YIVO Institute. Upon entering the Center for Jewish History, removing the contents from their pockets and placing their bags on the metal detector’s conveyer-belt, the two students in front of me exchanged nervous glances and a collusive smile: “this place is like the Fort Knox of Yiddish,” the first student whispered to her friend with a laugh. Such a feeling of remove and inaccessibility from the institution of YIVO stands in marked contrast to the goal of the Yiddish Book Center, in the opinion of one Yiddish instructor, who had worked at both institutions. In comparison to YIVO, this professor noted, the general effect of the Book Center’s approach to Yiddish is to, “lower the affective barrier many students experience learning the language,” thus hopefully enhancing the desire in students for future Yiddish studies.

A Huge Yiddish Family

During the summer of 2011, the Book Center held its first alumni weekend for graduates of its summer program. At the opening dinner, a large, catered event held in the Book Center’s Kligerman-Greenspun auditorium, a group of around 200 current and former students, staff, and a few older Book Center members sat together and chatted at large, round tables. After getting settled, attendees took time for introductions. Amidst the rhythm of short, stock student accounts of their name, university, and nature of their interest in Yiddish, an elderly couple stood up. “Hi, I’m David Rabinowitz and this is my wife Martha....And we are just so excited that Alex’s daughter

[referencing the daughter of an upper-level staff member] is in the program and is learning Yiddish!”¹⁰

The couple’s excitement over Alex’s daughter’s opportunity to study Yiddish at the Book Center stuck with me as we continued around the table. We finished introductions, listened to welcome speeches by Center staff, and even an update from Aaron about the exciting new programs at the Center and the new initiatives for young people. For example, we were told that the Wexler Oral History Project includes interviews with younger generations of Yiddish scholars and students, and not just, “how grandma used to make *flanken* (beef flank).” We finished up our dinners (which did not include flanken) and made plans with friends and new acquaintances to go to an after-event house party of one of the younger, year long fellows. I stood up from my half-eaten desert to see Leah making her way across the room, weaving through buffet tables covered with trays of grilled vegetables and salmon fillets. “Shik! she said, addressing me by my Yiddish name, “I wanted to tell you. I finally understand what the Book Center does! For the longest time, I never really had a clear sense about exactly what he was up to, but I finally get it. It’s not about preservation. It’s about *creation!* Aaron Lansky’s trying to make a huge Yiddish family!”

Leah’s experience of “getting it,” immediately conjured for me Mr. Rabinowitz’s comments. Over a year later at lunch with Leah in New York City, I brought up what I thought were implicit intergenerational connections of her observations. She quickly corrected me. “Oh I wasn’t thinking about them [the older people around the table]. I was talking about the [student] alumni!” For her, family connections were instantiated in the group of young people who had moved through the Yiddish Book Center’s programs. She did not even notice the older couple watching with pride the

¹⁰ A Book Center staff member later identified the couple as donors. The staff member noted that they had not, in fact, been invited to the event, but happened to be at the Book Center and decided to stay for dinner.

children of others, learning Yiddish and possibly devoting themselves to more Yiddish, and more Jewish, futures.

The fact that, when Leah thinks about Aaron Lansky's huge Yiddish family, she does not notice the older generation of funders is actually constitutive of the production of the peer group that constitutes the "abstractly attractive" cohort of future Yiddish devotees—the individuals who may, if things go according to plan, inherit Yiddish. In fact, the presence of a largely older generation of donors literally surrounds Leah at every moment, even if she overlooks their presence or fails to recognize it in face-to-face interactions. Like the dedicated shelves of books described in the previous chapter, the totality of organizational materials embody the care older generations of American Jews feel for Yiddish. In the dining halls in which they eat, in the classrooms in which they study, in the comfortable chairs and sofas on which the Steiner students lounge between classes, the investments of American Jews in Yiddish literally "hold" the students within the "warm" embrace of the institution.

The Center's education wing manifests such architectural embodiments of collective Jewish care that are especially relevant to current cohorts of Steiner students who spend summers there. They devote most of their time to that part of the Center, a place marked by a keen attention to aesthetics. The building's centerpiece is a large room, surrounded by built-in wood shelves filled with Yiddish books, and books about Yiddish in English. Large, inviting arm chairs, sofas and ottomans are arranged throughout the room, positioned without much formality, making clear that students are free to move them around and reposition them as they like. During the summer program, students can often be found studying in these comfortable chairs, or talking, laughing and eating lunch with their peers. The wing also contains an AV studio and a sound-proof recording room for the Center's oral history project (complete with a stylish "*Shal*" (Quiet) sign, to humorously let passersby know recording is in progress). In addition, two classrooms, each

complete with shelves of vintage Yiddish books and ergonomic, fabric-lined chairs surrounding large, sturdy wood tables foster inviting confines for Yiddish studies. The classrooms doubtless recall those at the students' own universities, though for most students, the Center's may be more generously appointed.

These comfortable environs are, whether by coincidence or design, set off from the administrative and fundraising arms of the institution—in other words, from the people who have direct contact with the Center's members, donors and visitors responsible for funding the kinds of programs in which the Steiner students participate. During my own fieldwork, even the more proximate staff working within the education wing—including the year long fellows—often had more distant relationships with the Steiner students. At times, this seemed odd, or even disappointing to some of the students and to the fellows alike. “I feel like we aren't really even part of the Center,” one Steiner student told me, reflecting on this distance. “I wish I could spend more time with the [Steiner] students,” fellows in 2011 told me on a number of occasions, expressing a reciprocal desire for more consistent contact between the cohorts. One professor, in a comment lauding the Yiddish studies of the students over and against the metacultural work of the fellows confessed to me that, “I still don't know what the fellows are spending all their time doing. It seems like they spend most of their time at the computer doing office work, or organizing programs. Its like, what is all this AV stuff for?!”

Leah, though, had a different take on these dynamics of separation. When I asked her whether she also felt “not a part” of the Center, we had the following exchange:

“I actually think we *are* the center,” she immediately responded. “We sit around, we put our feet up, we walk around without socks on. Occasionally visitors come by, but it feels like ‘our place’.”

“But what about all the other people who are working here full time? What about the

fellows?” I asked, “Is it not also “their place”?”

“You know, it’s maybe weird to say,” she answered, “but I kinda feel like the rest of the staff and even the fellows work for us.”



Figure 11. A student relaxes between classes.

The intra-group nature of intimacy that Leah indexes here thus also implies a limitation of contact and access of other groups that animate the Center’s particular imagined Yiddish community. Judging from organizational literature, this structuring of gazes and glances appears not entirely unintentional. A glossy 1993 brochure describing the design concept of the Yiddish Book Center’s first building gives the structuring of gazes explicit attention:

In the winter of 1993, some of the country’s foremost museum directors and Jewish educators came together to begin planning exhibits for the Center’s new building. Seeing the Center not as a museum but as a dynamic workplace with unique educational possibilities, they recommended *that we design the building in such a way as to*

put not only our core collection but our entire, day-to-day operation on display, with interpretive exhibits explaining to visitors the cultural and historical context of the activity all around them. Architect Allen Moore has designed the building and exhibits to do just that. Arriving at the orchard, the visitor crosses a wooden foot bridge, steps through the “Context Foyer,” and emerges into the Great Hall: a dramatic, light-filled gathering place with a high, pyramidal ceiling recalling the interior of one of Poland’s old wooden synagogues. Standing here, overlooking the Book Repository, the visitor can see *at a glance the excitement of the entire building...* (Yiddish Book Center n.d.(a):11, emphasis my own).

It is indeed, a *glance* at youthfulness that visitors to the Center will take if they happen to come to the institution during one of its summer programs; and it is reciprocally, as Evan realized in the stacks, glances that students will give to the Center’s wider public. Thus, in keeping with Allen Moore’s design concept of the “Great Hall,” so too in the education wing do the frequent summer tour groups, “see at a glance,” the energies of young Yiddish students *in situ*. When tour leaders guide visitors through the stacks of books, and down the stairs to the education wing, they might encounter someone like Leah. At times, they exchange a few words with her and her friends as the abstractly attractive Yiddishists look up from their reading, or pause in the middle of their conversations to greet visitors. Paralleling the distribution of gazes in the “Great Hall” it is instructive that the classroom walls that face tour goers are constructed primarily of large glass windowpanes. Thus, the Center’s design literally provides visitors lucky enough to tour during classes with a “window” into the future of Yiddish in the making.

These glances are understandably inspiring to many. They provide, however briefly, a flash of the excitement of the Center’s institutional labor to convert the wealth of its donors into a possible Yiddish future—however that future might be understood. In the brief exchange of words and glances, the Center, its donors, and its students collaboratively objectify a moment in a process of youthful Yiddish becoming. This process precedes the visiting tourists, unfolding as they happen upon a Yiddish class—the scene of young students acquiring linguistic and cultural literacies. The windows framing these scenes of Yiddish study mirror in their form the images circulated in

countless fundraising letters, institutional magazine articles, and e-mail blasts routinely distributed to members and visitors. On at least one occasion, members even received small photographs of the Center's young fellows, printed, as one fellow explained to me, to mimic personal pictures one might receive from family members. In a similar vein, development staff ask Steiner students, who also sign photo-releases at the beginning of the summer, to write thank you letters to their donors, perhaps not unlike letters home from camp, at both the beginning and end of the session.



Figure 12. Windowpanes frame a Book Center classroom.

For the generally older visitors or donors, to actually *enter* the classroom, to invite oneself into the intimate space of the generationally defined peer group alters its nature. Regular, more

prolonged access to the actual private spaces of youth sociality at the Book Center, even as simply a hypothetical scenario, would be potentially hazardous to everyone involved in these relationships of abstract kinship. In addition to altering the generationally defined nature of the group, which is so productive of the kind of age-specific patterns of comportment that make the Center enjoyable for students, there are other intergenerational differences to consider. Differences in attitudes about gender, Jewish peoplehood, and politics between a largely older and in some cases quite wealthy network of donors, and a younger cohort of liberal arts and humanities students are understandably more easily kept at bay when interactions are distant and brief. Students often see Yiddish as providing access to a kind of Jewish authenticity constructed in opposition to those conditions of Jewish upward mobility and suburbanization that made American Jewish philanthropy possible: conditions that produce the comfortable chairs, well appointed classrooms, and free tuitions that constitute the very preconditions for the practice of youthful intimacy and Yiddish competencies among the students. A deeper exposure to the student's actual aspirations, politics and desires might provide to some a less desirable vision of where their money is going.

But of course, given the episodic nature of the summer program itself, both students and donors know that not every student will go on to enact Yiddish or Jewish futures. Even on what seem to be the rare occasions on which donors object to a student's motivations or identity, another students may promise more desirable Yiddish returns. Evan's comments in the stacks reflect this logic of abstraction. As a young, beginning Yiddish student, he knows that neither his present nor future is necessarily shot through—like a Yiddish book—with Yiddish devotion. Statistically speaking, judging from number of students in the U.S. who continue their studies in the language past the beginner or intermediate level he very well may not deepen his competencies in the Yiddish

language or in the study of Ashkenazi Jewish history and culture.¹¹ Indeed, he may decide that he has little interest Jewish topics, or Jewish identity at all. A more extensive conversation with Evan may yield a more undetermined picture of the student who has yet to choose a major, and who to the dismay of some donors, but certainly not all, is not himself Jewish.¹² But in that moment of exchanged glances the future trajectory of each young Yiddish leader seems equally loaded with Yiddish and Jewish potential—offering a whole future of subsequent Jewish “returns” on intergenerational gifts.

Practicing Yiddish Intimacies

As the Book Center works to create the conditions in which youthful Yiddish intimacy is practiced students contribute to the Center’s affective labor. This labor of what Shneer and Aviv (2005) call “homemaking” is indeed part of creating and producing a “huge Yiddish family.” But practicing Yiddish intimacies derives not only from passions already oriented to Yiddish or Jewish things. Rather, the Center and the program participants create intimate bonds through relationships

¹¹ To provide one illustrative measure, the most recent Modern Language Association report on enrollments in non-English language university courses shows a bottleneck between undergraduate (usually at beginner and intermediate levels), and graduate enrollments. Thus in 2006, 932 students enrolled in Yiddish at undergraduate institutions with 44 enrolling in graduate programs. These numbers dipped in 2006 (301 and 30) and 2013 (230 and 21) respectively. These patterns reflect as much the political economy of the academy as they do student commitment to language study. They also apply to many less commonly taught non-English languages. But they nonetheless illustrate the pattern noted here. (Goldberg 2015:40).

¹² This matter requires more attention than I can devote here. I witnessed a few instances in which donors and visitors explicitly disapproved of the non-Jewish status of students—a matter that was also the source of gossip relayed to me by former and current employees. In general, the baseline assumption of most visitors is certainly that the center’s young students are Jewish. The experience of this assumption was conveyed in multiple interviews with non-Jewish work-study students and other participants, who noted how visitors frequently addressed them with Hebrew expressions they did not always understand. However, at other instances, the non-Jewish identity of a student interested in Yiddish seemed to add value to Yiddish language and culture in general. Because no inherent, identity-based reason at least appears to underwrite the choice of Yiddish study among non-Jewish students, their decision to choose Yiddish over other languages confirms its universal value.

and practices *already familiar* to cohorts of primarily white, Jewish college students. Thus, much of what the Center's participants do outside of class involves the practice of intimacy in ways typical of a summer vacation.¹³ Only in this case, within a Yiddish environment, their activities help contribute to the institution's work to cultivate a feeling of groupness within the episodic Yiddish cohort.

When students are not studying Yiddish, they are generally enjoying what the Pioneer Valley has to offer during the summer: the farmer's market on Saturdays, swimming in Puffers Pond, or going out for dinner and drinks in Northampton or Amherst's restaurants and cafes. In 2010, when I was a Steiner student, we lived either on campus, or in nearby apartments and rented rooms. The following year, however, all students were required to live in the vacant Hampshire College dorms a five-minute walk from the Center. Though Spartan in comparison to the Book Center's own facilities, dorms provided a great context for group bonding and socializing, adding to what most of the students felt, in the summer of 2011, was an extremely tight-knit group dynamic. Tucked away from staff and the comparatively public context of the Center, the dorms also helped facilitate the kind of college-like independence to which the students were accustomed the rest of the year. And of course, dorm living helped precipitate a few intra-group romances and summer-crushes that would unfold throughout the program, and in a few cases, beyond.

¹³ A recent description of the Book Center's Tent program by Aaron Lansky in his year-end letter, makes this approach clear. "Tent" Lanksy write, "is a brand-new venture for the Yiddish Book Center. It came in response to the fact that most Jews in their twenties are unaffiliated, disengaged, and, in many cases, disaffected from Jewish life. Many in the Jewish world have given them up for lost. We're taking the opposite approach: we think it's possible to bring lively and emphatically substantive Jewish learning to Jews between the ages of 21 and 30 by reaching them where they already are. According to Josh Lambert, the program's 32-year-old director, 'we're helping young artists, creative professionals, and cultural enthusiasts discover that much of what they find exciting in contemporary American culture – from stand-up comedy to serious literature, from pop music and theater to photography, film, law, and cuisine – has its roots in Jewish history. **Tent offers young North Americans a new way of seeing Jewishness: as something deep, rich, alive, and inseparable from the cultural forms and practices to which they are already committed.**'" (Lansky 2014, bold in the original).

Commenting upon their living quarters, students playfully nicknamed the dorms, “the shtetl,” or ghetto—thus capturing the polyvalent and multilingual notion of the dorms as both “Jewish,” and also lacking in white, bourgeois norms of domesticity. A ghetto, to the extent that it is a place of separation, also captures how creating intergenerational distance was key to constituting what is set aside from the rest of the institution and its public. In fact, the Center lodged some of its younger administrative staff in the shtetl. After work, they more naturally participated in the social life of the episodic peer group as a result. Further highlighting the importance of affect and social connection in relationship to academic study, the shtetl proved for at least one student detrimental to actual Yiddish studies. Indeed, so foregrounded was the value of enjoying oneself in the artificial Yiddish confines of the shtetl that this participant eventually moved out because he couldn’t get work done with all the socializing in the dorms.

If places like the shtetl delineate a particular space of youth sociality, they also intensify that Yiddish space. As the comfort Leah felt at the Center after just three weeks reveals, the program’s seven-week duration, together with the fact that students spend most of their time with each other, tend to produce affectively intensified social conditions. Leah acknowledged this one afternoon when complaining to another student and me about her dissatisfaction with her summertime crush. “I don’t understand how a guy can like you one day and then the next day pretend like he doesn’t even know you!?”

“But aren’t you leaving after the summer anyway?” the other student asked provocatively, “Look,” Leah answered, “if I’m going to have something over the summer I want it to be really intense and romantic!” she said, gesturing excitedly with her hands to underline “intense.” “Something dramatic!”

Within the intensified Yiddish environment Leah indexes, the deepened enjoyment of other students (romantic or otherwise) in fact *produces* the group as a Jewish one. One Friday night at the

shtetl illustrated these dynamics. The students had organized an ad-hoc Shabbos dinner, complete with home cooked food and blessings. The dinner was open to the entire group—Jewish and non-Jewish alike, as well as a few of the younger summer staff and myself. Only one person couldn't attend, namely, the student who kept strictly kosher, and who left every Friday before sundown to observe Shabbos with nearby family members, returning to the peer group by Sunday morning. Our Shabbos observance that evening simultaneously constituted an act of Jewish religious observance and a ritual of group bonding in a Jewish/Yiddish key. The Jewish elements of the ceremony—the blessings, melodies, and so forth—were not common to the episodic community, but rather had to be brought in by the students, remembered from their own histories of Jewish experience. These Jewish elements of the ritual were not forged in the episodic community. This fact became quite clear as different melodies for the blessings with different Jewish histories competed against one another. After a night moving from singing Yiddish songs, to salsa and hip-hop dancing (with i-pod accompaniment), Shayna, who went to Reform Jewish summer camp as a child, suggested that we *bentsh*—that is, say the blessing after the meal. Mordkhe, the former Chabad ba'al teshuva, tried leading us in prayer. However, his Ashkenazi pronunciation and customary fast-paced recitation was more than the rest of the group could handle. By the end of bentshing, things had basically devolved into Mordkhe reciting alone, with Shayna and a few others chiming in during the parts they recognized from her Jewish summer camp upbringing.

At the end of the blessing Rena, a young program staff member, expressed her frustration to Mordkhe about the ritual. “Why did you have to go so fast?!” she asked him.

“What?!” he said, as if defending himself, “I went really slow!”

“But I wanted you to use a melody that everyone knows.”

“Did you know the other melody?” I asked Mordkhe.

“No!” Mordkhe said in defense.

This interaction revealed the complicated relationship between a commitment to groupness, and the uneven distribution of the Jewish resources employed to key the group dynamic. Especially in light of the few non-Jews in the group, no one could assume collective knowledge of the prayers or familiarity with the same melodies. When Rena asks for Mordkhe to choose a melody that, “everyone knows,” she asks that he mediate groupness as evenly as possible by employing linguistic (i.e. the prayer) and metalinguistic resources (the melody) available to at least a majority of the people in this episodic Yiddish community. With Mordkhe’s traditional style of bentshing, Jewish knowledge concentrates in him.

The valuation of the group dynamic as a performance of Jewishness was reflected also in efforts by individual students and some Book Center staff to ensure that non-Jewish students felt included in group activities. This, of course, is not always an easy task. Much of the history of Yiddish’s linguistic development took place within Jewish religious and social systems. Thus, not only are many expressions connected to Jewish religious life, but the language can also normalize differences between Jews and non-Jews. Even basic greetings like, “vos makht a yid,” (how are you (a Jew) doing?) make sense only within an intimate Jewish social context in which Jewish and non-Jewish differences are essentialized. Otherwise, their use depends on the willingness of speakers to play their appropriate roles. Thus, one former Steiner participant described a professor’s response when a non-Jewish student expressed concern over whether she could use such expressions: “here (in the program),” this student told me about the professor’s response, “we’re all Jews.” If Yiddish study makes students “all Jews” though, its performative power depends on intra-group intimacy that works against the ethno-religious exclusions some students experience learning the language.

Such reassurances, however, are not always able to offset the way that the Jewishness of the group can sometimes impinge on the comfort of non-Jewish program participants. One Jewish studies professor working at the Steiner program consistently reminded students to be careful with

“we” language, urging them to remember that not everyone was Jewish—a fact that only reinscribes the extent to which “we” language can occur so naturally within the Jewish space. The difficulty some non-Jewish students experienced separating the Jewish culture of the immersive Jewish program from language study emerged on specific occasions when some students expressed frustration with what they felt was the overly Jewish nature of the group: “I didn’t come here for the culture,” one non-Jewish student told me as a way of expressing her occasional feeling of isolation from the majority of the group, “I came here to learn the language!” When I asked what she disliked about the culture classes that students attended in the afternoons, she corrected me, explaining that by “culture” she did not mean what we were formally learning in class, but the Jewish assumptions made within the group itself.

Like the non-Jewish student who is “made Jewish” in the classroom, the space of the group itself takes on the capacity to make things “Yiddish.” Leah was trying to explain this to me over lunch in New York City, the winter after her summer at the Yiddish Book Center. We’d been discussing how to contextualize the Book Center. She herself, like others, had often struggled to capture and describe exactly what the Book Center is. That is, if it’s not a “library, archive, book store, school” or otherwise, how does one characterize the institution?

Leah: “Es hot a sakh tsu ton mit zikhroynes.” “Malka, vos iz geven ir englisher nomen? Eh, ikh gedenk nisht. Ober Malka hot gehat a “hug mug” beshas dem program. Un zi hot es gebrakht umetum. Un itzt, du kenst zen afn feysbukh, az zi fotografirt dem ‘hug mug’ in a sakh farsheydene kontekstn. Dos heyst: zey zaynen undzer eygene zikhroynes.” [It has a lot to do with memories. Malka, what was her English name? Eh, I don’t remember. But Malka had a “hug mug” (a specific coffee mug) during the program, and she brought it everywhere. And now you can see on facebook, she photographs the hug mug in a lot of different contexts. So you see, they are our own memories.]

Me: “Yo, ober vos hot es tsu ton mit yidish?” [yeah, but what does that have to do with Yiddish?]

Leah: “Tkh vays nit! Vos iz vikhtik iz az es iz geshen in a min yidishn ort.” [I don’t know! But what’s important is that it happened in a kind of Yiddish place!]

By moving through the Book Center and later through the group's facebook page, forged in the "intense" environs of the Steiner program, the "hug mug" for Leah becomes "Yiddish." It becomes part of the group's memory, and thus acquires a small piece of the intimacy that circulates among the participants. The connection to the Yiddish language may not be entirely clear; but through the mug's history of circulation, the object, like a summer student, becomes "charged" with that particular kind of episodically based Jewish intimacy.

Reflecting the value placed on cultivating a positive group experience, staff in casual conversations often implicitly grounded the success of a given session not only in how much Yiddish was learned, but also in its success fostering positive relationships between students, a healthy group dynamic, and thus possibly, constructive relationships with both Yiddish and the Center in the future. Thus, when I would check back with staff and former students who went on to become fellows, their evaluations of a summer session's success often hinged on the group's emotional "vibe." "This year's group was great!" one such fellow explained to me, because, "they loved each other!...They had Shabbos every Friday and no one even asked them to!" she continued, indexing the group's mutual affections.

Similarly, those Book Center participants who were critical of the Center often framed their critique around what they considered a misallocation of intra-peer group sociality. This was especially clear in the particular peer group of the year long fellows, a number of whom are former Steiner students. Unlike the students whose studies are subsidized, the Center pays fellows a salary for labor that includes a great deal of unglamorous organizational work—organizing programs and events, assisting in the publication of the institution's organizational materials, helping with tours, and so forth. At times, these fellows discussed feeling over-worked to the detriment of the creation

of fellow-feeling and collegiality between staff. Thus, when one fellow's increased responsibilities on a cultural project became overwhelming, she felt her nerves "frayed" and her mood distressful as she found herself working late nights alone at the office.

For a few individual fellows, a surplus attention to office-work could foster a dynamic that has the potential to make the circulation of youthful energy and enthusiasm feel alienating. Thus, Emilia offers one particularly clear example in her own reflections about her fellowship year. She described to me a work environment lacking in attention to intra-group and intra-staff collegiality in contrast to the cohort of fellows with whom I did ethnography. As part of a culture of "professionalization" Emilia described to me what she felt was the absence of a culture of, "talking, chatting, socializing in the office," or sufficient time for "decompression" among fellows after intense periods of work performed by her cohort. Rather, she experienced an ongoing, "expectation of more work."

In contrast to Leah, whose positive experiences at the Center were grounded in intimacy that flowed primarily "horizontally," within the peer group, Emilia is highly attuned to the presence of donors at the Center. Remarkably, she understands the labor of affect among fellows flowing "vertically," between her young cohort and the Center's wider public. "Fellows," she remembers being instructed by staff should ideally be (in her paraphrasing of the message she received) "charming and seductive to donors." Thus, in an acerbic mobilization of social theory garnered from her university studies Emilia describes how: "We the fellows are more care workers, performing fascination and intimacy (with Yiddish language/culture) for the benefit of patrons than we are allowed to be intellectual agents." Neither are the terms of youthful charm purely "Yiddish": "the male fellows especially," she wrote to me, "are approached by older folks looking to matchmake for their grandchildren at the end of every tour they give." Emilia experiences tension between this flow of intimacy and her desire for intergenerational connection with the worlds, cultures, and

experiences of historical Yiddish speakers. She laments, for example, the lack of attention to the, “emotional toll our work takes--paging through Yizkor books (memorial books of pre-Holocaust Jewish communities in Europe), [or] opening envelopes containing the membership cards of deceased YBC members.”

Certainly Emilia is especially sharp in her critiques. Other staff members and fellows I met spoke positively, or not at all, about their engagements with the Center’s primarily older American Jewish public. And it is not, after all, intergenerational contact in its own right that is problematic in Emilia’s discourse. Rather, given the potential for, and indeed institutional priority placed upon, the objectification of youth at the Book Center, Emilia’s comments make visible the discomfort that can ensue when that intergenerational “care-work” seems to overwhelm proper investments in the personal relationships, individual aspirations, and intellectual agency of the fellows. Balancing those investments are essential to making the Center’s “huge Yiddish family.”

From Yiddish to American Jewish Potentialities

Nothing of course guarantees that the Center’s efforts to foster the right affective tone will result in the actual practice of intimacy among the participants within its programs. Nor do those practices of intimacy at the Center necessarily secure the kind of iterative future practices of Yiddish engagement conjured in its literature. Rather, the Center is producing energy out of which potential future Yiddish engagements might be made through these Yiddish peer-groups, even as it makes this energy into an object of exchange in the form of glances for the Center’s wider public.

Some do indeed go on to enact such futures. Allison, the aforementioned staff member, explained the value of possibility to me about a fundraiser she had recently attended for the Book Center. A star Yiddish studies professor who happened, in his undergraduate years, to have attended the Yiddish Book Center’s internship program graced the crowd as the guest of honor. According to

Allison, the professor explained to the audience what a profound impact his experiences at the Book Center had upon him at such an influential age. “After he had finished speaking,” Allison told me, I just wanted to get up and tell them, “see! This is what you can help create!” Not each student, Allison knew, would go on to pursue the paths of the professor. But each student’s participation mattered. “If we don’t manage to share what’s in these books with the next generation, then the culture will surely be lost. Having a father as a rabbi,” she told me, “you probably know this, all the pressure of passing down tradition, the challenges of intermarriage. The work I do helps people like you keep it going. If the work I do helps open up one more book,” she continued, “then its worthwhile.” Just like her efforts might help open, “one more book,” so too might one more Yiddish devotee be produced out of the Center’s educational programs.

But not every student needs to pursue these paths. Allison assumes that I, as a rabbi’s son, see the value of promoting engagements with Yiddish, like those facilitated by the Center, as part of a larger process of Jewish continuity that cross-cuts religion, tradition and ethnic endogamy. And indeed, in the current funding climate in which Jewish non-profits operate, it is quite understandable that these possible Jewish returns would also be of value to the institution. The opening pages of Aaron Lansky’s *Outwitting History* mirror Allison’s conflation of language and the dominant communal values of the American Jewish community. On the opening page of the foreword, Lansky paints the following scene: “Not long ago, I met under an apple tree with a group of very bright college students. ‘Why are you interested in Yiddish?’ I asked. They laughed. ‘Don’t you understand,’ one young woman explained, the sun glinting off a diamond stud in her bellybutton, ‘nowadays Yiddish is *hip*’” (Lansky 2004a:ix).

Perhaps, the fact that Lansky can be accused of, “not understanding,” is precisely the point that the charismatic organizational leader seeks to impress upon his readership. Like the structuring of the intimate exchanges between the generations that I have described throughout this chapter,

providing the Center's wider public of real and imagined donors with bright "glints" of youthful possibility from the productive energy of young Yiddish students is constitutive of the Center's production of Jewish kinship in the abstract. Like thin description that invests so many possible values in books, the brightness sparkling from so many passionate Yiddish students invites visitors, guests, and others to imagine the multiplicity of productive Jewish futures such engagements portend. The sparkle from a diamond stud in the belly of a young, bright Yiddish student suggests that the creative possibilities of Yiddish studies may lie as much in young bodies as in young minds.

At times the linked semiotics of the Center's attention to youthful intimacies and sparkling brightness reflected an iconic similarity between the Center and more explicitly demographically oriented programs like Birthright. For example, in his reflections about the Book Center's trip to New York City "Alexander," a smart, politically left-wing Steiner program alum, described the trip as: "'kinda like Birthright, but not evil," referring to Birthright's aim to indoctrinate young Jews into a pro-Israel politic. Alexander attended the Book Center program in the mid-2000s, when the organization was starting to move away from its internship model and toward a more academic focus on Yiddish studies. He remembers a surplus, in his summer, of emotion—a feature that brought out the similarities between the Center and the wider culture of episodic Jewish programs. When I asked him about his experience working with Yiddish books at the Center, for example, he deepened these analogies: "honestly, I don't remember much about working with the books. Really, what I remember was the people, and who was dating who, and stuff like that... We spent time unpacking books, but there wasn't a lot of urgency to it and so it didn't really feel important. And they ignored the really interesting stuff," he told me incredulously, "like these pamphlets of stock bar-mitzvah *drashbes* [sermons] we found. I mean, what an ethnographic resource! ... When we were there, working with the books, it felt like it was more about giving us something to do. It was like summer camp; you know, people interacted like summer camp."

One should interpret Alexander's comments within the context of the period he attended the program. In the mid-2000s, the Center generally considered its book collection work complete. There was indeed, as Alexander noticed, less urgency around book-related work than in previous years. It thus makes sense that the affective bonds cultivated within the program would appear to Alexander more pronounced in comparison to the serious work of Yiddish rescue. By moving the summer program in more academic directions, the Center itself seemed also to recognize the importance of balancing potential surpluses of emotion with academic engagements that reflect a more scholarly approach. But when I brought up Alexander's comments to other students, they tended to ground similarities between the Center and Birthright in the attention paid by both organizations to the experience and aesthetics of youthfulness. In 2011, years after Alexander's summer at the Center, I asked Brian who had attended Birthright before the Steiner program about whether the summer program reminded him of Birthright.

"Do you think the Book Center is similar to Birthright?" I asked. Brian thought over the question for a second. He had not made the same connection as Alexander.

"Why did he [the other student] say that, because it's kind of teeny-boppery?"

"What do you mean, 'teeny-boppery,'" I asked him.

"Well," Brian continued, reframing his language, "maybe not really teeny-boppery, but that everything is all *shiny*."

I give Brian a look to go on.

"Like, were you at that concert with the singer the other day?" I thought about the concert to which he was referring, and about which I had recently written in my fieldnotes. The Center had held a public concert of a young singer-songwriter and alum of the Center, during which the Steiner students greeted and took tickets from a largely elderly and middle-aged population of visitors at the door. The performer's repertoire at the concert consisted largely of, as she described them, "love

songs to my great grandparents I never met, and to my own grandmother who is 92 years old.” The songs she would sing for us, she explained, were inspired by her own “journey” of Yiddish study to speak her grandparent’s language. “Along the way,” she explained between songs, “I learned to appreciate the courage that my ancestor—that all of our ancestors—had. And with this one in my belly [she pointed to her stomach] I hope to pass that on.”

“I don’t know what you felt about it,” Brian told me, “but for me...its like, you’d *never* see something like that at YIVO.”

“So what did people think about YIVO?” I asked.

“Definitely that the people there were pretentious,” he explained. The Steiner students and YIVO students had attended a Yiddish theater performance together in New York City.

“You got that sense?”

“Yeah, people were definitely bitching about how they [the YIVO students] were all high on themselves. And then there was that guy from YIVO who spoke to us at the beginning.” He continued laughing, referencing the student’s trip to the institution, “He didn’t even introduce himself! And he’s all, ‘where did my grandmother get her blue eyes?!’ (mimicking the YIVO employee’s overly dramatic voice) ‘What? Who are you? Do you even work here?’ I mean, honestly, that’s one thing I like about the Book Center. They don’t have all the ideology and politics built into it like YIVO does.”

The “shininess” that links the Steiner program to Birthright for Brian, and which he seeks to explain through the Book Center’s embrace of Jewish singer-songwriter music, echoes Emelia’s sense about her own self-presentation. I am not sure whether Brian also made the connection that the brightness of his own youth was on display in the form of young students, greeting the predominantly older generations of concert attendees as they took tickets at the entrance of the Applebaum-Driker theater. However, in the quick flash of a bright smile he, like the other

“abstractly attractive” Yiddish students at the Center, hold out possible futures highly valued among the Center’s wider public of donors who have invested so much in these possible Yiddish, and also Jewish, returns.

Those brief exchanges of tickets and glances elicit Jewish futures encompassing an array of Jewish values. I realized this forcefully during a follow-up visit to the Book Center, shortly after concluding my fieldwork there. Walking through the stacks of books, not far from where Evan probably stood months earlier, I encountered a wealthy donor in the company of a Book Center employee. The employee introduced us.

“You look familiar,” the donor told me, “were you at the dinner in New York a few months ago?”

“Yeah I was. Maybe we met there?”

“Are you one of the fellows?” he went on. I explained that actually I was an independent researcher studying the Book Center’s role in Yiddish preservation. He asked me a bit more about my project, nodding politely as I tried to explain what ethnography was, and my interests in the Yiddish Book Center as a place for the contemporary transmission of Yiddish.

I finished. He paused in thought. “Come with me for a second,” he commanded, “there’s someone I want you to meet. I want to introduce you to my grandson.” We made our way to another section of shelves holding old Yiddish books. “My grandson,” he continued in a low voice as we approached a young, college aged individual a few shelving units away, “is in an interfaith relationship. He’s studying Japanese culture at Amherst, and I think it could be good for him to meet someone like you.”

“Michael! I’d like to you meet Josh.” I reach out to shake Michael’s hand, “Josh is a real live...”

And with that, he left his sentence unfinished, leaving us to pick up the conversation.

Chapter 5.

“What do they Grow at Yiddish Farm?”: Episodic Jewish Culture as Practice and the Conscription of Yiddish Space.

Fieldwork

“Seven weeks is a long time,” he tells me. I’m driving back from a lazy June lunch in Flushing with a friend, a fellow anthropologist writing his dissertation in Brooklyn. It’s a goodbye meal before I set out for nearly two months of fieldwork at Yiddish Farm. Though the Farm is just an hour’s drive north of Manhattan, my colleague’s concern about how long I will be away registers a certain conceptual distance between the location and daily life. I am traveling, in his eyes, to something of a different world.

“So what do they grow there?” he asks with a wry smile.

“Well, apparently the soil is ideal for onions and garlic,” I answer plainly, “but I think they are still working out the logistics of what’ll grow best.”

He ignores my earnest, matter-of-fact explanation, an admittedly self-conscious attempt on my part to resist the interactional frame of collusion about the supposed unusualness of the project. After all, the Yiddish farmers *are* planning to grow onions and garlic; and I was well aware of the intention, effort and resources they were investing in doing so. My colleague laughs and shakes his head; “I guess you really are going to do ‘fieldwork’ then, huh?”

As I prepared to move from Brooklyn to Yiddish Farm, I repeatedly heard these kinds of expressions of disbelief. Even some Yiddishists I knew variably treated the idea of spending seven weeks farming and speaking only Yiddish with equal measures of excitement and skepticism. My friend, the ethnographer, captures this skepticism. I start with his question about, “what they grow there” because, as his comments illustrate, he was not really interested in the nutrient-rich, deep-black earth on Yiddish Farm’s land, or the soil tests Yisroel and Naftuli had ordered to determine the best vegetables to grow. Rather, hidden in the intonation of disbelief about what Yiddish Farm might produce was really a dig about the capacity of the emergent project to produce and reproduce itself. He wasn’t interested in “what” but “how”: how could a farm that runs in Yiddish really work?

This chapter takes that question seriously. What kind of sociality, I ask, is taking root at Yiddish Farm? Part of the answer lies in the very bounded form of the summer program itself. Having submitted a request for summer funding from the Frankel Center at the University of Michigan, I paid the \$2,000 tuition fee to leave my apartment, my friends and informants and immerse myself in a hermetically sealed Yiddish experience. For seven weeks I would wake up in the mornings, work in the fields, attend afternoon Yiddish classes, and live in an intentional community with other, primarily American Jewish twenty-somethings in Yiddish. In these particular ways Yiddish Farm organized Jewish sociality episodically.

The episodic form of the summer program exists in a delicate tension with the revernacularizing aspirations of the Farm’s organizers. This chapter thus describes a process of negotiation—between a desire to live more of one’s life in Yiddish, and the program’s episodic culture that constitutes one of Farm’s central means of community building. It shows how the young farmers seek to transcend the temporal confines implicit in the episode as they attempt to wield that very form for their own ends: the creation of a new, full time, Yiddish speaking center. Yet, at the same time, it also reveals the structuring force of episodic Jewish culture itself. The

episode, as I will show, is also structuring this emergent site of Yiddishland, thus potentially pulling the Farm into the orbit of other temporary, immersive Jewish programs, and the relationships of philanthropic exchange that I theorize as “abstract kinship.”

To analyze these processes ethnographically, I link the culture of the episode to the habitual practices and basic assumptions of program participants. This focus highlights the “bottom-up” nature of the episode. A space like Yiddish Farm is not made into an instrument of abstract kinship, I argue, solely at the will of Jewish professionals, donors or anyone else with the means and desire to transform their wealth into a Jewish future. In the eyes of most philanthropists, after all, Yiddish has not proven to be the most productive Jewish medium for those agendas; and the farmers are still in the initial phases of attracting donor investment. Rather than instituted from the “top down” then, I argue that episodic Jewish culture at the Farm is developing through everyday practice—“growing,” that is, through the micro-level engagements and face-to-face interactions unfolding in Goshen.

An investigation of conscription at this micro-level involves attention to the histories individuals bring into Yiddishland. As articulated in his landmark *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977) Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of habitus offers a way to account for such historical effects. According to Bourdieu, it is through one’s embodied, culturally learned, and habitual dispositions that social structures are reproduced. For the college-aged and twenty-something Jews who are organizing and attending Yiddish Farm, how to behave and what to expect within an episodic Jewish program is part of what Bourdieu would call their American Jewish habitus. They bring this implicit knowledge to the Farm; that knowledge, I argue, is structuring the kind of social life unfolding there.

There is much to say about the numerous critiques regarding the potentially problematic assumptions embedded in how anthropologists have put theories of practice to use. These range from their tendency to locate the meaning of action in the interest of individuals (Ortner 1984) and the liberal theory of agency that is assumed to underwrite the practicing self (Keane 2003b, Marrow

2013), to how practice theory can close off possibilities for resistance and social change (de Certeau 1984). Scholars have suggested that practice theory tends to reproduce a monolithic and totalizing vision of social structure (Appadurai 1996). Particularly in cosmopolitan contexts (like the Greater New York City area in which Yiddish Farm is located), the notion of a practitioner who iteratively reifies hierarchical relationship of society writ large seems difficult to sustain on a theoretical level. As anthropologist Niko Besnier succinctly puts the matter, “particularly at the current moment in history, many people live in multiplex and shifting worlds that resist the structural holism underlying practice theory” (2012:493). The sense that worlds and communities are somehow less bounded than they once were underwrites Arjun Appadurai’s claim that the notion of culture-as-habitus is dissolving, making culture, “less what Pierre Bourdieu would have called a habitus (a tacit realm of reproducible habits and dispositions) and more an arena for conscious choice, justification and representation...” (1996:44).

Most scholars, though, have not been willing to jettison the notion that large-scale economic processes are embedded within and reproduced through embodied habits, tastes, and assumptions—even in contexts marked by so many rapid cultural “flows.” Such linkages become especially visible in projects focused on the remaking of physical space—particularly in contexts of cultural preservation, heritage making, and gentrification in which spaces are simultaneously restructured in both cultural and economic terms. Thus, Portouglu-Cook (2006) has shown how the “gentrification” of belly dance (its standardization and domestication) in Turkey has become an intimate part of neoliberal gentrification projects in contemporary Istanbul. By showing how, “the sanitization of movement and standardization of space [are] essential to local gentrifying efforts,” Portouglu-Cook analyzes how alterations in cultural practices mutually constitute alterations in Istanbul’s urban landscape (2006:636). Though less directly engaged than Portouglu-Cook with Bourdieuian notions of practice, Andrew Shryock’s analysis of Jordanian hospitality (or *karam*)

reflects a similar interest in the interplay between global heritage economies and intimate, moral ones. Shryock shows how efforts to commoditize karam as a part of an emergent tourist economy have not only displaced host-guest relationships to new, public spaces configured as “homes” (hotels, tourist sites, even electoral politics), but have also extended moral economies associated with karam to those spheres, remaking both in the process (2004a).

As a project that is still very much in its early stages of development, Yiddish Farm offers an excellent context in which to view how macro-level economic processes and micro-level practice come together in the remaking of particular spaces, while simultaneously foregrounding the tentativeness and vulnerability of such connections. First, the activists involved with Yiddish Farm are still attempting to work out the logistics of how best to settle the land in Goshen. Everything from the Farm’s physical infrastructure to religious practices and social relationships between participants have yet to be firmly established. Second, as an aspirational project aimed at creating a space where Yiddish can be spoken on a full-time, everyday basis, Yiddish Farm seeks to act upon, and ultimately to alter the habitual manner in which Yiddish devotees use the language—a manner the organizers see as suffering under the delimited and temporary conditions of language use. Third, social life at Yiddish Farm unfolds at the nexus of multiple American Jewish habituses. This is endemic to the very pedagogical philosophy that underwrites and distinguishes the Farm from other Yiddish language programs. Specifically, Yiddish Farm provides program participants and Yiddishists alike with access to native and near-native Yiddish speakers as mimetic models for their own language use. These include both the small, intimate community of non-Ultra-Orthodox Yiddishists in New York City and native, Yiddish speaking Ultra-Orthodox Jews in the greater New York City area. In such a context, the assumptions, implicit tastes, and habitual understandings that participants bring with them often become explicit matters of negotiation and contestation.

With the Farm's emergent state in mind, the metaphor of growth seems a particularly appropriate lens with which to consider the episode. Just as farm managers go to great lengths to control what will flourish in their fields, so too, do the activists around Yiddish Farm seek to implement a certain vision of Jewish life in Yiddish. But in tension with a farm manager's efforts, anything from the acidity of soil, seasonal variations, or profits from last year's crop can influence what is likely to grow in a particular environment. These contingencies, some predictable, others not, shape the materials required, what will be bought and sold, and thus the networks of people and goods that will animate a farm's social life. Yiddish sociality is similarly an object of cultivation on the farm. As the farmers literally lay the infrastructural foundations for agricultural growth, they simultaneously seek to manage space in a way where Yiddish can flourish—where a Yiddish speech community can take root and develop. But as I will show, the people participating in the farm project bring with them, in their embodied practices and assumptions about what a Yiddish Farm is, their own "seeds" of practice that are, (to paraphrase my colleague's question), "growing" at the Farm. They too are incrementally leaving their mark on Yiddish Farm's physical and social space.

In using practice theory to describe these processes, I aim also to highlight the need for alternative theoretical frameworks for mapping "Yiddishland." As I laid out in the introduction, most discussions of the Yiddish world tend to imagine performatively enacted Yiddish spaces as part of a wider territory described in primarily Yiddish terms. But given the fact that most non-Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speakers today are not raised as native speakers, our scholarly maps of the territory in which a Yiddish space is situated must account for the histories that people carry through Yiddishland. To the extent that these histories inevitably influence how people make sense of, behave within, and also help constitute those spaces, they have consequences for the territory of which a Yiddish space is a part. This is a point that Bourdieu makes elegantly:

It is significant that “culture” is sometimes described as a *map*; it is the analogy which occurs to an outsider who has to find his way around in a foreign landscape and who compensates for his lack of practical mastery, the prerogative of the native, by the use of a model of all possible routes. The gulf between this potential, abstract space, devoid of landmarks or any privileged center—like genealogies, in which ego is as unreal as the starting-point in a Cartesian space—and the practical space of journeys actually made, or rather journeys actually being made, can be seen from the difficulty we have in recognizing familiar routes on a map or town-plan until we are able to bring together the axes of the field of potentialities and the “system of axes linked unalterably to our bodies, and carried about with us wherever we go,” as Poincaré puts it, which structures practical space into right and left, up and down, in front and behind (1977:2).

To avoid reifying an abstract map of Yiddishland then, we must also pay attention to, “the journeys actually bring made.” These journeys, I argue, illuminate a variegated and politically contested cartography of Yiddishland—one traversed by a range of different people who bring their own proprioceptive awareness about where they are, where they are going, and where they have been. As they travel, they signal and also help enact a linkage between the particular space of Yiddish Farm and those spaces of American Jewish youth programs that have helped orient their Jewish routes.

Following Bourdieu I thus begin this chapter with my own journey to Yiddish Farm. After all, my own path did not result entirely from consulting a predetermined scholarly map of Yiddishland. Rather, I ended up there as a result of the contingencies entailed in being an ethnographer, particularly one whose project required a field. This would prove significant. It turns out of a similar experience of the field of Yiddishland in New York City, as I learned, also animated the desire on behalf of the Yiddish Farm activists to create this particular kind of Yiddish space. An account of my journey thus offers a reflection of the relationship of Yiddish Farm to other spaces of Yiddish practice in New York City.

Getting to Yiddish Farm or How to Follow “a map” in Yiddishland

Having dropped off my fellow ethnographer, I drove back to my Crown Heights apartment to pack for Yiddish Farm. I realized, as I climbed the stairs of my four-floor walk up, just how much I was looking forward to the kind of ongoing, immersive ethnographic research that access to Yiddish Farm's fields could provide. Over the past year in New York City, I had myself managed to assemble my own field of Yiddish engagements. Anywhere between two to five days a week I would attend different Yiddish-related events in the city: Yiddish performances, *leyen-* and *shmueskrayzn* (reading and speaking groups), and *svives* (informal get-togethers held in Yiddish), klezmer music performances, or lectures in or on Yiddish. Not unlike the demographics of Judaic Studies programs, these contexts of Jewish study were overwhelmingly, though not exclusively, attended by American Jews.

These nodes of practice oriented me in the space of Yiddishland in New York City. Yiddish reading groups took me to synagogue basements or private homes; *svives* to living rooms in Brooklyn and Manhattan apartments, and performances to cafes, bars and lecture halls. As I managed to carve out a Yiddish routine for myself, though, the ethnographic data I produced appeared increasingly repetitive in nature. All of these activities usually lasted between one and three hours and, at their completion, gave way to other, often non-Yiddish events. The weekly reading group I had attended at the Workmen's Circle came after a Yiddish class, and was sometimes followed by a meeting of local Jewish social justice organizers. A tai chi class met in the room adjacent to the Yiddish conversation circle I attended Wednesdays in the basement of an Upper West Side synagogue. In attending these events, I also noticed what Shandler observed in his own *Adventures in Yiddishland*: that what was read, spoken, or discussed in Yiddish was generally not as significant as the fact of using Yiddish itself. And over time, my fieldnotes in these spaces became shorter and more repetitive (2006a).

The iterative quality of Yiddishland came up continually in interviews and ethnography with Yiddishists, often in forms that Michael Hertzfeld would identify as “cultural intimacy”—that is, “the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality” (1997:3). Thus at music related events, for example, the person who inevitably wants to sing stock Yiddish folk songs like *tumbalalaika* or *oyfn pripetchik* is greeted by eye rolls and knowing glances that are perhaps as ritualized as the singing itself. A young Yiddish professor who had been active in Yiddishist circles in New York City in the 1990s put the matter in these terms: “sometimes I’m not sure when we sing those songs,” she confessed in half-laughter, “whether we’re keeping the language alive or nailing the coffin shut.” Such responses seemed to point to a constitutive aspect of the terms of Yiddishist sociality: that iteration was both implicit in Yiddish practice and something that being a Yiddishist meant striving to overcome.¹

I too, in my capacity as an ethnographer, was positioned within this cultural field. In coming to New York City from the Book Center, I also sought to move “deeper” into the Yiddish world: to really understand how cultivating Yiddish linguistic and cultural competencies was related to, and was important within, the greater context of the everyday lives of Yiddish devotees. After all, as so

¹ In addition to negative language ideologies that have typified Yiddish, in various ways, as a language confined to the Jewish past, and thus allegedly incompatible with modernity, science, or creative cultural production, other sensibilities are reflected here as well. First, most Yiddish devotees today are academics, artists, and other members of the “creative class” who work in fields of cultural production in which criteria of newness and innovation are prized. But more elementally, the fact that iteration seems parasitic on the life of Yiddish has as much to do with more widely circulating ideologies about language in the Euro-American West than those specifically related to Yiddish. That excessive repetition of stock folk songs among Yiddishists might seem problematic for individuals interested in keeping the language alive reflects the way in which decontextualized speech challenges normative conceptions of linguistic agency in which speech should reflect the meaning and intentions of its speakers. This is what Webb Keane has referred to as the metapragmatic “norm of sincerity” (2007, 2008). If too often performed in a repetitious manner, Yiddish performance seems to index less a speaker (and thus a community of speakers in which the language would live) and more an “animator” (Goffman 1981) of someone else’s discourse.

many people I interviewed maintained (in keeping with popular ideologies about the language) Yiddish engagements were, at their essence, about depth. This might be for them the depth of history offered by cultural roots made accessible through knowledge of the language, or the depth of feeling that would come from speaking, hearing, or reading a language identified so intensely with an essentialist understanding of the Jewish heart or soul. But, in tension with these ideas about depth, the iterative and self-consciously crafted nature of Yiddish engagements and practices created the experience of a semiotic gap between one's inner-self (where the "heart" ostensibly lies) and one's performed Yiddish self cultivated in Yiddish classes, reading groups, svives or otherwise (see Keane 2007). The presumption to nativeness encoded within Yiddish language ideologies seemed contradicted by the sense among some Yiddishists, so many of them non-native speakers, that Yiddish speech was always being animated by another self, one defined by its distance from Yiddish roots—that is, by the metalinguistic quality of being a performer. Arthur, a twenty-something secular Yiddishist explained to me in an interview: "Maybe that's what you're saying when you say "vi zogt men" (how do you say [in Yiddish]), he reflected as he sipped coffee with me during an interview in a trendy Brooklyn café. "You're saying, 'I'm not really this, what I really am is a financial planner living out in the suburbs.'" For someone who had just described himself to me as a "serious city person," the self-referential bite of contradiction between his Yiddish self and what he "really" is reflects the sense of separation from one's "real" self that for many can accompany the presentation of a Yiddish one. Of course, speaking any second or third language can involve the performance of another identity. But not all linguistic performances entail the ideological presumption that the speaker aspires to nativeness. Arthur's class-based comparison between the animating financial planner and the animated Yiddish voice suggests a concern that a truly authentic Yiddish self is ultimately beyond the reach of even the most devoted Yiddishist.

As I moved from Yiddish reading group to lecture to performance, returning afterward, like my fellow participants, to my own apartment (if not in the suburbs, at least in a gentrifying neighborhood in Brooklyn) I increasingly had the sense that ethnography in Yiddishland constituted ethnography among performed selves (see also, Shandler 2006a:145-154). If “behind” the animated Yiddish self is a suburban financial planner, then to move into those spaces “beyond” the explicitly formulated Yiddish event meant beginning an entirely different ethnography. Furthermore, I was also realizing just how autoethnographic crossing that boundary could be. The selves “animating” Yiddish speech seemed similar in their engagements to my own ethnographic project. Those Yiddishists my age were often themselves graduate students, artists, activists and other creative types, often from the kinds of suburban middle and upper class American Jewish backgrounds in which I grew up. The older generations of participants in reading groups could just as easily have been my parents’ or grandparents’ peers.

Only after I had finished my summer at Yiddish Farm, a full year after beginning ethnographic work at New York City’s Yiddish events and informal gatherings, did I realize I had, in fact, partially misunderstood the Yiddish terrain I was mapping. In attending so much to the problems of *correspondence* between the signifier of the Yiddish self and the signified, authentic self “behind” it, I failed to properly analyze a constitutive aspect of the Yiddish events I had been attending. That is, I overlooked the preparatory nature of these spaces. This is what came through in an interview I conducted with “Bradley,” the organizer of a *leyenkrayz* I had attended weekly at the Workmen’s Circle. When I asked him to describe why he and the other participants attend the reading group, this is what he had to say:

Bradley: Okay. So I used to play in a rehearsal band in [city]. Occasionally we performed too, but primarily the activity consisted of meeting on Friday mornings at a nursing home or the Jewish Community Center. And the leader at the time [Morris Fineman] would bring in a collection of charts. Whenever a local bandleader died we’d inherit the library. So he had this massive library of stocked charts from the 20’s

to the 50's of dance band music ... you know for 17 pieces, 18 pieces. And we got together, we'd sit down for an hour and a half and he'd pass out a chart, we'd play it through. If it was a simple chart we'd play it through once. If there was a passage that was difficult we'd go back and rehearse that or play the whole chart again if we liked it, you know whatever. And it would be three years before we'd see the same chart again. And the whole idea was just to keep up practice at sight-reading music you know? Because that's one skill that you want to have and it keeps you sharper with the music.

I was never, I was strictly third chair, I was never a jazzier; I never had a particularly good lip. I'm a trumpet player. But I wound up becoming a very good sight-reader of music because of that band. I knew what's going on with it. It keeps you on your toes with music. And so I think that that was an element there with the *leyenkrayz*

Me: You mean...

Bradley: ...with any *leyenkrayz*

Me: ...specifically with Yiddish?

Bradley: Yes. I think that all of us there are looking to sharpen our skills.

For some people in the reading groups, the pleasure of practice is enough. But for others, their efforts to cultivate Yiddish competencies were part of other emergent projects for which a reading group or *svive* was a context to build skills. Those projects varied from person to person. Some, like mine, were academic in nature; others were musical or theatrical. But, by allowing us, “to sharpen our skills,” such spaces allowed people to cultivate capacities necessary for potential future Yiddish projects down the line.

By treating the Yiddish terrain I was researching as a *destination*, then, I was missing the important propulsory role that these sites played in the projects their participants were conducting. In the self-consciously formulated Yiddish reading groups and conversation circles, moving “beyond” the selves populating them was not only a matter of crossing a boundary between the performed Yiddish self and the animating one—of “following the people” from reading groups to more private confines. Moving deeper, as it were, into Yiddishland also meant following people’s Yiddish projects. To build upon Bradley’s metaphor, it meant seeing the connection between the

iterative practice of learning to sight-read sheet music, and the “performances” that might come out of these practices in the future. In and through projects people navigated their way through Yiddishland.

If I initially struggled to understand this aspect of Yiddishland in New York City, it is because I did not initially understand my own Yiddish project as preparatory for something else. Understanding a *leyenkrayz*, for example, only as a site unto itself—as its own performance of Yiddishland—I missed the fact that I, too, was performatively enacting a certain route through that imaginary place. What I understood as a repetitive quality of these sites was not their most defining feature. Rather, iteration characterized these sites because they were also where skills for future Yiddish projects were always being cultivated—were always existing *in potentia*.

Yiddish Farm as a Serious Yiddish Space; or, Scaling up Yiddish Encounters

Though I did not know it at the time, the research I conducted in reading groups or Yiddish events, or the lectures and performances I went to at YIVO or in cafes in Manhattan—even my decision to live with Eli, a friend and Yiddishist—were retrospectively preparatory in nature. In these and other spaces, and through the relationships cultivated there, I had the opportunity to sharpen my own Yiddish skills, and to meet and build relationships with the Yiddish farmers. If I maintain here that I did not see ethnography in New York as preparatory for Yiddish Farm specifically, it is to highlight the highly contingent nature of ethnography in Yiddishland. Indeed, I could have pursued a number of different projects that were emerging within the Yiddish scenes I frequented; I might have followed, for example, the klezmer musicians, translators, or older Jews in search of Yiddish roots whom I also saw and befriended at reading groups, performances and other Yiddish functions. A decision on my part, then, to pursue an alternative Yiddish project would have rendered a different “map” of Yiddishland.

My attraction to the particular project of Yiddish Farm stemmed in part from my own approach to, and desires for, ethnography in Yiddish New York. As I made my way through the self-consciously created Yiddish zones in the city, the interviews I conducted with previous generations of Yiddishists provided a comparative foil against which to historically compare and make sense of the relationships that were shaping my own experience in Yiddishland. In light of the importance of Yiddish institutional spaces in nurturing the creative projects and social networks of previous generations of Yiddishists, I was struck but what I theorize in the introduction as the “contraction” of public and organizational spaces specifically devoted to Yiddish in New York City. Like Alan’s attraction to “another world” in which to cultivate Yiddish competencies, so too was I searching for a space where I might cultivate a thicker, face-to-face description of Yiddish.

This desire, born out of my experience of Yiddish spaces in New York City, seemed to align my ethnographic project with the revitalization project of Yiddish Farm’s organizers. At one of my first meetings with the Yiddish Farm activists at Yidish-Vokh, just prior to my move to New York City, one participant, “Avrom,” made explicit that a similar feeling about the limitations of Yiddish space in New York City animated their own work. I had just come to the week-long Yiddish retreat with Eli, from a Yiddish language program in Vilnius, Lithuania. Avrom, for his part, had just completed the Yiddish Farm pilot program, held on Kayam Farm at the “Pearlstone Center” in Reisterstown, Maryland—a popular destination for American Jewish conferences and synagogue retreats. For two weeks that summer, prior to Yidish-Vokh, a select number of yugntruf members and other Yiddish students (the majority of whom were Jewish) gathered to live in cabins, work in Kayam’s fields, and assess the possibilities of a Yiddish immersion program built around farming. Sitting on the porch one afternoon, Avrom explained to me part of the problem with Yiddish in New York City that Yiddish Farm sought to address: “In Yiddish circles,” he explained “When people get together and speak Yiddish, they only speak about Yiddish itself. But what’s the point of

that? That's not a culture, and it's not a people (*folk*).” At Yiddish Farm, he went on to explain, the goal was to create a new center that could function as a literal home for a small cadre of Yiddishists, while offering education programs and events that could serve as a resource for the wider world of current and future Yiddish speakers.

Over the year that followed, alongside research in New York City itself, I would travel to Yiddish Farm to attend a Shabbos weekend, a trip, or activity the Yiddish farmers were conducting. Its founders Naftuli and Yisroel were, at the time, living at the Farm; but they were very much within the orbit of both Yiddish and Jewish cultural spaces in New York City. I would see one or both of them at the parties held in apartments by yugntruf members, at YIVO lectures, at the independently organized pot-luck Shabbos dinners with other Jewish twenty-somethings, or at major Jewish events, especially those targeted at our shared age demographic. Eli and I also began holding Yiddish events of our own, or simply gathering friends for Shabbos dinners where Yiddishists would be well represented.

Gradually it became clear that, as the young activists orbited through Jewish and Yiddish New York City, they were not simply socializing. They were also drawing on communities of primarily twenty-something Jews to help construct a core base of participants who might be active in the creation of the new space of Yiddish Farm. They were, in other words, laying a social foundation for their project. In concert with these foundations, on the select Shabbos weekends that I traveled to Goshen, I realized that they were laying a linguistic foundation as well. Each Yiddish Farm trip or event provided an opportunity to further assert the fact that Yiddish Farm was a *Yiddisbland*, one in which guests would have to conform their linguistic choices to the values of the Farm. Going to Yiddish Farm, as one individual put it, “is like going to a foreign country. Only everyone there speaks Yiddish.” In the sense that, by traveling to the Farm, one enters a “foreign country,” one can

hear echoes of Alan's memories that, when he entered the Bund's offices, he too was entering "a different world."

For Naftuli in particular, this affective orientation to Yiddish space (one described earlier as an orientation of "seriousness") is a shared family project. In addition to his family's history of Yiddish activism, in Yiddish New York today, Naftuli Ejdelman's family members are involved in a number of Yiddish social and organizational spaces. Naftuli's mother, Rukhl Schaechter, is an editor and writer for the Yiddish Forward, where Itzik Gottesman, his uncle, until recently worked as well. Binyumin Schaechter directs the Jewish People's Philharmonic Orchestra, in which other members of the Schaechters participate. All are regulars at Yidish-Vokh, lectures at YIVO, leyenkrayzn and other Yiddish events. At more informal events that make up so much of the non-Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish world in New York City, if one does not encounter a member of the family, he or she is almost certain to run into someone acquainted with a Schaechter.

These kinds of intimate social networks helped facilitate the actual development of Yiddish Farm. Prior to beginning the program in Goshen, Yiddish Farm acquired grant money from the Naomi Kadar foundation, the Chaim Schwartz Foundation, the Aaron and Sonia Fishman Foundation for Yiddish Culture and the Benyumen Shekhter Foundation for the Advancement of Standard Yiddish in order to conduct the pilot Yiddish Farm program at Kayam. In comparison to the kind of funding sources that organizations like the Yiddish Book Center vie for, these are small, philanthropic organizations. A number of them are connected to families that are part of the same close, intimate Yiddish world out of which Yiddish Farm emerged. The Binyumen Shekhter foundation, for example, is named for the great-grandfather of Naftuli, while the Fishman foundation is associated with the family of Joshua Fishman, the famous linguist and Yiddishist who had once lived alongside the Schaechters and other Yiddishist families in the Bronx.

The land in Goshen itself is similarly connected to the world of cultural Yiddishism. It is leased to the young Yiddish Farmers by the Jochnowitz family, which has a long history of involvement within the Yiddish world. Eve Jochnowitz, daughter of farm owner George Jochnowitz, frequently lectured at KlezKamp, has taught Yiddish courses at the YIVO Institute, and attends Yiddish events in New York City, as well as Yidish-Vokh during the summers. She also co-hosts a cooking show in Yiddish produced by the Yiddish Forverts with Rukhl Schaechter. George Jochnowitz, a linguist with a focus on Jewish languages, and Judeo-Italian in particular, grew up working summer weekends on the farm after his family purchased it in 1942. From his own autobiographical writings and interviews, farming appears to be something that his parents did recreationally. As a full-time occupation they owned a machine parts factory in New York City that specialized in airplane components, a profitable business particularly during the Second World War. Jochnowitz credits his own childhood experiences on the farm with inspiring his interest in dialects and his ultimate decision to pursue a career in linguistics (Jochnowitz 2010, 2013). The agricultural community in and around Goshen during Jochnowitz's childhood had been home to Polish onion farmers, as well as German Jewish cattlemen who spoke Western Yiddish, an exceedingly rare dialect of the language.

From an historical standpoint then, Yiddish Farm is materially, familialy and ideologically a product of the intimate world of cultural Yiddishism in New York City. For Naftuli, it is inspired by the work of his grandfather, who himself was instrumental in developing many of the key spaces of Yiddishland. In a 2013 article in *The Jewish Week*, which names Ejdelman as one of the 36 most influential, “young visionaries reshaping and broadening the Jewish community” (Robinson 2013), under 36 years of age, the author observes that, “in all senses, Ejdelman has entered the family business” (Brown 2013). Furthermore, in a very concrete material sense, in the use of the Jochnowitz family farm as the site of the emergent project, Yiddish Farm can also be understood in

terms of cultural and linguistic transmission: it makes available the very physical resources held by families of Yiddishists to help cultivate future Yiddish cultural production and activism.

Particularly against the backdrop of the contraction of secular Yiddish institutions described in the introduction, Yiddish Farm can indeed be understood as a continuation of the possibility that one can walk into a Yiddish place in New York and enter “a different world.” It is, in a sense, an effort to “scale up” Yiddish engagements—increasing the space and time available to non-Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speakers. If, as described in chapter two, the ability to strive towards greater degrees of Yiddish engagement was part of what a Yiddish “framework” made available to Yiddishists like Alan, then we can similarly understand Yiddish Farm as a *serious* Yiddish space.

Yiddish Farm reflects both ideological and economic changes in the nature of Yiddishland in the particular, local context of New York City and its surrounding areas. If Alan and Alexis described older, secular native Yiddish speakers as mimetic models against which to craft a serious, secular Jewish identity, Yiddish Farm has described itself as, “a Shomer-Shabbos organic farm ... that hosts Yiddish educational programs with the goal of teaching Yiddish and fostering unity and respect between Hasidic and non-Hasidic Jews” (Yiddish Farm n.d.). On the one hand, this orientation reflects the particular biographies of the Farm’s founders. In addition to being socialized into the Yiddish world Naftuli, for example, grew up attending a modern Orthodox day school near his Riverdale home in the Bronx. Yisroel, though growing up in a conservative Jewish milieu in suburban New York, had like my housemate Eli, become increasingly traditional in his religious observance.

When I started taking trips to Yiddish Farm during the year prior to the program, I began to get a sense of the work that Yisroel had put into building connections not only with less traditional Yiddishists like myself, but also with Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speaking Jewish communities of native Yiddish speakers. For years, he had cultivated ties with Ultra-Orthodox Jews in Brooklyn and

nearby Kiryas Joel. In addition to personal motivations for doing so, practical possibilities emerged from these relationships as well. The farmers have sought, for example, to hire part-time workers from these communities to help them during the planting seasons, to cultivate business relationships with grocery stores in Ultra-Orthodox communities, and to offer the Farm as a site for potential Hasidic retreats, festivals and celebrations. This engagement paralleled Yisroel's own process of becoming more religiously observant—something about which he's consciously aware and at times commented upon. For example, when a rebbe from a small Hasidic group in Brooklyn came to visit the Farm, it happened, as Yisroel explained over a meal one afternoon, because, "he can see that Yiddish brings people to *Yiddishkayt*."²

The religiously observant nature of the Farm, however, transcends personal biography. With the aging of secular native Yiddish speakers, some Yiddishists have grown interested in the potential that Ultra-Orthodox Jews hold for the vitality of Yiddish language and culture. As Itzik Gottesman has written, "[d]emographics tell us that future Yiddish speakers and readers will come overwhelmingly from the Hasidic world. Everyone in the Yiddish cultural world knows this and is thinking about how to accommodate them in years to come without compromising our 'secular' inner core" (Gottesman 2007). The Yiddish Forverts itself, once staunchly secular, has now begun publishing a website directed at native Yiddish speakers from Ultra-Orthodox backgrounds. Entitled "*Yidish mit an Aleph*," (Yiddish with an 'aleph') a reference to the divergent, non-standardized orthographies of Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speaking Jews, the new venue constitutes a forum for Hasidic Jews to publish for a wider audience. The effort can be understood as an attempt by the

² The connotations of the term "Yiddishkayt" vis-à-vis Jewish identity, practice, and religiosity vary depending on who uses the expression and in what context. Self-described secular or less religiously observant Jews generally use it to refer to an (implicitly Ashkenazi) Jewish cultural essence underwriting any number of engagements regardless of one's religiosity. In this case however, because it is the lack of religious observance that would ostensibly keep Hasidic Jews from visiting the farm, the form of Yiddishkayt referenced is one in which religious observance is implicitly central. See chapter six for further ethnography and analysis on this matter.

Forward to participate in a wider array of Yiddish-language facebook pages, twitter feeds and websites created by Hasidim, and that in their publicness constitute a quasi-shared discursive arena for contact between Yiddish communities.

Though in more ephemeral settings than the Farm, such online Yiddish spaces can find face-to-face equivalents in New York City's environs as well. One particularly important meeting point for Yiddishists and Hasidim has been the ad-hoc, weekly gathering known as "chulent." Named for the thick, bean stew traditionally served on Shabbos, chulent is a kind of cross-cultural Jewish borderland that could only exist in a place with as diverse and variegated a Jewish life as New York City. Since its beginnings in the late 1990s, the event has drawn together for conversation, food and performance Ultra-Orthodox Jews, hipsters, homeless individuals, hangers on, and others who often understand themselves as on the borders of their communities. A number of non-Ultra-Orthodox Yiddishists have frequented these gatherings as well, forming relationships with native Yiddish speakers outside of the highly intentional Yiddish cultural spheres generally associated with the Yiddish world.³

Yiddish Farm emerges in part from this wider array of efforts by some Yiddishists to formulate social connections with Ultra-Orthodox communities in New York City and include them within the relevant orienting sites that constitute the terrain of Yiddishland. The young farmers are especially interested in attracting Ultra-Orthodox native speakers who are to some extent on the boundaries of their communities. These individuals belong to subsets of the Ultra-Orthodox world generally labeled, "off the derekh (path)" (sometimes described as "OTD", referring to those who have left the community) or "orthoprax Jews" who are said to, "go through the motions," but do

³ A number of journalists have discussed Chulent in ways that often exoticize Ultra-Orthodox Jews and romanticize the particular borderland it has come to represent. For one example see, Bleyer (2007). For a more nuanced and subtle ethnographic account as well as a critique of more popular depictions, see Boyarin (2008).

not believe. Among this subset, the ideal participant for Yiddish Farm is what I sometimes heard referred to among non-Ultra-Orthodox participants as “di rikhtike mentshn”—in the sense of the “appropriate people.” The “right people,” though not fully committed to the Jewish communities in which they grew up, were still traditional in the sense of being, “ok mit Shabbos un kashrus” [ok with observing Shabbat and kosher dietary laws].

In this level of comfort with traditional Judaism, these individuals differed from the militantly secular, former ultra-Orthodox Jews that I often heard Yiddishists associate with the non-profit organization “Footsteps.” An organization in New York City, Footsteps supports Ultra-Orthodox Jews who seek to leave the Ultra-Orthodox world. This often means providing them with a community of likeminded people to create a support network. It also means helping them acquire the practical skills necessary to acclimate to the secular world—including learning or improving one’s English language skills, acquiring a GED, and otherwise surviving outside of their previous communities. “Footsteps mentshn,” who the Yiddish Farm Yiddishists had encountered in New York City, were generally considered too hostile to traditional forms of Judaism, and sometimes even to the Yiddish language, to be a part of the kind of community the organizers were seeking to create.

Rooting the Episode at Yiddish Farm

Emerging out of a critique of the delimited nature of Yiddish space in the city, and drawing on the ideological, material, and social resources available within Yiddish communities in New York, the project of Yiddish Farm is rooted within New York’s particular Yiddish environment. Yet, as I began to deepen my engagement with the Farm, I heard alternative contextualizations as well. These seemed somewhat closer to home for me, more intimately familiar than the “other world” or “foreign country” described above. “One of the reasons I wanted to go to Yiddish Farm,” Malka, a

graduate of years of Zionist summer camp and a participant in a Yiddish Farm education program told me, “is because I really wanted to have another summer camp experience.” “How’s Yiddish camp going?” friends would ask us throughout the Yiddish Farm summer program. “When do you get back from Yiddish camp?” they insisted, even after countless attempts to explain to them that the seven-week summer program at Yiddish *Farm* was not, in fact, Jewish summer *camp*.

From the moment I arrived in Goshen for the summer, I saw indications that the broader culture of episodic Jewish programming was incrementally shaping sociality on the Farm. As I found myself again driving down the dirt road, passing the bungalow homes just prior to the main entrance, I thought of myself less as arriving for the first time to begin a new episode, than as returning to a place already somewhat familiar. But, as I exited the car and approached the door I could immediately sense the difference between my own daily life and the environment I was entering. For one, Brooklyn had been brutally hot that summer, but the air around me was cool and crisp, and it was pleasantly quiet outside. As I stepped onto the front deck, and then through the door to the large indoor porch that ran the expanse of the house, I was greeted by “Rivke,” a tall woman in her 20’s with short hair. It wasn’t whom I had expected. On previous visits to Yiddish Farm throughout the year, the vast majority of visitors had been young men. Furthermore, I thought I had arrived early; I expected to meet Yisroel or Naftuli, or perhaps another yugntruf member who was friends with the two Yiddish Farmers. I’d never seen this person before.

Whatever I thought I knew of Yiddish Farm, I quickly realized that I was going to have to check my experiences at the door. I greeted Rivke warmly, but she was all business. My intention was to introduce myself, and settle in. But Rivke, understandably treating me as a newcomer, had another goal. She was eager to familiarize me to the logistics of the house and the program. I told her that there was no need, and that I’d been here before; but she didn’t seem interested in my claims to familiarity. As she began her introduction to life on the farm, I realized that much had

changed since my last visit. There was, for example, a new kosher dish system in the kitchen that I, with my head uncovered, could not be assumed to understand. As Rivke explained to me where meat and milk dishes go, and the correct non-absorbent sponges to use for Shabbos, I noticed for the first time the *tsitsit* fringes flowing from the bottom of her shirt at the waist.⁴ We walked from the kitchen into the main room, which I learned was not only a classroom, but also our dining and living room. Rivke went on to instruct me on the rules and best strategies for tasks as basic as bathing and sleeping:

“The main house,” she explained, “is also Yisroel and Naftuli’s home so we have to be out by 10 at night so they can get to sleep. We’re all using one shower, too. So what I do is shower just after lunch—when we come in from working in the fields, and before Yiddish classes in the afternoon.”

“We try and keep the living space clean here,” she tells me in Yiddish as we walked back into the kitchen. I was again struck by the “here” and the presumed social distance it established between Yiddish Farm and myself.

“Oh that’s definitely important to me as well” I tried to assure her.

“Well that’s really good to know,” she answered. “We’ve got a lot of visitors coming through here and it’s really important that we present ourselves well.”

I paused at her comment. During my previous trips to Yiddish Farm, the visitors were the ones (or so I assumed) who were, or who would be, doing the “presenting” to others. To whom, I wanted to ask her, would we be presenting ourselves and who made up the “we” who would be hosting visitors? Rather than ask, though, I decided instead to acquiesce to my new position as

⁴ *Tsitsit* are knotted tassels worn by observant Jews on the four corners of the “*talis*” or prayer shawl. According to Jewish law, the commandment to wear them is reserved for men; and thus in most observant Jewish communities, one would not see women wearing them. Thus, Rivke’s observance of the ritual also expressed to me that she maintained an egalitarian vision of how Jewish law is applied.

newcomer and inquire about finances instead. “Food is included in the cost of the program.” She told me, “And you can definitely live here without spending any more money. But they aren’t rich,” she continued in reference of Naftuli and Yisroel, “so I try not to take advantage. For things like school supplies, I buy my own.”

As I made my way to the single occupancy camping tent that would be my home for the next two months, I realized that although I might have become comfortable with the organizers around Yiddish Farm during the year, I was now a newcomer to the particular episodic space that Rivke had come to know. Rivke, I learned, had been there for the beginner’s program the previous session. She was herself ba'al-teshuva, having become more observant in part due to an Israel trip she took during college sponsored by an Ultra-Orthodox outreach organization that runs religious identity tours for young, non-Orthodox Jewish students. Having grown interested in Yiddish in part after reading *Outwitting History*, and having met friends in college involved in Yiddish, she decided that she would spend the summer at Yiddish Farm before beginning a year long program at an egalitarian yeshiva in New York City. Something else struck me as well—her Yiddish. Rivke had arrived at the beginner’s program a month ago without a single word beyond what most American Jews already know. But already, she was able to communicate well. I had studied Yiddish in multiple summer programs, completing an advanced class in one, and her ease with speaking was already equal to my own ability.

I started unpacking my things. The tent stood adjacent to a makeshift fire-pit and, directly next to the pit, a large tipi that had been erected during the previous session. The tipi, I later learned, was purchased for practical reasons—to provide an inexpensive social space for the participants of the summer sessions. However, the critic in me could not help but consider the implicit linkage to the Indian cultural reenactments that are so much a part of the history of American summer camping. In the tent, I found a small plastic shelving unit, and a former occupant’s empty candy

wrappers. I settled in, wrote down some notes from my meeting with Rivke, and prepared for a quick walk around the farmland. It was beautiful. Looking out over the hay field in the cool breeze, with farmland in the distance, I got that feeling I used to get in Oconomowoc, Wisconsin at Olin Sang Ruby Union Institute, where I was a summer camper for six years, plus a seventh summer on a camp-organized Israel trip.



Figure 13. A tipi, set up during Yiddish Farm's first session in Goshen.

In addition to the small main house and the three bungalows, the 227-acre territory of Yiddish Farm consists of five fields. I headed further away from the house and toward the farmland. Straight ahead I could see a fork in the road. On the right, a road scooped down and rose again, leading to the rocky earth of the “upper field” (*Eybershte Feld*). The left took the visitor on a path

between the two hay fields (*aleph* and *beyz*), and down a hill to what had become dubbed the “*shvartze erd*” or “black earth.” Black earth refers to the color of the nutrient rich soil of the lower field, which had once been the site of a glacier. In comparison to the drier soil of the upper field, the *shvartze erd* was quickly identified by the farmers as the ideal place on which to grow Yiddish Farm’s crops. It was thus there that a greenhouse was initially constructed, and plans developed to plant garlic—which, as the soil tests had shown, would grow especially well in that area.



Figure 14. Directional signs at Yiddish Farm.

After walking around for a while, I returned to the house to discover that Yisroel had arrived. He’d gone to pick up a young Hasidic *bokber* (unmarried male), Herschel, who couldn’t have been older than 20. Yisroel and I hug hello, and he introduced me, but Herschel had little to say.

Herschel, Yisroel explained, had come potentially to work on the farm for the summer; he was not introduced as a program participant. “I’m really looking forward to this session,” Yisroel told me, “it’s the second session, but it’s the real beginning of Yiddish Farm.” This is because it would be the first session, he explained, where everyone would really be able to communicate in Yiddish full time. “There’s going to be a ‘family meeting’ up at the house later,” he told me before heading back into the field, “and then the next morning we’ll start work.”

Later on we gathered ourselves around the large dining room table for the family meeting. It was a small group, which was not surprising given the fact that it was Yiddish Farm’s first summer in Goshen. I took a seat next to Naftuli, joining Rivke, Ester, Yisroel, and Dovid-Leib, an 82 year-old Chilean Jew, a native-born Yiddish speaker and professor of sociology who apparently learned about the Farm online. By all accounts, his participation was both unexpected and would become highly limited (his age preventing him from participating fully both in farm work, and in the younger community of participants.) Not in attendance, but arriving later would be Eli, my housemate from Brooklyn. In the weeks to come, reflecting on the stereotypical nature of the group that had made its way to Yiddish Farm for the summer, Eli would often comment that we were “right out of central casting”—the old, Yiddish speaking Jew, the feminist-religious yeshiva student, a number of ba’alei teshuva, and of course, the grad student. There would be other characters too, who would pay smaller tuition amounts to attend shorter episodes: a young nature enthusiast who would stay for a couple weeks, a young married couple who would come for a week. There were also neighbors who helped out with work around the farm. And of course, there were our frequent guests for Shabbos. With the exception of Dovid-Leib and the neighbors, most of these people reflected the age demographic of the Farm’s founders.

Looking around the room I also realize something else—with the exception of Rivke and Dovid-Leib, all the people in the room shared previous social ties—often mediated by other Jewish

programs. Ester and Eli knew each other from Adamah, and Eli first met Naftuli on the latter's visit to the summer farm-program in part to hang out with Ester; Yisroel and Eli from Adamah and New York Yiddish events; Eli and myself from the Yiddish Book Center's summer program. Even Yiddish Farm's founders, as noted earlier, are not only the products of the secular Yiddish world, but also of bourgeois American Jewish institutional culture more generally. Raised in the suburbs and urban suburbs (Yisroel on Long Island, Naftuli in Riverdale, respectively), both are to a certain extent the products of American Jewish youth programming. Naftuli previously worked as an environmental educator for children at the Teva Learning Center. Teva, which is Hebrew for "nature" a Jewish environmental education initiative, describes its mission, as "immersing participants in the natural world and providing structured activities to sensitize participants to nature's rhythms, help them develop a more meaningful relationship with nature, and deepen their own connection to Jewish practices and traditions" (Teva n.d.). Yisroel is a graduate of the Adamah farming program located at the Isabella Friedman Jewish retreat center in Connecticut. Later in the summer, the Yiddish Farm participants, myself included, would travel together on our own "adventure." But rather than take us exclusively through Yiddishland, ours included a visit to Adamah and Isabella Friedman on our way to the Yiddish Book Center, where Naftuli was scheduled to speak to the Book Center's young summer students about attending Yiddish Farm in the future.

Despite these previous social ties that connected the group, though, if this was a family meeting, the familial ties did not depend on the preexisting relationships between participants. Rather, the meeting initiated us into the community we would be creating with each other over the course of the summer program on the Farm. As a ritual of introduction, these kinds of meetings are key features of any number of intentional communities created within similar programs and immersive experiences—Yiddish or otherwise. Within such programs, they serve an important

distinguishing function; in this case, they marked off a boundary between the relationships we hold outside the space of the program, and those relevant to the episodic space being created on the Farm. Here, the meeting established the authority of the two program leaders within the “family” group, while simultaneously constituting the episodic space as one in which, with our cooperation, a more thorough, more encompassing engagement with Yiddish could be achieved.

The two young leaders were clearly highly fluent in such rituals. “I grew up going to a lot of Yiddish events and programs,” Naftuli explained to the group, “and would hear people speak broken (*gebakete*) Yiddish.” When he met Yisroel, he told us, they thought about starting a Yiddish Farm so that people could really speak the language as a language of everyday life. “Yiddish Farm is based on three core values (*ikrim*),” he went on, getting up from the table to take a framed picture from the wall that he explained was Yiddish Farm’s founding declaration. “A broader role for the Yiddish language...so that means that Yiddish is not just a language of music that people don’t really speak, or a secret language spoken so others can’t understand, but a language that’s a normal language that people really use to communicate.” The other two values, he continued, were “unity between Jews” (a value that Yiddish Farm participants would sometimes gloss as unity between Yiddish speakers) and “sustainable living.”

Yisroel introduced himself as the farm manager at Yiddish Farm. He described growing up in a Conservative-Jewish suburban community in Long Island. He talked about going to college in California, participating in Yiddish events and organizations there and spending time with older Jews before moving back to New York City to be in a richer Yiddish environment. He took classes with a Yiddishist active in *yugntruf*, participated in Yiddish organizations and events before realizing—in an echo and critique of Shandler’s thesis—that Yiddish had become a kind of “meta-Yiddish” in which conversations tend to focus only on the language itself. Yisroel strove for something else, something, to quote the title of a manifesto he composed on the future of Yiddish, *mamoshisdik* (real

or tangible). “I wanted to think about what could create bonds between people where Yiddish didn’t have to just be about Yiddish itself. There’s obviously the military,” he said, with a half smile. (Clearly, he was not interested in setting up a Yiddish militia), “but I’m not really a military kind of guy, and that’s not really appropriate for Jews. But there’s also a farm. At a farm,” he went on, “there is a field, a hen house, a house with housework to be done, and from doing all of these things that a farm requires, it might be possible to build a context for speaking Yiddish that isn’t just about Yiddish itself.”

Each morning we woke up around 6:00 in order to participate in the kind of work that Yisroel had described in the family meeting, and out of which he hoped a full time, future Yiddish speaking community would grow. And indeed, to prepare for that future much work had to be done. Earlier that fall, on one of my visits, Yisroel had taken me on a tour of the Farm’s land. As we walked through the lower field, after explaining the work required to clear the waters that had flooded portions of the field earlier that year, he reflected on the difference between Goshen and the previous test-site of Kayam. Kayam had possessed relatively comfortable cabins, a nearby dining hall, and a fully functional farm from day one. But “Goshen,” Yisroel explained, “is a work in progress.” They had worked tirelessly throughout the year to build up the infrastructure to where it was, and they had accomplished much. Each visit to the Farm over the year had been an experience of witnessing a gradual process of domestication—of making Yiddish Farm into a habitable Yiddish home. Yisroel in particular, who lived on the land full time, knew intimately how much work was required, “just to begin to make it [the farm] livable (*mentshlekh*).”

As the program got underway, the precise vision of livability appeared far from determined. Kinks existed in the rudiments of everyday communal living—scheduling our time, or cooking and cleaning for example. This state of emergence was also reflected in the very material conditions of the Farm. For example, because the main house was also Naftuli and Yisroel’s personal space the act

of cleaning the kitchen, bathroom or the common space of the episodic group often overlapped with cleaning up the personal space of the program leaders. In its first summer, the Farm had not yet acquired the funds necessary to more clearly build up and differentiate its physical space according to recognizable distinctions of public and private, staff and participants, and so forth. As we cleared out thick brush from areas that could one day be used for programming or perhaps an informal “hang out space,” or shellacked directional signs to be hung around the farm, our very work seemed in part to be laying the groundwork for future episodic Yiddish communities that would make their way to Goshen.



Figure 15. Yiddish Farm program participants taking down the green house.

Yiddish Farm was also in the middle of routinizing the logistics of the farming operation. As mentioned above, the original plan was to grow crops mainly in the dark earth of the shvartze erd. But the fall's heavy rains eventually meant that the lower field had to be abandoned for the summer. Moving the earth was also out. In Southern Orange County in which Goshen is located, it is illegal physically to transfer the specific kind of rich soil that makes up the lower field. At one point in the summer, then, rather than growing vegetables in the greenhouse, which had been constructed by volunteers previously that fall, we found ourselves taking it apart and moving it to the upper field.

Since conducting ethnography in 2012, the farmers have made further strides developing their farming infrastructure and farm business.⁵ But most of the work this first year on the organization's new land would take place on the Upper Field under challenging circumstances. The Upper Field required a great deal of maintenance, but was still salvageable, serving as something of a test site in which to see what grew best on that particular plot of land. The nearby well was broken; so for much of the summer Yisroel had to bring water to the field in his large pick-up truck before later managing to fix the well. In addition to these complications, stones of various sizes were scattered across and deeply embedded within the earth; we often spent much time clearing these rocks from the field in order to run the weed-wacker between the rows of crops

Despite previous friendships and a mutual commitment to Yiddish among our group, at times, the heavy, tiresome work of taking down and relocating the greenhouse or picking rocks out of the soil led to moments of frustration. And in these moments, the assumptions about space, work, and roles drawn from expectations about what episodic Jewish community should look like often bubbled to the surface. This is exactly what unfolded one Friday morning in the fields. Rivke,

⁵ For example, after reclaiming the farm's wheat field, the organization has begun making and selling its own matzah (unleavened bread traditionally eaten on Passover) as well as garlic harvested in the lower "black earth" field. On a visit in 2014, I learned that the farmers had also constructed a washing station, the funding for which had been obtained through the USDA.

Ester and I were weeding silently as Yisroel drove off to run an errand. A few minutes later, Ester threw down the rocks she had been collecting and made her way over to the picnic table. Rivke and I followed. “Ugh!” she yelled, “This is so stupid,” she continued in English, thus breaking the linguistic terms of the program as she stepped away from the weed wacker. “There’s no reason to run the weed wacker between the crop beds this much!” We sat down at a nearby picnic table, drinking water and eating the granola bars and fruit we’d brought with us from the house. “So far, this session is really poorly organized,” Rivke said, also reverting almost entirely to English. “It just needs to be much more professionally run. We’ve barely had any formal classes yet, so most of what we’re learning is happening informally.” Lacking also this session, Rivke explained, was Naomi, a native-born Yiddish speaker from whom Rivke and other participants had learned much of their Yiddish the previous session. Ester agreed with Rivke: “I really think this program needs to be more like Adamah, or like other intentional communities, or programs,” she said, stuttering between “community” and “programs.” “This is too top down.” Things back at the house needed improvement too, they pointed out, as some people, often the female participants, were getting stuck with most of the housework—a critique from which I was not exempt. Recognizing that the current dynamic was not sustainable, we agreed that the group needed another family meeting to better sort out roles and responsibilities.

A week later, shopping with Ester and Eli for Shabbos groceries at a nearby farmer’s market, Ester would again reflect on Yiddish Farm needing to be, “more like Adamah.” I asked her what she meant. “There needs to be more community building, and talking about how everyone is feeling.” Eli, who had also attended Adamah, partially agreed, “right now, it [Yiddish Farm] seems more like any farm internship program, where you just go out and work, than a Jewish program. But honestly, this is probably what Adamah was like in the beginning too.”

We can see here how Eli, Rivke and Ester's assumptions about the organization of work and roles derived from their knowledge about and experience on other Jewish programs. For Eli and Ester, what set off Yiddish Farm from Adamah, and threatened to make the program like any other farming internship, was the lack of intentional community-building that marks any number of similar programs, in which professional staff help facilitate social relationships and program logistics. In this case, such mediating work was expected, even when social relationships already existed. Indeed, for Eli, the culture of episodic Jewish programs was so associated with "Jewish community" that he locates the Jewishness of the program in the attention paid to community building. Meanwhile, Ester slips between "program" and "community" as she voices her frustrations. Even as these assumptions encode notions about culture and community that Shandler theorizes as reflecting "postvernacular Yiddish," they are not drawn from the history of the Yiddish language, from Eastern European Jewish folk culture, or otherwise. Rather, as can be seen by the invocation of Adamah, professionalism, and summer camp, they come from the culture of Jewish programs that dot the histories of the participants' lives. The assumption that Jewish community on Yiddish Farm should be self-conscious and highly reflexive, qualities that Shandler associates with postvernacular Yiddish in particular, emerge from this ethnographic moment as also rooted in the culture of immersive American Jewish programs more generally.

In contrast to the Book Center, with its relatively clear divisions between domains of institutional activity, the emerging physical conditions of the Farm also foreground material dimensions of episodic community making. Tensions over work, authority, and gender seemed to emerge out of the unfinished condition of the Farm's physical infrastructure. Such issues as where farming would take place, where "staff" and "students" were supposed to live, or what spaces were private and which were public, blurred and complicated expectations about behavior, roles and

responsibilities within the episodic Yiddish community.⁶ On the one hand, participants were friends and fellow Yiddishists, working together to create this new Yiddish center; but on the other hand, they were also students who had paid for an immersive Yiddish study experience, and who held expectations about the physical, emotional and social conditions appropriate for a Jewish summer program. In moments of conflict like the one described above, these default, reflexive expectations referenced the physical and social organization of the Farm itself.

Thus as the farmers sought to develop a landed, full-time Yiddish environment, the seeds of another kind of sociality, in the form of the participants' familiarity with the culture of American Jewish programs was also growing at Yiddish Farm. The extent to which those assumptions will take root, conscripting Yiddish Farm into a wider network of similar Jewish programs cannot, of course, be predicted. However, as the success programs like those at Adamah, Birthright, the Yiddish Book Center and other Jewish institutions illustrate, a well-established economy exists for nurturing that particular kind of Jewish community. To the extent that being "more professional" hinges on upgrading facilities, improving programs, and routinizing both Jewish life and farm work, the claims by Ester, Eli and others that Yiddish Farm should be "more like Adamah" seem to index implicitly the need donors who can provide the resources for those conditions to emerge in the future.

Yiddish Farm has actively tried to situate itself within the social and institutional relationships—like the Book Center as described earlier—between philanthropists, Jewish professionals, and major Jewish institutions. Specifically, the activists have sought to build relationships within the "Jewish innovation economy." In addition to Naftuli's aforementioned participation in ROI, in 2011 Yiddish Farm was selected to participate in the Presentense "Community Entrepreneurship Program (CEP)" (Presentense Group n.d.). The CEP aims to

⁶ Creating these differentiations in space were some of the first projects the organizers pursued after the initial summer. For example, today student participants live in the now renovated, former bungalows noted above.

provide young Jewish innovators with professional training in, “business skills, tools, and principles to effect social change” (York Entrepreneurship Development Institute (YED) n.d.). The program does so by, “immers[ing] its fellows in a supportive peer-cohort and network of mentors and coaches” (YED n.d), and connecting them with mainstream Jewish organizations as well as potential philanthropic networks. Through this social entrepreneurship model, the program describes itself, in fluent corporate prose, as connecting, “local young professionals with Jewish community organizations and its leadership, leveraging the energy and experience of both parties to extend ... impact and build new opportunities” (Presentense Group n.d.).

Hence, part of the Yiddish activists’ efforts to construct a full-time Yiddish speaking community involves connecting Yiddish Farm to a wider formation of cultural entrepreneurialism. Philanthropists and Jewish professionals currently seeking to leverage both communal resources and youthful energy recognize this type of entrepreneurship. The format itself implicitly asks those potential investors, and the young Yiddish farmers seeking to appeal to them, to read Yiddish Farm beyond its situatedness in a particular Yiddish terrain: to instead see the Farm as a part of a wider genre of variegated Jewish adventures. In those adventures the protagonists—in this case, passionate young Jewish entrepreneurs—embark on a variety of projects that can help build and revitalize not just Yiddish, but American Jewish life. In this economy Yiddish is not an end in and of itself but rather one option in a market of means toward other Jewish ends—whether understood as “Jewish literacy,” Jewish identity, religious involvement, demographics, or simply “innovation.”

If the organizers of Yiddish Farm seek to link themselves into these philanthropic and institutional networks, though, it is not simply to become another American Jewish program among others. As Naftuli and Yisroel made explicitly clear in the “family meeting,” it is precisely Yiddish’s delimited, temporary, and overly reflexive nature that, in part, they seek to overcome. In the discourse of everyday life, of linguistic normalization, and the need to transcend “meta-Yiddish,” we

see a desire for a full time, face-to-face vernacular Yiddish-speaking community—the kind of Yiddish space that can avoid the spectre of repetition that, for these Yiddishists, impedes the development of Yiddish as a spoken language of everyday life. In demonstrating how the episodic culture of American Jewish programming for emerging adults is currently “growing” at Yiddish Farm, I argue not that the Farm should be understood solely as another American Jewish program. Rather, I show how, through the cultural economy in which Yiddish Farm is embedded, and the assumptions its participants bring with them about Jewish programming, the culture of the episode is, in a literal sense, competing for Jewish space.

This competition for space was especially tangible when it came to the Farm’s efforts to engage Ultra-Orthodox native Yiddish speakers. Indeed, if part of the Farm’s linguistic aspirations entail making connection with Ultra-Orthodox communities, then this also involved making the Farm comfortable and appropriate for those kinds of people as well—to make it “*hey mish*.”⁷ At times though, during the summer, this would conflict with the patterns of everyday life we’d established within our own episodic Jewish community. Throughout the summer, a number of OTD and on-the-boarder Hasidic visitors, friends of Yisroel and Naftuli, came to the Farm for Shabbosim or other events. But other visitors had simply heard about the Farm and would sometimes show up without warning. When visitors not known personally by the Yiddish farmers appeared, sometimes just to stroll through the Farm and appreciate its beauty, we often found ourselves (almost automatically) masking the emergent patterns of everyday life that had taken root among the episodic community of participants—covering our ankles and heads, and putting away our laptops.

Nowhere were these practices of realignment more pronounced than when the *kebeyder* (a religious school for young Ultra-Orthodox children) called Yisroel. Checking e-mail in the house

⁷ Among Ultra-Orthodox Jews, to call something “hey mish” (literally, ‘home-like’) is to suggest that it accords with the cultural norms and social relations deemed appropriate for Ultra-Orthodox Jews.

with other participants after my post-lunch shower, Yisroel came in: “so, tomorrow around 300 Hasidic children are coming here.” Our jaws dropped. Yisroel had just gotten off the phone with the head of a kheyder in one of the nearby Hasidic summer bungalow communities just north of us in the Catskills. They would visit in just a couple days, which meant we’d have to implement what another participant would later half jokingly call a, “frum alert code red.” “Seriously though,” another said, “we can’t corrupt these children.” A few days later, when they arrived, we again put away laptops and dressed in more *tsniusdik* (modest) fashion. A few male participants went out into the fields to join the children, take pictures and speak with them in Yiddish; but the notion that the female participants could join us was clearly off the table.

The desire to keep Yiddish Farm heymish thus also structured, to a certain degree, decisions about religion and gender. During religious services, for example, when there were pious visitors who articulated a preference for counting only men in the *minyan* (prayer quorum), we complied. When observant Jews who insisted on praying with a *mekhitzze* (a ritual partition separating men from women during worship) came to the Farm, we accommodated them as well. When I asked one of the people involved in the Farm about why he felt we had to accommodate the prayer style of Ultra-Orthodox Jews, the following explanation was provided: “because we don’t have a religious tradition (*mesoyre*) that can compete with theirs. “far a guter mesoyre,” he said “gib men op di bekhoyre!” [for a good mesoyre, one gives up their birthright].⁸ And thus, at such moments, we gave up our own religious patterns to accommodate our visitors.

⁸ A mesoyre, or tradition, refers to a legitimating narrative for a given Jewish practice, the authority of which rests in its claimed lineage from an authorizing figure, or Jewish community. “Birthright” refers here to the authority by those at Yiddish Farm to make decisions about religious conduct. During my time conducting ethnography at Yiddish Farm, a number of people impressed upon me the importance of Yiddish Farm grounding its religious orientation in tradition partially in order to maintain authority over religious practice on the Farm.

The degree to which the religious culture of Yiddish Farm took on the character it did emerged not only from a desire to make the space inviting to observant Jews. It also seemed linked to a feeling among a number of activists around the project that those more likely to become devoted Yiddish speakers would be more traditionally religious to begin with. “In the very beginning,” one participant in Yiddish Farm’s pilot program explained to me, “we looked for radical secular people...but I think a lot of it [the religious culture on the Farm] just had to do with the people who came here. I’ve heard a lot about radical secular people who are interested in Yiddish, but when we started doing it, those people were just not the people who came ... Radical secular people might be interested in Yiddish as a symbol, but to really speak the language, that’s a different thing entirely.” This was part of why, in the opinion of one individual, the Farm had, “a very modern Orthodox feel,” something that was practically beneficial for attracting the right kind of people: “Modern Orthodoxy is the best kind of Judaism for the Farm,” this individual felt, “because it just goes with the most different kinds of Judaism.

But of course, the Orthodox religious culture of Yiddish Farm, judging from the broader discussions in the Jewish community about Orthodoxy’s approach to sex and gender, also shapes who is likely to feel comfortable davening (praying prescribed liturgical prayers) with a mekhitze or counting only men in the minyan. In this sense, efforts to keep Yiddish Farm heymish constrained or at least competed with the terms of Jewish community-building conducted by program participants. During the summer I was there, the participants around me (with the exception of myself and Dovid-Leib) were all religiously observant; and they almost always accommodated more stringent rules about gender and prayer when we hosted visitors who required such stipulations. At the same time, more secular visitors, particularly women, commented almost without fail on the male-oriented Jewish culture emerging in concert with the predilection for Orthodoxy.

The following year, as I learned from interviews, participants actually broke off one Shabbos to create their own prayer quorum, which they organized in egalitarian fashion. As one participant remembered, conveying to me the reasons they decided to hold their own prayer service on that particular Shabbos, one of her fellow program participants had declared amidst the controversy, “this is our community!” For that person, regardless of the goals of the farm to create a full-time Jewish community in Yiddish, or to foster a traditional Jewish environment in the process, the community that mattered was the episodic one being created in and through the summer program.

Multi-Directional Aspirations

By cultivating a context in which Yiddish engagements can be more than about Yiddish itself, the emergent community around Yiddish Farm hopes to create a new, full-time Yiddish space that will transcend the condition of “meta-Yiddish.” In this sense, the Farm continues in the ideological tradition of the cultural Yiddishism embodied in its sponsor organization yugntruf, or expressed in interviews like those I conducted with Yiddish activists in chapter two. Like Alan or Alexis decades ago, though in the context of a very different cultural project, organizers at Yiddish Farm are *serious* about Yiddish. In its identity as a Yiddish speaking environment, Yiddish Farm represents a place in which that seriousness can be cultivated, directed and ideally expanded.

To create this particular kind of Yiddish space, activists around the Farm have aspired to foster intra-Jewish linkages in multiple directions. Specifically, they have sought to develop relationships of exchange with networks of philanthropists, Jewish institutions and Jewish professionals that animate the Jewish innovation economy. At the same time, they seek to develop a traditional, observant religious culture that can accommodate Ultra-Orthodox Jews. Both relationships are highly ambivalent, provisional and aspirational in nature. Yiddish Farm cannot, nor do its young activists want, to align the Farm *too* closely with Ultra-Orthodox communities—to

subject itself to the increased traffic of visitors from those communities that would almost certainly close Yiddish Farm off to less observant devotees. Neither though, do the Farm's organizers want the project to function simply as another Jewish youth program among many—a delimited, bounded engagement of Yiddish experimentation on a path to bourgeois American Jewish adulthood.

Whether Yiddish Farm will be pulled fully into the orbit of episodic Jewish cultural programs or enter into deeper forms of exchange with Ultra-Orthodox communities—or whether it will succeed in balancing these competing interests—remain open questions. The Farm, to my knowledge, has yet to acquire major blocks of funding from the kinds of mainstream Jewish donors that support other Jewish programs. If they do, likely they will be pressured to further adapt to the demands and values of those programs, funders and networks of college-aged and twenty-something Jews: those who sometimes feel that Yiddish Farm should be, “more like Adamah.” Already, as one individual familiar with the Farm's logistics explained to me—“there are two reasons Yiddish Farm is having trouble getting funding from major Jewish organizations: we don't have enough numbers and we don't bring in enough unaffiliated Jews.” Such comments reveal the tension implicit in the Farm's goal to slowly cultivate a Yiddish community from devotees, and the pressures from philanthropists and organizations to scale up a project's “impact.”

Balancing their commitments to full-time Yiddish community with the logic of experimentation that underwrites the episodic program is difficult culture work. But it would be wrong to suggest an inherent incompatibility. Indeed, like the summer seasons that bring new harvests, so, too, does each episode infuse the Farm with new possibilities for Yiddish community there as well—with new Yiddish devotees, new donors, new possible projects and new possibilities for “routes” through Yiddishland. “It's too early to say how things are going to develop here,” one individual warned me about too specifically describing the Farm's religious orientation this early into its existence. The exact form that Yiddish Farm will take is indeed still “growing” in Goshen.

Chapter 6.

“Omeyn!”: Intertwining Traditions of Discourse in New Yiddishist Practice.

“In the front rows, where my parents sat with other American-born professionals, the proceedings grew steadily more decorous with each passing year. In the back, it was different. There the European-born immigrants davened (prayed): tough Jews in enormous wool *taleyism* (prayer shawls), bootleggers, peddlers, and junkmen, who drank *shnaps* (straight whiskey) out of water glasses, munched on herring and raw onions, spoke mostly in Yiddish, and almost never stopped talking. I was seven years old, with a clip-on tie, but instinctively I preferred the *heymish*, homegrown, back of the shul over the highbrow front, and I escaped there every chance I got. The old men greeted me in their heavy Yiddish accents, hugged me to their bristly cheeks (they never shaved on Shabbos) and let me sit with them while they told and retold their jokes and stories. They listened with one ear to the service and interrupted their kibitzing only long enough to shout ‘*Omeyn!* (Amen!).’”¹

“Another Kotzker [Rebbe] teaching translates as ‘Molo hooretz kinyonecho’ — ‘The world is full with paths and ways to make God yours.’ A farm is neither more nor less full with ways to make God one’s own than a city. But here, the paths and ways to make God one’s own are more visible. The environment is less developed; the paths aren’t hidden behind concrete walls. On the Yiddish Farm, we connect Jews to their tradition through teaching Yiddish and history. More important, we bring these teachings into the present and connect them to contemporary issues. Through farming and living in an immersive and intentional environment, the paths to ownership and faith are highlighted... Students often come here because a parent or grandparent spoke Yiddish. Often, they leave with a feeling that Yiddish and Yiddishkeit are a part of their story and their ‘Jewish performance.’”²

“Vest kenen ariberkhapn dem Shabbos?” [Can you drop by this Shabbos]. A text flashes on my phone. It’s Avrom. I already know he’s probably right down the street. Earlier that summer, through social connections, four men in their twenties from the Lubavitch community had come to spend Shabbos at Yiddish Farm. Now, over the last few months, some of the Yiddishists involved with the Farm had been reciprocating the visit, spending weekends in Crown Heights.

“Nisht gekrogen keyn protim vegn Shabbos di vokh,” I answer. “Vu vet ir zayn?” [I didn’t

¹ Aaron Lansky in *Outwitting History* (2004a:31-32.)

² From Yisroel Bass’s “The Wheat Harvest Story” see, Bass 2014.

get details about Shabbos plans this week. Where will you guys be?"]

“Zelbiker platz, [address]” he replies, sending me an address in Crown Heights not far from my old apartment.

The next day, around lunchtime, I walk over from my new apartment. I’d been subletting from a friend that year, a klezmer musician away in Eastern Europe studying Jewish folk music on a Fulbright scholarship. The apartment, on the western frontier of Brooklyn gentrification, and east of the Ultra-Orthodox area of Chabad, is adorned with old klezmer posters, a map of Berlin, and a Yiddish poster taken from Williamsburg that reads “Marathon” in Hebrew characters, intended to warn the stringently pious Satmar community of the scantily clad runners whose New York City marathon route would cut through their neighborhood.

I’m tired and my Shabbos clothes are in the laundry. Its Chabad, though, so I’m wagering that the sight of a young Jewish male, about my age, dressed a bit casually is not likely to raise any eyebrows. I know, after all, that according to the outreach ideology of Chabad, I’m a potential ba'al-teshuva. Plus, I’m going to meet a shomer Shabbos group of Yiddishists, a number of whom were raised modern Orthodox or became ba’alei teshuva themselves; so, though I am not dressed *shabbosdik*, (appropriate for Shabbos) I am banking on the fact that my company will help me pass—if not as a frum Jew, at least as a frum possibility.

I’ve arrived after davening and during the end of the Shabbos noontime meal. There are large, white tablecloths spread out over rows of foldable tables adorned with plastic wear and half empty bottles of liquor and cola alongside empty containers of hummus, herring, and pickled vegetables. An all male, intergenerational, and mostly English speaking crowd fills the narrow room, from the looks of it, a former storefront. A good looking, thirty-something man rises to give a speech, and make a *lekbayim* (a toast). “Tell something about your father!” shouts out another in English, interrupting him as he tries to begin. Despite the interest, he has a hard time maintaining

the stage, forced, as he is, to compete against the milling of side conversations, people getting up for chulent heated in a nearby slow-cooker, and fathers corralling young children.

I make my way over to the group of Yiddish Farm guys and exchange hellos and hugs. We sit down and, as I make a plate of what remains of humus, fish, babaganoush and other sides, we start whispering conspiratorially together—if only to see if anyone has anything to conspire about: news about the Farm, the most recent romantic developments in our lives, our plans for the day. I’ve arrived toward the end of the meal, but the itinerary is to go Shabbos “meal hopping.” We decide upon an up-and-coming shul popular with younger generations of Hasidim, one that tends also to attract observant, non-Hasidic Jews in the neighborhood. Between the single men among us, as we head over, talk builds about the possibility of meeting someone outside the shul.

This next shul is also full of young men. I notice a few familiar faces from the *balakbik* egalitarian³ Jewish scene that congregates around Hadar (an egalitarian yeshiva for recent college graduates) on the Upper West Side. I contemplate the considerable distance to Crown Heights from the Upper West Side, and especially the Washington Heights area where a number of them live; they must have come down for Shabbos the day before, likely staying overnight with friends. We sit down at a messy but unoccupied table and dig into what remains of the food as young Hasidic men (a number, likely ba’alei teshuva themselves) loudly sing *niggunim* (traditional wordless melodies). It’s a gendered scene, bringing into focus and solidifying some of those tensions that had come up on the Farm that previous summer. There would be no possibility, I thought to myself, of Rivke or Ester joining our group in this particular space.

I start speaking with Yudl about the politics of Jewish institutions: one of our favorite topics. Yiddish Farm is currently fundraising. They are trying to develop a language for potential donors to

³ The term describes people and communities invested in the study and practice of Jewish law, coupled with a commitment to gender egalitarianism.

convey the value of having an immersive Yiddish-speaking environment—no easy task. As a number of participants had told me in the past, part of marketing any Jewish youth program today involves numbers: how many young Jews does your program affect? What is your “impact”? And, relatedly, what are you doing to create new kinds of Jewish culture for young people? As Rivke had explained about the politics of Jewish philanthropy during the previous summer, “everything today is about innovation.” Yiddish Farm, though, is about process: about the slow work of community building and language acquisition through immersion and, often intense, study. So the numbers simply are not there yet. With the Book Center in the back of my mind, I suggest developing a language around texts:

“Mir hobn azoy fil arkhivn. Mir hobn shoyrn arayngeleygt a sakh gelt derinen. Ober fregt zikh di frage: ‘ken men zey nitsen on kehiles fun fleysik yidish reders?’ Der entfer, kenst zogn, iz ‘nayn.’ Un dos iz take emes, vayl—” [We have so many archives (of Yiddish language materials). We’ve already invested a lot of money in them. But it begs the question: “can we really use them without communities of fluent speakers?”] The answer, you could say, is ‘no.’ And its really true because—]

“Du bullshitst mikh!” chimes in a young bearded man wrapped in a *talis* (a ritual Jewish prayer shawl) draped over an untucked white dress shirt and slacks. He’s been standing behind us, across the table listening to our conversation. “Everything you just said is total bullshit!” he slurs in English and sits down. “Du bist an apikoyres [you’re a heretic]. I could sense it the minute I saw you!” Silence. It’s an uncomfortable moment, but I also can’t quite tell if he’s serious.

I try to explain. “Ober—(but)”

“Bullshit! bullshit!” he shouts. I decide at this point that silence is, in fact, the best course of action. The young man, who I’ll call Yosi, puts his arm around Yudl and starts a side conversation. Yosi, who is not so different in age from myself, is clearly drunk. Yudl cracks an uncomfortable smile and Yosi close-talks into his ear. They seem to know each other. Avrom and I continue

talking, but are soon interrupted again. Yosi leans over the table and looks me deep in the eye: “why do you like Yiddish?” he asks me. I pause, unsure of what to say, hoping to provide an answer that helps me avoid conflict. “Koydem-kol, iz yidish farbunden mit mayn forsh arbet, ober, nokh dem, ikh hob lib—“ [first of all, Yiddish is connected to my research, but besides that, I like—]

“You!” he cuts me off again, pointing knowingly at me, as though we’re in on the same joke, “you know, I like you.” He pauses, his voice more sober now, “But what you have to learn,” he tells me, “is that Yiddish is not an end. It’s not a goal, understand? It’s a tool that takes you into Yiddishkayt. You have to understand that.”

Implied in Yosi’s parrying between the “bite” of insult and the “nip” of playful jesting is an investment and divestment of my performance of Yiddish with a religious potentiality. If I’m an apikoyres, someone who self-consciously rejects religion, I’m, “100% full of shit.” As he would later inform another Yiddishist in our group during a separate incident on another Shabbos day (this time, as I would hear, devoid of any jest), Yiddishist Yiddish is the “fake Yiddish” of a “hipster revival,” not the *real* Yiddish that Hasidic Jews are raised speaking. If it has value, as he conveys to me, it does so as an entrance into a more pious Jewish way of life. But in Yosi’s opinion, the mutability of purely cultural Jewish engagements is palpable, destined, like the Yiddish posters on the wall of my rented Crown Heights apartment, to be taken down when new renters move in. If the Yiddish of Yiddishists is fake for Yosi, it is because we have mistaken a mere object for something of real, spiritual value.

Yosi’s glossing of Yiddishists as “hipsters” indicates his familiarity with the influx of twenty-something newcomers to the trendy areas of Crown Heights. The new restaurants and coffee shops on Franklin Avenue, just north of Eastern Parkway, were constant topics of conversation among the young gentrifiers in the neighborhood—discussions marked by a typical mixture of excitement and

guilt about the increased cost of rent. In the eyes of Chabad, the Jewish cohorts among these populations represented both a concern and an opportunity. Especially after Jewish holidays, young Hasidic *bokbrim* (unmarried men) are a fixture on the corners of Prospect Heights and Park Slope just west of Lubavitch Crown Heights, asking male passerbyers whether they are Jewish, and if so, whether they have completed the requisite commandments associated with that holiday. This emerging, westward market of souls came with material opportunities as well. Toward the end of my fieldwork, a few self-consciously hip kosher restaurants had even opened in Crown and Prospect Heights: a kosher small plates farm-to-table restaurant on Washington Avenue and a *cholov Yisroel* coffee shop just off Franklin.⁴ I knew further, from conversations with Eli, that a number of Jews amidst the populations moving to Prospect and Crown Heights had regularly prayed in Yosi's shul. Chabad expertly attracts non-traditional Jews to Orthodoxy, particularly by keying in on the Jewish interests of potential ba'alei teshuva and parleying them into observance.⁵ Knowing this, Yosi's particular vitriol for Yiddish seemed especially harsh.

A few weeks later, though, Yosi would call to apologize. He seemed embarrassed about how he'd acted, and wanted to assure me I was always welcome in shul. He explained that he had been drunk, but that this was no excuse, and that he never should have insulted other Jews like that. He also confessed that he might have misunderstood the nature of Yiddishism. Motivating his apology, he told me, was an e-mail from one individual in our group that had impressed upon him the error of his assumptions. "Most of my impressions about Yiddishists came from what I knew from Sholem Aleichem as a child," he explained about the iconic Yiddish writer, "and how Yiddish writers talk about frum Jews." He saw our investment in Yiddish, if it was a sincere investment in

⁴ Chovol Yisroel is a designation for dairy products that have been under the supervision, throughout the entire production process, of an observant Jew.

⁵ For recent work on Chabad, including analysis of its focus on outreach and its relationship to other Jewish denominations see, Katz (2010), Ferziger (2009, 2013), Berman (2009)

ethnic heritage, as a substitute for, or alternative to Judaism grounded in the observance of halakhah, or Jewish law. The e-mail he had received, he told me, had impressed upon him that Yiddish was, perhaps, doing what he had insisted it do for me—that perhaps it was putting Jews on a path to a more observant Jewish life. Yiddish was, after all, partially responsible for bringing all of us to shul that Saturday.

His apology, I soon learned, numbered among other conversations Yosi would initiate to mend his relationship with Yiddish Farm. Following the e-mail, he decided to apologize and seek forgiveness for his actions from each Yiddishist in shul that Shabbos. A few weeks later, with me and two other Yiddishists in attendance, he would go as far as to get up in front of the congregation and apologize for his actions. He wanted to make sure that the people offended still felt comfortable davening in his community. After his apology, I learned, there was even talk about the shul coming to Yiddish Farm for their shabbaton (a retreat over a Shabbat weekend). The terms of both spiritual and material exchange, it seemed, were rectified. “We’re natural friends (*khaverim*)!” Yudl explained to me about why they should build connections with Yosi’s shul. That shul, he explained, “is the coolest thing in Crown Heights.” It only makes sense that Yiddish Farm, which is, he continued, “on the edge,” would build relationships with them...

The relationship between ethnic, identity-based engagements like the study of Yiddish, and potential religious processes of becoming offers an alternative to dominant discourses that conceptualize Yiddish cultural engagements as secular performances. Scholars and popular observers alike have often interpreted contemporary Yiddish pursuits as secular Jewish practices through which Jews and non-Jews alike connect themselves to imagined, ethnic histories and communities.⁶

⁶ Avineri (2012) employs the term “secular” to delimit the Yiddish pedagogical spaces she researches in producing her theory of Yiddish practitioners as constituting a meta-linguistic community (see

When writers have theorized the sacredness of such practices, they have generally conceived of the language as a substitution for religious texts—either as a replacement for, or commensurable alternative to, traditional conceptions of the sacred.⁷ According to this logic, to study, perform, listen to, or identify with Yiddish reflects in reference to language-survival what Jonathan Woocher argued about the concept of Jewish survival more generally—that it constitutes the object of an American Jewish civil religion (Woocher 1986). In a sense, Yosi’s initial reaction to Yiddishist Yiddish articulates Woocher’s idea of sacred survival. Of course, where Woocher argued for sacred survival as a form of Judaism, Yosi worries about the prospect of competition. In our initial conflict, he conceptualizes Yiddishists as relatively self-conscious, self-assured, and committed in their Jewish pursuits, seeing them as a public possessing a substitution for religious engagements.⁸ But later, in our phone conversation, he introduces a second epistemology: one in which secular commitments

also, Avineri 2014) Shandler, drawing on Gans (1979), defines a range of the postvernacular Yiddish practices he describes as enactments of “symbolic ethnicity” (2006a). Fishman (2002), sees a sharp decline in testaments to and metaphors of Yiddish’s sacredness after the early 1970s. He attributes this to these Yiddishists’ lack of “traditional Jewish exposure,” thus leading them to value the language, “along well-known modern lines, focusing on ethnonationalist, ideological, ethnohistorical and cultural creativity associations” (2002:139). Moreover, in many popular media depictions of Yiddish engagements among non-traditional Jews and non-Jewish students, the value of the language is often located in the fact that it can be pursued without being part of a larger Jewish process of self-making. For a recent example, see Basu (2014).

⁷ Yale Strom (2012) reproduces this logic of substitution when he describes klezmer revivalists as “bale kulturiks” (that is, masters of culture, as opposed to master of return to pious Judaism). Avineri (2012) implicitly employs the logic of substitution in her own analysis of the sacred dimensions of “secular” Yiddish practice, tellingly citing Benedict Anderson’s work on nationalism (see footnote 8). Fishman, in an approach that compares different kinds of sacralizing discourses and logics, notes that the association of Yiddish with those murdered during the Holocaust has dominated the logic of sacralization among “secular” Yiddishists after the war (2002). He interestingly notes that Orthodox and Ultra-Orthodox discourses of sacralization offer an alternative logic of holiness, one in which Yiddish becomes sacred in and through its proximity to sacred objects and people, and its capacity to reinforce traditional Jewish practice.

⁸ The logic of replacement, of course, has a long genealogy in the social sciences, and is intimately connected with theories of secularization in which the significance of religion supposedly fades in the face of a teleological process of modernity. Thus, for Durkheim (1995), it is the individual who replaces the divine in modernity, and for Anderson (2006), the power of nationalism is derived in part through its ability to tap into human needs that had previously been addressed by religion.

may initiate a process of religious return. In this view, secular Yiddish ultimately recedes in importance, or takes its proper place within an ultimately observant way of life. Put differently, by reinvesting Yiddish engagements with a religious potentiality, Yosi's apology functions by discursively correcting the separation of ethnic identity commitments from pious religious ones. By accepting it, I allow these commitments, for the time being, to intermingle, to coexist, and perhaps one day, to infuse each other in directions Yosi may deem more becoming for Jews.

Among anthropologists, the relationship between traditions based in canons of sacred texts, and traditions based in ethnic identity has recently featured in (often heated) debates about secularism and religion. Those debates have been grounded significantly in the influential work of Talal Asad and his students and have largely been conducted in reference to Islamic and Middle Eastern ethnographic contexts (see especially, Asad 1986, 1993, 2003, Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005). Samuli Schielke captures the influence of that body of work, defining it as a, "research programme," one based upon Asad's argument that Islam can be defined as a "discursive tradition" (2010:1-3). The theoretical issues germane to these debates are wide ranging in scope, touching on the nature of agency and subjectivity (Mahmood 2005, Keane 2003b, Hirschkind 2006) the question of the "worldliness," or secular nature (Said 1983) of critical thought (Asad et al. 2009), and the significance and function of violence in liberal-secular state contexts (Asad 2003). But I am concerned here with the particular emphasis that the discursive tradition approach places on canons of sacred texts. The "traditions" of discourse to which Asad and others refer differ in fundamental ways from the engagement of religious subjects with other "traditions" associated with Islam—particularly engagements with heritage and folklore that would instead frame Islam as an identity.

A key premise of Asad's definition of Islam as a discursive tradition is the argument that the category of "religion" emerges from a particular European historical context. In Europe, Christian missionaries and colonists, as well as scholars, made the concept of belief central to universal

definitions of religion.⁹ Efforts to apply that definition to Islam, in which the role of belief and practice are different than normalized by such inherently Christian definitions, consequently reflect and (sometimes violently refract) a construction of religious others in implicitly Protestant Christian terms. The move to define Islam as a tradition of discourse not only shifts attention to practice, but also productively foregrounds the dynamics of knowledge/power (Foucault 1977, 1990) that mediate how a subject comes to understand the proper and desirable ways to practice, think, feel and indeed, “believe” in the first place.

Given both the post 9/11 political environment in which this body of scholarship came to fruition and the intellectual genealogy from which it emerged, it is not surprising that Islamic contexts have featured so prominently in the recent literature on religion and secularism. And yet, to the extent that these case studies within Arab and Muslim ethnographic contexts have served as touchstones for high theoretical debates about secularism, they play a disproportionate role in how these debates have proceeded.¹⁰ Notably, Jewish case studies have rarely informed them. This is curious, to the extent that Judaism can also be said to be, in part, a discursive tradition (see for example Satlow 2006, Boustani et al. 2011) with parallels to Asad’s description of Islam. Like Islam, Judaism’s encounter with Euro-American modernity has also entailed the subjection of Jewish

⁹ This intervention is most associated with Asad’s classic critique of Clifford Geertz’s efforts to define and explain religion as a symbolic system (Asad 1993). In it, Geertz provides a universal definition that assumes religion is a system addressing itself to universal human needs (1973). In contrast, Asad traces the historical emergence of this assumption, showing how the priority scholars place on phenomena like “needs,” and “belief” that are interior to the subject in fact emerges out of a specific European history (especially the development of Protestant anti-materialist critiques of Catholicism, the Wars of Religion, and the colonial encounter). As such, Asad makes a subsequent argument that a universal definition of religion is impossible. Since then, most scholars have heeded his critique about interiority. Not everyone agrees with the subsequent claim about the impossibility of definition. See for example, Lincoln (2003).

¹⁰ In a recent *Annual Review of Anthropology* article providing an overview of contemporary work and theoretical trends on the anthropology of secularism, scholars within the discursive tradition framework represent the departure point for the author’s general discussion of the literature (Cannell 2010).

people and communities to definitions of religion in which belief has been prioritized over practice. One of the contributions that the ethnography of Jews can make to these debates is to allow for a reconsideration of the concept of a “discursive tradition” that has underwritten them. In contrast to sharp delineations between identity and discursive traditions, Jewish studies scholars whose work relates to the role of discursive practice within processes of Jewish self-making have not always been so insistent on this separation. Satlow, for example, observes that, “[m]any, but certainly not all, Jewish communities have located their tradition in a largely stable (but nevertheless evolving) textual canon” (2006:850). Building on the work of Jacob Neusner (1993) and Jonathan Z. Smith (1982) in their formulations of what Smith famously called a “polythetic” understanding of Judaism, he defines it as “Israel, discursive tradition and practice” (2006:846). Andrew Bush, in a discussion that bears particular relevance to this study, has observed how the modern academic field of Jewish Studies has functioned, not to replace, but to expand the set of texts, practices and materials with which Jews have produced and reproduced themselves as Jews (2011). This does not mean, Bush argues, that traditions of sacred discourse are always commensurable with other Jewish texts; rather, the notion of expansion draws attention to their interrelations. Departing from the work of sociologist of religion Daniele Hervieu-Leger, Bush builds on her concept of “metaphorization” (2011:67), which Leger offers as an alternative to secularization (2011:2-3). To illustrate, he provides the example of, “the great pioneering figure of modern Jewish ethnography, S. Ansky (Shloyme-Zanvl Rappoport),” who literary critic David Roskies argues envisioned Jewish folklore as akin to Oral Torah. “Folklore is clearly Oral Torah only metaphorically,” Bush writes, “for neither Ansky nor Roskies claims that along with mishnaic dicta, grandma’s tales and recipes were handed down to and through Moses” (Bush 2011:3). In this way, Bush’s conception of “Jewish Studies” departs from a theoretical engagement with the dynamic interrelationship between traditions, thereby calling attention to what Schielke observes about the emphasis anthropologists have recently placed on the

concept of discursive tradition: that “people’s lives...never fit into the framework of a single tradition” (2010:1).

The above encounter with Yosi similarly foregrounds a dynamic relationship between (glossing Bush) “Yiddish study” and Jewish discursive practice. Specifically, the scene highlights the problem entailed in analytically separating identity from piety in an *a priori* manner. Where such a separation implies that the engagement with Yiddish necessarily reflects or symbolizes an identitary engagement with Jewish tradition that replaces religion, Yosi and I collaboratively embed a possible pious trajectory within Yiddish practice. Even though, in the present, I understand the practice of going to shul as Yiddish studies, the logic of his evangelical rhetoric suggests that I might later look back on those secular engagements as part of a religious process of return.¹¹

As I will show through an analysis of observance at Yiddish Farm, Yosi may not be *entirely* incorrect. Part of the practice of Yiddish at Yiddish Farm is in fact to entwine Yiddish language use within an everyday Jewish life marked by religious observance (the stringency of which is itself emergent at Yiddish Farm). Cultivation of such a religious context is key within this particular institution. It is part and parcel, as noted previously, of their efforts to create social relationships with Ultra-Orthodox Yiddish speakers who continue to use the language, in variable ways, as a language of everyday life. In practice, the emphasis on religious observance at Yiddish Farm has meant that the participants, visitor and organizers often found themselves practicing *Judaism* as they practiced *Yiddish*. Specifically, in a way that semiotically parallels Yosi’s efforts to embed a pious future within my own ethnographic engagements with Yiddish in the present, part of the practice of Yiddish study at Yiddish Farm connects Yiddish practice to Jewish discursive practices of religious self-making. And, relatedly, many of the people who have felt most comfortable at the Farm have

¹¹ For a similar ethnographic example that deftly portrays how evangelical rhetoric semiotically reconfigures secular signs, see Harding (1987). For a theoretical engagement that more fully fleshes out these dynamics, see especially Keane (2007)

been those who are, in some way or another, comfortable with traditional Jewish practice—a condition that, as I will show, often breaks along gendered lines. For some even, Yiddish has, as Yosi suggests, been understood as part of their process of getting closer, if not being brought into a more observant Jewish way of life.

But Yosi is not *entirely* correct. The precise religious trajectories that emerge from these practices are undetermined and unfolding. Indeed, as twenty-something American Jews, most of whom are ensconced within a larger process of making decisions about work, love, and religion, the nature of their (of our) aspirations—including religious ones—are themselves in flux. They are, like the Farm itself, on a path—one that at times resembles a “*derekh*,”¹² the term that expresses a condition of striving to live one’s life according to a Jewish discursive tradition. That path, as I will describe, is neither unidirectional nor teleological.

The undetermined nature of religious possibilities latent in the futures of Yiddish practice thus points to the importance of paying close, analytic attention to the quality of openness, ambivalence, and indeterminacy in the lives of religious (or potentially religious) subjects. Indeed, recent critics of the discursive tradition approach have argued that these are precisely the qualities scholars tend to elide by placing such an emphasis on traditions of sacred discourse. As Schielke (2010) and Gregory Starrett (2010) have noted, this focus results from the over representation of what Weber (1946) called “religious virtuosos”—highly adept and religiously motivated subjects such as converts, missionaries, and other committed religious activists. As religious activists, these kinds of subjects represent an elite minority of religious practitioners—those already highly focused upon and engaged with the project of cultivating pious selves through the application of religious knowledge to their lives.

¹² *Derekh*, in Hebrew, translates to “path” or a “way.”

The case study of *Yiddish* cultural activists, particularly American Jews in their twenties, foregrounds the importance of accounting for openness in a social analysis of religious experience. Specifically, the case study offers a window into the emergent and highly undetermined nature of religious observance within the enactment of *activist aspirations themselves*. This provides a different perspective on the relationship between the condition of openness and religious experience as argued for by Schielke. Openness, in Schielke's corrective to the discursive tradition research program, is an ontological *a priori* about what life is like; he understands openness and ambiguity, that is, as a context in which devotion and certainty (religious or otherwise) can be seen, assessed, and studied, as well as compared to the engagements of non-activists. In this case study, the people and communities in question are certainly devoted activists, and thus represent a committed core of Yiddish devotees. However, at Yiddish Farm, working to encompass a range of Jewish orientations among participants has meant fostering an observant space in which some practitioners can maintain ambiguity, openness, and at times ambivalence about their relationships to Jewish discursive traditions. At the Farm, in other words, openness about religious observance *itself* constitutes an activist project—one that is simultaneously religious and Yiddishist in nature. Living an observant Jewish life, in this context, is part of what participants practice when they come to the Farm.

Identity Politics and the Politics of Piety

“An article on the Farm is about to come out in the Forward,” Avrom told me during Shabbos, one in which a large group of guests were in attendance. We'd been walking through the recently cut, golden hay fields that extended from the main house deeper into Yiddish Farm's land. I'm actually worried that Noah,” he continued, using the name of the reporter (another Jewish twenty-something who came to do the story), “is going to talk about the Farm as secular.” He

paused. This was clearly something that had been on Avrom's mind, something about which he wanted to vent. "That totally misses the point." He went on, more emphatic now, "There aren't really any Yiddishists anymore who are actively *against* religion."

"Not even I'm a strong secularist in that sense," I offered. Avrom knew, from past conversations, that while I was one of the least observant Jews in the program, my participation in the Yiddish Farm community's religious life was not just to elicit ethnographic data, but stemmed also from my own ambiguous, often unarticulated, and uneven engagement with Jewish religious community and practice.

"Yeah and I really thought of you," he said, "someone who's not observant (*frum*) but who's comfortable here. I mean, we're not Hasidic, but we're definitely not secular. We're completely shomer-Shabbos, we have a kosher kitchen; there's no way someone could call this place secular."

For ethnographers, Avrom's point is particularly relevant in light of how these kinds of divisions—between religious piety and ethnic heritage—have helped to organized theoretical discussions among anthropologists about the nature of the secular. In general, these debates have pivoted, as noted above, on Talal Asad's highly influential notion of Islam as a "discursive tradition." Rather than consider Islam a religion, Asad argues, anthropologists would do better by beginning, "as Muslims do, from the concept of a discursive tradition that includes and relates itself to the founding texts of the Qur'an and Hadith. Islam is neither a distinctive social structure nor a heterogeneous collection of beliefs, artifacts, customs and morals. It is a tradition" (Asad 1986:14). As Saba Mahmood, one of the central authors associated with the discursive tradition approach, has described, the notion of discursive tradition is, "a particular modality of Foucault's discursive formation in which reflection upon the past is a constitutive condition for the understanding and reformulation of the present and the future. Islamic discursive practices, in this view, link practitioners across the temporal modalities of past, present, and future through pedagogy of

practical, scholarly, and embodied forms of knowledges and virtues deemed central to the tradition” (Mahmood 2005:115).

Anthropologists theorizing Islam through the concept of discursive tradition distinguish it not only from religion, but also from related mnemonic practices of heritage and folklore so often employed in ethnic identity making.¹³ Asad and Mahmood both explicitly point out that a discursive tradition differs from the kinds of invented, national traditions described by theorists like Hobsbawm and Ranger (1983). Where the latter are employed to ground and legitimate ethno-national identities, engagements with an Islamic discursive tradition serves to craft virtuous Muslim selves, formulating and reformulating one’s ethical sensibilities, embodied tastes, and conceptions of self. In this view, tradition is not:

a set of symbols and idioms that justify present practices, neither is it an unchanging set of cultural prescriptions that stand in contrast to what is changing, contemporary or modern. Nor is it a historically fixed social structure. Rather, the past is the very ground through which the subjectivity and self-understanding of a tradition’s adherents are constituted. An Islamic discursive tradition, in this view, is therefore a mode of discursive engagement with sacred texts, one effect of which is the creation of sensibilities and embodied capacities (of reason, affect, and volition) that in turn are the conditions for the tradition’s reproduction (Mahmood 2005:115).

For those whose work is grounded in the discursive tradition approach, the concept offers a way of thinking about religious practice that sets off and distinguishes this notion of tradition from more identity-based ones. And indeed, Mahmood’s informants do seem to see things this way. They distinguish their efforts to cultivate virtuous selfhoods from what Mahmood describes as, “the folklorization of worship” (2005:48). As she writes:

¹³ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, for example, defines heritage, “as a mode of cultural production that has recourse to the past and produces something new” (2004:1).

An important aspect of the mosque movement's critique of the secularization of Egyptian society focuses upon how the understanding and performance of acts of worship (*ʿibadat*) have been transformed in the modern period. Movement participants argue that ritual acts of worship in the popular imagination have increasingly acquired the status of custom or conventions, a kind of "Muslim folklore" undertaken as a form of entertainment or as a means to display a religio-cultural identity. According to them, this has led to the decline of an alternative understanding of worship, one in which rituals are performed as a means to the training and realization of piety in the entirety of one's life" (2005:48).

Thus, one of Mahmood's informants describes the relationship between "custom" and piety: "The state and society want to reduce Islam to folklore, as if Islam is just a collection of ceremonies and customs, such as hanging lanterns from doorways or baking cookies during Ramadan, or eating meat on *al-īd al-kabīr* [feast that celebrates the end of Ramadan]. Mere-ceremonies [*mujarrad al-manāʿisik*] without any bearing on the rest of life" (2005:49).

What makes religion *actually* folklore for state and society is that it constitutes a vision of Islam in which religious knowledge is not extended into the minute realms of everyday life. Rather, religious commitments stop at the surface. Their implications are not extended beyond the outward forms of religious practice itself—beyond lanterns hung in doorways or the preparation of meals for holidays. Behind these metaphorical entryways are only the baking of cookies and preparation of meat. Such signs are only symbols of a pious engagement with Islam that, stopping at the surface, serves really as a kind of mask or cover for identity. They are thus prototypically superficial, embodied, and otherwise non-discursive. They are, for example, easily performed by almost anyone, and thus lack the thoroughgoing energy, attention and engagement that cultivation of the textual and practical literacies associated with a tradition based around sacred discourse would demand.

The question of the separation between identity and its politics from what Mahmood calls, "the politics of piety" (2005) is not only relevant for Mahmood's informants. While the author attributes the division between "folklore" and "piety" to them, elsewhere she reifies, on the level of

analysis, the division between spiritual and material that this dichotomy embodies. Perhaps nowhere were these divisions more clearly—and bitterly—articulated than between Saba Mahmood and Stathis Gourgouris on the subject of identity politics. The disagreement unfolded within an online debate focusing on the question, “is critique secular,” and responding to Mahmood’s article “Secularism, Hermeneutics, and Empire” (2006). On the subject of veiling in particular, Gourgouris describes Mahmood’s analysis of piety as little more than the description of, “identity politics.” Mahmood responds as follows: “the conceptual acrobatics by which Gourgouris comes to gloss my argument as *facile identity politics* are stunning in so much as my article builds on a body of work that has challenged the notion of identity as adequate to the analysis of a wide array of Islamic politics” (Mahmood 2008, emphasis my own). What Gourgouris seemed to be objecting to, though, was less the question of how Mahmood’s writing on piety was or was not related to that body of literature (which, though never cited, seems to be that of Asad) than her refusal to consider the fact that veiling could *also* be considered an identity performance in addition to a pious one: “It is precisely Mahmood’s inability or unwillingness,” Gourgouris writes, “to even entertain the notion that these gestures are themselves identitary gestures—no doubt, in their *own* way, and here the *difference* between identitary frameworks would be indeed a worthy theoretical pursuit—that anchors her anti-secularist politics to the stealth dogmatism of nativist identity politics” (Gourgouris 2008). In the context of a debate about whether critique is secular, Gourgrouris’s comments are especially sharp; he suggests that Mahmood’s analysis constitutes an unreflective repetition of her informant’s distinction between piety and identity. This separation and subsequent elision of identity transforms critique into, “stealth dogmatism.”

I find striking the definitive distinction between identitary and pious gestures on which these debates turn. Even if Mahmood’s informants conceptualize their engagement with Islam as something other than identitary in nature, they are clearly aware of the diverse ways other members

of the Muslim community they imagine as “folklorizing” worship might interpret those practices. These social others might indeed see a gesture like veiling as identity in nature. Certainly, Mahmood’s pious subjects are interested in differentiating the semiotics of their own practices from what they consider its folklorization. But to argue so strongly on an analytical level for a separation between competing ideas of politics, both of which are clearly relevant to the social worlds of Mahmood’s subjects, implicitly offers a theory of experience in which a pious subject is always and in all instances engaging (and, indeed, able to engage) Islamic discursive traditions in pious ways. What, for example of misreading, or strategic or incidental re-readings of one’s practices? How might identity relate to piety in moments of doubt about the implications or boundaries of the canonical texts against which a virtuous self might be produced? To the extent that discursive practice is a publically circulating objectification (Keane 2003a, 2008), it is problematic to theorize identity against a notion of discursive tradition without accounting for the contestation with which people may think about, consider and reconsider their relationship to that tradition, or how that very tradition is conceived.

An alternative methodological point of entry into the relationship between identity and piety can be found in Webb Keane’s material approach to the study of religion. In keeping with Schielke’s argument about the need to be attentive to dynamics of openness in accounting for religious experience, Keane suggests we focus first on the materiality of semiotic forms and how they give rise to different assumptions and interpretations in practice. Focusing particularly on the Protestant missionary encounter, Keane describes the anxieties about materiality that have accompanied the prioritization missionaries, converts and other religious actors have placed on the sincerity of the religious subject—a subject who should ideally speak from the heart rather than animate the words of others. Theories of religion that prioritize belief or other inner states similarly shift the emphasis from the materiality of religious practices themselves and instead understand those practices as

expressions of those inner religious states—a line of reasoning that Keane rightly notes is “circular” (Keane 2008:S116).

Despite the fact that Asad similarly addressed his notion of discursive tradition to theories of religion that privilege interiority, Mahmood’s stress on the cultivation of pious states without attending to how such states are recontextualized as identity performances similarly privileges interiority. We might recall, in this sense, the associations among Mahmood’s informants with hung lanterns in doorways, or cookies and meat preparation that are ultimately about nurturing the body as opposed to cultivating the soul. In contrast, if Keane is right that the, “category of religion must be capable of including not just the ardently faithful but the bored schoolboy who has memorized a credo which he recites by rote,” (2008: S116) then we also need to understand the interplay between the *supposed* superficiality (or “facile” nature) of identity engagements and the “inner” devotion of religious adepts. Whether those states are conceptualized in terms of sincerity or in terms of an affective cultivation of piety, they are still publically available for contestation, negotiation, and change.

Gregory Starrett gestures to a similar need to avoid sharp analytical divisions between “religious” and “secular” notions of tradition before examining how those concepts are employed in practice. “The categorization of the world into the secular and the religious is a peculiar kind of practice,” he argues, “that serves a purpose for particular kinds of people” (2010:646). In this sense, such divisions constitute “strategic statements” that people deploy in part to justify certain kinds of authority and power, and to root people in certain genealogies as opposed to others (Starrett 2010:646). The reverse, I would add, is also true; these are divisions people may strategically refuse to make. They might instead insist on the emergent and as-yet-undetermined nature of their engagements—including the conceptions of “tradition” with which they are orienting their practices.

The Indeterminacy of Devotion

The scene is a cool summer Shabbos morning and the program participants, together with Shabbos guests, had just finished davening *shakbris* (the daily morning service). The group was relaxed, a mood that seemed laden with the satisfaction of having, on their own and with few resources, cobbled together the requirements for a traditional, spiritually-rich morning service. A Hasidic guest had read from Yiddish Farm's own *Sefer Torah* (Torah scroll) as the rest of the group sat back in lawn chairs and foldable camping seats under Yiddish Farm's make-shift white "shul," a cool breeze blowing through its open, rolled-up walls. With just short of twenty people total on the Farm that weekend, we had managed a minyan no matter how people counted. Everyone knew though, that we were only counting men; after all (and even though we did not have a mekhitze), some of the guests that week would only worship communally under these stipulations. Most of the women were not davening that morning anyway. Even Rivke, who prayed daily and each week looked forward to Shabbos, had elected not to join the group of primarily twenty-something worshipers. She had begun davening with us but, to my surprise, decided to leave early and go back into the nearby house. From the occasional clinking of dishes we heard through the open windows, it seemed like those who had abstained from prayer were readying the table for the long lunch that always followed Saturday morning davening at Yiddish Farm. I apparently wasn't the only one who noticed these gendered dynamics. On our way up to the house, a fellow Yiddish farmer yelled out to the group that, "the girls (*meydelekh*) should not lift one finger this whole afternoon!"

Part of that tension was perhaps connected to our tacit awareness that it was largely because of that labor that Shabbos was slowly becoming one of the smoothest programmatic components of Yiddish Farm. Many of us may not have been fluent in farm labor or even in Yiddish. But a number of the people who came to the Farm that summer were, or were working to become, highly skilled at Shabbos; Ester, who grew up modern Orthodox, knew how much work would go into preparing

the Shabbos meals, especially in our small kitchen, for the large number of people who often visited during the weekends. Rivke who had accommodated herself to the legal strictures of kashrus, helped regulate the flow of goods and people through the kitchen, making clear not only to us, but also to our guests, that Yiddish Farm was serious about the legal stipulations surrounding ritual dietary restrictions. The group periodically made efforts to mitigate against a strong gender division of labor. But it was also clear that, when people were not highly attentive to these dynamics, that division would again assert itself.

We sat down at a white-clothed, set Shabbos table, mingling in Yiddish before reciting the blessings prior to the meal. In traditional fashion, as the guests gradually made their way back to their seats after ritually washing in the kitchen, people refused to talk, instead singing wordless melodies. These niggunim were irregularly traditional. In the middle of the first, Eli broke off into his own rendition—rearticulating the theme from Superman (“*dub dub du-dub!*”) into traditional style. People laughed and joined in; the theme to Indiana Jones followed, before switching back over to a traditional melody and then ironically and much to the chagrin of others, Miley Cyrus’s “Party in the USA.” After everyone was seated, a process that always involved a bit of a traffic jam in the small dining room, people quieted their singing. Yisroel, sitting at the head of the table, recited the blessing over the bread, employing the Ashkenazi accented Hebrew typical in many traditional Jewish communities. Bread was passed, lekhayims were made, and various dips, purchased recently in the nearby Catskills kosher markets, circulated throughout the room. Naftuli called everyone’s attention, holding the silence of the room, and began speaking in a cadence reminiscent of a rabbi beginning a *drash* (a religious teaching).

“Why do we daven the same prayers every Shabbos?” he asked the group, pausing after his question. “Wouldn’t it be more interesting,” he smiled, “to switch things up every now and then? Isn’t it, maybe, boring to recite the same things over and over?” he continued rhetorically. “I’ll tell

you: one answer is that, after practicing for a while, you get better. It's like working in the fields. At first, it may seem boring to go out and do the same thing over and over again, but you get better at it, and eventually you have success. At Yiddish Farm, there's a lot we have to work on. But one thing we are getting down here is how to have a Yiddish Farm Shabbos."

Each week we practiced—we practiced not only Yiddish but, as Naftuli observed, we practiced *Shabbos*. And, each Shabbos, those practices intermingled with our Yiddish studies. The following description, drawn from my fieldnotes about a different Shabbos weekend, further elaborates this intermingling:

We're having about eleven guests this Shabbos. It's the *yahrzeit* (anniversary of a death) of one of Eli's relatives, so we needed a minyan. What's more is that we needed a minyan of ten men. That only men were counted in the minyan did not seem to be a forgone conclusion. Yiddish Farm's level observance was a constant subject of debate and negotiation. But it was Eli's request. Also, assuming that there would be no minyan at Yiddish Farm, he had originally planned to travel back to New York City for the weekend and daven in Crown Heights in a small Lubavitch shul populated largely by people in their twenties and thirties (the same shul, in fact, where I later had my encounter with Yosi.)

"You should just make a minyan here," people suggested when they heard the news of Eli's planned departure.

"We can do that?" Eli asked.

"Yeah, it shouldn't be a problem," Yisroel replied.

It was not that Eli *always* insisted on having a male minyan. Alongside adoption of his own religious path, his politics were feminist and in some ways radical. Even his decision, a year later, to attend a Chabad yeshiva in Jerusalem was fraught because of his left wing politics on Israel. Back in

Brooklyn, before we left for the Farm, he had circulated between a variety of minyanim, sometimes the small egalitarian ones (always with, usually vegetarian, potluck dinners afterward) held in private homes by young twenty-something Jews who had moved to Brooklyn after college. At other times, he had attended egalitarian Jewish retreats at Isabella Friedman. In this case, though, given the personal importance of this particular Shabbos, insisting on a traditional minyan seemed important. “It’s not something I really want to play with,” he reflected. And so calls were made until we managed to summon together a variety of Yiddish speakers—a combination of Jews from Hasidic communities, and Jewish, Yiddish students. Elisha, a Yiddishist and ardently secular academic and Yiddish activist in New York City was even going to come up with a few Yiddish students to whom he’d been teaching spoken Yiddish at YIVO that summer.

As Thursday came around, the process of preparing for Shabbos began to intensify. Tasks were split up—a feature that had grown in importance after several “family meetings” to address the aforementioned gendered dynamics of labor; grocery lists were planned for the items we could not grow ourselves; the grounds around the main house were cleared and tidied. By mid-day on Friday, a day on which we had begun to almost skip farm work entirely in order to prepare for Shabbos, Naftuli and I were outside readying the shul for weekend prayers. We re-secured the support poles (which sometimes came uprooted during storms or in the face of strong winds), set up ‘tiki’ torches, and brought down chairs and a small table on which we would place Yiddish Farm’s own ark and Sefer Torah. It was a hustle to get everything done in time, but we were all pleased to have kept Eli at the Farm, and even more pleased to have a community on which to draw to make that possible.



Figure 16. Inside Yiddish Farm's shul before sunset.

At shakhris the next morning, people slowly and leisurely made their way to the outdoor shul. Naftuli, a natural host, guided people down to the white tent, making sure everyone was comfortable, and had their required “prayer” books. Toward the back sat Elisha, and the two female Yiddish students. Behind them were a couple other people who seemed in a more social than spiritual mood. I sat down with them. “That’s going to be the “omeyn’ section,” Naftuli said with a smile to us as he passed out Yiddish magazines, before setting down a stack of copies on a nearby yellow ottoman: issues of the Yiddish literary magazine *Afn Shvel* alongside the Hasidic *Der Yid*, and even the Book Center’s English *Paken Treger* magazine. As the service went on, Elisha and the two students read through these materials, practicing their Yiddish as those around them prayed. Occasionally during the service, I noticed a few others switching between participating in the service

and reading the magazines. Another Yiddishist looked back approvingly: “an emeser Yiddishist Shabbos”¹⁴ he remarked, himself shuckling (ritual swaying during worship) as he davened.

What appears to make the Shabbos a “real Yiddishist one,” was how Yiddish textual practice was “surrounded” within an observant Jewish frame. In his approval, the Yiddishist invites the secular guests he knows may refuse to pray to practice a desirable vision of Jewish subjectivity—one in which a person is so native to Jewish community that abstention from religious practice does not negate Jewish identity. This is how I described that vision in my fieldnotes: “there was something authentic about it to him, something about the fact that, maybe some of those people would and *could* have davened if they wanted to, but choose not to.” Instead the option exists to revert to the Yiddish magazine, looking up only to say “omeyn,” thereby fulfilling a basic modicum of (male) ritual participation. The reading of Yiddish magazines seems to parallel the discursive “location” of Yiddish in popular American Jewish memory (such as in Aaron Lansky’s *Outwitting History*), that depict elderly, European-born Jewish men socializing in Yiddish in the back of shul, while the rest of the congregation prays in formal American fashion.

After Shabbos dinner I sat down with “Eliza,” one of the vising Yiddish students, together with some of the Hasidic guests to drink beer and talk on the porch. At one point during that conversation, the two Hasidic men asked Eliza about her Jewish background. Eliza explained her desire for the kind of Jewish authenticity that she saw embodied in the guests in front of her who, though not completely out of their communities, were on the boundaries: “I grew up in the suburbs and went to a Reform synagogue,” she explained in the beginner’s Yiddish she was studying at YIVO, working to make herself intelligible to her interlocutors. “So I didn’t really learn how to pray or say the blessings correctly, or how to act in shul.” “Sometimes,” she reflected, “I’m jealous of

¹⁴ “A true Yiddishist Shabbos”

from Jews who leave their communities. They get to do what they want, but they have the knowledge.”

Eliza contemplates an alternative liberal selfhood like the one she embodied (someone who can “do what they want”) but who comes to that agency through a Jewish upbringing that would have endowed her with embodied capacities and forms of Jewish literacy she feels that she lacks. Yet, this vision of Jewish authenticity she locates in the past—that of a Jew whose self has already been constituted in relationship to a history of engagement with a Jewish discursive tradition—can only be obtained through present and future practice. Two years later, upon moving back to New York City after completing the bulk of my fieldwork, I would see Eliza again, this time at a Jewish text-study session in Manhattan. Eliza, it turns out, had eventually decided that she was going to make good on her desire to become more Jewishly literate, enrolling in a Jewish studies masters program in New York City. Alongside and partially shaped by her formal academic Jewish studies, she had begun participating in religious Jewish communities in Manhattan. She started learning Hebrew in addition to Yiddish and travelled to Israel. I saw her, in fact, on more than one occasion at that same text-study session. Though not *ba’al teshuva*, her Yiddish studies were hardly separate from a larger process of Jewish self-making—one that would eventually also entail engagements with sacred Jewish texts.

For a number of *ba’alei teshuva* I met during the course of my fieldwork, a similar intermingling of Yiddish and religious self-cultivation explicitly marked a process of becoming *frum*. For Yisroel, for example, who had spent years frequenting Ultra-Orthodox circles and communities, Yiddish is something that he feels, “brings Jews to Yiddishkayt.” These possibilities, in his opinion, underwrite the reasons that Hasidic Jews who might otherwise be hesitant about a Yiddish Farm, were willing to visit. In his own life, devotion to Yiddish initially took the form of participation in secular Yiddish cultural organizations, or the devoted study of Territorialist and Diaspora Nationalist

literature (which he mastered in Yiddish). But today when Yisroel describes his process of learning Yiddish, those initial forays are integrated into a larger Jewish narrative in which religious transformation is central. A similar intertwining of Yiddish and Jewish observance marks Eli's experience as well. What began as an engagement motivated by a desire to speak the language of his grandparents later became intimately interwoven with his religious practice. "I can't even daven there anymore," he confessed to me over a Shabbos lunch in New York, about a popular minyan among twenty- and thirty-somethings that davens in the more conventional Israeli Hebrew pronunciation used by most American Jews. "It just doesn't feel that Jewish anymore," he explained, going on to discuss how he prefers the Ashkenazi inflected linguistic practice of Lubavitch Hasidim. Honestly, he went on, "my Yiddish practice feels so wrapped up in my religious practice right now."

For people who move through, help organize, and otherwise participate in the emergent Yiddish space of Yiddish Farm, Yiddish can indeed become "wrapped" or intertwined within a larger emergent process of crafting a more observant Jewish self—a Jewish self whose embodied practices are shaped, however incrementally and unevenly, by an engagement with a Jewish discursive tradition. These narratives offer a different reading from my initial take on the "omeyn" section at Yiddish Farm—and thus, consequently, against a reading that sharply insulates the space of Yiddish practice from emergent religiosity. I had originally conceptualized the omeyn section as the carving out of an interactive frame for secular Yiddish study within a religious ritual context. However from the vantage point of Eli or Yisroel's discourse, we might instead understand how these frames can blend or, as Judith Irvine (1996:148) has described, "leak" into one another—cross pollinating and infusing one another through practices like the Yiddishist Shabbos described above.

For scholars of performance and linguistic anthropologists, the practice of Yiddish text-study within a frame of religious worship foregrounds precisely these questions about the relationship of frames in any analysis of what is being practiced. Erving Goffman, for example, was

highly attentive to the dynamics that cause frames for social interaction to be established or “keyed,” as well as what causes them to break and be renegotiated (Goffman 1986). Linguistic anthropologists have focused extensively on the process by which texts become “entextualized” within and alongside new contexts and co-texts (Silverstein and Urban 1996). These processes subject texts to new meanings, practices and interpretations. Irvine, for example, applying Bakhtin and Voloshinov’s literary analyses of voicing and reported speech to social interaction, highlights what she calls the “intertwined” relationships between the voices that constitute the authorial context and those that constitute reported speech. For Irvine, “[t]he idea of intertwined voices recognizes the complexity of the sources on which a speaker draws, and the complexity of the speaker’s commentary on those sources” (1996:151). Given the ideological association of Yiddish text study as an engagement with heritage and the observant context of worship toward which Eli’s service aspired, these modes of inquiry point us to the potential for Yiddish text to become intertwined or “wrapped” within and alongside traditional Jewish co-texts.

Two years after my own summer in the Yiddish Farm program, after spending a year back in Ann Arbor writing my dissertation, I returned to New York City to find that the wrapping of Yiddish together with observant Jewish co-texts had continued both within and outside the Farm. Over the previous two years, Rivke had been organizing her own Yiddish reading group. But instead of reading Bashevis or Sholem Aleichem, that group, which is often frequented by participants in the Yiddish Farm *kehve* (community), studies Rabbi Simcha Petrushka’s Yiddish translation and explication of *Mishna*.¹⁵ Participants debate and discuss this material in Yiddish in the context of an egalitarian yeshiva. As with the “omeyn section” and as in Yosi’s discourse about the potential role Yiddish might play in leading Jews into Yiddishkayt, so too here does the study of the Yiddish

¹⁵ The books of the Mishna, which form the first layer of what is called “Oral Torah,” constitute the principle codification of Jewish law from the turn of the millennium. Jewish tradition holds that the Oral Torah was revealed to Moses on Mt. Sinai alongside the Written Torah.

language become bound together and entwined with religious content. On the level of practice, Rivke's reading group parallels Eli's reflections about how his Yiddish practice has changed in and through his experience of becoming observant: that it is now, "so wrapped up in [his] Jewish practice."

On a return trip to Yiddish Farm that summer, I met up with three other Yiddishists to see these patterns further reflected. Two were Yiddishists and frequent visitors to the Farm, and the other who I'll call Chaym, was a recent graduate of the Yiddish Farm program. All are Orthodox in some fashion. Hence we were rushing to get to Goshen before sundown. Chaym and I had met in Crown Heights, where he had been staying while visiting New York City. In his twenties, Chaym first got interested in Yiddish, he explained, "while volunteering in Chiapas with the Zapatistas." Identifying himself as an anarchist, and impressed by the linguistic and cultural maintenance programs he learned about in Chiapas, he eventually decided to attend Yiddish Farm to learn a language connected to his own heritage. At the Farm, he had become something of an ideal student, taking to the language quickly, and soon communicating with relative ease. After leaving Yiddish Farm, he began his own process of religious return. "He's like Yisroel, only a few years ago," a participant observed to me during a Shabbos walk around the Farm, about how Yiddish can lead an individual into a more traditional Jewish way of life. Naomi, who was visiting that weekend, noted the knotted tsitsit fringes hanging by Chaym's side, a new addition since she had last seen him a summer earlier: "He's Yiddish Farm's first ba'al teshuva!" she said appreciatively.

That evening, we davened indoors from Yiddish Farm's prayer books. During my summer in the program we had prayed largely from old conservative prayer books, likely donated to the Farm, or collected by Yisroel or Naftuli. But as we joined together (this time with a mekhitze that, as was explained to me, is now used every Shabbos) Chaym took down new leather-bound *siddurs* (prayer books) from a bookshelves filled with Yiddish textbooks, books on Jewish spirituality, and farming.

As I opened my siddur, I noted the Yiddish translations directly underneath the Hebrew prayers thus allowing for prayer and Yiddish practice to happen simultaneously among the college-age and twenty-something community that had gathered at the Farm. Martin, in front of me, was reading a book by Bashevis Singer, putting it down intermittently to pick up and join in with the rest of the minyan. As we davened from our prayer books, or alternated between them and works of Yiddish literature, we performed almost simultaneous acts, linking oneself to a Jewish discursive tradition and to an imagined tradition of Ashkenazi Jewish heritage.

It makes little sense, in an *a priori* manner, to separate and lift out the components of these actions that are identity performances from those involved in producing a pious self. During this service, that they should happen simultaneously seemed to be precisely the point. Specifically, such practices help make room for Yiddishists with a variety of levels of Jewish observance, while grounding Yiddish Farm's identity as a traditional Jewish space—one theoretically open to native, Yiddish speaking Jews from Ultra-Orthodox communities. At the same time, by creating contexts for Yiddish immersion that strive to facilitate this multiplicity, Yiddish Farm fosters spaces in which engagement with Jewish tradition through Yiddish intermingles with, and for some individuals infuses, practices with sacred texts.

In fact, when participants did make such divisions between Jewish observance and Yiddish studies, they often made explicit the affective and moral interweaving of these two traditions. These divisions were especially apparent in the reflections of many secular women, queer and/or feminist participants who were uncomfortable practicing Yiddish within an observant Jewish religious context—even if that meant foregoing an opportunity to dramatically improve linguistic competence. These critiques of Yiddish Farm reestablished clear boundaries between Yiddish studies and Jewish discursive practice. Nearly every female visitor I met, and many men as well, commented on the male “vibe” of the environment, particularly in relationship to the religious

culture taking shape there. These feelings were perhaps most clearly expressed by “Malinda,” a self-consciously secular Yiddishist who grew up attending a socialist Zionist summer camp. She had participated in the Book Center program and, having moved back to New York City afterward, began socializing and “hanging out” with Yiddishists in New York City. Malinda describes her attraction to the younger generations of Yiddishists involved with Yiddish Farm as connected to her excitement about going from an “artificial place” like the Book Center, where everyone was just learning the language, to a place where people were, she explained, “just being natural [in Yiddish].” Among New York’s younger generation of Yiddishists, she explained, it, “just feels like you’re in Yiddishland.” But as she contemplated the prospect of spending one or two months living and studying Yiddish at the Farm she found it potentially “scary,” worrying that when her practice of Yiddish was entrenched within a religious context, it would feel “uncomfortable” for her. The religious orientation of the Farm, she described to me in an interview:

“was one of the reasons I was not thinking about applying to Yiddish Farm. Because I’m— like at the Yiddish Book Center it’s one thing. You go there and it’s academic and then you go home and you do whatever you want. But on Yiddish Farm, people are going to be praying all over the place. Shabbat is going to be a thing. It’s probably going to be mostly Orthodox people and that’s not a scene where I feel super comfortable and, I guess I don’t know how I would... I don’t even want to sing *Birkat HaMazon* [the blessing after the meal]. I just don’t want to do that. I feel some kind of intense aversion towards it. But I still really like Yiddish and I’m hoping it’ll work out anyway that I’ll be able to speak Yiddish and have fun without feeling uncomfortable about the religion.”

For Malinda, even if her stay at the Farm would be temporary, and even if the Farm offered to, “be like family, [to] bring me closer,” she felt that she would not be able to insulate her own Yiddish practice from the religious environment taking shape there. Her thoughts represent a particularly marked reflection of feelings that were expressed, either in passing or in more formal conversations about the Farm, regarding its religious life and the disproportionate difficulty it created for more secular-identified participants to “feel comfortable” there. “Dem emes gezogt, iz es

a bisl frim far mir,” [truth be told, it (the Farm) is a little too religiously observant for me], explained another female Yiddishist about why she had not yet visited the immersive Yiddish environment, despite being active in the Yiddish world in New York City. “Es iz nisht mayn svive” [It’s not my group of people]. In the words of another Yiddishist and self identified feminist who visited the Farm for Shabbos another week, when I asked him what might make his visits more enjoyable, he replied, in English, that something needed to be done about, “the crushing Orthodoxy,” he experienced on his visit. The use of the expression “crushing” tropes on the particular semiotic relationship between Yiddish and Jewish discursive practice enacted in the kinds of textual engagements described above. Like Eli’s metaphor of “wrapping,” the imagery of an Orthodoxy that “crushes” also depicts Jewish observance as “around,” “above,” or “on top” of another thing. But in this case, the religious frame impedes and forcefully alters the shape of its object. Such reflections reveal how, for some, orienting oneself to a heritage language at Yiddish Farm translated into orienting oneself to Jewish religious observance. Comfort with that orientation is what was required, to use Avrom’s description of my own experience on the Farm, to be “comfortable here.”

Being “On a Path”

When considering the experiences of people like Chaym, Yisroel, Eli, and others, for whom Yiddish has been part of a process of becoming more observant, it is not difficult to understand how practicing the language at the Farm was part of an overall “Jewish practice.” If the Farm mediates such practices, one can understand Yosi’s realization that Yiddish might indeed “bring you into Yiddishkayt.” Judging from the practices and experiences detailed above, and the routes taken by people like Rivke, Eli, Chaym and others, I would offer a subtle correction to this discourse. It cannot be determined in advance where their paths will lead. But when Yosi interpellated my own trip down Eastern Parkway that Saturday as a potential step on a path to religious return, he

rhetorically performed in time a similar interweaving of Yiddish and religious becoming that was enacted in practice on the Farm. In our conversation, Yosi took up a position in my own possible future, looking backward on a process of Yiddish study that leads one into (his vision) of Yiddishkayt. Both of us though, recognized that this future had not yet been lived. Thus, between my own Yiddish studies, and the pious destination he felt would justify them, lay a process of becoming that was and remains still open, undetermined and emergent.

Somewhere within that process, on a path, best captures the place of many Yiddishists with whom I spent time at Yiddish Farm. Over the five years I've known Eli, for example, I've seen his relationship to Jewish observance change remarkably. In Crown Heights, he kept strictly kosher and even went through periods of being *shomer negiah* (refusing physical contact with women) alongside his increased involvement with Chabad. But he never felt, he explained, that he could completely integrate himself into that Ultra-Orthodox community. He once described his feelings about traditional Judaism in roughly these terms: "There's an audacity," he told me one night over beers, "in taking Judaism seriously. Did you hear this story?" he asked, "I was listening to it recently on the radio—about the guy in Japan who refused to believe that the war was over. He just kept fighting a guerilla war in the jungle out on his own. That's kind of how I feel about observant Judaism: 'the temple is destroyed but *we are going to go on*, ready at any moment for it to be rebuilt.' ... I think there's something heroic in that" (emphasis my own). What appears to enable Eli's serious engagement with Judaism, as his provocative comparison suggests, is less his faith in the legitimating reason ostensibly underwriting his practice. Rather, for him personally, the willingness to insist that "we are going to go on," itself legitimates and makes possible an eschatological narrative about which he otherwise maintains ambivalence. The path itself, in his discourse, takes priority.

That path, in his own life, has hardly been teleological or unidirectional. Living a fully observant Jewish life seemed in practice to function as a possible future, a beacon that orients his

moral compass. It is, though, one beacon among others. As he had explained to me when we first moved to Crown Heights, he often finds himself, “on the borders of different Jewish communities.” That *Sukkos* (a fall holiday), for example, he had gone on an egalitarian retreat at Isabella Friedman after attending an event with the politically radical (and hardly frum) Jews for Racial and Economic Justice, before spending most of the holiday at Chabad. None of these communities felt fully authentic to him, felt quite like his “Jewish home.” Over time, his religious practice has gone through shifts as well. Earlier this year, when I recounted the story to him of the Shabbos in which we ensured an all male minyan, he seemed surprised that he had asked for one: “woah, I did that?!” he exclaimed. Such a reaction captures the continually unfolding nature of his relationship to Jewish observance. Throughout our friendship, Eli and I have talked often about these shifts “forward” and “backward” in his relationship to Jewish law, and he often leaves open the possibility, when we talk, of both greater and lesser levels of devoutness in the future.

For others, the vision of observant “yiddishkayt” to which they are headed differs from that envisioned by Yosi. Rivke, for example, whose religious practice includes the observance of mitzvos traditionally designated for men, maintains a practice that differs from the gender normative vision of religious piety championed by someone like Yosi. But, as described here and in the previous chapter, Jewish discursive practice structures her personal, professional and spiritual life. Rivke seems, like Eliza, not necessarily moving toward a codified vision of Jewish observance and community. Rather, her process is more illustrative of another participant’s comments about her own relationship to traditional Jewish observance: “I want to develop,” she told me at one point, “my *own* frum identity!”

Taken together, the people most comfortable around Yiddish Farm tended to be people who were, “on some kind of path (derekh).” It’s that expression that Naomi used, one Shabbos in Crown Heights, to describe a newcomer to Yiddish who people described as “epes frim”

(“somewhat pious”). The notion of proceeding in “some kind of” direction reflects the openness and unfolding nature of how that path will develop in the future. That condition, after all, reflected the general quality that marked the broader conditions of the lives of most of the twenty-something Jews who have been involved in Yiddish Farm—including myself. When we were not talking about Yiddish engagements, most of our conversations covered topics structured by a similar kind of indeterminacy: new jobs or internships begun and ended, new semesters and classes, new lovers or partners (and break-ups), doubts about how to support oneself in New York City, and so forth.

Being “somewhere on a path” may thus be constitutive of the particular religious environment that Yiddish Farm seeks to carve out for itself in Goshen. This religious “location,” as it were, is structured by the Farm’s desire to link itself, on the one hand, to Ultra-Orthodox communities who employ Yiddish, to different extents, in their own communities, and on the other, a desire to draw in cohorts of primarily college-age and twenty-something Jews. With regard to the former, being recognized as legitimate interlocutors by frum Jewish communities means created a place that, to some extent, is “heimish.” “Why speak Yiddish if it isn’t connected to a Jewish way of life (*lebenshtayger*) to people who actually speak the language?” Avrom asked me rhetorically over lunch, as we debated the future of Yiddish. “Why not just switch over and speak English?” In the opinion of another individual, secular Yiddishism had run its course. “Do you know Manny Rosensweig?” this person asked me about a well-known Yiddish cultural activist in New York City. “He’s about the only person I know who’s still strongly devoted to Yiddish secularism; where we’ll have Yiddish culture without religion. He’s the last guy,” he went on with a smile, “who still observes the 613 commandments of secular Yiddish.” As this last reference makes clear, the time in which Yiddish could function as a replacement for religion has, in his opinion, come to an end. For him, Yiddishism involves connecting the language with traditional Judaism.

As a project striving to make room for multiple connections between religious observance and Yiddish practice, the ethnographic context of Yiddish Farm foregrounds the importance of attending to conditions of openness, ambivalence and indeterminacy when theorizing people's relationships to religious conceptions of how a life should be lived. Scholars risk eliding these dynamics, critics have argued, when their theories of religion and the secular are based too heavily on the practices of religious virtuosos. Relatedly, as I've argued here, these approaches tend to separate discursive traditions from those related to ethnic heritage. The *Yiddish* virtuosos described here, on the other hand, foreground these multiple traditions' mutual articulation in practice. This offers a new perspective on the social analysis of openness in theories of religion and secularism. For Schielke, for example, openness and indeterminacy about piety constitutes a point of departure for ethnographic analysis; in this case study, openness about how identity traditions are related to discursive ones is *itself* an activist project. Indeed, part of what makes Yiddish Farm work as a full-time Yiddish space, as I've argued here, is precisely the *refusal* to easily pull apart discursive Jewish traditions from those associated with identity.

Conclusion.

Jewish Ethnography and the Intimate Lives of Analytical Concepts.

-*Dos Pintele Yid*: “Let’s take these words one by one. Dos means “the” or “that” in Yiddish — in this case, “the.” Pintele (PIN-teh-leh), a noun with a diminutive ending that can also be used adjectivally, means “little point.” Yid means “Jew.” Yud and Yod are variants of the name of the 10th letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *i*, which also happens to be both the first letter of *yid* and the smallest letter — a little point, as it were — of Hebrew’s 22...Here, culled from various English sources, are a number of freer translations of *dos pintele yid* that I have been able to find: “The core of one’s Jewishness”; “the very core of Judaism”; “the Jewish spark”; “the spark of Jewish spirituality”; “the innermost Jewish spark”; “the little point of light in the Jewish soul”; “the quintessence of Jewish identity”; “the essential Jew”; “innate Jewishness”; “the heart and soul of each individual Jew”; “the little Jew within the Jew”; “the tiny yet brilliant spark which is the unchanging, concentrated essence of Jewishness;” “the saving remnant, however deeply buried, in every Jewish heart’...it’s a way of referring to an indestructible core of Jewishness that supposedly exists within every Jew and that always has the potential, even in totally assimilated or uneducated Jews, to return every Jew to the Jewish fold by making its presence felt at the most unexpected and unpredictable moments.”¹

-“Rashi, more than once I think, in his Torah commentary, provides an explanation for how there can be a limitless number of commentaries on a single verse. He introduces the image of a hammer on a rock, which shoots forth an infinite spray of sparks (*punktn*) in all directions. That is how many potentialities rest in the rock, and only as the hammer—the tool of rabbinic homiletics—strikes does one see what lies within. [Peretz] Markish’s metaphor reflects ... refracts Rashi’s. He writes of a mirror that breaks against a rock, not a hammer that strikes and is not stricken...Tragic in contrast with Rashi’s self-assurance. But Markish the man, the modern Jew, became the mirror of a world-view that was utterly incapable of admitting the multiplicity of meaning, of significance. So the smashing of the mirror is a kind of newly won freedom, and the slivers so many kernels of renewed Jewish creativity. Just as Rashi’s hammer becomes a human mirror, Rashi’s rock of Torah becomes Markish’s pitiless rock of history.”²

-“I cannot express the gratitude and honor I feel at participating in this program, and how it has impacted me in my future language and life pursuits. A life-changing opportunity that will hopefully

¹ Philologos, language expert for the Jewish Daily Forward (2006).

² *Yidish Visnshaft un di Postmodern* by Jonathan Boyarin (1996:183-190). The quote is taken from the translation, *Science and the Postmodern*, by Naomi Seidman, which follows directly after the Yiddish in the same volume. (1996:197-198).

have ripple effects into the Jewish and academic communities and beyond.”³

One early summer afternoon, the Steiner students gathered in the Applebaum-Driker theater for an orientation before the upcoming New York City trip. Allison together with a few other administrative and educational staff stood before the students, seated throughout the auditorium. “I’m here to calm fears about the Steiner dinner,” she announced with a smile, a slight hyperbolic tone to her voice.

I personally had not heard about any fears this year. But, having been at the Book Center the previous summer, I knew about what Allison was likely referencing. During that summer, as we gathered for a similar meeting, a different staff member had informed us that, for the Steiner dinner, guys were *expected* to wear nice pants and a collared shirt and that women *should* wear “skirts and dresses.” Though most did not blink at the recommendation, one young woman resented the gender binary implied in the dress code. To make matters worse, the Steiner dinner was not even the only part of the trip in which such a dress code was required; when we would visit the Ultra-Orthodox neighborhood of Boro Park, students were told, conservative dress was expected. In Boro Park, where students would have an opportunity to read through Hasidic children’s literature in Jewish book stores, withdraw money in Yiddish from ATMs, and perhaps exchange a few words with store owners, modest dress was an assumed priority—especially for women. This year Allison was noticeably more ambiguous about the requirements. Beyond dressing like you’re going to visit grandparents, and abstaining from, “ripped jeans or flip flops,” she provided no noticeable gender-specific requirements.

Professor Misha Rothman, the director of education, took the stage shortly after Allison. A

³ A Steiner student’s review of the program, posted on the Book Center’s website. (Yiddish Book Center n.d(h))

large, projection screen behind him, he clicked to open a google map layout of Manhattan, displaying the destinations on our trip itinerary. In addition to the Steiner dinner and Boro Park, he explained, we would tour the Lower East Side, and attend a Yiddish theater performance at the Sholem Aleichem Center in the Bronx followed by a Yiddish *zingeray* (song session) with YIVO summer students at the home of nearby Yiddishists. There would be serious matters of Yiddish study to attend to as well. During a visit to the YIVO Institute, students would have a couple hours to peruse archival material for their final research projects.

Though I thought the matter of dress had been settled, it slowly became clear that Professor Rothman was attentive to, and perhaps anticipating, the problems of identity performance that had come up the previous year. Segueing from Allison's discussion of the Steiner dinner, Misha asked the students to consider our presence on both our trips to Boro Park and the Steiner dinner in commensurable terms. "Both places," he told us, "are places where we're going to have to think about how we dress, our comportment, and how best to appeal to the norms of others."

"So," he continued, "I want you to try and experience our trip to New York *ethnographically*." Ethnography, as he went on to explain, would help mitigate some of the problematic aspects of being tourists in Yiddishland. Misha had come equipped with notes from a conversation he had with a Jewish ethnographer, as well as definitions of ethnography from Wikipedia because, as he explained with a smile, "I'm a populist." The ethnographer, he went on, wanted to remind students that they would still be tourists. So, he explained, "you should act like tourists, but *critical* tourists." Thus, the goal in Boro Park was not to have a pleasurable experience in an exotic life-world of an authentic other, but to learn about the role of Yiddish in their communities.

"How you dress," he continued, "is up to you. But it will affect your experience in Boro Park. Dress in terms of being an effective ethnographer." Though he neglected to say explicitly what that meant, students grasped that modest dress was a way of smoothing social interaction so as to

ease the exchange of Yiddish between visiting Steiner students and their Hasidic “hosts.” The students filled in the rest: “I’m uncomfortable with it,” said one student about having to dress modestly, “but if we’re interested in Yiddish we have to go here and make contact with these people.” Another student added that, “*tsniuskdik* (modest) dress is also a way for us,” she said implicitly referencing women, “to avoid getting bad looks in Boro Park.” Mordkhe leaned back to his friend Leah behind him, “I’ve got people to see.”...

By all accounts the reflexive turn in anthropology has come and left its mark on the discipline. We are accustomed to acknowledging positionality, of attending closely to the practice of ethnographic writing, of thinking critically about the genealogies of our own concepts. At its most dynamic and most creative, the legacy of that tradition leads scholars to better account, in theory and method itself, for how the particular communities with whom we work shape the knowledge we produce—that they anticipate and at times even mediate the future contextualizations of the ethnographies in whose creation they have shared (see especially Irvine 1996). So too, as representations circulate with greater ease, are ethnographers increasingly forced to confront the possibilities that what they write will make its way back to their informants.

And yet, certain analytical tendencies, popular among scholars across the disciplines today (and which I make ample use of in this ethnography) suggest a need to more rigorously attend to that reflexive tradition. I refer here to the tendency by scholars of insisting on a separation between “categories of practice” and “categories of analysis.” Identity, Brubaker and Cooper have contended, in what has become an influential line of critique, is simply too unwieldy for social science. As they argue, “Social analysis—including the analysis of identity politics—requires relatively unambiguous analytical categories. Whatever its suggestiveness, whatever its indispensability in certain practical contexts, ‘identity’ is too ambiguous...to serve well the demands of social analysis” (2000:2). So too,

has Gregory Starrett similarly confined the category of “the secular” to the domain of practice, noting that it suffers from a “generality” born out of its, “utter dependence on the concept of religion” (Starrett 2010:645). “Conceptually,” he writes,

the secular is always a term of contrast: it is what is left over when we create and populate the category of religion. Taxonomists call such leftovers “paraphyletic categories.” A paraphylum is a category formed by the objects left over in the construction of another category. The category “invertebrate,” for instance, is constructed by defining the class of vertebrates, animals with backbones, leaving behind a paraphylum of creatures as diverse as earthworms, mosquitos, crabs, octopuses, and coral, which have nothing in common except their spinelessness (Starrett 2010:645-646).

There are good reasons for these critiques. Understanding the breadth of the secular, as opposed to struggling to define its domain, allows us to better illuminate its capacity to naturalize the claims so often made on its behalf. Similarly, considering practices of “identification,” as opposed to identity, offers a practice-based approach that keeps the scholar from being pulled into circular debates about what constitutes an authentic identity.

And yet, within the Applebaum-Driker theater, a place that at an earlier stage of its social life had once been a *generous gift*, the transformation of eighteen young students into Yiddish ethnographers also makes clear the politics entailed in those analytical separations. For me to insist that the value of this analysis lies in the separation of its categories from those used in practice disguises and obscures much about the interactive and social conditions of this ethnography’s production. *Interactive*—because much of my material and institutional access was generated precisely by allowing for degrees of ambiguity and opacity about how my project was related to the expectations and desires of those who understand the production of analytical concepts as enactments of and resources for Jewish identity. *Social*—because a backward glance on the “vector of Jewish futurity” that produced this ethnography illuminates spaces of interaction that are the concretization of so many philanthropic gifts contributing to identity’s production.

Separating categories of analysis from practice against this backdrop thus risks eliding the role that the practice of *avoiding* such separations can play in the production of theory in the academy. It also creates the illusion of a Jewish scholarly community, those who trade in categories of analysis, existing apart from Jewish communities of practice. Not only do Jewish studies scholars also participate in Jewish religious, political and institutional life; in an extension of insights from native ethnographers and feminist ethnographers a generation ago, these two domains denote categories of the self and attendant modes of behavior that one must know how and when to enact whether or not the scholar is Jewish. Furthermore, these domains—as the above ethnographic example should make starkly clear—are not neatly parsed out from one another. They overlap within Jewish studies departments, at academic conferences, and within the emerging terrain of Jewish para-academic institutions and organizations that provide employment and supplementary income for social scientists equipped to produce knowledge that aids the broader American Jewish community in identity's production. This is a fact I have come to appreciate, as the Book Center routinely sends its staff—including its cohorts of young fellows—to the annual Association for Jewish Studies conference. In circumstances that appear as an intensification of the old story of the ethnographer who discovers that her ethnography circulates among the people she studied, so too do I often find myself pausing nervously before quoting the words of previous informants sitting out in the audience.

In addition to distinguishing our categories of analysis from those used in practice, we might also consider how to better analyze the social and interactive conditions that mediate the relationship between the two—to capture the transformation of one into the other and back again. That would do much to reflexively illuminate the politics entailed in the production of analytical categories in the academy more generally. Amidst the “crisis” in the humanities and social sciences, it's a timely endeavor indeed. As scholars are called upon to justify their departments within a

context of ongoing financialization of the university, of decreased tenure appointments and low paying adjunct work, questions about the economic conditions that make academic labor possible are themselves increasingly becoming objects of public debate and critique among scholars. Thus, work that reflexively speaks to the conditions of academic production offers a valuable theoretical and public critique that addresses directly the circumstances under which we work.

The close relationship between American Jewish philanthropy, scholarly production, and the American Jewish community makes the ethnography of American Jews particularly well suited to such a critical engagement. That engagement also strikes me as a fitting analytical path forward for a subfield whose emergence and development was rooted within a broader turn to reflexivity within the discipline. Anthropologists of Jews, so many of whom have historically been Jewish, have long worked within conditions in which the identities of their informants are intersubjectively bound up in their own. For the first generation of Jewish ethnographers, this often involved a relationship with older Jews. Today, though, the field into which we enter is increasingly populated with *ethnography*. Whether theorized as “quest tourists” and guides (Lehrer 2013), folk ethnographers (Kugelmass 1992, 1997), and Jewish “adventurers” of all sorts (Shandler 2006a, Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2002), I am hardly the first to notice that the ethnographer of Jews by profession increasingly finds her or himself in fields alongside other ethnographers. But at the current moment in which tropes of discovery (*Taglit*) and adventure permeate and frame any number of philanthropically supported Jewish engagements, the promise of Jewish ethnography today seems to lie precisely in its ability to illuminate the connections between the categories we produce, and those that circulate in the fields we work. As a form of Jewish devotion, ethnography itself, after all, is already invested with future Jewish trajectories—intimate lives that are not so easily disentangled from the intergenerational exchanges in which they are embedded.

Indeed, in the Applebaum-Driker theater, whatever my own conception of the particular

vector of futurity that I sought to pursue ethnographically, it remained within that moment an instance of *Yiddishness*—one point among 18 others still coming into being, latent with so many sparks of potentiality. It was not up to me entirely to determine the relationship of the analytical concepts I sought to produce to the categories circulating in practice. Even more so, to further pursue this project undoubtedly depends on my ability to maintain those entanglements—to allow others also to decide when identity and identification are separated and when they are fused.

The extent to which such separations were contingent upon the social and interactive conditions of the episodic program would, only a few days later at the Steiner dinner itself, come clearly into view...

Scene One (continued from chapter one)

After exiting the bus outside Steiner Studios and, after a short wait downstairs, we made our way up the elevator and into an elegant, minimally decorated event space. Some staff from the Center were already there, handing out nametags and pointing out sponsors to students. At the end of the room lay an expansive balcony, to which students, after grabbing wine and beer and snacks from the fruit and cheese plate, headed to take pictures against the view. It was early evening, the sun beginning its descent over the East River and the Lower Manhattan skyline stretched out before us. In a little while, after more introductions and mingling, we'd all take our seats and listen to three students—selected by the contracted staff of Jewish studies scholars in the humanities—to address the audience of older American Jews discussing their motivations and aspirations in learning Yiddish.

In the days preceding the dinner Marie, one of the students selected to address the audience, had initially worried about what she would say. It was less that she was one of the few non-Jewish students in the program, and more that her desire to learn Yiddish stemmed from the language's

connection with left-radicalism and her own commitment to labor politics and community organizing. But Misha and the staff had encouraged her to be honest. After all, it was not entirely unlikely that some of the people in the crowd had themselves initially been exposed to Yiddish within the context of a left wing shule system. And furthermore, in the eyes of politically progressive professors working with the students on a daily basis, the ability of a student to speak sincerely about personal motivation and desire trumped any possible institutional value with which that ability might be at odds—if, indeed, there would be any such conflict at all.

Marie's short speech was to be flanked by two highly conventional testaments of Yiddish devotion. Before her, Brian spoke about his familial connection to Yiddish. He explained to the audience that, despite not speaking Yiddish growing up, he was raised knowing that his grandfather was a Yiddish writer. He wanted to learn Yiddish in order to, possibly, connect to this grandfather by reading his writing. He ended, in sentimental fashion, by reading one of his grandfather's poems—albeit in English—a testament to his emotional connection that would one day lead to mastering competencies necessary to read the original.

As people applauded Brian's speech in satisfaction, Marie approached the podium, her silhouette framed by the room's mammoth windows. "My own interest in Yiddish," she began, "is not so innocent." She paused for effect, "I am a revolutionary socialist." Unable to hold back a somewhat uncomfortable smile, she looked out at the crowd. Her audience responded with an uncomfortable laugh, soon falling silent as she explained her identification with the Yiddish anarchist and socialist left of early 20th century New York City, in which, "there was a strike a week!" Finally, when the longest five minutes of the evening ended, the crowd applauded politely and Marie turned over the stage to Alan, whose discussion of his doctoral research provided the crowd a bit of relief.

Toward the end of the evening, as I would learn later, one of the older guests (likely *not* one who had grown up in the Yiddish left) approached Marie to learn a bit more about her background. After she politely answered his questions, he looked at her and, as if to symbolically “remove” her from the Center’s Yiddish public, informed her, “you’re not even Jewish!”

As news of the exchange circulated among the Steiner students, though, its meaning began to take on a new social life. If the older gentleman’s remarks cast doubt upon the legitimacy of Marie’s engagement with Yiddish, gossip about the exchange brought her back into the group’s intimate social space. Told and retold by Marie and others, the story became the subject of intergenerational mockery, critical commentary about the Book Center’s own means of production, and a more general eye rolling about wealthy donors that might be funding future Yiddish socialists without fully realizing it. Students, staff and even visiting professors expressed “shock” in the days that followed, wrinkling their faces in solidarity as Marie relayed the barb: “*you’re not even Jewish.*” Mordkhe appeared to take particular satisfaction confirming his friend’s belonging: “Hey!” he’d often say with a smile, “you have *dos pintele yid.*”

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