

5-2019

Stealing Borders: The Yiddish Book Center and Expansions of Postvernacular Yiddishland

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Stealing Borders: The Yiddish Book Center and Expansions of Postvernacular Yiddishland

An Honors Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Anthropology

Bates College

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Degree of Bachelor of Arts

By

Sarah Elsa Freyd

Lewiston, Maine

March 27, 2019

Acknowledgements

There is no way I could have even come close to completing this thesis without the tremendous support of many. First and foremost, I want to thank everyone whose voices and ideas have quite literally made my thesis what it is and who took the time to speak with me about Yiddish. I am forever in debt to your thoughtfulness and your willingness to bear with me as I asked sometimes confusing questions. Without your collaboration, this thesis would not exist.

I also want to thank the Yiddish Book Center for allowing me to learn about the incredible work that you do. I especially want to thank the Center's academic director Josh Lambert. Thank you for taking the time out of your busy work day to so generously help out a random undergraduate student with her senior thesis.

Of course, I would like to thank everyone I have encountered at Bates College for challenging me intellectually and teaching me more than I could have ever imagined. Thank you to the Anthropology and French departments for your endless support, and to Kirk Read for being especially flexible throughout this past semester.

Thank you to my dear friends who have always been there when I needed good company, a good laugh, and a good excuse to procrastinate. Thank you to my Bates friends in particular for providing solidarity, warmth, and community through the long winters and through the collective thesis process.

Thank you to my family for allowing me to fly across the country to go to a place like Bates, for your unwavering love and support, and for providing me with the most incredible opportunities. And thank you Mom for sending me snacks and scarves all the way to Maine.

I cannot forget to thank those in my Jewish community for making me who I am today, for teaching me how to be a leader, and for inspiring me always. Thank you for the transformative experiences and the endless love. Thank you especially to Wendy Marcus. It was because of you that I was introduced to Yiddish in the first place.

Lastly, I want to give a hearty thank you to my advisor Josh Rubin for always believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself. Your thoughtfulness and incredible insights have made me even more excited about this work.

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Abstract

This thesis examines the contemporary politics, uses, and mobilizations of Yiddish language and culture, particularly through the Yiddish Book Center located in Amherst, Massachusetts. This non-profit organization sponsors a wide array of programming, both on-site and virtual, with a broad goal of making available an expansive and diverse body of works and knowledge often neglected in a post-World War II context. Through its mission to “recover, celebrate, and regenerate Yiddish language and culture,” it embodies “postvernacularity,” a theoretical framework and linguistic conceptualization introduced by Jeffrey Shandler. Engagements with Yiddish that are characterized by postvernacularity allow for increasingly expansive and accessible modes self and community making. Employing postnational and diasporic frameworks, this thesis uncovers the possibilities of Yiddish’s applicability in new cultural contexts and demonstrates how specific individuals utilize it to interpret and create historical narratives. This thesis examines the role of boundaries and borders in defining contemporary vernacular Yiddish use in an era of widely postvernacular Yiddish. This thesis also explores the formations of heritage production in shaping how narratives of Yiddish are constructed and mobilized in the present moment and unlocked from an enclosed and inaccessible historical realm. It is revealed that the act of shifting and challenging of boundaries characterize Yiddish as a portable, diasporic, and diverse set of resources.

Introduction

Landing on Yiddish

In December of 2017, I attended the Union for Reform Judaism’s Biennial in Boston, where I sat in on a talk given by the Jewish Studies program director at University of San Francisco Aaron Hahn Tapper. For two hours, he explained the problematic nature of defining who is a Jew by showing us diverse examples of World Jewry. Out of the many learning workshops I attended that weekend, this one particularly intrigued me, especially how he identified the ways in which we, in our Jewish communities, could do better at recognizing Judaism’s diverse forms and at dismantling notions of what it means to be “authentically Jewish.” The broader discussion he fostered immediately prompted me to think about how my Jewish educational experiences and even non-Jewish-led discourse about Jews typically erases the diverse ways that Jews articulate themselves. And if ‘World Jewry’ is even recognized in the first place, groups like Sephardim and Mizrahim are typically only utilized from a dominantly Ashkenazi¹ standpoint in order to say “Look at how Jews who are different than us (used to) do something”!

¹ Jews are typically divided into three cultural or ethnic groups – Mizrahim, Sephardim, and Ashkenazim, who trace their roots to the Middle East and North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, and Europe respectively. However, these terms are extremely problematic and inaccurate. First, it was Jews of European descent – who are also composed of a diverse range of communities and practices, more than the terms “Ashkenazim” or “European Jews” can encompass – whose arrogance and ignorance led them to “[lump] all non-Ashkenazim together.” “Mizrahi” literally means “Eastern,” “is commonly translated as ‘Oriental,’ and is used by and about Israelis often interchangeably with *Sephardi*” (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 74, 87). Most Jews of Mizrahi and

As my senior year at Bates approached, I admittedly had a hard time deciding my anthropology thesis topic. In the back of my mind, I always knew it was an option to write about something Jewish – something that felt so personal yet a topic that I had never really studied academically. Still, it felt strange and unfamiliar to think about “Jewish people” or “being Jewish” as “anthropological” or “ethnographic.” Although a surprising number of important figures in the history of anthropology had Jewish roots – like Malinowski, Mauss, Boas, Durkheim, and Levi-Strauss – the study of Jews has generally been marginalized in the discipline and the ethnographic study of Jews has been largely limited to area or cultural studies (Boyarin 1991, 14; Brink-Danan 2008, 675). Many Jewish ethnographies have followed a more traditional anthropological precedent of being centered in geographically bounded spaces, like in ultra-Orthodox neighborhoods (El-Or and Watzman 1994; Fader 2006, 2009; Goldschmidt 2006) or synagogues (Goluboff 2000; Kugelmass 1986; Prell 1989; Ram and Aharon Gutman 2017; Shokeid 1995). Other recent anthropologists who focus their work on Jews and Jewish life – and who are often also Jewish themselves – have studied non-traditional Jews in their dispersion across space.²

In recent years especially, I have loved to think about Jewish identity politics and the diverse ways that Jews, as a diasporic people, create senses of home and build communities. I find it fascinating to think about how diaspora and a diasporic consciousness have been so essential not only to my personal Jewish identity, but to the construction of Jewish spaces and communities. In the process of choosing a thesis topic, “diaspora” was a concept that stuck with

Sephardic descent live in Israel, and in North America, the majority of Jews come from Ashkenazi descent.

² See Brink-Danan (2008) for a more detailed overview of Jewish Anthropology.

me; it felt like something that was erased in dominant narratives (or always associated with Jewish life outside of the state of Israel) yet represents an inherent part of Jewishness³ and Jewish communities. As I grew older and reflected more intentionally on my senses of identity, I realized that feeling rooted in a place was never too important to me. I was American, but I never felt *that* American. I could not identify much with the Fourth of July, but I *could* identify with Passover and most other Jewish holidays, or immediately feel at home in a community of other Jews, even if I hardly knew anyone.

As I will describe more in-depth in the second section of Chapter 1, I began the fall of my senior year spending hours in the library and figuring out where the different “Jewish” stacks were, diving into contemporary Jewish Studies and Jewish anthropological literature in ways I was never previously able. I came upon diasporic thought, like Aviv and Shneer (2005), Boyarin and Boyarin (1993), and Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007), and realized that I wanted to take this opportunity to follow a stream outside of the relatively mainstream Judaism that I felt I knew well. Eventually, I came upon the idea of “revival” movements – a term I will later unpack – and settled upon Yiddish, a language that I had some encounters with growing up (mostly through Klezmer).⁴ Even still, I knew little about its contemporary scenes and the ways in which many young folks in particular were sometimes radically engaging with it and shaping its future.

³ “Jewishness,” as I will use it, is “the complex indivisible swirl of religion-culture-language-history” that is erased or neglected by the dominant contemporary conception of being Jewish as “Judaism” the religion (comparable to Christianity or other ‘world religions’) (Kaye/Kantrowitz 2007, 28). Because of the complex nature of Jewish identity, which is difficult to disentangle from the categorizations of ethnicity, culture, religion, race, and nationality, I prefer to use “Jewishness” over “Judaism” in order to recognize the diverse ways that being Jewish manifests in different individuals and communities.

⁴ Klezmer is traditional Eastern European Jewish music.

I had known about the Yiddish Book Center for quite a few years, initially learning about it after I had a couple of good friends in high school who participated in Great Jewish Books, the Center’s two-week long high school program. I explored their website and was particularly struck by how accessible Yiddish seemed – a language that I had often perceived as dying and obsolete. What I found online signaled to me that there was something both in Yiddish and at the Center for everyone – for beginners and serious Yiddishists,⁵ for high schoolers and adults. It was clear early on that they were doing extremely important and extraordinary work in shaping the future of Yiddish. My experiences in Reform Jewish spaces, especially at summer camps and in NFTY,⁶ have encouraged me to think about Jewish futurities, and more specifically, how to make the Jewish future more inclusive and expansive. Since 2013, when I first heard Rabbi Rick Jacobs (President of the URJ)⁷ explain “audacious hospitality,”⁸ I began to reflect even more on the ways in which Jewish communities and spaces could be more accessible and inclusive to all, especially for youth whose engagement rates in Jewish life were low. The Yiddish Book Center seemed to partake in this broader mission in its own ways, and in ways that some perceive as alternatives to mainstream Judaism. My preliminary research prompted an increasing interest in Yiddishism,⁹ and I knew that a place like the Center would provide a unique glimpse into this world that felt unfamiliar yet vitally important and personal.

⁵ A Yiddishist is someone who takes interest in Yiddish language and culture.

⁶ “North American Federation of Temple Youth,” the Reform Jewish youth movement in the United States and Canada.

⁷ “URJ” stands for “Union for Reform Judaism,” the largest and one of the more mainstream movements of American Judaism.

⁸ “Audacious hospitality” is a major component of the URJ’s 2020 vision and their “focused effort to embrace our diversity and reach out to those currently not engaged in Jewish life” (Union for Reform Judaism n.d.).

⁹ Yiddishism means interest in Yiddish language and culture.

As the Yiddish Book Center “[works] to recover, celebrate, and regenerate Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a), they react to and even shape Yiddish’s contemporary perceptions and uses, both as a language and culture. Though Yiddish is widely no longer the vernacular of Jews of European descent, it has taken new forms and expanded beyond how it has been used and who previously has used it. Jeffrey Shandler (2006a) describes the contemporary status of Yiddish as “postvernacular.” As I will explain further in Chapter 1, postvernacularity signifies a mode of language engagement where meta-level significance – thinking about language use – is more prevalent than vernacular, or spoken, language.

This leads me to some central questions of this thesis: How are people, particularly through the Yiddish Book Center, mobilizing and shaping Yiddish in a postvernacular moment, and to what ends? What particular role does the Yiddish Book Center play in shaping this moment? How do people use Yiddish to situate and define themselves within cultural contexts? And, when we view Yiddish as a postvernacular linguistic phenomenon, what new formations of identity and belonging come into view? While the Yiddish Book Center acts as the central ethnographic location of this thesis, I will at times cover these questions through a wider lens and use what is visible through the Center as an avenue for understanding contemporary Yiddish more broadly. In doing so, I also recognize that this thesis can only represent my own perspectives and observations, as well as my interpretations of ethnography, a topic I will discuss further in depth in the methodology section.

Before beginning the body of this thesis, I will provide some background on the Yiddish Book Center (which I will sometimes refer to as “the Center” and “the YBC” throughout the thesis) and introduce the important term of “Yiddishland,” an idea based in fluid and de-

territorialized conceptualizations of space and place. In order to explore this and answer this thesis' central questions, we must first understand diasporic formations and the broader concept of diaspora, which I will do in the in the section of this introduction titled "Diaspora and its post-national properties." At the end of this section, I will situate myself within bodies of scholarship and outline the importance of this work.

In Chapter 1, titled "The vitality of postvernacular Yiddishland," I aim to show how a language vitality framework that prioritizes and only legitimizes vernacular and spoken language use is both limiting and does not do justice to contemporary formations of Yiddish. With ethnographic examples, I explore what postvernacularity looks like and how the Yiddish Book Center widens Yiddish's accessibility to a wider public by positioning itself as a postvernacular space and institution. I will also explain how translation play a crucial role in shaping postvernacularity. Then, in Chapter 2, titled "Vernacularity and its intentional forms," I seek to understand what using vernacular Yiddish means in a widely postvernacular Yiddish world and show how vernacular Yiddish spaces – constructed through intentional boundary formation – are characterized as mobile and expansive localities. It is also in this chapter that I give an overview of Yiddish's historical shifts as a vernacular form to demonstrate how intentional efforts to maintain and shape Yiddish language does not represent a new phenomenon.

Next, in Chapter 3, titled "Yiddish, history, and constructing a portable homeland," I aim to move beyond nostalgic modes of historicizing Yiddish in order to understand how both people and institutions create and mobilize narratives of the past from their situation in the present. I will analyze the Yiddish Book Center's physical space as a heritage display and the Center's mission to "recover, celebrate, and regenerate Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture." Additionally, I will explore Yiddish books' characterization as a portable homeland and how

some folks subvert Yiddish’s historical narratives in order to shape present-day identities and Yiddish’s futurities. I will conclude the thesis by exploring the relatively recent movement of Queer Yiddishkeit as a critical example of postvernacular Yiddish and by more broadly reflecting on how postvernacular Yiddish has transgressed, transcended and even *stolen* boundaries as a diasporic form of engagement. Throughout this thesis, I will ultimately argue that postvernacular Yiddish, particularly through the Yiddish Book Center, creates possibilities of achieving more expansive, vibrant, accessible, and diasporic Yiddishland.

Yiddishland and the Yiddish Book Center

The Yiddish Book Center, some Hasidic communities, and other spaces like Yiddish Farm,¹⁰ Yidish Vokh,¹¹ and Yiddish classrooms at universities can be considered part of the greater realm of Yiddishland. Yiddishland is name for the places where Yiddish lives, which was previously relatively limited to Eastern European Jewish communities (Brossat, Klingberg, and Fernbach 2016, 6). Shandler (2006a) defines Yiddishland “as a virtual locus constructed in terms of the use of the Yiddish language, especially, though not exclusively, in its spoken form” (33). The term “infers a highly contingent tenacity inherent in any spatial entity defined by language

¹⁰ Yiddish Farm is a Jewish, Yiddish-only speaking farm in Upstate New York that provides an array of immersive programming. According to their website, “Yiddish Farm creates and fosters Jewish connections between agriculture, culture, and language” (Yiddish Farm n.d.).

¹¹ Yiddish Vokh is also based in Upstate New York. According to their mission statement, “*Yugntruf* (‘call to youth’ in Yiddish) cultivates the active use of the Yiddish language among today’s youth here and abroad by creating opportunities for Yiddish learning and immersion, and by providing resources for support for Yiddish speakers and families within an expansive social network” (Yugntruf n.d.). One of their most well-known programs is “Yidish Vokh,” meaning “Yiddish week,” which is a week-long Yiddish-only immersive experience.

use” (33). This sociocultural space is “interwoven with other cultural and national worlds, intersecting...[and] supervening them” (Brossat, Klingberg, and Fernbach 2016, 29-30). Today, according to the Yiddish Book Center’s academic director Josh Lambert, the YBC “and other organizations have tried to make a physical complement to the virtual Yiddish world so that there’s a small concrete physical space that you can be in and feel like you’re connected to the thing that is mostly virtual.” He compared its virtual territoriality to Internet companies like Amazon that have pop-up stores in various locations. Yiddishland is a virtually-territorialized community, but places like the Yiddish Book Center, Yiddish Farm, or Yiddish classrooms “give it an actual physical space,” – as Amazon bookstores do for Amazon, for example.

The Yiddish Book Center’s “actual physical space” is situated in Amherst, Massachusetts, directly across from Hampshire College’s campus on what was once an apple orchard (Friedman 2015, 6). It was founded in 1980 by Aaron Lansky who was “then a twenty-four-year-old graduate student of Yiddish literature (and now the Center’s president)” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a). Lansky began to study Yiddish academically when he attended Hampshire College in the mid-1970s. He continued to study Yiddish literature in graduate school but ran into a fundamental problem – “there were no books to read” (Ball 2001; Friedman 2015, 111). Here is an excerpt from the YBC website describing how Lansky came to conceptualize the non-profit organization that was once called the “National Yiddish Book Center” and before that called the “National Yiddish Book Exchange” (Friedman 2015, 5).

In the course of his studies, Lansky realized that untold numbers of irreplaceable Yiddish books – the primary, tangible legacy of a thousand years of Jewish life in Eastern Europe – were being discarded by American-born Jews unable to read the language of their Yiddish-speaking parents and grandparents. So he organized a nationwide network of *zamlers* (volunteer book collectors) and launched a

concerted campaign to save the world's remaining Yiddish books before it was too late. (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a)

Within the first six months of Lansky's effort, he and other young volunteers collected over "a million volumes – some lovingly handed to them by their original owners, others rescued at the last minute from demolition sites and dumpsters" (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a). They collect and digitize other items as well, including Yizkor books,¹² children's books, sheet music – the list goes on. Today, it has nearly 30,000 members and a multi-million dollar building, situated scenically near the Holyoke Range. It's location is "rural in character," yet its "setting embodies much of what postwar American Jewry sought in the suburbs: open spaces, elite universities, a sense of security" (Friedman 2015, 7).

The Center's programming and initiatives have expanded immensely since 1980; translation, digitization, archiving, oral history collection, recording, textbook standardization, the production of language learning resources. Since the release of its first episode in December 2011, the YBC has produced a podcast called *The Shmooze*, which is available online, like the more than 700 oral history video interviews from the Wexler Oral History Project and the over 11,000 Yiddish titles available in the Steven Spielberg Digital Yiddish Library (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-b, n.d.-e, n.d.-f). The Center also produces a magazine titled *Pakn Treger* that it sends twice yearly to its members, carrying on the tradition of the *Pakn tregers* who "traveled from shtetl to shtetl in Eastern Europe bringing books and news of the world" (Yiddish Book Center

¹² Yizkor books are "memorial books that document Jewish life before World War II" (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-g).

n.d.-d). In addition to educational programming that takes place during the summer, the Center hosts Yidstock, a Yiddish music festival,¹³ over the course of a weekend.

The Center sponsors both educational and public programming. Public programs are catered mainly towards the local population and consist of public tours, film screenings, lectures, and even educational field trips for local schools. They also offer the option of scheduling special group tours and booking the space – specifically the Kligerman-Greenspun Performance Hall – for special events like weddings and b’nai mitzvahs. Education programs include the two-week Great Jewish Books Summer Program for high schoolers, the seven-week Steiner Program for college students and young adults, the year-long Fellowship Program for recent graduates, “Tent: Encounters with Jewish Culture” workshops for twentysomethings, the Translation Fellowship program, an array of programs for Yiddish and Jewish literary educators, and many options for adult learners from weekend or week-long on-site programs to online courses (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-c).

Methodology

For my thesis, I centered my project on one location of Yiddishland – the Yiddish Book Center in Amherst, Massachusetts. I was unfortunately only able to visit the Center once, on a Sunday in November. My direct experience was with a few aspects of their public programming; I went on two public tours, met a few of the fellows, and attended a film screening. I was told early on in my project that not much goes on there during the year, as the summertime has more programming, like the Steiner Program, Great Jewish Books, and Yidstock.

¹³ For more on Yidstock, visit <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/yidstock>.

Still, even though I could not attend any of their summer programs or do too much in-person participant observation, I wanted to focus my research on the Yiddish Book Center because I was fascinated by how their efforts reach far beyond the limits of both the summer and the physical location of Amherst. The Center's efforts to engage those interested in Yiddish play out on alumni pages, in their online book club, through training programs for teachers, and through the dispersal of sources online, both in their original form and in translation. Additionally, nearly tens of thousands of individuals have encountered the Yiddish Book Center during its existence. Unlike in many traditional ethnographies, "participants" are not bounded within a particular space or time, some stopping by the Center in its physical or online location multiple times and for long stay, and others having brief encounters.

Due to these factors and my overall desire to focus on individual perspectives, I decided that interviews would be the best way for me to do ethnographic work centered on the YBC. I spoke with individuals, current and past participants and staff members, who have interacted with the Center's programming in the past six years. I got in touch with most of them via email and social media, and some of them I already knew. Additionally, I used my experiences from my November visit as well as online resources, such as the Yiddish Book Center website,¹⁴ interviews from the "Wexler Oral History Project,"¹⁵ and other online interviews. I also wanted to center my project on interviews because I wanted to have conversations and continue to challenge the boundary between "ethnographer" and "subject" – a construction that much relatively recent anthropological work has worked to deconstruct. It was important to me to both hear and value the observations, opinions, and experiences of a small subsection of those who

¹⁴ For more information, visit <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/>

¹⁵ For more information, visit <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/collections/oral-histories>

have interacted with this institution and its broader mission, one that gives a small glimpse into the contemporary world of Yiddish.

When conducting interviews, I referred to a long list of questions to guide conversations and often did not come close to addressing them all. Most of all, I wanted the interlocutors' thoughts and responses to my questions to lead our conversations. Each discussion I had was unique from one another. Some interviews were conducted in-person, and most were conducted over the phone. I had never met most of those whom I spoke with, and some of them I have known for years and have developed close relationships with. Although I tried to conduct each conversation in relatively similar ways, these dynamics inevitably affected the interviews, both in terms of how I came across and how others expressed themselves to me.

The people I met throughout this project have all experienced Yiddish and the Yiddish Book Center in vastly different ways. For some, Yiddish is a major part of their lives and identities; they might have had multiple encounters with the Yiddish Book Center or other sites of Yiddishland, have continuously engaged with Yiddishist communities, or spent much time and made many stops at the Center. Others I spoke with have only have one, maybe two, brief encounters with Yiddish through programs like Steiner or Great Jewish Books. Many more fall somewhere in between. I decided to use pseudonyms for most of those I interviewed so that their identities remain confidential. For some, I did not use pseudonyms and instead refer to them without names. Although I did my best to stay authentic to how those I spoke with expressed themselves, I had to inevitably put their thoughts onto paper and filter what they said through the format of relatively academic writing, and this fact is extremely important to recognize.

Because of the nature of this thesis – one that focuses on a rather academic institution and phenomenon – the lines between “ethnographer” and “subject” or the “theoretical” and

“ethnographic” were often blurry. I realized throughout the interview process – lasting from November 2018 to January 2019 and continued with follow-up questions via email – that many understood and explained their thoughts and Yiddish encounters in ways that were embedded with academic, intellectual, or theoretical language. In other words, theorizing happened fairly explicitly and frequently during our conversations. Those I spoke with were also all college educated or in the process of completing their college education. I realized throughout the interview process that I could explain my project in theoretical terms, or introduce a few abstract concepts and ask to hear about their opinions on their connection (although I do realize that this part was sometimes difficult or confusing for many folks). This also meant that I could explain the theories or veins of scholarly work that I was using, and I could ask questions that I could write down in this thesis and would be considered more or less “academic.” This being said, I recognize the privilege implicated in this – of myself, of those I spoke with, of the institution I have interacted with, and of my ability to carry out this project in the first place. While my project as a whole is not explicitly tied to questions of age, it is also important to point out that most I spoke with are among a relatively younger generation. This ultimately affects the orientation of my project in a number of ways; it affects how they might situate themselves in terms of historical or cultural trends, or the relationship that some may have to native Yiddish speakers, or even how they might choose to engage with institutions or create communities.

In a certain sense, I am a participant in this project, as someone who visited the Yiddish Book Center and went on their website to learn something about Yiddish and to learn about how the Yiddish Book Center functions and what it does. At the same time, I am notably an outsider, and I cannot, nor would never, claim to be an expert on my topic or on what happens through this organization. My encounters have been brief and have occurred mostly in tandem with the

completion of this project. I have also encountered the Center's physical space once, on a relatively quiet November Sunday, and cannot nor would not claim to fully understand what happens on other days, especially during the summer when the bulk of their programming takes place. I also recognize that the ethnographic moments that I will share in the body of this thesis were brief and grounded in particular moments. While these moments might allow a glimpse into broader phenomena, they are by no means fully emblematic nor can they fully speak to the complexities and the wide array of experiences that are possible.

My Jewish identity and the ways that Jewish engagements have shaped who I am give me particular privileges and insights into this project as well. It was because of my experience in Jewish settings that I have encountered – or not encountered – Yiddish in the ways that I have. I cannot imagine my life nor my intellectual or political interests without the immersive experiences I have had in many intersecting Jewish communities. As Josh Friedman (2015) says about himself, “I am...a product of Jewish programming” (89): Hebrew school until 12th grade, eleven plus years of Jewish summer camps and Reform programming, eight plus years as a songleader, temple youth group, NFTY, Bates Hillel, and other experiences. It is also worthy to note that many of my Jewish experiences have been in Reform settings or put on by the URJ. In short, Jewishness is an essential aspect of my identity that defines nearly everything I do and how I understand the world around me, including why I chose this thesis topic, the questions I ask, and how I interpret conversations and experiences.

Before I continue with the rest of my thesis, I want to recognize the complexities of some terms that will come up. The word “Yiddish” itself means “Jewish,” which clearly does not have the same denotations or connotations in most contexts today, specifically in English. I want to make clear that when I speak about Yiddish, I do not use it synonymously with “Jewish,” and

while Yiddish has uniquely Jewish intertextualities, its Jewish nature plays out in different ways for different individuals and communities. Not all use it as a Jewish language or in explicitly Jewish ways, and not all Yiddish users are Jewish. However, it would be problematic to erase Yiddish's Jewishness. Additionally, Yiddish is not the only Jewish diaspora language – languages and dialects that Jews in the Diaspora have developed during their nearly 2000 year exile from the Holy Land “by combining elements of Hebrew with local vernaculars” (Goldsmith 1997, 27).¹⁶ As I will explain further in the introduction and in the thesis, it is Yiddish's diasporic nature and existence among other languages and cultures that have shaped it into being.

While I share many commonalities with those who helped to bring this project together, I have seen very clearly that I have a lot to learn when it comes to Yiddish and Yiddishism, and that in these fields I am in no way an expert, nor does my Jewish identity and experiences make me an expert. I have sought to make this point clear throughout my thesis, by means of a commitment to let the folks I spoke with lead the thesis and its analysis in the directions that made the most sense to them. It is because of them that I learned as much as I did and am growing increasingly curious and excited about Yiddish and more specifically the projects at the Yiddish Book Center. Though I have a lot more to learn, I do feel I am slowly but surely entering into a more Yiddishist-centered world and way of Jewishness through this thesis, which for me is simultaneously an intellectual and highly personal pursuit.

¹⁶ Other examples of Jewish diaspora languages include Aramaic, Judeo-Arabic, Judeo-Greek, Judeo-Italian, and Ladino (Goldsmith 1997, 27).

Diaspora and its post-national properties

Through this thesis is centralized around a place, it is also centralized on a mission and an institution whose work enters non-local spaces and places. For this reason, and for the essentiality of the Jewish Diaspora to creation of Yiddish (as a Jewish Diaspora language) in the first place, we must first have a clear understanding of not only the field of diaspora studies but of larger post-nationalist theoretical orientations. As we will explore in this thesis, Yiddish use today often challenges and redefines boundaries, including those of the modern nation-state, and instead brings to light transnational mobilizations and solidarities. While Yiddish and its speakers represent only a part of the full complexity and richness of the Jewish Diaspora, we will see that in scholarly work, how scholars and others treat this Diaspora affects how other diaspora groups are characterized. I will conclude the section by situating my work within broader bodies of scholarship and by giving an overview of its importance and potential contributions.

The term “diaspora” was originally used to characterize to the exile of Jews from their historic homeland and “their dispersal throughout many lands” (Vertovec 1997, 278). This initial conception had a negative connotation “associated with forced displacement, victimization, alienation, [and] loss” (278). “The Jewish Diaspora” refers to both the geographic dispersion of Jews from historic homelands and the dispersed group itself. Shortly after, it began to encompass other “classical diasporas,” the Greek and Armenian Diasporas, that were also oriented towards a conceptual homeland, and then was used to described an African diaspora (Brubaker 2005, 2). Its uses and definitions have expanded as a condition, signifier, and experience, to describe transnationalism, now sometimes encompassing “words like immigrant, expatriate, refugee, guest-worker, exile community, overseas community, [and] ethnic community” (Tölölyan 1991, 4-5). In the past few decades, “an entire school or mode of critical inquiry called diaspora studies

[has been] devoted to describing and assessing a global condition, in which populations and ethnic/national groups find themselves in and out of territory” (Mann 2012, 99). Still, some scholars like Habib (2004) have been questioning the validity of using “diaspora” to describe anyone living away from their “homeland” (7).

Before William Safran’s (1991) article in the inaugural issue of the journal *Diasporas: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, scholars working on issues of ethnicity and identity gave little notice to diasporas (Brubaker 2005; Safran 1991, 83). Safran was one of the first scholars not only to open up a broader, more vibrant discussion about diasporas, but also to use the term “diaspora” more dynamically. He conceives of Jewish Diaspora as the “ideal type,” using it to inform his discussion of many other groups (something many scholars later critique) (Safran 1991, 84).¹⁷ He offers six characteristics of a diaspora, predicated on an inherent diaspora-homeland paradigm and homeland orientation, as well as on the normalization of static communities.

1) they, or their ancestors, have been dispersed from a specific original ‘center’ to two or more ‘peripheral,’ or foreign, regions; 2) they retain a collective memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland—its physical location, history, and achievements; 3) they believe that they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host society and therefore feel partly alienated and insulated from it; 4) they regard their ancestral homeland as their true, ideal home and as the place to which they or their descendants would (or should) eventually return—when conditions are appropriate; 5) they believe that they should, collectively, be committed to the maintenance or restoration of their original homeland and to its safety and prosperity; and 6) they continue to relate, personally or vicariously, to that homeland in one way or another, and their ethnocommunal consciousness and solidarity are importantly defined by the existence of such a relationship.¹⁸ (Safran 1991, 83-4)

¹⁷ See Brink-Danan (2008), Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994b)

¹⁸ While Safran uses these qualifications to characterize what diaspora can mean for groups living outside of their homeland, he recognizes that “none of them fully [conform] to the...Jewish Diaspora” (Safran 1991, 84).

By comparing many different ‘diasporas,’ from Armenian and Jewish to Portuguese and Indian, Safran shows the difficulty in concretely defining what qualifies as diaspora and generalizing diasporic experiences. His discussion about the Jewish Diaspora makes clear that for Jews, the idea of physically ‘returning home’ has been historically complex and involves theological questions as well as practical ones.¹⁹

Khachig Tölölyan (1991) also introduced the project of the *Diasporas* journal to “[trace]...struggles over and contradictions within ideas and practices of collective identity, or homeland and nation” (3). Diasporas prove the porousness of the nation-state even as they “[remain] a privileged form of polity,” yet he does not write off the power of these transnational communities in creating and maintaining their own institutions and inevitably questioning nation-state borders (5). While nation-state borders are not natural facts, the rise of the nation-state in the nineteenth-century, “a polity [that] claims special political and emotional legitimacy [and represents] a homogenous people,” has inevitably redefined both the meaning and roles of dispersed groups (Tölölyan 1991, 4). He recognizes that the term has expanded in recent years to encompass transnational communities other than the Jewish, Greek, and Armenian Diasporas.

In following years, scholars have accounted for diaspora’s hybridity and the fact that they do not always fit neatly into culturally or nationally absolutist terms. For instance, Paul Gilroy (1993) comes from the standpoint of British cultural studies and proposes a framework that rethinks the essentialist nature of diaspora. Prominent cultural theorist Stuart Hall (1998) characterizes “the diaspora experience...not by essence or purity, but by the recognition of a

¹⁹ For many Jews historically and even fewer today, return to the Holy Land cannot happen until the Messiah comes. The concept of *golah*, how American Jews characterize their diaspora, represents a purely physical dispersion, while *galut*, used more popularly by Israel political leadership has more “traditional associations with moral degradation, insecurity, and persecution” (Safran 1991, 91).

necessary heterogeneity and diversity; by a conception of ‘identity’ which lives with and through, not despite, difference; by *hybridity*” (235). James Clifford (1994) traces the changing definitions of the term “diaspora” and critiques Safran’s criteria that leave little room for ambivalence for physical return (305). Unlike Safran, Clifford grounds his approach in the struggle to define “diaspora” in an increasingly globalized and mobile world, arguing that “contemporary diasporic practices cannot be reduced to epiphenomena of the nation state or of global capitalism” (302). Still, displacement and “unrootedness” represent a key dimension of his framework of diaspora. He recognizes “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaption, or resistance” as being possibly as or more important than “the projection of a specific origin” (304).

Many other scholars aim to avoid simplifying what “diaspora” means by explaining it in multiple ways. Vertovec (1997), for example, does this by introducing three meanings of diaspora; as a social form through maintenance of a collective identity and “relationship-despite-dispersal,” as a type of consciousness. According to Clifford (1994), “diaspora consciousness” straddles the line of negative experiences “of discrimination and exclusion” and positive experiences of “having attachments elsewhere” and identifying with transnational historical, cultural, and political forces” (311-312).

Scholars have critiqued Safran’s and others’ use of the Jewish Diaspora as the paradigmatic model or “ideal type” to characterize other diasporic experiences. Clifford (1994) questions his project of using one group’s experience to characterize others’. Although Clifford understands Safran’s urge to define “diaspora” to account for “the range of experiences covered by the term,” he suggests that having a list of features becomes a slippery slope with defining the purities of diasporic experiences (306). Mann (2012) wants to think about “what might be

obscured by privileging this particular formulation and by accepting the Jewish model as paradigmatic” (2012, 106). Using the Jewish diaspora as the “ideal type” might insinuate a static or agreed-upon collective memory, while instead, it represents “a dynamic response to the demands of the present” (106). She, like others who will be discussed below, questions the validity of a “host society” model (107).

Marcy Brink-Danan (2008), who critiques the tendency of ethnographies of Jewish life to foreground memory and likens them to “salvage anthropology,”²⁰ sees links between this greater problem and how often scholars and anthropologists use Jews as the model (683). Although they are used as a point of comparison, Jews – including the Jewish Diaspora in diaspora studies – are quickly dismissed. Thus, scholars tend to gloss over or neglect to recognize the diversity of Jews and their vibrant lived experiences (683). Mann also wants to “[dislodge] the Jewish diaspora from its theoretical pedestal as ‘the mother of all diasporas’” in order to more deeply engage “with the full spectrum of ways in which Jewish communities have experienced space and produced place” (Mann 2012, 108).

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1994b) acknowledges that Clifford does not want to “run the risk of making Jewish experience again the normative model,” yet similarly to Brink-Danan, she urges us to note how social theory has utilized “the Jews” similarly to a lab rat (340). She also adds broader contributions to diaspora studies, encouraging scholars to “[uncouple]... displacement, dispersion, and diaspora” in these conversations. She continues to critique Clifford, marking the problematic of defining ‘diaspora’ through displacement that “still assumes

²⁰ “Salvage anthropology,” Brink-Danan notes, “involved the pursuit of knowledge about cultures assumed through assimilation, colonialism, or political change to be in the process of disappearing.” She is mainly concerned about the trend of what she “might call ‘the anthropology of Jewish memory’ in which the stories, customs, and life-ways of ‘lost’ or dwindling Jewish communities are catalogued and recreated” (Brink-Danan 2008, 683).

the primacy of an earlier placement-of physical proximity and contiguity” (342). She recognizes modernity and globalization’s effect on how diaspora populations articulate themselves by challenging many previous scholars’ focus on physical location and recognizing the power of telecommunication in producing senses of “hereness” and in creating senses of home through common interest rather than shared physical placement (342-3).

Contributions to diaspora studies such as Safran’s follow a “diaspora-homeland” model that juxtaposes a central and bounded physical location to dispersion, homelessness, and reduction to minority status. Many scholars have critiqued this paradigm both as a theoretical framework and as a lived reality. Weingrod and Levy (2005) track and account for the changing meanings in “homeland” and “diaspora” in a world characterized as a “‘global village’ without boundaries” (3). “Homeland”, in an older sense, “was commonly depicted as a sacred place filled with memories of past glory and bathed in visions of nobility and renaissance,” while “diasporas” once “were commonly depicted as melancholy places of exile and oppression that restricted social and cultural fruition” (4-5). In their reconceptualization of the terms, “‘homelands’ sometimes fade out of view entirely...or...become nation-states that by definition repress minorities and place limits upon their cultural and other freedoms,” and “‘diasporas’ are enthusiastically embraced as arenas for the creative melding of cultures and the formation of new ‘hybridic,’ mixed identities” (4-5). Others like Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow (2011) want to do away with the dualistic model altogether and push back against “diaspora” being utilized as the marker of authentic Jewish identity (9). Even when conceptualized as a geographically fluid space, the homeland-diaspora paradigm, they argue, reflects the easy tendency to think in terms of Western-constructed binaries like the Occident and the Orient, or the Third World and the First World (10).

Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow, like Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, are also critical of the homeland-diaspora paradigm because it assumes a problematic host society model that erases the agency of diaspora groups (2011, 13). Brubaker (2005) has similar critiques, and joins the growing body of scholars who discuss diaspora both generally and in terms of specific racial, ethnic, religious, and national groups. In attempting to “‘transcend’ the old assimilationist, immigrationist paradigm” that takes “nation-states as units of analysis” and in recognizing the social construction of the nation-state, he proposes that scholars move from discussions of diaspora as a bounded group or ethnocultural fact to discussions of “diasporic stances, projects, claims, idioms, practices, and so on” (13). This mirrors the relatively recent shift in scholarly perspective that rejects bounded concepts (like the noun “culture”) and moves towards thinking about these concepts as adjectival and as dimensions (like the adjective “cultural”) (see Appadurai (1996, 12-13)). When he traces the changing meanings, or “the diaspora,” of “diaspora,” he treats it “not as a bounded entity but as an idiom, stance,...claim,” and category of practice (Brubaker 2005, 1, 13). Any subset or combination of dispersion, homeland orientation – real or imagined – and social boundary maintenance to reproduce a diaspora identity can characterize the many definitions of diaspora (6).

Both diasporas themselves and the recent scholarship on them have revealed the fluidity and porousness of nation-state borders as well as the ways that groups can mobilize outside of them. While decentralizing the nation-state, Appadurai (1993) pushes for an imagination of patriotisms other than national ones. He centralizes political power through post-national modes, as he both recognizes “the need to construct a theory of large-scale ethnic mobilization that explicitly recognizing and interprets postnational properties” (417). By imagining postnational spaces that will tolerate difference and diversity in narratives and identities, he reframes what a

postnational discourse might look like to allow a legitimacy of diasporic engagements. In recognizing something “diasporic” – like Yiddish – as a legitimate avenue of political engagements, then we can begin to see Yiddishist-Americans as being more than solely “American” politically.

Sayyid (2010) also sees the faults in recognizing national citizenship as the sole means of political engagement and, in that critique, conceives of political power through a diasporic narrative, specifically for Muslims. He also sees the faults in recognizing national citizenship as the sole means of political engagement. Globalization plays a large part in “the weakening of the nation-state, as “the idea that national citizenship is the only legitimate mechanism through which political expression can take place is no longer adequate” (129). As scholars in this vein typically deconstruct the nation-state, Schnapper and Davis (1999) argue that diasporas and diaspora identities in fact predate the nation-state model. Werbner (2005) also recognizes political agency that is not inherently tied to the nation-state, as she defines diaspora as “a transnational network of dispersed political subjects” (31).

As noted by many scholars, the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel has inherently altered the Jewish Diaspora and complicated the homeland-diaspora paradigm. What does it mean when the place and the state of return has been shaped by many diverse trajectories and experiences of diaspora? Can a homeland, then, be diasporic? There has been plenty of scholarly debate “over whether the Israeli nation-state represents the zenith of Jewish vitality and the fruition of Jewish national destiny,” or whether it was in the diaspora where “Jewish agency and creativity have thrived” (Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow 2011, 9) Zionism²¹ represents a

²¹ Zionism has many contested definitions, but for the purpose of this thesis I will define it as the political ideological movement that affirms the rights of Jews to statehood in the historic Land of

nationalist movement founded from communities in the Jewish Diaspora, primarily some European Jewish communities. Increased violence and ghettoization of Jewish communities by larger national power influenced many Jews to mobilize and imagine how a Jewish nation or collective could be constructed, both through Jewish territorialist models – like Zionism – and through Diaspora nationalist models – like *doikayt*.²² Nonetheless, Mann argues that “Diaspora...has been an essentially different experience for Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jewish communities; the differences between them further exacerbated, by both the establishment of the State of Israel and the destruction of European Jewish life” (Mann 2012, 107).

Butler (2012) theoretically critiques Zionism and follows a trend of Jewish diasporic thinking. She wants to frame Jewishness outside of the nation-state model using Jewish resources. Through her critique of Zionism, she wants “to understand how the exilic—or more emphatically, the diasporic—is built into the idea of the Jewish (not analytically, but historically, that is, over time)” (15). In this account, Jewishness is a set of resources that are used in translation, meaning that “what begins as a ‘resource’ upon which one draws undergoes a set of changes in the process of being drawn upon” to continue as tradition or be relevant or useful in another context (8). She argues that “to be effective, a tradition must be able to depart from the particular historical circumstances of its legitimation and prove applicability to new occasions of time and space” (8). For Butler, “to ‘be’ a Jew is to be departing from oneself, cast out into a

Israel. Zionism is not synonymous with nor equivalent to Judaism/Jewishness, as Judaism/Jewishness has existed long before Zionism and the modern state of Israel. This being said, it is important to note that many Jews, both inside and outside of the state of Israel, express their senses of Jewishness/Judaism through Zionism and through ties to the state and land of Israel. The movement began in Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century as anti-Semitism and violence against Jews increased, and some Jews saw a need for a state of refuge, either in the land of Zion (from where Jews were originally exiled) or elsewhere.

²² *Doikayt*, in Yiddish, means “‘hereness,’ as opposed to the ‘thereness’ of Zionism and other forms of Jewish territorial nationalism (Mendelsohn 1993, 10).

world of the non-Jew, bound to make one's way ethically and politically precisely there within a world of irreversible heterogeneity" (15). In other words, Jewishness, like how many understand Yiddish, is defined by encounters with the 'Other.' Of course, post-Zionist conceptions exist outside of the scholarly realm. For example, in contemporary Israel there are several contradicting definitions mobilized by many different groups, including "different wings of the gay movement... [who are opening] up a space for a discourse of individual rights" (Soloman 2003, 153)

The Boyarin brothers, in their 1993 article "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity" and their 2002 book *Powers of Diaspora*, similarly conceive of Jewishness outside of the political ideology of Zionism. In the former, they reformulate "diaspora" identity and "diaspora as a theoretical and historical model" as an alternative to national self-determination (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, 711). While recognizing the importance and prominence of "Diasporic cultural identity" to Jewishness, they critique any action to bound Judaism within a nation-state model that would "[transform] entirely the meanings of its social practices" that might have one meaning in the Diaspora and "entirely different [meanings] under political hegemony" (713). They develop their claim in their later book, using Jewish ethnography and Talmudic examples to show how diaspora is used by Jewish communities find power and "articulate themselves" (2002, 27). They think of diaspora "not merely as a comparative social or historical phenomenon, not even only as a predicament shared by many people or peoples who otherwise have little else in common, but as a positive *resource*," similarly to Butler, "in the necessary rethinking of models of polity in the current erosion and questioning of the modern nation-state system and ideal" (5).

Commenting on their 1993 article, Mann suggests that it represents a “post-Intifada text, [implicitly] deeply engaged with the kind of place Israel has become specifically regarding its use of power and military force, especially since the first Intifada” (Mann 2012, 110). Cooper (2015), directly critiquing Butler and the Boyarins’ 1993 article and reflecting Sayyid’s political focus, understands the appeal of the this diasporic model but challenges them to “redirect their energies from theorizing the Jewish self toward defending the ability of polities other than the nation-state to ensure Jewish political empowerment” (83). For her, “their preoccupation with the ethics of particular identity” prevents them from “[grappling] with political Zionism’s diagnosis of the Jews’ vulnerability as a stateless people” (83). Her critique reveals the central role of political questions in this debate.

Other scholars use specific ethnographic examples within various Jewish communities to critique a unifying narrative that Zionism often invokes and to instead propose frameworks that embrace the differences that come with the Jewish Diaspora and are comfortable being situated in diaspora. Scholars like Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007) also propose a model of embracing Jewish difference by presenting a diverse picture of what it means to be a Jew and recognizing the complexity of Jewish identities in the dominant Ashki-normative conception of Jewry.²³ She advocates for a radical Diasporism that “represents tension, and resistance to...assimilation,... nostalgia,” and other hegemonic forces (xii).

²³ “Ashki-normativity” refers to the normalization of Ashkenazi religious and cultural practices, beliefs, and narratives in American Jewish life and the erasure of non-European forms of Jewry. This normally assumes one unified experience of diaspora and historical memory. In my experience, customs with Ashkenazi origins (a term that also assumed homogenous European Jewish experiences) are typically not named, while other customs with “more wordly” or origins, like those of Sephardim or Mizrahim, are named and “othered,” if even addressed in the first place. For more on Jewish orientalism and how it has been propagated by European Jews, see Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow (2011, 10-11).

Aviv and Shneer (2005) want to decentralize the nation-state of Israel for Jews ‘living in diaspora’ in order to demonstrate that Jews are flourishing and making homes for themselves where they are. They ultimately argue that the Jewish Diaspora, in the sense of a focus on and an eventual return to the homeland, has ended. While I applaud their effort to theorize an alternative to an Israel-centered model of Jewish authenticity, I want to challenge the temporal scale they are setting up in arguing that the “Diaspora has ended” – something that even the mainstream narrative is guilty of. By using the same temporal scale that those they are critiquing use, they leave historical models of Jewish Diaspora untouched and thus may miss an opportunity to recognize subversions of historical narratives. Though engagements with Yiddish, as I will show, many are able to construct their own visions of diaspora or diasporism outside of this temporal scale, grounded in cultural resources and in movement as a kind of “homeland.”

By no means does my project call for an explicitly or uniquely diasporist stance. However, I do wish to take part in their mission to highlight and embrace Jewish difference and diversity in scholarly and wider Jewish discourse. I hope this thesis can bring attention to the diverse ways that different Jews articulate themselves and to the expansive and often de-territorialized avenues of identity formation that Yiddish can offer. I also intend to call attention to the postnationalist ways in which histories and identities are constructed through language and narratives about language, and recognize the agency that we in the present have to shape these narratives. I also want to mirror Kaye/Kantrowitz’s effort to deconstruct Ashki-normativity; although this thesis focuses on what emerged as an Ashkenazi language, I hope that I am able to elucidate and decipher Yiddish endeavors in a way that can lift up and give an avenue to the stories and perspectives of other veins of Jewish diasporic difference.

Chapter 1: The vitality of postvernacular Yiddishland

Meta

During the first few minutes of a conversation with a Yiddish Book Center fellow, I asked her if she had any memorable anecdotes from the time she has spent there. She told me a story of meeting an older gentleman at the front door who began to speak Yiddish with her, a young recent college graduate. After having only been a fellow for a few months, she was surprised; while she did expect someone to speak Yiddish with her at some point, it still threw her off guard. Even at the Yiddish Book Center, a prominent establishment of Yiddishland, conversational Yiddish during the work day and outside of educational programs was a rarity. Rebekah reflects on her conversation.

It was almost alarming in the first moment that it happened, almost a challenge, I think of... a generation where people still spoke Yiddish in a way that I think I hadn't quite I encountered... because I think a lot about the interactions between generations and people who are speaking Yiddish and what it means to interact with someone who is a native speaker... He was delighted that I spoke Yiddish back to him.

We can take note of a few components of this story. First, that hearing spoken Yiddish outside of Hasidic Brooklyn is much more infrequent than frequent; and second, that encounters with the vernacular, even in a place called the Yiddish Book Center, hold particular meaning compared to quotidian language use. She is thinking about what it

means to use the vernacular in the context of the broader historical legacy of Yiddish of particular segments of Jewry.

Rebekah’s recollection of this moment makes clear that even the Yiddish endeavors that involve or center on vernacular speech represent a different phenomenon than most other cases of an elderly individual speaking their native tongue, or of a young person learning a new language in the classroom. How can we explain these differences? And, what does recognition of these distinctions allow us to see? In exploring how Yiddish has transformed since World War II, Jewish Studies scholar Jeffrey Shandler (2006a) introduces what he calls “postvernacularity” to help answer these sorts of questions. As I will explain later in the chapter, postvernacularity is both a mode of language engagement and a way of theorizing language engagement that reflect historical changes and account for the Yiddish’s dynamism and expansive, diasporic nature. Yiddish’s status as a widely postvernacular language implies that its “meta-meaning supersedes its value as a system for quotidian communications” (Shandler 2006a, 197). In other words, Yiddish in a post-Holocaust era has gained more meaning and prominence symbolically and as an object of reflection and critical thinking than as a vernacular language.

After discussing conventional models of measuring language vitality and what “reviving” and “revitalization” mean in the context of Yiddish, I will demonstrate how postvernacular engagements continuously contribute to the shaping of a more accessible, expansive, and portable Yiddish landscape. Through an exploration of contemporary Yiddish endeavors – especially those happening through the Yiddish Book Center – I aim to reveal how the expansion and diversification of postvernacular initiatives helps to ultimately make Yiddish as a history,

culture, body of knowledge, and community more accessible and welcoming to a wider public. By conceptualizing today's Yiddish use through a postvernacular theoretical model rather than limiting it to an essentialist vernacular-centered model, not only can we more accurately explain what institutions like the YBC are doing, but we can also better understand how it shapes identities of a wider public, especially of those who are wrestling with what Yiddish means today. In de-essentializing vernacular use of a language as the authentic marker of language vitality, translation becomes a key component of postvernacularity, one that is a legitimate form of engaging with a language and a culture and that widens accessibility and promotes applicability in new cultural contexts.

In embracing postvernacularity, we can reinterpret not only what comes after the “post” – vernacularity – but also bring to the forefront Yiddish's dynamic and mobile historical legacy, one that today's use draws upon. If Yiddish – either spoken or spoken *of* – is a central point for identity and community as it is for some, then this point is contingent, malleable, and decentered from place; instead, it is centered on knowledge and collective projects to make meaning and promote continuity. In a world where Yiddish is mostly a postvernacular language, you do not need to learn to speak Yiddish to find or create Yiddishland.

Language revitalization and the question of Yiddish

In early September I was sitting in the library trying to decide what in the world my year-long thesis topic was going to be. Knowing I wanted to write about something that centered on Jewish identity and diaspora, I found myself captivated while reading the introduction Caryn Aviv and David Shneer's (2005) *New Jews: the end of the Jewish Diaspora*. Their ideas really

resonated with me; as someone who has been deeply engaged in many aspects of American Jewish life, I too was frustrated with the common narrative that ‘real’ and ‘thriving’ Jewish life was not happening in the Diaspora. In recent years, as I have new experiences and reflect on old ones, I have become increasingly frustrated with the Jewish American discourse around Israel that posited the Jewish nation-state as a somehow more ‘authentic’ center of Jewish life. As they outlined a brief history of ideological and institutional changes in American Jewish communities in the twentieth-century, I learned that many Jews a few decades before now were pushing back against a trend towards assimilation and the erasure of diaspora languages and cultures. Those turning to language and culture that emerged out of the Jewish Diaspora – like Ladino or Yiddish – as alternatives sought to reclaim and highlight the diversities of being Jewish against a dominant narrative that emphasizes Jewish unity and thus, erases the vibrant differences and cultural histories of Jews from all over the world (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 16).²⁴ Growing up, my encounters with Yiddish and Klezmer never seemed like an ‘alternative’ to other more widely-practiced modes of Jewishness, although looking back, I am realizing what a rarity it was for me to engage with Yiddish so regularly in a Reform synagogue. I knew from my reading and reflection that writing about this *maybe* radical trajectory in American Jewish life was something that could sustain my interest for at least two semesters – or maybe longer.

At the beginning of this project I would call what I was working on – with little hesitation – “Yiddish revival.” After all, I discovered in my continued reading that this is how many authors and scholars named the collective trend of the relatively recent, post-Holocaust engagements with Yiddish. However, I learned throughout my project that many who were engaging in this ‘revival’ were in fact not calling it that. Some, like Ilana, even commented on

²⁴ For more on the diversity of experiences within World Jewry, see Kaye/Kantrowitz (2007).

the term. She explained to me that the “Yiddish revival” – particularly the Yiddish music revival – already happened in the 1980s and 90s, and that what is happening now is something different. I started to think about what “reviving” means, and how that implies bringing back something that was dead.

Most of my experiences in Jewish spaces – aside from my engagements with Yiddish led by my temple’s Yiddishist cantorial-soloist – overwhelmingly reinforced the idea that Yiddish was dead; it was rarely addressed, and when it was, it was only the language of Hasidim or our grandparents. At Hebrew school, it was often reduced to another component of Jewish history that has little, if any, present-day importance. At camp and Jewish youth group events, I cannot recall a time when Jewish Diaspora languages were merely addressed, even when learning about the diversity of World Jewry. When I went on a public tour at the Yiddish Book Center, someone asking one of the first questions addressed the status of Yiddish: “This might be a dumb question but, is Yiddish a *living language*?” The fellow who led the tour replied with an enthusiastic “Yes!” The term “revitalize” carries similar implications of bringing life back to something that is more or less lifeless, and I was not sure if Yiddish was being revitalized either. What would it mean if Yiddish was dead? And, are institutions and spaces like the Yiddish Book Center bringing Yiddish ‘back to life?’ Or are they instead helping shape new landscapes for Yiddish?

Language revitalization refers “to the development of programs that result in re-establishing a language which has ceased being the language of communication in the speech community and bringing it back into full use in all walks of life” (Grenoble and Whaley 2006, 1). It can also refer to efforts to combat a decline in the number of speakers – particularly native speakers – of a language (Hinton and Hale 2001). These revitalization efforts oftentimes consist of programs in and outside of schools for children, adult programs, and documentation efforts

(7). Each context of revitalization differs not only in terms of the strategy of revitalization but also in terms of the goals, as some focus on formal education while others prioritize the increase of quotidian use (Grenoble and Whaley 2006, 1). These efforts have become more and more common for Indigenous speech communities, as many in recent generations no longer speak nor understand their Indigenous languages and have thus lost sets of cultural knowledge systems and senses of sovereignty that coincide with linguistic knowledge (Linn and Oberly 2016, 142). These Indigenous languages undergoing revitalization efforts would fall into the category of “endangered languages,” or languages that are declining in the number of speakers and are at risk for going “extinct” (Dega 2016, 18-9).

Modern Hebrew as it is known today is itself a revitalized language, one that was successfully transformed into a vernacular and eventually became one of the most widely-spoken languages of the present-day State of Israel. Before Hebrew became a literary language in Europe thanks to efforts of some proponents of the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment (the *Haskalah*), it was strictly a holy, textual language for many Jews. In rare instances, Jews across the Diaspora who shared no other language used Hebrew as a medium of communication (Hirschfeld 2002, 1025). Mendele Mokher Sefarim, who wrote in both Hebrew and Yiddish, is credited as one of the creators of Modern Hebrew, although this form was strictly literary (Kutscher 1982, 192). He used Biblical Hebrew to write in a language that mirrored the more modern structures of Yiddish, as Biblical Hebrew had not been ‘updated’ like Yiddish had to reflect a modern reality (192). Modern Hebrew is not only a transformation of Biblical Hebrew; it also reflects the influence of Medieval Hebrew, the Hebrew in prayer book, Aramaic, and even some Yiddish and other Diaspora Jewish languages (190-91).

As more and more Jewish communities moved to Palestine in the Second Aliyah at the beginning of the 20th century, many used Hebrew vernacularly because it was the only mutually intelligible language between Jews coming from distant geographic locations (Kutscher 1982, 193-94). Some also chose, very intentionally, to teach their children Hebrew as their mother-tongue, as it came to symbolize a unifying Jewish language (193-94).²⁵ With the conception of Zionism, many did not initially imagine Hebrew to be the language of daily life in the Jewish state (Hirschfeld 2002, 1031). As a language that connected Jews over two millennia and many miles of Diaspora, this modern version of Hebrew became increasingly tied to the Zionist movement, especially with increased Jewish immigration to Palestine. In the 1920s – 1940s, Hebrew artistic and literary creation flourished in Palestine like it had never before in other locations (1032-40). After the state of Israel’s 1948 declaration of independence, Hebrew became the country’s official language, spoken mostly by Jewish Israelis. Today, many Jews and some non-Jews speak Hebrew as their first or second language while many more study it as a holy language or become familiarized with it through Jewish education.

The conception of Modern Hebrew represents a unique case of a strictly textual language being successfully revitalized into the vernacular of millions, a case in which the politics of creating a nation-state and the re-unification of Jews across the Diaspora played a central role. Aside from the example of Hebrew, most cases of language revitalization are predicated upon the notion of the language in question being “endangered” or at risk for extinction as its prevalence of speech declines. Since the Holocaust, vernacular Yiddish has generally reflected this, as communication in Yiddish – except in some Hasidic communities – has sharply declined.

²⁵ As we see in the next chapter, linguistic-centered spaces are intentionally constructed and help to characterize communal identities.

Netta Avineri (2014), however, shows through Yiddish not only that the status of endangered languages may not be best measured by communicative ability, but that the criteria for measuring language vitality are not objective nor universally applicable. The many who engage with Yiddish metalinguistically, who are “positioned social actors engaged primarily in discourse *about* language and cultural symbols tied to language,” inherently shift the conversation about what constitutes language vitality (Avineri 2014, 19). Yiddishists today demonstrate firsthand how language vitality is not strictly limited to utilization but can expand beyond to a “[demonstration of]...collective moral orientation to valuing linguistic cultural knowledge” (Avineri 2014, 30).

Those combatting the endangered status of a language often turn to revitalization strategies – such as those discussed earlier in the section – which are tailored to the particularities of each linguistic context. Yiddish, as with other Jewish Diaspora languages, is complex because it is largely deterritorialized²⁶ and is a product and reflection of the languages and cultures it has encountered. Metalinguistic practice and its prioritization of symbolic meaning over vernacular use reflects how Yiddish has become both more adaptable and expansive, which, I would argue, is a sign of vitality. Yiddish’s relatively unbounded and rhizomatic nature calls for a framework to account for the range of engagements that disrupt the boundary between vernacularity as a sign of vitality, and non-vernacularity as a sign of being endangered. As we will observe in the remainder of the chapter, postvernacularity both recognizes portability across spatiotemporal and linguistic contexts – especially in the post-Holocaust era – and legitimizes the language’s expanding and shifting roles and meanings.

²⁶ This is not to discount Jewish and specifically Yiddish territorialism movements. For more information on Jewish territorialist ideology, see Alroey (2011).

Metalinguistic practice and postvernacularity theory

As a language whose stable vernacular status is mostly limited to some relatively closed-off Hasidic communities, Yiddish, for many, might seem to straddle the line between dead and living. Reflecting back on one of the questions I heard someone ask on my Yiddish Book Center tour, I cannot help but think of the many conversations I have had that show how ‘not dead’ Yiddish is. For some like Rebekah, a vital Yiddish landscape means asking big questions and, reflecting a core component of metalinguistic practice, wrestling with the implications of engaging with Yiddish.

Being [at the Yiddish Book Center] is being inherently engaged in this, honestly I think like, struggle that we are all experiencing together. What do we do? What is our role? What is the role of a place that is trying to figure out what Yiddish means in the world? And not that.... The Yiddish Book Center is the place that will do this. No, it’s that it’s engaged with all these places and people that are asking all these same questions.

Rebekah is not the only Yiddishist to do this. Ilana has also observed and participated in the Steiner program, where she said students would often stay up into the “wee hours” having heated debates over similar questions and the future of Yiddish. These examples of metalinguistic practice – of wrestling with questions over the meaning of a language – reveal a particular kind of intellectual, communal, or even personal vitality, one that certainly counters the idea that Yiddish might be dead. The mere *topic* of Yiddish can serve as a touchstone for questions about identity both individually and collectively, what it means to be a Jew, and how to continue or shift historical legacies.

These examples along with many scholarly contributions like Avineri’s reveal the need for a theoretical approach that recognizes the diversities of language engagement.

Shandler (2006a) introduces his framework of “postvernacularity,” through which these metalinguistic engagements with Yiddish can be theorized in an era after the Holocaust.

Indeed, having an affective or ideological relationship with Yiddish without having command of the language epitomizes a larger trend in Yiddish culture in the post-Holocaust era. In semiotic terms, the language’s primary level of signification – that is, its instrumental value as a vehicle for communicating information, opinions, feelings, ideas – is narrowing in scope. At the same time its secondary, or meta-level of signification – the symbolic value invested in the language apart from the semantic value of any given utterance in it – is expanding. This privileging of the secondary level of signification of Yiddish over its primary level constitutes a distinctive mode of engagement with the language that I term *postvernacular* Yiddish. In the postvernacular mode, familiar cultural practices – reading, performing, studying, even speaking – are profoundly altered. Though it often appears to be the same as vernacular use, postvernacularity is in fact something fundamentally different in its nature and intent. And while it predates World War II, the postvernacular mode has had an increasing primary in Yiddish culture since the war. Therefore, to understand the nature of Yiddish in recent years and to think about the possibilities of its future, the notion of postvernacularity is key. (4)

Shandler’s postvernacular moves beyond the sole criterion of vernacularity to measure language vitality; he also legitimizes language and cultural endeavors in a way that undermines the common-held belief of the grimness of Yiddish’s present and future. The postvernacular framework also questions the notion of vernacular ability as an authentic point for measuring a language’s vitality. By de-essentializing and reimagining vernacularity, Shandler’s theory serves as a critical point in more fully understanding the “willfully paradoxical existence” of Yiddishland, “defined by geographical instability and contingency” (39).

Postvernacular engagement often centralizes the context in which the language is being used and the politics of its use, even if the language is not understood. For example, in the postvernacular mode, “the very fact that something is said (or written or sung) in Yiddish is at least as meaningful as the meaning of the words being uttered – if not more so” (Shandler 2006a,

22). When I sang and performed Yiddish songs with a Klezmer and Jewish music group growing up, it became clear to me – simply by how the director introduced Yiddish songs and how the audience typically reacted – that the mere fact that we were singing in Yiddish meant something special. This heightened or unique meaning was not quite comparable to the meanings that songs in English or Hebrew – two languages that American Jewish audiences heard more frequently – often evoked.

As a child and even in my teen years, I always felt that Yiddish had a particularly special significance during our group’s annual performance at a Jewish nursing home. In my mind, although I knew that not every residents spoke Yiddish, their presence nonetheless embodied some kind of vibrant and eventually tragic vernacular past when communicating in Yiddish and celebrating Jewishness through Yiddish music and culture was relatively commonplace. When we would perform more popular Yiddish songs like “Tumbalalaika,” I always interpreted the residents’ more enthusiastic participation as some sort of joyous resurrection of the past. My imagination of Yiddish vernacularity and vitality as part of my ancestry, along with my participation in celebrating an aspect of Jewish culture across generations and as a community, meant that singing in Yiddish carried meaning for me, even without understanding it. Shandler describes this aspect of postvernacularity as a “relational phenomenon,” meaning that those engaging in Yiddish are “[aware] of [their] distance from vernacularity” (Shandler 2006a, 22). During these performances, I was utilizing it in a non-quotidian way while “[responding] to the language having once been a widely used Jewish vernacular” and maybe, having once been a key component of Jewish collective identities (22).

As I discovered throughout my project, I am by far not the only one who has learned to associate Yiddish with older generations. “My great-grandparents were Yiddish speakers but

they did not pass it on,” is a line that seemingly many Jews of Ashkenazi descent in America can relate to. “My grandparents spoke Yiddish around us so we would not understand” functions similarly; I gathered that the staff at the Yiddish Book Center hear this one frequently from the public. Many with Eastern European Jewish heritage commonly associate Yiddish with older generations in their family, like Rachel. Her initial experiences with Yiddish before participating in Great Jewish Books revolved around not simply her Yiddish-speaking grandfather, but with the *fact* that he spoke Yiddish. When I asked those with whom I spoke how they initially became interested in Yiddish, many told me that their family connections inspired their curiosity, or that they felt it would allow them to learn more about their family and thus, themselves.

Michaela, a past participant in the Great Jewish Books program, associates Yiddish with memories of her grandmother, a native Yiddish speaker, singing a Yiddish song to her when she was a child. Although she does not understand the song, it still produces meaning for her, similarly to how singing songs in Hebrew at Jewish summer camp produced meaning even without understanding the words. She is cognizant of her distance from vernacularity, something her grandmother has, while recognizing her closeness – through participation at Great Jewish Books – to Yiddish as a “tool” or “key” for “unlocking history.” Her grandmother’s engagements with Yiddish were for the most part vernacular, as she grew up speaking it at home but never studied it. At Great Jewish Books, Michaela engaged with Yiddish more academically and in a uniquely Jewish space, characterized by coming together across divisions to participate in discourse. Her relationship to Yiddish embodies postvernacularity’s relationality; it is not quotidian use yet “is responsive to the language having once been a widely used Jewish vernacular” for those like her grandmother (Shandler 2006a, 22).

Shandler's postvernacular approach both explains the actual vitality of Yiddish and allows for a recognition of many forms of engagement that ultimately reframe Yiddish from something that is 'dying' into something that is changing and expanding. Additionally, postvernacularity can be explained as a mode of language engagement. With this framework, the distinction between those who are engaging with or using Yiddish and those who are theorizing these endeavors is not so clear. Scholars and academics only represent a small portion of folks who theorize contemporary Yiddish; rather, postvernacularity means that those 'using' the language and participating in Yiddishist endeavors are theorizing their own engagement. As Yiddish has historically muddled and disrupted boundaries, so too does a project centered on ethnography like the one I am pursuing. While I am by no means a 'hardcore' Yiddishist and while I have never participated in educational programs at the Yiddish Book Center, the boundary between 'anthropologist' and 'informant' is not so clear, as I too am reflecting on my own experiences with Yiddish and on larger questions about Jewishness. Through a postvernacular lens, I am able to appreciate the theories that emerge during every conversation I have had.

In the vein of Judith Butler's theory on cultural translation, the postvernacular mode allows for the fact that Yiddish language and Yiddish works take on new meanings and become relevant in many spaces and for many purposes. While Yiddish works in the postvernacular mode "depart from [their] particular historical circumstances of [their] legitimation and prove applicability to new occasions of time and space" (Butler 2012, 8), the meta-value of this departure is implicit with this new applicability and thus adds a profound sense of awareness of the transposition process. When I sat down with Alexis towards the beginning of the interview process to hear about her experiences, I initially spoke about contemporary Yiddish engagements

as a “revival” and questioned my own use of the term. After I briefly described my research and Butler’s theory of cultural translation, she shifted the narrative, saying that what is happening now is not really revival; it is actually cultural translation. “That’s a better term for it.”

The Yiddish Book Center as a postvernacular institution

In its physical space in Amherst, the Yiddish Book Center is available in a broad range of capacities, as an interactive museum, a language or history classroom, an archive, an language and cultural education resource center, a film-showing center, a library, as a venue for events like B’nai Mitzvot or weddings, and even as a setting for Steiner Program late night dance parties. The establishment of the new building in the mid-nineties transformed the atmosphere and the public image of the Center, expanding its programmatic possibilities and adding an exceptionally conscious exterior design. After its 1997 grand-opening, the English *Forward* called it “a post-modern shtetl” (Lansky 2004, 284). This architecture that “pays homage to the wooden synagogues of Norther Poland” embodies postvernacularity’s paradoxical relationality; it encourages those standing outside or viewing it virtually to reflect on a broader historical connectivity while recognizing our distance from a pre-Holocaust Eastern Europe. (Shandler 2006a, 51). At the same time, “the architecture of this implicit Yiddishland strives to transcend, even defy, the limits of space and time” (51). In this one location, multiple spaces, histories, and temporalities are now available, along with a plethora of books and other cultural artifacts. With the Center’s physical space as a resource in and of itself, the significance that can be drawn from Yiddish’s history becomes accessible even to those who stop by for an hour-long public tour or for a film-screening.



Figure 1: A photo of the Yiddish Book Center's exterior

After speaking with Ilana who has participated in many other Yiddish programs, it became clear that the Center differs from other Yiddishist spaces in that creating spaces for conversational Yiddish is not its central focus. What seems more important is to help the wider public start to think about Yiddish, especially Yiddish books. Josh Lambert told me that the preserving “Yiddish language and books” is “a huge part” of the YBC’s mission, and in doing so, they also aim “to find ways to make connections between those Yiddish books and the wider non-Yiddish speaking...contemporary world.” The Center’s expansive physical location and its

visual displays of a vast body of works demonstrate that what constitutes as Yiddish goes beyond language and blends into both lived cultural experiences and cultural potential. When I took a public tour, the fellow was able to weave in interactive educational moments, during which we learned Yiddish words that might inspire us to make connections with the knowledge we already had and with a developing understanding of the Center's place in Yiddish's history. Its programs and initiatives present language, literature, and culture as fluid and intertwining, aiming to tell a story about Yiddish's rich cultural, political, and intellectual histories.

By not requiring vernacularity or any amount of cultural proficiency, the Center's communication of Yiddish in the postvernacular mode – where meta-level thinking is prioritized – means that accessing these histories and taking part in the YBC mission, at whatever level, becomes much easier. Initiatives that meet members or those interested in Yiddish where they are – like the online book club, the podcast *The Shmooze*, the *Pakn treger* magazine, and YouTube access to thousands of Wexler Oral History Project interview clips – prove that the wider non-Yiddish-speaking world can engage with Yiddish and connect with Yiddish books and. In this sense, while the Center's efforts aim to solidify a place for Yiddish, it becomes increasingly deterritorialized.

Translation as postvernacular engagement

For scholars and Yiddishists alike, translation from Yiddish represents a crucial marker of postvernacularity, one that makes a meaningful postvernacular mode feasible for the many who do not speak or understand Yiddish. In its nearly 900 years of existence, not only has

Yiddish never “[stood] alone” among other languages, but it is also “founded in translation” and grounded in landscapes of multiple languages, both Jewish and non-Jewish (Shandler 2006a, 92-

3). As Alexis said,

One of the reasons that Yiddish was so often associated with non-territorial nationalism or Diaspora Judaism was because it developed and spread in the Jewish Diaspora. It’s obviously not the only Jewish language that developed and spread in the Diaspora but it was and continues to be the most widely spoken, so it’s rooted in the Jewish lack of home... Because of that, in a way I think a lot of people identify with the language itself as a form of home. But the language and the culture that develops around [it]...takes the place of home in the Yiddish-speaking Jewish identity. And a lot of people find a lot of comfort in that, especially because the language travelled place to place with the people who spoke it and it changed depending on who spoke it and it took on linguistic characteristics of the places in which it was spoken. And it did also provide a certain sense of consistency in the way that it changed reflected the way that the people who were speaking it were changing.

Alexis’ comments speak to the paradoxical comfort many take in Yiddish’s instability and dynamism, and this is certainly nothing new in a post-World War II, widely postvernacular Yiddish world. Historically, Yiddish’s rhetorical, linguistic, and cultural multiplicity “derives from its social origins as a language of translation and mediation, simultaneously, between sanctified rabbinic tradition and everyday life, as well as between the coterritorial, non-Jewish world and the porous domain of Jewish values and tradition” (Caplan 2011, 9). Translation of Yiddish texts into other languages, most commonly English, represents the kinds of transformations that Alexis describes; as vernacularity decreases and postvernacular practices become more widespread, the language and culture adapt and expand through translation. Yiddish, like translation, is characterized by both stability and instability, as it continuously grapples with and redefines borders.

Etymologically, translation means to “[carry] across’...words or phrases from one language to another” (Hellerstein 2012, 25). This motion of “carrying across” characterizes how Yiddish has acted historically, as a language that often disregarded borders (Lansky 2004, 231). Postvernacularity allows us to understand translation as detached from strictly linguistic spheres: “carrying across” occurs, for example, when setting a Yiddish poem to music and thus translating the mode and the original setting of a work. As Rebekah explains, working with a text translated from Yiddish to another language is simply a different experience and does not “mean [it is] inherently a bad one.” Translation implies a change; as a work is translated, it “undergoes a set of changes in the process of being drawn,” changes that are necessary in order for a work to become historically continuous (Butler 2012, 8). While translation can “induce misunderstandings... [and testify] to the impossibility of holding the *same* conversation across cultures, languages, times, and spaces” (Mishra 2006, 112), it is not – according to a postvernacular model – inherently negative or inauthentic, nor does it signify the death of a language. Rebekah’s point, taken in conjecture with translation as an key marker of postvernacularity, begins to shatter essentialist notions of language, ones upon which the primacy of vernacularity marks ‘more legitimate,’ and maybe more bounded and exclusive, linguistic engagements.

While some Yiddish literature – only about 2% - is translated into English, the language into which a source is translated does not define which canon it is considered part of. In other words, texts, songs, or stories that were translated from Yiddish to English are still considered *Yiddish* and part of Yiddish, Jewish, or other canons. Thus, the process of translation itself must not be ignored in order to understand the changing functions, symbolisms, and meanings of a text across historical contexts. Josh Lambert told me that in some Yiddish Book Center

programs, participants often work with texts in translation and in the original. In the online book club, for example, participants frequently compare the two. Rebekah also enjoys comparing translations to their originals. Recognizing the translation process does not only show how texts have changed over time, but also prompts acknowledgement of the translator's labor and creativity as an essential component of shaping a widely postvernacular landscape.

While the Center only sponsors translation projects from Yiddish to English, there are outside efforts to translate texts *into* Yiddish. For these translations, which are often of works that are considered pieces of world literature,²⁷ “their meta-value has a distinctive primacy” as “translators intend for readers to center their attention not on the original works but on the very act of these works’ being rendered into Yiddish” (Shandler 2006a, 118). When Zackary Sholem Berger and his wife thought of translating a Dr. Seuss book into Yiddish, they thought that “it would be perfect. Everyone knows the Seuss books, and even non-Yiddish speakers would find it interesting” (Yiddish Book Center 2016b). As translators, they knew that for some in the wider public, the book’s symbolism as a translation into Yiddish was more significant and meaningful than what a vernacular reading could provide them. These translations overtly reflect an intentional reproduction of hybridity, rather than an attempt at purity or protection from ‘mixing.’ Translations like these imply movement and change, and “can be regarded as sites of cultural engagement that reveal the contingent nature of Yiddish in relation to their languages at a given time and place” (Shandler 2006a, 92-3).

²⁷ Most engagements with Yiddish and translation happen in renderings from Yiddish to another language. However, in recent decades some have translated works of world literature *into* Yiddish. Before World War II many popular works of poetry, prose, and even scholarly writing were translated in Yiddish (Shandler 2006a, 117).

Since the Yiddish Book Center sponsors year-long fellowships in translation, it is clear that they do not take the task of translation lightly. Translation does not imply an easy, direct, or transparent transition from one language to another. It is a process that necessitates thoughtfulness and careful choices in considering both how and what to communicate to a wider audience. Translation between Yiddish and other languages is not simply linguistic, as the communicability of a resource is inherently tied to cultural relevance and saliency (Butler 2012, 8). In the postvernacular mode, the act of linguistic and thus cultural translation itself carries meaning and speaks to the broader project of reimagining sources in new contexts.

In the context of the Yiddish Book Center, many have described to me the power of translation in making the world of Yiddish accessible to a much wider audience, as the number of who can read Yiddish works *in* Yiddish has dramatically decreased since World War II. The postvernacular mode's ability to move beyond the necessity of language proficiency allows for a framework that legitimizes translation as an authentic way of engaging with a language and culture. Additionally, an awareness of translation also prompts the kind of meta-level focus that defines postvernacularity. As translation is a fundamental component of postvernacularity, its larger project of increasing a wider public's accessibility to Yiddish speaks to the accessibility of postvernacularity itself. Many translators do this individually and as freelancers outside of institutions like the YBC. One translator even looks for texts to translate into English that people would not have access to otherwise, understanding that translation allows a wider public to familiarize themselves with those who were originally writing in Yiddish and in some cases, give a spark of inspiration to learn the Yiddish language. Some Yiddishists like Rebekah enjoy comparing translated texts, using translation as a guiding point for study. Not only does the act of

translation symbolize Yiddish's role historically and even contemporarily, but it also creates an entry point into worlds of Yiddish that a required vernacular ability does not.

The Yiddish Book Center's prioritization of translation initiatives both exemplifies an accessible postvernacular model and responds to what many see as the dire need for the translation of texts that non-Yiddish-proficient young people would not otherwise interact with. In a Wexler Oral History Interview, Yiddish translator Bracha Weingrod explains the need for mass translation efforts: "I keep saying, why aren't we doing more? We need to hire a whole troop of translators and begin to bring out things that young people really should know, have to know, that are really interesting and really beautifully written" (Yiddish Book Center 2011). At the YBC, translation and education go hand in hand, and as a fellow in both these sectors, Rebekah's goal "is to get things out to as many people as possible." By translating works, providing comprehensive education around these translations, and often publishing them online to make them available to a wider virtual public, the Center acts as a key force in conceptualizing an accessible postvernacular model, one that ultimately shapes a more inclusive, flexible, and arguably viable Yiddishland across barriers of comprehension abilities.²⁸

While individuals and institutions focus increasingly on translation efforts, it is no easy task, and the fact that language develops to reflect and embody cultural knowledge represents a central problematic of this process. According to a few translators I spoke with, the particular Jewishness of Yiddish represents a point of difficulty in translation, especially when thinking about not only who will read the translated texts but who will understand them and *how* they will understand them. Those who wrote texts in Yiddish often assume a baseline understanding of

²⁸ To see "a growing collection of poems, stories, essays, and other works by Yiddish authors, translated into English" on the YBC website, visit <https://www.yiddishbookcenter.org/language-literature-culture/yiddish-translation>

Jewish knowledge, like of the Tanakh, Talmud, or other sacred texts. As Josh Lambert pointed out, Jewish languages were never completely limited to Jews historically, yet “the way in which they are connected to Jewish history and culture is important.” While the majority of Yiddishists today are Jewish, not everyone is, and it is crucial to not erase those who do not identify and to not broadly equate Yiddish with Jewishness. And, Jewish identity does not imply a fundamental understanding of these references, ones that require particular Jewish backgrounds of Jewish education and knowledge. It has become clear that like any other language, Yiddish cannot be removed from the cultural and historical contexts from which it arose.

A few translators I spoke with sometime wrestle with how to communicate Jewish references when aiming to make their translations as accessible to as many as possible. One, for instance, is at times unsure how to present Talmudic references with complicated explanations and background to an English-speaking audience that likely does not have that knowledge. Another told me about the difficulties of translating words with Jewish intertextualities, saying that some translations they have seen are rather “clunky.” One example they cited is in an early translation of Yiddish author Sholem Asch’s *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance), in which the translator translated “Torah” as “Holy Scroll.” Often, they told me, it is simply hard to predict what the audience might know or not know. When translators make careful decisions about how to translate certain concepts or words, or how to introduce a translation or the work’s author, not only do they direct who can access the translated sources and how, but they also transform original meanings and add their own voices to a larger cultural body of works and a broader historical legacy.

The Yiddish Book Center states their mission to “recover, celebrate, and regenerate Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a). Translation

represents a kind of regeneration that adds new layers of meaning and creates new avenues for engagement, whether it be as personal, political, intellectual, or communal pursuits. Translated texts and the translation process also celebrate a broader legacy of diaspora languages: “in Jewish cultures, translation not only negotiates transmigrations across Jewish-gentile borders, it also engages the definitional practice of having more than one Jewish language” (Shandler 2006a, 93). Not only is translation necessary to postvernacularity, but many would argue that it is a necessary part of having a diasporic cultural identity that “teaches us that cultures are not preserved by being protected from ‘mixing’ but probably can only continue to exist as a product of such mixing” (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993, 721). In other words, translation – linguistically and culturally – as well as moving beyond a framework of bounded language and culture prove essential to continuity across space and time and in new contexts.

A catalyst for engagement

Rather than being ‘dead’ because it is no longer spoken in ways it was in past contexts, Yiddish – and how many people engage with it – has simply changed. Rachel, like many others I spoke with, recognizes that unlike many other languages, vernacularity is not a central focus nor realistic goal for many people in a contemporary context: “You still see scholars writing about Yiddish without knowing any Yiddish which isn’t acceptable for other languages.” In a post-World War II world, the effort to learn spoken Yiddish or to make it their vernacular is, for many, not a realistic goal. Even those I spoke with who are hopeful about Yiddish’s future and who are able to communicate in the language are not expecting that Yiddish will become, once again, the vernacular of the descendants of Eastern European Jews. Shandler’s framework more

accurately describes the state of Yiddish in contemporary contexts while de-essentializing vernacular use as a defining factor of linguistic vitality.

Postvernacular Yiddish is much more accessible to a non-Yiddish-speaking public as an entry point into learning about Yiddish and the cultures implicated by it. In regards to Yiddish books, which the Center's founder Aaron Lansky calls a "portable homeland" (Lansky 2004, 37), a postvernacular model would include reading, discussing, and translating, and reflecting upon Yiddish books as a legitimate form of language engagement and not limit the language to day-to-day communication. But more than that, the increased accessibility to Yiddish via postvernacularity strengthens portability. While Yiddish has never stayed in the same place, Yiddish today even more so does not have a central place but many contingent locations.

Someone I spoke with brought up Shandler's theory of postvernacularity, asking if I have heard of it or read it. Postvernacularity, they told me, recognizes that you would never be able to go back to Warsaw and speak Yiddish on the street: "By dedicating yourself to Yiddish now, you're really kind of admitting that, and this kind of new diaspora-based identity in which you're recreating a homeland all the time." In other words, vernacularity is no longer the defining factor of a center of language, culture, or a particular community. Postvernacularity does justice to Yiddish being a diasporic or "displaced" language, a language of mediation, and a language and culture that question and recreate boundaries and borders. In the next chapter, we will see how vernacular use today creates portable localities while solidifying the boundaries the separate speaking ability and lack of speaking ability. While solidifying its physical presence in Amherst, the Yiddish Book Center and similar institutions which ground themselves in Yiddish knowledge production also help to centralize meta-level reflection within a wider public more than ever before. In a widely postvernacular world, then, "Yiddish serves as the catalyst for engagement,

linking the conversation with a larger, imagined project, borne out of desires to reconfigure the roles of language and culture in a radically redefined sense of self' (Shandler 2006a, 201).

Chapter 2: Vernacular Yiddish and its intentional forms

Bounded Yiddishlands

As many Soviet Jews migrated to Palestine in the 1920s, some were also moving five thousand miles east of Moscow to a region along the Sino-Soviet border (Weinberg 1998, 13). This region, called Birobidzhan, was later established in May 1934 by the Soviet government as a Jewish autonomous region and as “a territorial enclave where secular Jewish culture rooted in Yiddish and socialist principles could serve as an alternative to Palestine and resolve a variety of perceived problems besetting Soviet Jewry” (13). While the region “in its heyday...boasted a Yiddish theater, library, school system and...a Yiddish teachers’ college” and published official documents in both Russian and Yiddish, Jews still made up a small minority of its inhabitants (Shandler 2006a, 37; Weinberg 1998, 13). For some Soviet Jews, Birobizhan represented their national territory, especially as many European languages in the decade after the First World War were going through “a period of language-nationalism and language planning” (Fishman 1991, 183). While it “was an important tool in Jewish communist anti-Zionist propaganda” and was inevitably tied to the Soviet Union, it was the sole example of Yiddish, a Jewish diaspora language, having a government or any sort of official territory (Fishman 1991, 183; Zaagsma 2013, 100).

Was Birodidzhan, then, a rather official version of Yiddishland? According to Shandler (2006a), this may not be so: “If Yiddishland is understood as a site, whether actual or virtual, defined by language use, Birodidzhan and other such settlements do not meet this primary

criterion in the strictest sense” as “[for] in these instances, turf, not language, is the defining matrix” (Shandler 2006a, 37). Even today, Yiddish does not exactly have a “turf,” notably in the region where it emerged – Europe. As one Yiddishist noted, postvernacularity means “you can’t go back to Warsaw and speak Yiddish on the street.” While New York City is characterized by many as “the de facto capital of Yiddishland” (Friedman 2015, 13) – for Yiddish culture and also for spoken Yiddish mainly in Hasidic Brooklyn – the language is largely decentered from place. As Rachel told me, “it’s hard to find other Yiddish speakers sometimes.” Like the language itself, Yiddish speakers are often also decentered from place.

If this is the case, then how does a collective spoken language – or vernacular language – characterize a community or even a place where a community resides? Deriving from the Latin word *verna*, meaning “native-born slave,” the origins of the word vernacular have clear colonial origins, and the word also speaks to the creation of localities (Adejunmobi 2004, vii-viii). Communicative language, then, defines groups and communities. Moradewum Adejunmobi (2004) discusses the implications of a group using a language other than what is considered their vernacular.

The willingness of a certain type of formal association to use a language recognized by most members as something other than a vernacular often points to a larger pattern of dislocation from the space of the local, and a loss of faith in the ability of acknowledged spaces of locality to provide the kind of security normally attributed to the space of home and the space of the local. In other words, commitment to and involvement with associations using non-native languages that are also languages of wider communication should be interpreted not as a resolution to replace one space of locality with another space previously considered foreign, but as an expression of doubt in the complete adequacy of the space of the local as a framework for survival in the contemporary world. (Adejunmobi 2004, 165)

When I spoke with Rachel, she asked an essential question about how language defines senses of home, particularly in the context of Yiddish-speaking immigrants: “I think the connection between Yiddish and assimilation is really interesting.” She explained that while today more insular Jewish communities, like Hasidim, speak Yiddish, many people gave up it up “as they migrated...to fit in more and feel more at home. At the same time, if you have to give up a part of yourself to feel more at home, are you really at home?” she asked. In Jewish diasporic contexts where solidarities often transcend national or geographic boundaries, defining and bounding the local has always been complicated. If spoken language is a form of home, then how much does language define personal and collective identities? And, if place is pause and space is movement, as Barbara Mann (2012, 100) conceptualizes, then how does spoken language characterize or construct space and place, especially in a widely postvernacular Yiddish world?

In this chapter, I will explore how vernacular Yiddish use constructs space and place through the production and maintenance of boundaries – physical and virtual. First, I will outline the history of Yiddish as a vernacular language to reveal how language use, even as a “mother-tongue” (*mameloshn*) or as a tool for communication, has always been politicized and how historical shifts have attached vernacular language to identity and more notably, to bounded collective identities. Then, I will explore how dedication, intentionality, and consciousness have become a necessary aspect of the creation and maintenance of contemporary vernacular spaces and abilities. Next, we will examine a few examples of how boundaries of time and space characterize a few sites of different vernacularities today, namely in Hasidic Brooklyn and in “episodes.” Ultimately, I argue that in a mostly postvernacular Yiddish world, vernacular-centered Yiddishland represents the rhizomatic formation of localities, ones based in movement and malleability. As these borders are paradoxically solidified and continuously redrawn, these

localities become both exclusive and expansive in terms of possibilities of generating knowledge and creating community.

History of the vernacular form

The exact origins of the Yiddish language are not clear. Scholars have offered differing theories of the migration paths of Yiddish's original speakers, the original inhabitants of Ashkenaz;²⁹ some have argued that they migrated directly from the Middle East and started speaking a Germanic language with Hebrew and Aramaic mixed in, and others have said that they migrated to the Rhinlands from Northern France, where they previously spoke a Romance-derived Jewish language (Myhill 2004, 126-7). The language likely began to develop during the 11th century – some say as early as the ninth century – around the Rhinlands of Medieval Europe, “roughly between Cologne and Speyer” (Goldsmith 1997, 29-31; Shandler 2006a, 5). These Jewish populations adopted the Germanic language of their neighbors with heavy influences of Hebrew and Aramaic and created cultural practices unique to them (Myhill 2004, 126). Yiddish, like other Jewish diaspora languages, “is a product of Jewish-gentile interaction” and its speakers “have always been multilingual, understanding, speaking, and sometimes reading and...writing in one or more of their neighbors' languages” (Shandler 2006a, 5). In order to show Yiddish's multilingual nature, Lansky gives the example in his book and uses the phrase “*Di bobbe est tsholent af Shabbes,*” which contains words influenced by Slavic, Middle High German, Old French, and Hebrew (Lansky 2004, 13). As Jews migrated East in the 13th century,

²⁹ The “Jewish cultural empire” from which Yiddish arose. The term “Ashkenaz” has biblical origins and once designated where Jews lived in German-speaking Europe. For more on the term's meaning and origins, see Katz (2004, 22-23)

Yiddish spread with them and gained increasing influence from Slavic languages (Myhill 2004, 127). It first developed as a spoken secular language but became a literary language beginning as early as the 11th century (Goldsmith 1997, 32).

As technology changed with the invention of the printing press, “the use of written Yiddish began to expand significantly beginning in the 16th century, at the same time that a number of Christian vernaculars similarly began to develop an increased range and frequency of use” (Myhill 2004, 128). It became more commonplace during this time to write in vernacular languages so more could understand written texts. In fact, it was this ability and demand to print in vernacular languages that allowed Martin Luther and the Reformation to be so successful (Anderson 2006, 40). During this time, a growing number of women – in addition to those who could not read *loshn-koydesh*³⁰ – wrote and read translations and other types of writing, like pietistic writings and folktales (Myhill 2004, 128). Shifts in Diaspora Jewish cultures, and Yiddish subsequently, developed alongside trends of their gentile neighbors. While trends in Yiddish varied depending on location, Yiddish publishing generally “emerged against the backdrop of the *Haskalah*, the European Jewish Enlightenment,” as Jewish intellectuals saw a place for a distinctively Jewish language and culture in a ‘high-status’ sphere (Friedman 2015, 7). As other groups became empowered through writing in and legitimizing their vernacular forms, so too did some European Jews beginning in the mid-18th century (Myhill 2004, 128).

Nevertheless, before and even during the *Haskalah* some Jews and non-Jews perceived Yiddish pejoratively, as an impure jargon or a polluted German. It was not until the mid-19th century when what we call “Yiddish” today was called “Yiddish.” What Ashkenazi immigrants spoke in America was simply called “Jewish,” and in Europe, before recognition as a

³⁰ Hebrew, the holy language of study.

“dynamic...literary folk culture,” it was called *zhargon* or “jargon” (Trachtenberg 2008, 1; Whitfield 2002, 1106). Some proponents of the *Haskalah* used Yiddish creatively to show that Jews can be cosmopolitan and that Yiddish has potential to be a *kultur-shprakh*, a language of high culture (Shandler 2006a, 8). As “gentiles at the time took language as the essential marker of peoplehood,” Yiddish emerged as a central symbol of Jewish identity for many European Jews (Myhill 2004, 131-2). It also became a vehicle for expressing a secular Jewish identity and communicating political ideologies – such as communism, socialism, territorialism, and forms of Jewish nationalism – to the masses. For example, groups in the Soviet Union like the Jewish Workers’ Bund formed in 1897 – after Jews in the last decade were forced to move into cities and work in factories – and used Yiddish with Jewish workers to encourage them to join the revolution. This movement along with others “challenged the political status quo, reshaped Jewish culture..., and expended considerable energy fighting among themselves” (Lansky 2004, 127-8). Even for many Yiddish-speaking immigrants in the United States, Yiddish was a “vehicle for propagation of various shades of socialism, anarchism, and nationalism” in a land without governmental or religious constraints (Goldsmith 1997, 65). For some today, it is this vein of Yiddish’s history that gives them an avenue to express radical leftist politics.

For others, like the emerging Hasidic movement, speaking Yiddish became increasingly tied to religion and tradition (Isaacs 1999, 9). This movement formed with the goal of empowering the common people, as “existing Jewish...institutions...were perceived as being too distant” from them and “too focused on the use of sacred languages, of which the knowledge among the common people was limited” (Myhill 2004, 129). For this reason, Hasidic leadership encouraged their followers to use Yiddish and create original Yiddish prayers and writings (129). This empowerment through vernacular language and growingly popular association between

identity and language reflected the broader ideology of “everyday-language-and-identity” that “permeated the thinking and activities of intellectuals,” especially around the time of the First World War (138-9). The Yiddish term for vernacular language, *folk-shprakh* even means “people’s language” (Shandler 2006a, 13). Not only did Yiddish as a vernacular centralize “the people” and the needs of the greater masses, but it also created a commonality between many who are geographically far from one another; it was Yiddish as their vernacular that united them (12). Thus, it was an “essential, definitional feature of a modern Jewish nation” (13). Even before Yiddish’s contemporary status as a mostly postvernacular language, the Yiddish language was characterized by its wide range of uses.

Also significant in the early 20th century was the new declarations of Yiddish’s legitimacy and further institutionalization after 1914 with the Russian Revolution and the Trianon and Versailles Treaties: “In all three instances new states came into being in which Yiddish was established as the legally recognized language of the Jewish ethnic-‘national’ group,” making Yiddish eligible “to receive public support and...recognition” (Fishman 1991, 92-3). During the preceding tsarist rule, state restrictions tightly censored Yiddish books and plays, as “these were suspected as serving as vehicles for sedition” (Shandler 2006a, 13). For many in the generation born in the 1880s, during the pogroms and rapid modernization, “Yiddish was not simply a form of poor German that had been rejected in order to join the larger world; instead, it stood proudly at the center of a growing Jewish national revival” (Trachtenberg 2008, 3). Despite the establishment of processes to legitimize and institutionalize Yiddish, the tightening government control suppressed Soviet Yiddish cultural institutions a few decades later in the 1930s for fear that Jewish national sentiments – like those embodied by movements like Zionism and Jewish territorialism – would trump Soviet nationalism. After World War II,

“leading figures for Soviet Yiddish culture were arrested and later executed for their involvement in efforts that had come to be denounced as acts of anti-Soviet nationalism and treason” (Shandler 2006a, 14).

Even while Yiddish took on new forms, the rates of Yiddish vernacularity began to decline around 300 years ago, starting in Western Europe and mostly German-speaking areas and then continuing to decline in Eastern Europe (Myhill 2004, 137). In the United States, many Yiddish-speaking immigrants did not pass on the language to the next generation (Wisse 2008, 1). In the Russian empire, Yiddish as considered the “mother-tongue” started to decline with urbanization and political shifts in the beginning of the 20th century and as Jews learned to speak their neighbors’ languages (Myhill 2004, 137). Surveys showed that some Jews increasingly used another language as their “everyday” language but learned Yiddish at home as their “mother-tongue” (136). Some Jews also rejected Yiddish, instead championing Hebrew as their language or opting for their neighbors’ languages (Shandler 2006a, 13). In general, Yiddish endured “vehement attacks” from both Jews and non-Jews (13).

Despite these declines, the legitimization and transformations of Yiddish continued into the intellectual sphere. The Czernovitz Conference, held in what is today Ukraine, was extremely significant in that it was not only an intellectual conference about Yiddish, but it was held *in* Yiddish (Fishman 1991; Myhill 2004, 133). In the end, the majority at this controversial and disorganized conference adopted a resolution recognizing Yiddish “as a national language of the Jewish people and [demanding] for it political, communal and cultural equality” (Weinreich 1980, 294). Other than passing this resolution, the conference accomplished nothing concrete, although its legacy and repercussions are “powerful and enduring” (295). John Myhill notes that Jews were not the first to hold this type of debate over a language (134), while Joshua Fishman

reminds us that Czernovitz was “merely the brief climax of various steps that had taken place before that” in the Yiddish’s “status planning,” like a 1905 resolution of the Jewish Workers Bund (Fishman 1991, 235). Later in 1925, intellectuals and scholars founded YIVO (Yidisher Visnshaftlekher Institut), or the Yiddish Scientific Institute in Vilna, Poland, “to document and study Jewish life in all its aspects: language, history, religion, folkways, and material culture” (YIVO Institute for Jewish Research n.d.). Today, the institution has transformed, both in title – now as the Yivo Institute for Jewish Research – and in headquarters – now in New York City. YIVO has had a significant role in standardizing a spoken Yiddish that does not reflect exactly a specific regional dialect but does generally favor “Northern rather than either Central or Eastern European Yiddish” (Fishman 1991, 211). The Yiddish taught in contemporary college and university classrooms in the United States, Israel, and elsewhere reflects this standardized YIVO version (211).

Of course, the Holocaust represents the most brutal attack on Yiddish language and its speakers, as five million Yiddish-speakers perished (Fishman 1991, 16). Before the Holocaust, Yiddish was “the vernacular language of an estimated two-thirds of world Jewry,” yet the Holocaust reduced the number of Yiddish speakers by half (Friedman 2015, 3; Shandler 2006a, 15). Yiddish in the early years after the Holocaust both found new homes and took on new meanings. In postwar Poland, for instance, many Jews were afraid to speak it, and in America, “Yiddish was an embarrassing vestige of immigrant difference” (Shandler 2006a, 16). Not only did the Holocaust have a massive effect on the language, but it also destroyed much of Eastern European Jewish communal infrastructure (16). In short, what was once “the central locus of Yiddish culture for half a millennium was now perceived as a haunting void” (16).

Other forces in the United States, both before and after the Holocaust, shaped the Yiddish landscape and how it was used and perceived. It was not only the Holocaust in isolation that caused a decline in vernacular Yiddish, as in previous centuries, other broader historical shifts contributed to its decline and changing meaning (Myhill 2004, 138). As Jews became more Americanized in the 20th century, there was a shift from Jewishness, as part of an ethnic group, to Judaism, as a religion (Shandler 2006a, 16). A secular, more politically-charged idea of Jewishness and general left-wing manifestations of Jewishness became negatively associated with communism and socialism during the Cold War era (16). While senses of self changed, so too did Jewish American institutions. These institutions became more reflective of Protestant ones, in which for the most part, Yiddish had little place as Jews abandoned it as their vernacular (16). Senses of Jewishness moved into institutions like schools and synagogues and away from writing and spoken language, like how their Christian neighbors structured their religious observance (Wisse 2008, 18). In the post-World War II era, many American Jews moved to the suburbs and joined synagogues to provide their children – largely baby-boomers – with a Jewish education (Prell 2011, 36). Generally speaking, many Yiddish-speaking immigrants preferred English over Yiddish and did not pass it on the language to the next generation (Sarna 2004, 174; Wisse 2008, 1, 17).

With the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel, Hebrew gained more speakers as well as legitimization of a nation-state: “for the first time in nearly two thousand years a Jewish language...would have its own state apparatus to foster, protect, and favor it” (Fishman 1991, 16). Yiddish, on the other hand, began to acquire a “sense of nostalgic sacredness” after Hebrew, “once the holy tongue,... became the modern Jewish vernacular” with the formation of the state of Israel (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 8). Modern Hebrew gained prominence in American Jewish

institutions as American Jewish policymakers aimed to foster a connection between “Jews in the Diaspora” and Jews in their historical and mythic homeland – the state of Israel (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 52). As discussed in the Chapter 1, Yiddish in Israel overwhelmingly symbolized diaspora and exile, unlike Modern Hebrew which was tied to Jewish statehood and political autonomy. Modern Hebrew and English came to supersede Yiddish as the primary Jewish vernacular and as a marker of “a vibrant sense of Jewish peoplehood” in Israel and the United States respectively (Shandler 2006a, 81).

While Yiddish was studied and regarded as a language with scholarly value in previous centuries, it was not until recent years when Yiddish studies was deemed a legitimate academic field and when it “[became] a presence in dozens of institutions of higher education in North America, Europe, and Israel” (Shandler 2006a, 2). This area of study is political in its own right, but its politics differ depending on the context. For Yiddish scholars in Israel, for example, “it was not until Yiddish as a first language was less of a threat to the project of making modern Hebrew the national language of the Jewish state that a chair in Yiddish studies could be established at Hebrew University in 1947” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2013, xii). Compared to other places, the United States has the highest number of students interested in learning the language, yet there is fear that the language will not be taken seriously and courses would “come to Yiddish on a quest for their roots rather than as serious scholars” (xii).

In examining the Yiddish language’s nearly 1000 year history, we can understand how historical trends have shaped its status and symbolism today. It is clear that language – vernacular language in particular – is not always a passive vehicle for communication. Rather, it has come to define senses of self, of communities, and of place or placelessness; it has been mobilized, politicized, and used with intention to foster connections both between individuals

and between communities and geographic landscapes. Even as vernacular Yiddish has unique meaning in a mostly postvernacular Yiddish world, speaking and using the language consciously and intentionally is nothing new.

Vernacular Yiddish in a postvernacular landscape: an intentional endeavor

As a meta-level framework, the postvernacular mode requires a hyper-conscious kind of engagement with Yiddish. The prominence of postvernacular engagements today gives new meanings to spoken or vernacular Yiddish. In many pre-Holocaust Eastern European Jewish communities, speaking quotidian Yiddish did not constitute a radical act of separation or a maintenance or reclamation of tradition, as it sometimes does today. As Rebekah puts it,

People were just speaking it because it's their first language....It was just part of their lives and not necessarily this act of choice in the way that I think frameworks happen today – for Yiddish as being something that is this very active choice to be speaking or interacting with or learning.

Those I spoke with discussed the special effort it demands to find communities of Yiddishists and even more so, vernacular Yiddish spaces. We can understand from the creation of Yiddish-centered localities through episodes and Hasidic communities that learning or speaking vernacular Yiddish demands a special effort to break from the norm and the non-Yiddish-using world. As the Holocaust disrupted how most Jews imagined and used Yiddish and the prevalence of Zionism rose with the establishment of the state of Israel, Yiddish began to have a limited and hardly-recognized role in most North American Jewish educational paths.

Many I spoke with discussed the erasure of Yiddish from their Jewish education. Not only was the language erased, but everything that comes with it; the history and culture of European Jews, the stories of important Yiddish-speaking figures, the literature, the music – the list goes on. Josh Lambert, who grew up going to a Jewish Day School, felt well-educated in many Jewish topics yet had never heard of important Yiddish writers.

The degree to which you can be a really well educated and knowledgeable and connected Jewish person in contemporary North America and be absolutely ignorant about the entire history of Yiddish-speaking Jews is to me mind-boggling. It would be like if most Americans had never hear of George Washington or Thomas Jefferson... it just doesn't make sense.

Others, like Alexis, wish that learning Hebrew as a Jewish language was not the only option in many Hebrew schools or Jewish day schools, and that other Jewish diaspora languages, Yiddish included, were also taught. Speaking about Jews of Ashkenazi descent, Noah believes that forgetting Yiddish and simply “moving on” to Hebrew – what many deem as “the *real* Jewish language” – is like “denying 800 years of our past.”

This erasure, however, is not synonymous with an absence, per se. In fact, many I spoke with implied that Yiddish was there all along, inextricable not only from personal histories and the contents of Jewish education, but also from the reasons why many Jews are how they are, or speak how they speak. In short, what is being erased from dominant Jewish American narratives is the ways in which Yiddish has informed and still does inform Jewish identities. One individual I spoke with said that once they started learning the language, their perceptions of the role that Yiddish played in their childhood experiences shifted. Instead of growing up with no Yiddish, they realized that they grew up with “zero conscious Yiddish.” Once they started taking their first Yiddish class, they learned that in studying Yiddish that “you start to have answers for

questions that nobody really wanted to answer before” and that Yiddish filled many gaps in their knowledge.

Similarly, Noah recalled spending his time in the language and culture classes at Steiner and having “a-ha” moments and making many connections with what he already knew. Learning Yiddish allowed him to understand why some words already in his vocabulary are the way they are. For Rebekah, it was through a Yiddish education that she learned, only recently, of the Yiddish origins of her grandmother’s name. As an act of “filling the gaps” of knowledge, engaging with Yiddish brings an awareness to the very fact that it is often erased from mainstream narratives. As previously discussed in the chapter, Yiddish’s history as well as the stories of those who are interacting with it today inform us that vernacular Yiddish is not absent of consciousness and intention. In fact, as these examples show, engaging with the language prompts a conscious reflection of how education and knowledge is constructed, seemingly even more so when interacting with the vernacular form.

For many whom I spoke with, gaining a first-hand awareness of Yiddish’s erasure inspires a new consciousness of the politics of language and how language is used with intention to create a narrative or construct a space. One individual I spoke with, who had a non-Orthodox Jewish upbringing, explained that entering a Yiddishist world made them aware of Ashkenazi pronunciations of Hebrew. Generally speaking, engaging with Yiddish has forced them to notice of how modern Jewish practice has moved far from Yiddish practice. They have become very conscious of the difference between entering Chabad, where most pray with Ashkenazi pronunciations, and going to a Reconstructionist synagogue, where Modern Hebrew pronunciations are used. This difference in pronunciation reflects a history of how decisions involving language are not free from politics or ideology, nor are they made subconsciously. In

the decades after the 1948 establishment of the state of Israel, Zionism and the state of Israel became a point of pride for many American Jews. By the 1970s, many non-Orthodox Jewish American policymakers focused more of their attention on fostering a connection between Jewish communities in America and Israel (Aviv and Shneer 2005, 14). One prominent shift that marked this change in focus was the abandonment of Eastern European pronunciations of Hebrew prayers and the teaching of Modern Hebrew pronunciations in American Jewish schools (14). As Aviv and Shneer explain, this is “why [older generations] say ‘Yisgadal, ve’yiskadash,’ while we were trained to say ‘Yitgadal, ve’yitkadash’” in the mourner’s prayer (14).³¹ Hasidic groups like Chabad also continue to use these Eastern European pronunciations. Even subconsciously, particularities of language like pronunciation shape personal and communal attachments to other groups, histories, and places – near or far.

Hebrew revivalists, who were mostly of European descent, also made a linguistic choice in order to shape identities in the years prior to the formation of the state of Israel. They chose Sephardi pronunciation for Modern Hebrew: for them, Sephardi pronunciation symbolized cultural renaissance while Ashkenazi pronunciation represented the immediate past of the Diaspora, which they wanted to reject (Kutscher 1982, 228). For someone else I spoke with, who often uses vernacular Yiddish to break out of the English mainstream into a conversational Yiddish world, speaking Yiddish is far from a neutral or mindless action and affects both how they are marked by others and how they see themselves.

When I’m speaking Yiddish or thinking in a Yiddish mode I’m very conscious of like what it means to be kind of like marked at Jewish, even though I’m not

³¹ It is important to note that Ashkenazi pronunciations of Hebrew were historically the norm in American Jewish institutions because the vast majority of Jewish immigrants in North America came from Eastern Europe.

necessarily tying that to any observance or to any sort of religious aspects, but being sort of aware of what it means historically, culturally, globally by speaking that.

Acknowledging these historical precedents of how language choice has broader implications for defining both the self and collective identity can help us understand the gravity of choosing Yiddish today, it is nearly impossible to divorce using or speaking Yiddish from identity politics or from the politics of its history. It is clear not only that finding Yiddishist circles today often necessitates a greater intention or effort but that often, choosing Yiddish – non-exclusively to other languages – incites a hyper-conscious mode of engagement with larger questions about identity and about what a language and culture can mean.

According to Shandler, “those who use Yiddish (including a noteworthy number of non-Jews) do so voluntarily, as communities, as families, and as individuals” (2006a, 24). Some go to Yiddish-speaking clubs in New York to practice their conversational Yiddish. Others spend time in language immersion spaces like Yiddish Farm or Yidish Vokh, programs that are not catered toward complete beginners like the Yiddish Book Center often is. Ilana spoke to me about the role of vernacular Yiddish in her life and those she knows.

I know people who live in Yiddish-speaking apartments together. My roommate speaks Yiddish; we want to speak more Yiddish. We’ll leave each other notes in Yiddish... We have friends over too, often to only speak Yiddish in our apartment, but it does [make it] exciting to have a Yiddishist household... And...I know a number of young people who are raising young kids to speak Yiddish and that’s like a huge amount of work.

As Shandler explains, “speaking, reading, writing – even hearing – Yiddish has become an elective act” (2006a, 24), as Ilana helps us understand. Making the active choice to use

vernacular Yiddish signifies the very intentional the creation of a space or a community, and to the creation of localities and the portable site of “Yiddishland.” This created community is catered towards those who have ability to read, speak, or write in Yiddish. While it may be obvious, it is worthy to note that for those who learned Yiddish in a mostly non-vernacular Yiddish world, both the Yiddish language and the choice to use it *means* something and is not without intention. For Ilana, keeping up her spoken Yiddish is partially an intellectual pursuit and a “fun challenge,” but it also provides a community as “sort of like this in-group thing.” Paradoxically, speaking Yiddish and finding vernacular spaces provides inclusivity in an exclusive way that solidifies the boundaries between the Yiddish-speakers and the non-Yiddish-speaking world.

Jewish Studies scholar Barbara Mann thinks about how Jews throughout a history of diaspora have constructed Jewish spaces within ethnically mixed environments with devices such as the *eruv*, the “rabbinic practice of marking a Sabbath boundary” used by some Orthodox communities (Mann 2012, 105, 133). Like “the cultural practice of Yiddishland,” Mann explains, “the *eruv* is both seen and unseen, powerful and regulatory,” yet as a boundary, it is “quite flimsy [and] made of just poled and strings” and thus, can be constructed anywhere (2012, 138). The practice of forging this rigid yet flexible boundary reflects a broader commonality within Jewish culture – that “spaces within Jewish culture have always described relation to others” and that “spatial configurations...have been methods of signaling both difference and community, both power and powerlessness” (2012, 7). What happens inside the intentionally-marked *eruv*, whether real in Hasidic Brooklyn or metaphorical via vernacular language use, is both exclusive and expansive. A boundary that previously never existed is devised to distinguish the inside of the *eruv* from the outside, yet because of its existence, those inside have widened possibilities

and increased mobility. In Hasidic Brooklyn, the *eruv* means that on the Sabbath women can push their children's strollers on the sidewalk, attend communal prayer, and have meals outside of their home (2012, 139). In a Yiddishland predicated upon speech or language comprehension, one is not limited by translation and has access to particular communities as "sort of an in-group thing."

As new boundaries are constructed, the perception of other boundaries are often impacted. Ilana also recalled to me a time at Yidish Vokh, when it took an unusually long time for her to realize that someone with whom she was conversing was Australian, something that would have come up immediately if they were speaking in English. Yiddish becomes the definer of a locality in vernacular spaces, while nationalities, a seemingly important identity marker in today's world, become less important. Moments like these also reflect the international makeup of many Yiddishist spaces, as Yiddishists come from all over the world and often create communities that transcend both national boundaries themselves and the primacy of nation-state boundaries. Even while Yiddish may have some rather static physical locations, it also is diasporic in nature as Yiddishland's emergence is characterized by the creation of portable localities centered on language and defined by the existence of the 'Other,' meaning non-Jewish groups. In this sense, "diaspora [and its cultural forms, are signifiers], not simply of transnationality and movement, but of political struggles to define the local, as distinctive community, in historical contexts of displacement" (Clifford 1994, 308). Appadurai (1993) notes that "no idiom has yet emerged to capture the collective interest of many groups in translocal solidarities, cross-border mobilizations, and postnational identities" (418). In the context of Yiddish, then, Yiddishland might just be that idiom. In the next two sections, we will attempt to understand the particularities of two prominent sites of Yiddishland where vernacularity is

central – in Hasidic communities and in “episodes” – and see how boundaries and borders across space and time are intentionally constructed.

Sites of vernacularity: Hasidic communities

After the fellow quickly answered “Yes!” when asked if Yiddish was still a living language during the public tour I attended at the Yiddish Book Center, other visitors started to converse about where Yiddish was still being spoken. “In Brooklyn I think it’s still being spoken,” someone said, and everyone else nodded in agreement. When Yiddish is labeled a “dying language,” there is always a notable exception, and that is the Yiddish in the Hasidic communities, where the number of speakers is growing (Avineri 2014, 18). In fact, like those on my tour, many associate Yiddish with Orthodox Judaism. Growing up, this was the case for Rachel, as her “main exposure to Yiddish was through Orthodox and ultra-Orthodox communities.” As someone who is non-Orthodox and does not particularly identify with Orthodox Jewish principles in terms of feminism and egalitarianism, she initially had a rather negative association with Yiddish because of these principles, although she does not judge Orthodox Jews or those leaning towards Orthodoxy. Many assign Yiddish and vernacular Yiddish to the past and the category of history, and Hasidic Brooklyn is a crucial component of this process.

As already discussed, studying Yiddish or participating in Yiddishist communities postvernacularly allows access to a world of knowledge and connections and can even give historical, political, and cultural legitimacy to those with radical ideologies. We too have already learned that historically Yiddish has acted as a language of mediation, situated on the boundary

between Jews and non-Jews. For Hasidic communities, especially in the post-Holocaust era, Yiddish is far from a language of mediation. Instead, it is used to maintain exclusivity, as a “symbolic marker of difference” (Fader 2006, 209). Today, “it is still the principal spoken language...in some Orthodox communities in Brooklyn and Israel who understand it as a way of preserving both tradition and their senses of close-knit community (Shapiro 2008, xviii). Continuing efforts to uphold customs of the past and insularity became an especially critical goal in the post-Holocaust era, and passing down the tradition of Yiddish as a vernacular became an important device in doing this.

Hasidim³² are included in the broad category of Haredim, or ultra-Orthodox Jews, who refer to themselves as *Yidn* or *erlicher Yidn*, meaning “Jews” or “virtuous Jews” (Heilman 1992, 12). Before spreading across Eastern Europe, the Hasidic movement “began in eighteenth-century Poland as a folk movement that stressed emotional religion as against what it perceived as the dry rationalism of the scholarly leadership of that time” (Grossman 2005, 97). The Holocaust took a massive toll on Eastern European immigrants, “decimating their numbers, obliterating the communities from which they had come, murdering many of their leaders, and testing their faith in the possibilities of spiritual repair and God” (Heilman 1992, 30-1). In the United States and Israel, then, they were forced to create “a new religious framework” (30-1). To prevent Americanization and mass assimilation, many Hasidic leaders “felt that they could and should resurrect the world they remembered” and thus, speak Yiddish to “continue inculcating tradition” (Gurock 2009, 220; Heilman 1992, 31). For some diasporic groups, “resistance to assimilation can take the form of re-claiming another nation that has been lost, elsewhere in

³² The category of Hasidim includes a few separate sects and communities who exist mostly in the United States and Israel. For example, the Satmar sect of the village of Kiryas Joel in New York and the Lubavitch movement or Chabad are also Hasidic (Grossman 2005, 97).

space and time, but powerful as a political formation here and now” (Clifford 1994, 307).

Hasidim, then, have continued and strengthened efforts to reject assimilation and construct a boundary between themselves and others through language use and with physical constructions such as the *eruv*.

Of course, each sect of Hasidim faced the challenge of maintaining tradition differently and thus employed Yiddish differently. For example, the Lubavitch or Chabad sect of Hasidim make an active effort to reach out to and proselytize non-Hasidic Jews while other groups and their leaders never “attempted to extend [their purviews] beyond [their] pious followers” (Gurock 2009, 220-1). And while Yiddish is the vernacular in many of these communities, differences in education of girls and boys have also resulted in different speaking abilities and in differences in language transmission across generations. For instance, older generations of women in the Borough Park community do not know Yiddish as well as younger generations of girls, as Hasidic schools for girls were established relatively recently in the 1970s. In the Williamsburg Satmar community, “Yiddish education for girls began almost immediately after the Holocaust” (Vaisman 2013, 343). In Israel, where most use Modern Hebrew as the vernacular, Haredim speak Yiddish to maintain Hebrew’s status as the “holy tongue” and because “Yiddish is more social and political” (Heilman 1992, 165-6). For some Hasidim, Yiddish is also a reminder of their status in diaspora.

To speak Yiddish, an alternative Jewish language and one tied to the Diaspora, the cultural crucible in which the consciousness of the Haredim was formed, is to remain bonded to the society that refuses to be part of the contemporary scene and which maintains that though it is *in* Israel it is not part *of* the place and is still in a state of Diaspora. (165-6)

Yiddish and the strict maintenance of other customs serve as a reminder of their status of difference, their status in diaspora, and thus rejection of assimilation. Yiddish language, along with other customs, allows for the rigidity of this border, even in an urban center or in the state of Israel. This locality, then, is paradoxically based in a diasporic condition as well as in an inherited cultural tradition of being aware of this condition.

In learning to speak Yiddish, non-Orthodox Yiddishists complicate the rigidity of the boundary between the observant realm and the secular outside world that many Hasidic Yiddish speakers attempt to uphold. Many Yiddish-speakers who I met with told me that they often find it difficult to find others to speak Yiddish with. While many Hasidim in Brooklyn speak Yiddish, the version they speak differs from what many more secular Yiddishists learn today. The Yiddish taught at many colleges and universities reflects the “standardized” literary Yiddish that YIVO scholars helped to define and normalize (Fishman 1991, 211). A few with whom I spoke use their Yiddish in Hasidic Brooklyn, particularly in Hasidic-owned shops. When in Brooklyn, Noah will go to these shops to speak Yiddish with Hasidim and inevitably shock and surprise them as this “secular person who knows their language.” Another individual I spoke with makes a point to practice Yiddish with vernacular speakers in Brooklyn, even though they do not speak the same Yiddish. In an oral history interview, a professor of Jewish Studies and German Studies describes when a Hasidic woman in a shop pointed out the strangeness of her Yiddish and how she was “saying all the wrong words” (Yiddish Book Center 2015). When she similarly spoke Yiddish in Hasidic shops during previous instances, most who she spoke Yiddish with would not speak it back to her. Interactions like these show that while vernacular Yiddish can bridge Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities, the category or language of “Yiddish” cannot be homogenized nor isolated from those who use it, shape it, and politicize it. Often times, it is

more secular Yiddish speakers who initiate this crossing of borders and a meeting of vernacularities through movement to a particular place – to Hasidic Brooklyn.

The annual Steiner Program weekend trip to New York City exemplifies this paradoxical tension and bridging of divisions that come with vernacular use. Green explains in an interview about the program that participants go to New York City, a cultural center for Yiddish, and to Hasidic Brooklyn, a center of vernacular Yiddish, “to experience ‘living’ Yiddish and to get cultural context for what we’re doing all summer” (Green and Benjamin 2017). Benjamin explains some of the complexities of this visit.

The Williamsburg visit is tricky; I think most Yiddish programs within proximity to Hasidic communities are unsure of what their relationship to such Yiddish-speaking communities should be. If you’re learning Russian you’d want to visit Russia where the language is used and Williamsburg can be a physical location for what otherwise might be a virtual, disparate language of academia or books. But at the same time, there’s the uncomfortable reality that such interactions are necessarily voyeuristic. (Green and Benjamin 2017)

Green wrestles similarly with how to visit Hasidic Brooklyn respectfully coming from a secular organization (Green and Benjamin 2017). This trip can bring to the foreground issues around gender presentation and modesty. One person I spoke with discussed how every year some Steiner participants wrestle with what it means for vernacular Yiddish to be central in communities where the gender guidelines are very strict. This excursion sparks conversation about how participants should dress or fit into gender expectations and what adhering to these implies for what Yiddish symbolizes.

While Hasidic Brooklyn may represent a relatively stable or normalized location of Yiddishland, it is not too different from proponents of more secular Yiddishland sites, as both

groups intentionally create boundaries and expansive localities through language use. Hasidic Brooklyn's Yiddish use resembles not a history of passive language use, but instead a history of how communities have been agents of language use and have themselves politicized it. For many Hasidim, Yiddish is not only a sign of insularity and a tight-knit locality, but it represents a continuity across catastrophes and across spatiotemporal boundaries, as well as a perpetual cultural transmission of consciousness of being different. In other words, Yiddish can embody many paradoxes and tensions, between stability and instability, rigidity and malleability, insularity and expansiveness, and history and the here and now.

Sites of vernacularity: episodes

The Yiddish Book Center's location in Amherst, Massachusetts not only changes its accessibility compared to a Yiddish institution in, say New York City, but it also changes its function and the type of programming experiences it can create. For Academic Director Josh Lambert, the Center's "location is a double edged sword... most people don't live just around the corner... the people who get there are really focused and really committed." Because of this, staff "can pack in a lot of [stuff]" in programs like Steiner and Great Jewish Book in particular during which students live in the nearby Hampshire dorms and, in the words of Ilana, are immersed in "24/7 Yiddishland." This is especially true the Steiner program and for those who choose to live in a Yiddish-only dorm for the duration of the summer. This immersive environment is particularly advantageous for language learning; it would be different than doing a Yiddish language program in, for example, Tel Aviv. If the Center was in New York, he goes on, the programming would instead cater towards people who would attend programming on a

weekly or other regularly scheduled basis. On-site programming also requires non-local participants to go out their way, making the physical site less accessible to them. At the same time, it is worthy to note that the Center is uniquely positioned in a college town and to some extent, is more available to scholars and students.

Both taking place during the summer, the Steiner program for college students and young adults lasts seven weeks while the Great Jewish Books program for high schoolers lasts two weeks. The Center also hosts weekend programs and other on-site programs for Yiddish teachers and Jewish educators. Citing a 2014 panel led by Moshe Kornfeld and himself, Josh Friedman (2015) explains this type of phenomena as “episodes” in his dissertation:

Like summer camp, such programs generate affective connections by facilitating the removal of young adults from their everyday lives and their subsequent immersion in age-specific Jewish peer groups focused on Jewish engagements... The artificiality of the relatively temporally and spatially bounded worlds created in episodic programs produce social conditions that are conspicuously saturated with Jewish engagements and Jewish attachments. (54)

Like summer camps, these programs are “‘anti-structural’ [and] outside the ordinary routines in life” (Prell 2011, 38). Historically, the remoteness of anti-structural Jewish programs like Jewish summer camps allowed isolation from cities and the “[creation] of a new world and landscape” (38). In this new realm, then, the focus of the episode comes to the forefront through programming and continual immersion.

Unlike many Jewish summer camps, programs like Steiner and Great Jewish Books have a more scholarly focus. Michaela, who participated in Great Jewish Books, described the program as centered on discussion of books, and Noah, who participated in Steiner, described the division of the day between language classes and history and culture classes. Friedman’s

conception of episodic culture is grounded in models of Jewish futurity through intergenerational giving. Through the creation of episodes, older generations can financially invest in the creation and continuation of Jewish futurities through younger generations, though the “return” of their investment is unknown (Friedman 2015, 54). It is also worthy to note that donors cover the costs of both of these programs through scholarship, so once an applicant is accepted, there is no financial requirement to participate. According to Friedman, it is not only the official program participants who participate; “episodes...do more than create heirs to Jewish culture, [as] they also symbolically transform the donors who make inheritance possible into participants within a collective process of linguistic, cultural, and ethno-religious transmission” (65). Through this model, the inheritance of cultural sources places both older and younger generations as agents in the processes of cultural translation and postvernacular engagement.

Yiddish non-profits represent a particular case of generational transmission when put in context with the funding of other Jewish episodic programs, as “the donor-class of primarily American Jews lacks the ability to transmit Yiddish competencies to future generations” (Friedman 2015, 65). Because of shifts in the 20th century away from “Jewishness” and towards “Judaism” the religion in institutions like synagogues, as already discussed, there has been little room for the continuation and transmission of Yiddish. Instead, the Center and its episodic programs, among other Yiddishist programs,³³ are capable of doing that. Those I spoke with who participated in or worked at the Steiner program noted that there was a keen awareness of this intergenerational connection and transmission of Yiddish language and sources. Some joked that the late-night conversations often conducted in Yiddish that were about the Yiddish’s future mirrored the Czernowitz Conference. Speaking Yiddish as well as thinking about speaking

³³ For more on intergenerational transmission at Yiddish Farm, see Friedman (2015).

Yiddish in a postvernacular framework generates a hyper-consciousness and awareness of what it means to take part in this cultural transmission. It also prompts reflection on what it means to know or use Yiddish vernacularly in an extremely different way than older generations or Yiddish-speaking Hasidic communities. Through episodes and episodic culture, the Yiddish Book Center and those participating in these programs can construct a Yiddish-only or Yiddish-centered space through which participants can disengage from their daily lives and immerse themselves in a world of Yiddish as well as participate in an institutionally-mediated transmission of linguistic and cultural knowledge.

As Josh Lambert told me, the Yiddish Book Center in this way acts as a mediator of vernacularities of older and younger generations. According to him, many of the members who fund these programs were the ones who initially connected with Aaron Lansky. They typically had parents who spoke Yiddish but did not have vernacular ability themselves nor did they know how to read their parents' Yiddish books. Even so, they did not want to throw away their books, so they entrusted Aaron Lansky, whose mission was to give them to a new generation of readers. This generational mediation happens through students who learn to speak Yiddish or develop their speaking skills at programs like Steiner, but this happens through institutional initiatives and other educational programs, as well. The Center's effort to create a Yiddish textbook that standardizes Yiddish pedagogy acts as a mediator in ways that go beyond the physical space or those who participate directly in YBC programming. While many in older generations had access to Yiddish language at home or through direct generational transmission, many learning Yiddish today do not have these resources. Instead, they learn the language through institutions like the YBC or through the various college and university Yiddish classes. This textbook effort to standardize Yiddish and even the Center's online language resources reflect the shift both in how

people today often utilize institutions to access information and in how Yiddish language is often learned through institutions.

Besides sometimes acting as immersive linguistic experiences, episodes are also often essential to creating tight-knit community and fostering relationships. This was the case for both Michaela and Naomi when they both attended Great Jewish Books and became close friends after only two weeks. In fact, nearly five years later, they remain close friends. Michaela recalled how discussing and reading books brought everyone in the program together, coupled with the additional moments she spent outside of structured time building relationships and spending time with other participants. “We got to know each other really well,” she said. For both Michaela and Naomi, the diversity of the participants’ backgrounds and upbringings remained a key takeaway of their time at the Center. Naomi explained being so surprised by how the program seemed to normalize the pluralism that existed among the participants. She said that in other pluralistic Jewish programming she has attended, program leaders would directly and continually address the topic, unlike at Great Jewish Books where she said that pluralism “was never a big deal” nor an obstacle. In these types of episodes, putting postvernacular Yiddish at the forefront – especially in the form of episodic culture – allows for intentional community-making not in spite of difference, but in embrace and in normalization of difference.

Episodes as intentionally-crafted moments in space and time are the product of efforts of multiple generations of participants and of the institutions through which they are mediated. As mentioned at the beginning of the previous section, there is a commonly held idea that Hasidic communities represent an exception to the “Yiddish is dying” trope. Through Hasidic and episodic sites – which sometimes intersect – we can see that positing Hasidic communities as the exception and as contrary to episodes is problematic; this would ignore the complex processes of

intentional community making, in addition to the deliberate and conscious engagement with history, that go into both episodes and Yiddish-speaking Hasidic communities. While physical and temporal boundaries in both circumstances, especially for institutions and Yiddish-immersion programs, can be an important aspect of maintaining or fostering vernacular abilities, they are one of the many devices that are utilized to create space and place.

Language as home

In its vernacular or non-vernacular forms, Yiddish language both historically and today has been a center of identity and community for many. Alexis explains how.

One of the reasons that Yiddish was so often associated with non-territorial nationalism or Diaspora Judaism was because it developed and spread in the Jewish Diaspora. It's obviously not the only Jewish language that developed and spread in the Diaspora but it was and continues to be the most widely spoken, so it's rooted in the Jewish lack of home... Because of that, in a way, I think a lot of people identify with the language itself as a form of home. But...the culture that develops around the language that takes the place of home in the Yiddish-speaking Jewish identity. And a lot of people find a lot of comfort in that, especially because the language travelled place to place with the people who spoke it and it changed depending on who spoke it and it took on linguistic characteristics of the places in which it was spoken. And it did also provide a certain sense of consistency in the way that it changed. [It] reflected the way that the people who were speaking it were changing. And so it was consistent and also inconsistent in that way and in a way that allowed it to continue to feel comfortable for the people who were speaking it and to allow them to connect to it and exist within it, in the same way that I think we would hope a home, like a physical home, would stay the same in some ways and change in others, to better accommodate us.

According to Alexis' framework, when language is a form of home, there is room for both consistency and malleability, and both stability and movement across time and geographic

landscapes. As we have explored, Yiddish has historically and contemporarily embodied these paradoxes, as a postvernacular and vernacular language. In a mostly postvernacular world, constructing vernacular spaces or moments necessitates an intentional kind of community-making, one that is often explicitly linked to larger questions about what it means to use a language or how language is tied to personal and collective identity. For some, it means reclaiming a sense of Jewishness outside of a religious framework. For others, it might provide a platform to voice radical ideologies, to connect to a collective project, to bridge Jewishness with queerness, or to continue a tradition. Vernacular language use is both in itself a boundary and a realm of possibilities, for creating community, constructing space, wrestling with larger questions about identity, and engaging with history.

Chapter 3: Yiddish, history, and constructing a portable homeland

Beyond Nostalgia

In the middle of her article titled “Why we do this anyway: Klezmer as Jewish youth subculture,” founding member of the Klezmatics Alicia Svigals included her “Manifesto” that lists the “tenets of [her] faith” as “an openly Yiddishist klezmer musician” (Svigals 1998, 47). The first bullet point states, “Against nostalgia,” and explains that “Klezmer music is our music, not the music of our grandparents, to be reproduced in a kind of tourism of the past” (47). A month or two after I initially read this, I spoke with Rachel, who had her own take on anti-nostalgia when speaking about the generalized differences between older and younger generations of Yiddishists.

Younger Yiddishists are generally more far-removed [from the old, pre-Holocaust Yiddish world than older Yiddishists], but at the same time that’s creating a more expansive Yiddish and that creates new cultural production where you have to teach yourself and make Yiddish your own. Less nostalgia – nostalgia can be a dangerous thing... I think when you’re talking about scholarship and cultural production, the most effective drivers are curiosity and dedication to authenticity and to nuance whereas nostalgia is more kind of a weak, less accurate, perhaps, less devotion to facts and to innovation, to facts of history and innovations of the future.

In short, she suggests that nostalgia acts as a stumbling block to properly contextualizing and mobilizing Yiddish in “scholarship and cultural production.” Nostalgic visions of history neglect to recognize the past’s stake in the present and the present’s essential role in constructing the

past. In other words, a limited nostalgic stance both ignores the dynamic relationship between the past and present and can prevent the realization of historical and generational continuities.

According to Rachel, less nostalgia in the contemporary moment signals that there is more expansive possibilities for Yiddish, as a creative force and as a point of engagement in new contexts. When I spoke to another Yiddishist about nostalgia, they explained that a nostalgic version of Yiddish is one that is “locked in the past” and thus, is not and cannot be an “agent for the present or the future.” Nadia Seremetakis (1996) explains the American sense of nostalgia – in contrast with its more expansive Greek connotations – that mirrors these ideas. Nostalgia in English “implies trivializing romantic sentimentality” and in the American sense, it “freezes the past in such a manner as to preclude it from any capacity for social transformation in the present, preventing the present from establishing a dynamic perceptual relationship to its history” (Seremetakis 1996, 4).

While recognizing the validity as well as the value of Yiddish’s nostalgic portrayals, I intend to show in this chapter how the past is in fact not so locked in the past, as the American definition of nostalgia assumes it to be, and that even nostalgia itself has political potential in the present. In the first section “Heritage and its public displays,” I will use Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s (1998) conceptualization of heritage as a new mode of cultural production to understand how the Yiddish Book Center constructs a version of the past that implicates Yiddish’s futurities. Next, in “Recovering, celebrating, and regenerating a diasporic heritage,” I deconstruct the Yiddish Book Center’s mission statement to both understand the diasporic nature of its efforts and characterize these efforts and other engagements in a historical narrative of diaspora. After this, I will show how some construct their own historical narratives and the implications for doing so. Finally, I

will conclude the chapter by discussing the broader implications of expanding Yiddish's story beyond a bounded historical realm.

Heritage and its public displays

When I entered the Yiddish Book Center for the first time in November, I was struck by the vastness and the calmness of the repository. Of course, as I learned early on during my project, the summertime is much busier. When I later walked down a long ramp and into the repository, it began to seem more like a museum than a library, with tall signs of engaging description, a children's book area, and a mock restaurant possibly mimicking what a restaurant with Yiddish and Eastern European Jewish-inspired menu items. As the tour continued, we stopped to observe and discuss a cart of books, one sent from Zimbabwe to the YBC. This crate was different from the other carts of books; it was in isolation from more modern bookshelves, worn-down, and crookedly-placed. From its appearance, I would have assumed that this lost crate of books was very recently discovered and sent to his new home in Amherst. In this exhibition, visitors can see the possibilities of both a lively Yiddishland and a mass mission to rescue Yiddish books.

With continuous shelves of books interspaced with books on carts waiting to be shelved, the repository strikes a unique blend between library and museum as part of the heritage industry. According to Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998), heritage, while seemingly old, is in fact new. She defines it as "a new mode of cultural production in the present that has recourse to the past" (7). It is exhibition – like visual displays of books, sheet music, giant colorful Yiddish



Figure 2: “Restaurant Moishe Pipik” display in the YBC repository

MEAT Fleyshiks פליישיקס		DAIRY Milkhiks מילכיקס		PARV Pareve פארעוו	
Brisket	בריסקט	Kugl	קוגל	Homentashn	המן־טאשן
Cholent	טשאָלנט	Rugelach	ראָגעלעך	Latkes	לאַטקעס
Holishkes	האָלישקעס	Blintzes	בלינצן	Kneydlekh	קניידלעך
Kishkes	קנישעס			KharoySES	חרוסת
Tzimmes	צימעס			Teyglakh	טייגלעך
Gehakte Leber	געהאַקטע לעבער			LekekH	לעקעך
Kasha	קאַשע			Matzo brei	מצה־ברי
Varnishkes	וואַרנישקעס			Bagels	בייגל
Kreplach	קרעפלעך				

Figure 3: Menu from the “Restaurant Moishe Pipik” display in the YBC repository



Figure 4: View from the center of the YBC repository

letters hanging from the ceiling, a restaurant, informative signs of description – that “endows heritage thus conceived with a second life” (149). Kirshenblatt-Gimblett reminds us when thinking about these exhibitions that “the display interface...is a critical site for conveying meanings other than the message of heritage” (8). The repository in many regards appears not too dissimilar to a library of which visitors can make use, complete with shelves of books, a children’s section, and tables and chairs for sitting and reading. Its interactive nature goes beyond that of, say, a public library, as the repository’s construction evokes a message not only

of Yiddish language and culture's breadth but of Lansky's original story and mission – to save books, and thus a culture, from destruction and forgotten memory.³⁴

In addition to the repository's rows of bookshelves, the display of the cart of books shipped from Zimbabwe gives continued life to the urgency of Lansky's original project.

Shandler offers his own interpretation of the repository's physicality.

Drawing on the powerful association of smell with memory, inhaling the aroma of abandoned Yiddish books is meant to evoke a lost culture as well as its retrieval. Indeed, the books' very presence on the shelves at NYBC,³⁵ surrounded by its young staff, transforms them into symbols of resurrection. (Shandler 2006a, 176)

The repository's presentation gives visitors transport not only to the globality of Lansky's mission and but also to a time when these books were more commonly known. What is also clear in the repository is the Center's mission to collect books, as visitors can see the many ready to be shelved in addition to the fellows who are shelving them during tours. In other words, this mission is displayed, intentionally or not, as a work-in-progress, making it different than other institutions in the heritage industry that typically shield visitors' view from exhibit construction.

The cart of books from Zimbabwe holds special symbolism, as this location of world Jewry and Yiddish-speakers ultimately conveys a story of place-based-identity-making predicated upon movement and diasporic associations with distant holy places. When Yiddish-speakers migrated to the former colony, they brought books with them and produced new works, but when they migrated elsewhere, many of their books stayed behind. The sign accompanying

³⁴ The Yiddish Book Center's mission states: "The Yiddish Book Center is a nonprofit organization working to recover, celebrate, and regenerate Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture" (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a).

³⁵ National Yiddish Book Center, the previous name for what is today the Yiddish Book Center

the cart tells this story and celebrates the rescue effort, reading, “Among the volumes crammed into the wooden crate were African Yiddish imprints, including *Oydshorn: Yerusholayim d’Adfrike (Oudtshoorn: The Jerusalem of Africa)*, a chronicle of daily life in a commune of Yiddish-speaking ostrich farmers supplying feathers for women’s hats.” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett argues that “museums – and the larger heritage industry of which they are part – play a vital role in creating a sense of ‘hereness’ necessary to convert a location into a destination” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 7). The cart’s exhibition along with the broader discussion of Lansky’s mission situates visitors in the “hereness” of the YBC’s mission, as witnesses of or even participants in the wider rescue project of books which is centered in Amherst. At the same time, the sense of “hereness” expands beyond the Center’s physical location in Amherst and into a diasporic realm.

The accessibility of these visual displays, necessitating little to no Yiddish language knowledge or cultural proficiency, reveal the postvernacular nature of both the Center and its mission – especially of what is available through public programming. Books and the other displays both in the repository and throughout the building act as materialization of Yiddish cultures. These materializations, including Yiddish high culture and more populist and “lowbrow Yiddish realia..., concretize the semiotic transformation of Yiddish inherent in postvernacularity, privileging the language’s symbolic meanings over its vernacular value” (Shandler 2006a, 176). In the context of a broader historical legacy, postvernacularity communicates that the way to keep Yiddish ‘alive’ is through the production of symbolic meaning. The Center, then, produces heritage in helping to shape the widely postvernacular nature of Yiddish today and in reproducing a relational affiliation with vernacularity.

In creating a sense of “hereness,” heritage productions rely on virtuality, “whether in the presence or the absence of actualities” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998, 166). Books, stories, sheet

music, and even typewriters, like the many I saw in the Center's vault, attempt to give virtual access to far-away spatiotemporal imaginaries while the fellows contextualize them in the present moment by fostering discussion among tour-goers. These discussions, which I often observed as collective imaginations of past livelihoods, allow visitors to construct windows into historical moments. In having the opportunity to construct stories of the past with contemporary knowledge, visitors can bring the virtual, imagined aspects of another time and place into one moment, one that came together via a broader mission. Thus, it would be mistaken to assume a static past-present binary. Instead, the past and the present have a dynamic and overlapping relationship, where we in the present think about how the past has informed contemporary knowledge at the same time that we continuously construct past narratives. Even when a discussion largely bounds an object or a story within the realm of the past or does not directly address its present-day relevance, those in the contemporary moment are still interacting with – and even constructing – the past.

When I took a few tours at the Center, it seemed to me that our tour guides helped to show how history and heritage are relevant to contemporary knowledge and practices by using a variety of tools to engage tour-goers in the learning material. In doing this, they invite explicit participation in the shaping these narratives and more specifically, through constructing a life of a cultural artifact. We ended the tour by looking at the Center's collection of typewriters in the vault, for instance. The fellow guided our observations, asking us what we noticed and what differentiated some from others. Then, they attributed these differences to the typewriters' histories and used our knowledge and engagement to reflect on how they were once used. As these typewriters sat on a shelf, we crafted narratives of those who wrote in Yiddish, whether it was with an Israeli-made Hebrew typewriter or one in Yiddish manufactured in America. The

visual representation along with a discussion of the typewriters reflect the Center's dedication not only to historical archiving but to the recognition of the physical and the creative process that goes into the works that the Center collects, translates, and ultimately redistributes to a wider public.

Earlier in the tour, the fellow engaged tour participants in bringing up S. An-sky,³⁶ an early 20th century author, playwright, ethnographer and activist who collected Yiddish folklore. The fellow each handed out three questions for participants to read aloud, most of them sounding quite bizarre to a contemporary audience. These questions were translated versions of few of the more than 2,000 question surveys he sent out to be answered by Soviet Union Jews. After audible reactions to questions like “If a pregnant woman bites off the end of an *esrog*,³⁷ would she be protected?” the fellow connected the story of An-sky receiving tales in response from a wide geographic landscape the present-day legacy of the Yiddish Book Center, one that collects, interprets, redistributes stories about Jewish life. During this part of the tour, I remember other visitors, like many whom I spoke with in the wider Yiddishist community, soaking in the material, filling in gaps of their own knowledge, and then making broader connections with stories that centered Yiddish. In doing this, the public can rewrite their conceptualizations of history, religion, and Jewish culture. As a first-time visitor to the Center, I left feeling both curious – about the breadth of Yiddish and all that I knew I did not know – and optimistic – about my thesis and the future of Yiddish.

³⁶ Pronounced “Shin An-sky”

³⁷ An *esrog* (*etrog* in Modern Hebrew) is a yellow citrus fruit used during the Jewish festival of *Sukkos* (or *Sukkot*).

Recovering, celebrating, and regenerating a diasporic heritage

If heritage is a new production, how can we understand heritage in the context of the Center's mission, which states, "The Yiddish Book Center is a nonprofit organization working to recover, celebrate, and regenerate Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture" (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a)? Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (1998) notes that "[t]he process of protection, or 'adding value,' speak in and to the present, even if it does so in terms of the past" (150). These three key verbs "recover, celebrate, and regenerate" invite those visitors, student, donors, and members to take part in a collective mission, led by the Center, in order to pull into the present a grand yet fading culture of the past – the body of "Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture." We can understand this process through Butler's (2012) conception of cultural translation. When taking a source in consideration as a translation,

access does not take place through a historical return to the time and place of the original which is, in any case, impossible. On the contrary, we can only turn to what translation makes available to us, brings forth, illuminates within the present. In a way the loss of the original is the condition of the survival of a certain 'demand' relayed through language and across time. What survives is thus both ruined and vibrant. (13)

"Recovery, celebration, and regeneration" epitomizes Butler's theory, which conceptualizes what survives as something new, something more complex than a preserved copy from the past. In producing heritage, even as reference to the past, the YBC, its initiatives, and others who engage with Yiddish are in fact creating something new and indeed, vibrant.

If both Yiddish and Jewish books are being destroyed and forgotten, what does that mean for Eastern European Jewry? And more broadly, what does it mean for Jewish peoplehood and continuity, rhizomatic and dispersed across geographies and chronologies? "Recovery" in

particular plays an integral role in a key narrative of the Center – the stories of Lansky, as a young Yiddish Studies graduate student in the late 1970s and early 80s realizing the shortage of available Yiddish books and his tales of recovering deteriorating, fragile books from dumpsters and basements (Lansky 2004). Others like Rebekah who partake in this mission understand Lansky’s story as integral to the mission. She told me that the Center’s mission really “boils down to a guy in his 20s trying to save books.” As Lansky makes clear in his book *Outwitting History* and his narration of “Bridge of Books” – a short documentary outlining the Center’s story – books are not simply written versions of stories. Instead, they are a defining factor of Jewish peoplehood and historical legacy. He notes in his book that “Jews venerated books as a ‘portable homeland,’ [as] the repository of our collective memory and identity” during historical displacement and landlessness (Lansky 2004, 37). In his video retelling of the Center’s story, Lansky begins by explaining how books define Jewish collective identity: “Books were our portable homeland. Books define our national identity. We call ourselves *am hasefer*, the people of the book, and yet here are books being destroyed” he says (Ball 2001).

Through reading and learning about Jewish books, some like Michaela connect to their Jewish identity and understand “where they come from.” According to both her and this portable homeland model, books – even symbolically – become a grounding resource and a means for accessing what they deem a point of origin. Clifford describes how diaspora populations today are able to reach their territorial point of origins – as territories and centers of identity formation – via modern technologies.

[D]ispersed peoples, once separated from homelands by vast oceans and political barriers, increasingly find themselves in border relations with the old country thanks to a to-and-fro made possible by modern technologies of transport, communication, and labor migration. Airplanes, telephones, tape cassettes,

camcorders, and mobile job markets reduce distances and facilitate two-way traffic, legal and illegal, between the world's places. (Clifford 1994, 304)

As people and their ideas move across landscapes – as a diasporic people have done historically – so do the books that they generate. Yiddish – particularly Yiddish books – represent a medium through which Jews can access distant spatiotemporal contexts, similarly to modern technologies that diaspora populations, including Jews, use widely today. At the same time, this symbolism of books and their increased accessibility both disrupt the boundaries and symbolically shorten the distance between spatiotemporal contexts. As Butler would argue, even when preserved or recovered, these books are not the same as they were in past contexts. According to this framework, books as a “portable homeland” emblemize continuities that transverse borders of space and time. Thus, the Center’s mission bolsters these continuities and even reclaims them from broad erasure by “regenerating” and recreating accessible productions of “Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture.”

In the vein of the Yiddish Book Center mission, what a portable homeland might signify is a goal of a return to – with continual translation and reinterpretation into present-day contexts – Yiddish literature and thus, Yiddish language, “as our last, best bridge across the abyss” (Lansky 2004, 78). If “the abyss” symbolizes the relatively recent tragedy of the Holocaust and the other “unspeakable horrors of the twentieth century,” then this collective mission signals to a reclamation or a reimagination of the murky abyss. It also prompts a call to action to take agency over this historical displacement from both geographic landscapes and material points of identity (78). This continual process signifies a return to books not as isolated objects, but as gateways into lost or forgotten histories. Thus, this model of “recovering” a portable homeland is

characterized geographic contingency, decentered from territory and grounded in the dynamicism of multiple cultural realities.

Often times what is recovered in learning or “returning to” Yiddish is highly personal and symbolic. Additionally, the objects of recovery often only exist through knowledge and thus access to knowledge. Rebekah, for example, is constantly learning about her family history through Yiddish, something she perceives as inherently tied to her own identity formation.

For me a wish for the future [of Yiddish] is that we can continue doing this work and that people can also just recover these pieces... it feels like I'm constantly recovering pieces of myself, of my family, and it feels like this really grounding thing to continue to piece together because I just didn't have it before I started learning Yiddish...

As she shows us, recovery – both of and through Yiddish – is inherently based in the present with ties to the past, creating new formations between both past and present and the personal and communal. As someone who is engaged in this work, she knows that increasing the accessibility is a critical initiative for maintaining the futurity of Yiddish. In terms of the Yiddish Book Center mission, celebration and subsequent regeneration relies upon a collective goal of recovery, as both a real and symbolic grounding in history. Access to knowledge and the means to generate knowledge, then, allows for the celebration of “Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture” (Yiddish Book Center n.d.-a)

A principle way staff at the Yiddish Book Center is working to increase accessibility is through digitization efforts, something that allows anyone who is interested in Yiddish, with an available computer or digital device, to have access books, music, language learning resources, and much more. As Butler and Kirshenblatt-Gimblett would argue, broadened accessibility to a

recovered object, mainly through digitization and translation, does not reproduce the same object but something different. Through translation from a widely postvernacular language like Yiddish, an object becomes accessible in a contemporary context. If books and even Yiddish itself symbolizes a portable homeland – in vernacular or postvernacular forms – then this homeland becomes both changed and de-essentialized. At the same time, it is both centralized in one accessible location and increasingly capable of being dispersed, transcending the homeland-diaspora paradigm altogether. Through the implementing of this mission via digitization, translation, and standardization efforts – like that of the Yiddish textbook – the portability and accessibility to this “homeland” increases at the same time that the historical narrative of books as a unifying movable homeland continues and even flourishes in new contexts.

As a non-profit organization with a Jewish focus, the Center’s initiatives to ensure the viability and continuity of a “portable homeland” arguably echoes an important biblical story of the tabernacle being carried through the desert, a comparison made by Mann (2012). If the tabernacle did indeed “[foreshadow] the idea of a ‘portable homeland,’ that toolkit of cultural, social, and political talents that have enabled Jews not only to survive, but to thrive in far-flung corners of the earth” (98-9), then we can understand the portable homeland as a versatile phenomenon that extends beyond books – to a project of preservation that, if executed properly, can ensure historical continuity and prosperity. For Jews and other diaspora communities, the place of diaspora of not simply a metaphorical or abstract space, but is also a de-territorialized “historical location” shared despite dispersal (Werbner 2005, 31).

Many I spoke with indicated that the vastness and diversity of Yiddish literature and culture – something that the space of the Yiddish Book Center visually demonstrates – is in itself something to celebrate. Not only are Yiddish realia and political movements diverse, but so is the

makeup of Yiddish users whose affiliations range from the radical left and to the ultra-Orthodox. One individual I spoke with knows that there are many voices in Yiddishism that many will not like or might really hate. “This is important for people to know,” they told me. Josh Lambert told me about the particularities of teaching about Yiddish literature in the space of the Yiddish Book Center, filled with books that many today cannot read. The space itself, he said, sends a clear message about the breadth of Yiddish literature and culture, one that is in accordance to what he teaches: “Whatever you thought you knew about the history of Jewish language or culture is partial, is just not complete. And it sends that message in... a warm and encouraging way.” The repository, like the Center and its mission, encourages celebration not only of Yiddish language and culture itself, but its breadth and diversity.

For some like Michaela, celebrations of Jewish culture do not always happen in overt ways. When she spoke to me about her experience at Great Jewish Books, it became clear that she sees holding and participating in intellectual and religious discourse as a celebration of her Jewish identity. She described Great Jewish Books as similar to coming together to study Torah, but instead what they came together to read and discuss was Jewish and Yiddish books. Many others also hinted at the importance of struggling and questioning as part of embodying a Yiddish identity and sometimes too, a Jewish one. Before my Bat Mitzvah, for example, my rabbi arm wrestled me to instill this very message – that *Yisrael*, the name that God gave to Jacob and then to the Jewish people, means “to wrestle with God,” and that asking questions, doubting, and struggling with concepts was essential to being Jewish. Of course, this is not to say that discourse and asking difficult questions is exclusively or explicitly Jewish, but many do link affirmations and celebrations of their Jewishness or their Yiddishism to holding discussions and reinterpreting and reimagining historical sources. What also makes discourse both an affirmation

and a celebration of Jewishness for Michaela is its critical role in creating community, something she experienced first-hand in many Jewish spaces and especially at Great Jewish Books. Often times, this “wrestling” – what Rebekah described to me as something “we are all involved in” – means pushing, recharacterizing, and thus redefining boundaries. In naming the acts of wrestling, struggling, questioning, and discussing as celebratory acts, new meanings of “celebration” – ones that coincide with recovery and regeneration as commitments to Yiddish and its sources – begin to emerge.

Along with recovery and celebration, the Yiddish Book Center also focuses on the regeneration of “Yiddish and modern Jewish literature and culture.” Reflecting on what this means and how the Center implements this, Josh Lambert thinks about regeneration as “a reference to those programs we offer that support cultural creativity in the present, like writing residencies and translation fellowships,” as well as Yidstock. In aiming to center itself as a reproducer of a heritage and a continued historical legacy of creativity, the Center acts as a mediator and transmitter between the recovery of pasts – what could be characterized as neglected imaginaries – and the creative potential within the present and future. On the public tour I took, we stopped in the Kligerman-Greenspun Performance Hall to discuss and look up at the room’s centerpiece, the chandelier of *di goldene pave*, or “the golden peacock” – “a traditional symbol of Yiddish creativity” (Shandler 2006a, 237). Others in their individual work see themselves as participants in this historical legacy of creativity, reflecting upon creators of the past and contextualizing their work in the present for future productions. Ilana explains,

I see myself as an intellectual [successor] of people like...S. An-sky who collected Yiddish folklore and folksong and then made other stuff out of it, which I think is incredibly cool. And then [there’s stuff] I’m picking up as like material from the past, and then [thinking]...what am I gonna make out of it?



Figure 5: The Kligerman-Greenspun Performance Hall and a glimpse of the golden peacock chandelier

She continued, giving examples of those she knows personally who are basing new works upon Yiddish novels, songs, or plays. Not only are some using their personal knowledge and employing their interests in creating new forms of works for the present moment, but they are also consciously placing themselves in a historically meaningful narrative by consciously embodying and taking inspiration from historical figures.

In relatively recent years, the Yiddish Book Center also launched a program to foster a continued creative legacy. The week-long “Tent” workshops, specifically the creative writing program, began in 2013 to engage those in their 20s and 30s at the Center and to conceptualize

how their interests and what they are doing might be relevant to “the legacy of Jews in America, Jews in Europe, [and to] Yiddish literature.” Josh Lambert explains,

The whole history of modern literature is one of which the experience of Yiddish speaking Jews might have some influence on or some relevance to anybody who’s writing poetry or novels or doing screen-writing or essay writing today. There’s a direct line you can draw between the literary activity in Yiddish, also in Russian, also in French, also in Hebrew, at the turn of the 20th century in the kind of literary work people are doing now. So the point of that program is to say to people – for Jewish people, for non-Jewish people, for anyone for whom this legacy can be relevant – to come together and try to figure out how they can connect what they’re doing to this legacy.

In adding to the larger project of strengthening representation of Yiddish-speaking and Jewish authors, programs like “Tent” counter their erasure both from the creative consciousnesses and from their situations within other historical contexts. By demonstrating how authors around a century ago shaped literary work today, “Tent” helps to construct a narrative of power around Yiddish, one that is contrary to the often reproduced trope of Yiddish as lost or of Yiddish-speakers being ‘dead and forgotten.’ In the “Bridge of Books” documentary, Lansky claims that the YBC gave Yiddish an *adres* – a place in the world (Ball 2001). These initiatives, in addition to the regular publishing of Yiddish works online and their wider distribution, also give Jewish authors and their ideas a place in the world, simultaneously continuing and adapting their legacies to bolster their applicability to new contexts.

As with the case of heritage, what is preserved or recovered from a historical context represents something new, informed by its legacies in past realities and landscapes. What is happening through the Yiddish Book Center adds another chapter to a broader historical experience of “rediasporization,” a “distinctive feature” of the Jewish Diaspora that signifies remembrance of one place frequently happening through that of another (Boyarin and Boyarin

2002, 11). As we already learned through the important role of translation in postvernacularity, Yiddish is characterized by contingency, hybridity, and the straddling of borders. On a broader historical level and “[w]ithin this [rediasporizing] process of repeated removal and regrouping, Jewish culture has elaborated a range of absolutely indispensable technologies of cultural transformation” (11). In yet another moment of rediasporization, Yiddish takes on new cultural contexts and new places, both in stable geographic locations and through virtually accessible mediums. Through continual returns to Yiddish, the portable “homeland” that institutions like the YBC aims to “recover, celebrate, and regenerate” ultimately changes, straddling the line between stability and variability and further complicating the homeland-diaspora binary that is marked by fixity and movement respectively. In framing resources and histories as a malleable and portable, we can begin to question what it means to be grounded in a past that is ultimately socially constructed and strategically mobilized, and to consider the extent to which it is possible to fully ground ourselves in the past.

Subverting Yiddish’s historical narratives

From a review of scholarly literature about diaspora, it is clear that a common theme of interpretations of diaspora is relation to the “Other.” Butler, while setting out to define a post-Zionist Jewish self, believes that “[departing] from oneself, cast out into a world of the non-Jew,” is an essential part of being a Jew (Butler 2012, 15). Similarly, Mann (2012) cites examples of the “intricate prohibitions of the Talmudic *eruv* or the globally-inspired architecture of postmodern Judaism” in order to demonstrate how “space within Jewish culture has always described relation to Others,” one that “[signals] both difference and community, both power and

powerlessness” (Mann 2012, 7). Rebekah describes the connection between Yiddish and diaspora and constructing a historical narrative of power through relations with the ‘Other.’

I think Yiddish is fascinating because it is the language coming out of placelessness or diaspora. But then, I guess in its own way, it’s kind of like a form of place-making because Yiddish in every place that it was spoken knew parts from the languages that were being spoken in that region. [They] would come into Yiddish, or even the origins of Yiddish. [We could] think about this [as a] language which took from German or came out of German, whatever framework we wanna create. But I love thinking about Yiddish as this thing that, like all of the stories about Yiddish, as coming out of Jewish oppression and the Rhinelands and looking around and being like ‘fine, you’re gonna be mean to us so we’re gonna take your language and then gonna make it sound slightly different and incorporate words that you don’t understand... It’s a really radical way [of thinking]... Is that historically accurate? [Not sure, but] that narrative definitely exists in Yiddish..., like that is definitely a way that people think about Yiddish – this way of taking what the powers that be, or the people who own, have used as oppressive forces on Jews, and then flipping it on them.

Rebekah is taking the historical phenomenon of Yiddish language and culture ‘borrowing’ from gentile neighbors – who are sometimes described as ‘hosts’ – and subverting it with a story of Jewish empowerment and resistance. Often times in Jewish historical discourse, particularly that of the Holocaust, narratives of Jewish resistance or self-help are marginalized and overshadowed by “accounts of righteous (gentile) rescue attempts” (Moore 2014, 193). These narratives, then, ultimately paint a picture of Jews as the passive victims of oppression. Through Rebekah’s framework, Yiddish at its very essence is agentive, and defiant, directly engaging with and radically redefining the boundaries between itself and the ‘Other’ at the face of oppression.

Not only do narratives such as Rebekah’s question the rigidity of historical narratives, but they also transcend an assimilationist paradigm predicated upon the idea of fixed, territorial, and often nationalistic host societies to which ‘lost’ or ‘exiled’ diaspora peoples – culturally and linguistically – move unidirectionally. This model, which we can call the host-society-model,

“has framed studies of Jewish ‘assimilation’ and ‘acculturation’ into society presumed to preexist the Jews” and does not account for Jewish agency nor for how Jews helped to create these societies (Boustan, Kosansky, and Rustow 2011, 13). Other scholars reject this model, some by showing how Jews are creating homes where they are (Aviv and Shneer 2005) and others by critiquing how language of “influence and imitation” when describing diasporic communities “[legitimizes] discourses of nationalism that speak in terms of purity and precedence” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1994a, 340). The narrative that Rebekah recounted resists a historical model that relies on loss or a lack of something – lack of place, lack of agency, lack of home. Instead, she transforms the “placelessness” of diaspora into “place-making,” affirming presence rather than absence.

For some, Yiddish provides a way to conceptualize what has been lost in dominant historical trends, namely the assimilation of Jewish or Yiddish-speaking immigrants. With the historical transition from “Jewishness” to “Judaism,” some in the contemporary moment say that their sense of “Jewishness” and the possibility of having a secular Jewish identity has been largely lost; yet, Yiddish is a way to reclaim it. Rachel spoke to me about a narrative that some Yiddishists are pushing back against, what they would call “the Protestantization³⁸ of Jewishness and of Jewish religion.” In our conversation, I brought up Ashki-normativity too, as a problematic aspect of many American-Jewish spaces and narratives. She says this concept is simplistic since there were distinct European Jewish communities within “Ashkenazim.” However, bringing Yiddish into normative Jewish spaces as something with which every Jew

³⁸ “The Protestantization of Jewishness” refers to the major transformation that American Jewish life underwent after World War II to more closely resemble Christian institutions. For example, synagogues became centers of American Jewish life, similarly to the role that churches play in maintaining Christian communities (Prell 2011, 36).

could identify would be problematic because it does not represent everyone's background and might thus reinforce Ashki-normativity. While she has seen how Yiddish has provided immense opportunities for some, she recognizes that this would not be the case for everyone. What she is hoping to see is "a de-assimilation from an Ashkenazi standpoint in tandem with...and in cooperation with other movements to bring Jewishness back for people who've lost it." A vision like this one directly responds to the past and represents a reflection and reinterpretation of how history has influenced the present. In this case, engagement with Yiddish, not as a mainstream goal but as an option for some individuals and communities, is a departure point for highlighting diverse histories and ways of being Jewish.

Interpretations like Rebekah's and Rachel's prompt a rethinking of common-held perceptions of Yiddish, both contemporarily and historically. By both some Jews and non-Jews, Yiddish has historically been classified as a lowly, muddled version of German (Fishman 1991, 19). Because Jews "created something German-looking," linguists prior to Max Weinreich and Solomon Birnbaum's "life-long scholarly contribution" studied Yiddish as "a once-'pure' German now fallen" (Jacobs 2005, 11). Today, while scholars and many others view Yiddish as its own linguistic entity and defined by hybridity, the trope or questioning of Yiddish being a "dead" or a useless language persists widely. One individual I spoke with told me about their experiences telling people they study Yiddish, and about how many do not understand why they would study it or even laugh in their face. Like the communities across Europe from which Yiddish emerged, Yiddish is commonly associated with destruction, Jewish death, and thus with a fallen realm accessible mainly through nostalgia.³⁹

³⁹ In their chapter "Encounters with Ghosts: Youth Tourism and the Diaspora Business," Aviv and Shneer (2005) describe how Diaspora Jewish tourist experiences construct a narrative of

For some like Michaela, Yiddish “just evokes a lot of history,” unlike Hebrew which she sees as more modern. The narrative of Yiddish as representative of a haunted void became especially prevalent after the rise of Zionism and the 1948 formation of the state of Israel where a Jewish language was both revitalized successfully and attributed to a nation-state’s sovereignty. Historically, Yiddish was measured in terms of its linguistic impurity, while today, we can see that it is often measured in terms of absence – absence of place and more widely, of a vernacularly-centered and nationally-constructed territory. Rather than limiting sources of empowerment and ethics within the politically-charged territorial boundaries, many Yiddishists today are crafting and embracing narratives that not only legitimize the contingency of diaspora but also demonstrate Yiddish’s historical continuity and resilience. As one Yiddishist told me, “I would say to speak Yiddish and really dedicate oneself to Yiddish is to really establish a diaspora identity.” In this sense, as Brubaker (2005) argues, diaspora is “an idiom, a stance, a claim” (12).

Others construct and mobilize Jewish histories, specifically those of Yiddish, as a source for understanding and interpreting the present both individually and collectively. For Michaela, learning about the past allows her to trace her own personal history and how that relates to collective experiences.

I think that like with any like minority group, sharing stories of the past is really meaningful. And I think like understanding where, even if it’s not directly where you came from (or where the group that you identify with [came from and] some of the things they went through)... I think that can be really powerful.

Eastern Europe as a place of Jewish death, and how much Jewish heritage travel is “driven by memory and nostalgia for a lost or imagined past (57, 61).

Noah also expressed the importance he finds in using a historical lens to learn about Yiddish, as well as the idea that contemporary identities are directly impacted by history: “It’s really important to learn our history and where we come from,” he told me. For Naomi, learning Yiddish is inherently intertwined with “going back to your roots.” While Michaela sees Yiddish as an aspect of history in and of itself, she also understands it as a “key” or “tool” for unlocking history and, like many others, filling in the gaps of her knowledge. In other words, she understands Yiddish as both an object and a means of historical study, one that has a direct relationship to the present. Through Great Jewish Books, she told me, she learned about her history, one that becomes personalized through familial connections and thus a sense of collectivity. Both Noah and Michaela, like Jewish communities in the Diaspora, “[rely in part] on history to invent themselves” and their Jewish selves in particular, finding grounding in the events and experiences of past realities (Feingold 1996, 23).

Unbounding the historical realm

In our conversation, Noah critiqued the ways that Yiddish is commonly spoken about by many American Jews; It would be “giving it the short of the stick” by just reducing it to common anecdotes about grandparents speaking it and reducing it to “this thing that happened in the past,” he told me. Like the American view of nostalgia, this version of Yiddish is bounded in the past and is lacking of explicit agency in the present. The Greek view of nostalgia is quite different; rather than trapping it in the past and removing it from the present realm, this word, *nostalghia*, implies a carnal and sensory experience of memory, like a pain or a wound that lingers (Seremetakis 1996, 4). If history is a way that we understand ourselves, then unbounding

it from a closed realm can reveal both how we imagine place and how we construct collective ties across communities and spatiotemporal distances.

Conclusion

Queer Yiddishkeit and Yiddish Expansions

As individuals, institutions, and communities constantly reconstruct narratives of language, new and expanding possibilities of affiliations and connections become realized. In recent years, the notion of “Queer Yiddishkeit” or “Queer Yiddishism” has emerged,⁴⁰ which Svigals (1998) describes as a growing movement “of Queer Nation types who also identify as Yiddishist, and who bring a queer radical sensibility to Yiddishism” (1998, 48). The term “Queer Yiddishkeit” “is both as a set of practices and...a cluster of implicit theoretical models” (Shandler 2006b, 112). One person I spoke with cannot say for certain, but thinks that the queer-friendly nature of Yiddishism might be a big reason why some folks come to the Yiddish Book Center, particularly to programs like Steiner. In an online interview about the program, past participant Noam Green discusses the overlap between queerness and Yiddish.

I feel as if there is a definite overlap in the people that are drawn to Yiddish as an alternative to “mainstream Judaism/mainstream academic Judaism” and queerness. Maybe it’s because their experiences as queer humans could have informed their desire to find community outside of the Jewish mainstream (Green and Benjamin 2017)

Yiddish, like queerness and the Queer community, has been marginalized historically and contemporarily within mainstream Judaism. David Shneer noticed while studying Yiddish in

⁴⁰ Yiddishkeit means “Jewishness.”

international settings that many queer folk, both Jewish and non-Jewish were attracted to Yiddish, and he learned that they think the attraction is connected to marginality and the fact that Yiddish has become marginalized in relatively recent years (Yiddish Book Center 2013). By “[juxtaposing] Yiddish and queerness,” Queer Yiddishkeit “[challenges] some cultural status quo” (Shandler 2006b, 92) while continuing a history of Yiddish’s increasing expansiveness to act as a source for community-making, creativity, and radical ideological potential.

While Queer Yiddishkeit is “among the most tellingly provocative recent examples of postvernacular Yiddish,” the first intersections of queerness and Yiddish did not happen in the post-Holocaust era (and of course, postvernacular language use did not begin then either) (Shandler 2006b, 91-93). In fact, there were some aspects of Eastern European Jewish culture – including high culture – that addressed queerness, like “Jewish drag artists who performed among a wide array of popular entertainers in interwar Poland” or Sholem Asch’s 1907 play *Got fun nekome* (God of Vengeance) (93). Today, mostly in North America, many queer Yiddishists work, write, and perform in different capacities and mostly independently (92). Still, Yiddish and Queer Yiddishkeit has allowed some queer folks to find one another. Artist Rebekah Erev explains how.

I mean all of my friends who are into Yiddish are queer, so there’s gotta be something there. I think that as a queer person we experience an amount of stigmatism depending on history and oppression and that can and for many of us does end up helping us have compassion for other people who’ve experienced stigmatism. And we’ve had to identify, use an identity, [and] we’ve had to name ourselves in order to find each other and in order to transcend those names, and when you have to identify yourself, you want to know, I think, often about other parts of your identity as well, and so I think that leads many of us – I can speak for myself – to wanting to understand where I come from, and that included Yiddish culture. (Yiddish Book Center 2018)

Erev is speaking about social boundaries, ones that they have had to name, engage with, and shift in the quest to answer larger questions about marginality, social identity, and in their case, Jewish identity. For them, Yiddish has acted as a catalyst and a framework of reference for doing what Rebekah – the one I spoke with – sees as nothing new: “asking questions about identity and how to interact with it, which...[is] something that’s happening for a lot of people right now,” Jewish and non-Jewish.

While “there is a way in which now we talk about how great Queer Yiddish is..., that wasn’t true of the establishment historically,” says Zohar Weiman-Kelman, a Queer Yiddish and poetry scholar. We already know that Yiddish is not free from institutional politics and that many do identify with Yiddish for particularly political reasons. As someone who moves between both groups of the more establishment, academic Yiddishists and those mostly outside of academia who see Yiddish’s creative and radical potential, Weiman-Kelman would like that the former group disseminate the keys to vital resources “a little more widely and in more inviting ways” (Yiddish Book Center 2016a). Their perspective gives interesting insight into the politics of institutional Yiddish and shows the diversity of the ways in which folks utilize and culturally translate not only a language and its cultural resources but also its public perception. Some understand Yiddish as part of a lost culture and as a vein of history, and others wish to turn this narrative on its head and create a radical Yiddish culture rooted in the present. Many use it for its funny words – something that Naomi does most often around other Jews – and others call for it to be taken seriously to promote high senses of Jewish self-esteem, like Klezmatiks member Alicia Svigals (Svigals 1998, 47).

Either way, those using it today, particularly younger generations and those identifying with its potential for radical politics, continue a historical precedent to both translate it into new

cultural contexts and continue to disrupt how both mainstream Judaism and more establishment Yiddishists have understood and used it. Rachel in addition to others whom I spoke with have observed how younger generations are using Yiddish in increasingly expansive ways. As the term “diaspora” has in recent years, Yiddish’s “meaning has been stretched to accommodate the various intellectual, cultural and political agendas in the service of which it has been enlisted” (Brubaker 2005, 1). Lansky describes how Yiddish itself sometimes seems like “a Rorschach test”:

Young people, especially, saw it in what they wanted to see. For atheists it was Jewishness without religion; for feminists, Judaism free from patriarchy; for those uncomfortable with Israeli politics, nationalism without Zionism; for socialists, the voice of proletarian struggle; for more contemporary radicals, a *shtokh* to the establishment. Although there was truth in each of these characterizations, they remained fragmentary at best; those who espoused them had rarely read deeply in what was, after all, an incredibly rich and multifaceted literature. (Lansky 2004, 213)

This list could go on. For Hasidim, Yiddish signifies a connection to a body of practices and beliefs that are framed as traditional and, in doing so, serves as a reminder of past ways of life. For other vernacular speakers within mostly postvernacular Yiddish contexts, Yiddish represents both an expansive avenue of community-making and a way to solidify rather portable boundaries. For queer Yiddishists, Yiddish shares important commonalities with queerness: “diasporism; rootless cosmopolitanism; a penchant for transgression, border-crossing, and being proudly, defiantly different; standing as a challenge to broader societies' sense of ‘certitude and power’” (Shandler 2006b, 112).⁴¹ In sum, the canon of Yiddish and what can be recovered

⁴¹ Shandler cites Alisa Soloman’s 1997 essay “Notes on Klez/Camp” from *Davka*, “an American magazine dedicated to ‘Jewish cultural revolution.’”

through the language and the communities it engenders is expansive, rich, and diverse. The Yiddish Book Center, for Lansky and for many others who associate with the organization, is a clear expression of that broad significance and applicability.

While Queer Yiddishkeit certainly does not represent the only possibility for postvernacular Yiddish, it does reflect broader trends of boundary transgression, of expanding accessibility, of finding common ground by embracing difference and alternative versions of Jewishness, of intentional community and self-making, and of an even more diasporic Yiddishland. It also serves as an example that has been proven to be true historically – that Yiddish itself is not a bounded, closed-off realm, but is defined by straddling and redefining borders. History has shown that Yiddish only exists because of the “Other,” and that hybridity, movement, cultural and linguistic mediation, and shifting sensibilities shape its many forms. In other words, Yiddish continuities are characterized by disruption, by movement, and by change. In the next few sections, I will show how Queer Yiddishkeit and institutions like the Yiddish Book Center are rethinking, disrupting, and expanding continuities while prioritizing and embracing diaspora. Ultimately, I will characterize this an act of stealing borders. While doing this, I will also touch upon how this overall project could be expanded.

Rethinking and disrupting continuities

As discussed in Chapter 2, language transmission through familial use does not happen today as it has historically. As Josh Friedman (2015) shows, donors have positioned institutions like the Yiddish Book Center and Yiddish Farm as mediators of intergenerational linguistic and

cultural transmission in order to expand upon and bolster Yiddish continuities.⁴² The Center’s physical space, with “dedicated plaques and shelves of Yiddish books memorializing loved ones...makes concrete how American Jews care for Yiddish,” and that happens through institutional centers (Friedman 2015, 6-7). These institutions themselves represent new Yiddish centers and modalities of regenerating traditions. As some of those I interviewed have implied, the Center’s institutional nature makes it not so different than other mainstream Jewish institutions, through which postwar American Jews have engaged and constructed Jewish localities. Queer Yiddishkeit, “as does queer culture generally,” provides “an alternative to a biological mode of conceptualizing intergenerational cultural transmission” and ultimately prompts a reconceptualization of Jewishness in tandem with a similar, broader discussion among American Jews (Shandler 2006b, 110). According to this framework, both inclusion and expansion within communities become possible at the same time that past norms are de-essentialized and reimagined. As continuities take new and expansive forms, the borders of postvernacular Yiddishland are shaped by transgression, movement, and change.

For this thesis, I primarily interviewed folks who have either worked at or participated in the Yiddish Book Center’s educational programs. The mobilization of recent technologies to expand the reach of recovered sources has played a vital role in continuing and reshaping Yiddish’s legacies. Although I have touched upon the effects of digitization and online source availability in expanding and recharacterizing the borders of postvernacular Yiddishland, this is a

⁴² Another noteworthy organization that promotes intergenerational transmission is the Workmen’s Circle, founded in New York City. According to their website, “The Workmen’s Circle is a social justice organization that powers progressive Jewish identity through Jewish cultural engagement, Yiddish language learning, multigenerational education, and social justice activism” (The Workmen's Circle n.d.). They have existed for over a century. See <https://circle.org> for more details.

topic that deserves to be explored further in depth. Not only are Yiddishist communities keeping in touch through online and mobile technologies, but the internet also provides a new platform for heritage displays. How are these displays and communities characterized compared to those based on in-person interactions? How do these technologies create senses of “hereness?” How is the internet shaping Yiddish classrooms all over the world? How do those who center their activism on Yiddishism and Yiddishkeit mobilize online? And, how are people today using the internet and other technologies to publicize and expand upon creative legacies?

Diaspora and its communal modes

I was surprised by how many people I spoke with throughout this process named “other Jews” when I asked them about their Jewish senses of home or if any place in their mind is “Jewish.”⁴³ “Wherever you go there’s always someone Jewish,” the popular saying and song title go. The bridge continues: “Amsterdam, Disneyland, Tel Aviv/Oh, they’re miles apart/But when we light the candles on Sabbath Eve/We share in the prayer in each one of our hearts.” If we look at the rest of the song lyrics, the principal message becomes clear; Jews live in many far-away places and in many different ways, but the fact that we are all Jewish, unified by a particular weekly Sabbath tradition. It seems as if I have heard these words everywhere: at Sunday school, at Jewish summer camp, at NFTY events, at Hillel, and even in a few interviews I conducted for this thesis. When I grew up singing this song, it always reminded me, energetically and lightheartedly, that Jews are far from homogenous, and that place does not uniquely define us. However, there is more to it than this. When singing this, we convey the message that while Jews

⁴³ It is worthy to note that everyone I interviewed identified themselves as Jewish.

are dispersed around the world, that geographic location does not matter so much, and most importantly, that comfort is found not in a singular place but in the company of other Jews: “So when you’re not home and you’re somewhere kinda newish/The odds are, don’t look far, ‘cause they’re Jewish too/The odds are, don’t look far, they’re Jews just like you.”

As one person explained to me, speaking Yiddish in the contemporary moment means “recreating homeland all the time.” Their framework mirrors that of a portable homeland, where a diasporic existence is an essential way of defining and expressing identity. Jewish portable homelands exist beyond books; they exist in people and in community, in their shifting and mobile formations. For Noah, the feeling of being at home in a Jewish sense is not geographically stable nor based in turf. When he visited Belarus, a country where his grandparents once lived, it was “just a place.”

When I was there, I didn’t really feel any sense of...belonging. Obviously there’s no Jews there anymore... My sense of Jewishness and my Jewish identity are really just rooted in community, so it’s really wherever there are lots of Jews... For me it’s more rooted in people than the place.

Michaela similarly roots her Jewish identity in the presence of other Jews and not so much in a particular place or religious tradition. “Jews coming together in a space for a common purpose” is what makes a Jewish place,” brings a certain level of comfort, and evokes “a certain feeling.” “There’s an automatic connection,” she told me, that she feels when she meets another Jewish person. Through relating to other Jews, no matter how different they may be, she situates her Jewish sense of self that connect to broader histories and experiences. Naomi also told me that important Jewish places in her life are characterized by the existence of other Jews.

Like the modes utilized to reproduce Yiddishland, what constitutes Jewish spaces represents a mobile form of locality construction, meaning that their borders are defined by contingency. According to these frameworks, Jewish centers are diasporic, yet not diasporic according to a strict, essentialist “homeland-diaspora” paradigm. In a certain sense, their homes are in fact based in a model of diaspora and geographic mobility. Diaspora too is a paradox embodying both disruption and continuity: “on one hand, everything that defines [Jews] is compounded of all the questions of our ancestors. On the other hand, everything is permanently at risk. Thus contingency and genealogy are the two central components of diasporic consciousness” (Boyarin and Boyarin 2002, 4). In models where diaspora is central – either intentionally or subconsciously – sources and their legacies from the past can shift to work in new spatiotemporal and cultural contexts. Diasporic frameworks, like those embodied by many I spoke to, leave room for change, for movement, and for an embrace hybridity and difference. Questions about diaspora and its forms are inevitably linked to postvernacularity and its broader embrace of change. They are also linked to how Yiddish acts as an entry point, an expansive realm, and a continuous point of reference that reimagines solidarities and community formation across space and history.

Diaspora consciousness transcends into queerness, as well, according to a former Steiner program participant Noam Green. Here is what they said about queerness, diaspora, and the Yiddish Book Center.

I feel like queerness can be a place and just as you can say queerness comes in a spectrum, I feel like diaspora is also a spectrum. The way I see it, the Yiddish Book Center, maybe inadvertently, places Diaspora at the center. They don't so much make it about 'here' vs. 'there,' but it's more like 'this is us, this is Yiddish and we're presenting what we have to you.' And that's a unique thing. (Green and Benjamin 2017)

Green also notes that while queerness may have been central to what attracts many folks to the Steiner program, the institution as a whole is not “queer” in the same way. For them, queerness can act as a grounding for defining senses of self, community, and a collective project, as a physical place does in national or territorially defined contexts. For solidarities defined by a diaspora consciousness, “decentered, lateral connections” and “a shared, ongoing history of displacement, suffering, adaption, or resistance may be as important as,” or more important, I would argue, “as the projection of a specific origin” (Clifford 1994, 306). By centering diasporic, postnationalist forms of imagining communities and constructing solidarities, we can start to break down binaries and bring multiplicity, creativity, and vibrant difference to the foreground.

Although there is surely not enough room in this thesis, it would prove interesting to explore how diasporic consciousnesses might permeate or form in Yiddish territorialist contexts, like at Yiddish Farm. This might be something worth exploring at the Yiddish Book Center, too, especially in episodic programs. How might physical barriers shape diasporic consciousness, either individual or collective, in spatiotemporally bound contexts? What about in a place like Hasidic Brooklyn? And, how might explicitly religious or secular diasporic consciousnesses differ?

Ganvenen dem grenets (stealing the border)

In his book *Outwitting History*, Lansky recounts a story of sneaking a recovered Yiddish book across the Canadian-American border and names what he did as an act of “stealing borders.” He explains the broader historical and cultural significance of this term and how Jews have dealt with borders.

Historically speaking, Jews have had little use for national boundaries. Countless Jewish refugees made their way to the United States and Canada by hiring smugglers to lead them across the frontiers of Europe. Their historical disregard for borders was not their fault. There were, after all, Jewish families on both sides of the frontiers... Even when Jews stayed put, the borders themselves kept changing. Between the two world wars there were Jews who never left their *shtetlekh* yet found themselves living in Russia, Poland, Lithuania, all in quick succession. Not surprisingly, then, the most common way of saying “crossing the border” in Yiddish is ‘*ganvenen dem grenets,*’ which translates literally as ‘*stealing the border*’” (Lansky 2004, 231).

We have already uncovered that those who are using Yiddish in postvernacular and often increasingly diasporic forms are transgressing, confusing, breaking, or ignoring boundaries and borders, but what if we conceptualized this as “*stealing borders?*” Yiddish as “stealing borders” does not connote a lost culture, or a fading nation, or a dead language, but an agentive, powerful, defiant, and very much alive force with radical potentials and possibilities to *redefine* histories, communities, and identities. Ilana herself, through involvement in Yiddishist programming, has situated herself within an international community, across borders of nationalities and different generations of the Yiddish ‘revival’: “It’s really exciting to be in a community with people who are all interested and...committed to learning this thing,” When Yiddish steals borders, it embodies and embraces postnational properties and translocal connectivities, as Appadurai would call for.

If Yiddish *steals* borders, then maybe it has the potential to break down the boundaries that perpetuate division and erase difference. I will conclude with a tellingly important thought that Josh Lambert expressed to me during our November phone conversation.

There's a belief I have about Yiddish, which is that one of the reasons it's important, to me at least, is that it was... able to connect people across divisions in the Jewish world and even outside the Jewish world, so Yiddish is the language of the ultra-Orthodox, it is the language of the most radical seculars. Yiddish is the language of... the people who went on to become the great industrialists and capitalists of the 20th century, and it was the language of anarchists and socialists and communists who literally planned – in some cases – to murder capitalists. People so deeply divided and opposed to one another, and yet and yet and yet,..., because of their Yiddish language – there was a way they could connect. I think that was a really powerful narrative of something deeply needed in the contemporary Jewish world, and more so in the contemporary world in general.

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