What the Jews Do

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Some years ago, on a small boat in the Galapagos, my partner and I attempted to energize the lagging mealtime conversation by generating a list of topics that might produce interesting responses from this international group of eco-tourists. We started with what we thought to be our most promising and innocuous topic by asking the Swiss couple whether they thought the recently introduced Euro would succeed. He said, “It depends on what the Jews do.” My disbelief was such that I asked him to repeat his remarks, which he did with equanimity. I was so unprepared for this turn in the conversation that I asked, “Do you really believe Jews have...
that much power?” This elicited not the apology for their rudeness that I think I expected, but rather an animated and voluble reply from this otherwise soft-spoken couple about Jews in fur coats and diamond rings on television demanding Holocaust reparations. Needless to say, we opted for taciturn meals for the next six days.

I remember at that moment wishing for one of Adrian Piper’s “calling cards.” Piper, who is a conceptual artist, a philosopher, and a light-skinned African American, used to carry cards that she produced in response to racist remarks uttered in her presence:

Dear Friend,
I am black.

I am sure you did not realize this when you made/laughed at/agreed with that racist remark. In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate. Therefore, my policy is to assume that white people do not make these remarks, even when there are no black people present, and to distribute this card when they do.

I regret any discomfort my presence is causing you, just as I am sure you regret the discomfort your racism is causing me. (1986)

The point of the Galapagos story, in this context, is to notice the ways in which Jewish identity is not given but rather produced. Up until those anti-Semitic remarks, I was unselfconscious of my identity as a Jew, more focused on my identities as adventure tourist and gregarious dinner table conversationalist. But subsequent to the remarks, my Jewish identity was foregrounded, even if it was not legible to my tablemates.

I do not actively practice Judaism. I don’t attend services (anymore) nor do I do much these days to mark Jewish holidays. I am, however, the product of Jewish day school and summer camp, someone who until eighth grade spoke Hebrew more or less fluently. I still know by heart the words to Hebrew songs, from “Dona Dona” to the marching anthems of the various Israeli scouts and military forces. When asked if I am a practicing Jew, I like to joke: “I don’t need to practice anymore. I’m already good at it.”

When I first moved to the Midwest (in 1984), I found myself seeking out other Jews on the high holidays and was known to visit all four synagogues in Madison to touch base with my friends. But as the years went by I grew less and less willing to tolerate the rhetoric of presumed community. Not only was I put off by an anti-abortion sermon delivered at the conservative shul, but also by the Zionism of the alternative one. In the end, I found even the sermons of the very progressive Rabbi Michael Lerner too sanctimonious. It is the presumption of shared values, the conjuring of an imagined undiversified community that makes me squirm. And as someone able to understand the Hebrew liturgy, I could not continue to listen to people say words in Hebrew transliteration that they would not conceivably recite in their native English.

I believe that Jewishness is “practiced” or “performed.” That is to say, Jewishness is not a matter of birth or faith or education but rather of interpellation. Jewishness is reactive. It is a set of aesthetic, ethical, identificatory, and disidentificatory practices. Jewishness is neither a set of beliefs nor the participation in a community but rather an Althusserian hailing through recognition of self in response to a force in the world (see Althusser [1971] 1972). It is a response to the world, a repertoire of tactics produced in response to certain stimuli. For Jacobo Timerman, being Jewish is a political, rather than religious or ethnic, identity. In Prisoner without a Name, Cell without a Number (2002), he parses that this is true both in the case of persistent anti-Semitism and in the case of the persistence of his own Jewish identity in the face of anti-Semitism.
I’ve actually had very few direct experiences of anti-Semitism, so few that I am surprised—as I was in the Galapagos (in a liberal sort of way)—that anyone would express such sentiments aloud. Nonetheless, until I was a teenager, I had recurring nightmares of the familiar world falling away and being replaced by a need to run or to hide. This was an image of Jewish life that was brought home to a generation of Jewish children through Anne Frank: The Diary of a Young Girl ([1947] 1952) and films like Vittorio De Sica’s The Garden of the Finzi-Continis (1970). But even more vivid for me as a child was I Never Saw Another Butterfly, a collection of prose and poems written by children in the Terezín concentration camp, which we read aloud at my summer camp on tisha b’Av. For example, from the prose of 15-year-old Petr Fischl, who perished in Oswiecim in 1944:

We got used to standing in line at 7 o’clock in the morning, at 12 noon and again at seven o’clock in the evening. We stood in a long queue with a plate in our hand, into which they ladled a little warmed-up water with a salty or coffee flavor. Or else they gave us a few potatoes. We got used to sleeping without a bed, to saluting every uniform, not to walk on the sidewalks and then again to walk on the sidewalks. We got used to undeserved slaps, blows and executions. We got accustomed to seeing people die in their own excrement, to seeing piled-up coffins full of corpses, to seeing the sick amidst dirt and filth and to seeing the helpless doctors. We got used to it that from time to time, one thousand unhappy souls would come here and that, from time to time, another thousand unhappy souls would go away. (Volavková and Státnížidovské muzeum 1978)

What could possibly be the value of immersing children in this kind of terrifying literature? It was to teach us that we were never ever to assume that our integration into mainstream culture would last, that just as German Jews thought they were German, so too could our sense of Americanness vanish overnight.

With this as a formative part of my identity, it is no wonder I don’t go out of my way to “out” myself to anyone I don’t know to be Jewish. I seem to have this anxiety in common with many Jews of my generation. In Pier Marton’s moving video, Say I’m a Jew (1985), children of Holocaust survivors who were raised in Europe and now live in the United States discuss what it means for them to identify as Jewish. They all articulate Jewishness as their only anchorable identity, and at the same time describe a similar sense of impending disaster and catastrophe, along with internalized self-hatred and a fear of revealing their identities to anyone but another Jew. One talks about her sense of being an ambassador:

When I anticipate an unpleasant confrontation with a sales clerk or a bank teller, when I know I’m about to argue with someone and I know they are not going to be pleased with me, I usually stick my Jewish star inside so they won’t think, “Ach, that nasty Jew; they’re all alike.” (in Marton 1985)

I have never thought of myself as a Jewish artist. While I am an artist who is a Jew, the bulk of my work does not take up explicitly Jewish content. Rather, the persistent themes in my projects have been gender, material culture, and employment. My friend and colleague Douglas Rosenberg believes that the tikkun olam (repair the world) outlook, which is to say the social justice agenda, that undergirds all my work is what makes me a Jewish artist.1

It was not until I was invited to work in Germany, more than 20 years into my professional life, that I began to make art that took on any issues that could be identified as Jewish. That is to say, my identity as a Jewish artist was formulated in response to the opportunity to do work in Germany. Going to Germany for the first time was complicated by several factors. While I had grown up believing that Germany was one of the countries in the world I would avoid visit-

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1. See also “Self Portrait (As a Jew)” by Douglas Rosenberg in this issue of TDR.—Ed.
iting, as an adult I had come to know it as one of the most supportive environments for artists. Moreover, I was well aware of the outstanding and extremely nuanced artworks being produced by German artists, especially those working in Berlin, who take up the theme of the Holocaust and its aftermath from an informed insider perspective, which I lacked.

So, going to Germany, I felt that I needed to address these conflicts but also felt underqualified to do so. The first project I produced, *Klanglos Verschwunden* (2001), which literally means “disappeared soundlessly” but would be the discursive equivalent of “disappeared without a trace,” looked at the peculiar kinds of silences that were necessary to resume some semblance of a normal life in Germany after the war. It considered both the relative absence of diversity in contemporary Germany and the tacit social agreement not to ask what someone (or their family) had done during the Holocaust years.

That project was followed by three others, each building on my growing familiarity with the context of southern Germany and ultimately coming to consider the Holocaust as part of a set of global questions parallel to the research questions I had been considering in the same period. The 93 small houses in *Versteckte kinder* (2002) are dedicated to the “hidden children” of the Holocaust, but the piece is framed around the more prevalent German association with children in the forest—not clandestine Jews, but rather the *kinder* of Grimm’s fairy tales.

When I was installing this project, I was repeatedly asked to explain it to well-meaning younger Germans who did not recognize (the significance of) a *mezuzah*. In response to my explanation, I was asked more than once, “Why do you care about that old history?” This is a moment when my Jewishness is produced by my interlocutor. In that moment of being asked why I care, I am being hailed as a Jew, not because I have been identified as such but because my identity is produced in response to the question.

There’s a funny postscript to this project. Over the course of the show, all the small houses were stolen, removed to spectators’ homes. It seems likely that most were collected by people who (like the audience members I met while installing) could not “read” the demarcation of the houses as Jewish, but I like the poetic justice of their placement in protective custody within German households nonetheless.

*Halteschttellen* (2003) continued thematically with children, but broadened the context and shifted the perspective by examining how children in nonthreatened populations come to understand the violence that surrounds them. As a project, it is more in keeping with the research I do on trauma tourism in which I insist that the Holocaust must not be treated as a unique or even an extreme instance but must be considered together with other atrocities. *Halteschttellen* comprised seven posters for bus shelters built around “revelatory” moments in young adult literature and memoirs, from *Little House on the Prairie* (Wilder [1941] 1971) to *Master Harold...and the Boys* (Fugard 1982), where children first notice injustice.
Finally, \textit{Die Geschwister} (2005) provided a utopian/dystopian image of the “sibling” rivalry at the core of the Palestinian/Israeli impasse. By reverting a garden to a desert, this project enacts a reversal of the mythological cultivation by Israelis of gardens in the desert. In this decimated landscape, a \textit{keffiyeh} and a \textit{talit} hang side by side. Interestingly, what I thought of as a very sad picture—an image of my longing for a peace that seems improbable—was perceived by many spectators as utopic and therefore hopeful.

As formative as the first opportunity to work in Germany was in my professional trajectory, my return from there to Wisconsin on 9 September 2001, my scheduled (and of course canceled) flight into New York City on the 11th, and my subsequent trip there on the 18th set the stage for what has become my major research in the past decade. Like many artists, I had the impulse to respond to the events of 9/11 by designing a memorial, which was obviously a process in which I would never have the opportunity to participate. This was the impetus for what ultimately became a global comparative study of trauma tourism. In this book-length study, “Always Already Again: Trauma Tourism and the Politics of Memory Culture,” I am looking at the practice of creating and visiting memorials to a wide range of atrocities (war, genocide, slavery, state terrorism) in a dozen countries on five continents.

The Holocaust figures prominently in this research. The extermination camps in Germany and in Poland are both the best known and by far the most visited trauma sites. But Holocaust memorialization is not limited to the trauma sites in Europe. There are museums and memorials to the Shoah all over the world; some of the best known include \textit{Yad Vashem} in Israel and the United States Holocaust Museum in Washington, DC, but there are many others across Europe, the United States, and other places where there are substantial diasporic Jewish populations, such as South Africa. Moreover, it is the Holocaust that is the “benchmark” for all other memorialization practices. Most sites rely on rhetorical strategies that were articulated through the creation of Holocaust memorials and many refer directly to the history of the Jews in Europe to claim similarities or parallels between the local histories that are being memorialized and the Holocaust.
My question, in trying to reframe my research (which to date I had experienced as secular) for this issue of *TDR* on Jewish American performance, is whether memorialization of the Holocaust is in and of itself a performance of Jewishness. That is, should we simply presume that research on Holocaust memorials obviously belongs under the umbrella of Jews and performance or does it need to be argued? And perhaps also, what are the costs of presuming the Jewishness of the Holocaust? While Jews were the largest group victimized by the Nazis, they make up less than half the total number, making this a much more broadly applied “crime against humanity” than is commonly iterated.
There is no question that diasporic Jewry has claimed the Holocaust as its defining trauma, using it to frame both history and futurity. The textbook of Jewish history I studied as a child might be described as “one Holocaust after another” and this is the story that many Jewish museums tell: the exile(s) from Israel, the inquisition, the pogroms. In this master narrative, the Shoah is “the apotheosis of Jewish experience” (Novick 1994:164). The Nazi genocide becomes the rationale for the State of Israel, which now carries out its own program of violence that it explicitly and implicitly attempts to justify through the rhetoric of “never again.”

In “Why We Go to Poland,” Jack Kugelmass argues that Jews go to Poland (and send their children to Poland) to bolster a fragile and waning sense of identity and community, especially among secular diasporic Jews (1994). In the same volume, Peter Novick further elaborates that “more than any distinct set of religious beliefs [...] more than any set of distinctive ethnic characteristics [...] a sense of connectedness to the Holocaust [...] has come to define Jewishness in America” (1994:162). Both Kugelmass and Novick also draw attention to the ways in which the camps are deployed (especially since the Six-Day War) to distance Jews from a privileged oppressor identity and to authorize Israeli militarism through a history of victimization. The Polish concentration camp sites are claimed in highly performative ways by Jewish tourists. Most visible are the busloads of Israeli students who wrap themselves in Israeli flags throughout their site visits (fig. 1). Though as Jewish tourists we also make our presence known more subtly through the placing of stones and the burning of candles, as well as through the kinds of questions we put to tour guides, it is the performances of these Israeli tour groups that insist on the link between Israel and the Holocaust.

There are a number of good reasons not to align Jewish identity with the Holocaust. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, who is planning the displays for a new museum of the history of the Jews in Poland, argues that it does a gross disservice to European Jewry to write its long and rich history as though it inevitably leads to the Holocaust (2009). Along similar lines,

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2. Israel is not alone in its deployment of “genocide credits” to authorize unconscionable behavior. Sara Guyer has pointed out (citing Filip Reyntjens) that the Kagame government in Rwanda relies rhetorically on the genocide to bolster its authority. Increasingly, it also uses the anti-genocide laws to suppress political dissent (Reyntjens 2004; Guyer 2009).
Kugelmass observes that “it is extremely disconcerting that these rites only pay homage to the martyrdom of Polish Jewry without attempting to retrieve or recognize what their culture has achieved” (1994:181). Jacqueline Rose argues against recognizing distinctively Jewish suffering, towards the importance of thinking about the inhumanities of the Shoah and the nakba together (2010). So too my research attempts to decenter the Holocaust, to understand it as an instance in a long global history of interethnic violence, rather than the paradigm.

Another important question that writing for this context has lead me to ask myself, is whether and how I do this work “as a Jew,” whether and how my Jewish identity shapes my scholarly perspective. Is there a performance of Jewishness in my research, regardless of whether I am looking at a site in Poland, or Cambodia, or Rwanda? When I think about the moral obligation that a Jewish education instilled in me towards this work, I can understand it best through the avadim hayenu (we were slaves) liturgy from the Passover seder, the notion that in each generation we must understand trauma as though it happened to us, that our point of identification should always be with the victim. This can be an asset, as it drives towards social justice but, as elaborated above, it is also something to guard against, since as a white United States citizen, I am not only in a privileged position in terms of my capacity to undertake this research but I am also a citizen of a country that was complicit in a number of the traumas that I study, particularly those in Latin America.

Outside the camps, there are other remarkable instances of the performance of Jewish absence in Eastern Europe. Kazimierz, a former Jewish ghetto in Krakow, has been rebuilt as a kind of “theme park” of the disappeared. Cafés feature “Jewish” foods, klezmer music, and even “kosher” vodka. In “Post-Postmodern Homefulness: Performing Jewish Diasporic Space Beyond the ‘End’ Of Culture,” Shelley Salamensky describes her experiences at a café in the Ukraine that “provides guests Chasidic-style broad-brimmed black hats with attached foot-long wig-hair side-locks to wear. There are no prices on the menu; after eating, the guest is to bargain, or ‘Jew,’ with the wait staff over the meal’s cost” (2010).

I was similarly perturbed to find “Jew dolls” for sale in the central market in Kraków. These wooden figurines of 19th-century peddlers, musicians, rabbis, and moneylenders sit between statues of saints and other local crafts. While these are primarily marketed to Poles as part of an emergent “semit-philia,” they are also consumed ironically by many Jewish tourists, in the same way that many African Americans collect lawn jockeys and Aunt Jemima salt and pepper shakers. At this market, I was paralyzed in my attempts to purchase these dolls, literally unable in the moment to give my money over to these vendors. Yet to this day, I experience a sense of regret at not having acquired a complete collection.
Kugelmass argues that we make these pilgrimages to produce a more stable sense of self. Perhaps some do. But many of us make the journeys to mark the self’s instability, to embrace longing. It may be that we are “always already Jewish,” waiting to be hailed, but that sense of identity remains phantom, not quite able to be grasped. Perhaps this is for the best. It’s why representations of longing, rather than belonging, hit home. It is this sense of longing, rather than any kind of belonging, that may be helpful in elaborating an ethical diasporic identity.3 “Jewishness” is at its most violent, constrictive, and oppressive when it is used, either by ourselves or by goyim, to stabilize identity. It is at its most dynamic, activist, and honest when it is recognized as something that cannot be realized, that is forever deferred.

References


Piper, Adrian. 1986. Calling Cards. Offset lithograph on brown paper, h. 2″ x w. 3½″.


3. The creative work of Leslie Hill and Helen Paris drew my attention to the relationship between longing and belonging; (Be)longing is the title of their 2007 artwork.