Homeworld

Ilana Dodelson

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Homeworld

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

HOMEWORLD

By Ilana Dodelson, Master of Fine Arts

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

This thesis explores the experience of being tied to many worlds at once, and how that can be represented through paint.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020

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Introduction

This thesis comes out of a desire to ground my painting practice in joy, something which I’ve found challenging during my graduate school experience. Over the summer, while staying in Philly and seriously debating dropping out of school, I wrote a letter to myself. I told myself that I would remain in the program, but only if my whole practice was centered on joy. I would write my thesis, but I wouldn’t take it too seriously. I wouldn’t bring in any serious shit. I would write about painting, and why I love it. And I’ve stuck to that sentiment, but it turns out that the reason I love painting and the things that I feel moved to paint are so connected with everything else that it’s impossible to write about one without the other. So while this is a thesis about paint(really!), and the joy of painting, it’s also about solace, the Talmud, and the complexities of belonging. And how all of these things find their ways into my paintings. And before I even get to that, I need to set the stage; I need to talk about what I’m seeking solace from. There’s a section on Zionism, and then a section on some worlds I move through. I go on a long Talmudic tangent at the end. I don’t mention paint in this part, but it’s in there.
Political Context

Most of this paper, and the paintings I’ve worked on while at VCU, deal with the contradictions of belonging to a community that is both a source of comfort and also political despair. I’m from a Modern-Orthodox Jewish community in Skokie, Il. Until I was 20, this type of Jewish existence defined my life. In Skokie, Israel was rarely discussed outside of moments of political crisis, but Zionism was built into my life in many unspoken ways. It was taken for granted that we all supported the state of Israel. The history we were taught about ourselves was profoundly influenced by Zionist historiography. And while Zionism was not at the center of Jewish life in Skokie, it was what made continued belonging to that community feel impossible for me.

It goes without saying that the people who have been harmed most by Zionism as a political movement are the Palestinian people, who have been subject to mass displacement, apartheid, and murder on a massive scale by the Israeli State. This reality led me to cut many ties with my home; I didn’t know how to continue belonging to a community that supported this type of violence. It wasn’t until years later when I began to learn about the early history of Zionism, that I was able to return to Orthodox Judaism with a deeper understanding of its history, and appreciation for its political potential. While I always understood the threat of assimilation to Orthodox Jews—fear of assimilation was heavily worked into my education—and knew that Orthodox Jews were often more likely than secular Jews to have conservative politics, I now understand both of these trends to be a direct result of Zionism. If you want to read more, I’ve footnoted a very brief history of the ways Zionism was originally a colonizing movement intent on assimilating Orthodox and Eastern European Jews. I now have a much more

1 Zionism, before it was a colonizing apartheid project directed at Palestinians, before Palestine was even identified as the site of the future Jewish state, was a colonizing project directed at Eastern European and Orthodox Jews. The early founders of political Zionism came out of the Jewish enlightenment, or the Haskalah, a movement which began in Germany and pushed for Jewish assimilation into Western European society. The Haskalah in turn led to widespread assimilation, secularization, and Jewish entrance into the German middle class. This movement created a lasting divide between the relatively well- off and assimilated Jews of Germany and Western Europe, and Eastern European Jews who continued to live observantly in shtetls, speak yiddish, and remained separated both culturally and politically from non-Jews.

Haskalah views of Eastern European Jews largely fell along the same lines of common antisemitic tropes of the time. Steven Aschheim writes, in Reflection, Projection, and Distortion: The Eastern Jew in German-Jewish Culture: “Although there were exceptions, East European Jews were generally considered to be loud, coarse, and dirty. Together with a more generalized, negative picture of “the East”, these Jews were often portrayed as immoral, culturally backward creatures of the ugly, anachronistic ghetto.” (It’s worth noting that this adoption and internalization of antisemitic tropes is consistent with Fanon’s theory of colonial psychologies, and follows a pattern that has been observed in many colonized and oppressed peoples throughout history.) These views were essential to the development of Zionism, and can be found not only in the personal views of Israel’s founders, who came directly out of the Haskalah movement, but also in the early policies of Zionist institutions and the State of Israel. In Unheroic Conduct, Daniel Boyarin explains ways disdain for Eastern European Jews and orientalism showed up in Zionist rhetoric. He concludes that “Herzlian Zionism is thus itself the civilizing mission, first and foremost directed by Jews at other Jews and then at whatever natives happen to be there, if indeed, these natives are noticed at all.” Colonizing a new land, and developing a nation with military power, was seen as the ultimate departure from diaspora Jewry towards becoming a “civilized” nation.
A nuanced understanding of what it means to be connected to such a community. To quote a hero of mine, Daniel Boyarin, “By calling myself “orthodox”, I am making two statements: first, that I am committed to the compelling character of Jewish practice for Jews and to the principle that such praxis cannot be changed simply by fiat; and second, that I believe it is within the current community of Jews who call themselves “Orthodox,” many of whom live their lives in daily and consistent study and practice of Jewish life, that the most likely future for continued Jewish alterity is to be found, so it is there that radical change must ultimately happen.” The contradiction of living in and loving a community that seeks protection from a violent imperialist political movement originally designed for our own assimilation is a defining experience in my life and political development, and it plays a central role in this body of work.

The state of Israel, from when it was conceived by Herzl in The Jewish State, and continuing into the present day, has always been imagined by political Zionists as an extension of Western powers. In the early days of Zionism, this promise gave Britain an incentive to facilitate and support Jewish occupation of Palestine, as it would provide them with a military and political stronghold in the oil-rich region, as well as Zionist support in Russia during World War I. It’s important to keep in mind that this was also happening during the peak of colonization globally. Edward Said puts it simply in “The Question of Palestine” when he writes, “For although it coincided with an era of the most virulent Western anti-Semitism, Zionism also coincided with the period of unparalleled European territorial acquisition in Africa and Asia, and it was as part of this general movement of acquisition and occupation that Zionism was launched initially by Theodor Herzl.” As a strategy to gain European support, and also in line with the goal of the Zionist movement to create a place for Jews within “civilized society”, the political Zionist movement aligned itself from the onset with global capitalist and imperialist powers.

In order to sell the idea of Jews as a single nation in exile, Zionists had the challenge of defining Judaism as a nation in the first place. They faced two problems in this arena. The first was that, as discussed earlier, a central goal of the Zionist movement was leaving the “old Jew” behind. How to construct a Jewish national identity while simultaneously rejecting the reality of Ashkenazi Jewish identity? The second problem was that of the diaspora. While Zionism was born in, and in its origins was largely concerned with, European Jewry, there were, in fact, Jews all over the world. Jewish culture, having developed in diaspora for 2000 years, was varied and diverse to the point of not being one unified culture at all. In order to sell the idea of Jews as a single nation, while rejecting traditional versions of Ashkenazi Jewish identity and accommodating for the vast diversity of global Jewry, the Zionists had to construct an entirely new Jewish identity along with a national narrative.

The strategy that the Zionists came up with is known as “negation of diaspora”. This approach, which negates diasporic Jewish identity and turns instead to a revived conception of the biblical Jew, can be traced through almost every area of Zionist culture, from Zionist historiography to the Israeli military and Zionist gender norms. And for many reasons which are outside the scope of this paper, including but not limited to the efforts of Zionist leadership to spread Zionism throughout the diaspora, this framework for Jewish identity has spread far beyond Israel itself.

Most Orthodox movements responded to the liberal assimilationist Haskalah movement by adopting reactionary politics, which are still visible today. They understood Zionism to be a threat to everything it meant to be Jewish. Orthodox communities were some of the last and largest holdouts against the widespread adoption of Zionism among Jews. However, since 1967, for reasons outside the scope of this paper, Zionism has become more and more a part of Orthodox life. Furthermore, Zionist conceptions of Jewish identity have made their way into Orthodox communities. And the more Zionist institutions have positioned themselves as the protectors of Jews internationally, and equated critiques of Israel with attacks on Jews, the more Orthodox Jews seek protection from the very movement that was founded in an effort to destroy them.

Multiple Worlds

I don’t live in Skokie anymore, and I’m not observantly Orthodox. One day, I would like to be again, but it often feels far off and largely impossible. I cut many ties from home and began my process of radicalization in the wake of the 2014 assault on Gaza. Since then, I’ve become involved in and experienced the world through many different communities, all dramatically different from the one I grew up in. Moving through these different worlds and holding the ways they overlap and then depart from one another is central to this body of work and my approach to representational painting.

While living in Philly, I became involved in harm reduction organizing. I learned about, experienced, and did deep dives into the ways the policies and practices of the war on drugs in the US are a product and supporter of capitalism and imperialism—the same forces behind Zionism and its effects on Orthodox Jewry. I’ve lost friends and comrades to state violence, and know more people than I can count who are struggling to survive material conditions under capitalism and the war on drugs day to day. This has forced me to place my own experiences within a larger political context, to understand the ways our lives are determined by systems so large we can’t even fully conceive of them. Leftist organizing and Harm Reduction work has been, in many ways, a sort of political home for me.

I’m also gay! Queer Community isn’t really that important to me, but queer community is extremely important. It’s another world that’s become a sort of home.

Sometimes it feels like I have a foot in one too many conflicting worlds, and that each of those worlds is being destroyed by capitalism and imperialism in different ways in their own separate spheres: my continued and complicated attachment to a community spiraling in a reactionary direction towards its own destruction, the violence of the war on drugs impacting friends and comrades in Richmond and Philly, the violence against trans people becoming more codified every day. I’ve seen three comrades die due to state violence during my time at VCU and watched more and more anti-trans legislation pass every month. Over 200 Palestinians were murdered by Israeli forces in 2022 alone, while childhood friends are posting online, astoundingly, about “rising tensions” in Israel/Palestine marking the coming of another holocaust, as the line between Jew and Zionist becomes ever thinner.

I sometimes feel allergic to presumptions of belonging based on shared identity. Of course there’s something tempting about the simplicity of it- to claim only one space and be whole and done with it. I’m Queer! I’m an Orthodox Jew again! Communist! But with each wholeness comes a loss, as if to belong to one completely would be to abandon all the others. And I have seen in every world I move through complete apathy, ignorance, and cruelty towards the other worlds I am tied to. So it feels oddly better, or at the very least more honest, to keep my many feet in all my many worlds at once.

Distance

I’ve encountered a problem with my painting students over and over again: they want to blend and blend, erase any sign of paint, and want their paintings to look detailed and “realistic”. I
show them Vermeer’s paintings, how he paints things at a distance; *sharp, crystal clear and full of specificity, but only a few marks, no rendered detail*.

![Johannes Vermeer, detail from View of Houses in Delft, oil on panel, 1658.](image)

Or Bonnard, how he paints his mentally-ill wife merging, beautifully, with the room she confined herself to. *How else to paint someone you love so deeply, that love infecting the room she stays in?*
What does it look like to be in one place, but be vibrating with the specific sensations of another?

What does it look like to feel alienated from a community that you love, held back by your allegiance to another, both communities regarding each other with cautious distaste?

How do you paint something like this?

It looks something like distance, maybe. Something like, someone is right in front of you, intimate, but the closer you look, the farther away they seem.
During my first year in grad school, I tried to capture this distance. I learned about glazing, and thought about the distance it puts, both in space and time, between our eyes and the canvas. And how you can use each transparent layer to contradict the layer before, so that even as you render something, and bring it into space, you also riddle it with contradiction and force it to vibrate, unsettled. I wanted to capture the sensation of fraught belonging, of being in a moment of community where engagement is so filled with complexity and history and rawness that even if you say yes, yes I am one of you! it still feels out of reach. Of being held back by your own feelings of despair, the political reality of the community, by your ties to another far-away place. Sometimes you’re held back simply by the amount of time you’ve spent wishing belonging still came so easy that you didn’t even notice it.
And so you are only half there, you feel distance through proximity, the more you try to make clear your ties, the hazier they become. It’s the way I feel when I go home to Skokie, or to queer community events in Philly, or when organizing with and around community when most of said community is being murdered every day struggling just to stay alive and what the fuck are the rest of us supposed to do in the meantime?
River City Harm Redux, oil on panel, 2022
Billy, Far away, oil on panel, 2022
I used a photo for this painting, a selfie my partner Billy had sent me between visits. We were already feeling far apart. The photo itself was always a gesture towards closeness, not the real thing. Both the photo and the glazes emphasized this distance, coexisting with the intimacy of the pose, the lens-mediated eye-contact.

Search for Solace

Joy in Painting

Since I arrived at VCU, I've found myself repeating the words “doom and solace”. Like the distance described above, I wanted to capture the feeling of finding solace in communities
that also cause despair. So I painted these spaces. But the solace wasn’t just found in the spaces themselves; it was located in the paint, too. I wanted my shadows to be deep and rich, to pull you in and wrap themselves around you. I wanted the marks to contain all the complexity and beauty and sadness of the worlds I was painting.

Painting has always been a source of solace for me, both looking at it, and doing it. When I saw Jennifer Packer’s retrospective, I was reminded of the power of a single mark. Nothing is painted how you expect it to be, and the power of her work comes through only in the act of close looking. She describes painting from life as a problem to be solved. In each moment of her paintings, we are given insight into her thought process, into the ways she experiments and searches and stretches materials to create a solution to this problem. It becomes a private conversation between us, the viewer, and her.

I felt this way when I saw Danica Lundy’s show as well. Both of their marks contain all the complexities and infinite possibilities and contradictions of daily life. They are testament to the lived experience of navigating a problem. Looking at their paintings feels like communion. I see someone else wading through the murk, and I meet them there.

Philip Guston is another artist who comes to mind when I think of painting as solace, as a way to navigate the problem of lived experience. I think about him a lot. How he changed his

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name from Goldstein to Guston. How he wouldn’t speak of what he painted about. The shoes are not about shoes, he said. Not about piles and piles of shoes. Those hooded figures are just a formal symbol of violence⁴.

Really?

I was told that a rabbi from my family’s town in Jersey said in an interview during the last presidential election: “We’re Jews, we can argue with anyone”. The sentiment resonates deep inside me, even though he was speaking with worry about Trump’s loss in the election, putting his hope in the potential to argue against the “progressive” politics of the democratic party. Still the sentiment touched me. I’ve been thinking about the ways we (Jews) have always argued and argued and argued until no one knows what we’re talking about anymore. I sometimes think of it as a way of returning to myself (more on that later). But then I see the ways my paintings become so removed from the specificity of their origins, and I worry that maybe I’m no different than Guston changing his name from Goldstein; an abstraction of an abstraction of an abstraction. Those shoes aren’t about shoes, those hoods aren’t about hoods. An insistence that seems to want his paintings to say nothing at all.

And then I look at his paintings. His marks are so rich. So full of thoughtfulness and reflection and “doom” (his own word)⁵. The more I notice how little he could speak of his paintings, the more poignant they become to me. In his silence, his marks contain all the contradictions of an assimilated Jew of his generation. They speak to all the doom and despair of living in late capitalism. They break my heart now, when I look at them. It doesn’t solve the problem of abstraction and denial in his work, but it adds meaning to it.

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⁵ Blackwood, Philip Guston.
I struggled with the level of abstraction in this painting. I didn’t want to make the painting about nothing, yet was worried about pinning it down with too much specificity. And while the collage I worked from contained a strangeness of a world all its own (more on that process soon), when scaled up, the painting felt stiff and fussy. I was so tied to faithfully representing the collage that I didn’t allow the paint to participate in the act of interpretation and change, to articulate details of its own. Ultimately, I covered most of the painting up. It feels, in spirit, extremely specific. It contains joy and experimentation in paint, an atmosphere both dark and also rich and seductive.

It’s important to me to ground my painting in joy. I want to invite complexity and new ways to solve the problem of painting into my process. Part of that involves a joy in material exploration, and an openness to new ways of thinking through painting problems. Over the last two years, I’ve learned about different painting techniques and tried hard to allow the process of painting to lead the direction of each piece. In my last semester, I began experimenting with
digital rendering, and ways that digital mark-making to find their ways into paint. I’ve tried to learn from the artists I admire, the ones whose marks contain discovery, experimentation, and joy. I want my paintings, like those of Philip Guston, Jennifer Packer, and Danica Lundy, to speak to the honest interrogation and problem solving involved in their creation. I want the joy and presence in their making to allow them to evolve into a world all their own, one that contains the complexities of mark, lived experience, sadness, and joy.

Skokie

It’s easy to offer community and belonging as a source of solace. And it’s true, I look for it there. It’s one of the things that draws me back to Jewishness over and over. But of course, finding solace in belonging to a community is never so simple as knowing you belong. No one agrees on what it means to be Jewish, although we are all obsessed with finding out. I recently derailed an entire class because the teacher claimed Kai Althoff was Jewish, a statement I felt strongly, groundlessly, and ultimately CORRECTLY to be wrong. I didn’t let it go until I found a written answer (Not Jewish). I have torn an Airbnb apart to answer this same question upon finding a mezuzah placed confusingly on a shelf. I even called my mom to get a second opinion (also not Jewish, we decided). When my advisor recommended Some Styles of Masculinity by Gregg Bordowitz to me, I was delighted to discover that much of the book is a long session of this very game: find the Jews⁶.

But it’s not just a matter of knowing who’s a Jew and who isn’t; it’s an intra-community question as well. When my cousin by marriage told me about her experience leaving the ultra-Orthodox community of her youth to become, in her words, “Modern Orthodox”, I laughed at her, sheitl and all. (Not Modern Orthodox). Of course, she’s laughing at me too. (Not Jewish) I was raised with the simultaneous doctrines of ‘once a Jew always a Jew’, and also ‘reform Jews aren’t really Jews’. Conservative Jews are Jews but just not that good at it. And while we Modern-Orthodox Dodelsons occupied a both reasonable and also definitely Jewish-enough position, my large extended family and the many different types of Jewish lives they live are both definitely Jewish and also a little crazy.

And it goes farther than debating the boundaries of sects. Within Modern-Orthodox Skokie I knew which families turned on lights on Shabbos, which ones rode bikes (both not Jewish-enough); I knew which houses would allow a few taboo words between netilat yadaim and hamotzi (Jewish-enough), and which ones wouldn’t speak at all (Jewish enough, just a little too much). There were at least 5 Orthodox shuls to choose from on the same street in my neighborhood, so not only did we know where everyone went, what type of hair covering they wore, and how tall their chosen mechitza was, but we saw them going.

It sometimes seems like the entire project of feeling Jewish is one of debating, among other things, the boundaries of that identity. Michael Wex puts it this way: “Deciding what is in and what is out, assigning everything to a place on one side or another of a religiously-based dividing line, is a fundamental Jewish activity”. Belonging, for me, even before it was

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⁶ Gregg Bordowitz, Some Styles of Masculinity (New York: Triple Canopy, 2021), 24, 45, 55, more.
⁷ Michael Wex, Born to Kvetch: Yiddish Language and Culture in All of Its Moods (New York: St Martin’s Press, 2005), 61.
complicated by political differences and coupled with despair, was already defined by the complicated act of interrogating belonging.

*How do you conceive of a space that is defined by its own self-interrogation? How do you paint this space?*

*Vale and Vale*, oil on canvas, 2023
Talmud as Solace/ Love Letter to Daniel Boyarin

Daniel Boyarin changed the way I think of belonging. In A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora, he makes the argument that the Talmud itself has always functioned as the Jewish homeland, not the land of Israel. He writes, “What renders Jewry diasporic are the connections with other Jews in other places all over the world, owing to common cultural discourses and practices, primarily the study of Talmud… the best way to conceive of diaspora is as a synchronic condition in which a given collective is oriented twice: once toward the place that they are in, and once toward another place- once toward a local culture, and once toward a culture that they share with other related collectives that are not in their place”.

I came across Daniel Boyarin when I was already well into my re-engagement with Orthodox Judaism. I had been doing a lot of research into the Bund (a critical moment in Jewish history entirely left out of my education) and learning about the ways Yiddish was central to their anti-Zionist, communist politics. I started learning Yiddish and discovered the ways in which the Talmud is built into its structure. This got me interested, for the first time, in the Talmud—something which I had treated my whole life as something tedious, pointless, only to be endured during school and promptly forgotten. My dad and I started studying the Talmud every week, and this newfound interest in the Talmud led me, finally, to Boyarin.

When I started studying the Talmud with my dad and reading Daniel Boyarin, I was able to frame my experience of existing in multiple worlds less as being “in-between” and more as a sort of home itself. Boyarin’s reading of the Talmud positions that uncomfortable state of multiplicity as a rightful place, a place to return to and to find in it a sense of belonging. This shift in thinking opened up a new way for me to find solace in Jewish stuff. It gave me a way to locate my anti-Zionist politics within Orthodox Judaism itself and the history of Jewish experience at large. Prior to this, I spent a long time being told that my politics were a betrayal of my people. Though I’ve always known that to be wrong, this diasporic approach to the Talmud has given me a way to feel more or less ok about how complicated I always feel. It also changed the way I wanted to paint.

Process

I started thinking about my experience of multiple worlds in a different way;not so much as distance anymore, but as translocality, a word central to Daniel Boyarin’s understanding of diaspora. In the distance paintings, there is a sense of something close, yet untouchable. We cannot focus. The very marks used to build each subject up are simultaneously obscuring it as well. Or, there is eye-contact that feels ambiguous; we aren’t sure if it’s an invitation or a judgment. And, that’s not quite the same as the diasporic worldbuilding that occurs in the Talmud, the one that brings me solace and feels like a home, that exists here and there, mirrors

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9 Wex, Born To Kvetch.
the ways belonging has always been complicated for me, bringing together multiple worlds and flattening them into something new.

So, I began to apply Talmudic logic to my painting process. I used photographs from different parts of my life, edited and printed them, collaged them with each other, and arranged them within a maquette. I sculpted, digitally rendered, 3-D printed, or some combination of the three, miniature versions of objects and figures from my photos. Then I'd stage them within the maquettes, light them, and photograph them. From these photographs, I began the process all over again. I continued photographing, building, staging, and collaging, until I arrived at an image that spoke to various places at once while preserving a unity through mood, lighting, and color. I then used these images as sources for my paintings, subjecting them to yet another flattening.

All of the source images I used are depictions of friendship or community. The people who appear in my paintings are abstracted iterations of close friends, loved ones, and family. And though much has been lost or changed, there are moments of touch and solidity in each of these figures that speak to the connection at the center of all the strangeness and translocation.

This process of flattening through photography, recreating through maquette, and reinterpreting through collage mirrors Talmudic logic—with all its tangents, oddities, and circular arguments. My paintings have been flattened and reborn so many times that they finally emerge with stories of their own. Though the images always surprise me, I relate to them. They are born
of diaspora; they could not exist anywhere but multiple places at once. They are full of fraught belonging, grief, and small comforts. They speak to the experience of existing in multiple worlds at once, and of the vertigo and also the beauty that can come from being unsettled in such a way.

**Light**

One of the main devices I used in the maquettes to both unify and complicate a space was light. I found that when I simply collaged worlds together, they never settled into a single space. The paintings felt contrived, the seams too obvious. I wanted to create an atmosphere that contained multitudes, not a collage. Lighting felt like a solution. When I brought the photographs out into the three-dimensional maquettes, it gave me the opportunity to both embed more spaces into them, and also to unify them into something new. Even if each clay figure was taken from a different photograph, containing the colors of different times and spaces, and the photos in the background of the maquette collided clumsily. Lighting unified them all against their best efforts.
Take Vale and Benny for example. The original image I began with was taken under a canopy of trees in the middle of the day. Vale’s body was dappled with shadows, which I included in the clay miniature I sculpted. I lit the maquette with harsh lighting coming from the side. Her clay body, lit with the colored incandescent lightbulb, is still embedded with the light from the original day as captured and flattened through photography. The images in the background depict a lawn extending into the distance, yet the light from when I photographed the maquette reflects off those photos. The final image, though it does not make “sense”, coheres into a single space.

Talking about painting a space which contains multiple spaces at once automatically invokes cubism. But there’s a crucial difference; the cubists wanted to represent some essential truth. “He [the cubist] has renounced lighting- that is to say, the direction of light- but not light itself... it is enough for him to replace a crude and unjust distribution of light and shade with a more subtle and equal distribution”10. Light, or more specifically light attached to a specific time and place, to the cubist was an obstacle; they wanted to represent a single object in its truest form, as seen at different times, compressed into one. They wanted to contain multiple perspectives in order to capture a complete, entire, object. In almost the exact reverse, I want my painting to contain a single unifying view of a space that exists in multiple places at once; I want my paintings to make coherent a space that is inherently full of contradiction. Light is a way for me to add specificity of time and place at each point in my long iterative process of image making. The final image is then embedded with both the specificity of multiple places, the specificity of my process, and the specificity of the new world that has emerged from this process. I want my paintings to feel like a world that is built up through iterative logic and internal contradictions, through the act of its own interrogation. Unlike the cubists, in my world, there is no perfect whole.

Jewish Self

I’m going to finish off with a brief Talmudic tangent. It’s not necessary for the summary of this thesis regarding painting, but it is necessary for the central motivation; joy. Here is an approach to selfhood that brings me joy, a way of locating myself and the spaces I paint within a historical precedent of belonging that means so much to me.

Achille Mbembe write in his essay Disenclosure11, about the fences between self and the world enforced by the double-consciousness and othering gaze of colonialism. He suggests that central to the project of decolonization is the act of “disenclosure”- of lifting these fences so that one might once again be at one with their surroundings and reclaim possession of themselves. I come from a colonized people, though of a very different type than Mbembe (the similarities and differences detailed here12 13)– a people who have rapidly assimilated into settler culture over

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12 Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks (New York: Grove Press, 1952), 95.
the last century, and whose communities have been made unrecognizable, disappeared, or turned to reactionary politics as a result. But what does it mean to return to a pre-colonized version of the self- to lift these fences- if the pre-colonized version of selfhood is one that is literally built on the idea of the fence? Even before the Haskallah, the Holocaust, Zionism, and all that followed, the vision of the self in opposition to the other has always been central to Jewish identity.

There seems to be a general consensus among Jews that Jewish identity has something to do with contradiction, otherness, and ambivalence. Isaac Bashevis Singer wrote in *The Penitent*: “The modern Jew’s yearning to be like a gentile is contrary to the essence of Jewishness, which is to be as distant from the Gentile as it’s possible to get”14. Judith Butler describes, in what feels almost like a summary of this entire thesis, “One might argue that the distinctive trait of Jewish identity is that it is interrupted by altering, that the relation to the gentile defines not only its diasporic distraction, but one of its most fundamental ethical relations”15. There are so many more contemporary writers whose thoughts on the subject follow a similar thread.

The Talmud has its own answers, which take a different form but arrive at the same place. Purity is a subject of much debate in the Talmud, and shines a light on the question: what does it mean to be Jewish? On the matter of purity, there is a division between Jews and non-Jews. While Jews have the potential to become impure, and thus the Talmud spends a good amount of time discussing ways to avoid this, gentiles lack this potential altogether. In *Purity, Body, and Self in Early Rabbinic Literature*, Mira Balberg writes, “The ability to become impure, which depends upon wholeness and significance, situates the object or person in question as more complete, perfected, and consequential than objects or persons that are incapable of becoming impure”16. Though Gentiles are pure by virtue of being impervious to impurity, they are also themselves sources of impurity. Much of this can also be read in terms of an identity formed on alterity. Here, though, I want to focus on other implications of this division. The Talmud is very clear that a convert is a full person deserving of respect. So the difference between a non-Jew and Jew is clearly not physical, but rather ontological. If the ability to become impure depends on *wholeness* and significance, elsewhere described as personhood, then what makes a human being a person? The given answer: “that which turns them into agents, that which allows them to act as willful and conscious subjects and thus partake in the shaping of the world, is their subordination to the Torah”17, mediated, of course, through the rabbis in Talmud. So, to be a Jew, to achieve Jewish personhood, means to engage with and be subject to the laws delineated in the Talmud.

Which begs the questions, what does it mean to be subject to the laws of the Talmud? In *Law and Self-Knowledge in the Talmud*, Ayelet Hoffman Libson traces attitudes towards self-knowledge throughout the Talmud. Of the early sages, she writes: “Tannaitic law incorporates many mental categories such as intention, thought and will, mental activity is linked

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to physical actions and reveals a flat, generic subject”\(^{18}\). Over time, however, rabbis began to carve out more room for subjectivity in the application of Jewish law. “The Bavli, on the other hand, undermined this authoritative vein by introducing the principle of bodily ‘sensation’, based entirely on subjective bodily knowledge, thereby destabilizing the existing legal discourse.”\(^{19}\) As a result of this, Halacha became contingent on the subject’s experience, their engagement with Talmudic discourse, and their ability to apply the law appropriately based on their experience. This isn’t to say that the Talmud wants people to do whatever they want. It wants people to act according to Talmudic law, and much of that law requires individual interpretation. That is, it wants people to engage in the Talmud. Or, as Daniel Boyarin puts it, “It is the fact of learning the Talmud, not always its actual halakhic content, that is important”\(^{20}\).

Take unusual genital discharge and the question of purity. In the case of random ejaculation, certain subjective experiences can excuse the subject from impurity. The list of subjective experiences is long, including such things as “even if he ate any kind of food, whether good or bad, or drank any kind of drink”. It ends with Rabbi Akiva saying, “The responsibility for men with abnormal genital discharge is not on you”\(^{21}\). It’s a potent example of the ways in which bodily sensation and subjective experience is written into the law, and it’s also an example of the ways the Talmud is flexible, rewrites itself, showing that engagement with the talmud is often an act of following an argument as it twists around to contradict itself and conform to the times.

Recently my dad and I studied the part of Sotah where Rav Yosef and Rav Sheshet discuss a hypothetical case where witnesses to a woman’s infidelity come forward after she has already drank the bitter waters, and survived. They argue over a way to explain this that allows them to continue to believe the witnesses, as instructed by the Torah, and also believe that the bitter waters work, i.e. they reveal the truth of the woman’s infidelity. Rav Yosef argues that based on virtue, the effects of the waters can be delayed. Rav Sheshet says that the waters don’t work if there are witnesses anywhere in the world to her infidelity at the time of drinking.

We talked about how, basically, these rabbis were scrambling for a way to explain that the waters never worked. (There’s no such thing as magic, G-d isn’t real, etc. etc.) Add another layer to this, these rabbis were all alive 400 years after any use of the waters, since they were only used during the time of the Temple. The rabbis already spent the first couple pages of the Gemarah ensuring that it was all but outlawed to actually try a woman using the waters, (similar to the abnormal genital discharge example), a weirdly indirect way of addressing that there were no waters to use in the first place. But still, 400 years after the last possible use of the bitter waters, after they’ve already been basically rendered obsolete (though no one would ever admit this), the rabbis are arguing over how to explain the fact that the waters never worked at all!

My dad thought this was funny, how they spent pages arguing about how to explain this phenomena that was guaranteed not to even come up in the first place, totally rooted in a time 400 years earlier. I pointed out that here we are, nearly 2000 years later, studying the exact same thing, yelling at each other about it. We’re not really ones to talk. My dad made a snippy comment about Jews more Orthodox than us; at least the Talmud isn’t the only book we read.


\(^{19}\) Lisbon, Law, 184.

\(^{20}\) Boyarin, Traveling Homeland, 14.

\(^{21}\) Balberg, Purity, 145
To go back to our earlier question: what does it mean to be a subject to the laws of the Talmud, i.e. to be a Jew? Being a Jew means engaging with the Talmud and all of its contradictions as it continually defines and redefines what it means to be Jewish. This roundabout search for a Talmudic answer to Jewish identity left me with a welcome answer that feels eerily similar to what I already knew.
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