

לשלמות

L'Shleimut

A JEWISH RADICAL TRADITION AGAINST
CAPITALIST SCIENCE AND MEDICINE



Yarden Azoulay Katz

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**A Jewish Radical Tradition Against
Capitalist Science and Medicine**

YARDEN AZOULAY KATZ

With Illustrations by Anna Zeligowski



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*For Azoul and Bloom—your smiles bring us
wholeness—and for Ima and Aba.*

*And to all the resisters, fighters, and martyrs in the
struggle to liberate Palestine—past, present, and future.*

*They knew how to remember what was done and what
was planned
And me, I'm now forgetting what I am and where I stand*

*I'm asking you if you remember this and this and this
You're trying to recall, but you're forgetting what it is*

*Again you're angry at yourself, you blame yourself again
I'm trying to console you, but my efforts are in vain.*

—Psoy Korolenko

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Preface

We face many crises today that are related to science and medicine. Although scientists and doctors won't be the first to admit it, all these crises are linked by the pursuit of profit. The US health care system prioritizes profits over lives, routinely failing those who have enough money to access it and neglecting the rest. It is part of a system of global medical apartheid that provides care to some people and extracts profits from others deemed disposable. Meanwhile, the unending work and stress of living under capitalism themselves constitute a health crisis, although rarely acknowledged by the medical system.

These health issues are inseparable from our ecology. Extractive industries create pollution that poisons us and the other living beings we depend on while disrupting sustainable, Indigenous ways of life. Pollution, in turn, is inseparable from imperialism: The US military, with its hundreds of bases across the world, is one of the biggest polluters of the earth.

Yet the dominant scientific thinking would keep all these matters separate. It tries to shield science from "messy" social and political issues. This is part of a long history of scientific compartmentalization: dividing humanity into "races," dividing our interdependent world into "people" versus "environment," dividing the complexity of human life into "nature" versus "nurture," and when it comes to health care, dividing our bodies into ever-smaller pieces to be treated by narrow specialties. There is a systematic failure to look at the whole. Science also has little patience for the past, for thinking about how we got here. But without that, we could never understand the whole.

Science also tends to run in the opposite direction from liberation. As social movements across the world fight for freedom from state surveillance and colonial occupation, scientists form partnerships with weapons developers, police forces, and colonial regimes. While people demand real and free health care, scientists privatize their research (through patents and start-up companies) and collaborate with the corporations that sustain medical apartheid. The American scientific enterprise, as one of the thinkers in the pages that follow puts it, is “a creation of capitalism”—and capitalism is indeed what it serves. The dominant narrative of our times, of course, says exactly the opposite: Science is a universal force for good, rising above politics, and everyone should go into it.

I was grappling with these contradictions while working as a scientist for many years in US universities. I was generally appalled by science’s dominant ideologies, capitalist institutions, ties to imperialism, obsession with the newest technologies, and confining forms of imagination and writing. I was in it, but I didn’t identify with it. I felt like I was playing the part of a scientist but mostly using the experience to gain insights into how knowledge is produced. I experimented with different approaches and was accused of not “having a field” (Cornel West is right when he says “Fields are for cows”).

Over time, it became too hard to reconcile my political commitments to a world that isn’t organized around profit and war with being part of the scientific enterprise. I was searching for another way.

I found myself gravitating toward certain critical perspectives that spoke to my experience and its contradictions. They made explicit some things I have felt intuitively. They also brought important historical context, but in a way deeply informed by the practice of science—something that historians and critics of science who have never picked up a pipette or put together a scientific paper couldn’t do. Most importantly, these works pointed to an alternative way of being where the commitment to political struggle isn’t something you set aside while engaging with science, but quite the opposite. Some of this exciting work was done by people who even worked in the same colonial institutions I did,

yet their contributions had been buried under the layers of my miseducation.

The perspectives that spoke most powerfully to me were developed by the descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who had arrived in the US during the large wave of migration starting in the late nineteenth century. They challenged capitalist science and medicine in profound ways. They questioned all the artificial boundaries and divisions of the endeavor, such as the notion that biological and medical issues are separable from social and political ones or that humanity can be divided into “races.” And they worked collaboratively with others to create alternative ways of thinking and organizing that don’t revolve around profit. They were committed to fighting for liberation for everyone, with their neighbors, where they already lived. Their approach was so different from the Zionist ideology that has dominated Jewish institutions in the US, which urges Jews to become separatists and colonize Palestine.

I started working backward. Where did their radical energies come from? Which experiences had motivated them? What sources of wisdom were they drawing on, beyond what’s at the surface? What forms of political organizing were they using? And where else could we identify similar radical challenges to the dominant agenda of science and medicine? That’s how I found the tradition described in this book, which had been under my nose all along.

The radicals in these pages drew on Jewish experiences, memories, social movements, and traditions as they confronted the dominant agendas of science and medicine. They were trying to grasp the whole—to understand the interconnectedness of life, to care for people as whole beings—but they were also aspiring to wholeness by continuing ancestral ways of being rather than letting them be erased by assimilation into US culture. This tradition didn’t fit into the usual boxes of “secular” versus “religious.” People brought traditional Jewish rituals and sources into their political struggles. Sometimes they were reclaiming them from the dominant Jewish institutions, which had alienated so many by embracing Zionism, patriarchy, and other reactionary ideologies. This reclamation, too, was part of the struggle for wholeness.

The tradition described in this book thus brings together the seemingly disparate worlds of Jewish radicalism from Eastern Europe, of radical approaches to science and medicine, and of traditional Jewish sources and rituals.

When writing, I had in mind the herbalists, street medics, and various health care workers who already practice some of the things described here but maybe haven't had a chance to consider their history or connections to other radical efforts. This book is for them. This book is also for those who are interested in science and medicine but can smell that something's wrong, without yet having the language for it. Or maybe they're already in it but feel the contradiction between their commitment to liberation and being part of the capitalist scientific enterprise. This book is also for them. Science and medicine aside, this book might also serve those who aren't content being deracinated, "secular" socialists or communists or anarchists (or whatever), without any traditions, histories, and cultures of their own to draw on. It may also be useful to those who are rethinking the notion that the Zionist lies they've been fed are what it means to be Jewish.

Working backward, my focus on this tradition didn't come from a preference for Eastern European Jews. Like many Jews, my lineages are diverse, reflecting the expulsions, migrations, and genocidal violence in our history. Three of my grandparents were Holocaust survivors who ended up in Palestine, but they came from very different worlds. My maternal side had Jews from Algeria and Sephardic Jews from the Ottoman Empire (some of whom had long roots in Palestine, predating the rise of the Zionist movement). My paternal side had Jews from Poland and Ukraine. But I never heard Yiddish growing up, even though my paternal grandparents knew it along with several other languages they sadly kept to themselves. I took Yiddish courses as part of working on this book and learned to love it, unlearning the negative Zionist attitude toward Yiddish. Writing about this tradition was therefore partly familiar but also a form of *re-membrance*: recalling and reclaiming what had been lost, in a struggle for wholeness.

Research for this book also took me back to traditional sources, such as the Talmud, and gave me a deeper appreciation of their

radical potential. This was another form of re-membrance. When our family moved from '48 Palestine, the Zionist settler-colony known as "Israel," to the larger and older settler-colony known as the United States when I was a teenager, I entered a religious Jewish school. I vividly remember the unbearable Zionism and allegiance to American empire, but we also had mandatory "Rabbinics" classes. Those classes killed the magic of the Talmud. They left young people with the impression that the Talmud was some nonsense about why you shouldn't cook a goat in its mother's milk and that the rabbis who wrote it were lifeless bureaucrats. But the oppressive school couldn't beat the love of Torah out of me; I was always drawn to the stories, the language, the beauty, and the infinite possibilities for interpretation. It's one of the many things that I realize, in retrospect, I was missing in my years of wearing a lab coat and playing scientist.

My aim with this book was to write about a tradition I love in a way that's as true to that tradition as possible. I see my role as transmitting the good stories and struggles (along with some things that have been whispered to me) and hopefully making them more accessible. I tried to collect enough here so that more people can re-member the rest.

Unfortunately, many of us are products of the reactionary ideologies we strive to break free from. We often fail to see the whole or identify the potential in practices that we have been alienated from. Errors or gaps in transmission from ancestors can also lead to things getting inadvertently watered down or distorted. My wish is that readers who share the commitments of the tradition in these pages will take the good parts to their most radical conclusions and let the rest go.

The ongoing genocide in Palestine has weighed on every word here. I believe that the battle to end Zionism takes place on multiple fronts. The most important and urgent front is being fought by Palestinians, in Palestine. It includes the real, nonmetaphorical battle to stop a regime that is committing unspeakable atrocities. As Ghassan Kanafani points out in these pages, this Palestinian liberation struggle is also indirectly a fight to liberate Jews from Zionism.

Zionism is also being fought along another front—infinately less pressing now—which is about reclaiming Jewish traditions, defending them from Zionism, and recovering pre- and anti-Zionist Jewish ways of being. I view this book as a small contribution to that battlefield. I hope it will provide others who are fighting with some ammunition. I also hope that my love for Jewish traditions comes through in these pages.

Introduction

Abracadabra, a Jewish Radical Tradition

Don't listen to those who tell you: obey the law. For the higher law is integrity. Don't listen to those who tell you that you'll disrupt the existing social order. For the higher order is the covenant between working people to achieve wholeness [*shleimut*] for all.

—Aaron Shmuel Lieberman (1875)

Regardless of all political and economic theories, treating of the fundamental differences between the various groups within the human race, regardless of class and race distinctions, regardless of all artificial boundary lines between woman's rights and man's rights, I hold that there is a point where these differentiations may meet and grow into one perfect whole.

—Emma Goldman (1911)

Time flies in every direction. We are moved by hidden forces. The past is not past. And every act of resistance is connected to every other.

*

Some people are trying to put together pieces of broken worlds. Capitalism and imperialism destroyed many communities. So many have lost connection to ancestral traditions, cultures, and languages, as well as to the land and the earth.

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Science has played a role in this destruction, providing theories that said some people were less worthy of life—therefore, they could be colonized, profited from, or eliminated. The medical establishment participated in efforts to limit the reproduction of the “unfit” while dismissing ancestral healing traditions as backward and dangerous.

Science and medicine today reflect the fragmentation that they helped create. Science separates, divides, and isolates. Those of us who have been harmed by the medical system painfully know how it can misunderstand our conditions, how it tries to localize our ailments, how quick it can be in reaching for the scalpel or expensive drugs. This approach is based in reductionism: trying to explain all phenomena by appealing to the smallest physical parts. It’s why the American health care system, as some have observed long ago, is arranged like “the tables of contents of medical textbooks.”¹ We are treated as individuals disconnected from our communities and histories, as our bodies are fragmented into ever-smaller pieces. The medical system is often more interested in profit, data collection, and experiments with new technologies than in whole people.

While capitalist science and medicine routinely fail us, they remain central in justifying the destruction of many worlds. Argue about colonialism long enough, and you’ll reach science. Some will admit that entire worlds have been destroyed, maybe even admit there were genocides, but they’ll uphold modern science, medicine, and technology as the crowning achievements that supposedly justify the destruction. And what was lost, we are told, is totally gone. Don’t cry over spilled milk.

Yet some people still fight for wholeness—for stitching together the pieces that have been shattered; for reconnecting with ancestral ways and resisting assimilation into capitalist society; for understanding our bodies, our well-being, and the ecology of which we are part as wholes; and for recovering healing traditions that have been marginalized by the rise of professional, for-profit medicine. Some people, in other words, wish to assemble pieces of broken worlds.

This book traces one tradition that aspires to wholeness. This tradition was made by Jewish immigrants to the US, mostly from Eastern Europe, and their descendants, who continue the struggle.

Most arrived in a large wave of migration between the late nineteenth century and the end of World War II, often from Yiddish-speaking communities that were destroyed by the war's end. The immigrants brought with them their traditions, cultures, and languages. They carried memories of oppression—their own and that of ancestors. Many had lived under a Jim Crow–like regime in the Pale of Settlement, the western region of czarist Russia that Jews were confined to and where they faced racist violence, discrimination, and exploitation. Later waves of immigrants brought direct memories and experiences of the Nazi Holocaust.

But these immigrants also brought traditions of resistance. They carried the principle of *doikayt*, which means “hereness” in Yiddish (from *do*, meaning “here”). *Doikayt* was a counter to the Zionists who, having internalized the racist idea that Jews could never belong in the diaspora, decided to become separatists, cut deals with European empires, and colonize Palestine.² Those committed to *doikayt* wanted instead to fight where they already lived, with their neighbors, for everyone's liberation—through solidarity and mutual aid.

When Eastern European Jewish immigrants and their descendants encountered the American scientific and medical system, with its commitment to eugenics—the idea that some people are less worthy of life—it activated memories of oppression. Jews who wanted to fight eugenics had traditions they could draw on.

And they did. Jewish radical immigrants and their descendants offered profound critiques of the notion that humanity can be divided into hierarchies based on race, gender, class, physical ability, or any other features. They exposed the very incoherence of “race” as a category. They railed against claims that capitalist society's gender roles are natural, merely a product of biology.

By practicing *doikayt*—never alone but always as part of larger movements—they developed alternatives to the dominant scientific and medical agenda. Their efforts included creating collective health care based in mutual aid; running an underground abortion service that sought to recover the suppressed healing traditions of midwives; using direct action to give people with a disease more control over their own treatments; thinking of agroecological

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alternatives to capitalist agriculture; reviving an ancestral herbalism that can help nourish activists and those marginalized by the health care system—and more.

This tradition insists that while the reductionism of science and medicine produces profitable technologies, it leads to an impoverished understanding of our health, our bodies, and the ecology. Yet this tradition doesn't reject every single aspect of science and medicine under capitalism. Doing so wouldn't make sense. Under the big umbrella of "science and medicine," there are reliable practices and forms of knowledge, including ones with a folk or Indigenous origin that need to be reclaimed.³ Instead, the point is to explode all the artificial divisions of the scientific endeavor: the separation between the social and the biological, between "professional" knowledge and folk or activist knowledge, between people and the environment, and between past and present. Overcoming these divisions is necessary for wholeness.

To Wholeness, via *Doikayt*

In Hebrew, the word for wholeness is *shleimut* (שלמות). It comes from the root *shalem* (שלם), meaning "whole," which is shared with the word *shalom* (שלום), meaning "peace" (perhaps true peace will only come with wholeness). Wholeness has always been there in Jewish traditions and spaces. It often appears around health, notably in the *mi sheberach* prayer for the sick, which contains the phrase *refuah shleimah*—meaning "whole medicine" or "healing in wholeness" (it is common to wish *refuah shleimah* to those who are sick). Many Jewish activists, healers, and artists continue to invoke wholeness in a variety of contexts, all recognizing that entire worlds have been shattered and need repair.⁴

In this book, wholeness takes on multiple meanings. There is wholeness as a way of thinking and being that understands all life as interdependent. Richard Levins, a radical raised by Yiddish-speaking socialists, saw wholeness as the antidote to science's tendency to fragment the world. Capitalist science, he writes, is "beset by a growing sophistication in the small that obscures the irrationality of the whole enterprise." By pretending that social issues

(such as capitalism and imperialism) can be separated from biological and medical ones, and that history can be ignored, science and medicine fail to address the root causes of ecological and health crises. Levins wanted to overcome these separations; he thought that discussions of health “must go beyond health service and confront the whole relation of our species to the rest of nature and ourselves.”⁵ Like others in this book, he aspired to wholeness by practicing *doikayt*, building on what had been transmitted to him.

There is also wholeness that comes from continuing ancestral struggles and traditions. In the AIDS movement of the 1980s and '90s, some Jewish activists saw the AIDS crisis as another Holocaust—another case where those deemed disposable were being eliminated while the majority stayed silent. Rather than treat the Nazi Holocaust as unique, they helped make it part of the movement's language. They were trying to practice “never again”—for anyone. They also brought the traditions of their Yiddish-speaking ancestors to the struggle, refusing to have them erased by assimilation into American whiteness. Gregg Bordowitz, of the direct action group ACT UP, compared himself to the Yiddish language itself: not bound to any nation-state, “born as one thing but always becoming another,” picking up things from different cultures while still preserving an ancestral core.⁶ This diasporic attitude was good for building the coalitions needed for grasping the whole—for recognizing that the AIDS crisis wasn't just about a virus to be managed with drugs but something rooted in social ills such as homophobia, racism, patriarchy, and for-profit medicine, which these radicals wanted to confront.

Wholeness also means treating people as whole beings. Judith Arcana, who was part of an illegal abortion service that became known as “Jane,” treated women as whole people—and accomplices in the fight against patriarchy—not as “patients.” Their full needs couldn't be met by simply granting more access to the clinic; the aim was to restore women's healing traditions, to reclaim them from professional medicine. For Arcana, breaking the law with Jane was part of what it means to be Jewish. It was a continuation of a defiant tradition of care that went back to Arcana's “spiritual influence”—Emma Goldman, the Jewish anarchist and midwife from the Pale of Settlement—and back still further. Both Arcana

and Goldman found inspiration in Judith, a character from the margins of the Hebrew biblical canon who was willing to use radical means to defend her community.

This book weaves together these different senses of wholeness. The book's title, *L'Shleimut* (which in Hebrew means "to wholeness"), is a reminder that wholeness is an aspiration, something to struggle for, not a final state. It also reflects that wholeness should be blessed: "To wholeness" (*l'shleimut*, לשלמות) is a cheer to wholeness, the way "To life" (*l'chaim*, לחיים) is a cheer to life.

Eating Contradictions for Lunch

The word for wholeness, *shleimut*, is often translated (mistakenly, in my opinion) as "perfection." But perfection isn't at all what the tradition described here is about. Struggling for wholeness and practicing *doikayt* is imperfect and messy. It generates difficult questions and contradictions. Herbalist Dori Midnight explains it is essential to love questions, to "lay them upon the altar." Activist Gregg Bordowitz says he "eats contradictions for lunch."

This tradition confronts science and medicine using a dialectical approach that isn't afraid of questions and contradictions. It challenges the dominant categories and troubles easy explanations about how things came to be or what causes what. This dialectical approach didn't come from modern European thinkers, at least not exclusively, but from the Talmudic tradition.

The Talmud, whose core was completed in the sixth century CE by rabbis living in present-day Palestine and Iraq, is much more than an influential text. It is a wild, bizarre, meandering, sometimes inspiring and sometimes offensive, intergenerational, transhistorical conversation about the Torah (Hebrew Bible) and how to live—a conversation that began with memories of oral teachings that were put into writing (the Mishnah) and is now made up of thousands of pages of those teachings, commentaries on the teachings, and commentaries on the commentaries made by people living in different times and places from the original rabbis.⁷ It is a style of conversation where it's fine to leave things unsettled, troubled, and open-ended (inviting more commentary).

Activists challenging the dominant understanding of sex and gender, for example, draw on the Talmud and related rabbinical texts that not only recognize multiple sex/gender categories beyond “male” and “female” but also provide tools for challenging Western science’s rigid classifications. Their engagement with this old queer approach is motivated by political struggles, including the fight to stop medical institutions from violently enforcing the binary. Talmudic study led these activists to what trans Rabbi Reuben Zellman calls the “Holiness of Twilight”: the appreciation of the sacred nature of the in-between states that won’t fit into boxes.⁸ Life’s unruly diversity is to be blessed, not tamed.

But accessing this old tradition also requires grappling with its problematic elements and with the oppressive institutions that claim to be the tradition’s keepers. Trans artist and activist Micah Bazant wants not only to “take on the doctors” and “spit their terms back in their faces,” but also to “walk through the gender partition” of the synagogue.⁹ Bazant dreams of having a truly anti-Zionist congregation that welcomes all those marginalized by dominant Jewish institutions.

Eating contradictions for lunch also means dealing with the imperfections of ancestors’ *doikayt*. Most Jewish immigrants, especially those living in cities, didn’t appreciate that they were settling on stolen land (even if they were claiming to fight for liberation for all people). But some of their (non-Native) descendants joined Native struggles. Some now aspire to learn from plants how to be good guests on Turtle Island rather than identify with the settler-colony known as the United States. Putting that aspiration into practice, in turn, raises more questions and contradictions.

Questions and contradictions demand that we reinterpret and sometimes rewrite the stories that have been passed down. The rabbis of the Talmud excelled at that, making big and playful interpretive leaps. They also weren’t afraid to sharply break with what previous generations had done. It’s why some have said that Jewish tradition generally is “a chain of broken chains.”¹⁰ In what follows, we will trace some links in this chain of broken chains. We will find radical reinterpretations of the usual stories. We will also see how rituals such as the Pesach (Passover) seder and the weekly

Torah reading cycle facilitate this work by asking us to mull over the same stories again and again. Activists use these rituals to ask, What are we doing *here*? What should be done *now*? Who will be our accomplices, and to whom do we answer?

Assembling an Overlooked Tradition

This book takes a different approach from some previous works on Jewish radicalism in Eastern Europe and the US. Some accounts have argued that Jews have been numerically “overrepresented” in socialist and other radical movements.¹¹ But I have no interest in counting Jews, and I view the tradition described here as one of a minority within a minority. The counting business can also lead to the absurd implication that there’s something inherent, even special, about Jews that predisposes them to fight for social justice. I am also not pursuing here the project of recovering the Jewish (or “ethnic”) element of radicals with Jewish ancestry who never expressed their struggle in Jewish terms, including sometimes those who had contempt for Jewishness (Karl Marx being a famous example).¹²

This book is about Jewish radicals, not radicals who happen to be Jewish. They are radical in wanting to fight against oppression and grasp at its roots, and they explicitly draw on Jewish traditions, sources, experiences, or social movements in that fight. They struggle *as Jews* (but always as part of broader movements).

Yet their challenge to capitalist science and medicine has been overlooked, in part because of the pervasive myth of “Jewish genius.” This myth holds that Jews naturally excel in science and medicine, even suggesting that it’s “in their genes.” So why search for a Jewish challenge to the scientific and medical status quo?

Even when we decide to look for it, some digging is still required. Because these radicals were committed to *doikayt*, they sometimes didn’t emphasize their own Jewishness. They might have been wary of sounding like the Zionists, who had embraced discourses on “race” and exceptionalism. Zionist leaders believed they could apply the tools of eugenics to characterize different Jewish populations and select the best “human material” for their colony (while trying to eliminate the non-Jewish Palestinians).¹³ These Zionists

propagated racist stereotypes about Jews, especially Eastern European Jews, whom they saw as weak and effeminate, bound by backward tradition (the aim was to create a new, masculine type of Jew in Palestine).¹⁴ For all these reasons, too much public discussion of Jewishness could be off-putting to those wishing to practice *doikayt*.

Legibility is another reason why some Jewish radicals didn't emphasize their own Jewishness. To reach a broad audience, Jewish radicals would have better luck quoting Marx than, say, appealing to an intangible Talmudic force—even if that force was the truer source of their own dialectical approach.

Racialization has also contributed to this tradition going unnoticed. Certain Jews from Europe—especially those who don't wear their Jewishness on their bodies and live outside observant communities—have been racialized in the US as “white” in contingent and shifting ways. As a result, in accounts of the movements challenging capitalist science, Jewish radicals get presented as generic “socialists” or “Marxists” or whatever ideological label seems most fitting. Their Jewishness is erased, and with it, their tradition.

This book tries to restore this lost context. It seeks to put together what may seem like disparate efforts into a whole.

For this assembly work, it's not enough to examine individuals and organizations. We must also explore families and the making of kin (including beyond “blood” relations). Radicalism often travels through these relationships, getting passed down from generation to generation. In these intergenerational relationships, we find magic, loss, conflict, trauma, and radical potential. We also find the perennial question of how to live in the diaspora; how to transmit a minority ancestral tradition while practicing *doikayt*.

My description of this tradition is based in part on interviews with activists and their descendants. These interviews contain fragments of suppressed or discontinued practices that can't always be found in archives. And while I have also used archives to trace this tradition, my aim here isn't to “tell history” or to offer a “balanced” account by some academic standard. I enter the archives like a pirate raiding for gold. Gold, to me, is anything that is useful for present struggles for wholeness.

One of the problems with telling history is that it can particularize things to death, making it impossible to see the whole. Everything becomes a product of ever-more specific circumstances of time and place. Historians also tend to bring the tyranny of chronology, where time only flows in one direction. But that's not how many of the radicals described in these pages approached the world. They reached and modified the past in ways that altered their present. They took it for granted that, as activist Avram Finkelstein puts it, "every gesture of resistance is connected to every other one, past, present, and future"—and that the project of resistance is always there, waiting to be reborn when we decide to pick it up. This loopy sense of time, inscribed in many Jewish rituals, doesn't fit within the imperial timeline of history.¹⁵

To trace the tradition that binds the efforts in these pages together, we will have to be boundary crossers. We will move across different periods, places, and domains, linking what may appear like disconnected events and acts of resistance.

We can start by asking, Where did this Jewish radical tradition come from? Where did it travel, and when?

Jewish Radicalism Travels from Eastern Europe to the US

Between 1880 and 1910, over 1.5 million Jews arrived in the US, largely from Eastern Europe.¹⁶ They weren't the first Jews on Turtle Island, of course. Jews had arrived earlier, including Sephardic Jews, who, expelled from Spain and Portugal in the 1490s, sometimes came by way of Latin America and the Caribbean.¹⁷ But this Eastern European wave was huge.

People left for many reasons. Some were fed up with pogroms.¹⁸ Some were looking for better ways to make a living. Some who left in the nineteenth century were avoiding conscription into the czar's army, which stole children as young as twelve (especially from poor families) into military service that could last decades.¹⁹ And some, like the Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman, wanted to escape not only exploitation by employers in the Pale of Settlement but also the suffocating patriarchy of the observant Jewish community in which they were raised.

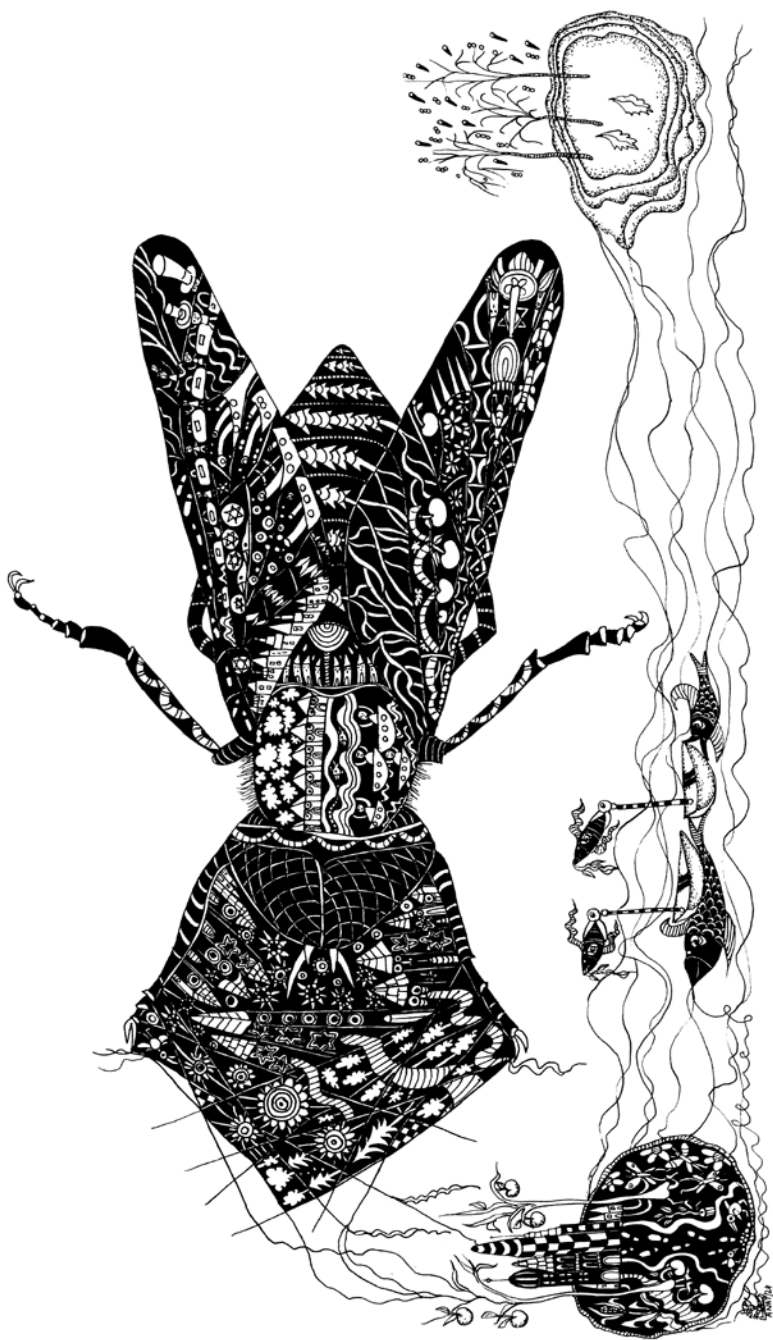


Figure 0.1: "Time Flies in Every Direction" by Anna Zeligowski.

Not as White as You Thought

In August 2017, Nazis with Confederate and swastika flags marched in the “Unite the Right” rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, chanting, “Jews will not replace us.” They believed in the “Great Replacement Theory,” which says Jews are bringing nonwhite immigrants into the country to replace whites and destroy white society. The next year, a white supremacist entered the Tree of Life synagogue in Pittsburgh and murdered eleven people, wounded six, and traumatized countless many. The shooter also believed in the theory. He had ranted against Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS), an organization founded in 1881 to help Jewish immigrants from Russia settle in the US that later extended its support to other immigrants.

Charlottesville and the Tree of Life massacre shook up many Jews of European background in the US who thought they had been fully accepted as white—especially those who didn’t wear Jewish symbols on their bodies and considered themselves “secular.” Many were also now middle-class professionals, even if their immigrant grandparents or great-grandparents might have been factory workers (and we know race and class are inseparable). But these events made them reconsider their place.

Even Jews who had a far more sophisticated understanding of whiteness as contingent and reversible were changing course. Gregg Bordowitz, an artist and AIDS activist, created a one-man show in response to the Charlottesville rally. “Faced with neo-Nazis up in arms over the great replacement, white genocide, white extinction, and so on, I decided to go out and do the most Jewish show possible. I decided to take my queer Jewish act on the road, *schmear* myself in *schmaltz*, and grease up the fucking world.”¹ Bordowitz’s show is a mix of stand-up comedy, Torah commentary, and profound reflections on the AIDS movement, solidarity, whiteness, and what it means to be a diasporic Jew.

1. “*Schmaltz* is chicken fat, which, where I come from, you *schmear* on bread. Very tasty!” Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 30.

Already upon entry, many of these Jewish immigrants—whom the state saw as “Hebrews”²⁰—could tell that this was a place organized by racial hierarchies. Those arriving at Ellis Island in the early twentieth century were subjected to “intelligence” tests designed by scientists committed to eugenics and deported if deemed “unfit.” Their status was marked in chalk on their clothes: mentally ill, diseased, pregnant, and so on.²¹ At the time, the US was legally formalizing a eugenics regime that would sterilize many thousands of those considered disposable, especially those who were poor, Native, Black, or deemed disabled (with women within these groups as primary targets).²² The resulting eugenics laws made Adolf Hitler praise the US, in *Mein Kampf*, as the exemplary racist government, one that Germany must emulate.²³

The immigrants who settled in places like New York City often worked in the garment industry, where they also learned that American sweatshops and factories could be worse than what they had endured back home. But they had a tradition of resistance to draw on.

Many of these immigrants had already been exposed to Jewish radical movements, especially in the Pale, where the conditions fostered radicalism.²⁴ Jews of the Pale were confined to working in certain crafts (such as textiles) and to being merchants; they weren’t allowed to own and cultivate land, except in some limited zones. After Czar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881 (for which Jews were often blamed), his successor increased the brutality. More restrictions were added. The minority of Jews who had been allowed to live in places like Moscow were expelled to the Pale. It was racial capitalism—using difference to extract profits—at work: Concentrating the Jews in the Pale and limiting their job options created a surplus of Jewish workers who were forced to take lower wages.

In 1897, the Jewish General Labor Bund (“the Bund”) was founded in Vilna, Lithuania (part of the Pale), with the aim of organizing Jewish workers. It was also the year of the First Zionist Congress, but the Bund rejected Zionism. Bundists believed in *doi-kayt*: fighting for liberation *here*, where we live, by creating real solidarity.²⁵ This principle negated the “thereness” (*dortikayt*, from the word *dort*, meaning “there”) of Zionism. Bundist anti-Zionism

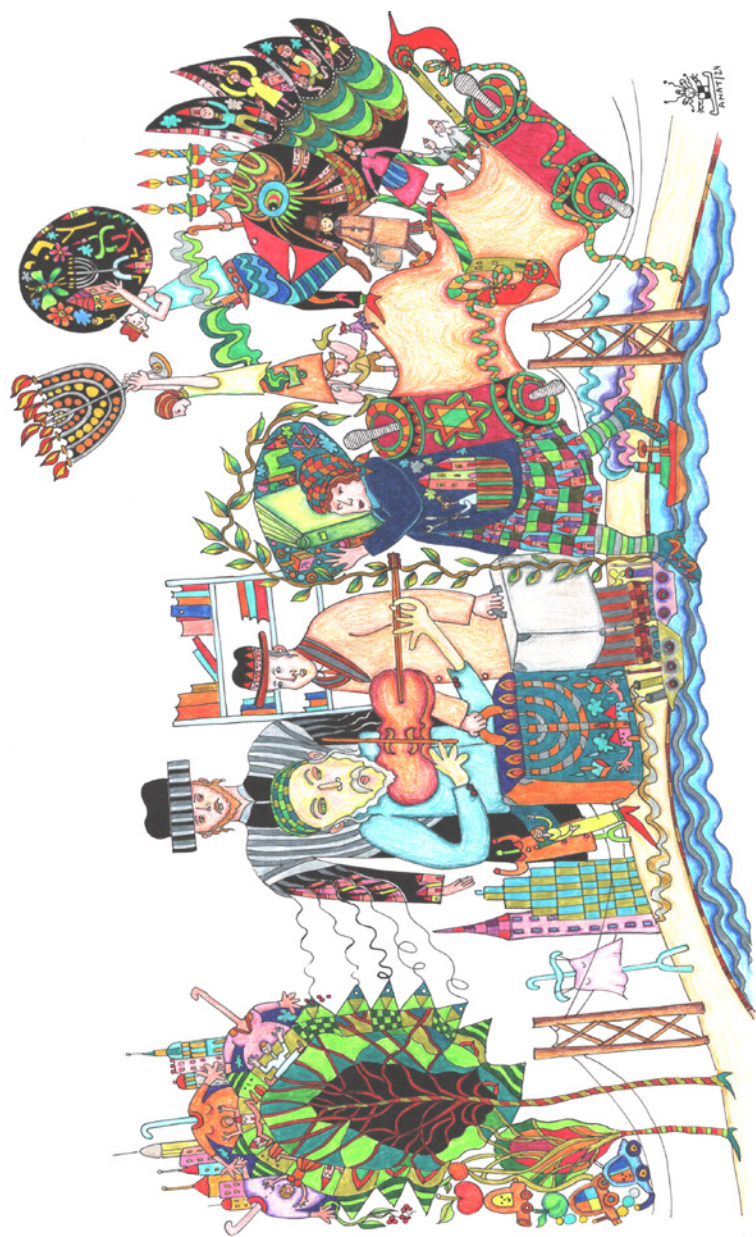


Figure 0.2: "Hebrew Emigrants to Turtle Island" by Anna Zeligowski.

had serious limitations, to be sure. It often lacked the anticolonial clarity that some Arab Jews had, who were already resisting European colonialism in their countries.²⁶ And by the Nakba of 1948, when over 750,000 Palestinians were expelled from their homes to make way for the state of Israel, Eastern European Jewish life was essentially destroyed, and the remaining Bundists generally accepted the Zionist state as here to stay.²⁷ Nonetheless, the most perceptive Bundists understood Zionism early on as a colonial project based on stealing the land of the non-Jewish natives. Bundists also understood that Zionists were making a pact with the devil: the oppressive European powers who wanted to remove Jews from Europe. Theodor Herzl, one of the founders of Zionism, had promised that a “Jewish State” in Palestine would be a “rampart of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism.”²⁸ The Bund wanted to fight these oppressive European regimes, not become their servant.

The Bund was rather successful in this fight. It became one of the largest socialist parties in the Russian empire. It organized Jewish workers of many kinds along with armed resistance to defend Jews from racist violence. The Bund also created health care services, youth movements, and cultural groups.²⁹ It was less male dominated than expected: At a time when many socialists in Europe imagined the male factory worker as the agent of change, about one-third of Bundists were unmarried women.³⁰ Cultivation of the Yiddish language was central to the movement. Bundists believed that the language, along with shared Jewish traditions, bound Jews of the region together. They believed in autonomy—they didn’t want to abandon their culture—but rejected separatism and nationalism. As David Rosenberg, one of the many activists who find the Bund inspiring today, puts it, “Their stress was always on *people* rather than nations and states. In times dominated by nationalist thinking and rigid hierarchies, they held to their healthy antinationalism and their mistrust in unnecessary hierarchies.”³¹

After the Bolsheviks took power, they dissolved the Bund in Russia and began persecuting some of its members, and the Bund’s center shifted to Poland. There, Bundists continued organizing around *doikayt* rather than accepting Zionism. “This seemed as

natural to us,” recalls Bernard Goldstein of the Bund in Poland, as it was for Black people in the US to fight for freedom “in the United States rather than to accept emigration back to Africa as a solution to the problem of racial inequalities in America.”³² The Polish Bund would play important roles in the resistance to the Nazis, notably in the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943.

The Bund was itself an outgrowth of an earlier direct action movement by Jewish workers in the Pale known as the “strike movement.”³³ Its frequent strikes emerged from the workers themselves, not union leaders. They organized *kassy*, small circles of mutual aid, to support the strikers.³⁴ This movement “struck terror in the hearts of the employers” (including Jewish ones).³⁵ Its energy made the Bund possible. And although the Bund developed formal party structures, it would often re-create the earlier movement’s method of organizing: using small, autonomous groups that addressed local needs through mutual aid yet collaborated with other autonomous groups. It was *anarchistic* organizing, matching many of the principles espoused by anarchist movements, even if the people putting these principles into practice often didn’t identify as “anarchists” (and might have been insulted by the label).³⁶

This anarchistic way of organizing didn’t come out of the blue. Jews had long been living in Europe in relatively autonomous communities. Each community (*kehila*) had its own customs and its own decision-making council known as a *kahal*, which was responsible for internal affairs as well as for dealing with the ruling governmental authorities.³⁷ Different communities debated matters and sometimes collaborated, but when there were disagreements, there was generally no centralized authority that could step in to resolve them. Jewish tradition also had a dialectical character (exemplified by the Talmud) that tended to raise more questions than answers, producing a diversity of ways to live, always shaped by the local cultures. While these Jewish communities didn’t lack in oppressive hierarchies, their overall decentralized structure, coupled with the love of the dialectic, made anarchistic organizing feel natural to many Jews getting involved in radical movements.

Aaron Shmuel Lieberman, a nineteenth-century socialist from the Pale, recognized this. He grew up in an observant community

and had attempted to radicalize yeshiva students with his socialist pamphlets, written in Hebrew. Like some of his contemporaries, Lieberman believed that Jewish memories of oppression could empower a struggle for the liberation of all. He also recognized the radical nature of old Jewish traditions like the *shmita* year—the seventh year where, according to the Torah, the land must rest and anything that grows is free for anyone (human or nonhuman) to take. Every seven cycles of *shmita*, the Torah also calls for a Jubilee year in which all debts are forgiven. What could be more anticapitalist? As Lieberman put it in 1875,

Socialism is not alien to us. The community is our existence; the revolution—our tradition; the commune—the basis of our legislation as quite clearly indicated by the ordinances forbidding the sale of land, by those of the Jubilee and sabbatical years, on equal rights, fraternity, etc. Our ancient Jewish social structure—anarchy; the real link between us across the surface of the globe—internationalism. . . . Did not our ancestors go through all the horrors of torture by the Inquisition and go to the stake for their convictions; so how can hard labor frighten us today, we who are pursuing much higher goals?³⁸

What were these “higher goals”? What was the aim of the struggle? For Lieberman, it was to reach wholeness. He wrote his own set of “commandments,” one of which was “Sacrifice all your powers to unite the people around wholeness for everyone and create a kingdom of labor, fraternity, and integrity.”³⁹

*

All these previous movements—with their tradition of direct action, suspicion of “unnecessary hierarchies,” and embrace of *doikayt*—shaped the way Eastern European Jewish immigrants would organize in the US against a society that deemed so many people disposable. Even if they hadn’t directly participated in radical movements in Eastern Europe, the ideas and organizational structures were there as inspiration for immigrants and their descendants.

Jewish immigrants organized mutual aid groups such as the Arbeter Ring (“Workmen’s Circle”), formed in 1892, which provided material support to members who were sick or disabled. It organized socialized health care, which included doctors who made home visits. It also cultivated Yiddishkayt (Yiddish-speaking Jewish culture). The Arbeter Ring was made up of autonomous chapters that varied in character and ideology, allowing people who identified with different labels (anarchists, socialists, communists, etc.) to work together. This diversity generated splits, like the split in 1930 where some communist members left the Arbeter Ring and formed the International Workers Order (IWO).⁴⁰ The IWO continued organizing through a structure that allowed different groups (Black workers, Yiddish-speaking workers, Polish immigrant workers, etc.) to maintain their culture and handle their own affairs but still fight together for the whole. The IWO organized collective life insurance and, unlike insurance companies of the day, didn’t discriminate against Black workers. It had racially integrated summer camps in the 1930s, decades before legal desegregation. An important IWO organizer was Louise Thompson Patterson, a Black communist who in the early 1930s was calling attention to the “triple exploitation” of Black women: as workers, as women, and as Black people.⁴¹ One of the IWO’s slogans became “No Jim Crow in the IWO!”

Jewish communal structures enabled the tradition of direct action to continue. When the meat trusts raised prices in 1902, Jewish women (most of whom were housewives) organized a kosher meat boycott through these structures. Not respecting the separation between “religious” and “political” spaces, they took the stage in synagogues to tell everyone they should join the boycott. They recruited their neighbors. During the strike, they blocked entrances to butcher shops that violated the boycott, and when the cops came to crush the effort, Jewish women threw meat at them. *The New York Times* condemned this behavior of people who “mostly speak a foreign language,” correctly recognizing it as un-American. “They do not understand the duties and rights of American citizens,” the *Times* editorial states. “Resistance to authority does not seem to them necessarily wrong, only risky, and if it ceases to be risky the restraint it can have on their

passion is very small.”⁴² But these tactics were effective: Meat prices came down within a month.

Direct action also shook the garment industry, which employed many Jews (much like in the Pale), especially young Jewish women. The conditions were horrible: People toiled in dangerous factories and sweatshops, where it was difficult to breathe. A famous Yiddish poem by Morris Rosenfeld, “Mayn rue plats” (My resting place), captured the life of a garment worker: “I am a slave, where chains clang, there is my resting place.” Women suffered from discrimination and sexual harassment by their bosses. In 1909, women of the garment industry called a meeting to plan a general strike, but the men leading the major union hesitated. After a long discussion, Clara Lemlich, a twenty-three-year-old immigrant from the Pale, got fed up. She famously took the floor and addressed the crowd in Yiddish: “I am a working girl; one of those who suffers from and is on strike against the intolerable conditions portrayed here. I am tired of listening to those who speak in general terms. I am impatient. I move a general strike—now!” Lemlich famously then raised her right hand and took an oath, along with the crowd: “If I turn a traitor to the cause I now pledge, may this hand wither from the arm I now raise”—a play on a verse from the book of Psalms.⁴³ It launched a strike that became known as the “uprising of 20,000” (though more had participated). By the end of the strike, many workers won some concessions, and it also energized future struggles.⁴⁴ Lemlich went on to organize women’s circles and joined the IWO.⁴⁵

Such organizers, as historian Hadassa Kosak argues, fought for more than the “bread and butter” issues. They were looking at the whole; they wanted to change the nature of work, to gain more control over their time and limit employers’ powers. Their radical approach drew strength from not only Jewish communal structures but also traditional stories. Organizers in the garment industry, for example, could say that the bosses were like the Pharaoh, the workers like the enslaved Israelites, and be understood. Meanwhile, the structures helped overcome artificial divisions into trades that were imposed by the major trade unions. Solidarity across trades was natural when organizing took place far beyond

the point of production—in synagogues, neighborhoods, and dance halls.⁴⁶

The spirit of this tradition is best captured by the Yiddish songs that Jewish radicals carried with them from Eastern Europe. There is “Daloy politsey,” a song embraced by socialists and anarchists, which literally means “Down with the police”—or, as it has been translated by musicians who continue to perform it today, “Fuck the police.”⁴⁷ The song, already circulating around the 1905 revolution against Czar Nikolai II, called for strikes and the toppling of hierarchies:

On every street you go
you hear rumblings.
Men, women, children, families
are talking about strikes.

Brothers, enough of your drudgery,
enough of borrowing,
We’re going on strike,
Brothers, let us free ourselves!

Brothers and sisters,
let us join hands,
Let’s break down
little Czar Nikolai’s walls!

[Chorus]
Hey, hey, down with the police!
Down with the ruling class of Russia!

The phrase “Let us free ourselves” reflects the tendency toward direct action, not waiting for politicians or trade union bureaucracies.

The commitment to *doikayt* was also expressed in song. There was the Bund’s anthem, “Di shvue” (The oath), written by S. Ansky in 1902, which calls on all “brothers and sisters in work and in need” to take an oath to fight together, for “the flag is ready, it waves with rage, it is red with blood.” Another song of *doikayt*,

from 1931, that we can be sure hasn't been taught in many Jewish schools in the US is "Oy, ir narishe tsionistn" (Oy, you foolish Zionists). It presents Zionism as an escapist project led by the bourgeoisie who didn't care about workers' struggles:

Oy, you foolish little Zionists
 With your utopian mentality
 You'd better go down to the factory
 And learn the worker's reality
 You want to take us to Jerusalem
 So we can die as a nation
 We'd rather stay in the diaspora
 And fight for our liberation⁴⁸

*

Beyond "Secular" and "Religious"

To appreciate this tradition and to learn to identify its challenges to science and medicine, we must let go of the distinction between "secular" and "religious." This tradition is neither. The category

Jews Are Now Very Pious

"Jews are now very pious. They observe all the ritual laws: they are stabbed and punched with holes like *matzahs*, and have as much bread as on Passover; they are beaten like *hoshanas*, rattled like Haman; they are as green as *esrogim* and as thin as *lulavim*; they fast as if it were Yom Kippur; they are burnt as if it were Hanukah, and their moods are as if it were the Ninth of Av."

This fragment was recorded by Rabbi Shimon Huberband, a member of the Oneg Shabbat group in the Warsaw ghetto that secretly documented daily life and buried thousands of pages in boxes and milk cans that were recovered after the war. Huberband did not survive.

of “religion” is itself largely a creation of the “secular” (in reality, Christian) state, which uses it to control populations and make them legible. It presumes that some practices can be removed from place, language, and culture. The lens of “religion” leaves us with superficial differences, often made in Christian terms (think “the Jews go to their church on Saturday, not Sunday”), and erases ways of life that the state considers weird.⁴⁹ It also underplays the role of racialization. Jews in the Pale, for example, were Jews because they were born into Jewish communities and racialized as Jews by their neighbors and the regime they lived under, without much of a choice. It didn’t matter whether they believed in God, prayed, or did other “religious” things.

Separating secular and religious also gets in the way of appreciating the forces driving radical struggles. Historians often say, for example, that the Bund was a “secular” movement. But even the Bund’s very name alludes to the *bond*, the covenant, between the Israelites and God (and recall the movement’s anthem was called “The Oath”). The movement’s practices simply didn’t fit these categories. Was it “secular” or “religious” when a Bundist in Piotrków, Poland, risked his life to save Torah scrolls from a synagogue that the Nazis had taken over? (This wasn’t an isolated incident.⁵⁰) Was it “secular” or “religious” when Bundists held Pesach seders using a Haggadah they wrote (mostly in Yiddish) that added a contemporary socialist spin, yet retained the structure of the Hebrew original while also blasting the rabbinical authorities for colluding with “the rich bloodsuckers and oppressors”?⁵¹

And when Jewish anarchists in Emma Goldman’s circle organized “Yom Kippur balls” (jovial gatherings on a day that for observant Jews was a fast of atonement) and wrote parodies of traditional Jewish texts, were they being “secular” or “religious”? These anarchists needed to know the texts well to write the parody.⁵² Their audience had to know the texts too, which means these anarchists were committed to engaging other Jews. And if these radicals truly didn’t care about Yom Kippur, they would have simply ignored it.

In all these cases, the middle finger of the Jewish radicals was pointed at establishment institutions, not all Jewish traditions. They were adding links to the chain of broken chains.



Figure 0.3: "Ancestral Whisper" by Anna Zeligowski.

A Jewish Rebellion Against Racial Science

The eugenics regime that Eastern European Jewish immigrants encountered upon arrival in the US wasn't new. As we will see, eugenics and the resistance to it can even be found in the Torah. But during the nineteenth century, racial science—the set of frameworks and tools for perfecting eugenics—was expanding rapidly, becoming entrenched in scientific and medical research. Racial science came under serious attack by some descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants who were “insider-outsiders” in scientific institutions. The political education they received at home and their commitments to ancestors were incompatible with the eugenics of their profession. To appreciate this collision, we should explore what eugenics meant to its scientific proponents.

The term *eugenics* was coined by Francis Galton, an influential nineteenth-century aristocratic Englishman and relative of Charles Darwin. It was a combination of the Greek *eu*, meaning “good,” and *genos*, meaning “birth.” Eugenics is about ensuring the “well-born” are cultivated and the rest become their servants (or otherwise get eliminated). Galton's new name for an old practice excited the establishment, and he helped secure the place of eugenics in scientific and medical inquiry. Galton's frameworks remain widely used; they include concepts such as “rank,” “median,” and “regression” (“regression” originally alluded to the loss of “desirable” traits in a population).⁵³

Galton's racial science was meant to sort people into finer groups based on their supposed worth. In addition to statistics, he used photography to overlay photographs of different individuals' faces, creating composites that supposedly reveal their “type,” such as the “criminal” or “ill” type. In 1885, Galton photographed Jewish schoolchildren to create the “Jewish type.” “They were children of poor parents, dirty little fellows individually,” Galton wrote, “but wonderfully beautiful, as I think, in these composites.” But what stood out to him most was the “cool, scanning gaze” he received from the schoolboys and the rest of the Jewish community, who showed “no sign of diffidence” toward him.⁵⁴

The Jewish radicals in these pages challenged racial science in all its forms, from the crudely racist Galton-type to the more subtle



Figure 0.4: Francis Galton's "Jewish Type," made from photographs he took of Jewish schoolboys. He thought they had all given him a "cool, scanning gaze." Source: Galton Papers, UCL Library Services, Special Collections.

variations that came later. Yet their challenge isn't understood as a Jewish challenge, in part because eugenics itself is so ingrained in discourses on Jews.

The logic of eugenics is behind the myth of "Jewish genius," which states that Jews (especially those from Europe) have always excelled in modern science and medicine because of their inborn high "intelligence."⁵⁵ We find this myth in the regular counting of Jewish Nobel laureates and in the theories, popular and scientific, that try to explain how Jews got their genetic genius.

Jews have also been presented as the group that proves the validity of racial science. It's clear in the work of Charles Murray, one of the great schmucks of contemporary American racial science. Murray is well known for his 1994 book *The Bell Curve* (coauthored with Richard Herrnstein), which infamously argues

that traits such as “intelligence” are mostly determined by genetics, meaning the state should not waste resources on so-called inferior groups (Black people especially, according to the book). It was eugenics, even if the tone was more polite than in the past, and useful to those working to eliminate remnants of the welfare state.

In a 2007 article for the right-wing *Commentary* magazine titled “Jewish Genius,” Murray uses Jews to defend the validity of *The Bell Curve*. Murray admits that his theorizing about Jews made his Jewish (and also racist) collaborator Herrnstein uncomfortable, but he insists it is very important. “This Scots-Irish Gentile from Iowa,” Murray declares, “hereby undertakes to tell the story.” The story is the usual one in which systemic oppression and history aren’t key factors in determining the course of people’s lives. “We have good reason to think that Gentile children raised in Jewish families do not acquire Jewish intelligence,” Murray the scientist reports. “Hence my view that something in the genes explains elevated Jewish IQ.” Murray praises Jews not only for excellence in science and medicine—measured by metrics such as the number of Nobel prizes—but also for maintaining such good genes. Jews prove the validity of eugenics; now all the reactionary programs follow. If you don’t like it, Murray says, just look at the Jews. This narrative uses Jews to shield racial science, much like older narratives used Jews as scapegoats for capitalism (thereby protecting capitalism). And Murray’s “love” is arguably worse than the contempt eugenicists have historically had for Jews, because such “love” makes us into the justification for the entire project of eugenics.⁵⁶

Ironically, certain Jews have been working hard to destroy Murray’s project. Some became major figures in groups such as Science for the People, founded in the 1960s, which challenged American science’s racist and sexist ideologies along with its services to empire and capital. But while for Murray, Jewishness was hyper-visible and imprinted in every Jew’s genes, in accounts of radical challenges to science and medicine, Jewishness is invisible.⁵⁷ Jewish thinkers and activists weren’t recognized as such, let alone viewed as part of a broader tradition, even if their work was well known.

One of the most famous critics of racial science was Stephen Jay Gould, a socialist and evolutionary biologist who worked at

Harvard University, best known for his book *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981). The book attacks the foundations of racial science and its manifestations in things such as IQ testing. Gould's attack was inspired by his family's history; his grandparents, to whom he dedicated the book, were Jewish immigrants from Eastern and Central Europe who would have been excluded by immigration quotas (justified in part through IQ testing). Some of Gould's formative memories include holding his parents' copy of *Mein Kampf* as a child, before his father joined the army during World War II to fight "a bad man named Hitler." He returned to the book later as a critic of racial science, seeing his own work as a continuation of the family's fight against fascism. "The whole enterprise of setting a biological value upon groups," Gould concludes in *The Mismeasure of Man*, is "irrelevant, intellectually unsound, and highly injurious." When *The Bell Curve* came out, Gould became one of its loudest critics, and the revised edition of *The Mismeasure of Man* included a new section devoted to debunking the book. When Murray is protested on college campuses today for being a white supremacist (when invited to speak by fascist student groups), it's in part thanks to Gould.⁵⁸

But Gould was actually on the more conservative end of a loose network of Jewish radicals who were attacking racial science from within the academy (the more radical among them were also in constant battle with the institution). On the more radical end, there were Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, Anne Fausto-Sterling, and Ruth Hubbard, described in these pages. Their works became pivotal to groups such as Science for the People. All railed against eugenics and racial science; all were deeply inspired by Jewish experiences, traditions, or social movements; and all wanted to grasp the whole.

Their perspectives are more relevant than ever. Eugenics is everywhere, as modern institutions decide who will live and who will die, and who will be squeezed for profits. Racial science continues in different forms, including those enabled by developments such as genomics and genome editing as well as by the profitable industry of "ancestry" DNA testing, which tells us that who we are isn't about our relationships to community, traditions, or place but

about what's in our DNA.⁵⁹ Among scientists, the ideology of eugenics is alive and kicking: In 2021, one of the world's most revered biologists, at Harvard Medical School, told *The Wall Street Journal*, "I don't see why eliminating a disability or giving a kid blue eyes or adding 15 IQ points is truly a threat to public health or to morality."⁶⁰

The people in this book can be viewed as part of a rebellion against racial science that gives Francis Galton that "cool" gaze he received from Jewish children, a rebellion that shows "no sign of diffidence" to eugenics. In place of eugenics and other ways to destroy and fragment the world, the tradition described here offers wholeness and an appreciation of life as an interdependent web. This web, to borrow from the band Funkadelic, is "so wide you can't get around it, so low you can't get under it, so high you can't get above it." So why try? Why create harmful and false divisions and separations? Why try to reduce all phenomena to the smallest parts? Why not struggle, instead, for wholeness?

How This Book Is Organized

The chapters in this book are more of a web than a linear story. They can be read in any order. But for simplicity, the book is divided into two parts, each emphasizing a different question and focusing on different aspects of science and medicine.

Part 1 asks, How do we save worlds from eugenics? Its theme is the concept of *pikuach nefesh*—an antieugenics principle that literally means "saving souls." The three chapters in this part show how this principle is practiced by examining direct confrontations with eugenics regimes that try to control bodies and populations.

Chapter 1 follows Shifra and Puah, two midwives from the Torah who practiced *pikuach nefesh* and disobeyed orders to implement eugenics. The chapter shows how Shifra and Puah were part of a defiant and subversive tradition of care. It follows their spirit, from the Torah and rabbinical texts to the work of midwives in Europe, to the radical midwifery and nursing of Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman, to the underground abortion service in Chicago in which Judith Arcana participated. All these episodes are about saving the worlds people make with one another from eugenics and

patriarchal efforts to control bodies. This chapter demonstrates the radical potential of stories from the Torah: their relevance for resisting racial divisions and their capacity to inspire antieugenicist practices of care. It also shows unexpected links between different acts of resistance to eugenics.

Chapter 2 turns to radicals who challenged efforts to create “normative” bodies by enforcing the male/female binary. Here, we find two converging streams of Jewish radicalism that defy classification into “secular” or “religious.” The first stream is one of activists (such as Micah Bazant) and rabbis (such as Elliot Kukla and Reuben Zellman) who tapped into an old rabbinical Jewish tradition that acknowledged a world beyond male/female. They used this tradition to rethink observant rituals from a perspective committed to queer, trans, and intersex liberation and to promote the idea that life’s diversity should be blessed rather than tamed. This stream also sought to reclaim the Talmud from traditionally oppressive Jewish institutions—“to Robin Hood the Talmud,” as Rabbi Benay Lappe of the queer yeshiva Svara puts it—and invite those who’ve been alienated from Jewish traditions to join. This stream converged with another stream of Jewish radicals who, working in the belly of science, challenged the dominant understandings of sex/gender. This second stream is exemplified by Anne Fausto-Sterling, a queer biologist, activist, and granddaughter of Bundists. Building on the work of figures such as Ruth Hubbard, Fausto-Sterling continued a line of Jewish radical feminist thinking about biology. She also drew on her own family’s tradition of activism as well as on rabbinical texts to develop dialectical alternatives to the dominant theories of sex/gender and to fight against the medical industry’s violent enforcement of the binary. Both these streams celebrate the unruly diversity of life, which, contrary to the eugenicists, cannot be tamed.

Chapter 3 asks how alternatives to capitalist medicine and its eugenicist logic can be organized from the grass roots, by turning to the work of ACT UP. The chapter looks at how Jewish radicals in the group drew on the memories, experiences, and traditions of their Eastern European ancestors in the fight against the AIDS crisis. It focuses on activists Gregg Bordowitz and Avram Finkelstein,

both of whom embraced a form of autonomous organizing—rooted in direct action, mutual aid, and solidarity—and saw it as a natural part of what it means to be diasporic Jews (a quintessential example of *doikayt*). Their work aimed to address the whole AIDS crisis, with its underlying issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, lack of health care and housing, and other social ills. While they traveled parallel paths, both Bordowitz and Finkelstein drew on similar Jewish conceptions of time, memory, and bearing witness in their activism. Their trajectories show what is possible when people embrace the diaspora and build boundary-crossing alliances without giving up on their culture and history.

Part 2 continues the theme of part 1 but emphasizes the question, How is a radical tradition transmitted from generation to generation? The phrase “generation to generation” (in Hebrew, *l’dor v’dor*) is usually associated with the Pesach Haggadah, a text that asks us to see ourselves if we were our own ancestors, blurring the line between past and present. This part of the book highlights these intergenerational flows. And while part 1 focused on defending people and their bodies from eugenics, this part turns to the earth and the broader ecology of which we are part. It explores efforts to reconnect with ancestral healing traditions and to develop noncolonial relationships to the land. It also considers the roles that plants play in the struggle for wholeness.

Chapter 4 explores the life and work of Richard Levins—a biologist, activist, one-time farmer, and descendant of Jewish immigrants from the Pale who became an influential figure in the group Science for the People. Levins developed an approach to ecology, agriculture, and public health that is grounded in wholeness. As with others in these pages, his radical alternative to capitalist science emerged from his life—his upbringing among Jewish communist activists, his experiences as a farmer in Puerto Rico, and his lifelong collaboration with his wife and comrade, the Puerto Rican poet and activist Rosario Morales. Although usually presented as a generic communist who used Marxist dialectical thinking, Levins thought of himself as a “Jewish thinker” inspired by the Talmudic way of asking questions. The chapter traces the enormous influence of Jewish radicalism and traditions on Levins’s work.

It follows Levins's efforts to practice *doikayt* as he and Morales moved from different places, providing a window into how a radical tradition is transmitted and adapted to local conditions (to the changed "here"). The chapter then examines how Levins and Morales's struggles were continued and extended by their children, Ricardo Levins Morales and Aurora Levins Morales.

Chapter 5 continues exploring our connection to the earth by examining efforts to reclaim Jewish ancestral healing traditions, especially herbalism. These traditions have been largely lost due to genocide and assimilation; they have also been overshadowed by the cliché of Jews as the "People of the Book" who supposedly weren't interested in the earth, the plants, and the soil. This chapter traces Jewish approaches to healing that are very much concerned with those things, from the Torah and rabbinical literature, to the work of Eastern European rabbi-healers such as Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, to herbalists such as Dori Midnight. The figures in this chapter take us beyond a human-centric view of the world. They show how plants not only are a source of healing but can also be teachers and allies in struggles for wholeness and in cultivating a noncolonial relationship to the land. Continuing the theme of intergenerational flows, the chapter explores how activists have tried to address the incompleteness of their ancestors' *doikayt*—and confront their own status as settlers on Turtle Island—by joining Native struggles and trying to learn ways of being from plants. The chapter also shows how herbalists try to learn from one another's distinct ancestral healing traditions in a noncolonial, anticapitalist way, allowing traditions to flow horizontally, beyond "blood" kin.

Chapter 6 continues exploring intergenerational transmission and the search for connection to the earth. It examines the work of Fredy Perlman, a radical writer and printer who was deeply moved by his life experience as a child survivor of the Nazi Holocaust. The chapter follows Perlman's quest to make sense of the Holocaust, which he saw as a symptom of a genocidal Western civilization that, using technology and what he called "Death-Science," alienated people from their connections to the earth and chained their creative spirits inside hierarchies. Perlman and his accomplices, most notably his wife, Lorraine Perlman, experimented

with different ways of unchaining the human spirit. The chapter explores their efforts to develop nonhierarchical forms of collaboration through cooperative printing in the Detroit area. Cooperative printing became an important mode of transmitting struggles to the next generation without imposing a singular view but instead encouraging the creation of multiple fronts of anticapitalist struggle. For Fredy these printing efforts were accompanied by a search for those ancestral links to the earth that had been severed by a science- and technology-obsessed Western civilization. His search involved radical reinterpretation of the dominant stories about human nature, including stories from the Torah. He also looked to inspiration from Native ways of living on Turtle Island, acknowledging that Native tribes have been the major force trying “to keep the entire continent from being turned into an island of Capital.”

Windows, Illustrations, and Songs

Each chapter contains “windows”: self-contained fragments that supplement the main text. These windows reflect the associative, staccato feel of the traditional Jewish texts that animate this book, from the Talmud to old Hebrew books of healing. They are meant to encourage more interpretations of the materials here that enrich or differ from my own. I hope the windows will also help in continuing the work of assembly—piecing together fragments and making unexpected connections.

The chapters also contain illustrations by the artist and medical doctor Anna Zeligowski, which make the interdependence of life and the struggle for wholeness vivid. Like the windows, these illustrations encourage fresh perspectives on the book’s materials, its questions and contradictions. As I explain in more detail at the end of the book, these illustrations are themselves a product of the tradition of care described in these pages.

Since this tradition is so musical, I have also included a playlist in the back with songs that accompany each chapter.

These three elements—windows, illustrations, and songs—are invitations to commentary, a way to shake the notion that things have one definitive interpretation. To borrow from Black & Red, a radical press discussed in this book, these are calls to “create

another front” of struggle as opposed to trying to be “*the* front.” They are also a reminder that this is just one Jewish radical tradition out of many, each with its own songs and art.

Tracing *a* Tradition, Not *the* Tradition

My approach draws much inspiration from Cedric Robinson’s book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Robinson beautifully violates the norms of history by connecting different uprisings and formations of maroon communities by enslaved Africans in different times and places, showing that they are linked through what he calls “the Black radical tradition.” Robinson appreciates the spiritual forces behind these collective struggles, which are often ignored or disparaged in Western Marxist frameworks. He argues that the enslaved who rebelled were driven by the need to save their worlds—in his words, “to preserve the collective being, the ontological totality.”⁶¹ Robinson understands that there is always the potential to tap again into the forces that drove these revolutionary actions. He also shows that long after the fact, writers can, however imperfectly, put these forces into words, the way C. L. R. James put into words the cosmic force of the Haitian revolution. But as Robinson reminds us, the radical tradition isn’t created by writers—nor by any individuals—but by collective action and the intangible forces driving it.

While Robinson writes of “the” Black radical tradition, I want to emphasize that this book only scratches the surface in tracing *a* Jewish radical tradition, not *the* Jewish radical tradition. This specificity, which I think is important, comes from the movement of Jewish migrants from Eastern Europe to the US at a particular period. This tradition is inseparable from other places and times, as will become obvious, but it cannot stand in for the great diversity of Jewish traditions. Looking at other paths of migration in other time periods would lead us to other radical traditions. This book is another invitation to follow those paths and consider their implications for more areas of science and medicine than the handful I touch on here.

I also want to underscore Robinson’s insight that a tradition is made by people, but individual people aren’t the tradition. Although

shleimut is often (mis)translated as “perfection,” the individuals in these pages are, like all of us, imperfect. They may disappoint us (if they haven’t already). When the time comes for revolutionary action, they may fail to join or show solidarity, even if that was supposedly the point of their struggle. Intellectuals and artists whose work gives us glimpses of the radical tradition of their ancestors could be compromised by a dependence on the academy and the nonprofit industrial complex, which try to co-opt and commodify everything, including radical struggles.⁶² Zionism also continues to be a consistent threat, having entered so many Jewish spaces, hijacking traditions, symbols, and sources. It is what it is. We’ll have to eat contradictions for lunch.

*

Traditions aren’t simply out there to be collected, like seashells on the shore. Using words to stitch together what appear like very different things into a tradition feels like a magic trick. Luckily, magic and words are intimately linked. The phrase “abracadabra” that is uttered before magical acts comes from the Aramaic and Hebrew *avrah k’dabra*, which literally means “I bring into being as I speak.”⁶³ Speaking of the diverse efforts in this book as the tradition that they always were is an attempt to magically bring this tradition into being by encouraging others to view themselves in it—belonging to a larger whole that transcends their own time and place.

PART I

Saving Worlds from Eugenics—*Pikuach Nefesh*

פיקוח נפש

I

The Tradition of Shifra and Puah

Saving Our Worlds from Eugenics

Adam was created single in the world to teach that for anybody who destroys a single life it is counted as if he destroyed an entire world, and for anybody who preserves a single life it is counted as if he preserved an entire world.

—Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:9

Is there any standard that can be used to decide who has the right to live? There is no such standard.

—Marek Edelman

This world needs revolutionaries who refuse orders to kill and exploit. Shifra and Puah, two midwives from the book of Shemot (Exodus), were such revolutionaries. They interrupted eugenics, the practice of eliminating or exploiting people considered disposable by those in power. When Pharaoh asked them to kill the male babies of the enslaved Hebrews, they refused, playing on Pharaoh's racist beliefs to disobey the order. Shifra and Puah are part of a larger story in Shemot that cautions us against racial hierarchies and their use in creating social divisions and extracting wealth.

Shifra and Puah belong to a subversive tradition that cares for the oppressed. They keep reappearing when people reject eugenics and create alternatives. We find them in Jewish communities where midwives work, caring for the poor and marginalized, whether in the Pale of Settlement or the tenements of the Lower East Side in New York City. We find them when people try to survive under

extreme eugenic regimes, in places like Auschwitz and the Warsaw ghetto. Shifra and Puah are also there when women illegally organize forms of health care that aim to treat people as whole beings, not viewing them as passive patients like capitalist medicine does.

The tradition of Shifra and Puah is guided by *pikuach nefesh* (in Hebrew, literally “caring for the soul”): the idea that to save a life is to save an entire world and that to destroy a life is to destroy an entire world. By following Shifra and Puah, we can see how this principle is being put into practice by people living in very different times and places. It is an illustration of how a shared story from the Torah becomes much more than a story, inspiring material forms of care and binding together what may seem like disconnected events.

Shemot: A Tale of Resistance to Eugenics and Racial Capitalism

Who is worthy of a good life in this world? One infamous answer is *eugenics*, from the Greek for “well born.” The term was coined in the late nineteenth century by Francis Galton, whose work left a deep mark on science. Eugenics says only the “well born” are deserving of support and resources; the rest should do society’s dirtiest jobs, and their reproduction should be controlled. For Galton, eugenics was a logical application of the theory of natural selection developed by his cousin, Charles Darwin. It was a way to dispose of society’s “unfit” (Darwin was enthusiastic about eugenics too).¹

Most discussions of eugenics treat it as a modern phenomenon, exemplified by the Nazi program of “racial hygiene” (elimination of inferior “races”) or the earlier US eugenics regime that inspired the Nazis.² But eugenics goes as far back as the Hebrew Bible. The book of Shemot (Exodus) can be read as a tale of resistance to eugenics. It also contains a powerful warning about the very idea of “race.”

Shemot begins with a “demographic threat”: The Pharaoh of *mitzrayim* (usually translated as “Egypt”³) realizes that the enslaved Israelites, the labor force of his regime, are growing too numerous. He fears they might rebel. Pharaoh’s solution is eugenics. He decides to limit the Israelites’ reproduction, first by imposing harsher forms of labor. He makes the Israelites labor with mortar

and bricks and work the fields. He also employs abusive taskmasters. Yet the Israelites continue to live and have babies.

Pharaoh then makes another attempt, this time by trying to control women's reproduction (like modern eugenics regimes). Pharaoh asks Shifra and Puah, described as the "midwives of the Hebrew women," to kill the newborn Hebrew males. "When you deliver the Hebrew women," he tells them, "look at the birthstool: if it is a boy, kill him; if it is a girl, let her live."⁴

The midwives refuse. They deliver all babies safely. When Pharaoh asks Shifra and Puah why they didn't kill as instructed, they tell him the Hebrew women give birth "like animals": too quickly to intervene.⁵ Their answer shows that Pharaoh saw Hebrew women as racially distinct from non-Hebrew women. Shifra and Puah exploited this racist belief to disobey the order. This refusal made Shifra and Puah, as some have suggested, into "revolutionaries" who fight for the most vulnerable and oppressed.⁶

But who are these revolutionaries, Shifra and Puah? The phrase "midwives of the Hebrew women" in the text is ambiguous. It could mean that they are Hebrew women who work as midwives among their own or that they are Egyptian women who work as midwives for the Hebrews. This ambiguity adds another layer to the story's critique of race: The very idea of a racial "us" versus "them" is challenged by the possibility that Shifra and Puah are acting as "race traitors," siding with the people who are deemed racially inferior.

Shemot contains other cases of people refusing their assigned role in the racial hierarchy. An obvious example is the Pharaoh's unnamed daughter who retrieves baby Moses from the river, after another one of her father's eugenics policies (Pharaoh had ordered the people to throw the male Israelite babies in the river, so Moses's mother sent him down in a basket in hopes he'd be saved). The daughter lets Moses's mother nurse him, then she raises him as her own. Moses himself is a case of race betrayal: an Egyptian aristocrat who comes to the aid of the Hebrews upon witnessing their oppression and ends up playing a major role in their—and ultimately, his own—liberation struggle. And that liberation struggle was never just about freeing "my people." When Moses was forced to flee *mitzrayim* after standing up for the Israelites, he found refuge in a place called Midian, where he met his wife Zipporah and later

Shifra and Puah Disobey Pharaoh Again

When Pharaoh ordered Shifra and Puah to implement eugenics by killing the newborn male babies of the Hebrews, they disobeyed. When Pharaoh confronted them, they played to his racism, saying that the Hebrew women give birth too quickly, “like animals.” This was the first time Shifra and Puah disobeyed Pharaoh. Rabbinical texts imagine that the midwives disobeyed Pharaoh again, this time by challenging the idea that a baby’s sex can be clearly determined.

The order was to kill the Hebrew male baby during the delivery, the midwives tell Pharaoh, but how could they tell if the baby was a boy or a girl? Pharaoh responds, “If the child issues forth from the womb with its face foremost, it is a man child, for it looks to the earth, whence man was taken; but if its feet appear first, it is a female, for it looks up toward the rib of the mother, and from a rib woman was made.” But the midwives continue to resist. Pharaoh tries other tactics, without success. “He approached them with amorous proposals, which they both repelled, and then he threatened them with death by fire . . . [but] they failed to execute what Pharaoh had commanded,” the rabbis write. “Instead of murdering the babes, they supplied all their needs. If a mother that had given birth to a child lacked food and drink, the midwives went to well-to-do women, and took up a collection, that the infant might not suffer want.”¹

1. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 252.

decided to name their son Gershom—from the Hebrew root *ger*, meaning “foreigner”—in honor of the hospitality he had received as “a stranger in a foreign land.”⁷

It is striking that these much-admired biblical characters challenge the very notion of race. What seems to matter is their commitment to what is right rather than loyalty to their “race.” Race, as Dorothy Roberts argues, is a “fatal invention” that is meant to

destroy solidarity and create divisions.⁸ Such divisions can be used to create wealth, as the story of Shemot also demonstrates.

When Pharaoh realized he couldn't use the midwives to implement his eugenic policy, he decided to make slavery even more terrible. Pharaoh required the Israelites to collect their own straw for making bricks but demanded that they produce the *same* total number of bricks. The text specifically states, "You must go and get the straw yourselves wherever you can find it; but there shall be no decrease whatever in your work."⁹ This is a core feature of racial capitalism—squeezing value from racial difference—even if the system we now call "capitalism" didn't exist in the time and place of the biblical story (whatever that may be). Shemot tells us that such an exploitative system goes hand in hand with eugenics. And Shifra and Puah show one way of disrupting that system while their own ambiguous identities remind us that race is a fatal invention.

Shifra and Puah Ignite the Imagination

Rabbinical commentators have embraced the antieugenics message of Shifra and Puah. But they understood that their own communities could also be tempted by eugenics; that this ideology wasn't something that only some other, "bad" people would find appealing.

In *Shemot Rabbah*, a book of midrash (creative commentary on the Torah) compiled between the tenth and twelfth centuries, the rabbis creatively continue Shifra and Puah's efforts to interrupt eugenics—this time among the Israelites, not their enslavers. In this midrash, Shifra and Puah are Hebrew women. Puah's father is assumed to be Amram, Moses's father, which means Puah is Miriam, Moses's sister. The rabbis also decide that Amram is the head of the Sanhedrin, the Jewish court. When Pharaoh orders that all Israelite male babies be killed, Puah's father, Amram, divorces his wife, saying there is no point being with a woman if she can't bear him children that will live. "Shall an Israelite lie with his wife for nothing?" Amram asks in the midrash. When the other Israelite men see this, they also leave their wives. Puah then confronts her father: "Father, your decree is harsher than that of Pharaoh! He only decreed against the males, but you have decreed against both the males and the females.

It is doubtful whether the decree of the wicked Pharaoh will come to pass, but you are righteous, and so your decree will be fulfilled.”

The midrash says that Amram then went back to his wife and “following his lead, all the other Israelite men did the same.” Puah managed to end the eugenic policy of the powerful men in her community—in this case too by playing to feelings of superiority (Pharaoh is “wicked,” she says, but father, “you are righteous”).

Shifra and Puah are so opposed to eugenics that rabbinical commentaries say the struggle to let babies live is inscribed in their very names. An early fourteenth-century commentary from Spain says that Shifra is derived from the Hebrew word *shfoferet*, meaning “tube,” because of the old practice of resuscitating babies by blowing a tube of reed into their bowels. The Talmud imagines that Puah is derived from a Hebrew verb for crying out (*po’ah*) because of the sounds the midwives made to soothe crying babies.¹⁰ Earlier rabbis had also imagined that the midwives’ names reflected their unruliness. Shemot Rabbah suggests that Puah’s name comes from a Hebrew phrase meaning “insolent” (*ho’fiah panim*) because Puah “was insolent toward Pharaoh and looked down her nose at him. She told him: ‘Woe to you on the day of judgment, when God will come to demand punishment of you.’”¹¹

Perhaps this insolence, this willingness to defy patriarchal authority (Jewish or not), is what led to Shifra and Puah being excluded from the Passover Haggadah. In that canonical telling of the Israelites’ liberation from slavery in *mitzrayim*, the midwives are nowhere to be found.

“May No Obstruction Be Caused by My Hands”

Jewish midwives in Europe continued the tradition of Shifra and Puah, which is evident from how they described their own work. In 1794, Roza bat Yukel, a Jewish midwife working in Groningen, Netherlands, wrote the following introduction (in both Hebrew and Yiddish) to the birth records of the babies she had delivered:

This is the book of the generations/children of man, those that were born by my hands among the Hebrew women.

I came to them, I the midwife, for they are vital and give birth to a son or daughter. I took this book as my possession, and I recorded in the name of those giving birth with the name of the newborn, with the date of birth, so that it should be a remembrance from the day I began this occupation and forward. . . . I am engaged in this profession, and may no obstruction be caused by my hands, heaven forbid, neither to the woman sitting on the birthing stool nor to the newborn about to be born: Only let it be expelled from the uterus like an egg from a hen.¹²

Roza bat Yukel sees herself as working “among the Hebrew women,” calling back to the ambiguous description of the midwives from Shemot. The phrase “birthing stool” is a direct reference to the birthing stool on which Shifra and Puah delivered babies, while the phrase “give birth to a son or daughter” signals a rejection of the Pharaoh’s order to kill the male babies. “May no obstruction be caused by my hands” is a beautiful way of saying the midwife’s duty is to refuse eugenics.

As historian Jordan Katz argues, birth records such as Roza bat Yukel’s allow us to hear Jewish midwives in “their own voices, unmediated by men.”¹³ While governments hoped to use these birth records to track populations, Roza signaled that her allegiance was to Shifra and Puah, not the state. Indeed, Jewish midwives in Europe sometimes subverted the authorities in part through obfuscated recordkeeping. In the early eighteenth century, as Katz notes, these midwives sometimes identified birthing women “solely through the person whose home they resided in, or by the baked goods they peddled on the street,” leaving records that were illegible to the authorities and only later “consolidated into a recognizable format.”¹⁴

Like Shifra and Puah, these midwives sometimes had to openly disobey the authorities to protect the vulnerable. A record from a Jewish community near Hamburg in the eighteenth century describes an insolent midwife named Friedche who was interrogated by tax assessors and community leaders (*parnasim*) about the “illegitimate child that was born at her hands.” Friedche refused to



Figure 1.1: Midwife Roza bat Yukel's introduction to her birth register, Groningen, 1794. The introduction was written in both Yiddish (left panel) and Hebrew (right panel). Courtesy of Bibliotheca Rosenthaliana, Allard Pierson, University of Amsterdam.

disclose the identity of the birth mother and was “banned for this audacity” from the community. A representative of the synagogue declared, “The midwife Friedche is forbidden and banned, for she served as a midwife for an illegitimate child and she refuses to reveal to the *kahal* [community] who is the whore that gave birth to the child.”¹⁵

Midwives in this period also worked in a socialist fashion that contradicted the expanding capitalist institutions of their day. For example, a Jewish community in Berlin decided not to reduce their midwife’s salary in 1774, despite economic hardships, because “it is well-known that she served the poor of our community for free.”¹⁶ Midwives were often paid from a communal fund, so they could serve the poor, and sometimes received free housing.¹⁷

Shifra and Puah were there when midwives worked for the vulnerable. A remembrance book (*memorbukh*) from a Jewish community in Frankfurt recalls a midwife who passed away in 1753, stating she “was involved in charity work for the living and for the dead. She delivered young babies at the *hekdesch* [infirmary and hostel for the poor] like Puah and Shiprah . . . and prepared medications with no charge for the rich and poor alike.”¹⁸ A tribute to another midwife states that she was like “Shifra and Puah and sat nights and days by women in labor and the sick, poor and rich, and dealt with medications and bandages by herself . . . with any person in issues of medications, bruises and wounds for the rich and the poor, and any person who turned to her.” It was also noted that “she lent [money] to the poor in times of need.”¹⁹

Midwives in the Pale of Settlement were also inspired by Shifra and Puah. Socialist writer S. An-sky—who wrote the Bund’s anthem, “*Di shvue*”—noted in his ethnography of Jews in the Pale, conducted shortly before World War I, that “the models for midwives are Shiprah and Puah, who refused to fulfill the cruel order of the Pharaoh.” He adds that “individuals kept life long ties with the midwife who delivered them and were considered her ‘grandchildren.’ The more ‘grandchildren’ the midwife had, the larger was her share of the world to come.”²⁰ The *Jewish Daily Forward* celebrated one of these midwives, Ester Khaye “the *bobe*” (grandmother), from the shtetl of Antopol, Belarus. “She brought half of



Figure 1.2: "Midwives Against Genocide" by Anna Zeligowski.



Figure 1.3: Ester Khaye, a midwife from Antopol, Belarus. The photograph appeared in the *Jewish Daily Forward*, April 20, 1924, with the caption “Ester Khaye the ‘bobe’ (grandmother), a midwife. She brought half of Antopolia into the world. Only in extreme cases is a doctor called to deliver a child in European towns.” Source: YIVO Institute for Jewish Research.

Antopolia into the world,” the newspaper stated in 1924. “Only in extreme cases is a doctor called to deliver a child in European towns.”²¹

Shifra and Puah live on.

Shifra and Puah in the Struggle Against Racial Capitalism

Jews living under the most extreme regimes of eugenics and racial capitalism sometimes thought of themselves like the enslaved Israelites.²² In resisting these regimes, they used the subversive tactics of Shifra and Puah.

We can see this in Auschwitz-Birkenau, which functioned not only as a death camp but also as a racial capitalist factory. The Nazis tried to extract everything from their captives. Important details come from the Sonderkommando, the prisoners forced to do the dirtiest work in the Nazi pipeline. These prisoners were, in the words of Jewish Hungarian doctor and Sonderkommando survivor Miklos Nyiszli, the “commando of the living dead.”²³ As Nyiszli reports, the Sonderkommando had to ensure that those about to be slaughtered put away their shoes and clothes neatly, so that these items could be used by Germans. The Sonderkommando then extracted the remaining valuables, like the gold from the crowns of the teeth (up to seventy-five pounds of pure gold, once smelted, each day) and the hair, which the Nazis used in making detonators for delayed-action bombs (among other uses). The last job was to burn the bodies. As one survivor of the unit once put it, “If all the trees in the world were pens and all the water ink, we still couldn’t record the Sonderkommando’s pain.”²⁴

Sonderkommando prisoners with medical skills, such as Dr. Nyiszli, also had to dissect the bodies of prisoners selected by the SS officer and doctor Josef Mengele. Organs of interest were sent to elite scientific institutions in Berlin.

The prisoners were even forced to build the facilities of their own captivity, as Nyiszli describes in his memoir, by laboring with brick just like the enslaved Israelites:

It was they who had worked in the Mauthausen [concentration camp] quarries cutting the blocks; it was they who

had carried the finished stones along the seven-kilometer path up the mountain. . . . And it was they who had constructed the powerful walls around their house of sorrow, which was composed of wooden barracks. They had finished the castle at the price of unbelievable suffering, but they had never lived to occupy it. In the midst of this great mass of stone and concrete they had all perished, like the slaves in ancient Egypt.²⁵

Nyiszli also gives us a view of the resistance inside the Nazi death factories, which is where we find the tradition of Shifra and Puah.

Like the biblical Pharaoh, Josef Mengele wanted to use those who care for the vulnerable to implement eugenics. The Nazis handled infectious diseases (such as typhoid fever) in any part of Auschwitz by exterminating all the prisoners in the vicinity, and they needed doctors to diagnose infections. When Nyiszli was ordered by Mengele to dissect the dead bodies of prisoners to determine the cause of death, he understood that the fate of several barracks might be in his hands.

Nyiszli decided to hide cases of typhoid fever by making up creatively false diagnoses. He remembers a pair of autopsies where he found clear signs of typhoid fever: ulcerous small intestines and swollen spleens. Mengele came to interrogate Nyiszli in the operating room after the autopsies, with the bodies on the table and the spleens and intestines in containers, ready for inspection. Nyiszli confidently told Mengele that this was “not a question of typhoid fever, but a serious inflammation of the small intestine, probably caused by meat poisoning.”²⁶ Like Shifra and Puah, Nyiszli played on Mengele’s racism—or more precisely, the incompetence resulting from his commitment to racial science. “Dr. Mengele was a race biologist and not a pathologist,” Nyiszli recalls, “so it was not difficult to convince him that my [incorrect] diagnosis was correct.”²⁷

The prisoner doctors assigned to Auschwitz’s barracks participated in the subversion and took care of sick prisoners. “They were careful not to reveal any cases of infectious diseases to the SS medical authorities,” Nyiszli writes. “As often as was possible

they went so far as to conceal the sick person in a corner of the barracks, and cared for him as best they could with the meager resources at their disposal. They avoided at all costs sending the sick to the hospital, since the SS doctors checked all patients there and the appearance of a contagious disease meant the liquidation both of the barracks where the disease had originated and of the neighboring barracks as well.” When the Nazis started using blood tests for typhoid fever, prisoner doctors sent samples of their own blood to save the infected prisoners.²⁸

Nyiszli’s Sonderkommando unit eventually took up arms against the Nazis, an action made possible by the subversive work of imprisoned Jewish women.²⁹ Some of these women smuggled gunpowder from the munitions factory where they worked to the Sonderkommando, hiding it in their dresses and bras. When the Sonderkommando attacked their Nazi enslavers on October 7, 1944, they killed four SS men and injured many more, and they threw one kapo known for his cruelty into a burning oven.³⁰ They also blew up one of Auschwitz’s four crematoriums, making it unusable.³¹

Many of the Sonderkommando were killed in the fight or executed after. Only a small number survived the war. One Sonderkommando prisoner shot in the uprising was, surprisingly, allowed by the SS to be sent to the hospital, to be dealt with later; there, a prisoner doctor from Warsaw treated his wounds and hid him, and he survived the war.³² Four of the Jewish women who supplied the explosives for the uprising—Ala Gertner, Roza Robota, Regina Sapirstein, and Ester Wajcblum—were tortured for days and publicly hanged in January 1945, only weeks before Auschwitz was evacuated.

Pikuach Nefesh: Preserving Our Worlds

The tradition of Shifra and Puah is ultimately about *pikuach nefesh*, or literally, “caring for the soul.” It is usually presented as the principle that saving a life takes precedence over other Jewish obligations, such as keeping Shabbat. But *pikuach nefesh* is more fully captured by the idea in the Talmud that to preserve a single life is

to preserve an entire world, and that to destroy a single life is to destroy an entire world.³³

Yet preserving worlds means that *pikuach nefesh* isn't simply about keeping as many people alive as possible.

What would you do if your loved ones were about to be taken away to be enslaved or murdered? How would you try to save them? And if you couldn't save them, would you join them or would you stay, if you had the option, knowing you might be next? What if it were your children—would you let them go alone to that bad place? And what if it were you who was being taken away? Would you leave your children behind, maybe place them in the hands of strangers so they survive but, as a result, lose their identity—lose the world they shared with you—and likely suffer in other ways?

The Warsaw ghetto forced people to confront these questions. Officially sealed in November 1940, it was the largest ghetto made by the Nazis, in a city where nearly one-third of the residents were Jewish. At its peak, the Nazis crammed nearly half a million Jews into an area of 3.4 square kilometers, less than 3 percent of the city's area.³⁴ More than seven people lived in a room in the ghetto, on average. Disease and starvation became widespread. The Nazis restricted calories to the ghetto according to a plan that would have starved everyone to death; it was thanks to smugglers (often children) who brought in food and other supplies that this was avoided.³⁵ The able-bodied among the captives were enslaved in workshops to make products for German citizens and the army.

The Nazis would periodically perform "selection": sending those considered unfit for work to the gas chambers—mostly children, elders, the disabled, and the sick. This process was influenced by the idea of "natural selection," as promoted by Charles Darwin and the eugenicists who embraced his ideas, for whom such genocidal violence was simply natural. Selection took place at the *umschlagplatz*, a large area where captives were divided into those who would work in the ghetto and those who would board the cattle train to the death camps.

Yet there were great efforts to rescue people from selection, to preserve their worlds. Subversion was a primary tactic. Doctors and nurses pulled people out of selection by telling the Nazis that

they were too sick to make “the journey east” (the Nazi euphemism for being sent to the death camps) and needed urgent medical care. The Nazis allowed for some medical care in order to maintain the fiction that those boarding the trains were heading to labor camps. Luba Bielicka-Blum, a Bundist who ran the nursing school in the ghetto, exploited this medical exception to smuggle people out, with the help of her nursing students (she also got her own children out of the ghetto in an ambulance).³⁶ Marek Edelman, a Bundist who fought in the Warsaw ghetto uprising of 1943, stood at *umschlagplatz* and helped identify people who should be diagnosed as “sick,” such as those involved in smuggling operations for the resistance.³⁷

The nursing students participating in this scheme not only pretended there were injuries but sometimes created them. They broke the legs of captives who wouldn’t have passed selection so they could be evacuated in ambulances. “They would wedge a leg up against a wooden block and then smash it with another block,” Edelman recalls. “All this in their shiny white robes of model students.”³⁸ Like Shifra and Puah, these nurses deceived the oppressors by playing to their racism; Jews were apparently of a weak, “degenerate race” that needed much medical support.

Sometimes an entire medical operation was faked. Nachum Remba, who worked for the Judenrat and could therefore move more freely around the ghetto, donned a white coat and pretended to be a doctor so he could remove people from selection. Remba worked with Ala Gołąb-Grynberg, head nurse of the ghetto, and nursing students. Together, they pulled hundreds of people out of selection who were “diagnosed” as too weak to travel, sending them back to the ghetto. This included many children, who Gołąb-Grynberg would sometimes drug with sleeping pills so they wouldn’t cry.³⁹ Those being rescued were initially taken to a fake “first-aid station” that was set up nearby. The Nazis believed the act. They apparently even started referring to Remba as “Chief Physician Remba.”⁴⁰

Jonas Turkow, a Jewish actor from Warsaw, was one of the people rescued by Remba. Turkow recalls how Remba came into the chaotic *umschlagplatz*, where the Nazis routinely beat and executed captives: “Remba, dressed in his doctor’s coat, went from one

place to the next, from one German to the other, rescuing Jews, pulling them out of the *Umschlagplatz* and sending them back to the ghetto. . . . Fearlessly and with dignity, he faced the German henchman on the *Umschlagplatz* and demanded that they free this very sick one who is unable to make the ‘difficult journey east.’ ”⁴¹

Like the Pharaoh of Shemot, the soldiers could be tricked. “Even the Germans, with their refined system of punctuality, were capable of being fooled,” Turkow writes. “And until they caught on to the ‘Jewish trick’ many a Jew was rescued.”⁴²

But these subversive tactics only went so far, obviously; most people could not be saved. Moreover, the Nazis created a condition where Jewish captives had to “choose” who got to live, something they railed against in their bones. As Edelman puts it, “Is there any standard that can be used to decide who has the right to live? There is no such standard.”⁴³

*

During rounds of selection in the ghetto, it was common for people who could have stayed as workers to “choose” to go with their children or parents to the death camps. Edelman recalls the case of Pola Lifszyc, a Bundist who could have crossed to the “Aryan” side, with good chances of survival, because she was “young, pretty, unlike a Jew.” But upon learning her mother was taken away, she raced to join her in the *umschlagplatz* and sneaked into the train to the death camp.⁴⁴ Pola Lifszyc decided to preserve the world she had made with her mother. Janusz Korczak (birthname Henryk Goldszmit), director of the Warsaw ghetto orphanage, was apparently offered a way out of the *umschlagplatz* by Remba, but he similarly chose to go to Treblinka with the children of his orphanage.⁴⁵

Anna Braude-Heller, a Bundist doctor who worked at the children’s hospital in the Warsaw ghetto, also refused to leave her children. Bernard Goldstein, a Bundist who helped organize the armed resistance, recalls Braude-Heller’s response when he offered her a way out of the ghetto: “ ‘This has been suggested before, Bernard,’ she said with a smile. Her voice was grim. ‘I am not going. I have agreed to send my son and his wife and child. As long as there are Jews in the ghetto, I am needed here, and here I will stay.’ ”⁴⁶

Braude-Heller was killed during or shortly after the ghetto uprising of April 1943 (how, exactly, remains unclear). Some twenty years earlier, Braude-Heller had written that no children should be “nobody’s children”—that no child should be left alone.⁴⁷ She stayed true to this principle.

The children of the ghetto also worked to preserve their own worlds. Turkow remembered a three-year-old girl who sat on the frozen ground as it snowed, rocking the cradle where her baby sibling was crying to the skies. They were alone. The girl kept rocking the cradle, occasionally wiping the snow from the baby’s face. Nazi soldiers watched this from their post with apparent pleasure. Turkow writes that this “three-year-old ‘mother’ looked like a Golem made of snow, from which two large shining eyes pierced through. Jewish eyes.”⁴⁸ Turkow and other captives tried to reach the child, but the Nazis started shooting when they approached. They eventually managed to crawl near the girl and drop off candy and a bottle with tea (there was no milk). The next day, they saw these items were untouched. The girl kept caring for her baby sibling, trying to keep their world intact—until the Nazis took them away.

These are all instances of *pikuach nefesh* because they are about trying to keep worlds together against Nazi efforts to tear worlds apart. This is not the same as trying to get as many people as possible to continue to breathe for as long as possible, no matter what (which would take us back to the calculating realm of eugenics).

In fact, *pikuach nefesh* sometimes requires killing. We see it in the work of Gisella Perl, a Jewish Hungarian doctor from Sighet who was imprisoned in Auschwitz. In her hometown, Perl was a respected gynecologist. She had convinced her father, a rabbi, to let her study medicine; he made her promise that she would continue to be “a good, true Jew.”⁴⁹ In Auschwitz, Perl was forced to work as a gynecologist in the women’s camp under the supervision of Josef Mengele. Perl and other imprisoned doctors had access to Auschwitz’s “hospital”—a filthy place that lacked medical supplies, a “ghastly Nazi joke” in Perl’s words. They still tried to alleviate prisoners’ suffering with whatever they had. “We saw things as a whole,” Perl writes, “and forgot our personal fate in the fight



Figure 1.4: A little girl tending to a younger, starved child on her lap, on the pavement of the Warsaw ghetto (September 19, 1941). The photograph was taken by German soldier Heinrich Joest, whose original caption was, “These were clearly sisters. If the younger one was dead, I could not say. She did not move.” Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

for others.”⁵⁰ Perl treated prisoners with little material resources, sometimes just with reassuring words and stories of better days from the past to remind them of reasons to live.

Pregnant women in Perl’s camp were told by the Nazis to identify themselves, with the promise of better conditions. One day, Perl saw the fate of these women. They were taken near the crematoriums, surrounded by SS men and women, and “given a taste

of hell, after which death was a welcome friend. They were beaten with clubs and whips, torn by dogs, dragged around by the hair and kicked in the stomach with heavy German boots. Then, when they collapsed, they were thrown into the crematory—alive.”⁵¹

Witnessing these horrors, Perl was at first incapacitated. But then her “horror turned into revolt,” as she writes in her memoir, and the experience gave her “a new incentive to live.” Perl thought she had to live because “it was up to me to save all the pregnant women in Camp C from this infernal fate. It was up to me to save the life of the mothers, if there was no other way, then by destroying the life of their unborn children.”

Perl secretly told the prisoners of the real Nazi plan for pregnant captives and began hiding pregnancies. She would stand in front of pregnant women during roll call. She would bandage their abdomens with rags to mask protruding bellies (quite doable when bellies were already bloated from malnourishment). And she would deliver their babies in secrecy. “I delivered women pregnant in the eighth, seventh, sixth, fifth month,” Perl recalls, “always in a hurry, always with my five fingers, in the dark, under terrible conditions.” Perl accelerated some of these births by rupturing membranes; in other cases, Perl explained, she “produced dilation with my fingers, inverted the embryo and thus brought it to life” and then “quickly bandaged the mother’s abdomen and sent her back to work.”

When possible, Perl faked a diagnosis of pneumonia for the mothers (a condition the Nazis usually didn’t kill one for having, unlike infectious diseases) so they could be sent to the “hospital” to rest. Then Perl killed their babies, out of love:

No one will ever know what it meant to me to destroy these babies. After years and years of medical practice, childbirth was still to me the most beautiful, the greatest miracle of nature. I loved those newborn babies not as a doctor but as a mother and it was again and again my own whom I killed to save the life of a woman. Every time when kneeling down in the mud, dirt and human excrement which covered the floor of the barracks, to perform

a delivery without instruments, without water, without the most elementary requirements of hygiene, I prayed to God to help me save the mother or I would never touch a pregnant woman again.

Maybe her prayers were partially answered. "God was good to me," Perl says. All the women survived the birth.

One of these women was Yolanda, who was from Perl's hometown and used to make fine embroidery, including for baby clothes. Yolanda had difficulties getting pregnant, but after she finally did, with Perl's help, she promised Perl "the most beautiful present in the world when my baby arrives." Auschwitz interfered. "In the end it was I who gave her a present," Perl writes, "the present of her life—by destroying her passionately desired little boy two days after his birth." Perl had managed to hide Yolanda's pregnancy from the Nazis and accompany her through an extraordinarily difficult birth involving convulsive seizures. Like Moses's mother hid him until she couldn't and sent him down the river, Perl hid Yolanda's baby for two days, until it was no longer possible. "I knew that if he were discovered, it would mean death to Yolanda, to myself and to all the pregnant women whom my skill could still save. I took the warm little body in my hands, kissed the smooth face, caressed the long hair—then strangled him and buried his body under a mountain of corpses waiting to be cremated."⁵²

Another woman cared for by Perl was Eva Benedek, a violinist in the prisoners' orchestra that was organized by the SS. Benedek initially thought she and her baby would survive, but by the time of the birth, reality set in. Perl hid Benedek's pregnancy and delivered her baby. "I dare not take my son in my arms, Doctor," she told Perl after the birth. "I dare not look at him, I dare not kiss him, I dare not get attached to him. I feel it, I know it, that somehow they are going to take him away from me." Benedek didn't want to create a world with her son only to have it destroyed. Twenty-four hours after the birth, the Nazis issued an order that prohibited mothers from getting extra food, including the soup with flour that nourished them just enough to breastfeed. Benedek had to watch her son starve to death for eight days, until Perl laid his body to rest.

Perl tried to save the worlds of these women, and she did not act alone. She was part of a network of women in the camps (often unnamed in the archives) who cared for birthing mothers, creating outfits and diapers from rags for their babies to wear during their short existence on earth.⁵³ Perl represents this caring tradition.

In March 1945, the Nazis transferred Perl to Bergen-Belsen, a hell on earth that made her think “Auschwitz was no more than a Purgatory.” She was assigned to the “maternity block,” and on April 15, 1945, as British troops arrived, she delivered the first free baby in the camp—born to a partisan from Warsaw.⁵⁴ “Pale and exhausted, the young mother could hardly smile,” Perl recalls, “but the words leaving her bloodless lips were like a prayer: ‘Freedom . . . Freedom . . .’”⁵⁵

After the war, Perl continued to practice medicine and deliver babies, holding God accountable to the promise of a healthy child for every new life she had to end in Auschwitz.⁵⁶

Shifra and Puah Migrate

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Jews in Europe were on the move, and many ended up in the US. Between 1880 and 1914, about two million Jews emigrated from Europe to the US, mostly from Eastern Europe.⁵⁷ Naturally, they brought with them their cultures and ways of surviving oppressive regimes. Some of these immigrants became major forces in radical social movements, such as the Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman. In Goldman’s life, and in the efforts she inspired, we can find the spirit of Shifra and Puah.

Goldman was born in Kovno, Lithuania, part of the Pale of Settlement. Goldman arrived in the US in 1885, at age sixteen. She had already worked in a corset factory and experienced czarist oppression. She had also suffered the patriarchy at home from her abusive father (who said, “All a Jewish daughter needs to know is how to prepare *gefüllte* fish, cut noodles fine, and give the man plenty of children”⁵⁸) and in the school system that punished this rebellious child. Goldman was further radicalized by the brutality she encountered in the US. Her early political consciousness was shaped by the Chicago Haymarket tragedy of 1886, in which the state executed anarchists who fought for an eight-hour workday. Her convictions



Figure 1.5: Gisella Perl holding babies born free in the Bergen-Belsen concentration camp, 1946. Original caption: "Babies of Belsen: Dr. Gizzella Pearl, gynecologist who performed abortions and mercy killings to save countless inmates of the Belsen camp from torture and painful death, holds Polish, Jewish and French babies born at Belsen after the camp was liberated by the British. This photo was made at Belsen, before Dr. Pearl came to the U.S., where she is now living." Courtesy of Bulmash Family Holocaust Collection, Kenyon College.

were further intensified by the Homestead Strike of 1892, in which a strike by steelworkers in Pennsylvania was crushed by private police and the state's militia. As Goldman reflected in her memoir, "America, 'the land of the free and the home of the brave'—what a farce it now seemed to me!"

Goldman became a writer and organizer, connected to anarchist circles. She was fiercely opposed to capitalism, imperialism, the state, prisons and policing, racism, Zionism, and what she considered to be misguided tactics for changing the world (such as electoral politics).⁵⁹ In her speeches—given in English, Yiddish, Russian, German, Italian, or French, depending on the audience⁶⁰—she also railed against patriarchy and puritanical views of sexuality. She most enjoyed talking about sexuality with Jews, in Yiddish. "If only the English lectures were anything like the Jewish," Goldman once wrote to a friend, "the struggle would not be so hard."⁶¹

Goldman is known for many of these things, but her work as a midwife and nurse is often overlooked. It was through this line of work that she became committed to women's liberation, to mutual

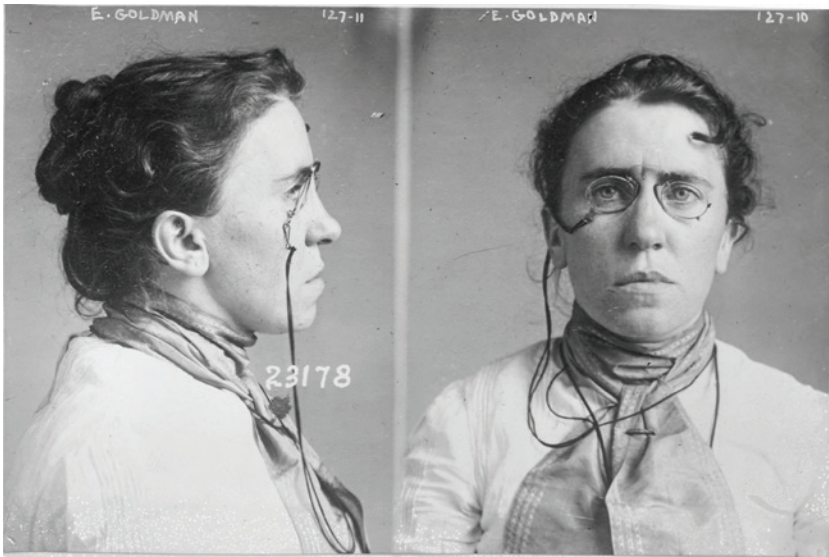


Figure 1.6: Emma Goldman mugshot from a 1901 arrest in Chicago.

aid, and to fighting against eugenics, inspiring many who would follow her path.

It started in prison. In 1893, Goldman was sentenced to one year in Blackwell's Island prison (she had been charged with "incitement to riot" for one of her speeches). A sympathetic prison doctor taught her the basics of nursing so she could help him treat other prisoners. The conditions were bad; everything from surgery to treatment of tuberculosis to childbirth took place in the same room. "My hours were long and strenuous, the groans of the patients nerve-racking; but I loved my job," Goldman recalls. "It gave me opportunity to come close to the sick women and bring a little cheer into their lives." As one of the more "privileged" prisoners, Goldman shared the food she received from loved ones on the outside with her fellow inmates. "I had so much to give; it was a joy to share with my sisters who had neither friends nor attention." Goldman was tasked with distributing food rations to sick prisoners and soon discovered that many rations were missing. She made this fact known, which angered the prison's head nurse, who had "a violent dislike of everyone not Anglo-Saxon," especially "the Irish and the Jews." Goldman was punished by being locked in the prison's dungeon. It only strengthened her commitment to liberation: "One must have the consolation of an ideal to survive the forces designed to crush the prisoner."⁶²

After her release, Goldman began working as a private nurse and midwife.⁶³ This was at a time when childbirth was being increasingly medicalized and taken over by male doctors. It was usually poor and immigrant women who would see midwives. "My profession of midwife was not very lucrative, only the poorest of the foreign element resorting to such services," Goldman writes in her memoir. "Those who had risen in the scale of material Americanism lost their native diffidence together with many other original traits. Like the American women they, too, would be confined only by doctors. Midwifery offered a very limited scope; in emergencies one was compelled to call for the aid of a physician."

Goldman refers here to a general "foreign element," but her description directly applies to poor Jewish women who immigrated to the US from Eastern European communities where birthing with

a midwife was the custom.⁶⁴ Those women would come to Goldman, both out of necessity and because that was the tradition of care that they knew—a tradition so different from professional medicine.

Gay Courter's novel *The Midwife* captures those differences and sheds light on how they might have been experienced by the Jewish immigrant women seen by Goldman. The novel follows the life of a midwife named Hannah, who comes from an observant Jewish family in Odessa. She had learned natural birthing techniques by apprenticing with an elder Jewish midwife. This was a world where it was obvious that childbirth should be handled by women, at home, without surgical instruments (unless truly necessary). Hannah's knowledge of natural birthing is even valued by Russian male doctors after she starts working in a Moscow hospital and manages to save a government minister's wife from a dangerous surgical intervention. The woman's baby was in transverse position, lying horizontally across the uterus. Hannah used a technique she learned from an elder midwife back home—"something so simple it never appeared in obstetrical texts!"⁶⁵—to get the baby to naturally reorient. Things were going well for Hannah until a wave of pogroms and her family's involvement with the illegal Bund forced her to leave for the US.

When Hannah arrived in the tenements of the Lower East Side in New York City, she found that women with money gave birth at hospitals, under the care of male doctors who were quick to use anesthesia and surgical instruments. The midwives in New York, left to serve poor immigrants, weren't like the midwives back home; they had poor hygienic practices and had lost the deep ancestral knowledge of childbirth. They also had no time to take good care of the women under their watch. Like Emma Goldman, Hannah served those Jewish women who barely had enough money to feed their own families.

*

For Emma Goldman, working as a midwife in such conditions was a radicalizing experience. "It put me into intimate contact with the very people my ideal strove to help and emancipate," Goldman recalls. "It brought me face to face with the living conditions of the workers, about which, until then, I had talked and written mostly from theory." Through midwifery she saw that there was, in her

words, “colossal work yet to be done to bring about the change our movement was struggling to achieve.”⁶⁶

This “colossal work” had to include giving women protection from a capitalist society that viewed them as incubators for a cheap workforce. This is why Goldman advocated for women to have access to contraceptives. She was imprisoned again in 1916 for distributing literature about birth control, which was illegal at the time.

The effort to make contraceptives accessible to women put Goldman into uneasy alliances with eugenicists such as Margaret Sanger, founder of the organization that would become Planned Parenthood. Sanger wanted white American women to have reproductive autonomy, and therefore advocated for access to contraceptives, but also wanted to limit the reproduction of poor Black communities, seeing them as a toll on society. Sanger pushed for birth control clinics to be placed in Black neighborhoods, staffed by Black workers but ultimately controlled by white elites with a eugenicist agenda, such as herself.⁶⁷ Goldman rejected this eugenicist agenda but shared Sanger’s goal of making birth control accessible. The relationship became tense when Sanger (correctly) accused Goldman and her comrades of using birth control advocacy to promote a larger anarchist program, and when Sanger “failed to aid birth-control advocates caught in the meshes of the law.”⁶⁸ Sanger also spoke of Goldman in racist terms (even while supposedly admiring her fierceness), referring to her as “short, stocky, even stout, a true Russian peasant type.”⁶⁹ This episode showed the difficulty of working as a Jewish outsider in a US society where eugenics is ingrained.

Goldman was committed to the poor and working-class women that eugenics sought to exploit or eliminate, women who often “lived in continual dread of conception.” Many of those women who were married accepted having more children, but others desperately tried to end their pregnancies. As Goldman recalls, “It was incredible what fantastic methods despair could invent: jumping off tables, rolling on the floor, massaging the stomach, drinking nauseating concoctions, and using blunt instruments. These and similar methods were being tried, generally with great injury. It was harrowing, but it was understandable.”⁷⁰ Some Orthodox Jewish women who already had many children would tell Goldman that

each additional child was “a curse from God.” Goldman wanted these women to be able to control their own reproduction, against the pressures put on them by society and their husbands.

These women begged Goldman for abortions, promising to get the money to pay for them. Goldman wasn’t opposed to performing abortions on moral grounds, and didn’t care about the money, but feared that the procedure as practiced then would harm the women. She was trying to preserve these women’s worlds, treating the whole rather than only being a medical service provider. Yet some women told Goldman that even if abortion meant death, “they preferred to die . . . the city was then sure to take care of their orphans, and they would be better off.”⁷¹

Goldman was devoted to the women she worked with, just like the old midwives of Europe who were likened to Shifra and Puah. Even on the day she was deported from the US—in December 1919 as part of the notorious Palmer Raids—Goldman took the time to help a fellow Jewish anarchist get an abortion. This woman, Hilda Adel, later reflected, “Emma spoke to me personally the day she was deported. I needed an abortion. We were poor. . . . Emma called [me] on the telephone. She didn’t know me that intimately, yet she was concerned about me and determined to help—on the very day that she was thrown out of the country!”⁷² Millie Grobstein also remembers Goldman’s devotion as a nurse when Goldman visited her in Toronto in the 1920s: “Father was very ill with rheumatic fever, and she would come to the house every day—it was a three-story house—and trudge up those two flights of stairs, bringing him medicine, feeding him lunch, all to relieve my mother of part of the burden. She was so compassionate!”⁷³

“Who Cares About the Law?”

Since Emma Goldman passed away in 1940, eugenics has continued in different forms. In the 1960s and ’70s, thousands of Indigenous women were sterilized in the US, either without their knowledge or by coercion and force. Black women were also intensely targeted. The radical organizer, musician, and farmer Fannie Lou Hamer was one of many subjected to a “Mississippi appendectomy”: She

went in to have a tumor removed, but the doctor removed her entire uterus.⁷⁴ The eugenicists have also acquired new tools, from long-term contraceptives to prenatal medical tests that promise to predict the “desirable” and “undesirable” traits of the newborn.⁷⁵

What does it take to continue the tradition of Shifra and Puah when some of the tools we might need for reproductive autonomy become instruments of eugenics? And what do we do about the fact that these tools are in the hands of the capitalist medical establishment?

Women inspired by Goldman decided to create alternative forms of care that reject eugenics. Several of these initiatives were named after Goldman, such as the Emma Goldman Clinic, established in 1973 in Iowa City. It was founded after the US Supreme Court case of *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion that same year. The clinic is “committed to participating in the struggle to end all forms of oppression based on: ableism, ageism, body size, classism, ethnic origin, racism, religion, sexism, sexual identity, national origin.”⁷⁶ The Emma Goldman Clinic rejects the eugenicist agenda that people like Margaret Sanger promoted. For this reason, for example, the clinic refuses to administer Norplant—a long-term birth control shot that women (often Black women) have been coerced into getting, sometimes as punishment by courts.⁷⁷ The Emma Goldman Clinic declares that it is “unwilling to participate in oppression through coercive birth control tactics.”⁷⁸

Before *Roe v. Wade*, when having an abortion was considered a crime (as it is again today in some US states), organizing illegal alternatives was essential. Emma Goldman thought that such illegal organizing had revolutionary potential. It was a form of direct action, of organizing the things we need ourselves, without the state. In those illegal spaces, Goldman claims, “lies the salvation,” because “everything illegal necessitates integrity, self-reliance, and courage.” Goldman says that women especially have “a force of divine fire” to bring to such underground spaces.⁷⁹

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We find such divine fire in the organization that became known as Jane, or “the Service”—or officially, the Abortion Counseling Service

of the Chicago Women's Liberation Union.⁸⁰ Jane operated from 1969 until the 1973 legalization of abortion by *Roe v. Wade* (a decision that was overturned in 2022). You could go to Jane to get an abortion without needing justification; people were simply told to call a number and "ask for Jane." Between 1969 and 1973, the organization provided over eleven thousand abortions to women of diverse backgrounds, many of them poor. Over one hundred women, known as "Janes," worked in the group throughout its existence.

Jane was founded by Heather Booth, a Jewish student at the University of Chicago. It began as a referral service: Booth would send women in need to T. R. M. Howard, a Black civil rights activist and surgeon who secretly performed abortions. More women later joined to help run the group, and more abortion providers became part of the underground network once vetted by Jane. Jane provided an (illegal) abortion service for women who had no other safe options. There were "butchers" and "quacks," as the Janes called them, who performed illegal abortions in dangerous and degrading ways. Women who went down that road could face sexual harassment and assault, in addition to the obvious health risks. Such illegal abortions were also unaffordable for most. And contraceptives were difficult to obtain: The birth control pill was fully legalized in the US only in 1965, and even then, only for married women.

For Jane, the abortion service was part of a broader struggle. Capitalist society served very few; for most, it provided little support. The burdens of care—especially childcare—fell disproportionately on women, while men in power were trying to regulate their bodies. An abortion service that was run by women was necessary for survival. It was also a way to experiment with alternatives to patriarchal, capitalist health care. Yet Jane also understood that abortions could become instruments of eugenics. The organization's pamphlet states that "some are actually attempting to control some populations, prevent some births—for instance those of black people or poor people. We are opposed to these or any form of genocide."⁸¹ Like Emma Goldman, Jane wanted abortions and contraceptives to be made available to *all* women, on women's terms—in opposition to eugenics.

When the Janes learned that one of their most skilled abortionists didn't have a medical degree, they realized that they too could learn to perform abortions—and some of them did. From then on, abortions were done by the Janes themselves. This allowed the organization to only charge women whatever they could afford to pay for the abortion (sometimes nothing or just a jar of coins).⁸² Some Janes saw this as a return to the times when midwives were in charge. As one Jane puts it, "Somehow the medical profession which is male-dominated got control of women's bodies; I saw the fight as largely winning control back from the medical profession."⁸³ Some of the Janes learned to give a shot of ergometrine, a drug derived from the ergot fungus that induces abortions and reduces bleeding, which had been used by midwives in Europe for centuries.⁸⁴

Yet Jane tried to care for the whole person rather than just provide a medical service. Jane's information pamphlet, for example, explains the medical procedure for an abortion but also adds, "You may have some emotional 'blues' after your abortion. Partly this is because of the way we're brought up, partly it is because of hormonal changes in your body. If you want to talk this over with someone, call us." Jane also offered birth control advice, distributed feminist health guides such as *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, performed pap smears, and linked women with vetted physicians for follow-ups. They provided childcare for the women who were getting abortions and created a cozy environment for them and their partners.⁸⁵

To care for people as whole beings, Jane broke away from medicine's hierarchical model. Some Janes called themselves "paramedics" to emphasize that they weren't part of the professional medical system. They also didn't wear traditional medical garb, nor try to hide their identities despite the illegality of their work (sometimes the procedure took place at a Jane's home, with her children around).⁸⁶ Some Janes also refused to call the women receiving abortions "patients," because they considered it objectifying, and referred to them instead as people "coming through the Service." They wanted these women to be "partners in political activities—partners in crime, to be exact,"⁸⁷ not passive receivers of a service. They also only used a local anesthetic during abortions so that the women would stay awake and hear an explanation of

what was being done to their bodies (it was also easier to detect drug allergies this way). And since stirrups were not used, during the procedure, women could ask for a break to get up and stretch.⁸⁸ It was all very different from the cold, judgmental, male-dominated service provided by hospitals at the time.

Running Jane required subversion. The Janes pretended to be doctors when buying medical supplies such as gauze, forceps, or curettes. They obtained the necessary drugs from a supportive pharmacist and would wash the labels off the bottles to avoid implicating him. Since the Janes were surveilled by the modern-day Pharaoh—the police—they acted accordingly. Women and their loved ones would gather at one location (called “the Front”) and then be driven by Janes to another location (called “the Place”) where the abortion took place (usually an apartment or dorm room), and these locations were changed each day. One of the Janes, Judith Arcana, recalls, “One of our guidelines was to always drive as if we were being followed, and so I was using small streets and turning here and there.”⁸⁹

In May 1972, Chicago police raided two of Jane’s locations and arrested seven of the Janes, including Arcana. She remembers getting “tremendous satisfaction” when she listened to the cops testify in court that they had trouble following her car and lost her several times.⁹⁰ The seven Janes present during the raid refused to talk to the police.⁹¹ Some started tearing up and eating the index cards that had personal information about women coming through the Service.⁹² The seven were arrested and jailed (but soon released on bail). They faced sentences of over one hundred years each. The lawyer they picked intentionally stalled until January 1973, when *Roe v. Wade* legalized abortion. The charges against the Janes were then dismissed.

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Judith Arcana (birth name Rosenfield) was interested in the link between Jane and Jewishness.⁹³ She recalls that there were many Jewish Janes and that at the time, they would make “awful, but funny” jokes about it, like “I guess it’s true what they say about us, that we kill babies” (a reference to the medieval blood libel).⁹⁴ But



Figure 1.7: Mugshots of four of the seven Janes arrested in May 1972.
Top: Sheila Smith (left), Martha Scott (right). Bottom: Diane Stevens (left),
Judith Arcana (right).

beneath the joke was something serious. Arcana began to wonder, Why *did* so many “nice Jewish girls” end up in “an underground criminal abortion outfit?”⁹⁵

Arcana’s grappling with her own Jewishness led her to an answer. She grew up with Yiddish-speaking grandparents, in a family that celebrated the major holidays and where the politics were felt. Her grandfather was a member of a Cleveland branch of the Arbeter Ring, a Yiddish-speaking mutual aid group.⁹⁶ Arbeter Ring believed in “collective medicine”⁹⁷ and provided health care to its members; it also made payments to members who were sick, disabled, or on strike and provided free burial. Arcana’s grandfather was deeply committed to these ideals, which Arcana absorbed growing up. But as a young adult, she came to believe that she “wasn’t a Jew” because she had stopped “believing in God” and had no interest in being observant.⁹⁸ In her early thirties, however, Arcana reclaimed her Jewishness and found new meaning in it.

The reclamation took place through a personal ceremony that included reading aloud the book of Judith, one of the books excluded from the Hebrew Bible. “I wanted to understand more about my namesake and her way of being a Jew,” Arcana recalls.⁹⁹ In the book, Judith is said to serve a God that is “a helper of the oppressed, an upholder of the weak, a protector of the forlorn, a savior of those who are without hope.”¹⁰⁰ Judith is subversive and defiant. She charms and then murders Holofernes, a military general who had besieged her city. “Strike, by the deceit of my lips,” says Judith, “break down their stateliness by the hand of a woman.”¹⁰¹

Judith of the book changed things for Arcana: “I realized she was not in the bible because she wasn’t a good girl; she was a powerful woman, she took action, she was not going to be Sarah or one of the others in our book. That was an extreme emotional, spiritual, and even political experience, and it just continued since then.”¹⁰² Emma Goldman, whom Arcana considers her “spiritual influence,”¹⁰³ also identified with Judith, writing in her memoir that “at the age of eight I used to dream of becoming a Judith and visioned myself in the act cutting off Holofernes’ head to avenge the wrongs of my people. But since I had become aware that social injustice is not confined to my own race, I had decided that there

were too many heads for one Judith to cut off.”¹⁰⁴ The Judiths had to come together and fight for all. The subversive Jewish tradition that Judith belonged to—despite (or perhaps because of) being excluded from the Hebrew Bible—is useful in this fight.

This was the sense of being Jewish that Arcana reclaimed in her thirties. She describes her reclamation in a poem titled “Return,” where she writes of “the sound of rabbinical repetition” that “echoes down the well of my past” and “vibrates in the deep flesh of my life as a Jew”; of a rhythm that is “beating with the pulse of old men in shawls.” The poem concludes,

So that yes, I am the dusky Jewess
the rabbi’s wet dream
and his nightmare
I come in the *shabbas* midnight
the queen and the bride
to lay my sword on the bed and say
I am Judith, home.¹⁰⁵

But what did being a Jew(ess) mean to Arcana in practice? It meant being part of something like Jane. There were so many Jewish Janes, Arcana realized, because “The element of responsibility for the society, of taking on responsibilities beyond the basic—that’s part of the deal for Jews.” Arcana adds that she “grew up knowing” this element of responsibility and eventually accepted that this way of being Jewish isn’t about whether one is observant or not. In her words, “When I was very young and I thought, well, if I don’t believe in God or any more then am I still a Jew? Well, the answer is yes. And the ‘yes’ is about this stuff. I did not mind that we were breaking the law [in Jane] because I knew the law was wrong . . . who cares about the law?”¹⁰⁶

Jane, like Gisella, like Emma, like Judith, like Shifra and Puah, knew that being unruly is holy.

2

Unruly and Holy

Blessing the Continuum of Sex/Gender

*I hate the fucking binary. Rips me apart
I Am Not One Thing.
I Am My Own Very Special thing.
Don't lose me. I am not crazy. I am yours.
I was made out of all that is
therefore I must have been in the world before.*

—Micah Bazant, *Timum: A Trans Jew Zine*

Jewish tradition has seen beyond male and female. For instance, the Tosefta, a compilation of teachings from around the third century CE that accompanies the Talmud, describes individuals termed *androgynos*: “*Androgynos* is in some ways like men, and in other ways like women. In other ways he is like men and women, and in others he is like neither men nor women.”¹ The Tosefta and Talmud consider such individuals part of Jewish life, discussing, for example, whether and how they should perform ritual purity or get circumcised. The Talmud has several other nonbinary categories, including a term for a person of an indeterminate sex (*tumtum*).

These categories show that this tradition considers the binary to be limited. The Tosefta declares that “*androgynos* is a created being of its own, and the sages could not determine if he is a man or a woman.” And in this tradition, being nonbinary does not necessarily imply being inferior. Early commentaries on the Torah consider the possibility that Abraham and Sarah, central figures in Jewish tradition, were nonbinary (*tumtumim*). The dominant scientific and medical approach is very different: Nonbinary people are seen as bodies to be “corrected,” made to fit society’s patriarchal gender roles through socialization, hormone treatments, and surgery.

Some Jewish radicals have taken all this to mean that Jewish tradition is already queer. Traditional texts already go beyond male and female, while the dialectical way of thinking found in these texts is perfect for undermining the binaries dear to patriarchal society.

Jewish radicals from two different yet converging streams have been building on this queer tradition. The first stream includes activists and rabbis who are interested in extending Jewish observant practices, doing so from a commitment to queer, trans, and intersex liberation movements. This stream considers, for example, how to incorporate gender-affirming care into daily rituals; naturally, this involves deep engagement with the Talmud and other rabbinical texts. These efforts also include creating alternative, queer spaces for Talmud study that invite those who have been alienated by the dominant Jewish institutions to join.

The second stream consists of radicals who have been attacking the dominant scientific and medical approaches to sex/gender from within scientific institutions. This second stream produces alternative ways of thinking that, deeply grounded in biology, reaffirm the first stream.

This second stream is exemplified by the work of Anne Fausto-Sterling, a queer biologist, writer, and activist and the granddaughter of Bundists who emigrated to the US from Eastern Europe. Fausto-Sterling drew on her family's tradition of organizing as well as on traditional Jewish texts to develop a dialectical approach to thinking about sex/gender. This approach is based on the idea that social structures shape our biology, and our biology shapes our social world. With this dialectical approach, Fausto-Sterling learned from and collaborated with activists who have been trying to stop the medical industry's violent efforts to impose the male/female binary.

These two streams start from different places, and have overlapping yet different interests, but arrive at the same conclusion: that life's diversity cannot be contained in boxes—and that this diversity should be blessed, for it is holy.

A Tradition That Is Already Queer

"I hate the fucking binary," writes the trans artist and activist Micah Bazant in *Timtum: A Trans Jew Zine* (1999). "I was made out of all

that is therefore I must have been in the world before.” *Timtum* is derived from the Talmud’s category for one of an indeterminate gender (*tumtum*), but as Bazant noted, the term has acquired negative connotations. In Yiddish, it is “an unproductive, uncreative misfit” and in modern Hebrew a synonym for stupidity. Bazant reclaims it as a positive term for “Jewish genderqueer” people.²

Timtum appeared at a time when young Jews who felt alienated by the patriarchy, heteronormativity, and Zionism of mainstream Jewish institutions had no obvious alternatives. “I wrote it out of spiritual need, to save my life,” Bazant recalls. *Timtum* was never formally published. It was circulated by people making copies for their friends. Years later, Bazant met people who read *Timtum* as teenagers and said it saved their lives. “I’m so glad that it helped them live,” Bazant says. “That is our sacred mission as trans people: to help ourselves and each other live.”³ Since then, there has been a proliferation of Jewish activist materials exploring similar themes to *Timtum*.⁴

Timtum delves into the difficult journey of reclaiming Jewish traditions from a trans and anti-Zionist perspective, working against the genocides and trauma that interrupted the ancestral chain of transmission. “I feel like Judaism is a secret package delivered to me through time, disguised and concealed, hidden from the enemy, smuggled through hell under layers and layers of protective cover,” Bazant writes in the zine. “With parts so dangerous and large that they were sometimes unknown to the smugglers themselves.” Bazant was ready to reclaim the package: “I feel a responsibility to the generations who sustained this, who died and lived as Jews—who am I to throw away this most precious of gifts—now, when I am finally free to fully unwrap it.”

Radical Jews like Bazant who’ve unwrapped this ancestral gift found an old and surprisingly queer approach to sex and gender.

*

Consider the story of creation, given in the book of Bereshit (Genesis), where God creates the world and later Adam and Eve. There is a patriarchal conclusion commonly drawn from this story: that women are inferior, mere derivatives of Adam’s rib.⁵ Yet the early

rabbis told a much queerer story. In *Bereshit Rabbah*, a book of midrash from sometime between 300 and 500 CE, Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar says that the first human being was *androgynos*, since it is written “male and female He made them” (*Bereshit* 1:27)—meaning Adam was *both* male and female. Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman then adds that Adam was in fact a “two-faced being” that was sawed in two to produce distinct male and female beings. The other rabbis then object: Doesn’t *Bereshit* say that the second being had been created from Adam’s rib? Rabbi bar Nachman responds that this is actually referring to Adam’s side, playing on the fact that the Hebrew word for rib (*tzelah*) can also mean “side,” as in the side of a temple.

It is remarkable that so many centuries ago, some rabbis made such bold interpretive leaps and that whoever compiled the texts chose to keep their queer ideas (along with the puzzled reaction to them).

When we know to look for it, queerness seems to be everywhere in traditional Jewish texts.⁶ The Talmud has multiple nonbinary sex/gender categories, beyond *androgynos* and *tumtum*. There are terms for those who cannot reproduce like “normative” males or females, either from birth or due to an accident or a condition that manifests later in life: A *saris* is a male who cannot reproduce and later acquires female characteristics, and an *aylonit* is a female who cannot reproduce and later acquires male characteristics.⁷ The Talmud also tells the story of a man whose wife died and who has no money to pay for a wet nurse, so he miraculously grows breasts and nurses their son.⁸

There is also plenty of queerness in the Torah. As Jericho Vincent argues, Joseph is “famously a little queer: he has this coat of many colors, these attributes that are considered feminine, and he’s described as very beautiful.” In the biblical story, Jacob, Joseph’s father, gives Joseph “blessings of breast and womb,” and Joseph’s grandchildren are later described as being birthed on Joseph’s knees—which, Vincent says, places Joseph in “the position of the grandmother, the matriarch.”⁹

In these traditional texts, bending gender doesn’t mean being inferior. In the Talmud, Abraham and Sarah, the revered



Figure 2.1: "One Side of Adam" by Anna Zeligowski.

patriarch and matriarch from the Torah, are said to be *tumtumim*, ones of indeterminate sex, who only later developed sexual organs—explaining why the couple had children so late (Sarah was ninety and Abraham one hundred years old, according to the Torah). A midrash from Bereshit Rabbah states that Mordechai (from the scroll of Esther, the Purim story) was unable to find a wet nurse, and so he nursed baby Esther himself (“milk came to him, and he suckled her . . . for a male’s milk is pure”¹⁰). The prophet Isaiah declares that *sarisim*, those who were born male and later became feminized, are “better than sons or daughters” and will be forever honored by “a monument and a name” (*yad vashem*).¹¹ Joy Ladin argues that even God in the Torah is queer: a mostly genderless figure who takes on a plural name (*elohim*), who defies any representation made by people, and whose essence can only be described as an open-ended process of becoming.¹²

Many queer and trans Jews draw strength from this tradition. Rabbi Elliot Kukla, the first openly trans person to be ordained by a conventional Jewish institution (Hebrew Union College in 2006), encountered the *tumtum* while a student in an Orthodox yeshiva. “I instantly identified with the *tumtum*,” Kukla writes. “I had spent a lifetime feeling homeless and adrift between the modern categories of ‘male’ and ‘female.’ When I met the *tumtum* I finally came home.” Kukla realized that the nonbinary thinking in these texts holds great potential for queer and trans liberation. Rabbi Reuben Zellman similarly argues that this rabbinical approach is grounded in the “Holiness of Twilight”: a respect for the in-between states that don’t fit into boxes. “Twilight cannot be defined; it can only be sanctified and appreciated,” Zellman writes. “People can’t always be defined; they can only be seen and respected, and their lives made holy. This Jewish approach allows for genders between male and female. It opens space in society. And it protects those who live in the places in between.”¹³

“Robin Hood the Talmud”

There are now yeshivas that are explicitly anchored in the “Holiness of Twilight” and emphasize the queerness of the Jewish

<i>Androgynos</i> is in some ways like men, and in other ways like women. In other ways he is like men and women, and in others he is like neither men nor women . . . <i>Androgynos</i> is a [created] being of its own . . . the sages could not determine if he is a man or a woman.	אֲנֶדְרוֹגִינוֹס יֵשׁ בּוֹ דְּרָכִים שְׁוֶה לְאֲנָשִׁים, וְיֵשׁ בּוֹ דְּרָכִים שְׁוֶה לְנָשִׁים, וְיֵשׁ בּוֹ דְּרָכִים שְׁוֶה לְאֲנָשִׁים וְנָשִׁים, וְיֵשׁ בּוֹ דְּרָכִים אֵינּוּ שְׁוֶה לֹא לְאֲנָשִׁים וְלֹא לְנָשִׁים . . . אֲנֶדְרוֹגִינוֹס בְּרִיָּה בְּפָנָי עֲצֻמָּה הוּא וְלֹא יִכְלוּ חֲכָמִים לְהַכְרִיעַ עָלָיו אִם הוּא אִישׁ אוֹ אִשָּׁה.
Said Rabbi Yirmiyah ben Elazar: In the hour when the Holy One created the first human, He created him [as] an <i>androgynos</i>, as it is said, “male and female He created them.” Said Rabbi Shmuel bar Nachman: In the hour when the Holy One created the first human, He created [for] him a double-face, and sawed him and made him backs, a back here and a back there. They objected to him: but it says, “He took one of his ribs . . .” [Bereshit 2:21]! He said to them: [It means] “[one] of his sides,” just as you would say, “the side of the Tabernacle” [Shemot 26:20].	אָמַר רַבִּי יִרְמְיָה בֶּן אֶלְעָזָר בְּשַׁעֲרֵי שְׁבַרָא הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, אֲנֶדְרוֹגִינוֹס בְּרָאוּ, הִדָּא הוּא דְּכַתִּיב (בְּרֵאשִׁית ה', ב'): וְזָכַר וּנְקָבָה בְּרָאָם. אָמַר רַבִּי שְׁמוּאֵל בַּר נַחֲמָן, בְּשַׁעֲרֵי שְׁבַרָא הַקְדוּשׁ בְּרוּךְ הוּא אֶת אָדָם הָרִאשׁוֹן, דִּינֵי פְרָצוּפִים בְּרָאוּ, וְנִסְרוּ וְעִשְׂאוּ גְבִים, גַּב לְכָאן וְגַב לְכָאן. אֶתִּיבּוֹן לֵיהּ וְהַכְּתִיב (בְּרֵאשִׁית ב', כֵּא): וַיִּקַּח אֶחָת מִצַּלְעָתָיו, אָמַר לְהוֹן מִתְרִין סְטְרוּהִי, הִיד מַה דְּאֵתָא אָמַר (שְׁמוֹת כו', כ'): וְלָצֶלַע הִמְשִׁכָּן, דִּמְתַּרְגְּמִינָן וְלִסְטֵר מִשְׁבָּנָא וּגו'.

A queer thread in rabbinical texts, with Hebrew original (right) and English translation (left). The first row is from Mishnah Bikkurim 4:5 (Gemara version), the second row from Bereshit Rabbah 8:1.

rabbinical tradition. An influential example is Svara, a yeshiva in Chicago cofounded in 2003 by Rabbi Benay Lappe, which describes itself as a “traditionally radical yeshiva” whose mission is “to empower queer and trans people to expand Torah and tradition through the spiritual practice of Talmud study.”¹⁴ Svara’s premise

is that the rabbis who produced the Talmud were willing to radically reinterpret and revise their traditions when times called for it. They made bold leaps (like the leap to see Adam as *androgynos*) and overturned many aspects of the temple-centered Jewish tradition described in the Torah.

In making these radical changes, the rabbis trusted their own *svara*—an Aramaic term that roughly means “moral intuition” (a combination of study and gut feeling). The rabbis were “queer,” Lappe writes, “not in the sense of sexuality or gender, perhaps, but in what *being* those very kinds of people usually makes you: courageous, creative, out-of-the-box thinking, fringy, and radical. And deeply attuned to that still, small voice inside and confident of the truth it is telling you even when the whole world is telling you something else.”¹⁵ This is why Lappe considers it “traditionally radical” to majorly reinterpret what we have been passed down in order to survive the present—and to do so through collective study. *Svara* is a space for such study, which includes wrestling with the painful aspects of traditional Jewish sources.¹⁶ The point of this yeshiva isn’t to learn what the Talmud says about any specific topic but to practice its dialectical, queer process together. Talmud study, Lappe says, is a “spiritual technology” whose purpose is to help us change ourselves for the better.¹⁷ She goes so far as to say that the Talmud is “an instruction manual for radicals.”¹⁸ Lappe’s position resembles that of Aaron Shmuel Lieberman, the nineteenth-century radical from the Pale of Settlement who believed Jewish traditions were essentially already radical, which is why he tried recruiting yeshiva students into the socialist movement.

Svara, however, tends to go the other way: It attracts many who didn’t grow up in observant Jewish homes and have never studied traditional Jewish texts but are already politically active. Lappe herself had “left Judaism” after coming out and lived as a Buddhist in Japan for a decade, until reading *Pirkei Avot* (part of the *Mishnah*) and a calling from within drew her back; she then went “into the closet” in order to attend conservative rabbinical school and, in her words, “Robin Hood the Talmud.”¹⁹ *Svara* emerged from Lappe’s efforts to relearn Talmud with queer people after she finished rabbinical school. Max Strassfeld was already

organizing queer Jewish groups when a Svava study session run by Lappe had introduced him to texts referencing nonbinary beings that he “had not realized the Jewish corpus contained.” He “got hooked” and went on to write an illuminating book on the topic, titled *Trans Talmud*. Rabbi Kukla, who now teaches at Svava, grew up “culturally Jewish” and had almost no exposure to Jewish holidays, traditions, or the Hebrew language. He had identified as a Buddhist as an adult until, as with Lappe, something pulled him back to Jewish tradition.²⁰

Such people with nontraditional backgrounds bring fresh perspectives to old sources, along with knowledge and sensibilities from activist movements. Their presence helps Svava address issues facing queer and trans Jews today, including around gender-affirming care. One example is Svava’s Trans Halakha Project, which grew out of the recognition that “the unique lives, bodies, and experiences of this growing subset of our community demand new *halakhic* pathways that are rooted in the sacred experiences of self-determination, agency, individual expertise, fluidity and holy liminality.”²¹ The Trans Halakha Project started the Teshuva Writing Collective (TWC), which provides *teshuvot* (“answers” in Hebrew, singular: *teshuva*) to questions about Jewish observant practice that concern trans Jews. The TWC is mostly written by trans Jews, for trans Jews. Questions that have been addressed include the following: Which blessing should be said over the application of testosterone gel? In which cases are trans men or transmasculine people obligated in *brit milah* (ritual circumcision)? And how should one care for body parts removed as part of gender-affirming care?

These questions are being raised at a time of enormous violence against trans people, including major efforts to criminalize gender-affirming care. The institutions that enforce the binary, including medical institutions, are responsible for this violence, and they deserve our rage.

Micah Bazant gives voice to that rage in *Timtum*. The zine has a drawing of a figure, with claws and a chest stitched up from breast removal surgery, that speaks to the reader: “You can’t get away from gender—it’s everywhere, in my face . . . I feel like everything is against me to prevent my existence.” The figure continues,



Figure 2.2: “Unruly and Holy” by Anna Zeligowski.

I look you
 all in the eye + stab the thought
 into your mind—No, you are wrong. You
 are the one with the problem. Giant metal
 claws spring out of my oh-so-soft + small
 hands + clutch your jaw, turn your Normal
 genetically-congruent face to the side +
 make you listen. Soon I'll be ready to go to
 shul + walk through the gender partition.
 Soon I'll be ready to take on the doctors +
 spit their terms back in their faces.

Timtum combines the rage against established Jewish institutions (the need to “walk through the gender partition” of the synagogue) with rage against the medical-industrial complex that enforces the binary (the need to “take on the doctors” and “spit their terms back in their faces”).

A more dialectical way of thinking about bodies and sex/gender can help spit the doctors' terms back in their faces. Queer and trans Jews have often found this alternative in Anne Fausto-Sterling's work.

Overturing Patriarchal Biology

Anne Fausto-Sterling is a writer, biologist, and activist who has been overturning patriarchal biology. She became part of a circle of radicals, often associated with Science for the People, who were employed by establishment institutions (Brown University in Fausto-Sterling's case) but challenged their agenda. In her books *Myths of Gender* (1985) and *Sexing the Body* (first published in 2000, with a revised edition in 2020), Fausto-Sterling shows how scientists naturalize the patriarchy and capitalism—especially during times when those systems were being seriously challenged by social movements. She debunks many studies that claim to find biological differences between men and women, differences that are convenient for justifying domination. Fausto-Sterling and her collaborators went on to develop an alternative, dialectical approach to

The Congregation of Our Dreams

In *Timum: A Trans Jew Zine*, Micah Bazant writes about reclaiming Jewish traditions. *Timum* expresses the need to disrupt the patriarchal way of doing things in Jewish institutions—the need to “walk through the gender partition” of the synagogue. Bazant worked with Rabbi Elliot Kukla to develop rituals for queer and trans Jews and had also studied Talmud with Svava, the queer yeshiva. Bazant also coauthored a Pesach Haggadah that centers contemporary liberation struggles, including the liberation of Palestine. But over the years, Bazant felt too alienated by Jewish institutions, from nonprofit groups and synagogues, to continue—Zionism was simply too entrenched in these places. Bazant remembers being “repelled and actively thrown out” from congregations. They eventually decided that the reclamation of Jewish traditional texts and rituals would have to be left to others. They also found ways to meet their spiritual needs without synagogue. But Bazant still wishes that the congregation they never found will come into existence. “The congregation of my dreams is anti-Zionist, a really anti-Zionist synagogue that is not fucking classist, that is accessible, that has incredible music,” Bazant says. “I should be so lucky to go to that synagogue in my lifetime, but I haven’t been there yet. I know it’s coming. It’s coming. People are building it.”¹

1. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 252.

understanding difference that does away with divisions between the biological and the social, or “nature” versus “nurture.”

Fausto-Sterling’s work was shaped by her Jewish family’s tradition of radical organizing and writing. She was born in New York in 1944 to communist parents. Her mother, Dorothy (Dannenberg) Sterling, was a writer for *Time* magazine. The FBI surveilled Dorothy for her communist activities and played a role in suppressing a critical book she had written about the magazine’s history.²² Dorothy later wrote books about Black liberation, including a biography for

Bundist Rebels in Vilna

Anne Fausto-Sterling's grandfather, Velvel Schatz, was a Bundist who participated in a May 1, 1902, demonstration in Vilna that was brutally suppressed by the authorities. Velvel and many of his comrades were beaten and jailed. He later wrote an account of what happened, in Yiddish. Below is an excerpt, translated by Ethan Fraenkel.

"Cossacks equipped with all the weapons of war began to ride around on the streets. The yards were ordered to remain closed. The superintendents [*di shtrezer*] came out in front of their houses with sticks. New orders arrived every now and then from the police-yard to the police on the streets to allow assembly. Everyone walked around nervously as if something would happen. It was said that behind the big, closed doors of the police headquarters stood troops as well. It was close to six or seven o'clock when the demonstration was set to take place. Glancing at the street there were no great masses, aside from those determined ones who had taken upon themselves the task and had the willingness to sacrifice in order to celebrate May Day today, and not put it off until later, despite the intimidations by the police and the population.

- *Nu*, begin! Down the middle of the street,—a voice was heard, and the command was carried out lightning-fast.
- Unfurl the banner!—Refoelke the painter [Refoel Gintsberg, a member of the Vilna branch 367 of Arbeter Ring] said to me, and indeed helped me put together the two half sticks into one long stick with the fluttering banner hoisted [in the air.]
- Long live the global revolution!—a hurrah-shout was heard from the entire mass that was standing nearby.
- Down with the autocracy! Long live the eight-hour work day!

Like a storm, the Cossacks descended upon us from the yards where they were hidden, and began to kill and slash right and left. I felt then as if I had found myself in the fifth cell, which used to be known back then as the cell of terrors by the arrested strikers or political prisoners. The cell was empty. I was the first. . . . It wasn't long before the cell was again crammed with beaten and bloodied comrades. We continued with the demonstration with great enthusiasm in the cell as well. We sang until the time when the governor arrived with Cossacks and began to summon us one at a time. We went through an arranged line of Cossacks and received beatings with whips [*nageykas*] until we passed out.

We were thrown back into cell number five. . . . Many still remember what happened that night. It is too terrible to mention. I also heard hysterical screams carry from the women's cells throughout the entire night. By early morning, the executioner [Viktor] von Wahl [governor of Vilna under czar] arrived again with his Cossacks. . . . It came to my row. I was taken through a line of Cossacks, tearing off the clothes from the lower part of my body. . . . I was thrown on to a bench lengthwise and two Cossacks sat down on me: one on my hand and the second on my feet. Two Cossacks on both sides—with riding whips in their hands—began to flog me across the entire part of my body. Mikhaylov, the doctor, decided according to the pulse how much of a lash to give everyone. Von Wahl accompanied almost every flogging with the exclamations: *zhidi* [derogatory Russian term for Jews], I will gun down all of you or drive you out of the country! . . .

With that the second lesson ended, through which von Wahl had wanted to suffocate the revolutionary spirit of the young, enthusiastic revolutionaries in Vilna, in the year 1902.”

teens of Harriet Tubman, abolitionist organizer of the underground railroad, which she dedicated to her daughter Anne “so that she may know the story of a great American woman.” Dorothy also wrote a biography of Martin Delany, an abolitionist writer and physician who was among the first Black men to be admitted to Harvard Medical School.²³ She also wrote many children’s books about nature so she could have better answers to the questions her kids, Anne and Peter, were asking.²⁴

Anne’s father and Dorothy’s husband, Philip (Schatz) Sterling, was the son of Bundist immigrants from Eastern Europe and also a writer involved with the Communist Party of the USA.²⁵ Dorothy and Philip met while both worked at the Federal Writers’ Project, established under the New Deal. Philip wrote for the *Daily Worker*, the Communist Party’s newspaper, and later wrote books about liberation, including a book about Malcolm X and Marcus Garvey and another book on the Puerto Rican independence struggle. Science interested both. Dorothy and Philip coauthored a book about the development of the polio vaccine, and when Anne was in graduate school, Philip wrote a biography of Rachel Carson, author of *Silent Spring*, a foundational book for the US environmental movement.

A Jewish radical tradition was felt at home. Fausto-Sterling’s grandfather, Velvel Schatz, was a signwriter and Bundist activist from Vilna, Lithuania (the birthplace of the Bund). Schatz participated in an infamous May 1, 1902, demonstration in Vilna that was prohibited by the czar’s regime. He carried a banner with the inscription “Long Live the Great Russian Revolution.” The police cracked down on the demonstration, and Velvel and several of his comrades were jailed and tortured. It was time for him and his partner, Helen (Levine) Schatz, to leave the Russian empire. In the US, Schatz worked as a housepainter and joined the Yiddish-speaking mutual aid group Arbeter Ring. Political debates were in the air; one family joke was that grandpa was Menshevik, grandma was Bolshevik.²⁶

Philip shared with his daughter Anne a partial English translation of grandpa Velvel’s Yiddish account of that May 1 demonstration, adding context about Jewish socialists in Eastern Europe.

(Anne Fausto-Sterling doesn't know Yiddish, and Philip never learned to read it despite growing up with it as a first language.) Fausto-Sterling says that this tradition of Jewish radicalism was valued at home and that while her family was not observant, she always understood that "there was no escaping being Jewish—in the eyes of the majority culture."²⁷

The commitment to liberation was passed down to the next generation. Anne's brother, Peter Sterling, was one of the original Freedom Riders who took racially mixed buses to Mississippi in May 1961 in protest of segregation and got arrested as a result. When Peter was deliberating whether to join the freedom rides and risk arrest (or worse) weeks before his own wedding, he called his father, Philip, who was supportive but told Peter to be careful. Many years later, when his life was in turmoil, Peter started reading Torah each morning and began seeing his own family's dramas in the biblical stories. He called Philip to tell him he had just realized that in that conversation about the freedom rides, they were reenacting the Binding of Isaac, with Philip as Abraham and Peter as Isaac; Philip understood immediately and agreed.²⁸

In a reflection on what made him join the freedom rides, Peter gives us a glimpse of the political home he and Fausto-Sterling grew up in:

My sister [Anne Fausto-Sterling] and I, along with perhaps 10,000 other Communist children (known to each other as "red-diaper babies"), shared our parents' struggles for equality and fairness right from the start. We were pushed in strollers in picket lines protesting the antiunion, anti-Communist Taft–Hartley Act. Gripping our parents' hands, we paced in forlorn vigils against the executions of Willie McGee in Mississippi, the Martinsville Seven in Virginia, and Julius and Ethel Rosenberg in New York's Sing Sing prison. Our values strengthened as we attended cooperative, interracial staffed nursery schools; then some of us went on to Communist elementary and high schools, such as Little Red School House and Elizabeth Irwin High School.²⁹

Anne and Peter were also sent to socialist summer camps where they sang songs with artists such as Paul Robeson and Pete Seeger. Peter recalls that in high school, “the pinnacle of our week was the Saturday morning Marxist discussion group, attended by red-diaper teenagers. . . . There, I first read the Communist Manifesto, whose core precept, ‘from each according to his ability, to each according to his need,’ I still embrace.”³⁰

This upbringing shaped Fausto-Sterling’s work. She credited her father, Philip, for helping her “understand the economic basis of women’s inequality”³¹ and dedicated *Myths of Gender* to her parents, writing in the dedication that they “have shared with me their visions of the world, including its past shames and glories, its present pains and wonders, and its future community.”³² Fausto-Sterling’s grandmother also had an impact by making her suspicious of a scientific enterprise that upholds sexist, racist, and capitalist ideologies. “I must reflect,” Fausto-Sterling writes in a 1981 article,

on the contrast between the Archie Bunker image of the working-class culture and my grandmother [Helen Schatz]. She had no formal schooling and started to work when she was eight years old. When she died, we gave to a library of Yiddish studies her book collection, which included in it—in Yiddish—the complete works of Guy de Maupassant. When scientists in our society ‘discover’ that blacks or members of the working class are less intelligent than whites or rich folks or that the very structure of women’s brains prevents them from learning math, one must, regardless of how clever the data or impressive and complex the statistics, **automatically** be suspicious, because it is nearly impossible for scientists to do research outside of the ideological framework of the society in which they live.³³

This suspicion meant that science and politics couldn’t be separated. Fausto-Sterling therefore declared that her work is both scientific and political—that it “could not be otherwise.”³⁴ And growing up with parents who were writers, Fausto-Sterling knew

the power of narrative: its ability to distort in the service of oppression as well as its potential to show liberating possibilities.

Exploding the Stories of Gender Difference

In her book *Myths of Gender*, Fausto-Sterling demolishes many harmful narratives produced by scientists, including the story that women's brains are inherently different from men's, and that women are therefore less capable (and hence less deserving of high wages and education); the claim by some sociobiologists that rape is a "natural" phenomenon resulting from biologically innate male aggression (meaning we just have to live with it); and the idea that women in menopause become "walking zombies," a toll on society who could only be saved by hefty doses of hormones (sold by pharmaceutical companies, with cancer as a likely side effect).

Fausto-Sterling shows how such claims about sex/gender differences collapse under scrutiny, often even by the standards set by the scientists themselves, but emphasizes that this didn't matter; the force of this science came from its political utility. Even when old claims about, say, the nature of the "female brain" were shown to be false or incoherent, they would often get recycled a few years later—when scientists utilized a new technology or slightly changed their framing—and again treated as the truth. We could debunk such studies all day, but it won't address the underlying assumptions about sex.

There was also a more foundational problem. Fausto-Sterling realized that even before sex becomes a variable in these ridiculous studies of difference, there's already a narrative at play about how sex came to be and how it manifests. She began to ask, What is sex? And how does an organism become sexed?

Fausto-Sterling knew that the usual answers would require much rewriting, and her approach continued a line of thinking from earlier feminist biologists, such as Ruth Herschberger and Ruth Hubbard. In her sharp and hilarious 1948 book *Adam's Rib*, Herschberger ridicules the received narrative about sex development—where the sperm is active and the egg passive, and where males are actively formed while being female is just nature's default state—and shows

Rewriting the Story of Sex Development

In her 1948 book *Adam's Rib*, Ruth Herschberger shows how the dominant biological story about sex development assumes that female means "passive" and male means "active." In this story, "the male sperm . . . is an independent little creature, single-minded, manly, full of charm, resourcefulness and enterprise, who will make his own minute decision to swim towards the egg. The female egg is portrayed as the blushing bride, ignorant but desirable, who awaits arousal by the gallant male cell." In this account, females are also viewed as undeveloped males, stuck in nature's default state. "The patriarchal biologist," she adds, "makes liberal use of the word *vestigial*, as applied to any organ in the female which is similar to an organ in the male but not quite like it. The uterus escapes being called a vestigial prostate because it bears sons, but the clitoris has never thrown off the label of vestigial penis."

Herschberger knew how to radically reinterpret such familiar stories. She wrote a "matriarchal" account of development that flips the roles. Now it was the females who developed "the complex and highly differentiated organ, the clitoris," while in males, "the infantile genital projection remains, merely thickening and growing larger. The penis is best described as a vestigial clitoris which has lost much of its sensitivity." Herschberger uses experimental evidence to degrade male development, just as mainstream biology had degraded female development:

The conditions of male development are derivative rather than positive, dependent rather than independent. This is scientifically proven by the fact that if ovaries are removed from new-born mammals, the development of the female organs is not perceptibly affected; the female retains her sexual identity. But if we remove the testicles of young rats, we find not only the growth of all the male structures in the body arrested, but the

female traits soon begin to appear. It is clear that the female is the dominant human form, while the male is more or less anomalous and accidental variation on that of the female.¹

The two narratives aren't symmetric, of course; the patriarchal account has been the dominant one, taught in classrooms and textbooks and shaping medical practice. But Herschberger shows how easy it is to rewrite the story.

1. Herschberger, *Adam's Rib*, 81.

how easy it is to flip roles.³⁵ Hubbard, a Jewish anti-Zionist biologist, builds on Herschberger's critique. She exposes the patriarchy underlying many biological theories, including Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, and challenges the idea that sex is self-evident, simply determined by genitalia.³⁶ Like Fausto-Sterling, Hubbard grew up in a socialist home that influenced her perspective on science. Her family fled Vienna in the 1930s, but she lived long enough under the Nazis to witness how destructive scientists' theories about race, gender, and disability can be. Her critiques of patriarchal biology helped pave the way for Fausto-Sterling (whom Hubbard also supported in an often sexist, hostile academy).³⁷ Both were committed to activism, and both eventually decided to leave the laboratory to focus on political writing about science.³⁸

Fausto-Sterling took this feminist program further by examining the processes by which sex and gender arise in the world. To this effort, she brought deep engagement with science, a willingness to learn from other activists, and inspiration from Jewish radical traditions.

Sex as a Continuum

Many presume that sex is a "biological" fact—imprinted in our chromosomes, organs, cells, and hormone levels—while gender is

“Have Only Men Evolved?”

While molecular biologists are trained to worship Darwin, too few read his works. Ruth Hubbard did, once she had both the background in biology and solid feminist political commitments. In her 1979 article “Have Only Men Evolved?,” she builds on Ruth Herschberger’s *Adam’s Rib* (1948) and exposes Darwin’s patriarchal premises.

She first notes how Darwin read capitalism into nature. Hubbard quotes Karl Marx, who wrote to Friedrich Engels in 1862 that “it is remarkable how Darwin recognizes among beasts and plants his English society with its division of labour, competition, and opening up new markets, ‘inventions,’ and the Malthusian ‘struggle for existence.’” Darwin found capitalism in nature, and this finding naturalized capitalism. This maneuver also meant taking the gender roles of capitalist society as natural.

We find this maneuver in Darwin’s theory of “sexual selection,” which, as Hubbard explains, paints a “Victorian picture of the active male and passive female.” Sexual selection, Darwin wrote in *The Origin of Species* (1859), is a struggle where males fight “for the possession” of females, utilizing “special weapons confined to the male sex”; the victorious males will “leave the most progeny.” Darwin elaborated on those special male weapons in *The Descent of Man* (1871). “The male,” he claimed, “possesses certain organs of sense or locomotion, of which the female is quite destitute . . . in order that he may readily find or reach her; or again the male has special organs of prehension for holding her securely.” Summarizing Darwin’s account, Hubbard writes, “Wherever you look among animals, eagerly promiscuous males are pursuing females, who peer from behind languidly drooping eyelids to discern the strongest and handsomest. Does it not sound like the wish-fulfillment dream of a proper Victorian gentleman?”

Darwin was quick to draw sexist conclusions from his theory, claiming, “Man is more courageous, pugnacious and

energetic than woman, and has more inventive genius.” He adds that women have “greater tenderness and less selfishness,” apparently because man “delights in competition, and this leads to ambition which passes too easily into selfishness. These latter qualities seem to be his natural and unfortunate birthright.” If this sounds favorable to women, Hubbard asks us to think again. Darwin decided that men are intellectually superior to women, his evidence being “man’s attaining to higher eminence, in whatever he takes up, than can woman—whether requiring deep thought, reason, or imagination, or merely the use of the senses and hands.” He concluded that although women are inferior, they are lucky to at least have fathers who can transmit some genetic greatness to them. Or as Hubbard puts it, with echoes of Ruth Herschberger, “Women’s minds would have become vestigial if it were not for the fortunate circumstance that in each generation daughters inherit brains from their fathers.”

Darwin’s zealous followers—the sociobiologists, led by Hubbard’s colleague at Harvard University, E. O. Wilson—continued this line of thinking. As Hubbard shows, Wilson simply told the same old patriarchal tales but framed them using language from capitalist economics, claiming organisms are making competitive “investments” against one another. “One gamete, the egg, is relatively very large and sessile; the other, the sperm, is small and motile,” Wilson writes in *Sociobiology: The New Synthesis* (1975), while the egg’s yolk is “required to launch the embryo into an advanced state of development.” The egg’s higher “investment” in the embryo, he concludes, “is the reason why parental care is normally provided by the female.” This was, as Hubbard argues, just another justification for “the patriarchal model of the household.” The same patriarchy, new scientific dressing.

socially constructed, a “cultural” phenomenon. Gender is about how you feel, how you act, how the world treats you, and how you might want to be treated, but sex is apparently in your body, part of your biological constitution. Fausto-Sterling shows that life is much queerer. The very assignment of sex is already entangled with politics. And when we consider the complexity of sex, it turns out to be much closer to a continuum than to the male/female binary.

Fausto-Sterling began to chip at the foundations of the idea that sex is merely biological in the 1980s, by examining how molecular biologists at the time understood sex development. What these scientists were saying sounded very much like the patriarchal accounts of sex development that Ruth Herschberger had parodied in the 1940s, except this time, genes and chromosomes were the primary actors. The dominant theory of this period was that the Y chromosome carries the gene that confers maleness. When present, this gene supposedly acts as the “master switch” that begins the (active) program for creating a male; when it is absent, the embryo continues along the default (passive) path of becoming female.

With this theory, the male-dominated field of molecular biology was off to a race to identify the gene for maleness.³⁹ With much fanfare, a laboratory at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology’s prestigious Whitehead Institute declared victory in December 1987. The scientists obtained DNA samples from individuals who had either (1) XX chromosomes but were designated “male” or (2) XY chromosomes but were designated “female.” Their assumption was that if there is a male-determining gene on the Y chromosome, then XX “males” must have acquired this gene (through a developmental event where a stretch of Y fused to one of the other chromosomes, for example), whereas XY “females” must have lost it. Through this kind of genetic analysis, the scientists claimed to have isolated the fragment of the Y chromosome that contains the “master sex-determining locus.”

Fausto-Sterling explained early on why this account couldn’t be right. For one, the X chromosomes of “normal” females contain a stretch of DNA very similar to the one identified by the scientists on the Y chromosome—so why don’t these people become males?

More importantly, Fausto-Sterling asks in a 1989 article, were these individuals with, say, two X chromosomes and a fragment of the Y chromosome really “male,” as the scientists and media coverage implied? The scientists who did the work assumed sex is binary, so male or female were the only options; they also never suggested that the XX “males” and XY females they sampled were “anything other than fully normal representatives of their sex.”⁴⁰ But a closer look revealed that these individuals had mixtures of male and female features. Indeed, the DNA samples were taken from people who likely were in the clinic because of their atypical sex development (several of these individuals completely lacked germ cells, for example). They did not represent the neat male and female categories scientists had in mind, despite having or lacking some fragment of the Y chromosome.

All this suggested a view of sex as a continuum, a view that makes much more sense when we think more deeply about how organisms develop. If we reject the patriarchal model and consider both the male and female states as actively formed, and if we recognize the complexity of the developmental processes that create these states, then mixtures of maleness and femaleness are to be expected.

It was eventually revealed that the account of the male-determining gene was totally flawed, even if one believed in the “master” genetic switch model of sex determination. Over the years, the alternative models of sex development, which Fausto-Sterling and other feminist biologists had pushed for, got partially absorbed into mainstream molecular biology (unsurprisingly, without crediting these thinkers).⁴¹ Today, molecular biologists are less likely to talk about the genetic master switch for maleness.

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In 1993, Fausto-Sterling was contacted by Cheryl Chase. Then in her thirties, Chase was still processing what had been done to her, after years of deception and lies. When Chase got ahold of her medical records as an adult, she learned that she was born with ambiguous genitalia that had confused the doctors. After days of deliberation, they decided the newborn was a male and instructed the parents to raise Chase as a boy. A year and a half later, the doctors changed

their minds. They thought Chase's genital appendage was "inadequate as a penis, too short to mark masculine status effectively or to penetrate females," but that as a female, Chase would be "penetrable and potentially fertile" (she had ovaries and a uterus). What had been a "micropenis" before was now an "oversized" clitoris. They amputated Chase's genital appendage, which would make her unable to experience orgasms as an adult, and assigned her a new sex: female. "Following doctors' orders," Chase recalls, "my parents then changed my name, combed their house to eliminate all traces of my existence as a boy (photographs, birthday cards, etc.), changed my birth certificate, moved to a different town, instructed extended family members no longer to refer to me as a boy, and never told anyone else—including me—just what had happened."⁴²

Chase had read Fausto-Sterling's *Myths of Gender* and thought she'd be a good person to talk with. Chase wanted to better understand her own condition, how people like her have been treated historically, and how the medical violence she had suffered could be stopped. She also wanted to tell Fausto-Sterling that her writings about the male/female differences missed many things; that there was much more to the story. Fausto-Sterling listened to Chase and agreed; she was just completing a journal article about exactly this topic, titled "The Five Sexes," and sent Chase a draft. Chase liked the article overall but also had some critiques. Fausto-Sterling arranged with the journal that they would also publish a response from Chase.⁴³

Fausto-Sterling's article "The Five Sexes" (1993) asked, Where did the idea of binary sex come from? Looking historically, she found that the binary was far from self-evident. In other times and places, people saw sex differently, much more like a continuum. She cited the midrash on Adam being *androgynos* and the Talmud's nonbinary categories as examples:

Hermaphrodites, for instance, are often featured in stories about human origins. Early biblical scholars believed Adam began life as a hermaphrodite and later divided into two people—a male and a female. . . . Both the Talmud and the Tosefta, the Jewish books of law, list extensive

regulations for people of mixed sex. The Tosefta expressly forbids hermaphrodites to inherit their fathers' estates (like daughters), to seclude themselves with women (like sons) or to shave (like men). When hermaphrodites menstruate they must be isolated from men (like women); they are disqualified from serving as witnesses or as priests (like women), but the laws of pederasty apply to them.⁴⁴

Ironically, Fausto-Sterling, who had never read Torah or Talmud growing up, learned of the nonbinary perspective of rabbinical texts from the work of Hugh Hampton Young, a Confederate general's son and surgeon at Johns Hopkins Medical School. In another ironic twist, Young—despite appearing enamored of the nonbinary approach of rabbinical texts—went on to develop surgical techniques for making bodies fit the binary.⁴⁵

For Fausto-Sterling, the thinking of the rabbis in the Talmud better captured the complexities of biological development than the binary model. She argues that intersex variations (which can be argued to resemble the nonbinary categories of Talmud) can easily emerge. Consider, for example, people with androgen insensitivity syndrome (AIS), who are born with XY chromosomes and testes but without ovaries or a uterus. Internally, they seem male. But although their testes produce testosterone, it cannot be utilized by the body due to a mutation in a testosterone receptor gene. These individuals are typically born with feminized genitalia, and during puberty, the testes produce estrogen (which their body does utilize) and they develop breasts; their external anatomy appears female. Such people include the Spanish athlete María José Martínez-Patiño, who was deemed “male” according to a chromosomal test and was therefore disqualified from competing in the 1988 Olympics, even though she had lived and had been seen by others up to that point as a woman.⁴⁶ Another intersex variation includes those individuals with XX chromosomes and female internal reproductive organs who, due to a genetic mutation in enzymes that produce hormones, develop masculinized genitalia at birth or later—a condition known as congenital adrenal hyperplasia (CAH). Fausto-Sterling estimates that roughly 1.7 percent of births fit into one of

the common intersex variations, though it is difficult to determine precisely.⁴⁷

With these intersex possibilities, the midrash on Adam as *androgynos* doesn't seem so far-fetched. Human beings are indeed "multisexed" in that they contain the capacities to form both male and female features. How any specific body will form depends on the trajectory of development, which will vary across people and change throughout life.

Considering intersex variations, Fausto-Sterling suggests in her "Five Sexes" article, in a tongue-in-cheek manner, that there aren't only two sexes, but five. These are (1) male, (2) female, (3) the "true hermaphrodites" (who have one testis and one ovary, or a combined gonad called an ovo-testis), (4) the "male pseudohermaphrodites" (who have testes and some parts of female genitalia but lack ovaries), and (5) the "female pseudohermaphrodites" (who have ovaries and some elements of male genitalia but lack testes)—a classification that loosely resembles the Talmud's categories of male (*zakhar*), female (*nekeva*), *androgynos*, *saris*, and *aylonit*.⁴⁸ Yet each of these categories is so diverse, Fausto-Sterling argues, that we should conclude that "sex is a vast, infinitely malleable continuum that defies the constraints of even five categories."⁴⁹ The point of her multisex classification was ultimately to show that no classification is possible.

In her response to the article, Cheryl Chase shares her personal story and notes that Fausto-Sterling's "willingness to question medical dogma on intersexuality is unique and refreshing." Chase also used the opportunity to announce for the first time the founding of the Intersex Society of North America (ISNA), which aimed to end the surgeries imposed on "people born with an anatomy that someone decided is not standard for male or female."⁵⁰ Following publication, she received letters from intersex people interested in ISNA and seeking community.⁵¹ In the gatherings that followed, some intersex activists said they found Fausto-Sterling's article helpful, even liberating. Chase's film *Hermaphrodites Speak!* (1997) documents a gathering where one participant recalls, "The 'Five Sexes' article was one of the first things that I read which finally spoke to my reality, you know. What I experienced as gender was

not a polar male or female. I really didn't feel that my body fell into the categories that I read were 'male' or 'female' that were assigned 'normal' status."⁵²

But "The Five Sexes" was also problematic. "I must take issue though, with the terms true, female pseudo-, and male pseudo-hermaphrodite," Chase writes in her response to the article. "They are inheritances from Victorian medicine, and without prognosticative value. They reflect the Victorian belief that human sexual nature rests entirely in the gonads, a concept of gonadal determinism belied by the relative success of intersex medicine in sex reassignment." Chase had also privately told Fausto-Sterling that the title "The Fives Sexes" is "really stupid and I hate it."⁵³ Fausto-Sterling's classification carried over the pathologizing and stigmatizing character of the dominant medical framework, even if that wasn't the intention (and even if the classification wasn't meant as a serious proposal). When first drafting the article, Fausto-Sterling hadn't yet met any intersex people; there were serious limits to what she could know. And eventually, many intersex activists moved away from the term "hermaphrodite" entirely, because it was misleading (especially when used as a medical diagnosis) and seen by some as objectifying.

Fausto-Sterling welcomed these critiques and began collaborating with Chase and other intersex activists. Such alliances, which at times revealed the conflicting goals of activism and academic research, became part of the fight against the medical establishment's violence.

Resisting the Enforcement of the Binary

While Jewish and other traditions have long recognized that life isn't binary, this way of thinking was pushed aside in Euro-American societies in favor of a binary model. The imposition of the binary affects not only intersex people—who are scrutinized by their anatomy and whose condition is entangled with the medical system—but also trans people (two identities that aren't mutually exclusive) and anyone who deviates from the male/female binary. Along with other writers and activists, Fausto-Sterling wanted to

understand how and why the binary became so dominant, so that it could be resisted.

To settle matters such as paternity and rights to property, modern Euro-American legal systems require people to be registered as male or female. By the late nineteenth century, many US states already had laws against cross-dressing. The legal system continued enforcing the binary in a way that maintains normative gender roles, as Fausto-Sterling shows in *Sexing the Body*. In the court case of *Corbett v. Corbett* (1970) in Britain, for example, a husband asked for his marriage to a trans person named April Ashley to be annulled because Ashley was really a man, not a woman. The court ruled in the husband's favor, on the grounds that Ashley's artificially constructed vagina was not large enough for penile penetration and that marriage is "the institution on which the family is built, and in which the capacity for natural hetero-sexual intercourse is an essential element."⁵⁴

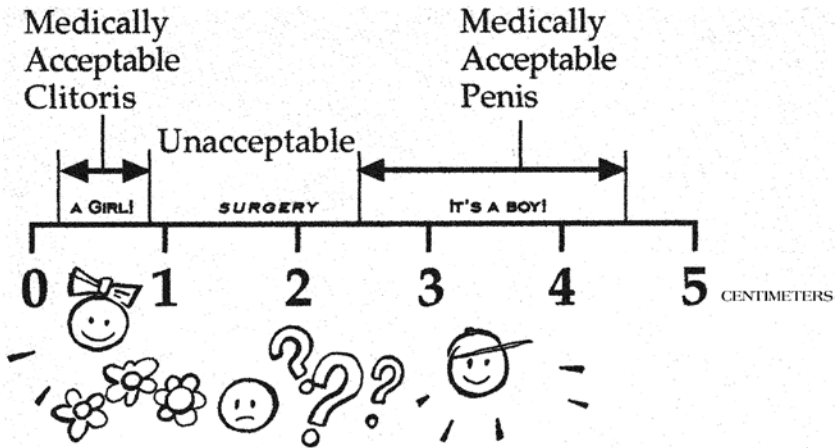
But since not all bodies are clear-cut male or female, medical institutions began violently intervening to make them conform. Fausto-Sterling explains that these actions were a response to social movements. In the twentieth century, she notes, "the more social radicals blasted away at the separations between masculine and feminine spheres, the more physicians insisted on the absolute division between male and female."⁵⁵ Medical institutions pursued this agenda despite sometimes acknowledging that intersex people exist and can be content living their lives without wanting to change their bodies.⁵⁶ By the 1960s, a program for producing normative male and female bodies was in place, with surgery as its primary method.

A newborn who didn't fit neatly into either category would get treated as a medical emergency. If the penis was considered too small—too small for future vaginal penetration, that is—it would be surgically removed to make the newborn more "female." If the clitoris was considered too big, doctors would often remove it to similarly make the newborn more "female," with the justification that female orgasms were "vaginal rather than clitoral."⁵⁷ For individuals to be made male, surgeons such as Hugh Young at Johns Hopkins University developed techniques to "straighten out and lengthen" the penis and "amputate the vagina."⁵⁸ Intersex activists have created

a “Phall-O-Metrics” cartoon that shows the arbitrary character of these surgeries (see figure 2.3).⁵⁹ Depending on the circumstances, doctors would perform additional surgeries when the child grew (along with hormonal treatment) to reinforce heterosexual male or female identity. This medical agenda also had a racist dimension: Surgeons such as Young believed that only white bodies could be fully sculpted into normative male or female, though it didn’t stop him and his colleagues at elite medical institutions from perfecting their surgical techniques on poor and working-class Black people.⁶⁰

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All these surgeries are generally unnecessary for a person’s health. They can also cause lasting damage, including scarring, an inability to experience orgasms as adults, and incalculable psychological harm, as Fausto-Sterling documented in collaboration with inter-sex activists.



Phall-O-Metrics

Figure 2.3: Cartoon from *Sexing the Body* showing the arbitrary way in which doctors decide whether a body can be assigned male or female, or if surgery is required. A similar graphic appeared earlier in Suzanne Kessler’s *Lessons from the Intersexed*.

In *Sexing the Body*, Fausto-Sterling discusses the story of Angela Moreno, who, in 1985, at age twelve, was found to have a clitoris deemed too large (1.5 inches; see figure 2.3). Moreno's parents took her to a doctor who lied and told Moreno she had ovarian cancer and needed a hysterectomy; the doctor then proceeded to remove her clitoris. It was not until age twenty-three that Moreno found out she was born XY and with ovo-testis (Moreno had partial androgen insensitivity, so her body didn't utilize the testosterone produced by her testis). As for how she identifies, Moreno says, "If I had to label myself man or woman, I'd say, a different kind of woman. . . . I'm not a case of one sex or the other, nor am I some combination of the two. I was born uniquely hermaphroditic—and from the bottom of my heart I wish I'd been allowed to stay that way."⁶¹

Some parents who were lied to or coerced into "consenting" to these surgeries for their children also became part of the intersex movement, such as Helena Harmon-Smith, who had a child in the 1990s born with an ovary and a testis. The doctors wanted to surgically make the child into a "girl," but Harmon-Smith refused, later writing, "He had parts I didn't have . . . he is a beautiful child." Against her wishes, the doctor removed her son's gonad. This experience led Harmon-Smith to start a parents' support group called HELP (Hermaphrodite Education and Listening Post)⁶² and to write the "Ten Commandments" of intersex, which include "DO encourage the family to see a counselor or therapist," "DO NOT make drastic decisions in the first year," and "DO NOT tell the family to not name 'the child'! Doing so only isolates them, and makes them begin to see their baby as an 'abnormality.'"⁶³

These activists were up against the medical establishment's long-standing denial that sex is a continuum. Medical literature recommends that doctors avoid any mention of mixed sex features when speaking to parents and children.⁶⁴ One doctor wrote in 1960 that "every effort should be made to discourage the concept that the child is part male and part female. . . . This is often best handled by explaining that 'the gonads were incompletely developed . . . and therefore required removal.' All efforts should be made to discourage any feeling of sexual ambiguity."⁶⁵ Medical resistance to the continuum has continued. In the late 1990s, when

Fausto-Sterling and Cheryl Chase tried to publish an alternative perspective on intersexuality in a newsletter of Brown University's medical school, they were rejected. "We do not wish our publication to become a forum for expression of ideas, be they medical or otherwise," a surgeon informed them.⁶⁶ "Some of my medical colleagues are apparently so scandalized by my thoughts on intersexuality that they refuse to discuss them with me," Fausto-Sterling notes in *Sexing the Body*.⁶⁷

"It's Time to Picket Them"

When trying to talk to the doctors didn't work, intersex activists began considering protests and more confrontational methods. Some people floated the idea of picketing the medical profession, but Chase was ambivalent about it. "I said, 'No, it'll just piss them off, and I really want them to listen because they need to change.' I talked to Anne [Fausto-Sterling] and Anne said, 'Yeah, it's time to picket them.' " The point of the picket, Fausto-Sterling told Chase, was to get media attention and force the doctors to listen. In that conversation about picketing, Fausto-Sterling invoked her family's history of radical protest, like her Bundist grandfather who was imprisoned for protesting the Russian czar's regime. In October 1996, activists with ISNA calling themselves "Hermaphrodites with Attitude" picketed the meeting of the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in Boston. One activist held up a sign with "Silence = Death," the slogan of the AIDS movement from the 1980s. They distributed pamphlets and asked to meet with the doctors. A representative of AAP came out to hand demonstrators a statement saying that "officials would be happy to meet with members of the press privately, inside, [but] they had no interest in meeting any Hermaphrodites with Attitude."⁶⁸

Today, intersex activists are still protesting medical institutions that violently enforce the binary. Thanks to the movement's efforts, there is now much more awareness, and doctors are being forced to listen. Some intersex activists are demanding reparations from medical institutions while seeking to "liberate intersex identity from medicine."⁶⁹ Intersex activists are also building relationships

with other movements and asking how the violence against intersex people relates to anti-Black violence, ableism, and other forms of state-sanctioned oppression. But in addition to coping with all the violence, the intersex movement is also making room for the joys of being intersex and loving one's body.⁷⁰

*

Beyond the medical establishment, there has also been fierce opposition to the idea of sex as a continuum by Christian fundamentalist and white supremacist groups. Some of these groups correctly understood that a queer Jewish tradition is challenging their binary worldview. Two years after Fausto-Sterling's "Five Sexes" article appeared, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights ran an ad in *The New York Times* stating it is "maddening to listen to discussions of 'five genders' when every sane person knows there are but two sexes, both of which are rooted in nature."⁷¹ And more recently, in 2015, a white supremacist magazine published an article claiming that "Jewish sexologists and social commentators were united in advancing theories of sexual inversion that moved away from interpretations involving themes like degeneration, demographic decline and biological reality, and instead towards *Talmudic abstractions* involving the nature of romantic love and the allegedly fluid nature of gender and sex."⁷²

One of the Jews the article railed against was Magnus Hirschfeld, a socialist who advocated for gay rights, coined the term "transvestite," and ran the Institute for Sexual Science in Berlin, which "provided medical transition for trans people as early as the 1920s"⁷³ (the Nazis shut down the institute and burned its archives in the street). Hirschfeld wrote of a multitude of gender identities "between which . . . there are no empty points present but rather unbroken connecting lines."⁷⁴ The Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman held similar views, writing to Hirschfeld in 1923 that she was opposed to all sex stereotypes and that it was tragic that society remained "so ignorant of the meaning and importance of the whole gamut of sex."⁷⁵

The white supremacists say this Jewish tradition of thinking about sex/gender is characterized by "a clear preoccupation with

the need for ‘tolerance’ and social pluralism” and “a fanatical opposition towards non-Jewish attempts to develop racial science.”⁷⁶ This is true, and it’s something to be proud of.

A Dialectical Approach to Sex/Gender

When scientists decide to study human differences, Fausto-Sterling argues, they enter a dense “web” where social and scientific matters are entangled (see figure 2.4). They may start with a question about the biology of hormones but then quickly run into deep-seated views about gender roles and differences, homosexuality, and what it means to be a productive and moral member of capitalist society—whether they like it or not. Intersex people, by merely existing, pose a challenge to these deeply held views and thus remain “interesting” subjects for the scientific machine. And even though studies of intersex people for the purposes of understanding their “deviant” biology produce few results even by conventional scientific standards, scientists continue to pursue them. They can’t stop comparing different groups, in objectifying ways, guided by the dominant ideology about sex/gender.⁷⁷

Could human differences be studied differently? Building on ideas by various thinkers working under the banner of *dynamic systems theory* or *developmental systems theory*, Fausto-Sterling has been sketching an alternative framework based on the premise that the social shapes the biological and vice versa.⁷⁸

This alternative framework recognizes that we are made of “bio-social sediments,”⁷⁹ with the emergence of sex/gender being a prime example. We enter the world naked, but our bodies are quickly and physically shaped (as the treatment of intersex people shows) by society’s dominant notions of sex/gender. We continue to be socialized into a gender from the earliest age, especially (but not only) by those who raise us. This socialization changes what we see, what we hear, who we interact with and how, in ways that literally alter our biology—down to the structure of our bones.⁸⁰ Yet we are not just passively molded by external forces: From a young age, we also participate in and shape gendered dynamics and relationships. This complex process affects our behavior and how we are

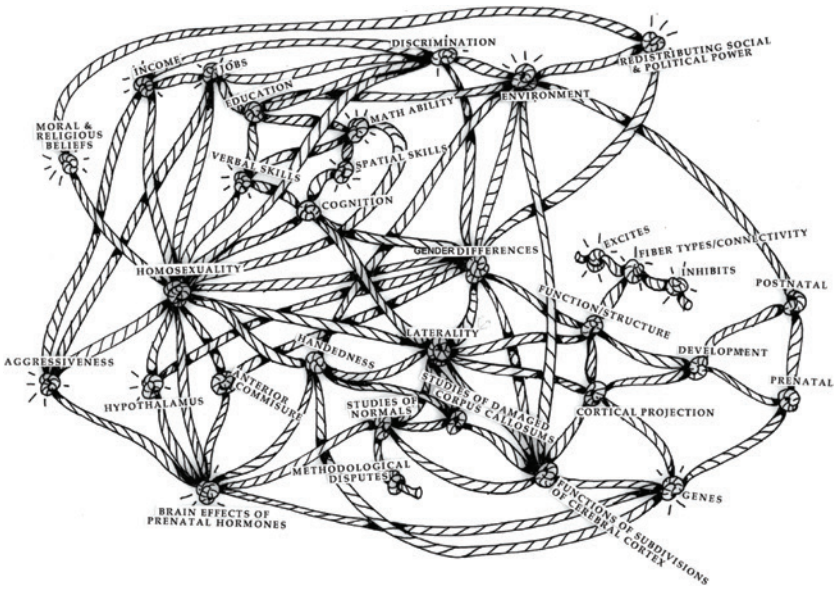


Figure 2.4: A tangled web in which scientific studies of, for example, “sex hormones” or the function of brain regions are entangled with issues such as homosexuality, labor struggles, education, and morality (from *Sexing the Body*). In this web, Anne Fausto-Sterling notes, we quickly move “along the strands from science to politics, from scientific disputes to political power struggles.” Knots in this web include “aggressiveness,” “income,” “jobs,” “homosexuality,” “gender differences,” “handedness,” “laterality,” “verbal skills,” “spatial skills,” “math ability,” “cortical projection,” “prenatal,” “genes,” and “studies of normal.”

seen and treated by others, which continues to alter our biological constitution—and so the biosocial sediments accumulate.

Fausto-Sterling aims to study the accumulation of biosocial sediments that make up sex/gender, with its (often oppressive) consequences. By focusing on the early stages, Fausto-Sterling argues, we could better appreciate how open-ended the emergence of sex/gender is and maybe even find liberatory possibilities for forming different kinds of relationships and identities. This approach entails paying close attention to early interactions between parent

and child, and between children, to ask, When does a concept of sex/gender appear? How and when do children begin to gender themselves and others and to associate gender with specific roles, traits, and body forms? There is some evidence that even children raised in patriarchal American culture do not immediately develop rigid notions of sex/gender. Some have suggested that children initially identify another child's "gender" by appearance and dress (e.g., short versus long hair, "boy" clothes versus "girl" clothes), not by genitalia. Children can easily conceive of themselves and other children changing from "boy" to "girl" by simply changing clothes (they do not develop what some psychologists call "gender constancy" until about age three, it seems).⁸¹ How flexible are these notions of sex/gender? When do they become rigid, and why? And how do interactions with parents and peers shape these trajectories? Studying these questions developmentally might illuminate those more fluid notions of sex/gender that children have early on—notions that are sadly crushed by patriarchal society.

Such work can be difficult to fund and publish because it doesn't necessarily fit within one academic discipline.⁸² Nonetheless, it is easy to imagine a research program based on this dialectical, embodied approach. As Fausto-Sterling is quick to point out, this research is already taking place, scattered across many fields.

What is harder to see is how such a program, if pursued within existing scientific institutions, could serve liberation.⁸³ Who, within these institutions, would be expected to conduct these studies of difference, and for what purpose? For whose benefit? Would this become yet another "science" of difference, one with less conventional premises but still ruled by scientific authority and the capitalist university? Or would it be an altogether different pursuit?

Making the Unruly Holy

While the medical and scientific establishment has viewed intersex people as bodies to be "corrected," made to fit the binary, there has always been an alternative. As Micah Bazant writes in *Timtum*, "I

hate the fucking binary. Rips me apart. I Am Not One Thing. I Am My Own Very Special thing. Don't lose me. . . . I was made out of all that is therefore I must have been in the world before." We cannot do anything sacred or in the name of our ancestors, Bazant adds, "without being whole," without stitching ourselves together from all the violent divisions.⁸⁴ We heard echoes of this view in Rabbi Reuben Zellman's reflection on the nonbinary categories of the Talmud, which calls to honor the "Holiness of Twilight": the in-between states that show us most clearly that life can't be contained in boxes.

Anne Fausto-Sterling arrived at a similar view, urging, for example, that intersex people and their "unruly" bodies be embraced. She hopes that "we will come to view such children as especially blessed."⁸⁵ The most radical conclusion is that this applies at some level to everyone, since no one truly fits the binary imagined by patriarchal society.

It is therefore not surprising that trans and queer Jews interested in extending and reclaiming Jewish rituals find Fausto-Sterling's work compelling. Rabbi Elliot Kukla, for example, uses Fausto-Sterling's work as evidence that the *tumtum*, the Talmud's indeterminate sex/gender category, is not "a mythical creature or a statistical aberration" but rather that "a binary approach to sexing the body is relatively new."⁸⁶ In a 2009 collection of queer commentaries on the Torah titled *Torah Queeries*, Rabbi Margaret Moers Wenig similarly builds on Fausto-Sterling's research, showing how her account of sex as a continuum fits well with the tradition that gave us the midrash about Adam as *androgynos*, the celebration of the *saris* in the Torah, and the nonbinary categories of the Mishnah and Talmud. "The Mishnah anticipated in its discussion of the *androgynos*," Wenig writes, "what scientists [referring to Fausto-Sterling] now understand nearly two millennia later."⁸⁷

But what would it take to fully embrace the "unruly" continuum, as these voices urge, and treat the diversity of sex/gender as holy?

This would require a radical transformation of science and medicine. In this transformation, as Fausto-Sterling argues, the harmful divisions that have characterized Euro-American science would get dissolved. And power would have to be shared rather than concentrated in a medical elite:

Imagine a world in which the same knowledge that has enabled medicine to intervene in the management of intersexual patients has been placed at the service of multiple sexualities. Imagine that the sexes have multiplied beyond currently imaginable limits. *It would have to be a world of shared powers.* Patient and physician, parent and child, male and female, heterosexual and homosexual—all. Those oppositions and others would have to be dissolved as sources of division. A new ethic of medical treatment would permit ambiguity in a culture that had overcome sexual division.⁸⁸

Medical practice would become fundamentally antieugenicist, with its main aim to preserve life. Fausto-Sterling imagines that following this transformation, intersex people with adrenal malfunction, for example, would be concerned not with fitting in but simply about getting care for health-threatening conditions that may arise (such as hernias, gonadal tumors, or salt imbalance). But any treatment would be “*a cooperative venture between physician, patient and other advisers trained in issues of gender multiplicity.*”⁸⁹ Through such cooperative ventures, trans people would be able to receive the gender-affirming treatment that is often denied them but forced upon intersex people.⁹⁰

The seeds of such cooperative ventures can be found in collectives outside scientific institutions. We have already seen how intersex people, along with their allies, provided alternatives to hegemonic medical narratives and formed support groups. Another important example is Boston Women’s Health Collective (BWHC), which created *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1970)—a practical health guide for women that was grounded in women’s experiences, not the misogynistic medical ideology that Fausto-Sterling, Ruth Hubbard, and others had worked tirelessly to refute (Hubbard was one of the women interviewed by BWHC, while Fausto-Sterling helped distribute the collective’s materials).⁹¹

Building such alternatives requires a commitment to collective care and mutual aid, something alien to capitalist medicine. It also requires forms of organizing that respect rather than erase differences.

3

Choose Life

Direct Action Against Capitalist Medicine

As a young queer Jewish AIDS activist, I found inspiration in the story of Moses plunging into the sea. It taught me divine intervention requires human action. We can't always just wait. We have to question. We have to do.

—Gregg Bordowitz

Remember that nothing has ever been given to our community (much less by our Government). It has always been taken in our name by the courageous and the radical. Do not forget that any good accomplished during the AIDS epidemic had to be fought for and won. And don't forget that anything that can change for the better can easily be changed back.

—Avram Finkelstein

Choose life. That is what Moses tells the Israelites after their liberation from slavery, when they are still in the desert, about to enter the land that Moses was forbidden from. "I have put before you life and death, blessing and curse," Moses says, but you must "choose life, if you and your offspring would live."¹

But choosing life is a struggle, not simply a choice, as the AIDS crisis that broke out in the 1980s makes clear. AIDS activists wanted to live, but they were up against capitalist medicine—a system that first abandoned people with the disease and later tried to extract profits from them. Activists in ACT UP (AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power), founded in New York City in 1987, organized against this system. They took direct action against medical institutions

complicit in the AIDS crisis. They challenged the fundamental assumptions of capitalist biomedical research. They argued that all people deserve autonomy, which meant that people with a disease should have control over the treatment and research of their own conditions.

The Holocaust loomed large in this struggle. Many Jewish activists in ACT UP were descendants of immigrants from Eastern Europe. To them, the parallel between the AIDS crisis and the Nazi Holocaust was clear: Minorities went through hell, while the majority stayed silent. For these activists, to truly remember the Nazi Holocaust meant working to end the AIDS holocaust—and all other holocausts—by building alliances among the oppressed.

ACT UP created such alliances using an autonomous structure that didn't require people to assimilate into the majority culture. It was made up of affinity groups (usually five to fifteen people) that were based on shared identities and interests. Affinity groups allowed people to intimately care for one another, from a place of trust and familiarity, but they also communicated with the larger group and joined forces for direct action.

Gregg Bordowitz and Avram Finkelstein were two influential members of ACT UP who embraced autonomous organizing and saw it as a natural part of Jewish diasporic life. This was the way to do things for Jews who didn't desire their own state nor wish to "whiten" by climbing up the American racial hierarchy. For Bordowitz, the autonomous structure of ACT UP was necessary for enabling direct action and for building alliances across divisions such as class, race, gender, and sexuality. It also allowed Jews to keep their cultures and ally with other minorities. For Finkelstein, affinity groups made the "ever-evolving whole" that was ACT UP, giving the movement its vitality and freedom to explore different tactics of resistance. This "ever-evolving whole" had the potential to treat the whole AIDS crisis: to address the underlying issues of racism, sexism, homophobia, lack of health care and housing, and other social ills rather than only focus on pharmaceutical treatments.

Although they worked separately, each in their own autonomous pocket of the movement, Bordowitz and Finkelstein both used similar Jewish conceptions of time, memory, and bearing

witness in their activism. Both drew on rituals like the Pesach seder to make sense of their struggle and link it to an ancestral chain of resistance. Their converging trajectories show what is possible when people embrace the diaspora and build boundary-crossing coalitions without giving up their culture and history.

Coping with Diversity in the Diaspora

AIDS activist Gregg Bordowitz (born 1964 in Brooklyn) tells that his parents were “Jewish working-class hippies.” His mother was committed to the US civil rights movement, and at home, he absorbed a “working-class analysis” of the world.² He had also attended Hebrew school, where he studied Torah and Talmud. His parents weren’t enthused about that, but it was important to his grandfather, who was raised Orthodox. And Bordowitz liked it. As a kid, he even seriously considered becoming a rabbi.

Bordowitz never quite saw himself as “an American.” Growing up in Long Island and Queens, he would speak Yiddish (or Yinglish) at home and English when out. As a Jew, he felt like an outsider: “I grew up with the question of the status of the Jews—of our family—hovering.”³ Being an outsider made it logical to ally with other minorities and oppressed peoples. And Bordowitz’s love for Jewish diasporic life—for Yiddish language and culture—made him suspicious of assimilation, of the idea that you’d give up your people, history, and traditions to gain privileges in a racist society.

Through his own family’s history, Bordowitz could feel the shift in how Jews were being racialized in the US, along with the resulting predicaments of assimilation. His great-grandparents had fled pogroms in the Russian empire, according to the family story, and arrived at Ellis Island in the early twentieth century. They settled in the Lower East Side, alongside other Eastern European Jews. In those days, they were seen as part of the “Hebrew race.” At Ellis Island, immigrants like them were subjected to a battery of tests for fitness to American society, from “intelligence” tests to medical examinations.⁴ Their assigned status would be marked in chalk on their backs, and the “undesirables” were deported. Once in, radical Jews were still potential targets for deportation in the early twentieth century

(many were deported in the Palmer Raids of 1919–20), and the fear lingered in the family: One of Bordowitz's great-grandparents was in the Communist Party of the USA, and Bordowitz was told by the elders to keep quiet about it.⁵

Around the mid-twentieth century, however, Jewish immigrants from Europe had moved up the class ladder and were being increasingly accepted as “white.” It was part of what some historians call the “consolidation of whiteness”: the creation of a larger white bloc that could be used to reinstate the color line, right when Black people were gaining freedoms from Jim Crow and moving to the North.⁶ It required erasing the cultures, identities, and histories of the groups that got “whitened” while affording them material benefits that came at the expense of other groups considered lower on the racial hierarchy.⁷ That consolidation was rather successful—so much so that many Jewish activists in the US today see whiteness as self-evident and immutable and have even adopted “white” as an identity (ironically, much like the white nationalists who chant “Jews will not replace us”). But there has always been another approach to race, which understands it to be malleable and shifting—especially in response to social struggles—and fundamentally incoherent. This approach views whiteness as a power relation, sustained by force and specific material interests, not some kind of natural order, and it seeks to dismantle it.⁸ Bordowitz's thinking is much closer to this more radical understanding of race.

For Bordowitz, whiteness is an absence, a loss, and a scheme for pitting people against one another. He likens its empty, relational character to heterosexuality: “Whiteness is like heterosexuality, right? What does ‘heterosexual’ mean? Not gay. . . . White pride, then, is like heterosexual pride: pride in *not* being a person of color, pride in *not* being gay.”⁹ Bordowitz knows that whitening comes with a cost: “I grew up with the sense that, as a Jew, you had a decision to make: you could go along with the consolidation of whiteness or you could take your place among the minorities on the margins. You could shed your name, history, and language or you could eat TV dinners in Queens. You could wear a suit or mend other people's suits.”¹⁰

Going along with the “consolidation of whiteness” also meant leaving the working-class neighborhoods where Jews lived among

other minorities. In those places, people had attempted to “cope with diversity,” Bordowitz says, rather than erase it. In his Queens neighborhood, for example, “Others viewed me as Jewish and I viewed others variously as Irish, Puerto Rican, Black, Italian, and Korean. . . . We all understood ourselves to be different from each other and at the same time we had an understanding of ourselves as a neighborhood.” Working-class solidarity brought people together, and even though there was certainly conflict, it was also possible to have close relationships across racial lines.

Like many other Jews of his background and generation, Bordowitz still felt immense pressure to “professionalize,” to whiten, to become middle class (he says that for him, writing was the ticket). But what about the loss of Jewishness? And of the diverse communities Jews lived in, which respected differences and enabled solidarity across groups?

Bordowitz insists on not letting go of these worlds, and the Torah he studied as a child provided a model for how.¹¹ In the Torah, he says, “Israel” does not refer to a place or country. Originally a name for Jacob, it becomes a name for “a people in the diaspora, a people on the march.” Such diasporic people are often vulnerable, at the mercy of various kingdoms; they need to cross borders and survive by forming alliances wherever they land. (The dominance

A Joke About Assimilation

as told by Gregg Bordowitz

“A Jew from Eastern Europe lands at Ellis Island, having fled from poverty, pogroms, and a low-calorie diet. He’s exhausted, confused, overwhelmed. He’s hardly able to figure out where to stand in line, much less how to explain himself. Finally, he approaches a counter and an official asks for his name. He replies, ‘*Shoyrn forgotten*,’ which, in Yiddish, means ‘I’ve already forgotten.’ His new name? Sean Ferguson.”¹

1. Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 86.

of Zionism could make Bordowitz's interpretation of "Israel" seem strange, but it is in fact quite traditional.¹²) Bordowitz embraces this notion of diasporic life. "I'm content in the diaspora," he says. "To me, there's something beautiful, even heroic, about holding on to your culture and beliefs while allowing them to be malleable, open to the influence of wherever you find yourself. And there's something powerful about being mobile: you can travel with your culture; you can adapt to a different country, city, and neighborhood; you can think and speak in another language."¹³

The language Bordowitz grew up around, Yiddish, was itself a product of this diasporic mobility. It had a Germanic grammar to start with, fused with elements of Hebrew and Aramaic, but incorporated words and phrases from other languages and cultures as it moved with Jews around the world. Bordowitz likens himself to the Yiddish language, "born as one thing but always becoming another, always traveling."¹⁴ The traditional rituals of Jewish study that Bordowitz learned in Hebrew school, such as the weekly Torah portion reading, provided tools for keeping things together on the journey. By collectively rereading the same stories every year, you could track the ways in which you were changing and relate your struggles to those of your ancestors.

Bordowitz's activism in ACT UP, which focused on building diverse and autonomous coalitions, would become another expression of this diasporic way of being—malleable and adaptive but refusing assimilation.

Shvaygn = Toyt (Silence = Death)

Gregg Bordowitz joined ACT UP in New York City after attending its very first demonstration in 1987.¹⁵ He joined because he felt that the gay community was the only place to get reliable information about AIDS and some form of personal support.¹⁶ He tested positive for HIV the following year. The abandonment and vilification of people with AIDS began activating ancestral memories of oppression. He felt it was urgent to speak up and fight back.

Other Jews with a similar background also felt compelled to join the movement. Sarah Schulman (born 1958), an ACT UP

member who wrote an extensive history of the group, observes that many Jews in ACT UP had grown up around Nazi Holocaust survivors. It made them view the AIDS crisis as another case where the majority was silent about the suffering of marginalized peoples. Schulman herself had family members massacred by the Nazis and says she was moved to fight AIDS because of the “horror of being a bystander.”¹⁷

It wasn’t hyperbole to invoke the Nazi Holocaust, given how dire the conditions for people with HIV/AIDS were at the time. After HIV broke out in the early 1980s, the US government under Ronald Reagan did basically nothing to support the people initially affected, much less to develop affordable drugs. At least 40,849 people died from AIDS in the US between 1981 and 1987. In the gay communities of New York City, people saw friends and lovers waste away; some would attend two funerals per week. Many hospitals would either not admit people with AIDS or treat them horribly once admitted. Survival depended on mutual aid organized by the community, through initiatives such as the “buddy program” of Gay Men’s Health Crisis (GMHC), which paired people with AIDS with individuals who could help with chores and navigating a hostile medical system.¹⁸

Some believed that the initially impacted groups, notably gay men and intravenous drug users, were being punished for their sins. In 1983, Pat Buchanan, who later became Reagan’s director of communications, wrote, “The poor homosexuals—they have declared war upon nature, and now nature is exacting an awful retribution.”¹⁹ The US Supreme Court echoed this view in *Bowers v. Hardwick* (1986), ruling that it was OK for states to criminalize consensual gay sex between adults at home; one of the judges wrote that gay sex contradicts “millennia of moral teaching.”²⁰ This brand of Christian morality led to devastating policies. The government blocked federal spending from being used on materials that “encourage, condone or promote” gay sex, effectively cutting safe-sex education and condom distribution programs. This legislation was promoted by Senator Jesse Helms, who was scandalized by seeing a pamphlet about safe sex created by GMHC. “Every Christian ethic cries out for me to do something,” Helms said at the time. “I

call a spade a spade, a perverted human being, a perverted human being.”²¹ Federal funds were also prohibited from being used for clean-needle exchange programs, which could have reduced the spread of HIV. The archbishop of New York, John O’Connor, justified these policies in the 1989 Vatican conference on AIDS, where he said that “the truth is not in condoms or clean needles,” that these are “lies perpetrated for political reasons,” and that “good morality is good medicine.”²²

At the time, there was also serious consideration of forcibly testing and quarantining all HIV-positive people.²³ In 1986, *The New York Times* published an op-ed by the influential pundit William F. Buckley proposing that HIV-positive people be tattooed “in the upper forearm, to protect common-needle users, and on the buttocks, to prevent the victimization of other homosexuals.” Buckley’s proposal was, as an ACT UP flier put it, “in the tradition of Hitler’s Nazi Germany.”²⁴

“We were very scared that the Reagan administration was going to put people with AIDS in internment camps,” Gregg Bordowitz recalls, “and I think we came close to that in this country.”²⁵ Bordowitz thought the state was using the AIDS crisis to see how far it could go in exerting control over people’s lives. In 1987, he wrote that “even armed resistance may become necessary in response to widespread mandatory testing and/or quarantine.”²⁶

*

The Holocaust became part of the language of radical AIDS activism, famously through the “Silence = Death” image created by a collective with the same name. The image featured the pink triangle that was stitched onto the clothes of gay prisoners in the Nazi camps. The Silence = Death collective changed the triangle’s color from the original pale pink to a vivid pinkish-purplish-red to better fit the militancy they hoped to convey. They also inverted the triangle (the Nazis’ triangle pointed downward), originally by mistake, but it soon came to symbolize the importance of subversion in the struggle.

Avram Finkelstein (born 1952), a founding member of Silence = Death who helped design the image, explains what the

equation meant to him. “To a Jew, if you’re silent, you’re participating in it.”²⁷ To remember past oppressions meant acting to stop current oppressions. All the images Finkelstein worked on, with the Silence = Death collective and later as an ACT UP member working with the Gran Fury collective, were meant to inspire action. Although he was an art school graduate, Finkelstein never wanted this to be part of the “art world” (which he detested).²⁸ He often points out that as an art object, “Silence = Death” was inert, empty, dead; it only had life when it was part of political action.

Finkelstein knows the meaning of “Silence = Death” in his bones. His grandmother, Lena, whom Finkelstein describes as “to the left of Karl Marx,” emigrated from Russia to the US in the early twentieth century. When Finkelstein asked Lena where she was from, she’d say, “Who can remember?”—there was nothing left. “My ancestral home,” Finkelstein writes, “is the genetic cellular memory of the meaning of cruelty.”²⁹ His family didn’t see Zionism as a legitimate answer to this loss. “I’ve never been to Israel, my family never wanted to go,” Finkelstein says. “My family was pro-Palestinian, all the way, as far as I could see, in either direction.”³⁰ The family chose *doikayt* instead.

Finkelstein’s parents met when they were counselors in a summer camp of the International Workers Order (IWO) in Lumberville, Pennsylvania, where Lena had worked as a cook. They became active members of the Communist Party.³¹ They knew the costs of speaking out and instilled in Finkelstein the need to protect oneself from repression. Finkelstein was told to say he knew nothing about the stacks of the *Daily Worker* (the Communist Party’s newspaper) in the closet, clearly meant for distribution, in case of a police raid.³² After the Kent State shooting in 1970, when students protesting the Vietnam War were killed by the National Guard, Finkelstein’s mother made him keep a packed bag under his bed because “the next step after gunning down students is a fascist military takeover.”³³ Despite the fear, the kids were brought into the tradition of activism. Finkelstein’s parents took his sister to see Paul Robeson in Peekskill, New York, where white mobs rioted against Robeson for being critical of the US, and brought Finkelstein to IWO retreats. Grandmother Lena went with him to

protests. Finkelstein says he was “born with a political poster in my hand.” The idea that “Silence = Death” was therefore deeply familiar. It turned Jewish ancestral memories of oppression in Europe into a call to action.

But the Holocaust, as Finkelstein and other Jewish radicals in the AIDS movement knew, wasn’t only a catastrophe for Jews; the Nazis went after communists, gays, those deemed disabled, Jews, and other groups racialized as inferior. Finkelstein felt it was liberating when the Holocaust framework was widely taken up by the movement, in part through the use of “Silence = Death.” It was, he reflects, “as if the burden of history had been shared, along with the responsibility for bearing witness.”³⁴ Indeed, the Holocaust was a reminder that the burden of history *must* be shared because all oppressions are linked. ACT UP conveyed this by printing German pastor Martin Niemöller’s “First They Came” speech on fliers, which warned against ignoring oppression that isn’t directly targeting you.³⁵ The Holocaust was also a fitting framing because it showed how science and medicine aren’t neutral endeavors but can in fact be crucial for sustaining interlocking oppressions. A Nazi propaganda image from 1943 shows a microscope that magnifies the “infectious germs” that should be eradicated from society, including Jews (represented by the Star of David), communists (hammer and sickle), and homosexuals (triangles). The Nazis capitalized on these social divisions to consolidate their power (the pink triangle on prisoners’ clothes was meant to maintain these divisions even in the misery of the camps) and used science and medicine to implement eugenics.

*

With the AIDS crisis a kind of Holocaust, Gregg Bordowitz turned to the literature of Nazi Holocaust survivors for lessons on how to properly bear witness. He learned from the chemist and writer Primo Levi that in Auschwitz, life was so harsh that “the possibilities of witness were foreclosed and some people drowned, lost in a vast abyss, alone.”³⁶ As Levi recalls in his Auschwitz memoir, “I am not even alive enough to know how to kill myself.”³⁷ Bordowitz feared this would happen to people with AIDS. “Those hardest hit by AIDS,”

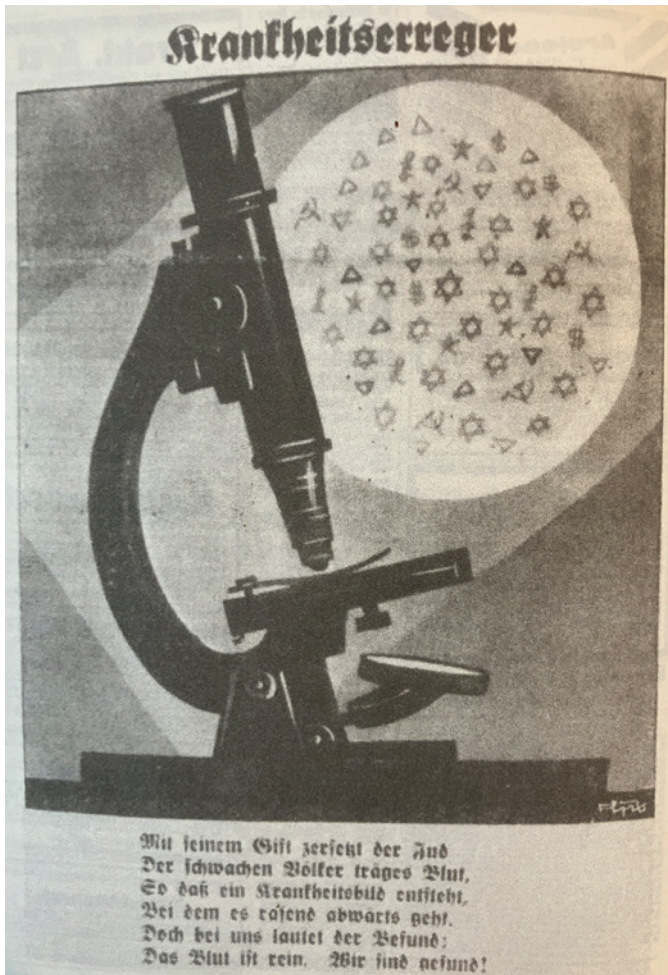


Figure 3.1: “Infectious Germs,” *Der Stürmer* (April 15, 1943). Some of the “germs” under the microscope are Jews (represented by the Star of David), communists (hammer and sickle), and homosexuals (triangles). At bottom: “With his poison, the Jew destroys / The sluggish blood of weaker peoples; / So that a diagnosis arises, / Of swift degeneration. / With us, however, the case is different; / The blood is pure; we are healthy.” Translation from Robert Proctor, *Racial Hygiene: Medicine Under the Nazis* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

he writes, “have struggled to prevent such foreclosures. We’ve organized ourselves into groups and institutions, formed communities against a horrible violence.”³⁸ Bordowitz used video activism and filmmaking to help build these communities and to bear witness.

To these efforts, Bordowitz also brought the Yiddish culture of his ancestors, which several forces had tried to destroy. On the eve of World War II, there were over ten million Yiddish speakers around the world, but the Holocaust drastically reduced that number. In the US, Yiddish-speaking Jews, like Bordowitz’s family, faced both external pressure to drop their language and become “American” along with internal pressure, from Zionist Jews, to give up a language associated with the diasporic opponents of Zionism (the Jewish socialists and anarchists). “Zionism pushes the wet and phlegmy among us to sound dry and clean, to say *toe-ruh* instead of *TOY-rah*,” Bordowitz says.³⁹ But he kept his Yiddish alive and infused it into his films.

In his 1993 film *Fast Trip, Long Drop*, Bordowitz weaves together his personal family story, his daily struggles living with AIDS, and the struggles of the AIDS movement. He plays many roles in the film to convey his multiple identities: a Jew, a socialist, a queer, a descendant of Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants, and an HIV-positive man. One of the characters Bordowitz plays is Alter Allesman, which in Yiddish means “old everyman” (it was also the name of Bordowitz’s mother’s family before they came to the US).⁴⁰ Allesman is a man with AIDS who shows the absurdity that results when the media tries to bear witness. He is interviewed by a talk show host who wants an inspirational personal story about living with AIDS.⁴¹ Sarcastic and cranky, Allesman eventually explodes: “Fuck you, I don’t want to be yours, or anyone else’s, fucking model.” He puts the question back to the host: “How do *you* live with AIDS, huh? Huh?” Allesman then breaks the fourth wall: “I wanna speak to people with AIDS. I know you’re out there. Aren’t you sick of this shit? And people who are healthy, people who presume themselves negative, how are *you* living with AIDS, huh? How do *you* live with AIDS? Why is it my burden, why is it my responsibility to survive and thrive, to get through this okay? . . . Aren’t we all living with AIDS? Isn’t this a crisis for all of us?”

The Allesman scenes are interspersed with footage from inter-war Jewish communities in Eastern Europe, all destroyed during World War II, and footage from ACT UP's actions captured by video activists. The film then cuts to a clip of influential Black ACT UP member Ortiz Alderson, who says, "I can't watch the TV anymore because every time I watch TV they keep saying 'only they' are getting it, and I know what 'they' they mean: 'only they' meaning gay men, 'only they' meaning Hispanic women, 'only they' meaning Blacks—and only they." *Fast Trip, Long Drop* tells us that entire worlds will be destroyed if we fail to act in solidarity.

*

Fast Trip, Long Drop's soundtrack was created by the Klezmatics, a New York City-based klezmer band. Bordowitz says he chose to have his Jewishness represented by klezmer music because "my Jewishness was my first experience of otherness in the world [and] the background against which I came to understand queerness and otherness in general."⁴² The Klezmatics bring a mix of joy and fury that accompanies ACT UP perfectly. They sing the wedding tune "Oy, Avram" over footage of a kiss-in.⁴³ They perform "In kamf" (In struggle), a poem written by Jewish anarchist David Edelstadt, over footage of activists carrying coffins in the streets. The English translation then runs on the screen: "You can murder us tyrants / but new fighters will come and we will fight on and on / You can kill our bodies, but you will never destroy our spirit."

The film also features cantorial melodies composed by Alicia Svigals, the Klezmatics' violinist. She was an ideal match for the project. Svigals had participated in kiss-ins before and even attended some ACT UP meetings.⁴⁴ And like Bordowitz, Svigals had made sense of her queerness through her Jewishness. "Being Jewish made coming out as a young lesbian that much easier," she writes. "Yiddish itself has been relegated over time to the marginalia of an already marginal population, so Queerness and Yiddishism by now seem a natural *shidekh* [match]."⁴⁵ Svigals also believes diasporic Yiddish culture provides a constructive way of being Jewish, with a long history, that isn't attached to the macho-militarism of Zionism.⁴⁶

Like Bordowitz, the Klezmatics wouldn't give up this Yiddish culture. But rather than sing songs about the old country, they brought Yiddish to contemporary struggles. They named their first album, released in 1988, *Shvaygn = Toyt*, which is Yiddish for "Silence = Death." (They titled their "best of" album, released twenty years later, *Tuml = Lebn*, or "Uproar = Life.") Band member Frank London says *Shvaygn = Toyt* was "an homage to the slogan of ACT UP, and an acknowledgement that if one is silent in the face of injustice then one is siding with the oppressor," but also "a literal statement about the Yiddish language: if no one speaks or sings in it, it will be dead." The album has songs like "Ale brider" (All brothers), a "Yiddish Socialist cry for unity" from the nineteenth century but updated for the struggles of the day. To the song's original lyrics, the Klezmatics added the line "We are all sisters" along with "We are all gay like Jonathan and King David," a reference to the intimate relationship between the two characters in the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁷ It carried new meaning given the AIDS crisis.

More of this richness could be brought into radical struggles, despite a society that tries to make everyone American. But for that to happen, radical organizations need a structure that makes room for people's diversity and draws strength from it. ACT UP tried to organize itself that way.

"Interlocking Parts of an Ever-Evolving Whole"

AIDS never impacted people equally. The disease rode on existing injustices, made by centuries of racism, patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism. In the US, HIV rates of infection quickly became higher among Blacks compared to whites, while Indigenous people had less access to treatments and testing.⁴⁸ HIV spread rapidly in prisons and among unhoused people and intravenous drug users. Around 1987, for example, while the media presented AIDS as a "gay man's disease," 20 percent of women entering New York's Bedford Hills prison were HIV-positive. Overall, marginalized people suffered deadlier manifestations of AIDS because they had existing ailments, lacked health care or adequate housing, and had more difficult lives.

Each harmed community had its own set of needs and struggles. Prisoners had to deal with abysmal or nonexistent health care in prisons, a lack of educational materials about prevention, and the stigma of being HIV-positive (which often resulted in forced segregation within the prison). Sex workers on the streets suffered from the police, who, in addition to the usual harassment, would sometimes confiscate their condoms and disinfectants. The women among these workers were also at greater risk of contracting HIV because of a patriarchal culture in which men often refuse to wear condoms. And HIV-positive sex workers were doubly stigmatized, both for their work and for having the virus, making it even more difficult to get health care.

Gregg Bordowitz thought that these differences among the oppressed could produce new forms of solidarity. As he put it, “Alliances among different disenfranchised groups create the possibilities of new communities that transgress constructed boundaries.”⁴⁹ The AIDS movement could “create new possibilities for a coalition across many traditional areas of political work: race, class, and sex.”⁵⁰ But creating true alliances requires a structure that respects differences and gives people their autonomy. The hierarchical structure of a party won’t do because such structures tend to impose uniformity. They are also not well suited for direct action, a tactic that hierarchical organizations often veto in favor of respectability. Direct action is better supported by an anarchistic structure.

ACT UP created such a structure using affinity groups, which typically consisted of five to fifteen people with shared interests and backgrounds. “The great thing about ACT UP, the brilliant thing,” Bordowitz explains, “was that ACT UP was not one monolithic institution. It was a group of people who met every Monday night. Many of them were parts of smaller groups, or cells, or affinity groups within the larger group. And those affinity groups to some extent had, if not a separate life, a life outside the group. So it was much more molecular in structure.”⁵¹

In this “molecular” structure, affinity groups often worked on their own but could propose actions at the weekly ACT UP meeting. The proposals might get voted down, but the next step wasn’t

dictated from above. If people didn't agree with the action, they could simply not join it. Bordowitz had urged ACT UP to adopt this structure, in the group's early days, so that people would be liberated to act. When the group once debated whether to take a certain action at one of the large meetings, he got up and said, "You don't have to go to the large group to get authorization. In fact, it's better that the large group is not involved with these kinds of actions because they don't have to be held accountable."⁵²

Maxine Wolfe, another influential ACT UP member who comes from an Eastern European Jewish family, thought this approach was a refreshing change from the highly ideological Marxist groups she had been part of. In those other groups, members were expected to conform to a unified analysis and strategy, a party line. But ACT UP had no such thing. ACT UP generated "great ideas for actions without any pre-set idea of the right way to do things," Wolfe recalls. "If you wanted to do an action, you proposed it. Most likely people would do it. In fact, they did more actions in a week than I'd ever thought possible." It also meant people had to cope with a diversity of approaches. As Wolfe puts it, "ACT UP is a true coalition. Everyone puts up with what my mother would call everyone else's *mischigas*—craziness [in Yiddish]."⁵³

Bordowitz, Finkelstein, Wolfe, and other radicals within ACT UP hoped the diversity of affinity groups would force the AIDS movement to hear voices from the margins and deal with the contradictions of coalitional politics. And it was indeed true that even when they represented minority views, affinity groups could influence the direction of the movement through their analyses and actions. Avram Finkelstein therefore describes ACT UP's affinity groups as "interlocking parts of an ever-evolving whole."⁵⁴

Affinity groups included DIVA TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists), cofounded by Bordowitz, which was "committed to challenging a racist, sexist, and heterosexist dominant media which is complicit with our repressive government."⁵⁵ This group made decisions largely based on consensus; as Bordowitz puts it, "Although AIDS-activist collectives have their share of divas, they are leaderless."⁵⁶ DIVA TV filmed ACT UP's actions, highlighting the perspectives of marginalized activists, with the aim of inspiring

more actions. Other affinity groups included the Condoms (an alternative term for dental dams, used for safe oral sex on the vagina or anus), which focused on issues concerning women and AIDS, and the Costas, in which Finkelstein and Wolfe were members.⁵⁷ Affinity groups often had names that weren't legible to outsiders but meant a lot to the members.⁵⁸

Not everyone was in an affinity group, however, and ACT UP in New York had other formations—committees, caucuses, and working groups—that made it possible to work on issues that were outside the dominant interests. Committees and caucuses were used for long-term projects; in committees, membership was open to all, while in caucuses, it was for specific communities. Working groups were used for shorter-term work on specific projects.

For example, while the Treatment & Data Committee explored ways to increase access to pharmaceutical drugs, the more marginal Alternative & Holistic Treatment Committee explored non-toxic treatments, from marijuana to traditional Chinese medicine, and tried to get scientists to seriously study what people with AIDS who experimented with various treatments had found.⁵⁹

The Spanish Language Committee had increased ACT UP's reach by translating its materials into Spanish. But the Latin American and Puerto Rican activists who did this work quickly realized that translating existing materials wasn't enough. Their communities' issues, such as housing, drug use, and immigration, weren't being addressed by the dominant agenda of accelerating pharmaceutical treatments, so they started the Latina/o Caucus. They held meetings in Spanish, which excluded many members of ACT UP but drew in new communities who came "not necessarily because it was ACT-UP, but because it was the Latino Caucus."⁶⁰ The Latina/o Caucus also formed an ACT UP chapter in Puerto Rico, spreading the message that "Silencio = Muerte."

The ironically named Majority Action Committee also addressed AIDS in minority communities, doing so from the perspective that the "AIDS Holocaust [is] caused not only by illness, but by homophobia, racism, sexism, indifference and profiteering at the expense of the dying."⁶¹ The Lesbian Caucus addressed the conditions of lesbians in the crisis, including "the lack of research

generated on woman-to-woman transmission of HIV.” The Needle Decriminalization Working Group created needle exchange programs to reduce the spread of HIV among intravenous drug users, while the PWA Housing Committee fought for housing for unhoused people with AIDS.

Forming Radical Bonds

Yet affinity groups were different from all these other types of subgroups. The affinity group, as Avram Finkelstein writes, was “binding individuals in need through pacts of acceptance, empathy, and shared history.”⁶² Its long-term intimacy made it possible for members to directly care for one another, especially when someone got very sick. This direct care was in the spirit of the Jewish tradition of *bikur cholim* (visiting the sick), which in the Talmud is considered a mitzvah whose value is so great it cannot be estimated.⁶³ The care within affinity groups (as with *bikur cholim* in many cases) went far beyond visitation; it was an attempt to keep together a person’s life when society had abandoned them. And in that intimacy, there was also the possibility of affinity group members failing one another, because the burdens of caring for even one person with AIDS could simply be too big.

Yet affinity groups also enabled caring for a broader collective when they joined forces to make the “ever-evolving whole” that was ACT UP. The result was a form of autonomous care where small cells of mutual aid cooperate to improve life for the whole collective, without losing their distinct character or pretending that everyone has the same needs.

Whether they did it consciously or not, Jewish radicals in ACT UP, such as Finkelstein, Bordowitz, and Wolfe, were re-creating the organizational structures used by their ancestors. In the mid-nineteenth century, Jewish workers in the Russian empire had formed small mutual aid circles, called *kassy*, that gave workers the power and resources necessary for direct action (which then usually meant going on strike).⁶⁴ This organization set the stage for the creation of the Jewish socialist, anti-Zionist Bund in 1897. When Yiddish-speaking radicals arrived in the US, they continued

forming mutual aid circles through groups such as the Arbeter Ring and immigrant societies called *landsmanshaftn*.⁶⁵ (One communist faction in the Arbeter Ring became the IWO, through which Avram Finkelstein's parents met.) And perhaps all these structures reproduced an even older Jewish way of getting together. The Talmud says that when ten people get together to pray, the *shekhinah*—the earthly manifestation of God, which is usually described in feminine terms—dwells among them.⁶⁶ This is roughly the size of an ACT UP affinity group. Maybe there's something holy about a small group of people getting together and creating a shared history of study and struggle.

"We Attached the Seder to Our Struggle"

Affinity groups allowed people to define the struggle on their own terms. In the Costas affinity group, for example, Avram Finkelstein and Maxine Wolfe explored their struggle as Jews. They started celebrating Pesach together with others in their circle (some Jewish, some not). They would "cross-reference" different Haggadahs and experiment with a new one each year.⁶⁷ They began with the Maxwell Coffee Haggadah, mainly because it was free and good enough to start a discussion. Another year, they explored a Palestine solidarity Haggadah. One year, Maxine Wolfe, who grew up in a Yiddish-speaking household in which "Israel didn't exist,"⁶⁸ brought the Bundist Haggadah. Originally written in Yiddish, the Bundist Haggadah interprets the story of the Israelites' liberation from slavery as a call to socialist revolution and blasts the rabbinical establishment for catering to capitalists.⁶⁹

At the seder, the group would spend hours discussing the chosen Haggadah and its significance for the present. For Finkelstein, who can only remember one seder with his family growing up (where they sped through the Haggadah to get to the food), this ritual was deeply meaningful. It allowed Pesach to become the "political holiday" it was always meant to be. The shared retelling of the story of liberation provided a way to counter the "dominant cultures and dominant tellings of various histories," as he puts it. It was also an opportunity to discover something new in an old

story. “I’m almost always moved to tears at some point during Passover, because it reminds me of something, or I hear something in it that I hadn’t heard before,” Finkelstein says. The seder for him isn’t really a “celebration” but a shared “act of witnessing.” “It’s so quintessential to the people who I am.”⁷⁰

In another pocket of ACT UP, Bordowitz and Alexis Danzig also started having a seder. At first it was small, but over the years it grew to over one hundred participants (though Finkelstein was unaware of it, while Danzig didn’t know that Finkelstein’s affinity group held seders).⁷¹ Danzig hosted the seder at her apartment and says she viewed it as a “spiritual practice.” It was a queer Jewish seder, which Danzig’s upbringing had prepared her for. She joined ACT UP months after her father died from AIDS; Bordowitz had invited her to the group, and by that point she had already seen the “Silence = Death” posters around the city and knew exactly what that pink triangle meant. Danzig’s mother, Naomi, grew up in an Orthodox community in Liverpool, England, and was evacuated as a child when the city was bombed by the Nazis during World War II. Danzig says that Naomi had a “ferocious sense of ethics”: In England, she protested apartheid South Africa, and in the US, she worked with the NAACP to expose racist discrimination in housing. She believed in direct action and eventually joined ACT UP alongside her daughter because she thought it was necessary for bearing witness. Naomi was also of a generation of Jewish feminists who were happy to defy patriarchal authority and write their own Haggadahs, which is precisely what Danzig and Bordowitz did in their ACT UP seder.

“We had permission to have our own seders with our own language and our own tradition,” Danzig says. “It was really wonderful to be at this table and realize that this wasn’t about reinforcing old family stuff. This is about expanding my own understanding of our traditions and our politics. This is how Jewish queer people do politics in the diaspora.”⁷² For Danzig, as for Finkelstein and Wolfe, Zionism wasn’t there to spoil this diasporic attitude; she grew up in a house where “Israel didn’t figure in at all.” In fact, she remembers a family seder where her mother got angry at the traditional Haggadah’s ending line, “Next year in Jerusalem,” and said

something like “Fuck Jerusalem, and this next year bullshit.” Danzig says this was the “beginning of understanding that my mother had made a deliberate intention to be a Jew in diaspora.”

As a gathering that revolves around what it means to remember and learn from oppression, the seder fit perfectly with the pursuit of *doikayt*. “We attached the seder to our struggle,” Bordowitz recalls.⁷³ For him, the seder was a chance to ask questions like “How do activists go further? How do we endure in the face of all that seeks to defeat us?”⁷⁴ Pesach’s biblical story also had a lesson about what it means to be Jewish. The lesson was that we should reject all racial hierarchies and claims to a nation-state; in Bordowitz’s words, “Exodus gives us the reason to understand ourselves as a people in diaspora, with freedom as an everlasting horizon and not a nation-state, not a passport stamped with ‘Jew.’”⁷⁵ Exodus also conveyed the importance of taking action. “As a young queer Jewish AIDS activist, I found inspiration in the story of Moses plunging into the sea,” Bordowitz writes. “It taught me divine intervention requires human action. We can’t always just wait. . . . We have to do.”⁷⁶

Bonds That Produce Direct Action

The bonds made within affinity groups gave people the power to act, to do. ACT UP targeted medical institutions, corporations, the media, Wall Street, and the Catholic Church. Activists blocked roads, took over spaces, held large political funerals, and disrupted the lives of complicit politicians—in their offices, homes, and at restaurants. There were diverse methods of attack, resulting from the diversity of affinity groups.

Here are just a few examples. In September 1989, ACT UP organized a rally on Wall Street to protest pharmaceutical companies profiting from AIDS drugs. On the morning of the rally, a handful of activists dressed in suits (Bordowitz among them) managed to infiltrate the New York Stock Exchange. They chained themselves to the balcony and dropped fake one-hundred-dollar bills onto the trading floor, disrupting the opening of the stock exchange for the first time in history. In January 1991, during the Gulf War,

ACT UP activists disrupted a CBS evening news broadcast, chanting “Fight AIDS, not Arabs!” The next day, they nearly shut down Grand Central Station; they blocked the schedule screen with the banner “One AIDS death every eight minutes” and flew balloons carrying the banner “Money for AIDS, Not for War” to the ceiling. Some activists put stink bombs in the station, and Finkelstein had to break up fights that broke out between members of his affinity group and some commuters.⁷⁷ Later that year, an affinity group called the Treatment Action Guerrillas draped a huge condom over the home of Senator Jesse Helms (who had cut funding for safe-sex education programs) with the banner “A condom to stop unsafe politics: Helms is deadlier than a virus.” In 1997, ACT UP members took over a New York office of pharmaceutical company Glaxo-Wellcome to demand they release certain AIDS drugs; seven were arrested after holding the office for an hour and a half.⁷⁸ There were many other actions across the US.

These tactics got the attention of the FBI, which tried to suppress ACT UP. FBI records show that the agency knew in advance of ACT UP’s plans to rush the police barricades and disrupt a speech by then-President George H. W. Bush in the Waldorf Astoria hotel in 1990. This information was used to place cops in strategic locations and block the action. Police were instructed to “wear thick gloves” and bring chain cutters and multiple keys to handcuffs when dealing with ACT UP—since these activists were known to chain themselves to things, sometimes using the police’s own handcuffs.⁷⁹

In many writings about the movement, ACT UP’s actions have been framed as a form of “nonviolent civil disobedience” in which getting arrested was part of the point. Getting arrested without resisting, according to the logic of nonviolence, was a way to draw attention to the issues while countering any notion that ACT UP used “terror.” But the group’s molecular structure (to use Bordowitz’s term) allowed for diversity, and not everyone bought into this ideology of nonviolence. Some felt that the AIDS holocaust demanded more. Activist Kiki Mason, for example, wrote a manifesto (anonymously, initially) in 1994 where he says he wants “to live by any means necessary.” Although he wasn’t Jewish, Mason embraced the Nazi Holocaust as a lens for understanding the AIDS

crisis. In his manifesto, he compares careerist AIDS activists who catered to pharmaceutical companies and the government to members of the Judenrat in the Warsaw ghetto who had collaborated with the Nazis. Mason called for armed resistance. ACT UP member and filmmaker James Wentzy made a video in which a shadowy figure reads Mason's manifesto against a background of images from the Nazi death camps:

This is my message to everyone with AIDS: If you think the end is near, take someone with you. Hold the president of a drug company hostage. Splatter your blood across the desk of a politician. Trash an AIDS researcher's home. When some silly-assed, blow-dried, brain-dead TV reporter asks you a stupid question about living with AIDS, spit in his face. Call the police and tell them you've put LSD in the water supply in retaliation for our genocide. Do it so they'll know what it's like to have your life ripped apart.⁸⁰

Kiki Mason died of AIDS in 1996, at age thirty-six. But he hadn't been alone in considering radical acts of resistance within ACT UP.

Bordowitz, as mentioned earlier, believed that armed resistance would be needed if the state tried to forcibly quarantine HIV-positive people (though he later embraced the ideology of nonviolence).⁸¹ Finkelstein was part of circles that had organized martial arts training and firearm practice and formed street patrol gangs. "Many of us believed we were about to die anyway, and gave serious consideration to assassinations and body bombs as a result," Finkelstein recalls. "The ACT UP I was a part of centered on ultraradical conversations, an aspect of this history that has drained away from most accounts."⁸²

It isn't surprising that radical resistance is left out of most accounts of the movement. After all, the insistence on distinguishing "nonviolent" from "violent" resistance benefits the state. The framework of nonviolence creates the image of the "righteous protesters"—those who break laws they consider immoral and are ready to pay the price by suffering state violence—while casting

those who believe in self-defense as illegitimate. The dominant story about the US civil rights movement, which is typically invoked in discussions of ACT UP's tactics, adheres to these terms. This story erases the presence of armed Blacks in the South who made "nonviolent" civil disobedience possible by deterring the police and white supremacist mobs from massacring the protesters. It also omits the fact that the icons of the "nonviolent" civil rights movement, such as Martin Luther King Jr., were themselves heavily armed (as was common when living among violent white supremacists).⁸³

What we choose to define as "violence" ultimately depends on our political perspective. The greatest violence is surely the violence of institutions that kill, criminalize, abandon, and profit from people. Does storming into a campus or office and seizing control of it, in protest of a holocaust, count as "violence"? Some of ACT UP's actions were inspiring precisely because they pointed to this radical possibility: seizing control of the institutions that fail us.

"Run the Fucking Thing Ourselves"

Direct action is based on the premise that people have the capacity and imagination to build together what they need to survive rather than devoting their energies to electoral campaigns or lobbying politicians. At its best, direct action is about seizing the existing means of production when possible and otherwise creating different alternatives.

Bordowitz took this approach in his early work on bearing witness through video activism. While many tried to get their voices into the "mainstream," Bordowitz thought it was better for activists to develop alternatives to corporate media. The Testing the Limits collective he cofounded in 1987 was one such effort. The collective filmed ACT UP's actions, centering the voices of people with AIDS. The goal was to get people with AIDS to see themselves "not as victims, but as self-empowered activists" who are part of a larger movement.⁸⁴ The process of editing the video was also valuable because it made activists grapple with internal tensions. Video activism is, for Bordowitz, like Torah in that respect. Bordowitz loves reading Torah because it is open to "infinite interpretations"

yet also forces him “to confront ideas that I don’t agree with.”⁸⁵ Video activism produces a similar grappling with questions that no single authority could easily resolve: Whose voices will be featured in the video? How will conflicting viewpoints be dealt with? Should the video collective seek a “master” narrative that tries to unify the diverse voices and actions, or are there other ways to cope with diversity? Bordowitz’s collective used consensus-based decision-making to address these important questions, which couldn’t even arise if production were in corporate hands. Moreover, the process of disseminating the videos through grassroots networks and screenings helped build community and relationships.

For Bordowitz, this approach to media should be applied to any technology. As he writes in a 1996 manifesto titled “Operative Assumptions,” “*Don’t trust technology*. Did you have a hand in its development? Is it developed in your interests? Take what you can use and use what you can take. Technology is designed within the context of social relations. Thus relations of power and dominance inform all decisions concerning its design, use and implementation.”⁸⁶

Why not approach medicine the same way? People living with AIDS and activists in the movement usually understand their own conditions and needs better than the doctors, medical researchers, pharmaceutical companies, insurance companies, and politicians who run the show, so why shouldn’t they seize the means of medical production?

This was the logic behind ACT UP’s “Seize Control of the FDA” action in 1988. The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was targeted mostly because it was failing to approve potentially lifesaving AIDS drugs. The action sent the radical message that people with AIDS should be in charge of health decisions that affect them. Bordowitz, who coined the slogan “Seize Control of the FDA,” recalls pushing for this action in ACT UP: “I was very insistent: ‘This is what has to be. It has to be that we are just going to take over the agency. The agency is not being run in our interests. People with AIDS are going to take over the agency and run it in our own interests.’ ” There was resistance to this approach, but Bordowitz kept pushing: “We were just going to seize control of the FDA and run the fucking thing

ourselves. We knew that we weren't actually going to do that, but this was it. We were just going to seize control. This was why it was so important, even though many people found that frightening—I was told, 'Gregg, back off of that rhetoric.' But I just thought it was incredibly important to stay on point with that rhetoric."⁸⁷

Bordowitz and his accomplices, such as Puerto Rican ACT UP member Robert Vázquez-Pacheco, had to convince others that the FDA was a worthy target. It wasn't, after all, the most obvious symbol of political power. Members of the Treatment & Data Committee prepared the "FDA Action Handbook," which gave a short history of the FDA and explained its role in the AIDS crisis. Support for the action was eventually won.

On October 11, 1988, about 1,500 activists surrounded the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland. They were bused from all over the country for the action, orchestrated by ACT NOW (AIDS Coalition To Network, Organize, and Win), a coalition of ACT UP chapters. Many affinity groups were present, each with their own plan for the day. Some activists donned bloodied white lab coats that said the FDA has blood on its hands. Artist and activist David Wojnarowicz, then living with AIDS, wore a jacket that said, "IF I DIE OF AIDS—FORGET BURIAL—JUST DROP MY BODY ON THE STEPS OF THE F.D.A." Some activists climbed on the FDA's awning and hung the "Silence = Death" banner, with pink triangles. The FDA locked its doors from the inside while employees watched the scene from their office windows. Avram Finkelstein's affinity group tried to open the glass doors, causing them to shatter. Cops wearing thick yellow gloves began arresting people and loading them onto buses. Activists then blocked the roads with their bodies until the cops dragged them away. Over 170 people were arrested that day.⁸⁸

As part of the action, ACT UP made fourteen demands to the FDA. These included approving and giving free access to potentially effective AIDS drugs that were known to be safe; including more people with AIDS in clinical trials, especially "gay men, lesbians, people of color, heterosexual men & women, IV-drug users, and children"; making all information from trials available to participants; and having people with AIDS on the institutional review board of clinical trials. These demands made it clear that even if



Figure 3.3: “Silence = Death” banner raised at the FDA headquarters in Rockville, Maryland, during the “Seize Control of the FDA” action, October 11, 1988 (later, more protesters climbed up on the awning). Courtesy of the University of Southern California Libraries.

control of the FDA cannot be seized tomorrow, the way the organization is run must radically change.

ACT UP continued to attack the main organs of capitalist medicine, including the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Over one thousand people participated in the “Storm the NIH” action on May 21, 1990. Activists lit up the lawn of the NIH in Bethesda, Maryland, with colorful flares. They chanted, “NIH, you can’t hide, we charge you with genocide!” The action exemplified ACT UP’s mix of joy and fury. The police couldn’t stop some protesters, who were later arrested, from storming the office of Daniel Hoth (then director of the NIH’s AIDS division). ACT UP demanded “more AIDS treatments, especially for opportunistic infections that killed people, and an end to the severe underrepresentation of women and people of color in clinical trials.”



Figure 3.4: ACT UP's "Storm the NIH" action, May 21, 1990. Photograph by Ernie Branson, courtesy of the Office of NIH History and Stetten Museum, National Institutes of Health. Some of the signs displayed on the lawn that day (not shown in photograph) included "One AIDS Death Every 12 Minutes," "Dying from Placebo," "AZT Is No Cure," "Treat Tuberculosis," "Treat Cryptococcal Meningitis," "Dying from Homophobia," "Dead from Greed," and "End Medical Apartheid."

One of the protesters at “Storm the NIH” was Phyllis Sharpe, a Black activist with AIDS who, at the time, had a three-year-old HIV-positive daughter.⁸⁹ At the NIH action, she gave a speech (filmed by Bordowitz’s *Testing the Limits* collective) about having been homeless and a drug user and a mother to an HIV-positive child. Sharpe talked about the failed health care system that could only offer her AZT, a toxic drug with bad side effects in children. “I am here to tell you that more trials should be available for me and the rest of the poor,” she told the crowd.

Sharpe’s life reflected both the interlocking oppressions that fueled the AIDS crisis and the grassroots knowledge people had to gain to survive. As Sharpe said,

I have learned as a woman of color with AIDS and as a mother of an HIV positive child on medicaid, that I have to always keep my ears and eyes open, and never stop thinking about this issue. There is no one to tell me what to expect as a woman living with AIDS, and most of the time I don’t know the right questions to ask. And yet I have had to be my own social worker, doctor, drug counselor, home worker, and even my own clinical researcher. . . . Through my involvement with ACT UP I finally met a doctor who really cares and listens to me. I can now say that my daughter and I are getting the same care as the richer community, but only because we have fought for it.⁹⁰

Sharpe’s experiences explain why some AIDS activists were compelled to become health care workers themselves and treat those shut out of the medical system. Intravenous drug users such as Sharpe couldn’t get access to drugs through clinical trials. Anthony Fauci of the NIH deemed them “a noncompliant population”⁹¹—in other words, incapable of producing useful data for scientists. And since needle exchange programs had been criminalized, activists decided to run the exchanges themselves. Between 1988 and 1990, ACT UP members created a needle exchange in New York City, starting in the Lower East Side. They would set up stations in parks where people could turn in dirty needles and receive clean ones,

with extras, along with a bleach kit for decontaminating equipment.⁹² Eventually, activists decided to get arrested (in the manner of nonviolent civil disobedience) during the exchange to make the point that it should be decriminalized. On March 6, 1990, ten activists met at the famous Katz's Deli for the action, among them Bordowitz (who had been a drug user). They managed to get arrested. In the trial, ACT UP used a necessity defense: The needle exchange was needed to save lives. The judge accepted the argument. The defendants were acquitted.

Challenging the Capitalist Laboratory

These direct actions came with a challenge to the foundational model of biomedical research. ACT UP questioned how laboratories choose their research subjects and run clinical trials, as well as how scientific facts are made and who counts as an expert. They challenged the enormous power that doctors and scientists have over people, especially over those whose suffering produces scientific data. Activists also exposed the flaws in how the field of epidemiology tracks infectious disease—flaws rooted in deeply held assumptions about behavior, sexuality, gender, race, and class.

These activists generally didn't approach scientists with reverence. They already had extensive knowledge about their own conditions, shared through grassroots networks, and knew how much the scientific enterprise had missed. Some AIDS activists were also highly aware that science under capitalism is driven by profit, prestige, and the chase after publications, prizes, and corporate sponsorships and that it was naive to treat scientists as neutral actors who simply seek "the truth." Besides, how one determines a medical truth is already a political matter.

Gregg Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto's tape *Seize Control of the FDA* (1989) captured this attitude. "We are the experts when we go there," Robert Vázquez-Pacheco says in the video. "We don't give them the power and say you are the only authorities. We are now the experts also, and we can talk to them as equals."⁹³ Other activists on the tape describe how the main treatment available then, AZT, was highly toxic and its benefits only lasted about a year.

These activists had also figured out that the prescribed dosage of AZT was way too high (one could reduce it severalfold and get the same marginal benefits with less toxicity). But there were deeper flaws still.

ACT UP pointed to a problem with the basic structure of clinical trials. The scientific “gold standard” for testing the efficacy of a treatment is the “double-blind” randomized controlled trial. In this experiment, one group of people is given the treatment (say, a new drug), while another group is typically given a placebo. Participants are randomly assigned to one of the groups without being told which, and the scientists evaluating the results are not supposed to know either (hence, “double-blind”). People who take drugs to treat secondary infections resulting from AIDS were generally excluded from such trials so that the data would be “clean,” meaning untainted by effects from other drugs.⁹⁴ For scientists who see themselves as observers of a world of which they are not part, this might be a nice way to determine “the truth.” For people with AIDS, it’s a disaster. Such trials ensure that some people who desperately need potentially lifesaving drugs won’t get them and won’t even know they aren’t getting them. They are asked to sacrifice themselves at the altar of scientific objectivity. It is cruel. It is also illogical if the goal is to find safe and effective treatments.

ACT UP proposed a different model. They argued that experimental drugs should be made available to people who are already suffering. As the ACT UP FDA Handbook says, “No drug could have a graver endpoint than the untreated disease itself.” ACT UP also called for an end to placebo-controlled trials. They proposed that a new drug should be tested against existing AIDS drugs, possibly with different doses (taking caution to avoid toxic drug interactions), against other experimental therapies, or simply against “what is already known of the natural progression of AIDS.”⁹⁵

Some of these demands were won. The year after the “Seize Control of the FDA” action, the FDA began developing the “Parallel Track,” which allowed people in dire conditions to receive experimental drugs while other trials were ongoing. More people with AIDS got included in trials and institutional review boards. In some cases, ACT UP helped recruit people into clinical trials who

had historically been excluded. These were steps toward achieving what Bordowitz calls “self-determination for people with a disease,” where those with the disease are “in control of all decisions” affecting their health.⁹⁶

Who Gets to Define a Disease?

Control of the FDA hadn’t been seized, and people with AIDS remained largely at the mercy of institutions that saw them as “subjects” and “patients.” And for those committed to the struggle for self-determination for people with a disease, a critical issue remained: What is AIDS, and who gets to define it?

When AIDS broke out in the US, medical researchers called the condition gay-related immunodeficiency (GRID), even though it clearly wasn’t limited to gay men. In 1982, *The New York Times* still referred to the disease as a “homosexual disorder” when it reported cases in heterosexual men and women.⁹⁷ GRID was eventually replaced by AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome), but it was still widely assumed women couldn’t get AIDS. A 1985 *Discover* magazine article claims women were protected from AIDS because the vagina is “rugged,” unlike the “vulnerable anus,” and concludes that AIDS is “the fatal price one can pay for anal intercourse.”⁹⁸ The article includes a diagram contrasting the anus and the vagina, with the caption “Why AIDS is likely to remain largely a gay disease.” A 1988 *Cosmopolitan* magazine article similarly claims that “Most Women Are Safe From AIDS,” this time with a racist twist. It states that only “rough” sex could transmit the virus to women, not “normal” heterosexual intercourse, and concludes that African women are especially at risk because “men in Africa take their women in a brutal way, so that some heterosexual activity regarded as normal by them would be closer to rape.”⁹⁹ But the prevailing wisdom persisted: AIDS is something only gay men should worry about.

These dominant discussions of viral transmission confused parts of a person’s identity (like being gay) with behaviors and social conditions that made one vulnerable to infection.¹⁰⁰ Bordowitz ridicules this way of thinking in his 1986 film *some aspects*

of a shared lifestyle. The title comes from the early medical reports on AIDS, which tried to find correlations between certain “lifestyle” factors and AIDS incidents in order to assess each group’s “risk” of infection. But no matter the results, the medical establishment couldn’t let go of the idea that AIDS is a gay man’s disease, and the film makes fun of this dogma. Bordowitz appears as a doctor, wearing a tie and lab coat, holding a clipboard. He reads excerpts from the medical literature, mocking the self-assured tone of the scientific expert. He then launches into a critique of epidemiology and the medical establishment’s understanding of disease risk:

In going over some of these [morbidity] reports, I once noticed a listing for tractor deaths among Georgian farmers. I had wondered if the cause for these deaths is attributed to some common aspects of a farmer’s lifestyle. That’s a crude joke, but it’s illustrative of how epidemiology works as a science. The appearance of death due to a mysterious cause within a specific sphere of surveillance is expediently explained according to ideological conceptions of perceived lifestyles of affected groups.¹⁰¹

The film calls on the CDC (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention) to drop its “risk hierarchy” calculations and instead present AIDS cases with all their characteristics, including in communities of color. The film also raises the problem with the CDC’s definition of AIDS, which was killing people.



Figure 3.5: Stills from Gregg Bordowitz’s *some aspects of a shared lifestyle* (1986). Images copyright of the artist, courtesy of Video Data Bank, School of the Art Institute of Chicago.

The CDC's initial definitions of AIDS listed symptoms common in men (such as Kaposi's sarcoma) while excluding those common in women (such as severe yeast infections and cervical cancer).¹⁰² This meant that even women who were HIV-positive found it difficult to get an AIDS diagnosis from doctors and were therefore denied AIDS social security benefits and insurance payments. Phyllis Sharpe, for example, was denied AIDS social security—despite being HIV-positive and suffering from chronic yeast and urinary tract infections.¹⁰³ ACT UP made this absurdity into a slogan: “Women don’t get AIDS, they just die from it.”

The CDC's definition also contributed to women being excluded from AIDS-related trials. This continued a long-standing practice of excluding women from studies. It was partly the result of the thalidomide scandal of the 1960s, in which a drug marketed as a sedative in Europe and Canada produced severe birth defects when taken by pregnant women. This made drug companies reluctant to include women in trials, and in 1977, the FDA issued a formal policy excluding pregnant women and those “of childbearing potential” from clinical trials (a policy that was only officially retracted in 1993).¹⁰⁴ Women were also generally considered too biologically complicated for medical researchers to think about; it was easier to just exclude them. An ACT UP poster captures this brilliantly, showing how women only become medical research subjects once they are corpses (figure 3.6).

The resistance to the CDC's definition demonstrates the power ACT UP had when it built boundary-crossing coalitions. Some of the key resistance to the definition emerged from prisons. ACE (AIDS Counseling and Education), formed inside Bedford Hills prison for women in New York in 1987, was one of the first groups organizing around this issue. It was cofounded by Katrina Haslip, an incarcerated Black Muslim woman who became influential in the AIDS movement. Haslip and her peers had received trainings on HIV/AIDS from ACT UP members and other activists who came into prison as volunteers but then went on to develop their own materials. ACE explained viral transmission and methods of prevention while pressuring the state to improve the abysmal health facilities in prison and stop segregating HIV-positive prisoners.¹⁰⁵

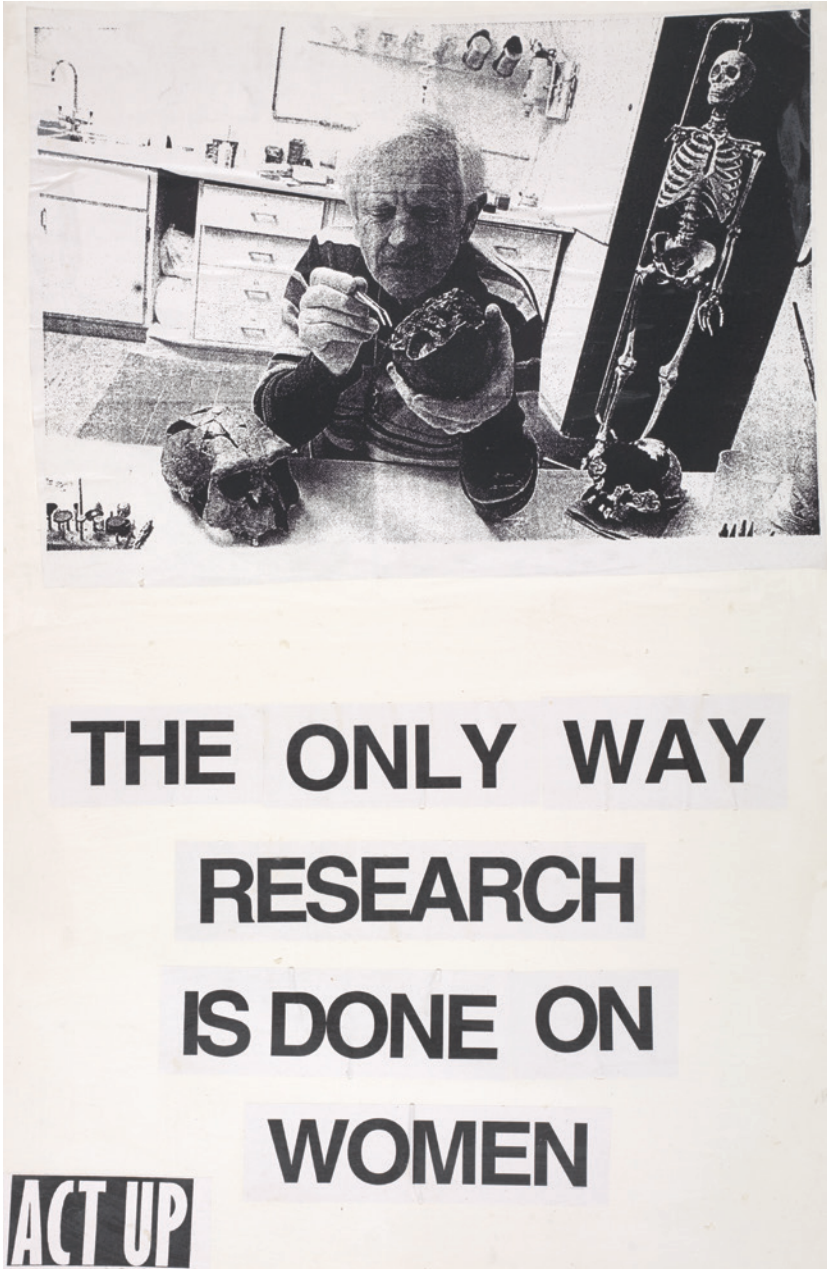


Figure 3.6: ACT UP New York flier, ca. 1992. Flier shows that “the only way research is done on women” is when they become corpses.

ACE also addressed issues of stigma, drug use, and the difficulties women face in negotiating safe sex with men.¹⁰⁶ The group aimed to do this on their own terms, without being lectured to by health officials who didn't understand their lives. Like the radical stream within ACT UP, ACE thought that "our diversity is a strength" and consciously explored the differences among incarcerated women. In some meetings, they split into separate groups of Black, Latina, and white women to discuss how AIDS affected "our particular culture and communities."¹⁰⁷

When Haslip got out of prison in 1990, she broke her probation to join an ACT UP protest. She founded ACE-OUT, an organization that supported formerly incarcerated women on the outside. Maxine Wolfe began working with Haslip, bringing the issues that ACE and ACE-OUT had raised to ACT UP's Women's Caucus. Wolfe, Haslip, Phyllis Sharpe, and other ACT UP activists began organizing to change the CDC definition. In 1990, ACT UP protested at the CDC headquarters in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1992, activists invaded and occupied the CDC's Manhattan offices. In December of that year, Haslip died of AIDS at age thirty-three. One month later, the CDC finally changed its AIDS definition to include more symptoms common in women.

A Noncapitalist Alternative

Even with an improved definition of AIDS and clinical trials with a wider representation of people with AIDS, major issues remained. The power was still largely in the hands of the medical and scientific establishment, for whom sick people were merely "subjects" and "patients." This meant that certain lines of inquiry weren't going to be pursued if they didn't align with the prevailing capitalist model of science.

Avram Finkelstein's upbringing had prepared him to critique this dominant scientific model. His mother, Frances Schmilowitz, was a communist and biochemist who worked in a cancer lab and was, as he recalls, a great diagnostician of illnesses. Through her, he got a sense of how science worked in practice, which many AIDS activists obviously didn't have. Sexism in the lab, for example,

was regular dinner table conversation: Schmilowitz would explain how she and other women (many of whom were Southeast Asian) were mistreated by the men. “To say she was a feminist doesn’t begin to describe the deep rage she had about gender inequity as a professional,” Finkelstein says. He learned from her that science doesn’t stand apart from society. When Finkelstein asked his mother why there isn’t a cure for cancer, she said that the pharmaceutical industry is happy to keep profiting from medications and other treatments that may alleviate symptoms but don’t eliminate cancer.¹⁰⁸ Schmilowitz refused to separate science from politics and saw capitalism as “the pivot point” between the two.¹⁰⁹ She made clear that science can’t be radically changed without addressing capitalism.

Finkelstein shared these insights with the AIDS movement. In 1993, he gave a presentation on the history of US biomedical research to the AIDS Community Television program. Though Finkelstein was never a “professional” scientist, he speaks on camera about science with a confidence that could only come from familiarity with the practice—a familiarity he got from his mother. In the presentation, Finkelstein explains how the course of science is steered by capitalist interests. Scientists pursue theories and experiments they consider “sexy,” and what’s considered “sexy,” Finkelstein says, is largely determined by the profit motives of the medical-industrial complex. Yet we are constantly told that science is a benevolent quest for truth and that we should simply trust the experts.¹¹⁰

Inspired by his mother’s analysis of cancer, Finkelstein realized the capitalist medical industry wouldn’t be incentivized to develop a cure for AIDS or a vaccine against HIV. It is simply too profitable to keep AIDS as a “chronic” condition to be “managed” with expensive drugs. An alternative, noncapitalist structure for scientific research was needed.

In the early 1990s, Finkelstein, Maxine Wolfe, and others in ACT UP made a detailed plan for such an alternative, called the Barbara McClintock Project (named after the famous plant geneticist). They wanted to create a publicly funded institute that would study the basic pathogenesis of AIDS—not just test drugs for people

who are already sick—and make any resulting treatments freely available to all. They aimed to remove all conflicts of interest from the endeavor so that the people making decisions about what was being researched and how weren't positioned to profit from the outcome. This plan was built on years of critically analyzing institutions like the NIH and FDA. Rather than try to reform the NIH, the plan called for taking AIDS research away from it because, as Finkelstein argued at the time, the NIH is both too entangled with the pharmaceutical industry and too conservative to follow many lines of research the medical establishment had decided in advance “couldn't possibly be true.” That's why the new project was meant to be, in Finkelstein's words, “separated from the NIH, financially and philosophically.” It was proposed as a congressional bill in 1993 but didn't make it through.¹¹¹

Finkelstein, meanwhile, got frustrated with the AIDS movement's uncritical support for the scientific enterprise. The radical agenda of seizing control of medical institutions was gone. The rage—the kind of rage Finkelstein felt since his soulmate, Don Yowell, died of AIDS in 1984—was dissipating. “Instead of fighting for our lives, we ‘celebrate’ life by dancing at benefits to raise funds for AIDS research, never questioning what is researched, who is doing it, or how it is going,” Finkelstein said in 1994. AIDS activism was being absorbed by capitalist philanthropy and nonprofit organizations: “AIDS is not a Cause or a Fund-raiser or a Dance For Life. It is not a Chronic, Manageable Condition. It is not Angels, or Ribbons or T-shirts. It is not a Learning Experience. AIDS is a heap-*ing* pile of bodies, bodies of people. People we have loved, people we would have died for.”¹¹²

The Four Questions

That same year, 1994, the image-making activist collective Finkelstein was part of, Gran Fury, made its final poster. Unlike the collective's previous images, this one had no graphics, no photographs—just four lines of black text on a white background. It was titled “The Four Questions,” an allusion to the four questions asked in the Pesach seder. The traditional four questions ask us to

focus on the uniqueness of the present, with the overarching question being, “Why is this night different from all other nights?”¹¹³

Yet the seder also asks us to literally become our ancestors and take on their suffering, with the Haggadah’s most famous line: that in every generation, every person must see themselves as if they had come out of *mitzrayim* (the narrow place, or “Egypt”) and transmit this tradition to their children. The seder thus makes us confront a basic intergenerational tension: We must continue what came before, but we are different, and times have changed. Gran Fury’s poster formulated this intergenerational tension for the AIDS movement:

Do you resent people with AIDS?
Do you trust HIV negatives?
Have you given up hope for a cure?
When was the last time you cried?

The first question voices the resentment some young gay men had for the older generation—resentment at “the reality of being born into a world that denied them the experience of unprotected sex.” This question, Finkelstein explains, also tries to confront the “‘street’ notion that if you were young and had sex only with other young people, you would somehow be immune from exposure to HIV, a fantasy that still exists within some social circles and communities, deepening generational divides.”¹¹⁴ The second question takes the perspective of HIV-positive people, who may resent the lack of urgency among younger activists who hadn’t lived through the same horrors because of the availability of treatments hard-won by older generations. The third question reminds the younger generations that people once dared to dream of a cure for HIV/AIDS. The fourth and final question speaks to the sadness over lost lives, a sadness that Gran Fury felt was missing. That sadness had produced creative rage, which was being dialed down as AIDS became (for people with access, at least) “manageable” by drugs.

A Plague for the AIDS Crisis

Most accounts of the AIDS crisis place it in the past, treating it as something that is now over. Institutions have therefore been making moves to memorialize its victims. Between 1981 and 2016, at least thirty-five million people died from AIDS.¹ How should this be marked? Many AIDS activists, including Avram Finkelstein, hate the AIDS memorial in New York City, which opened in 2016. When Finkelstein was asked by Sarah Schulman what he would do instead, his response was biblical. He wanted to make all the water fountains in Washington, DC, blood red—like the first of the Ten Plagues inflicted on Pharaoh in the Hebrew Bible. With members of his affinity group, Finkelstein experimented with a naval dye in a public water fountain in the Washington, DC, neighborhood of Dupont Circle (historically a hub of gay life). But it didn’t work; the fountain’s circulation quickly diluted the dye, turning the water pink. Finkelstein is still thinking about how to make all the public water fountains in the nation’s capital blood red.²

1. Bausum, *VIRAL*, 121.

2. Interview with Avram Finkelstein, March 22, 2024.

The AIDS Crisis Is Torah

Those particular “Four Questions” wouldn’t have been raised had it not been for ACT UP’s successes in reforming the drug development process. Yet those questions spoke to a longer-running split between those who were in the movement mostly for accelerating pharmaceutical treatments and those who wanted to treat the whole—to address the social ills that produced the crisis to begin with.

In 1992, several members of the Treatment & Data Committee split from ACT UP to create the Treatment Action Group (TAG) so they could focus on getting “drugs into bodies.” As an HIV-positive person, Gregg Bordowitz felt like he was expected to side with this

Contradictions Can Make You *Shpilkes*

Trying to build coalitions between different oppressed groups will inevitably produce contradictions. Confronting these contradictions was crucial, as the radicals in ACT UP knew, so that oppressive institutions don't win through divide-and-conquer. That's why Gregg Bordowitz said he "eats contradictions for lunch."

But contradictions take a toll, and we need a language for that. Bordowitz framed his 2001 film *Habit* around the Yiddish word *shpilkes*—a restless, nervous, tension-filled state, like you're on pins and needles (*shpilke* means "needle" or "pin"). The film juxtaposes scenes from his own life where he is on a strict regimen of antiretroviral drugs (hard-won through activism) with scenes from the AIDS movement in South Africa, where many people couldn't afford the drugs and where some activists with AIDS had decided *not* to take the drugs, even if they personally could afford to, until everyone had access.

The film exposes how the same pharmaceutical companies that ACT UP had successfully pushed to make the drugs available in the US were now using these drugs to profit from global medical apartheid. The availability of drugs, as the film implies, also helped deradicalize the AIDS movement in the US. The AIDS crisis appeared to have been "solved," the disease "managed" with pharmaceuticals (even though people periodically take "drug vacations" because of the high burden on the body). Such contradictions could make you *shpilkes*.

*

"Yiddish is not just a language. It's everything you feel.
In the past and in the present."

—Yosef Fraind, a Bundist in '48 Palestine

TAG crowd, but he felt “split” himself. “I wanted to get drugs into *my* body, but I really thought the movement had the potential to get socialized medicine for the country. And, well, I eat contradictions for lunch: I fought for both, never mind the debate. Why choose?”¹¹⁵ Yet as he points out, neither was achieved: Many people around the world still don’t have access to AIDS drugs, and there is no socialized medicine in the US.

The emphasis on “drugs into bodies” ended up sidelining the movement’s more radical visions. Bordowitz, for one, thought that ACT UP could have at least achieved universal health care in the state of New York. He envisioned ACT UP joining forces with labor unions and helping build coalitions that combine labor struggle with feminist, queer, and antiracist struggles. But the movement went in a different direction, and around 1993, Bordowitz stopped attending ACT UP meetings. A few years later, combination antiretroviral therapy became the gold standard of care. Now people with HIV/AIDS who could afford those drugs and adhere to the strict regimen of taking them (while dealing with side effects) could live much longer.

The gains made with drugs were the basis for the dominant narrative about the AIDS crisis: The pharmaceutical industry, pressured by activists and a responsive government, saved the day, and the system didn’t need to be radically changed. Yet as Avram Finkelstein concludes, the reforms to drug development were in fact “a benefit to the system, not a sacrifice.” Pharmaceutical companies obtained new markets and, through patents, could overcharge the Global South for drugs while leaving the flawed model of biomedical research and clinical trials intact. The prevailing story about the AIDS crisis became “a parable that ‘proves’ the system works in a way so predicated on the presumptive neutrality of whiteness, male physiology, [and] pharmaceutical intellectual property rights.”¹¹⁶

Beyond shielding the existing capitalist system, this parable also places the AIDS crisis in the past. It invites people to evaluate the AIDS activist movement by considering its “wins” and “losses” now that the crisis is supposedly over. Finkelstein rejects this as a capitalist approach that merely reduces struggle to “the acquisition

of things.” Instead, Finkelstein proposes that we view ACT UP as a resistance project. The project of resistance dies if we stop pursuing it, “but it’s reborn the second another one of us picks it up.” The past, therefore, is not past. We can always choose to continue and embrace the attitude that “every gesture of resistance is connected to every other one, past, present, and future.”¹¹⁷ The idea that the past is gone, irretrievable, is foreign to the Jewish notion of time Finkelstein is tapping into here.

Bordowitz had also tapped into that Jewish notion of time, which he associated with the Talmud. In the Talmud, Bordowitz says, “the past and future are alive in the present, and anything can happen at any moment: the dead can be redeemed, the lost revolutions can be won.”¹¹⁸ He likens the Talmud to an ancient radio that plays tunes from very different eras and genres, without regard to chronology. Consider a story from the Talmud as an example. Moses asks God to send him far into the future to meet the first-century Rabbi Akiva, who is destined to become a great interpreter of Torah. God agrees, and Moses finds himself sitting in the back row of a study hall with Rabbi Akiva and his students, confused about what’s being said. When Rabbi Akiva makes an interpretive leap and his students ask for the justification, he says it came directly “to Moses from Sinai.” Suddenly, the Talmud says, Moses’s mind was at ease; he was delighted that Rabbi Akiva’s teachings were part of his own Torah, the Torah he had received on Mount Sinai.¹¹⁹ Past, present, and future collapse. Events of the past revisit us as we reinterpret them; our ancestors shape us as we remake them. Rituals such as the Torah reading cycle or the Pesach seder, which reread the same stories again and again, reflect this understanding of time and the possibility of continuing ancestral struggles rather than letting them die. And we will be reading and rereading the AIDS crisis like Torah.

The COVID pandemic that broke out in 2019 and killed over seven million people by 2024 makes this rereading extremely urgent.¹²⁰ It’s a reminder that the AIDS crisis isn’t over; as some AIDS activists say, it is only beginning. And we are still only beginning to grapple with it. The eugenicist approach to health is still here, still killing people, still making hierarchies of worth, and

still trying to separate the political from the medical, the past from the present. Fighting this requires not only a reactivation of ancestral lines of resistance and ways of passing the struggle to next generations but also a consideration of the broader ecology in which we live.

PART 2

**From Generation to
Generation, to the
Earth—*L'dor v'dor***

לדור ודור

4

Anti-Imperialist Ecology

Connecting Social and Biological Worlds

I'm on nature's side. Man the scientist, *white* man the scientist, white *ruling* class man the scientist, the entrepreneur, the corporation president sets out to control nature—to make it behave! . . . I look at it from nature's point of view, from the insects' point of view, the insect out in the cornfield sucking the sweet juice of the crunchy cane or the nourishing mealiness of the newly plumped kernel. . . . They cannot even understand that the more they shoot and spray us, the more numerous we become, the more we fight back, the more corn and wheat we eat, until one day we will devastate their crops, bankrupt their agribusiness, destroy their armies, topple their governments.

—Rosario Morales

To what shall be compared one whose wisdom is greater than one's deeds? To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few, so that, when the wind comes, it will uproot it and overturn. To what shall be compared one whose deeds are more numerous than one's wisdom? To a tree whose branches are few, but whose roots are many, so that even if all the winds of the world were to come and blow upon it, they could not move it from its place.

—Rabbi Elazar ben Azaryah, *Pirkei Avot*

The dominant science we have is based on divisions and fragmentations. It tries to separate “social” from “biological” phenomena. It is reductionist—aiming to explain things by appealing to the

smallest physical parts—which is good for generating profitable inventions but misses so much about the world. And it’s all rather unsurprising because this dominant science, as Richard Levins writes, “is a creation of capitalism.”¹

Levins—a communist, ecologist, mathematician, and former farmer—spent his life understanding the harms of the dominant, Euro-American science and working with others to develop alternatives. He argued that this science fails to account for how imperialism and capitalism transform our relationships to one another and to the ecology we share with nonhuman organisms. As a result, the understanding of “public health” we get is impoverished, incapable of addressing, for example, the infectious diseases that periodically and unevenly ravage us. Medicine, meanwhile, isn’t concerned with how daily life under capitalism produces a complex tangle of illnesses for certain people. Instead, scientists and doctors are trained to be reductionists, to focus on “causes” of disease that can be isolated in the lab (and ideally, made into patentable products). Health prescriptions are similarly narrow, Levins said, typically focused on changing individual behaviors rather than the social arrangements that make us ill. Euro-American science does excel, however, at racial science: fitting people into racial hierarchies so they can be exploited, and telling many stories about how “low intelligence,” “criminality,” and other “defects” are based in biology (apparently common in some people but not others). As a creation of capitalism, this science serves its creator.

Levins made fun of this type of science, but he also diagnosed a serious problem: the neglect of the whole. Euro-American science violently separates: the social from the biological, thinking from feeling, the organ from the body, our histories from our present. It tries to fragment the world in hopes of controlling it. It is a science, Levins writes, “beset by a growing sophistication in the small that obscures the irrationality of the whole enterprise.”² “We can cut things open, slice them thin, stain them, and answer what they are made of,” he observes, “but have had dramatic failures in attempts to deal with more complex systems.”³

Levins’s antidote was to seek wholeness. “The social and the natural are really inseparable,” he urged, and our thinking must

reflect that.⁴ He developed models that don't separate social and biological variables and applied them to ask questions about ecology and health that were motivated by struggles against imperialism, capitalism, and racism. Levins also tried to organize ways of doing collective research without the hierarchy of the capitalist laboratory. In essence, Levins aspired toward an anti-imperialist ecology: a way of being in the world that embraces interdependence, grounded in liberation struggles and intended to support them.

Levins was part of a wider circle of activists who had challenged science in the core of empire. He was influential in Science for the People (SftP), a group founded in the 1960s that challenged the US scientific enterprise's commitment to profit and war. Often working with other Jewish radicals, Levins established some of SftP's most radical initiatives, including collaborations with anti-colonial movements in Vietnam as well as radical movements at home, which helped "America's Movement of Radical Scientists"⁵ (as SftP has been labeled) move beyond university campuses. Yet this Jewish radical current has been invisible in historical accounts of the movement, which present Levins and other Jewish radicals as generic Marxists or communists, erasing their Jewishness. To understand Levins's work, we should restore the lost context. We should examine the people and tradition that made him. We should look at the whole.

Contrary to how he is usually presented, Levins saw himself as a "Jewish thinker."⁶ Born into a family of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European immigrants with a rich history of radical organizing, he drew inspiration from Jewish texts, traditions, and social movements. At home, he absorbed a diasporic radicalism that profoundly shaped his views on science and medicine. And his life exemplified a commitment to *doikayt* ("hereness" in Yiddish), to joining the local liberation struggles where we live.

Levins lived that commitment with the Puerto Rican poet and activist Rosario Morales, his comrade and wife. They met through communist organizing in New York City and soon moved to Puerto Rico, where they got involved in the Puerto Rican independence movement. It was in Puerto Rico that Levins developed his ideas about ecology, always in dialogue with Morales. They mutually

influenced each other throughout life; their lineages fused. “My roots are not mine alone,” Morales writes in a poem dedicated to him, but “tangled and swollen tight” around Levins’s.⁷ Their children also became part of the struggle, both influencing their parents and continuing what they and other ancestors had started.

The Levins-Morales lineage thus provides examples of how to fight for wholeness through *doikayt*. It is also a window into how radical struggles are transmitted from generation to generation.

The Family’s Revolutionary Spark

Born in New York City in 1930, Richard (“Dick”) Levins would learn at a young age how his ancestors fought against oppression.

Levins’s grandparents left the old country (present-day Ukraine) because of economic hardships and to escape conscription into the czar’s army. They were part of a large wave of Jews who emigrated from the Russian empire, with New York City becoming one of their hubs. Jewish immigrants organized around the city, creating mutual aid societies and many socialist and anarchist organizations.

Levins’s grandmother, Leah (Shevelev) Sackman, was one of these radical organizers.⁸ Sackman was born around 1882 and lived in the southern Ukraine province of Kherson during a time of intense violence against Jews. It was in 1882 that the word *pogrom* was first used (by *The Times* of London) to describe an outburst of anti-Jewish violence that started in Elizavetgrad, Kherson, a year earlier, after the assassination of Czar Alexander II.⁹ In 1901, Kherson also suffered from famine and disease, and in 1905, there were more pogroms in the region during uprisings against the czar. In 1906, Sackman and her family left Kherson.

Sackman was already a socialist when she arrived in New York City.¹⁰ She became a member of the International Workers Order (IWO), as would her brother Sam and her daughter Ruth Levins, Richard’s mother.¹¹ The family worked in the garment industry, and Levins tells that Sackman was involved with garment workers’ strikes in the 1930s.¹² Some of the industry’s influential organizers were Eastern European Jewish women, such as Clara Lemlich,

who left the Ukraine around the same time as Sackman and helped launch the epic 1909 shirtwaist strike where over twenty thousand women walked off the job.¹³ These organizers had anarchistic tendencies, favoring direct action by the people, extending beyond factory and sweatshop workers. Lemlich also organized housewives who engaged in rent strikes, meat boycotts, and anti-eviction work. Sackman moved in these circles. She lived near Lemlich in Brooklyn and was affiliated with her women's councils (which later became part of the IWO).¹⁴ Sackman had also attended speeches by the anarchist Emma Goldman, another Jewish immigrant from the Pale known for promoting direct action.¹⁵

But Sackman was also influenced by her own ancestors' challenges to authority. Her grandmother, a *rebbetsin* (rabbi's wife) from Kremenchuk (in present-day Ukraine), protested not being allowed to become a Torah scholar by the rabbinical authorities. That feminist fight was inspiring. "It was my grandmother who planted the revolutionary spark in me," Sackman once wrote.¹⁶

Levins caught the family's revolutionary spark. He got a political education from Sackman, who lived with him and his parents in Brooklyn. She would canvass with unemployed women around the city and tell him about her "adventures" when she came home. "She often equipped me with *pishkes* [*pushkes*], collection cans to raise funds for various good causes, and I could report back my own adventures," Levins recalls. "It was from her that I got the notion that the struggle was a permanent way of life and that maybe my grandchildren would live to see the better world we fought for," he adds. "Even in the Sixties I never expected an imminent revolution or wondered about my own role in it, and our defeats did not lead me to despair."¹⁷

Levins says he was also inspired by the story of the rebellious *rebbetsin*—his great-great-grandmother—much like his grandmother was. Grandma Leah explained to him the political significance of the story: The rabbinical establishment was a repressive force in czarist Russia that tried to prevent Jews "from engaging in politics, from associating with non-Jews, and from resisting the pogroms"—unlike the Jewish socialists (the Bundists) who wanted to organize with their non-Jewish neighbors. Grandma Leah, who

had contempt for organized religion, would also sing to Levins the well-known Yiddish rhyme about the great rebbe that dipped in water and, big wonder, came out wet.¹⁸

But like many Jewish radicals, Levins didn't see a contradiction between identifying as an "atheist" (which he did) and as a "Jewish thinker" (which he also did). Jewish texts and traditions were crucial sources of wisdom. As a kid, he had studied the Hebrew Bible with his father, Reuben Levins, a communist lawyer. "My family had broken with organized religion five generations back," Levins recalls, "but my father sat me down for Bible study every Friday evening because it was an important part of the surrounding culture and important to many people, a fascinating account of how ideas develop in changing conditions, and because every atheist should know it as well as believers do."¹⁹ Later in life, Levins would turn to the Hebrew Bible for insights into struggle.²⁰ And as Levins's daughter, Aurora, recalls, in the Levins-Morales home, the holiday of Hanukkah was celebrated as a story of anticolonial guerrilla warfare (familiar in a Caribbean and Latin American context), with Jews taking back the temple that the Greeks had stolen from them.²¹

Levins was also shaped by the Talmud's way of asking questions, which, as we will see later, had much in common with the dialectical approach to science that he would adopt. But it wasn't at all about the Talmud as a guide to observant Jewish life. Rather, Levins says he was inspired by "the Talmud as a tradition of debate, and even though I never studied Talmud, I somehow got the flavor that it's perfectly legitimate Jewish activity to engage in debate and question and to argue with God." Levins adds that his own way of questioning things "comes from the Talmudic tradition" and that "even though none of us studied Talmud," this tradition had "nourished the three-way intellectual battles in the shtetl, which were between religious orthodoxy, Zionism, and socialism" (his family was on the "socialist wing"). Levins says that this Talmudic tradition gave him "the general sense that to argue was part of our way of life and so you don't shut somebody up for asking a question."²²

Levins also found inspiration in the Jewish social movements of Eastern Europe that shaped his grandmother's world. He was

moved, for example, by how the Bund, the Jewish anti-Zionist socialist movement, had organized self-defense against pogroms in the Russian empire. Levins also remembered the day his grandmother woke him up, in 1943, to tell him of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (led in part by Bundists). What Levins took away from these movements is that Jews don't need a state to be free. "We don't take nationhood that seriously. The Bible tells you, to whatever country you're in, contribute to its way of life," he says. "Who is the sovereign over a particular piece of land was a matter of indifference to us [Jews]." ²³

It's a diasporic approach—what the Bundists called *doikayt*—where the goal is to work with anyone who has revolution on their mind. "I grew up in a home where political ideas were part of everyday conversation and somebody was always involved in anti-fascist, anti-racist and pro-labor activities, and it was taken for granted that understanding the world was interesting because we were out to change it." ²⁴ The family celebrated May Day and subscribed to radical newspapers, including the *Daily Worker*, the newspaper of the Communist Party, and *Morgn Frayhayt*, a Yiddish newspaper also affiliated with the party. ²⁵ Levins learned the importance of class struggle, despite not growing up in a working-class home. ²⁶

This diasporic Yiddish radicalism also planted a profound message about health. Levins recalls that his family subscribed to the ideas of Ben Zion Liber, an anarchist doctor who had a clinic in a workers' housing cooperative in the Bronx and wrote practical books in Yiddish about health and sex for the masses of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. ²⁷ Liber, as Levins writes, promoted "preventive medicine," refused to separate mental from physical health, and taught people the basics of medical self-care. "He encouraged us to distrust commoditized patent medicines and doctors who mystify and create dependence," Levins remembers. "I distrusted establishment medicine with a vengeance." ²⁸

Levins's approach to science (and later, public health) developed with all these influences, but the family also provided a direct orientation on science and oppression. When Levins was in elementary school, his grandmother told him to "learn everything

they could teach [him]—but not to believe it all.” As Levins recalls, she “was all too aware of the ‘racial science’ of 1930s Germany and the justifications for eugenics and male supremacy that were popular in her own country. Her attitude came from her knowledge of the uses of science for power and profit and from a worker’s generic distrust of the rulers.” Racial science argues for the innateness of intelligence, criminality, and poverty; it gives the rulers justifications for oppression and exploitation. Under his grandma’s influence, Levins therefore decided to try to be “consciously in, but not of, the university”²⁹ and other ruling class institutions where science is done. His work would challenge the very foundations of racial science. But first, Levins had to join the ongoing struggles with his partner in crime, Rosario Morales.

To Wholeness, via Puerto Rico

Rosario Morales was born in New York City in 1930 to a Catholic Puerto Rican family with Indigenous Taíno ancestry.³⁰ Her parents migrated to New York City in 1929, at the start of the Great Depression. Her mother worked in the needle trades, and her father was an electrician. Growing up in the Bronx, Morales became a poet, an activist, and a student of anthropology who critiqued the discipline’s racist foundations. Levins developed his radical approach to science in close collaboration with Morales and through their joint political struggles. Those struggles taught them that imperialism is entwined with ecology and our health; that we can’t separate the social from the biological if we want to make a better world.

Levins and Morales met when they were eighteen in the communist circles of New York City. Their daughter, Aurora Levins Morales, tells that on their second date, they went to a lecture by Trinidadian communist Claudia Jones: “It was as they sat on a park bench discussing the lecture that my father proposed and they became engaged.”³¹ Their next date was at Peekskill, when white supremacist mobs tried to cancel Paul Robeson’s concert.³² Decades later, Morales said that maybe she unconsciously picked Levins because he was “definitely not a guy-guy.” He wasn’t “interested in the sorts of masculine kinds of bonding with guys. . . . If there was

anything anybody could mistake him for, it would have been—once someone did, when we were living in New York—was for a scholar, Hebrew scholar or something, you know, one of those.”³³

In New York those days, Puerto Ricans and Eastern European Jews often met through political organizing or work in the garment industry. In fact, Morales was brought into the Communist Party by Jewish students and was mentored by older Eastern European Jewish women. She embraced Yiddish and would mix it with Spanish in her poetry, which she often worked on with her daughter, Aurora.³⁴ In a poem titled “Bad Communist,” Morales writes that when she got exhausted from activism, she would imagine the “strong-voiced East European Jewish matriarchs of the Left, true fighters, the mentors of my Communist youth” standing before her and saying, “Nu? So when will you get off your tuchus, already?” To which Morales answers, “All right, already . . . I’m coming!”

From their early days together, Levins and Morales faced government repression. They were harassed by the FBI while Levins was an undergraduate student at Cornell University (where he studied mathematics and agriculture). FBI records describe the couple’s activities, classifying both as members of the “white race” and noting Levins’s “black, curly” hair, “high rasping voice,” and “round fat baby face.”³⁵ The authorities have historically slipped between “Jew” and “communist,” which is partly racist invention and partly a reflection of the reality that some Jews had embraced socialism and played key roles in communist organizations. Yet Levins says he always felt more vulnerable as a Jew than a communist, and as a child, he came to think of the police as “Cossacks”—perpetrators of pogroms.³⁶ Perhaps that’s why he felt empowered to tell FBI agents to go away when they tried to get information out of him once. Nonetheless, surveillance continued: Between 1950–1987, the FBI collected 1,280 pages on Levins.³⁷

In 1951, Levins and Morales moved to Puerto Rico and lived on a farm in the mountains of Maricao. It was a coffee-growing region that was undergoing changes. Empires had initially exploited Puerto Rico’s “black gold,” as coffee was known, and the island was one of the world’s main producers of coffee in the nineteenth century. After the US colonized Puerto Rico in the late

nineteenth century, it reorganized and eventually destroyed much local agricultural production, redirecting labor to US factories (an example of racial capitalism at work).³⁸ Today, Puerto Rico imports much of its coffee, some of it even sold by US corporations such as Coca-Cola. But in the 1950s, coffee production was still important, and in the spirit of *doikayt*, Levins looked to join the local struggles.

His daughter tells that Levins spoke “Brooklyn high-school Latin” to coffee plantation workers until he learned enough Spanish to start organizing. He tried getting the workers to unionize (unsuccessfully).³⁹ He also helped organize a cooperative where workers sold their coffee, citrus, and bananas. At the time, Morales worked with the women’s collective of Puerto Rico’s Agricultural Extension Service. “We agreed that the most important thing for the women of the barrio at that point was that they get out of their homes, meet together and get organizational experience,” Levins recalls. “And of course we propagandized in the barrio for independence and socialism.”⁴⁰ The couple joined the pro-independence Puerto Rican Communist Party (although Morales was never comfortable with the nationalistic and patriarchal elements of the independence struggle).⁴¹ FBI-driven campaigns had blocked Levins from getting jobs, so he turned to farming and, later, when he got sick with hepatitis, worked as a technician in a hospital.⁴²

It was as a farmer in Maricao, growing vegetables with Morales, that Levins developed his interest in ecology—an interest he credits to Morales.⁴³ He wanted to understand how organisms adapt to changing environments and developed mathematical frameworks for analyzing this problem while also experimenting with fruit flies in different controlled conditions. But it was Morales who encouraged him to study flies outside the laboratory. “What do the flies do when they are not in your bottles?” she had asked him. Morales even designed the fly catcher that Levins used to study flies from different habitats and ran some of his experiments while he was away.⁴⁴ Puerto Rico became the “lab,” but without the usual reductionist approach that tries to isolate and control variables, because that isn’t possible in the wild. Levins examined how *Drosophila* flies from different parts of the island adapted to new habitats, from the low dry regions to the wet forests in the mountains. The

experiments provided more proof that genes alone don't determine the life of an organism. For example, the flies Levins collected in the hot and dry regions were larger, presumably to avoid death by heat desiccation, while the ones from the cool forest regions were smaller. Yet when he raised flies from either region in the same hot temperature, the "cool forest" flies could turn out larger, yet at a lower temperature, both groups could grow to be the same size.⁴⁵ The environment, then, could override what might have appeared like an "innate" size difference between groups.

More generally, Levins's experiments illustrate the dialectical relationship between organisms and environments. Organisms aren't passive, Levins argues, but in fact actively "select, transform, define, [and] modify" the environments they inhabit.⁴⁶ When fruit flies are placed in a new environment, he observed, they will usually seek hospitable habitats within it (like pockets that are cool on a really hot day). And if they can't find hospitable habitats, they might migrate elsewhere. This will change the distribution of species found in different environments, thereby changing those environments. The environment, in other words, is affected by the organism's coping mechanisms.

This led Levins to develop a new framework for thinking about organisms and their migrations. Rather than thinking of organisms as members of a single population that is subjected to selection by the environment, as in conventional evolutionary biology and ecology, Levins thought of them as belonging to a "metapopulation" that is distributed across different environments, or "patches." A metapopulation consists of all the "subpopulations" found in the patches. Individuals of a particular species may migrate from one patch to another, especially when conditions are inhospitable. They may become locally extinct in some patches, but individuals from other patches might migrate and repopulate those patches. Extinction isn't extinction in the catastrophic sense environmentalists often speak of unless a species disappears in all patches (a case of "global extinction"). With the naturalist Harold Heatwole, Levins examined how various plants and animals (including flies, ants, butterflies, and birds) migrate between Puerto Rico's diverse islands, persisting in the global sense but sometimes becoming locally extinct.⁴⁷



Figure 4.1: “Metapopulation, or How to Survive Imperialism” by Anna Zeligowski.

Levins developed a mathematical model for these metapopulation dynamics, which became known in ecology simply as “the Levins model.” Its key parameters are the probabilities of migration and extinction. The model is based on several simplifying assumptions that aren’t very realistic, but the point of the math was “to educate the intuition,” as Levins liked to say. The model shows that under many conditions, some subpopulations are expected to become locally extinct in some patches, only to return later through migration. It also shows that the more patches there are, the more scattered individuals can become, increasing the chance the metapopulation will survive. Anticapitalist ecologists have embraced Levins’s insights, recognizing how “a balance between local extinction and regional migration” can prevent global extinction.⁴⁸ The Levins model also implies that we should consider the sites of refuge a species could migrate to, in case of trouble in its current habitat, instead of only tending to the places where it now lives.⁴⁹

It probably wasn't hard for Levins to accept a model of continual migration and extinction given the forced migrations he knew so well from his Eastern European Jewish family. We can even view the Levins model as a kind of Jewish natural history. People may get scattered across a vast diaspora but are still part of a larger group (metapopulation). The larger the diaspora, the better. Concentrating your people in one territory (say, a nation-state) could result in global extinction. When conditions are harsh somewhere, communities might be forced to move, or die, but migrants from other communities (subpopulations) will move in and try their luck—especially when they have little choice. It's so familiar from Jewish history (though obviously not unique to it). And people who come into a new place will of course transform it, the way immigrant communities do, thereby changing its conditions for others. Organisms are shaped by their environment, but they also shape it.

As a farmer in a colonized country, Levins also felt the harmful sides of this dialectical relationship. Imperialism and capitalism made humans transform their environment in destructive ways. "The contamination was hard to miss," he writes of Puerto Rico. "On days when the winds shifted to the southeast the fumes of the petrochemical complex at Guayanilla [in the southern coast] rose to the crest of the *cordillera* [chain of mountain ranges] where we still lived on the farm. The enterprises have since shut down. Having extracted their profits while they could, they left behind a political landscape and dislocated economy."⁵⁰ The interdependencies of the whole region also became clear. In Puerto Rico, Levins observes, "what happens in one habitat will necessarily affect what goes on in another habitat."⁵¹ Toxic spills can travel from one place to another in unpredictable ways through potholes and underground streams. Air pollution from the dry lowlands can reach the humid forests. This means that no industry is truly independent of any other. When the factory of a US corporation steals the water of the southwestern town of Yauco, for example, that hinders the entire region's ability to develop agriculture. Similarly, fertilizer or petrochemical pollution in Guánica harms the fishing industry in addition to people's health. Levins's own daughter, Aurora,

developed epilepsy from childhood exposure to pesticides used on the farm in Maricao.

These issues are inseparable from Puerto Rico's status as a US colony. As US industries extract profits from Puerto Rico and create pollution, state violence is used to crush the resistance. This is why Levins argues, in an article titled "Imperialism Is Bad for Your Health," that the "FBI is a major contaminant of the environment."⁵² The FBI suppresses activists, preventing them from shutting down the US corporations that poison Puerto Rico. While environmental scientists track the levels of specific pollutants to ensure they meet the already minimal regulations—a difficult and slow process—the FBI indirectly introduces hundreds of toxins by protecting the polluting industries from activists. The reason why "levels of FBI repression" isn't considered a major variable by environmental scientists is purely ideological: Capitalist science insists on separating "science" from "politics," which ends up excluding a major determinant of ecological and health harms. Levins's quest for wholeness was about putting these fragmented parts back together.

Analyzing the Whole

Many who have been trained in capitalist science might look at the interdependencies of our world and conclude that if everything is connected to everything else, nothing meaningful can be said or done. That wasn't the conclusion Levins drew. Seeking the whole was an opportunity to develop new ways of thinking about ecology and health. It was also a chance to create new solidarities that expand the horizons of our political struggles.

The quest for wholeness can start very small. Pests, it turns out, can lead us to the whole. Like many farmers, Levins was concerned with "pests": organisms that ruin whatever we're trying to grow. How can these creatures be managed? Capitalist agriculture's way is to use pesticides. Douse the fields with these toxic chemicals; the chemicals harm the nervous system of the pests; the pests die. It's a simple linear chain. But does it work? Levins loved using dialectical thinking to show how such easy explanations break down. It

makes sense that he was inspired by the Talmudic “way of asking questions,” since the Talmud is filled with this sort of dialectical troubling (as discussed in chapter 2).

Levins knew that the use of pesticides often brings more pests, a fact of folk agricultural knowledge. What might explain it? Consider more of the whole. All organisms, pests included, have relationships to other organisms. Pests are the food source for predators, who play an important role in “controlling” the population of pests. It is therefore possible to grow crops while having a variety of insects around (which is why some Indigenous farmers say they don’t have “pests,” only different types of insects).⁵³ But the use of pesticides can disrupt the relationship between pests and their predators, resulting in more pests.

Levins developed a way of formally reasoning about such interdependent systems using graphs. These graphs, called signed directed graphs (or *signed digraphs*), help communicate and organize our beliefs about complex systems. Nodes correspond to variables, and the edges between them represent positive or negative interactions. A node can be connected to other nodes or to itself (self-loop). The point isn’t to put everything into the model—“the *whole* whole is too big for us to encompass,” Levins acknowledges—but to have enough that the dialectical relationships between seemingly disconnected parts become explicit and generate unexpected insights. The insights Levins was after were *qualitative*. He thought that science fetishizes quantification, even when numbers are often meaningless.⁵⁴ Levins’s graphs have no numbers; they only represent the sign of a relationship (positive or negative) between variables in a system, not its magnitude. The framework Levins developed, called *loop analysis*, lets us deduce the long-run effects of intervening in such systems, under certain assumptions.⁵⁵ Loop analysis tells us what an increase in the rate of one variable will do to the rate of every other variable in the graph: increase it, decrease it, or keep it the same (or conclude the effect is ambiguous).

Levins used loop analysis to identify conditions where adding more pesticides leads to more pests, as in the graph in figure 4.2. The graph has four variables: the plant’s biomass, herbivores (the

→ positive link
 —○ negative link

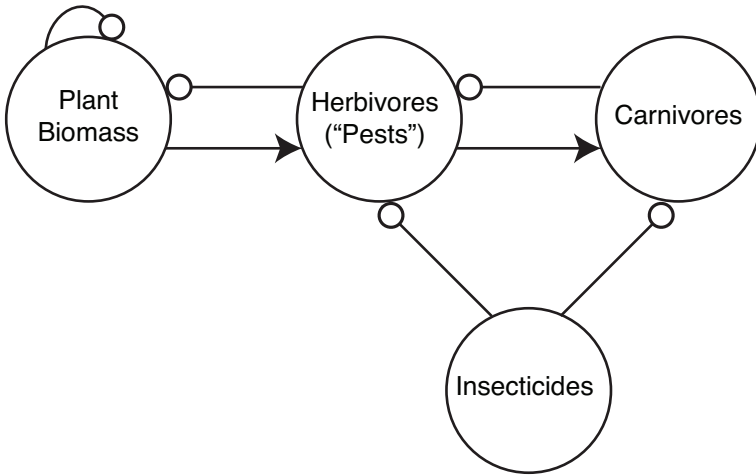


Figure 4.2: Signed digraph for the causal relationships between a plant, herbivores, carnivores, and insecticides, based on Levins and Vandermeer (1990). In this system, increasing the flow of insecticides leads to an increase in the “pests” (herbivores) because the insecticides reduce the level of the pests’ predators (the carnivores).

“pests”), carnivores (insects that prey on the pests), and the insecticides applied to the field. The plant’s biomass increases the herbivores (because herbivores feed on the plant), while herbivores decrease the plant’s biomass (by eating it). The herbivores increase the carnivores (by being their food source), while the carnivores decrease the herbivores (by eating them). Insecticides reduce the herbivores and carnivores by poisoning both. Note how the graph representation lends itself to dialectical thinking. It lets us capture that every variable is a “cause” of every other, whether directly or indirectly. It also captures the contradictory forces: Carnivores increase by eating their prey, but eating prey also decreases the carnivores by reducing their food supply. For this particular system, loop analysis states that in the long run, increasing the rate of

application of insecticides will lead to an *increase* in the rate of herbivores (“pests”)—no matter the magnitudes of the relationships in the graph. This is because the insecticides doubly hit the pest’s predator, the carnivore: first by directly poisoning it and second by reducing its food source (the herbivore, who is also poisoned by the insecticides).

This way of thinking had practical implications. It suggested that “pest control” shouldn’t be done in the manner of capitalist agriculture, with toxic chemicals, but through ecological relationships.⁵⁶ Levins applied this insight in his lifelong collaboration with Cuban institutions, which began in the early 1960s when he became an adviser to the Cuban Ministry of Agriculture.⁵⁷ This was not long after the overthrow of the Batista dictatorship, where there was much excitement for a socialist country to do things differently. But Levins and others in his circles were horrified that socialist governments might pursue agriculture like the capitalists, with big machines and lots of chemical fertilizers and pesticides.⁵⁸ They pushed for another way—the way of agroecology—as a case involving sweet potatoes shows. Cuban farmers wanted to get rid of pests that ruin sweet potato plants. Drawing on his studies of ants in Puerto Rico, Levins suggested introducing the *Pheidole* predator ant. Cuban scientists working with Levins developed an elegant system: They used banana plants to draw the ants near the sweet potato plants, and the ants then kept the sweet potato pest in check.⁵⁹ Such agroecological solutions are cheaper, healthier, and less exploitative than the capitalist approach that depends on industrial production of chemicals.

Ecologists, however, weren’t supposed to be helpful in this way. Like basically all fields in the Western academy, ecology developed with close ties to imperialism. Terms such as *ecosystem* were coined by scientists working for the British Empire, helping it manage colonized lands and extract profitable plants. Taking the perspective of colonial administrators, they assumed that the ecologist would have “native labor at his disposal”⁶⁰ and rejected Indigenous farming practices when these interfered with resource extraction. Given this history, Levins’s use of ecology to promote socialist farming in a place like Cuba was subversive. Through

the New World Agriculture Group, Levins and others inspired by his approach have since supported radical agroecological initiatives in Nicaragua (with the Sandinistas), Puerto Rico, Mexico, and Palestine.⁶¹

Capitalism as a Disease

Levins's dialectical thinking about ecology also had subversive implications for health, especially infectious disease. While capitalist science focuses on immediate "biological" causes of disease that can be isolated in the lab, such as viruses and microbes, infectious diseases can't be understood without considering how organisms adapt to and shape their environments. Since capitalism and imperialism massively rearrange the relationships between organisms and their environments, these forces should be part of the analysis. In the early 1990s, Levins and his colleagues organized meetings that brought together epidemiologists, biologists, climate scientists, social scientists, and journalists to consider this broader context. The motivation for these gatherings, Levins writes, was "the shared recognition that Public Health as a whole was caught by surprise."⁶² The dominant narrative of scientific progress implied that infectious diseases were disappearing, yet new diseases kept emerging.

Levins summarizes what the dominant scientific thinking had missed in an article titled "Is Capitalism a Disease?" (2000). He argues that epidemics cannot be understood apart from capitalist and imperialist plunder because with "any major change in the way of life of a population (such as population density, patterns of residence, means of production), there will also be a change in our relations with pathogens, their reservoirs, and with the vectors of diseases." Ignoring this whole only produces temporary fixes. Vaccines, for instance, arrive quite late and don't address the root cause: that capitalism and imperialism reorganize ecological relationships in ways that set the stage for new epidemics. For example, "The new hemorrhagic fevers appearing in South America, Africa, and elsewhere," Levins writes, "almost all seem to be related to increased contact with rodents that humans don't normally meet, caused by the clearing of land for the production

Talmudic Science Asks, Are Ants Anarchists?

There is a story in the Babylonian Talmud about investigating the living world and the danger of simple explanations (Chullin 57b). It reminds us that the explanations we come up with depend on our viewpoint and beliefs.

The story begins by recalling that Mishlei (Proverbs), a book in the Hebrew Bible containing King Solomon's wisdom, states that one can gain wisdom from the ant, since she has no ruler, no king telling her what to do, yet manages to be self-sufficient. Shimon ben Halafta, a second-century rabbi who earned a reputation as "one who investigates matters" (*askan b'dvarim*)—a "scientist" of sorts—decided to check if this is true. Do ants really have no ruler? Are ants basically anarchists? King Solomon had famously urged in Mishlei to "go to the ant." And that is what Shimon ben Halafta did.

Rabbi ben Halafta put his cloak over the ant hole during the summer, when the sun was blazing. An ant came out, and he put an identifying mark on her. Fooled by his cloak, apparently, the ant went into the hole to tell the other ants that shade had fallen and it was safe to come out. When the ants came up from the hole, ben Halafta lifted his cloak, and they were hit by the hot sun. The other ants then "fell upon the first ant and killed it." Rabbi ben Halafta concludes this means the ants have no ruler, because "if they had a king, would they not need the king's edict" before executing their own? Another rabbi then objects: Perhaps the king was present and gave permission? Or maybe, this rabbi continues, the ants that came out had already obtained the king's permission to kill? Or maybe the ants were in between the reigns of two kings, a period in which there is no law? These are all possible explanations; the "data" do not determine which, if any, is correct. The discussion concludes that we should trust King Solomon's wisdom: Ants really do live in anarchy. Perhaps this is what Richard Levins meant when he said he was inspired by the Talmud's way of asking questions.

But this story is about more than the fact that any experiment has multiple interpretations; it's also a story about the violence of scientific experimentation. To answer his question, ben Halafta was willing to seriously disturb the ants, resulting in one being killed. Of course, we have no idea if this actually happened—perhaps it was just a thought experiment made into an engaging tale—and if it did happen, who knows if ben Halafta reported it faithfully. And just because ben Halafta messed with the ants in the ways he described, that doesn't necessarily mean that his intervention caused the ant's death. We should keep alive the possibility that the ants were up to something else altogether, not legible to ben Halafta nor to whoever wrote this story.

This takes us back to Levins. Despite railing against dominant scientific frameworks, Levins was in many ways still operating within them. In Levins's experiments, the flies or the ants were still, for the most part, objects to be manipulated and studied (rather than, say, accomplices or allies). They often were for him, as for ben Halafta, means to getting an answer about this or that question (for ben Halafta, a question about King Solomon's wisdom, and for Levins, a question about the nature of evolution).

But one time, the ants appeared to assert themselves in Levins's lab at Harvard University. Charles Puccia, who was a graduate student in the lab, tells that the ants escaped and began exploring the building. The concerned dean came to speak with Levins. Levins listened to the dean, paused for a bit, and said, "So . . . should we . . . go to the ant?" (a reference to King Solomon).¹ Levins's colleague E. O. Wilson apparently used pheromones to draw the ants back.

Here we find again the entanglements with the dominant science, at the institutional level. It makes sense that Wilson—a eugenicist (so-called sociobiologist)—who believed humans, and all animals, can be predicted and controlled, would have

1. Interview with Charles Puccia, July 12, 2024.

the tools to manipulate the ants and lure them back into their “home” (perhaps more accurately, prison) in the lab. Even if Levins rejected Wilson’s politics and ideas about human society, here they are brought together by their shared “scientific” interest in the behavior and biology of ants. The academy creates and normalizes such ties, pretending that science and politics can be separated.

of grain.” Since rodents also eat grain, the number of rodents increases. Being “social animals,” rodents in turn “nest and build communities” and end up “wandering into warehouses and people’s homes, facilitating the transmission of diseases.”⁶³

It is easy to find recent examples that support Levins’s analysis. In 2010, for example, Madrid had yet another outbreak of leishmaniasis, introduced by rabbits that, displaced into residential areas by rapid construction of buildings and roads, brought with them the disease-transmitting mosquitoes.⁶⁴ Outbreaks of avian flu in Asia and Ebola in West Africa in recent decades have been similarly explained by patterns of capitalist industrialization.⁶⁵

Capitalism not only sets the stage for new infectious diseases to emerge, of course, but also ensures that their impact will be uneven (as we have seen with the AIDS crisis in chapter 3). And racist structures will in fact bundle different illnesses together for certain people. Living conditions, as Levins observes in “Is Capitalism a Disease?,” such as whether one lives in a wet or dry apartment, majorly determine people’s well-being—conditions that are determined in the US by a history of racist segregation. By highlighting these social roots of illness, Levins was continuing the tradition of Dr. Liber, the New York anarchist doctor his family loved. Liber noted back in the 1920s that sweatshop workers contracted tuberculosis not because of some innate predisposition (as some scientists have suggested) but because they’re packed so tightly at work that they can hardly breathe.⁶⁶

Yet capitalist science finds it more profitable to ignore the likes of Liber and Levins and focus instead on conditions that could, at

least superficially, be attributed to a single “biological cause,” like a microbe or virus in the case of infectious diseases. Such conditions receive clinical names and get studied in laboratories (often in hopes of producing profitable vaccines), while the entangled illnesses that result from, say, living in poverty in a wet apartment or toiling in a sweatshop get relegated to the margins of medicine.⁶⁷

Wholeness Against Racial Science

If wholeness had an antithesis, it would be racial science—the kind of science that Levins’s grandmother had warned him about. Racial science seeks to classify and rank people for purposes of social control. It fetishizes measurement and quantification, using the numbers to concoct theories that serve those in power. It favors individualistic explanations, supposedly rooted in biology, over social ones. Levins critiqued and parodied racial science but also sought to put back together what it had torn apart.

While many frame racial science as simply racism dressed up in scientific clothes, a “pseudoscience,” Levins understands that the problem is deeper.⁶⁸ Racial science is an expression of the scientific enterprise’s neglect of the whole (a problem that didn’t go away once explicit racial hierarchies became less acceptable or when the term *eugenics* dropped out of fashion).

Levins uses skin color to illustrate the point. “The difference in melanin between Americans of African and European origin is, from the point of view of genetics and physiology, trivial,” he writes, merely a change in how “pigment is deposited in the skin.” But in a racist society, “this difference can cost you ten years of life. So is this a lethal gene? Is this a gene for a higher spread of pigmentation—one that also makes you more vulnerable to arrest? A standard geneticist would look at family histories and determine that if your uncle was arrested, there would be a higher probability of you being arrested as well. Conclusion: the cause of criminality is genetic.”⁶⁹

An absurd conclusion—but at the same time, it makes no sense to discuss public health without considering the systemic oppression that renders such “trivial” differences lethal. This oppression includes what Levins called the “high-frequency, low-intensity

insults, the daily harassment” that many Black people (for example) are subjected to in the US, forcing them to make “strategic decisions”: “Am I walking so slowly that the cop is going to think I’m loitering? Or am I walking so fast that he or she will think that I’m running away from the scene of a crime? If I come onto campus at night to work in my laboratory, will I first be stopped by the police, who think that I’m a thief?”

This systemic racism is felt with the whole body, not just individual organs. We “think with our whole bodies, we feel with our whole bodies, and so the whole body is the locus of social experience that comes with these patterns of chronic conditions”—and living under white supremacy is a chronic condition. Is this condition “social” or “biological”? The distinction breaks down when we examine the whole.⁷⁰

In his article “The Road to Wholeness in Medicine and Public Health” (2014), Levins shows how the graphs he had developed can be used to reason about the whole by explicitly mixing “social” and “biological” variables. The example he gives is about labor and blood sugar (see figure 4.3). The graph includes a system of glucose regulation that is familiar to diabetics (Levins was one): Blood glucose increases insulin, insulin decreases the level of blood glucose, and insulin acts to decrease insulin (negative self-loop). The hormone adrenaline (epinephrine), associated with the so-called fight-or-flight response, also increases blood glucose. But this system is part of a larger social world. Anxiety can increase blood glucose levels by releasing adrenaline. Anxiety also increases a person’s metabolic rate, which in turn reduces the level of blood glucose. Levins now asks us to consider this system in the case of an exploited factory worker:

Suppose the patient works on an assembly line and that the blood sugar level depends on the work-related metabolic rate. When the person feels the effects of falling blood sugar, she might slow down her work, take a break, and eat a snack. But there is a foreman in the shop; his activity is aroused when the worker slows down to restore metabolism. This increases the worker’s anxiety

and metabolic rate and causes blood sugar to fall. Except that this is a union shop, and when the foreman begins to harass the worker, the shop steward moves in to intercept the foreman, reduce anxiety and allow the metabolic rate to adjust to the sugar level.⁷¹

Levins's graph includes these relationships. But he shows that the means of regulating glucose suggested by this analysis of the whole system aren't viable in a capitalist society. As Levins puts it, "It is clear in this case that a doctor's advice to take it easy when you feel dizzy will not be viable, and that at a population level the organizing of the union in a shop may be the best approach to the stabilization of blood sugar! Unfortunately most of what is called 'holistic medicine' stops at the skin."

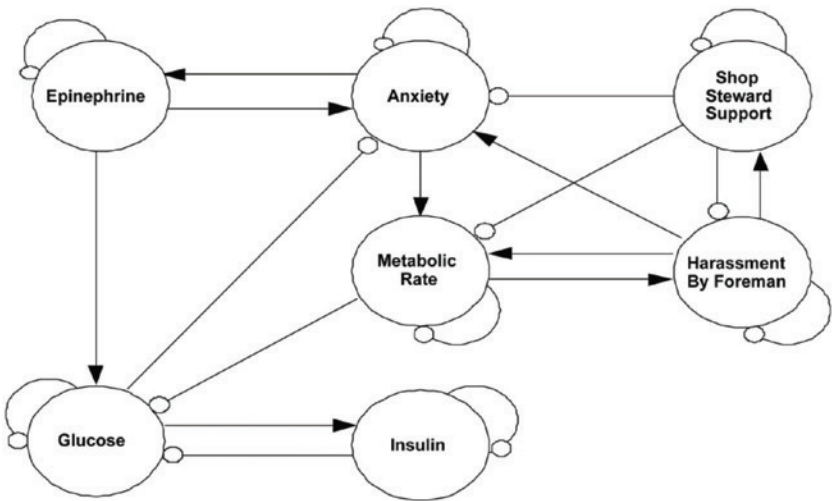


Figure 4.3: A signed digraph showing the relationships between blood glucose levels and anxiety in the context of the workplace, from Richard Levins's article "The Road to Wholeness in Medicine and Public Health" (2014). A simpler version of this graph appeared in Haila and Levins's book *Humanity and Nature* (1992), and the basic idea can be found in Levins's original 1974 paper on loop analysis.

“Aleph Is for Abraham”

By Isador Nabi

Richard Levins wrote many satirical pieces about science under the pseudonym Isador Nabi. Below is an excerpt from one of these pieces, titled “Aleph Is for Abraham,” which makes fun of how science, always shaped by the dominant ideologies, can be marshaled to support Zionism.

“The renowned archeologist Isador Nabi reported today on the preliminary findings of the Summer Interfaith Field Expedition of Constantine Academy, Lootin Center, Nebraska, a course for credit designated An Introduction to Field Methods for Excavation Underneath the Mosques of the West Bank.

This year they were working near the town of Hebron. During the soldiers’ lunch break, the expedition was pelted with stones by a disorderly pack of 9 year olds on their lunch break, who then escaped into the surrounding schools. However a careful examination of the stones turned up one piece of ancient-looking clay no larger than a small fist with the hint of an inscription. The clay was later dated as 2000 B.C.E. $\pm$ 4000 years. . . . On the clay there was a diagonal crack (when you rotate the fragment properly) that looked like \.

Our archeoscriptographer [*sic*] who wishes to remain anonymous identified the diagonal as the residue of an aleph: א. Of course the letter aleph can have many uses, but around Hebron an aleph calls to mind Abraham. In fact, as our press release points out, this may be the earliest known fragment of the deed of sale giving Abraham title to Hebron, Nablus, Gath, Jericho, Ramallah, Amman, Beirut, Damascus and Baghdad.”¹

1. “Aleph Is for Abraham,” in “We’ll Deal with That Later: Selected Writings of Isador Nabi,” undated, box 14, folder 20, Richard Levins Papers (MS 1142), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

When something is so seriously screwed up, sometimes the best response is parody. Over the years, Levins poked fun at capitalist science, writing under the pseudonym Isador Nabi.⁷² He realized after the fact that Nabi in Hebrew (*navi*) means “prophet,” and indeed Nabi invoked biblical themes to make fun of capitalist science. One Isador Nabi piece parodies the way archaeological science is used to support Zionist claims to ownership of Palestine. Another piece ridicules the pharmaceutical industry and its way of running clinical trials.⁷³ Nabi provides comic relief to the overwhelming and often demoralizing struggle against capitalist science.

“From Rebel to Revolutionary”

In 1959, when Levins was back in the US working on his PhD, he was subpoenaed by the House Un-American Activities Committee. In the hearing, he was repeatedly asked if he knew the Puerto Rican communist César Andreu Iglesias (his good friend). Levins refused to answer. He said he considers the question “harassment,” but they kept asking, and Levins walked out of the hearing.⁷⁴ After Levins got his degree, the family returned to Puerto Rico, and he began teaching at the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras. He became involved in Movimiento Pro-Independencia (MPI), founded in 1959, a precursor of the Puerto Rican Socialist Party. Andreu Iglesias helped get Levins appointed as MPI’s assistant secretary of political education, where he promoted dialectical thinking and wholeness while continuing his work in ecology at the university.

In 1965, Levins organized an event against the Vietnam War that would cost him his academic job. Since such events were prohibited on campus, Levins spoke from a ladder leaning against the campus wall, his words blasting from speakers that could be heard on both sides. The incident inspired the name of a radical journal, *La escalera* (The ladder), where in 1966 Levins published an influential article titled “De rebelde a revolucionario” (From rebel to revolutionary). The article took the project of building socialism seriously and spoke to the contradictions between nationalist and socialist visions of Puerto Rican independence.⁷⁵ As Levins writes in the piece (since translated from Spanish to English by his

daughter, Aurora), “We recognize that if by some miracle we found ourselves in power tomorrow, it would be a disaster. We would create a formidable constitution, since we have many skilled lawyers, and without doubt we would establish the National Museum of Art . . . but, how will we change the pattern of agriculture? What steps will we take toward industrial development?”

Levins’s efforts to develop agriculture based on ecology were meant to address this lack, but the main aspiration was still wholeness. “In my essay *From Rebel to Revolutionary*, I argued for a coherent view of society as a whole, for looking at the roots of our colonial problems,” he reflects, in hopes of moving beyond “a catalog of outrages and abuses.”⁷⁶

Because of his subversive activities, Levins was denied tenure at the University of Puerto Rico. “I was refused reappointment on the grounds of my supposed incompetence,” he recalls. In 1967, the family decided to move back to the US, where Levins got hired at the University of Chicago. In the spirit of *doikayt*, he joined the local struggles in Chicago, while still cultivating solidarity with the places suffering under the boot of US imperialism.

Science in Solidarity

In the 1960s, with the Vietnam War raging, American universities became sites of struggles. Many were radicalized by the horrors created by the US military, and it was hard to deny the central roles universities had played. Universities participated in weapons development, provided ideological justifications for imperialism, and created “counterinsurgency” tactics that were being used in Vietnam and elsewhere.⁷⁷

Richard Levins was now in the belly of empire, working at an elite university that was part of this war machine. He nonetheless tried living up to the ideal of being “in but not of” these institutions, per his grandmother’s advice. With like-minded people, he worked on building solidarity with Vietnam and other countries ravaged by US imperialism. He also experimented with alternative ways of organizing research. These alternative structures, he hoped, could examine the whole and support anti-imperialist movements.

Many of Levins's efforts took place through Science for the People (SftP), a group formed in 1969 largely by physicists and mathematicians who were opposed to doing science for war and profit.⁷⁸ With his friend, collaborator, and fellow socialist at the University of Chicago, Richard ("Dick") Lewontin, Levins cofounded the Chicago chapter of SftP. They had a similar background. Lewontin, also a descendant of Eastern European Jews, was a vociferous critic of the concept of "race," including the idea that Jews constitute a "biological" group.⁷⁹ They also shared a love of dialectical thinking. They argued in their influential book *The Dialectical Biologist* that the capitalist way in which science is organized—notably, through hierarchical and exploitative laboratory structures⁸⁰—limits the kinds of theories scientists produce.⁸¹

After a visit to Hanoi, Levins started (with Lewontin's help) the Science for Vietnam (SfV) initiative in 1971.⁸² SfV aimed to form collaborations with Vietnamese scientists and provide them with material aid but also to develop research projects that could advance anticolonial struggle. The initiative emphasized action over "verbalizing" (unsurprisingly, the FBI surveilled the group).⁸³ But Levins and comrades quickly realized that they didn't know what would be most useful for the Vietnamese struggle. They started by trying to meet requests for resources (such as scientific journals and equipment) from Vietnamese scientists.

This work was facilitated by SfV's anarchistic structure, described in the group's documents as "decentralized" and nonhierarchical. The Chicago chapter provided loose coordination between SfV chapters across the US, from Montana to Massachusetts, each contributing based on their areas of specialization.⁸⁴ While Levins didn't identify as an "anarchist," SfV was basically organized according to the anarchist principles of decentralization and voluntary cooperation between autonomous collectives. John Vandermeer, an ecologist, activist, and longtime colleague of Levins, says he reminded him "of a classical anarchist, which he wasn't, but that's the way he actually operated."⁸⁵ Charles Puccia, a former graduate student, similarly says that Levins had an almost "proletarian" way of organizing the lab, sharing his own office space equally with lab members, not taking more for himself.⁸⁶

Levins believed that if scientists in the US fully commit to anti-imperialist struggle, they must also change how they relate to each other. The first newsletter of SfV discusses the difficulties of this task: "We must cope not only with officialdom's hostility, but with habits, prejudices, and personal styles carried over from past professional training and socialization." To draw participation from nonprofessionals and move away from the prestige game, Chicago SfV deliberately didn't advertise meetings using the names of famous scientists. And initially, that worked. The meetings attracted nonprofessionals and younger scientists, and the discussions were focused on action. But when the "nonprofessionals" were absent from later gatherings, things degenerated. "A hierarchy of verbal contributions developed which closely mirrored academic one-up-manship," the newsletter states. "If we are to mold ourselves in the course of aiding the Vietnamese we must work to surmount the professional barriers which divide us." True to its nonhierarchical ideals, SfV's newsletter asked readers to send in ideas for overcoming these challenges and to raise any other issues they've identified.

The radical hope was that SfV's anarchistic structure would enable research projects that are useful in fighting US imperialism. Levins proposed such projects, building on connections to Puerto Rico. The napalm that was used in Vietnam, for example, was once tested in the Puerto Rican island of Vieques, where the US military had been training for wars (including the Vietnam War). Both places were also subjected to defoliants. Learning from Puerto Rico's experiences, what could be done about defoliation and bombardment, which destroy so many habitats? SfV looked for creative solutions. For instance, the bomb craters created by the US military became breeding sites for mosquitoes that spread infectious disease—but could these craters be converted into "microponds" for growing fish? SfV's other projects included looking for microbes that could break down the defoliant Agent Orange and testing different varieties of fast-growing rice that could be harvested before getting destroyed by defoliants. Levins included his daughter, Aurora, sixteen years old at the time, in this work.⁸⁷ It is unclear how far these projects went or what their impact was in

Vietnam. But they had potential and were likely transformative for the US scientists involved.

Solidarity with Vietnam tested Levins's commitment to be "in but not of" the university. In 1974, he refused the invitation to become a member of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS), a move that might have made his grandmother proud. In his rejection letter, Levins states that he is opposed to the NAS's support for US imperialism:

The whole system of direct intervention, covert operations, military aid, training, advisors and consultants acting through many government agencies as well as privately, has been aimed at thwarting popular insurgent movements throughout the world. They can only be described as 'defense' by the most cynical doublespeak. These interventions depend for their feasibility on a large and varied arsenal of 'flexible responses' that draw their most imaginative and vicious schemes from academic science. The NAS, through its formal contracts and informal advice, is an accomplice in this program.⁸⁸

Levins also adds that he wanted no part in this "stodgy" club that subscribes to the "elitist myth that history is made by the important people who are in the know, which happens to include us." On the day of the induction ceremony, Levins flew to Hanoi to give a talk instead.⁸⁹ Earlier, in 1971, Richard Lewontin had resigned from the NAS, also in protest of its war research, and because he said that being a member of this "exclusive club," a "professionalizing instrument," was a contradiction he could no longer tolerate.⁹⁰ It is telling that despite being well established in the scientific profession, both Levins and Lewontin tried to retain their sense of being outsiders. There was even discomfort with the label "scientist." Both understood that critical distance was needed to stay true to their political commitments and that the real struggle lay outside the university.

In Chicago, both got involved in the local movements of the day. Levins worked with the Young Lords, a Puerto Rican socialist

“You’re a Scientist. Yes?”

In 2000, Richard (“Dick”) Lewontin, Richard Levins’s longtime comrade, participated in a panel at Harvard Law School on the use of DNA testing in criminal court cases.¹ The panel’s moderator, Charles Nesson, a dramatic Harvard Law professor and trial lawyer, introduced him the obvious way, as a “scientist.” Lewontin didn’t cooperate.

Nesson: Dick Lewontin, you’re a scientist. Yes?

Lewontin: . . . so I understand.

Nesson: You think of yourself that way?

Lewontin: That’s what I’m paid to do.

Nesson: And you have your methodology for finding truth?

Lewontin: [long pause]. Yes [audience laughter]. What, what flows . . . ? Are you asking whether [scientific] methodologies would be good to be used, or infallible, or even extraordinarily good ways of finding out what’s true? The answer is No. Because in most cases we can’t get the kind of evidence that a really hard-minded, uh, trier of fact, would accept as being demonstrations of truth. There’s a great deal of backing and filling, of appeals to popular notions of what might be true, and so on. No, I wouldn’t suggest science has a method which is guaranteed to find the truth about the world.

1. “Innocent on Death Row,” C-SPAN, March 15, 2000.

organization that modeled itself after the Black Panther Party (BPP) and fought against “diseases of poverty”⁹¹ (such as lead poisoning and tuberculosis). “One of my tasks was to teach Puerto Rican history in a community where some were recent immigrants from Puerto Rico but didn’t know English and others who had grown up in Chicago and didn’t know Spanish,” Levins recalls.

“I remember giving lectures in a mixture of the two, alternating paragraphs, overlapping statements.”⁹² Levins also got called when the police attacked the Young Lords; his presence as a witness was thought to provide protection.

Levins and Lewontin also worked directly with the BPP, who had asked for their help with analyzing sickle cell anemia as part of the party’s effort to provide free health care to Black communities. As Levins recalls, “We were approached by the Black Panther Party to analyze sickle cell anemia for them and Lewontin and I said that *we wouldn’t do it for them but we would do it with them*, and demanded that we set up a joint working group.”⁹³ The attempt to work together revealed differences in approach, again bringing out Levins’s anarchistic tendencies. Levins says the joint working group “didn’t get very far because the Panthers had a very hierarchical view of everything. When they came to a visit with their leader, who was Bobby Rush at the time, they would come with three or four bodyguards and they would line up silently while he conversed with us.”⁹⁴

These differences, however, didn’t prevent Levins from materially supporting the BPP. Levins’s son, Ricardo Levins Morales, tells that his parents shared a car with another family so they could give the Panthers their other car for use in the free breakfast program (a fact used by the police to claim Levins was helping the BPP smuggle weapons).⁹⁵ After Fred Hampton, chairman of the Illinois chapter of the BPP, was murdered in his home by the FBI, Levins and Lewontin were called by the party to examine his room. “They wanted us to see that all of the bullets came from the outside in, that it wasn’t a shootout,” Levins recalls. “Lewontin and I were active witnesses describing what we saw when we came to Fred Hampton’s house and that made us targets for the FBI on top of any other reasons they might have not to like us.” (Indeed, Levins’s colleagues from Chicago would joke that calling the Levins-Morales home “sounded like long distance because there were so many FBI taps on the line.”⁹⁶) SftP also provided services to other BPP chapters through the group’s Technical Assistance Program, but providing technical assistance—“doing it for them,” to use Levins’s phrase—isn’t quite the same as struggling together.

“What Does It Mean to Be a Radical?”

Levins and Lewontin tried to bring the insights of these anticapitalist movements into Science for the People, and they didn't do the work alone. They were part of a circle of Jewish radicals who tried to undermine capitalist science from within, which raised difficult questions about the possibilities of being “in but not of” elite institutions.

At Harvard University, where Levins and Lewontin moved in the 1970s, there were Ruth Hubbard (discussed in chapter 2) and Stephen Jay Gould, among others.⁹⁷ Levins, Lewontin, Hubbard, and Gould confronted their own colleagues' racial science, including its manifestation as “sociobiology.” Gould, a socialist and evolutionary biologist, was the best known of this circle. He had famously critiqued racial science in his 1981 book *The Mismeasure of Man* (revised and expanded in 1996).

Like Levins, Stephen Jay Gould was moved to fight racial science by his own family's history. He explains how racial science was used to justify the immigration policies that would have blocked his own Eastern European Jewish ancestors from entering the US, leaving them to be murdered by the Nazis. He dedicated *The Mismeasure of Man* to his Hungarian grandparents, whom he describes as “brilliant people with no access to much formal education.” He adds, “My grandmother could speak four languages fluently, but could only write her adopted English phonetically.”⁹⁸ His grandfather had been a garment worker in New York City who started out living in poverty.⁹⁹ Gould therefore had good reason to be suspicious of those scientists who were creating hierarchies of “intelligence” and placing workers at the bottom.

Gould also saw his attack on racial science as a continuation of family tradition. His father, Leonard Gould, was a socialist activist who, like Levins's father, had been a member of the Young Communist League. He pursued antiracist activism (with the NAACP) and was extensively surveilled by the FBI, who even noted his intention to send his child to a Jewish socialist summer camp affiliated with the IWO.¹⁰⁰ In the 1950s, the elder Gould wrote to an anthropology journal urging it to stop comparing Black people to

apes, arguing that it encourages racist violence while being scientifically incorrect. Leonard was told that he's just a layman who shouldn't meddle in scientific affairs, to which he responded, "For those who prefer the ivory tower, I recommend the study of invertebrates, in whose world there is no discrimination. There they need have no concern with lay opinion."¹⁰¹ Gould hoped that *The Mismeasure of Man* made clear to his father "that his scholar son had not forgotten his roots."¹⁰² His own participation in struggles to end racial segregation, in the 1950s, further fueled his interest in debunking racial science.¹⁰³

For Gould, the fight against racial science was also linked to his father's fight against fascism. He remembered when his parents bought an English translation of *Mein Kampf* before Leonard left to join the army during World War II (Leonard had been moved to fight fascism by the Spanish Civil War). "Throughout my youth," Gould recalls, "I started at this volume on my parents' shelves, taking it down now and again—more to experience the frisson of touching evil than from any desire to read."¹⁰⁴ Much later in life, he recognized the centrality of biology and genetics to the Nazi regime of racial hygiene. "To hold the book now," Gould writes as an established critic of racial science, "gives me an eerie feeling of connectivity with my past, and rekindles my dimmest three-year-old impression of World War II as a fight between my daddy and a bad man named Hitler."

Like Levins and Lewontin, Gould attacked the false dichotomy between "nature" versus "nurture"—a distinction he showed was itself an invention of racial science—and urged for a more dialectical approach. Gould also further exposed the racism of esteemed Euro-American scientists such as Louis Agassiz, a Harvard University biologist and founding member of the National Academy of Sciences, who had argued that Black people had a separate evolutionary origin from whites. Ironically, it was two socialist Jews, Gould and Lewontin, who held the title "Agassiz Professor" at Harvard University, meant to honor the family of the scientist whose entire framework they were demolishing.¹⁰⁵

Yet being "in but not of" these institutions isn't that simple. All organisms are shaped by their environment. There are class

interests at play. Being a radical Harvard professor is a contradiction in terms, and Levins and Lewontin were aware of it.¹⁰⁶ They had their differences with colleagues such as Gould, who was not as willing to let go of the underlying ideologies of science. When Gould confronted racial science, he did it on established scientific terms, arguing that certain scientists “fudged” and “finagled” their data, that their statistical analyses weren’t quite right, and that with proper corrections to methodology, the racist conclusions disappear.¹⁰⁷ Gould’s inability to get at the roots of the matter reflected broader political differences. While Gould made references to America’s “egalitarian traditions,” even saying he is “a patriot at heart,” Levins wrote hilarious satires of US empire’s murderous quests to bring democracy to the rest of the world.¹⁰⁸

In their obituary for Gould, titled “What Does It Mean to Be a Radical?,” Lewontin and Levins praise his accomplishments but also mention the importance of always striving to be more radical, of engaging in “constant questioning of the bases of claims and actions, not only of others, but also of our own.” For this, they turn to Pirkei Avot, a part of the Mishnah (the basis of the Talmud). Levins and Lewontin cheered for Gould by way of Rabbi Tarfon, who teaches in Pirkei Avot that “it is not incumbent on us to succeed, but neither are we free to refrain from the struggle.”¹⁰⁹ No one succeeds in “being consistently radical,” Lewontin and Levins conclude, but we must try.

“LEVINS IS WILLING!”

Richard Levins wrote a satirical speech for the 1968 Democratic National Convention, addressed to “President Johnson” and “Almighty God.” The humor reveals how at odds Levins’s political views were with those of most of his peers in the academy:

“The eyes of the world are upon us today as we meet in the heartland of America. . . . The crisis we face is manifold: a crisis of freedom and the determination to defend that freedom anywhere in the world; to give them liberty or to give

them death. . . . It is our Tradition, the Tradition of our forefathers even from before the founding of the Republic under God in 1492 (from the days when our embattled Pilgrim Fathers brought freedom to the state of Massachusetts). . . . It is our national bi-partisan tradition since San Juan Hill, since God first told McKinley to seize the Philippines, since the Marines helped stabilize Cuba in 1906, Santo Domingo in 1905, 1916, 1965, Nicaragua in the 1920's.

Always we have risked and ventured to share the blessings of our revolution—yes, revolution, we are proud to be the descendants of revolutionaries—generously, peacefully when possible, as when the Pilgrim Fathers shared the first fruits of their labor with the now extinct Indians in the first Good Neighbor Policy. Where our flag has reached, there blossoms prosperity and liberty. Take Puerto Rico for example. Once an almost abandoned military outpost of a dying feudalism she has grown and developed under the leadership of Luis Muñoz Marín and J. Edgar Hoover and in partnership with the United States until verily, never have so many sold so much to so few . . .

But we have never presumed to impose our own particular form of democracy on other peoples. Rather we have learned to appreciate differences abroad as our great melting pot has learned to appreciate them at home. We have learned that often beneath a crude exterior there beats a heart of gold. Or oil. Or tin. Or sugar. We have learned to detect the latent democracy burning in the breasts of juntas and have extended our hand to all free peoples in a spirit of mutual respect (except of course that 'communism is not negotiable.') . . .

The second grave crisis of our time is the crisis of faith in America. Now we can understand the impatience of our minority group fellow citizens. Three hundred years may seem like a long time to wait for the blessings of our civilization. . . . For know this, the pride of America is not in her perfection from sea to shining sea but in her perfectibility over amber waves of grain, her slow, balanced, even ponderous march

upward and onward. . . . And let her history be a lesson onto you: progress never comes by violence. In slave times there were abolitionists, agitators and malcontents like Nat Turner and John Brown, impatient men like Frederick Douglass who even incited slaves to abandon their plantation in violation of the bill of sale. . . . But in the fullness of time it was not by rioting, not by burning, not by coercion that slavery was terminated but by due process. . . . Remember the tortoise and the hare. Haste makes waste. Look and look and look before you leap. Time heals all wounds. Utopias cannot be built on ashes. Ask not what your country can do for you. Ask not what you can do for your country. Ask not what will be done. Ask not what we are doing. Shut up already.

My fellow Americans: in these times of ominous tempest, when crime spills out of the bureaus and boardrooms to stalk the streets, when students stalk our universities and when alewives stalk our lakes. . . . We are here to chart a course of charge in stormy seas because we have all learned that only by changing can America remain the same, that only by sacrifice can we preserve affluence, only by the war can we find peace. . . . May we emerge from these peaceful deliberations with one party, one people, one leader. But if you, my fellow delegates, find it not possible to decide from these great Americans who come as candidates . . . if you must turn elsewhere for a new helmsman . . . a man who would reluctantly heed the call and return from his humble retirement to take the helm of this proud ship of state as it charts a course in perilous seas, know this:

LEVINS IS WILLING!"¹

1. Richard Levins, "Speech: Keynote Address to Democratic National Convention," 1968, box 5, folder 38, Richard Levins Papers (MS 1142), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst.

Levins was lucky to have Rosario Morales as an example for how to be more radical. She knew the academy intimately but kept a greater distance from it. She had developed her own critique of racial science through her experience in the field of anthropology. “Anthropologists watch murdered peoples die and look at the colors of their customs, the movements of the rigor mortis,” Morales writes. “And the emotional ones write vivid descriptions, the methodical ones take meticulous notes, the scientific ones make careful measurements.” As imperialism destroys people and the earth, “we [anthropologists] write and publish and get promoted, give or receive prizes and grants, and we never mention pain or sorrow or anger or death.” Anthropology is, Morales concludes, “a lie about murder, an intellectual necrology, a crime.”¹¹⁰

Morales had tried doing anticolonial work in anthropology but simply couldn’t bear being in it. It was impossible to do what she felt was necessary, which was to “mourn endless numbers of people in endless numbers of places” who suffered from the colonial structures that anthropologists built their careers on. “It’s no wonder I felt sick to my stomach all the while, that I was always angry, angry all the time while I smiled, while I wrote papers on [Claude] Levi-Strauss and his playful toying with myths and rituals, with women’s lives and women’s kin, while I drank and drank and drank.”

When the family moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts, Morales got to know Harvard University, the brain of US empire. Like the other colonial institutions she knew, it needed to be stopped. “I feel guilt for not shouting it out, for not screaming in their ears, not making endless scenes, burning their papers, their buildings,” she writes.¹¹¹ Being a critical voice on the inside simply wasn’t enough. Indeed, Pirkei Avot teaches that action is needed, not only wise words. “To what shall be compared one whose wisdom is greater than one’s deeds?” Rabbi ben Azaryah asks in Pirkei Avot. “To a tree whose branches are many, but whose roots are few, so that, when the wind comes, it will uproot it and overturn.”

Morales thought we had to align with nature, with the trees, that we had to fight back like those “pests” that capitalist agriculture couldn’t get rid of. She gives words to the battle in her poem “I’m on Nature’s Side”:

Many of us die. But not all. Some of us survive. Our survivors are stronger in some ways, more wily, more versatile. We protect ourselves. We fight back. And still they maim us and kill us. . . . No matter how we resist, how often we survive, they spray, because they are so deluded by their power—so sure that when they command, we will obey—that they cannot see what is before them. They cannot even understand that the more they shoot and spray us, the more numerous we become, the more we fight back, the more corn and wheat we eat, until one day we will devastate their crops, bankrupt their agribusiness, destroy their armies, topple their governments.¹¹²

Can Science Be Radically Transformed?

Levins believed that science was a creation of capitalism and, like Morales, thought that its institutions are instruments of empire. So what would it take to radically change science, from a commitment to anti-imperialism and wholeness? Is it even possible?

Levins sketches several proposals for such a radical transformation, which go far beyond making scientific institutions more inclusive of marginalized peoples, as is often advocated by liberals. His proposals also go beyond the more “radical” perspective commonly heard in the orbit of Science for the People. Levins argues that although the “radical science” camp has a more sophisticated critique of science than the liberal camp, it still lacks wholeness. It is still trapped in the same false dichotomies of capitalist science, separating the social and the biological, thinking from feeling, and so on.

Levins calls to transform science by dissolving these divisions altogether. This would require seriously incorporating social movements and their modes of knowing into what is now considered “science.” In other words, the basic terms of science—from its ways of knowing to the organization of its institutions—would radically change.¹¹³ This would entail unlearning many scientific practices, while recovering practices that have been suppressed under capitalism.

This transformation would need things outside the current world of science; it would need poetry. In imagining this radical transformation, Levins cites June Jordan's breathtaking poem about science and power, titled "A Poem About Intelligence for My Brothers and Sisters," which tore at the foundations of racial science:

A few years back and they told me Black
means a hole where other folks
got brain/it was like the cells in the heads
of Black children was out to every hour on the hour naps
Scientists called the phenomenon the Notorious
Jensen Lapse, remember?
Anyway I was thinking
about how to devise
a test for the wise
like a Stanford-Binet
for the C.I.A.
you know?¹¹⁴

In the poem, Jordan applies her own "test" to Albert Einstein, "the unquestionable the outstanding" and "Father of the Atom Bomb." Like Levins, she rejects the ideology that separated thinking from feeling—the ideology that had elevated the genocidal bomb-making "genius" of Einstein and the Manhattan Project physicists over kindness. Science couldn't radically change, Levins says, unless Jordan's insight is embraced. Yet Levins also clarifies that he isn't wishing for a return to an all-good knowledge of "the people" as romanticized by some intellectuals.¹¹⁵ For this point, he cites his daughter, Aurora, who wrote in a poem that "the worst thing about oppression is what happens to our desires, how they shrink to no more than a slice of bread, a roof."¹¹⁶ It would be a mistake to expect the most oppressed (or anyone for that matter) to have totally "pure" ways, unmarked by systems of domination.

Rather than seek a source of untainted knowledge, Levins calls for the "partial deprofessionalization of science based on the idea that all people have the detailed, intimate, and local knowledge

that makes them experts on their own situation.”¹¹⁷ He mentions Black Muslim organizing in prisons, the feminist movements of the 1970s, and liberation theology in Central America as movements that demonstrate “not only untapped but also actively thwarted capacity of people, even in the most unfavorable conditions, to unravel great complexity with subtlety and imagination.” These marginalized capacities, he argues, could transform “areas such as health, ecology, social science, resource management and conservation, and the redesigning of work, where the objects of scientific inquiry are those of everyday life”—areas where scientific expertise consistently fails us.

When these social movements and their practices are taken seriously, when the capacities of marginalized peoples are no longer suppressed, when the false separations between the social and the biological are dissolved, when the histories of imperialism and capitalism become central to how we explain and intervene in the world, and when the institutions of science are reorganized so that their hierarchies of domination and exploitation are dismantled—then science will have been radically transformed. “When science begins to look this way,” Levins asks, “will it have been so transformed that we will no longer call it science?”

Wholeness in the Next Generation

Levins passed away on January 19, 2016. Colleagues and family created a book in honor of his eighty-fifth birthday, titled *The Truth Is the Whole*. Levins often quoted (without giving additional context) that line from German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel, “The truth is the whole.” This line had become the quick encapsulation of Levins’s work. But does Hegel’s sense of “the whole” do justice to Levins’s aspiration for wholeness? Or was the reference to Hegel more of a way to get a message across, to be legible?

As we have seen, Levins’s idea of the whole is linked to dialectical thinking, which Levins certainly gets in part from Marx (who builds on Hegel) but also from an older Jewish dialectical tradition, exemplified by the Talmud, that wouldn’t have been nearly as legible to his audience of scientists and activists. The “whole” that

Levins talks about wasn't simply about uniting something with its negation and arriving at a synthesis—a synthesis that is associated with history's march toward “progress” in Hegel's colonialist worldview.¹¹⁸

The struggle for wholeness, in Levins's terms, is an effort to stitch together what had been fragmented by capitalism and imperialism. Unlike in a Hegelian march of progress, Levins rejects the idea that the past is gone; ancestors are very present in his work. And as we have seen, his analyses often point toward recovering older ways of being (such as Indigenous agricultural practices) that had been suppressed by those very imperial projects that have been celebrated as civilizational “progress.” Levins's notion of wholeness is also deeply connected to healing, to our bodies and our embodied relationships to the earth and nonhuman organisms—matters that barely interest the cerebral Western philosophical tradition associated with Hegel.

Yet those matters of healing had central importance in Jewish traditions, whose invocations of wholeness are far closer to Levins's use of the term. In those contexts, wholeness is invoked in the way Levins meant it: as a fight to put together what the world's most violent projects (in which capitalism and medicine played key roles) had torn apart. It is these notions of wholeness that have been taken up by Levins and Morales's children.

*

In a kind of blessing for her father in *The Truth Is the Whole*, Aurora Levins Morales celebrates the lineage they share:

Nobody springs fully formed from the heads of gods: you are your grandmother's child, the child of Leah Shevelev [Sackman], born in the 1880s in a village in the Ukraine, just as her own grandmother, the rabbi's wife, planted, she said the revolutionary spark in her. Your people taught you to think, and you have been gathering teachers, lessons, questions ever since. I am too much your daughter, too much my mother's child, too much a feminist to ever say you made me as I am, but you were the mineral rich

soil in which I grew, my prevailing wind. Your nutrients are in my bones. They color the irises of my eyes. I lean in the direction of your breath. The descendants of your body and of your mind all have that stamp.¹¹⁹

Born in Maricao in 1954, Aurora Levins Morales, a writer, poet, and activist, continues the struggle for wholeness. Her work is grounded in the idea that “every struggle is an ecological struggle,” that the world is interdependent and could never be understood through fragmentation.¹²⁰ Aurora takes this quest for wholeness in new directions, enriching what her ancestors had done.

Many of Aurora’s writings explore the marks that capitalism and imperialism leave on our bodies. She argues that our bodies are “repositories of stories,” records of our interdependent existence on earth.¹²¹ Through these stories, we could trace the world’s most violent projects, which have torn so many communities and ways of living apart. But these stories, as she argues in her book *Medicine Stories*, also show us the broken fragments and therefore possess healing powers—once we start to tell them collectively. Then, as Aurora writes, “the story of what is broken becomes something whole. The story of what was forgotten becomes memory. The story of how we survived becomes communal medicine. The story of what we lost becomes new soil. The story of how we are the same as everyone and the story of how we are unique are a braided lifeline.”¹²²

Aurora shared some of the stories that had been deposited in her own body. Growing up in Maricao, she had been exposed to pesticides pushed onto Puerto Rican farmers by multinational US corporations and developed epilepsy and a tangle of chronic conditions as a result. Her illnesses were inseparable from imperialism. And those pesticides, as Aurora observes, were originally developed as biological weapons by German scientists working under the Nazis and have since been used by neuroscientists to induce brain seizures in laboratory animals. Yet capitalist medicine denies such links between epilepsy and pollution, for all the reasons Levins had described. “It is both shocking and unsurprising that in the thirty-three years since my first epilepsy diagnosis,” Aurora

writes, “not one neurologist has ever suggested environmental factors as a possible cause, in spite of the fact that our environment is filled with neuro-disrupters designed to devastate the central nervous systems of insects.”¹²³ Aurora’s body, then, carried the cost of capitalist science’s neglect of the whole.

Capitalist science preferred to frame epilepsy as a problem of individual biology, a defect of one’s brain, so that the polluting industries would be protected. As Aurora explains, echoing her father’s analyses,

Our health care system is not set up to recognize, research or heal the emerging chronic illnesses that reckless industrial development and disregard for ecological consequences have made epidemic. The constellation of ills that impact the immune, neurological and endocrine systems, with their fluctuating symptoms and multiple causes, don’t respond well to a medical model designed to deal with infectious diseases where it’s assumed that “real” illnesses have consistent symptoms and single causes.¹²⁴

Like Levins, Aurora had searched for ways to deal with this “constellation of ills” without separating the biological aspects from the social ones. She had experimented, for example, with creative ways of dealing with her own epilepsy. Rather than viewing seizures as a chemical imbalance that can only be treated with drugs, as in the dominant scientific view, Aurora studied the social conditions, specific to her life, that trigger seizures. She created stories for herself about how and when seizures emerge, learning to anticipate and partially control them.¹²⁵ It wasn’t a “cure” for epilepsy, but it was a valuable therapeutic practice made possible by looking at the whole.

Out of necessity, Aurora had to seek more therapeutic practices grounded in wholeness. In 2007, she suffered a stroke, with serious injuries, and had to start using a wheelchair. The US health care system had little to offer but an endless bureaucracy that asked her to prove her pain was real. Through her father’s Cuban connections, Aurora was able to get into the exclusive International

Center for Neurological Restoration (CIREN) in Havana. It was the closest thing to medicine based on wholeness she had ever seen. She received nearly forty hours of treatment per week from a range of perspectives, including physical rehabilitation and psychiatry. She says she could nearly dance by the time she left. At the end of Aurora's stay, her Cuban psychiatrist prescribed solidarity: Find more ways to do meaningful activities with like-minded people.¹²⁶

This made Aurora think of how the diabetes she and her father lived with could be treated differently. Levins, as we have seen, created mathematical models that included not only "biological" variables such as insulin and blood sugar levels but also "social" variables such as the intensity of exploitation in the workplace and the workers' ability to unionize. Aurora expands the scope, not with more models and equations, but through stories and metaphors. She imagines ways to treat diabetes by building solidarity and changing entirely how we frame the illness:

What if we told a different story about diabetes? What if we said the pancreas has gone on strike from loneliness, from homesickness, from uprootedness and isolation. What if we created healing cells made up of four or five diabetics whose job was to help restore each other's roots and cultivate group solidarity? What if they shared meals, cooked for each other twice a week, went on walks together, strategized about protecting their bodies from stressors in their lives, cried and raged about what's been awful and unfair, practiced listening to their bodies' deepest hungers as a guide to diet? Tenderly chopped and cooked and seasoned what made them feel most at home in themselves. What if their story was not one of defective organs, unruly appetites and laziness? What if it was a story of homecoming?¹²⁷

But no matter how promising this approach is, Aurora recognizes, scientific institutions will never go for it. "The study of solidarity will never get an NIH [National Institutes of Health] grant," she notes. The NIH isn't the only problem, of course. There

is a general lack of collective support, a missing social fabric, that could turn Aurora's reframed story about diabetes into material practices of care. But the point is that if medical research is really about our well-being, it should concern itself with the problem of developing the kind of solidarity Aurora envisioned.

*

History isn't a march of progress, and radical traditions aren't perfectly continued by the next generations. Conditions change, and sometimes the descendants pursue less radical directions than their ancestors. The International Workers Order that Aurora's grandmother and great-grandmother were part of, which took care of people's material needs (such as health care), has no real counterpart in the country today.

Writers like Aurora, who don't have salaried positions at established institutions (like the ones Levins had), have had to create their own networks of support. "In spite of the fact that I was raised middle class, am highly educated, and am an internationally known author whose writing is widely taught in universities, I have lived my adult life in poverty, unable to consistently hold a job, and unable to afford adequate medical care, the most effective of which is offered by integrative medicine doctors not covered by insurance," Aurora wrote in 2013. "Over the decades, my health has deteriorated, and now, at 59, I am once again financially dependent on a now aged parent [Levins]." Aurora had managed to raise a monthly salary from the many readers she had inspired over the years.

In 2019, partly because of the circumstances and partly for the sake of wholeness, Aurora decided to return to the family farm in Maricao. Her aim was to reconnect with ancestral ways of living. Her intention was also to apply agroecology to revive some of the native plant and animal life. Aurora began experimenting with interdependent ways of living, from building a solar compostable toilet to an apprenticeship system where young artists and writers come live on the farm for a few months to help with chores in exchange for her help with their creative projects. Aurora's approach to these things is cooperative, informal, and based on reciprocity; it is anarchistic, even if the label "anarchist" wasn't used.¹²⁸

In addition to these ongoing experiments in survival through mutual aid, Aurora also develops Jewish liturgy that emphasizes the interdependence of the whole. Here, she adds a devotional dimension to the struggle for wholeness that her father's more analytic approach was missing. In Aurora's hands, wholeness received a blessing, but one that still carried the insights from analyzing the whole. In her poem "V'ahavta" (a riff on the Shema prayer), which is today being read in synagogues across Turtle Island, Aurora writes,

Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
 when you go out and when you return. In times of
 mourning
 and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
 embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your
 shoulders,
 teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies,
 recite them in your sleep, here in the cruel shadow of
 empire:
Another world is possible.

...

When you inhale and when you exhale
 breathe the possibility of another world
 into the 37.2 trillion cells of your body
 until it shines with hope.
 Then imagine more.¹²⁹

Aurora's younger brother, Ricardo Levins Morales, has also joined this project of imagining another world. Ricardo describes himself as "an artist by trade, a healer by temperament and a troublemaker by necessity." He has created posters for many struggles—for solidarity with Palestine, for health and ecological justice, and against policing and prisons, among others—which sometimes quote Aurora's poems.

Like his sister, Ricardo had absorbed an ecological way of thinking at home, which he has been applying to analyze social movements. In his pamphlet "Tending the Soil: Lessons for

Organizing,” Ricardo argues that in the long run, “the soil is more important than the seeds.” The seeds, in his metaphor, are the specific projects that organizers pursue at any given time, while the soil is the “compost of beliefs, ideas, values, and narratives that create the environment in which we’re working.” Even a wonderful seed could fail to grow in nutrient-depleted soil filled with toxins, Ricardo argues, whereas “almost anything will grow in rich, nutritious soil.” We should tend the soil, he urged, so that the seeds our descendants plant will have a chance. In Ricardo’s words, we need to “plant the seed of the tree that one day we want to live under. We need to be preparing the soil in which that tree can grow.”¹³⁰ This requires ancestral wisdom, along with a deeper connection to the soil and the plants.

5

The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants

Plantcestors Bring Wholeness

God produced drugs from the earth with which the physician heals the wound, and with which the pharmacist mixes their compounds. . . . There is not a single herb that does not have a corresponding star in the sky that strikes it and tells it, ‘Grow.’

—Bereshit Rabbah 10:6

It can be hard to know who we are and where we came from. Forced migrations, genocide, and assimilation disconnected many of us from our ancestors. We have been severed from their languages and cultures, including their healing practices.

But plants can help. Plants can connect us to ourselves and our ancestors while attuning us to the earth and the broader ecology we are part of. With their beauty, scents, and healing properties, plants can nourish us through our struggles.

By following the plants, Jewish herbalists and activists have been reawakening the healing traditions of their ancestors. They found healing practices filled with herbs, amulets, incantations, and angels that go back to the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud but varied across time and place as Jews learned from their neighbors and adapted to the local environment. These healing traditions look very different from capitalist science and medicine. And the plant magic in them provides a link to ancestors, their struggles, and their ways of coping.

Plants also have the potential to connect different cultures and traditions because they have no respect for artificial divisions such as race, nationality, class, gender, or geographical borders. Jewish radicals have therefore been looking to plants for guidance on how to live according to *doikayt* on Turtle Island (where most Jews are not Native) and resist the prescribed paths of settler-colonial society. After all, the plants do every day what many radicals aspire toward: building resilient systems based on mutual aid, respect, and reciprocity, without any centralized authority. Inspired by plant ways of being, radical herbalists have been learning from each other's ancestral traditions in ways grounded in collaboration and reciprocity. These herbalists have also been trying to re-create a people's herbalism that can support those harmed or neglected by capitalist medicine.

Plantcestor, You Are Part of Me

So many worlds have been shattered by colonialism, genocide, expulsions, migrations, and assimilation, leaving so many pieces to be reassembled if we want to be more whole. Plants are crucial to this process, which radical herbalist Layla Feghali calls "re-membrance." As we learn how our ancestors related to plants and try to reclaim those traditions for our times, Feghali argues, the plants help us *remember* where we came from. But the plants also *re-member* us: attach us to places and cultures we have been severed from and to the land itself—the basis of all life. To build relationships with plants, she says, we need to consider the pollinators, the soil, the microorganisms; in short, we need to embrace that the ecology is an interdependent whole (as discussed in the previous chapter).

But plants don't only attach us to the land and our ancestors. Plants *are* our ancestors—or as Feghali calls them, "plantcestors." Plantcestors are the organisms, like the trees and herbs, that predated humans and animals and that we depend on for life. Our ancestors cultivated relationships with these plants; the plants became part of their bodies and cultures and, as a result, part of us. "Our ancestral plants know us so intimately in fact that their mere

presence in our lives can retrieve parts of us so deeply buried we do not even know they are a miss,” Feghali observed. “Our plantcestors of lineage are such a foundational part of our cultures and legacies of knowledge, affection, and survival that we would not be who we are without them.” To restore relationships with plantcestors, she writes, is “to bless life” and reawaken “something scared and expansive in its healing and aid, especially for those of us who have been severed from our lands, lineages, or Indigenous cultures.”¹

In her book *The Land in Our Bones*, Feghali explores the plantcestors of her ancestral region, the land between Syria and the Sinai, which she calls Cana’an (this includes present-day Lebanon, Palestine, Egypt, and Jordan). Through plantcestors, Feghali recovers traditions that have been weakened or lost by years of colonial violence, including the encroachment of Western professional medicine that dismissed all folk healing as backward. In writing about Cana’an, Feghali, who comes from a Lebanese Christian family, also tenderly notes the “wound still desperate for repair”² that is the absence of Jews from parts of the region where they once lived (prior to the rise of Zionism) among their Muslim and Christian neighbors.

There are open wounds elsewhere too, which Jewish herbalists have been tending to through plantcestors. In Eastern Europe, Jewish life was essentially destroyed by the end of World War II. The folk healing traditions of these communities were largely discontinued or suppressed. The healers were either killed or displaced to new places where they and their descendants would lose touch with older practices. In the US, Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe were pressured to assimilate, which meant shedding their “foreign” ways.³

Assimilation meant accepting society’s dominant institutions, including those of science and medicine. The prevailing story today is that Jews have not only accepted but in fact exemplify excellence in Western science and medicine, evidenced by all the counting of Jewish Nobel laureates and gushing over “Jewish genius.”⁴ This narrative helped bury Jewish traditions that didn’t fit within capitalist science and medicine, including healing traditions with practices that would have been considered unreliable,

superstitious, or simply weird. We were left with many scattered fragments that need to be stitched together.

Jewish Ancestral Medicine

What were the healing traditions of our Jewish ancestors? What kind of earthly magic did they offer? What were some of their key plantcestors? We are sometimes stopped from asking these questions because of the cliché about Jews as the “People of the Book”—those who aren’t so interested in the natural world. Ironically, the most revered of Jewish books are very concerned with ecology, the earth, and magical plants.⁵

The three major holidays described in the Hebrew Bible track the cycles of the earth.⁶ Pesach (Passover) marks spring, when barley starts to ripen and its early sheaves can be made into a sacred offering. Then a count of seven weeks begins (the counting of the *omer*) until Shavuot, the harvest festival, which takes place in the beginning of summer when the barley and wheat are harvested. Sukkot is in fall, when the fruits are collected and also made into an offering. The Hebrew Bible demands that every seventh year be a *shmita* year (literally, “release”) where the land rests: No cultivation or planting is permitted, and all living beings—human or not—can freely take whatever grows naturally. This “Shabbat for the land,” as it has been called, is a sound agroecological practice. It is also deeply socialist, as many Jewish radicals have recognized.⁷ The Hebrew Bible further demands that every seven cycles of *shmita*, there should be a Jubilee year in which all debts are canceled.

The Hebrew Bible also contains lots of plant magic. The first human drama takes place in a garden, over trees and their powerful fruits. God famously speaks to Moses through a burning bush. The Israelites are instructed to protect themselves from God’s worst plague against Pharaoh—the death of the firstborn—by dipping hyssop (*ezov* in Hebrew) in blood and smearing it on their doorposts and lintels. Knowing about plants was also taken as a sign of wisdom: King Solomon is said to have been so wise in part because he could tell you about the trees and plants, “from the

cedar in Lebanon to the hyssop that grows out of the wall.”⁸ Hundreds of plants are mentioned in the Hebrew Bible, often taking on sacred meanings.

The Talmud also delves into the healing magic of plants. It mentions, for example, that the madder plant (*puah* in Hebrew) holds magical powers when tied into garlands that can be carried. One rabbi says his mother told him that three knots of madder hold the illness in place (so it doesn’t get worse), five heal it, and seven are “effective even against sorcery.”⁹

Of the plants, garlic holds a special place. In the Hebrew Bible, when the Israelites were exhausted from wandering in the desert after being liberated from slavery, they longed for the garlic and onions they once used to eat.¹⁰ In the Talmud, Jews are identified as both “keepers of Shabbat” and as “garlic eaters.” Garlic, the Talmud suggests, should be eaten on Friday night because it improves sexual potency (having sex on Shabbat is considered a mitzvah). It is said to warm the body, increase sperm production, and clean the intestines. The rabbis also add that garlic “brings in love and removes jealousy.”¹¹

These uses of plants are part of a long Jewish tradition of making amulets against illnesses and evil spirits, including amulets with herbs.¹² But the healing capacities of such amulets weren’t just taken for granted. The Talmud asks questions such as the following: How do we know when amulets are effective? And how can we tell who is a trustworthy amulet maker? These questions are treated in the usual dialectical way, with some things left unresolved, but the detailed discussions indicate that amulets were part of everyday life.

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Jewish healers in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continued building on these traditions. The influential eighteenth-century Palestinian rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai (also known by his Hebrew acronym, Hida) wrote books of healing that use plants. Azulai notes that rue (*pigam* in Hebrew) “protects from the evil eye and can dismantle any spell.”¹³ A related rue has been used by Ladino-speaking Sephardic Jews, in the Ottoman Empire and

Talmudic Science Asks, When Are Amulets Effective at Healing the Sick?

The Talmud discusses how life should be conducted on Shabbat. The rabbis consider what one may carry when going out, which brings them to the subject of amulets. And while discussing amulets, they ask, When are these amulets effective? And which amulet maker should you trust? The discussion shows that the rabbis cared about having good healing practices, and their answers blend magic and logic.

The rabbis begin by recalling that the Mishnah says one may not go out on Shabbat with an amulet that wasn't made by an expert amulet maker (and also not with sandals spiked with nails, but that's another story).¹ Rav Pappa says that this means the amulet may be carried if it was made by an "expert" (*momcheh*) maker of amulets, even if the amulet itself has not been proven effective. The text then recalls that the sages had once asked, When should an amulet be considered effective?

Their answer: An amulet that healed a person once, then healed them again later (second time), and then yet again (a third time). The sages taught that this criterion applies to both written amulets and amulets made with herbal roots, and that the criterion holds whether the person was dangerously ill or only slightly ill. The criterion is also said to hold even if the amulet was only shown effective as a preventative—for example, preventing one from falling rather than healing one after a fall—in which case it may be carried on Shabbat.

Some rabbis raise an objection: Hasn't it been taught that for an amulet to be considered effective, it needs to heal three different people, just as it healed one person three times? No, the text answers, that teaching wasn't about the amulets but about the amulet maker. To be considered an expert maker of

1. Shabbat 61a:14. See also Harari, *Jewish Magic*, 357–58.

amulets, one needs to have made three different amulets that healed three different people.

Rav Pappa says that if a person made three different amulets for three different people, and each amulet healed each person at three different times, then obviously this proves the amulets are effective, and the amulet maker should also be considered an expert. But if the person made three different amulets that each healed a person once, then the person could be considered an expert amulet maker, but the amulets shouldn't be considered effective (because each had only healed a single person once). And if the amulet maker made a single amulet that healed three different people, then the amulet should be considered effective, but we shouldn't consider its maker an expert (because they have only made one effective amulet).

Rav Pappa then raises a problem: What if one sick person was given three different amulets? What do we make of the effectiveness of the amulets and of their maker? Clearly, the amulets in this case were not proven effective. But should the amulet maker be considered an expert? After all, the amulet maker made three different amulets that worked, but maybe it was just by chance that they worked on that one person but wouldn't have worked for others? The Talmud says that this question is left unresolved.

It then jumps to the question, Are amulets sacred? This is relevant because the rabbis are trying to decide whether one can enter the bathroom with amulets, whether amulets should be handled and buried like sacred texts because of the writings they contain, and whether one should try to rescue amulets from a fire. The rabbis say that this discussion doesn't apply to amulets containing only herbs (since they have no sacred writing), but then the matter is complicated by amulets that have *both* sacred text and herbs. The rabbis go on to consider the type of material the amulets are made from, and the debate continues (Shabbat 61b:9).

elsewhere, who called it “the queen of the herbs” (*la reina de las yervas*) for its many uses, which include protection from the evil eye and easing of birthing pains.¹⁴

In the nineteenth century, the Moroccan-born rabbi Rafael Ochana wrote books of healing filled with herbs, amulets, and incantations. Ochana, who moved to Palestine in 1865, would often refer to herbs by their Hebrew and Arabic names. In one book, he writes that a person carrying roots of hyssop (*ezov* in Hebrew, *za’atar* in Arabic) will be protected from all spells.¹⁵ Like many other healers, he also recommends the incantation *el nah refah nah lah*—difficult to translate, but roughly meaning “god, heal her”—which is what Moses cried out after his sister Miriam was struck with skin disease by God.

For his healing work, Ochana was given the nickname “Angel Rafael,” after the angel associated with healing in Jewish traditions. *Rafael* in Hebrew literally means “healed by god.”¹⁶ The Talmud imagines that Angel Rafael, who isn’t mentioned by name in the Hebrew Bible, was the one who healed Abraham after he was circumcised (at age ninety-nine) as part of the divine covenant. God saw Abraham in pain after the procedure, futzing with his bandages, and thought the only proper thing to do was to send Rafael to help him.¹⁷

Something for “Any Trouble That May Arise . . . Passed Down from Generation to Generation”

In Europe, Jews became associated with their magical plants in the minds of racists. During the Spanish Inquisition, those Jews who were forced to convert to Christianity (conversos) but continued their ways in secrecy were apparently “exposed” by their use of garlic. “They never stopped the Jewish customs of eating little dishes and stews cooked overnight with coals, little dishes of onions and garlic fried with oil,” one Catholic priest wrote in the late fifteenth century, adding that garlic gave these disobedient conversos bad breath. “They themselves had the smell of the Jews, on account of the food they ate.”¹⁸ In Germany, garlic likewise came to symbolize Jews for racists who believed that Jews have a stinky body odor. Despite these oppressive associations—and despite



Figure 5.1: Nineteenth-century tin plate from Europe depicting a Jew scratching himself, surrounded by garlic and onions. Source: US Holocaust Museum, The Katz Ehrenthal Collection.

being ridiculed for being “superstitious” by the growing professional medical establishment of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Jews made efforts to collect and transmit their ancestral healing and herbal practices.

One stunning example is the 1911 book *Rafael HaMalach* (Rafael the angel) by Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, a rabbi from Poland who later in life became Montreal’s chief rabbi.¹⁹ Rosenberg is known for translating a key book of Kabbalah (the *Zohar*) from Aramaic into Hebrew, and for popularizing the story of the Golem, the creature made of earth through a rabbi’s magic spell (more on this soon).



Figure 5.2: Nineteenth-century bisque coin bank depicting a racist stereotype of a Jew holding two bulbs of garlic. On the left bulb, “Such a fine little stink,” and on the right bulb, “Smells!” Source: US Holocaust Museum, The Katz Ehrenthal Collection.

Rafael HaMalach aims to bring Jewish ancestral medicine to the people. The opening page explains that the book is a collection of therapies and amulets sent to us from devout ancestors for “any trouble that may arise.” It promises “incantations for many illnesses, passed down from generation to generation.” It also promises “useful remedies for many illnesses”—some homemade and some that can be bought at a pharmacy. This knowledge is meant to be accessible. Rosenberg writes that he only referred to ingredients that “governments allow to be sold to everyone” and that he had included their Latin names so that “anyone could buy them.”²⁰

Like other Jewish healing books of this kind, *Rafael HaMalach* is arranged alphabetically by keywords. The keyword might be the ailment or its remedy, the affected organ, or basically any topic. For example, there is one entry for “stone” that discusses bladder stones and another that mentions stones as remedies. There are entries on “love” that address unrequited love, and entries on “home” that address proper building practices and remind us that



Figure 5.3: “A Jew with Herbs” (*a yid mit kraytekhntser*), undated, by the photographer Alter Kacyzne (Source: box 2, folder 494, RG 1270, YIVO Institute for Jewish Research). Kacyzne had also photographed Bundist workers and worked with communist Yiddish newspapers. He was friends with S. An-sky, author of the Bund’s anthem “*Di shvue*.” During World War II, Kacyzne tried to find refuge in Ukraine, where, according to the Oneg Shabbat archive, he was tortured to death by Ukrainian guards. Kacyzne’s wife, Chana, was murdered in the Belzec death camp. Their daughter survived the war.



Figure 5.4: The title page of *Rafael HaMalach* (Rafael the angel), a 1911 book of healing wisdom written by Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg, then a rabbi in Łódź, Poland. It compiles healing practices (*segulot*) and amulets (*kmeiot*), passed down by righteous ancestors, for “any trouble that may arise.”

the whole point of having a home is to do the mitzvah of hosting guests. An entry on “road” says that to ensure safe travels, one must give some money for *tzedakah* (funds collected for the poor) before leaving, since the book of Tehillim (Psalms) states that justice must walk ahead of us and give rhythm to our steps.²¹ There are entries on pregnancy issues, as well as on coping with a distracted mind, poor memory, sweat, diarrhea, diarrhea with vomiting, snakebites, insomnia, a rooster that wakes you up too early in the morning, and a baby that refuses to breastfeed. The alphabetical ordering lets the book treat life as a messy whole (unlike professional medicine, which seeks order through specialization).

Rafael HaMalach is also significant for exploding some of the myths and categories often used to narrate Jewish history. For one, the book shatters the myth that Hebrew was a language used only for liturgy, prior to being “revived” by the Zionist movement.²² The book also defies classification as either “secular” or “religious.” Here we have a Hebrew book written by a rabbi, steeped in traditional Jewish texts and spirituality, but its aim is to broadly share practical knowledge about coping with life. It is neither legal code nor prayer book nor just a medical manual, though it has elements of all three. And while it draws on the works of devout writers, what it brings is of interest to everybody, not just devout men. Moreover, much of the knowledge it preserves came from people on the margins of the rabbinical world: mothers, grandmothers, and midwives. For example, for a baby that won’t breastfeed, *Rafael HaMalach* suggests prolonged skin-to-skin contact with the mother, putting a warm compress to the baby’s lips, and coating the mother’s nipples with something sweet like honey. It is safe to say that this knowledge didn’t originate with Rosenberg or the rabbis he often cites.

Contrary to the stereotypes about devout healers being dogmatic and closed-minded, *Rafael HaMalach* doesn’t simply ignore the professional medical advice of the time but instead combines it with Jewish folk medicine.²³ For fever, for instance, it first suggests quinine, which was widely known to European doctors as an effective treatment for diseases like malaria (after Spanish colonizers had learned about it from Indigenous people in Peru).²⁴ But it also

offers more elaborate remedies (*segulot*) that professional medicine wouldn't touch. One such remedy for fever is to clip the nails from the hands and feet of the sick person and put them into a small cake and bake it. The sick person must then take the cake to the market—but not talk to any person—and feed it to the first dog they see; then they will be cured. This ritual takes the “dead” parts of the sick person (the nails) and makes them into ingredients of something delicious (a cake) that nourishes another nonhuman being (the dog). Such rituals remind us that the decay of one life is the beginning of another, often nonhuman life; that we are all connected.

Rafael HaMalach also demonstrates the major role that amulets play in this suppressed healing tradition. Amulets were even part of major holidays such as Pesach. The book describes that the *afikomen*, the broken piece of matzah hidden during the seder, could be preserved and carried by travelers for protection. Eastern European Jews would also sometimes use the *afikoman* to “protect children from the evil eye” (by placing it under the child's pillow along with salt grains) or “as a charm for carrying a pregnancy to term, and for ensuring an easy birth.”²⁵ Other items from the seder also functioned as amulets. To prevent a difficult birth, bits of the *maror* (bitter herbs used as a reminder of the bitterness of slavery) were hung around the birthing woman's neck, reminiscent of the use of madder garlands mentioned in the Talmud.²⁶

Rosenberg's book makes clear that such herbal amulets had been passed down for generations. For protection against the plague, for example, he shares a recipe for an herbal amulet from the sixteenth-century Palestinian rabbi Chaim Vital. The amulet uses rue (*pigam* in Hebrew, *ruta* in Latin or Yiddish), and these were the instructions for making it. During the plague, wait until a full moon and go out and collect leaves of rue before sunrise. Do so while reciting the name of the person whom you wish to protect. Cut the rue leaves with a gold coin. Then write the text of the amulet on kosher parchment (following the design given in the book). Add the rue leaves and hang the amulet on the person to be protected.²⁷

The design of the amulet given in *Rafael HaMalach* shows that the text should be written into the shape of a palm with five fingers, the *hamsa*, a well-known symbol of protection used by Jews

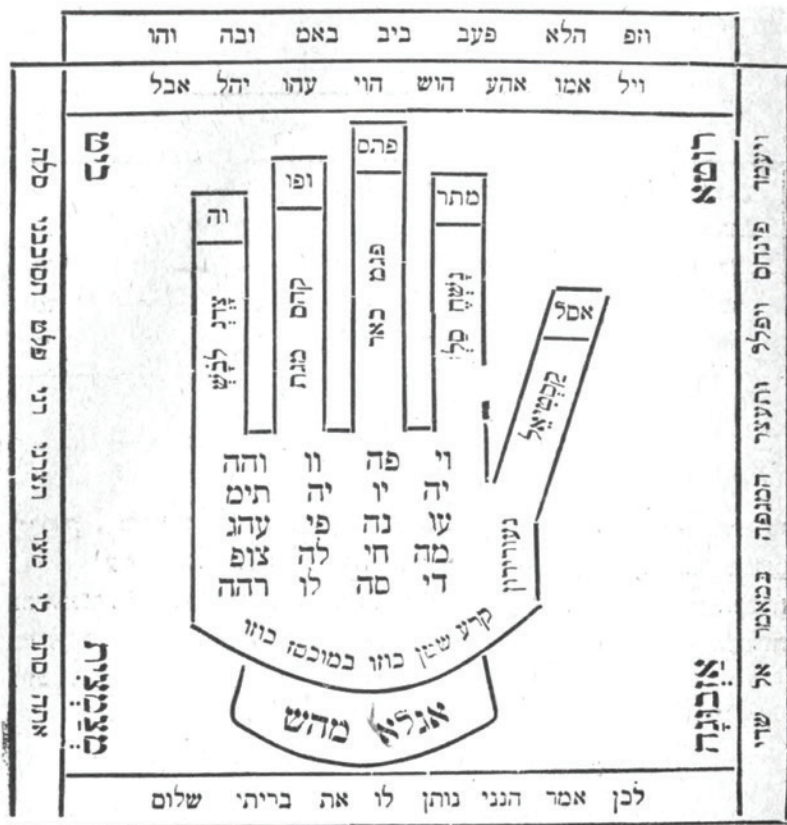


Figure 5.5: Design for an amulet for protection from a plague, to be made with rue leaves. Source: Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg's book *Rafael HaMalach* (1911).

and Muslims (see figure 5.5). Another layer of meaning is that rue leaves are themselves shaped like a palm, and some kabbalists in Palestine also thought rue is especially fitting for a plague, since in Hebrew “the rue” (הפִּיגִם) spells “plague” (מגִּיפָה) when reversed.²⁸ Rue’s Latin name, *ruta*, appears in Hebrew letters in one corner of the amulet, while the sides have biblical verses, including “I gave him my pact of peace/wholeness.”²⁹ The plant is considered holy enough that its name, even in Latin, can appear alongside Torah verses.

Holy Dust of the Earth

There would be no magical plants without the soil and the earth, which are also considered holy in the tradition that Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg is transmitting to us.

The earth's holiness is made clear in the book of Bereshit, which famously contains two creation stories. In the first story, Adam is created in the image of God, and Adam's rib is then used to create the second being (though there are alternative interpretations, as discussed in chapter 2). In the second story, Adam is created "from the dust of the earth"—a phrase that has also been translated as "from the soil's humus"—and God then blows life into Adam's nostrils.³⁰ An old midrash suggests that Adam's very name comes from the Hebrew word *adama*, which means soil or land.³¹ The earth, then, has magical powers—even its dust—and some Eastern European Jews continued treating it as such. Some believed that the dust from the feet of praying rabbis can have healing powers.³²

Inspired by the second story of creation, some Jewish healers also imagined using the earth's dust to create a force that could protect Jewish communities from violence, as in the tale of the Golem. There have been several Golem stories, but perhaps the most famous one is associated with sixteenth-century rabbi Yehuda Loew of Prague (also known by his Hebrew acronym, Maharal), who is said to have created a Golem to stop blood libel plots in his community. Rosenberg popularized this story through his 1909 book *Niflaot HaMaharal* (Wonders of the Maharal).³³ According to the book, the Maharal had debated Christian priests for many days, trying to convince them that Jews don't in fact use the blood of Christian children to make the matzah for Pesach. But it didn't work; some hostile neighbors had even taken the dead bodies of Christian children and planted them in Jewish areas to construct a blood libel.

So the Maharal turns to magic, infusing the earth's dust with life to make the Golem. He does it through a ritual that involves a magical combination of Hebrew letters, drawing a human shape in the sand, a circle dance, and an incantation based on the biblical verse where God breathes life into Adam. The Golem's main

function is to protect Jews from racist violence, though it also has other powers (like being able to summon the souls of dead members of the community in order to address unresolved conflicts). In essence, the Golem is a walking amulet, and in Rosenberg's telling, the Maharal even equips the Golem with its own protective amulet that can make it invisible when walking around town. With this amulet, the creature made of dust stops neighbors from smuggling the bodies of dead Christian children into Jewish spaces. The villain of the story, a racist priest, realizes what is happening and begins telling everyone (with some justification) that the Maharal was "a sorcerer."³⁴

This idea that the earth possesses magical powers that can be unlocked with the right spell went far beyond the world of rabbis. The Bundist activist and writer H. Leivick, a yeshiva student in his youth, wrote the Yiddish poem *Der Goylem* (The Golem), which retells the story of the Maharal of Prague (it was later made into a play). Looking for magical protection from violence made sense to Leivick, given that he had been imprisoned by the czar's regime for his Bundist activities and that the Bund was known for organizing armed self-defense. In *Der Goylem*, the Maharal promises the Golem that it will be "a people's champion," a doer of "great wonder" who will nonetheless appear as an ordinary servant, "a hewer of water, a cutter of wood."³⁵ When the experiment goes awry, the Maharal returns the Golem to earthly dust, telling it that it is Shabbat and even the earth must rest on this day.

Jewish radical healers have reconnected with this ancestral tradition that gave us the magical earth dust that can be made into a Golem, along with incantations and plant magic. They have also adapted it for their own struggles on Turtle Island.

Reawakening Jewish Plant Magic

When Dori Midnight was sick, her mother told her to eat garlic and would sometimes put it in her ear. Garlic was medicine. It could also protect you from harm. Midnight's great-grandmother carried garlic in her bra for protection from evil forces. Midnight's grandfather used to eat garlic right before going to bed, just in case the

Angel of Death showed up. He could then say, in a drawn-out way, “Helloooooo! Hooooowww are you?”—and the Angel of Death would be turned away by his garlic breath.³⁶ Dori Midnight is one of the herbalists who has been piecing together such fragments from her ancestors to revive a suppressed healing tradition.

Midnight (birthname Ehrlich) was born in 1976. Her father’s side of the family emigrated to the US in the late nineteenth century from the Pale of Settlement. The family, which was devout, settled in New York’s Lower East Side. It was a great-grandmother on this side of the family who carried around garlic (and who would also splash plants with vodka when they seemed down). Midnight’s mother’s side, meanwhile, had nonobservant radicals from Eastern Europe who had settled in the Midwest and later Southern California. In 1929, Yetta Stromberg, Midnight’s great-aunt, was arrested at age nineteen for waving the red flag in the largely Yiddish-speaking radical summer camp where she worked (she had also been a member of the Young Communist League).³⁷ Stromberg began serving her ten-year prison sentence, but her case was then taken to the US Supreme Court, where she won and was released. Stromberg and her sisters (who were also communists) are an inspiration to Midnight.³⁸ Another branch of the family remains more mysterious, since Midnight’s maternal grandmother was an orphan, but it had some Sephardic Jews who had moved to present-day Ukraine and later the US. As an orphan, Midnight’s grandmother was helped by the Midnight family, and it was in their honor that Dori changed her name from Ehrlich to (the far catchier) Midnight.³⁹

Although her ancestors had lost so much to migration and assimilation, they preserved enough of their ways for Midnight to sense there was a hidden healing tradition. “Even though I wasn’t taught all this . . . wild mythology of the magic of garlic, these little cloves [used by elders in the family] were tucked away for me to find,” Midnight recalls. “And then they opened up this whole world for me.”⁴⁰

Midnight began following the plants. She found all those references to garlic in the Torah and Talmud. She learned that garlic was one of the foods the Israelites had fantasized about while wandering in the desert, that garlic was linked to the mitzvah of sex, and that it

became synonymous with the Jews in Europe. Garlic told us about our ancestors—about the oppression they faced and their ways of coping—and as a result, it told us things about ourselves. “Plants can do that,” Midnight explains. “So much of it is about scent, our memory . . . more than sight, more than hearing, these smells can evoke so much beyond us, beyond our personal memories.” With its scent and pungency, garlic can ground you within your body. Midnight also sees garlic as community. It nourishes us when we are sick so we can keep together, but it also models community in the way it grows. “It’s like a tight little ball of individuals that all are connected and kind of stick together and rub up against each other and help us stay well as a community,” Midnight says.⁴¹ And garlic tends toward wholeness: Plant one clove, one subcommunity, and the whole set of communities will regenerate.

Garlic is just one (potent) example of what Midnight calls “Jewish plant magic.” There is much more. Midnight discovered why Ladino-speaking Sephardim calls rue “the queen of all herbs” and taught this fact to fellow radical herbalists such as Layla Feghali.⁴² Midnight also found that apples had a sacred Jewish meaning. Apples were medicine, and according to the Song of Songs, women would give birth under apple trees.⁴³ Midnight learned that you could even see God’s Hebrew name (יהוה or *yud-hei-vav-hei*) in each apple. Cut an apple along its horizontal axis and you will find it. The letter *yud* (the tenth letter) is represented by the ten dots surrounding the seeds, the letter *hei* (fifth letter) by the five seed pockets, the letter *vav* by the apple’s stem (which looks like a *vav*), and the final letter *hei* by the five seeds themselves (see figure 5.6).

Midnight wants to reawaken this tradition rather than treat it like a thing of the past. Some of the most inspiring bits for her efforts turned out to be on the margins of the rabbinical tradition. Midnight learned of a striking passage in the book of Enoch, which dates to around the third century BCE and had been excluded from the Hebrew Bible. It tells of fallen angels who coveted the women of the earth and eventually mated with them. These angels gave the women knowledge they apparently weren’t supposed to have: “They taught them charms and enchantments, and the cutting of roots, and made them acquainted with plants.”⁴⁴



Figure 5.6: A horizontal section of an apple, hanging on leaves. Some say every apple encodes the numerical values of the letters that spell God’s name in Hebrew (יהוה).

Midnight decided to reclaim this forbidden knowledge, to view it as a source of power that had terrified the patriarchal establishment. She wrote a song based on the verse, titled “The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants.” The lyrics name the magical plants, in both Hebrew and English:

*The angels revealed to us healing plants [sing twice]
The angels taught the daughters the cutting of roots [sing twice]*

Erez veh ezov
Levonah veh rimon
Shaked veh tamar
Pigam veh shoom
Cedar and hyssop
Frankincense and pomegranate
Almond and date palm
Rue and garlic

In the spirit of reclamation, Midnight changed “them” from the Enoch verse into “us” (she also encourages people to change “daughters” to whatever phrase, possibly less gendered, felt right). But who are these angels that are teaching us things? “I don’t know,” Midnight writes, “but in my dreams sometimes they are

The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants
 אֵרֶז וְאֶזוֹב

Lyrics and melody by Dori Midnight

The An - gels Re - vealed to Us He - al - ing Plants The

An - gels taught the Dau - ghters the Cu - tting of Roots The Roots

E - rez veh e - zov Le - vo - na - h veh ri - mon

Sha - ked veh ta - mar Pi - gam v - eh shoom
 Ce - dar and hy - ssop Fran - kincense and pome - granate
 Al - mond and date - palm Ru - e and gar - lic

Figure 5.7: Music and lyrics for Dori Midnight’s “The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants,” also known by the Hebrew title “Erez veh ezov” (Cedar and hyssop).

the trees and flowers themselves, generously sharing their magic and beauty everywhere we look.” Midnight and friends sing “The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants” on the album *Ancestralization* (2022), released by the Jewish Ancestral Healing project. The project aims to be “a portal to nourish and inspire ancestral connection and transformation.” Midnight’s song contributed by giving rhythm and melody to some of the plantcestors.

Midnight wasn’t taught any of this plant magic in the Hebrew school she had attended growing up in Los Angeles. But there she did learn the “value of questions.”⁴⁵ Like ACT UP member Gregg Bordowitz (from chapter 3), Midnight understood early on that the point was to ask questions—in her words, “to lay them upon the altar”—without expecting definite answers.⁴⁶ “Be with the questions, love the questions,” she says. Midnight shows that we can ask important questions about our ancestors even through a single plant. How did our ancestors use the plant? What was the broader set of rituals and healing practices that the plant was part of? Did our ancestors carry the plant with them as they migrated? And who might they have collaborated with to understand the plant? Because these worlds of our ancestors were mostly destroyed by genocide and forced migration, as well as by forces of assimilation and Zionism, we shouldn’t expect clear answers to everything. But plants give us a taste of these lost worlds.

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Like Midnight, other Jewish herbalists have started following the plants to recover these destroyed worlds of Eastern European Jews. Deatra Cohen, a librarian and herbalist, felt something was missing while she was studying herbalism in Berkeley, California. Students in her class were asked to name herbal medicines used by their ancestors, but Cohen couldn’t think of any. “We have chicken soup,” another Jewish student said. Chicken soup is indeed powerful, but Cohen felt there had to be more. All peoples have developed relationships with plants—her Eastern European Jewish ancestors couldn’t possibly be the exception. Yet Cohen was never told about herbalism in the little formal Jewish education she had received, and the information wasn’t easy to come by. At the same time, she didn’t want to be “an herbal interloper, forever having to refer to

other peoples' traditions, never knowing what plant knowledge my own grandparents had relied on." So she kept digging. "Was this the ancestors urging me on? Who knows."⁴⁷

Along with her multilingual partner Adam Siegel, Cohen began excavating her ancestors' herbal traditions, focusing on the Pale of Settlement. They searched many sources—in Yiddish, Hebrew, Polish, Ukrainian, Russian, Lithuanian, and German—looking for the plants. Cohen and Siegel found that, naturally, Jews of the Pale used plants extensively for medicine and as protection from harmful forces. Like Midnight, Cohen and Siegel learned that this herbal tradition went back to the Hebrew Bible, and that, unsurprisingly, Jews in the Pale adapted this tradition to their own conditions and incorporated practices from non-Jewish neighbors.

Cohen and Siegel describe their findings in the 2021 book *Ashkenazi Herbalism*, which summarizes the uses of twenty-six different plants in the Pale.⁴⁸ Some of these were plants that Cohen knew and loved from studying herbalism but had never associated with her ancestors, such as St. John's wort (*Hypericum perforatum*). "I really had a strong pull towards that plant," she recalls.⁴⁹ Many cultures have used St. John's wort for medicinal purposes and protection from evil spirits, which is why it has been called the "perfume of God" and "flower of the Fairies."⁵⁰ In Yiddish, apparently one name for St. John's wort is *sheydim-shits*, which means "demon protection."⁵¹ In an imaginative leap, Cohen and Siegel suggest that the plant was used by Jews in the Pale to treat those "seized" by paralysis, a condition that they infer "can most definitely be linked to the idea of a possession, possibly by an imagined demon."⁵² Scientific studies appear to support this folk use of the plant. St. John's wort became popular as an "antidepressant" over recent decades, with studies claiming it is as effective as pharmaceutical drugs but has fewer side effects. These scientific studies, however, remove plants from their context and reduce them to "active ingredients." Cohen and Siegel's speculation that St. John's wort might have been called "demon protection" in Yiddish is more interesting than whether the plant passes a reductionist test for being an "antidepressant" (a test that also removes depression from its social context).⁵³ The name suggests that some Eastern European Jews believed in evil spirits and

sought protection from them. Through the plant, we can learn about this ancestral world. Even more than that, we can cultivate our own relationship with the plant by growing it, smelling it, talking to it, applying it to our bodies, and making things out of it, to check if the relationship can help us like it helped our ancestors.

Cohen and Siegel learned that many familiar herbal remedies had been used by ancestors in the Pale. Valerian, for example, was used to make “a calming tonic” (it also appears in Rosenberg’s *Rafael HaMalach*). My own Jewish great-grandmother from Poland, as my father told me, used a valerian tincture to calm down and, in case of a crisis, would say, “Quick! Where’s the valerian?!”

Inhabiting Ancestral Worlds

Building relationships with plants is a way into ancestral worlds. Checking if the plants can heal us like they did our ancestors, or recognize our bodies, goes beyond just learning about ancestral worlds as if they were something of the past.

In her book *The Jewelers of the Ummah: A Potential History of the Jewish Muslim World* (2024), Ariella Aïsha Azoulay shows how we can also touch ancestral worlds through crafts. By learning the craft of jewelry-making that her ancestors had practiced in Algeria and elsewhere in the *umma*, Azoulay is reactivating ancestral muscles. Through jewelry-making, she argues, we can “reinhabit” ancestral worlds, resisting the idea that they had been fully deleted by history. It is a struggle for wholeness, a “painful yet blissful work of reinhabiting precolonial fabrics and mending the tears where worlds, ideas, communities had been severed.”¹

In relearning these crafts, Azoulay develops a relationship with metals the same way herbalists are developing relationships with ancestral plants. These are both tangible ways to touch and feel ancestral worlds.

1. Azoulay, *The Jewelers of the Ummah*, 141.

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There are other common European herbs that aren't mentioned in *Ashkenazi Herbalism* but that also show Eastern European Jews embraced the flora around them and learned from non-Jewish healers. In the 1830s, for example, Yehuda Bezael Eliashberg of Lithuania translated into Hebrew a bestselling book of folk medicine written by German doctor Heinrich Felix Paulitzky.⁵⁴ Eliashberg gave the translation the Hebrew title *Marpeh La'am*—"Healing for the People"—and the book is full of herbs from European folk medicine. Chamomile appears tens of times for treating things like anxiety and fear, and the book even includes a recipe for "strong chamomile tea."⁵⁵ For weak eyes, the book recommends using the rue native to Europe (*Ruta graveolens*), suggesting that the person with the condition use water boiled with the plant, or alternatively, that a healthy person chew some rue and blow air on the person with the ailment.⁵⁶ Eliashberg wrote a long introduction to Paulitzky's book that gives all this plant magic a Jewish spin, arguing these healing practices are necessary for doing the "mitzvah of *pikuach nefesh*," for preserving our lives. This example further supports Cohen and Siegel's argument that Jews' healing traditions show that they were fully embedded where they lived.

***Vegblatt*, or Straying from the Path**

Ashkenazi Herbalism doesn't explore the political implications of the fact that Jews had been integrated in their Eastern European environments. Colonialism and Zionism are not discussed in the book. The authors do mention that assimilation had a role in suppressing Jewish diasporic healing traditions as Jews migrated, but without exploring the specific predicaments of Eastern European Jews who arrived in a settler-colonialist society, the United States. Yet the plants in *Ashkenazi Herbalism* seem to have a different agenda. They *do* want to address colonialism and the question of how to live in the diaspora, including in those places where Jews aren't native.

Ashkenazi Herbalism discusses *Plantago major*, commonly known as plantain, which in Yiddish is called *vegblatt*, or "road leaf."⁵⁷ The name *Plantago* was given to the plant by Carl Linnaeus,



Figure 5.8: *Vegblatt* (*Plantago*) growing in a crack in a neighborhood basketball court in Ann Arbor, Michigan.

the eighteenth-century Swedish naturalist who also produced the racist classification of humans into the “red,” “white,” “yellow,” and “black” types. *Plantago* is derived from the Latin word *planta*, meaning “sole of the foot,” because the plant’s leaves grow close to the ground. Native to Europe, *Plantago major* has been used for centuries to heal wounds and infections, and *Ashkenazi Herbalism* describes similar uses in the Pale. On Turtle Island, Indigenous people called the plant “White Man’s Footstep” because it came with European settlers.⁵⁸

But *vegblatt* didn’t act like a settler. It humbly grew where there was space, without trying to take over. In fact, *vegblatt* likes to grow in areas where the soil has been compacted from being stomped on too much. You can find it in cracks on the highway or at the edges of an urban park where the grass meets the concrete.⁵⁹ Most people step on it without noticing, and it is often classified as a “weed.” Yet *vegblatt* is there, repairing some of the damages that capitalist industrialization has done to the soil, bringing greenery to paved blandness. In Hebrew, the word *shoteh* is used for such “weeds,” which could be translated as “wandering” or “straying” from a path.⁶⁰

Plantago strays from the physical path (the highway or sidewalk) but also the ideological path prescribed by settler-colonialism.

Unlike the settlers who brought it, the plant gave of itself generously to everyone. Robin Wall Kimmerer, an ecologist and member of the Citizen Potawatomi Nation, therefore argues that *Plantago* is a model for noncolonial migration. While there was initial suspicion of a plant that came with European colonizers, Kimmerer writes that the plant's "strategy was to be useful, to fit into small places, to coexist with others around the dooryard, to heal wounds." The Natives learned of *Plantago*'s amazing qualities: Its leaves can be made into a poultice to heal burns, cuts, or insect bites, while its seeds can help digestion. "Every part of the plant is useful," she observes. Kimmerer adds that "this wise and generous plant, faithfully following the people, became an honored member of the plant community. It's a foreigner, an immigrant, but after five hundred years of living as a good neighbor, people forget that kind of thing."⁶¹

The plants that served our ancestors, then, can also be guides for liberation struggles on Turtle Island, where the great majority of Jews are not Native.

Plants as Guides to *Doikayt* on Turtle Island

The Jews who moved to Turtle Island from Eastern Europe in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries found themselves in a settler-colonial society built on slavery, genocide, and continued efforts to eliminate Native ways of living. For these immigrants and their descendants, there was always the prescribed path: assimilate, climb up the class ladder, and identify with American empire (and later, Zionism when it aligned with US interests). There was also the alternative of *doikayt*: building solidarity with other marginalized groups to fight for everyone's liberation. Today, the descendants of Eastern European Jews are again asking how to live by *doikayt*—and the plants are proving to be useful guides.

L. B. Moore was already working with plants for years when they received a copy of the book *Ashkenazi Herbalism*. Moore is of a younger generation than herbalist Dori Midnight but lives in the same area of Western Massachusetts, the lands of the Nipmuc and Pocumtuc, where there is a community of queer and anti-Zionist



Figure 5.9: "The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants" by Anna Zeligowski.

Jews who wish to unlearn settler-colonial ways of living and who often seek herbal medicine. Moore had struggled with chronic illnesses that doctors had nothing to offer for, and herbalism became the alternative. “I was finding relief and an experience of well-being that was significantly more rooted, embodied, and holistic than the various failed or misaligned medical treatments that had been thrown my way.” Moore picked up *Ashkenazi Herbalism* and randomly flipped to the page describing *Plantago major*. “I just burst into tears,” Moore recalls. “It answered something in me that I hadn’t even known was a question before.”⁶²

Moore had already cultivated a relationship with *Plantago* for years. It was an “ally,” as Moore puts it, that had helped with digestive issues, among other things. *Plantago* is native to the places of Moore’s ancestors (Jews from the Pale on one side of the family, Irish people on the other), and Moore even got a *Plantago* tattoo to honor this plantcestor. “Our cells recognize each other,” Moore says. They view *Plantago* as “an incredible teacher” for how to live on land “that isn’t your ancestral land and participate as a contributor and part of the web, and not as an imperialist, not as a colonist.” And there *Plantago* was, described in *Ashkenazi Herbalism* to be modestly growing on highways in the Pale, as it does on Turtle Island, and in heaps of refuse. Moore now considers the friendship with *Plantago* as an expression of a “radically loving,” diasporic way of being that non-Native Jews on Turtle Island should embrace.⁶³

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On the other coast of Turtle Island, Jews are also looking to plants for inspiration on how to not live as colonizers. One example is the group Jews On Ohlone Land (JOOL), founded in 2019 by Rabbi Dev Noily and activist Ariel Luckey, in the East Bay of the San Francisco Bay Area, which is part of the ancestral land of the Ohlone peoples. JOOL seeks to educate Jews about settler-colonialism and integrate Jewish traditions into local decolonization efforts led by Native activists. JOOL’s work is about wholeness—or as the group’s purpose statement puts it, about “living as whole people in the diaspora” by “building beloved Jewish community in alignment with this place and Indigenous people.”⁶⁴

Some JOOL members say they aspire to be like *Plantago major*: good and helpful guests on Indigenous lands, so that maybe in a few hundred years, they will blend seamlessly into the Native landscape.⁶⁵ Other JOOL members find inspiration for practicing *doikayt* in the Chinese magnolias that grow today in Huichin (the stretch of Ohlone land that includes Berkeley and Oakland, California). These magnolias weren't native to the land but found a niche to inhabit and adapted to the local conditions—now their beautiful blooms signal early spring. “Where are the places that we can find and make home and offer back something of beauty?” a JOOL member asks.⁶⁶

But how could non-Native Jews be “good guests” on Indigenous land, like the plants, when they (and often their ancestors) have materially benefited from settler-colonialism? When, in practice, the state has made them into settlers?

JOOL approaches these questions as *teshuva*, a Jewish tradition where we account for the harms we are responsible for, or implicated in, and act accordingly. The group's logo features a shofar—the ram's horn that is blown on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur, the holidays where *teshuva* traditionally takes place—alongside a cedar branch. Cedar (*erez* in Hebrew), as Dori Midnight explained to JOOL, was used to build King Solomon's Temple and was also burned as a purifying incense at the entrance. “Cedar helps us release what gets in the way of remembering the exquisite miracle of our bodies and opens the way for spiritual connection,” as she puts it.⁶⁷ This spiritual connection is necessary for the hard work of *teshuva*, which in this colonial context must have material consequences.

JOOL focuses on giving land back to Native peoples, along with reparations. It pursues this work in close partnership with the Sogorea Te' Land Trust, a nonprofit organization led by the influential Ohlone activist Corrina Gould. Since the Ohlones have no reservations or federally recognized tribes, Gould views the land trust as “a tool” for acquiring ancestral land and protecting it from becoming property on the market.⁶⁸ Sogorea Te' uses the land to create community gardens and revitalize Ohlone traditions, including the use of Chochenyo, one of the Ohlone languages. In collaboration with

JOOL cofounder Ariel Luckey, Sogorea Te' developed the Shuumi land tax—a payment that non-Native people living on Ohlone land are asked to make.⁶⁹ JOOL views the payment of Shuumi as a key expression of *teshuva*. The group also added an acorn, a traditional food of California Natives, to the Pesach seder plate as a reminder of the obligations to the local Indigenous people. “The acorn on the seder plate,” writes JOOL cofounder Rabbi Noily, “asks how our ancestral story is reflected in, and contrasted to Indigenous experience, how our liberation empowers us and obligates us as accomplices in rematriating the land where we live, and what it means to live as good guests here.” The Shuumi tax promoted by JOOL became popular with many activists who encourage non-Natives living in the area to pay the tax (although Sogorea Te' emphasizes that simply making payments doesn't absolve anyone from complicity in settler-colonialism). Sogorea Te' has been widely held up as a model for decolonization initiatives that invite non-Native people to participate.

But this model has limitations that reveal how difficult it is to confront our complicity in settler-colonialism and seek repair. Gabriel Duncan, a Native historian and activist, argues that there is a crucial difference between a nonprofit organization headed by a Native person (such as Sogorea Te') and a tribal organization. He claims that Sogorea Te' misleads people into thinking that it represents local Ohlone tribes or that the Shuumi tax goes to these tribes—or that at the very least, Sogorea Te' benefits from such false impressions.⁷⁰ Charlene Nijmeh, chairwoman of the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe—the largest Ohlone tribe, with over six hundred enrolled members—also argues that the Shuumi tax doesn't benefit her people and that a single Native activist (in this case, Gould) “is not a Tribal government.”⁷¹ These disputes unfold as the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe fights for land and a reinstatement of their federal recognition.

By partnering with Sogorea Te' and promoting Shuumi, JOOL efforts at *doikayt* can be part of the problem. “Organizations like JOOL are wearing the Shuumi Land Tax like an armor that absolves them of doing the hard work of reparations, or examining the settler-colonial mindset, or how their actions can lead to more

settler-colonial violence, unintentionally,” Duncan says. “We know that they mean well, but it’s the effect we look at. There can be a whole group of Ohlone people shoved into the darkness as a result, being subject to erasure from their own people.”⁷²

Non-Native activists may wish to avoid getting in the middle of these conflicts. Centuries of settler-colonialism and genocide have created enough internal divisions, especially around Indigenous recognition, so why add fuel to the fire? But allying with one Native group means taking a side, as JOOL acknowledges. JOOL says it partnered with Sogorea Te’ because it had a good relationship with Gould and shared her political vision.⁷³ On the other side, Duncan urges that non-Native groups seeking real collaboration “must listen to a broader spectrum of Native voices.” He takes us to the same place as Dori Midnight—the place of the questions. “The most important thing is to ask questions,” he says. “Ask the hard questions. Ask who benefits, who is consulted, where is the money going. And remember that good intentions aren’t substitutes for good relationships. Real allyship means building trust across entire communities and not just individuals.”⁷⁴

As a Jewish group asking questions about US settler-colonialism, it would be hard to avoid Zionism, given the links between the two settler-colonial projects. In fact, research from the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe compares the erasure of the Ohlones to the “Israeli-fication” of Palestine: how Israel renamed the geography to erase Native history.⁷⁵ This comparison was suggested by Les Field, an anthropology professor and Muwekma’s tribal ethnohistorian, who is also an anti-Zionist Jew for whom the settler-colonial projects in Turtle Island and Palestine are “not strictly separable.”⁷⁶ And yet, JOOL has avoided talking about Israel. The group hoped to get synagogues and Zionist groups such as Hillel to confront settler-colonialism where they live and thought that being openly critical of Israel would interfere. Luckey, JOOL’s cofounder, believes it was anyhow easy for many to make the connection themselves once they heard about Native dispossession on Turtle Island. He also says JOOL is essentially creating “an alternative to Zionism” and “even an alternative to diasporism, because being diasporic is still referential back to the Holy Land, back to Palestine,” whereas

JOOL is “actually trying to be present” in their local environment. However, after the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation of October 7, 2023, and Israel’s subsequent genocidal war on Gaza, it became much harder to avoid the subject. JOOL’s main collaborator, Sogorea Te’, made public statements of solidarity with Palestine. This made JOOL reconsider its position—not because it felt an obligation to do so as a Jewish group or because it was now ready to embrace anti-Zionism given the genocide in Palestine, but because it felt obligated to follow the lead of its Native partner.⁷⁷

It is a good time to reground ourselves by asking, What would the plants do? Would the plants that have inspired JOOL to try to be “good guests” on stolen land distinguish between the two settler-colonial projects simply because they are on different continents? The plants, after all, know how far settlers’ feet can carry them. And is it possible to truly fight against one colonial project while ignoring the other? There has been much discussion so far of “hereness” versus “thereness,” but isn’t the distinction between “here” and “there” somewhat artificial in a world so connected by imperial conquest and the pursuit of profit? Or more precisely, to be fully present here, don’t we also have to address what’s happening there?

Reclaiming Herbalism

Plants can nourish those who are asking such hard questions and trying to build true solidarity, despite the contradictions and difficulties. Yet it requires moving away from the colonial Western model of herbalism in which plants are resources to be extracted. It also means making herbalism accessible—reclaiming it as a people’s medicine—which isn’t easy to do in a capitalist world. But here again, the plants can be guides. The plants help herbalists find their own ancestral healing traditions, so they connect with other traditions in a nonextractive way. They also model what it means to relate to others through mutual aid and reciprocity.

For Dori Midnight, the point of herbalism was never to create a cookbook of herbs, divorced from ancestral uses and political context, so that people with money can have another luxury health

commodity. Midnight had trained with Karyn Sanders, an herbalist with Choctaw and Jewish ancestry whose approach emphasizes listening to and learning from the plants. The Jewish traditions of plant magic that Midnight was tapping into had also directed her toward the importance of building relationships.

The ancestral practices she had found were, in her words, “embodied,” “relational,” and “reciprocal.” They were “life affirming and built in kinship.” They were “full of liberatory potential and impulses.” The plants weren’t treated as carriers of active ingredients. People developed relationships with plants. The plants also offered another way for Jews to adapt to their natural surroundings and exchange knowledge with neighbors. This is evidenced by the diversity of Jewish plant magic, which reflects the great diversity of Jewish communities across time and place—in contrast to the myth, promoted by Zionism, of a monolithic Jewish people, set in their ways, who could never truly be part of anything and therefore need their own separate territory. In other words, the tradition of plant magic was pointing toward *doikayt*. This message is so obvious to Midnight that she says she “can flow right from talking about cedar and garlic to talking about how this [herbalism] work is very much a part of resisting, undoing empire, and specifically Zionism.”⁷⁸

A key part of resistance is using herbalism to nourish those who have been harmed by oppressive systems. Midnight, for example, has developed herbal protocols for supporting trans people who are receiving gender-affirming care, including surgery or hormone replacement therapy. The premise of Midnight’s guidelines is that the capitalist medical system has pathologized trans people and others who deviate from the sex/gender binary (as we have seen in chapter 2). She points out that given the record of the medical establishment, and given that health care is often inaccessible to already marginalized people, “it is easy to see why many trans folks choose not to engage with [the] health care system at all.” Moreover, since little is known about the long-term effects of things like hormone replacement therapy, Midnight argues it is critical to develop affordable ways to cope with whatever comes, through herbs, nutrition, and rituals that are based in liberation,

not medicalization. “As herbalists,” she writes, “we are in the unique position of offering holistic care and education to individuals in a manner that honors the whole person.”⁷⁹

Midnight suggests a variety of herbal and nutritional supports for different stages of gender-affirming care, noting their physiological effects and contraindications. Her suggestions include some favorite plants of the Pale, such as *sheydim-shits* (St. John’s wort) for healing postsurgery bruises, garlic to help prevent infections, and valerian to boost adrenal health. Even if the context is very different, in Midnight’s work, we can also find echoes of the *segulot* promoted by Eastern European Jewish healers such as Rabbi Yehuda Yudel Rosenberg. For those about to have gender-affirming surgery that removes parts of the body, for instance, Midnight recommends having a parting ritual, reminiscent of Rosenberg’s ritual for parting with an ailment by removing parts of ourselves (like the nails when we say goodbye to a fever). “Write [a] letter, go to the ocean, have a bonfire, have a farewell party/funeral, bury something, plant a tree,” Midnight writes in her presurgery suggestions. “Let it go. Honor your scars.”⁸⁰ But she doesn’t forget the whole: Beyond rituals and herbs, she says you also need good music and a support network of friends.

Midnight recognizes that it’s not easy to make these healing practices accessible to everyone, especially those most squeezed for time and money. Much of herbalism practice takes place in one-on-one consultations, which are expensive and obviously take time. Midnight and other radical herbalists use a sliding scale for payments, or even barter instead of taking money, to make the relationship less capitalist. “Even though I’m not like a village-sustained witch, you know, I have been paid in chickens,” Midnight says. But it’s not perfect; a consultation with Midnight is expensive, even on the low end of the sliding scale. A long time ago, practitioners like her would have been supported by the community in which they lived, the way midwives were (as discussed in chapter 1). But those communal support structures have been mostly destroyed.

Yet Midnight says she still feels like a community-supported healer. Even the consultations are communal to her, and never really “one-on-one.” In each session, she senses the presence of

many: not only the person she is seeing but also that person's ancestors and web of support, along with her own ancestors and web of support—and of course, the plants. Midnight is carried by all those webs. “Sometimes I have this feeling, when I’m in a community space, or even when I’m working one-on-one, where I imagine my death,” she says. “I imagine that, when I die, I’ll be tended to and sung to, as I’m dying—like the community or the descendants of the communities in which I served, they’re the ones who are gonna sing to me as I’m dying and like throw flowers into the hole in which I’m buried. I can feel the circle of that.”⁸¹

Herbalism Without Borders

Once grounded in their own ancestral traditions, radical herbalists can learn from one another's traditions in a noncolonial way: through collaboration and sharing, in service of common goals, rather than for extractive purposes. This allows the herbalists to become more like the plants themselves in their way of being. But if we examine the traditions that are being shared, we find recurring plants and similar wisdoms. These commonalities are due to the plants themselves, who in their generous way ignore all the artificial divisions made by humans.

The work of herbalist and anarchist Nicole Rose provides powerful examples of how to share herbal traditions, in the service of liberation, without treating them as commodities. In 2018, Rose founded the Solidarity Apothecary in England, whose goal is to “materially support revolutionary struggles and communities with plant medicines.” Much of this work has been about supporting prisoners and their loved ones from state violence. Rose got into herbalism while in prison herself (for organizing around animal liberation), where she learned about plants from other imprisoned women, and she has since been collecting herbal medicine for state violence.⁸² These include herbal remedies for calming down after a police raid, coping with trauma after incarceration, and being resilient when visiting incarcerated loved ones. Rose shared this knowledge through books, podcasts, classes, zines, and care packages sent to those in need. She has also been part of free mobile

herbal clinics that aim to support migrants seeking asylum in northern Europe who suffer from the difficult journey and from police violence upon entry. “Herbalism,” Rose writes, “is a beautiful offering to help tend to people’s frightened hearts, exhausted bodies and fractured spirits when they are enduring repression.”⁸³

Rose builds on her own ancestral English, Welsh, and Irish healing traditions while acknowledging how, due to British imperialism, these traditions have sometimes been suppressed and at other times “forcibly integrated with colonial medicine, stolen and appropriated knowledge from Indigenous and traditional peoples on multiple continents.” Just as Jewish radical herbalists are reviving their traditions, Rose is reawakening her own ancestors’ healing traditions and bringing them into liberation struggles. Her book *Herbalism and State Violence* (2024) explains her approach to radical herbalism while also compiling stories and recipes from herbalists across different traditions.

Herbalism and State Violence confirms that different peoples’ ways of coping are ultimately quite similar. The book is filled with herbs that have been used across the world, for overlapping purposes, by generations of healers: chamomile, valerian, St. John’s wort, plantain (*Plantago major*), turmeric, lavender, and many more. For example, an Indigenous organizer who had been part of the movement against oil pipelines on Turtle Island shares herbal recipes for treating eyes that have been tear gassed by police and for a salve “to soothe forest defenders,” which make use of *Plantago major* and St. John’s wort. The book’s recipes also confirm the power of seemingly mundane herbs that have been emphasized in old folk healing guides. Chamomile, for instance, as Rose writes, can “tune your nervous system down and help cope with capitalism”—and as a tea, it is “instantly calming” (just like nineteenth-century Jewish healers from the Pale had recognized).⁸⁴ And because it’s so common, chamomile is a highly practical remedy; as Rose says, “You may even be able to get the tea in the police station itself!”

The message that emerges from these diverse efforts at radical herbalism, when considered as a whole, is that the plants are for liberation. Or as Rose puts it, when reflecting on her time in prison: “I ultimately knew that we weren’t alone. The animals were on

our side. The plants were on our side. They're not on the side of the state. Why on earth would they be on the side of an oppressor who destroys their habitats and destroys their communities and pollutes their land and their water? If we tap into that strength, then we really are never alone."⁸⁵

To tap into the strength, we need to build nonextractive relationships with plants, which, as Rose argues, would also require abandoning capitalist agriculture and instead embracing agroecology (as discussed in chapter 4).⁸⁶

And if we need a reminder that it's possible to build beautiful and diverse worlds based on mutual aid, without any centralized authority, Rose encourages us to just explore the plants around us. The plants and their allies are constantly building robust systems through interdependence. Their way leads to systems that are far more resilient than human-engineered systems, which are usually nonadaptive and brittle. "Plants to me are the original anti-capitalists," as Rose puts it. "They give generously and abundantly, and they don't charge you for their services."⁸⁷ Maybe we could organize ourselves more like plants.

A major obstacle, however, is the never-ending pursuit of technology, which crushes people's creative and spiritual capacities and severs their links to the earth.

6

Anything Is Possible

Shekhinah Against the Machines

We cannot know what it was to learn to hear the plants grow, and to feel the growth. We cannot know what it was to feel the seed in the womb and learn to feel the seed in earth's womb, to feel as Earth feels, and at last to abandon oneself and let Earth possess one, to become Earth, to become the first mother of all life. We're truly poor. Thousands of generations of vision, insight and experience have been erased.

—Fredy Perlman

*Don't look for me where myrtles grow green,
You will not find me there, my love.
Where lives wither at the machines,
There is my resting place.*

—“Mayn rue plats” (My resting place),
a Yiddish poem by Morris Rosenfeld

Must liberation from one oppressive system lead to its replacement with another? Or is there another way? What would it mean to allow the holiness in every being to flourish, freed from all forms of domination?

The Torah touches on these perennial questions. As the Israelites wander in the desert after being liberated from slavery, feeling the hardships of the journey, they begin to question whether this is really freedom. Had they been misled? An Israelite named Korach and 250 others decide to challenge their “leaders,” Moses and his brother Aaron. They tell Moses and Aaron, “You have gone

too far! For all the community are holy, all of them, and Hashem [the name, or God] is in their midst. Why then do you raise yourselves above Hashem's congregation?"¹ This challenge is based on the understanding that the *shekhinah*, the earthly manifestation of the sacred, dwells in every person. If holiness dwells in all, then why are the masses being dominated by the few?

We are not supposed to side with the rebels in this story. Traditional interpretations take Korach to be a power-hungry charlatan who simply wanted Moses's position for himself, even though this reading is unfounded. Korach never speaks as an individual, and the collective he is part of never proposes another leader. The collective only says that the current way of doing things doesn't honor the *shekhinah*. The challenge was valid; perhaps Moses knew so, because when he heard it, he "fell upon his face."² After all, Moses and Aaron were chosen by God, not the people. God was also responsible for much of the suffering of the Israelites. God had deliberately "hardened" Pharaoh's heart so that liberation would become a prolonged spectacle, an opportunity for God to exercise power, with Moses serving as the messenger. God was angry that this system was now under attack and made the earth open and swallow Korach and the other dissidents up, along with their kin and possessions. The remaining fire pans of the rebels were then made into plating for the altar—literally a tribute to the centralized authority that is God.

Korach's challenge raises the possibility that God was the villain, with Moses and the priestly leaders the real power-hungry charlatans. Korach might have been trying to get the people to organize more like plants. Some have said that berries grew in the spot where the earth swallowed up Korach, and one obscure Yiddish proverb even takes Korach's name to be an acronym for cherries, radishes, and horseradish.³ Maybe the plants were honoring the Korach collective for wanting to live more like them, through mutual aid, without leaders or bosses.

The writer and printer Fredy Perlman sided with Korach. Like the biblical figure, he insisted that hierarchies can be toppled so that the sacred spirit in everyone can thrive. Born in Czechoslovakia in 1934, Fredy had narrowly escaped extermination by the

Nazis, finding refuge in Bolivia before moving to the US. He wanted to understand the harms of Western industrialized society and to find alternatives grounded in love of the earth and a belief in people's creative capacities to self-organize. As a child survivor, Fredy came to view the Holocaust not as an aberration but as an acute symptom of genocidal Western civilization that was made possible by technology. For him, the Holocaust's important lesson was that all forms of domination should be destroyed. He thought Jews should embrace their history of living as a minority that, in his words, "had refused to be absorbed" into the ways of the state.⁴ Fredy didn't believe in authoritarian movements, even if their Moses was a self-styled revolutionary.

With his wife, Lorraine Perlman, and other accomplices, Fredy experimented with nonhierarchical forms of organizing through cooperatives and radical publishing. These were efforts to unchain human creativity, despite capitalist society, and to transmit the struggle to new generations. The Perlmans formed alliances with other radical organizations while always trying to free the spirit from ideological conformity and rigidity.

The Perlmans' cooperative efforts are beautiful experiments in *doikayt*, in cultivating solidarity and community. But Fredy knew that to truly find alternative ways of living, we had to reconnect with more ancient ancestral ways—to make contact, as he writes, with "the source of life, Being itself."⁵ For this he drew inspiration in part from the Torah and also from Native peoples, first in Bolivia, where he had been a refugee, and later in the Great Lakes region, where he and Lorraine had moved. Native ways, coupled with a radical interpretation of the Holocaust and the record of Jewish minority life, held enormous radical potential. This combination made Fredy think that we could make a different world, that anything is possible.

"Death-Science" and the Lesson of the Holocaust

Sometimes we can only understand an experience we've had long after the fact. Years later, events of the present may give that experience new meaning, even a burning relevance. We may suddenly

look back and realize that the experience had shaped us in ways we didn't know; that it was there all along, in our perceptions and actions. The realization can lead us to tell entirely different stories about history. The past will awaken. We will change our views of ourselves and others, including our ancestors, which may lead us to plan differently for the future. The past is therefore never past, and time doesn't flow only in one direction.

It took decades for Fredy to understand the most significant experience of his life: narrowly escaping death in a Nazi camp. His life after was one of dislocation: becoming a refugee in Bolivia, then an "immigrant" in the US, and eventually, a rebel against industrialized society. With dislocation came a desire for wholeness, for regrounding in the ways of life that were being destroyed by Western civilization and its worship of science and technology.

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Fredy was born in Brno, Czechoslovakia, in 1934 to Martha Grünberg and Henry Perlman. The family spoke Czech at home, but Henry also knew Yiddish (his father had emigrated to Czechoslovakia from Poland). Henry was a moderately successful businessman, and the family was not observant. In 1939, Martha and Henry decided it was time to leave. They were right. About a month after they left, the Nazis invaded Czechoslovakia.⁶ When Hitler and his troops marched through Brno in March 1939, some of the German Czech residents greeted them with a *Sieg Heil* salute. In 1941, the Nazis created the Theresienstadt concentration camp, north of Prague, where over 140,000 Jews would eventually be rounded up and sent for extermination. They also used the site to create propaganda: The Nazi film *The Führer Gives a City to the Jews* presented Theresienstadt as a resort town for Jews, a nice place to retire.

When Martha and Henry decided to go, they sewed money into their clothes and boarded the train with their children, Fredy and his younger brother, Peter.⁷ They later took a boat from France to Panama, where Fredy's father was sold a visa to Bolivia. Cochabamba became their new home. Fredy's father, however, had



Figure 6.1: Adolf Hitler and his troops in Brno, Czechoslovakia, the birth-place of Fredy Perlman, on March 17, 1939. The sign in the background reads, “We thank our Führer.” Source: United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

wanted to go to the US; Lorraine tells that “Bolivia was not the ‘America’” he was seeking.⁸ But the US didn’t open its doors to people fleeing the Nazis. The immigration quotas of the 1920s, justified by the idea that certain foreigners would contaminate the great white blood of the nation, severely limited visas. In 1938, for example, more than three hundred thousand German citizens were waiting for visas to the US, but the next year only about twenty-seven thousand applications were approved (the rate was much lower, sometimes zero, for those coming from places considered inferior to Germany).⁹ It is clear who suffered disproportionately from these policies: In 1939–1940, at least 50 percent of all US visa applicants were Jewish. And while Bolivia was accepting Jewish refugees in the late 1930s, by 1940, Jewish visas were officially suspended.¹⁰ The Perlman family had arrived just in time.

In Cochabamba, the family lived among other refugees but also interacted with the Quechua natives, who would have a major impact on Fredy's views. In 1945, the family was finally able to move to the US. Fredy went to college at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), and the University of Kentucky, and later graduate school at Columbia University. At Columbia, he met Lorraine Nybakken, the daughter of midwestern church-going professors who had tried to preserve their Norwegian ancestral traditions.¹¹ Fredy and Lorraine would become lifelong partners in struggle.

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Fredy never fully assimilated. Lorraine recalls that he would still sing Czech songs with his parents. Unlike his younger brother, he wouldn't happily accept being "American." As a newcomer to the US, however, Fredy was too busy trying to be the "good" hardworking immigrant to process what he had been through. "Study hard," was what his parents told him. "The implied motivation was: God forbid you should become a clerk or factory worker! Become something other: a professional or a manager."¹² In college, he started thinking critically about Jewish history while also getting radicalized by fighting anticommunist censorship on UCLA's campus as a student journalist.¹³ During the 1960s, Fredy continued reflecting on his own path, through the Adolf Eichmann trial, the Vietnam War, and the discussions among Jews in the US about their relationship to Israel (especially after 1967, when the Zionist state began occupying the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, the Sinai of Egypt, and the Jawlan of Syria).

It was only in his late forties that Fredy crystallized his understanding of things, in an article titled "Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom." It appeared in the Fall 1982 issue of *Fifth Estate*, a Detroit leftist newspaper, after Israel's invasion of Lebanon, which led to the massacres in the Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila.¹⁴ "Beirut Pogrom" is clearly a reference to the massacres, but Fredy barely discusses Lebanon in the piece. He instead reflects on his childhood in Bolivia, the Holocaust, Jewish history, Zionism, and the Vietnam War, mostly letting readers connect the dots for themselves.

Fredy begins with that decisive month that kept him from death. “A month more and I, too, would have been one of those who actually underwent the rationally-planned scientific extermination of human beings, the central experience of so many people in an age of highly developed science and productive forces,” he writes. What is the meaning of having survived? And what is the Holocaust’s message for humanity, if any? He couldn’t find good answers when he was busy trying to make it in the US:

Once in America, I had no use for my experience of narrowly escaping a Nazi concentration camp; the experience couldn’t help me climb the ladder toward Paradise and might even hinder me; my hurried climb might have been slowed considerably or even stopped altogether if I had tried to empathize with the condition of the labor camp inmate I might have become, for I would have realized what it was that made the prospect of factory work so fearsome: it differed from the other condition in that there were no gas chambers and in that the factory worker spent only his weekdays inside.¹⁵

Fredy came to realize that the Nazi Holocaust wasn’t exceptional—that the regimes sold to us as “civilization” had routinely applied what he called “Death-Science” to eliminate those deemed disposable. The America he emigrated to was built on the genocide of millions of Indigenous peoples and on slavery. Over one million kidnapped Africans died just on the way to the so-called New World as part of the slave trade. There were not one but many holocausts.

Fredy thought that if being a survivor of the Nazi Holocaust meant anything, it was that all forms of domination should be dismantled. The tragedy is that not all survivors felt that way, as Fredy knew from his own family. An uncle who survived a Nazi camp, Fredy writes, “wanted nothing more than to forget the Pogrom and everything associated with it; he wanted only to climb the rungs of America; he wanted to look and sound and act no differently from other Americans.”¹⁶ Most family members adopted

the same attitude. Many also became supporters of the state of Israel, even though Fredy remembers that most of the family was confused by the enthusiasm that American Jews showed “for a distant State.” The overtly racist family members resolved that confusion; they taught Fredy that this enthusiasm was based on “racial solidarity”—or simply, racism. “I thought racial solidarity was something confined to Nazis, Afrikaners and American Southerners,” he recalls. It turned out it wasn’t.

The 1961 trial of Adolf Eichmann further clarified matters for Fredy, as the Nazi regime and its methods of extermination came under public scrutiny. The US and other states could respond with indignation. They could portray Eichmann’s operation as a monstrous exception to Western civilization. But was it?

Family dynamics helped Fredy navigate this question as well. He had an aunt who chose to stay in the Andes rather than emigrate to the US. Unlike some other family members, she respected her Quechua neighbors (though not enough to learn their language, Fredy notes). When she visited with family who had moved to the US, they talked about an uncle who survived a Nazi camp and later moved to Israel, where he died shortly thereafter. The younger generations in the family were told that he died in a car accident, but the aunt from the Andes corrected the record: He had killed himself. Apparently, he had survived the camp by working as a technician, “applying chemical science to the operation of the gas chambers.”¹⁷ Once this fact became public, Fredy speculates, the uncle couldn’t bear being seen as a Nazi collaborator. Fredy’s initial reaction was repulsion: How could someone aid in gassing their own people? But later, he came to find “moral integrity” in the uncle’s suicide. Fredy felt that his uncle’s act stood in contrast to American soldiers who were “returning from the Far East and affirming their deeds, actually boasting of the unnatural atrocities they had inflicted on their fellow human beings.”¹⁸

The US bombed Vietnam with napalm, an invention of Harvard University scientists that had been tested in another US colony, Puerto Rico. It sprayed Agent Orange, a toxic defoliant that destroyed plant life and deformed generations of babies. American soldiers raped and massacred the Vietnamese people (including

children) and burned their villages to the ground. By the time the Americans left, they had killed one to two million people, created five to six million refugees, and exploded fourteen million tons of bombs that left scars on the land.¹⁹ Was this so different from what the Nazis had done?

This application of American “Death-Science,” Fredy now understood, was really a continuation of an older colonial war. It wasn’t a coincidence that the US military called parts of Vietnam “Indian Country” and that it had operation names such as “Crazy Horse,” lifted directly from battles fought against Native peoples on Turtle Island.²⁰ Vietnam was yet another war of the civilized white man against the so-called savages. A US Army general said he was fighting “termites” in Vietnam, pests to be exterminated, while another US official said that the Vietnamese peasant “develops only slightly beyond the level of an American six-year-old,” that these people were “ridden by superstition, incapable of distinguishing between truth and falsehood, except at the most primitive level.”²¹ This was the usual justification for enacting genocide through the use of Death-Science. As Fredy puts it,

The trick of declaring war against the armed resistance and then attacking the resisters’ unarmed kin as well as the surrounding population with the most gruesome products of Death-Science—this trick is not new. American Pioneers were pioneers in this too; they made it standard practice to declare war on indigenous warriors and then to murder and burn villages with only women and children in them. This is already modern war, what we know as war against civilian populations; it has also been called, more candidly, mass murder or genocide.²²

With this justification in place, American soldiers had a history of homegrown brutality to draw from. They would sever the ears of Vietnamese corpses and put them up on antennas as trophies, just like whites in the US South took teeth and other body parts as trophies from the bodies of the Black people they had lynched.²³

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It wasn't simply that these atrocities were on par with what the Nazis had done, but that the American tradition of brutality directly inspired the Nazi regime. In *Mein Kampf*, Adolf Hitler praises the US as the exemplary racial state.²⁴ The US had eugenics laws since the early twentieth century that led to the sterilization of thousands deemed "unfit," and Hitler passed similar laws shortly after coming into power.²⁵ In fact, the US was in some ways stricter on race: It had used the "one-drop rule" to determine who was Black, while the Nazis officially required at least a couple of Jewish grandparents for someone to be considered a Jew.²⁶ Moreover, to implement their Death-Science, the Nazis turned to American technologies. IBM had provided the Nazis with Hollerith machines, which used punch cards to keep track of camp prisoners, encoding attributes like their labor skills and whether a prisoner was a "Jew" or "gay" (these machines had been used in the US earlier to criminalize and discriminate against Black people); in 1937, IBM's president received a medal from Hitler for these services.²⁷ When the German army needed vehicles, it turned to Ford Motor Company, whose founder, Henry Ford, was a Hitler supporter who wrote of the dangers posed to white civilization by the "International Jew" (in 1938, he also received the Nazi medal). Meanwhile, Ford's German subsidiary company made use of slave laborers kidnapped by the Nazis, including children.²⁸ So could the US claim moral superiority over the Nazis now, when Eichmann was on trial? And what about the state that was trying Eichmann—could it claim the moral high ground?

The irony that Fredy notes in his "Beirut Pogrom" article is that many American Jews admired in the state of Israel exactly those features of nation-states that made the Nazi Holocaust possible. They admired, he writes, "the crusading nationalism that considered the humanity surrounding it as nothing but obstacles to its flowering"; "the industrial potency of the Race that had succeeded in denaturing the desert and making it bloom"; "the technological sophistication of the instruments of death themselves, infinitely superior to that of the Nazis"; and, "the bully militarism that pitted the latest inventions of life-killing Science against a motley

collection of weapons, and exacted a hundred or a thousand times the losses it sustained.”²⁹

What Fredy picks up on here is that the Zionist movement had embraced the ideologies and tools of anti-Jewish European imperialists. They had a shared goal: getting the Jews to leave Europe. Zionists had even hosted Eichmann in Palestine in 1937 to assess the viability of forced Jewish emigration. The idea had been formalized in the earlier *Haavara* (Transfer) Agreement between Nazi Germany and Zionist leaders, which allowed propertied German Jews to leave on the condition that they settle in Palestine and that their money would be used to buy German goods (thus breaking the campaign at the time to create an international boycott of German products). Some Zionist leaders had even met with Nazi race theorists and exchanged notes on racial science.³⁰ The state of Israel that was established in 1948 became another *Herrenvolk* state, built against the native non-Jewish Palestinians but also creating a racial hierarchy for Jews.³¹

Through Israel, Fredy learned the bitter truth: that racist ideologies and Death-Science became seductive even to those who had been their victims. In his words, “It’s as if the experience of being a victim gave exemption from human solidarity, as if it gave special powers, as if it gave a license to kill.”³² The images in Fredy’s “Beirut Pogrom” piece in the *Fifth Estate* make this point vivid. There are side-by-side photographs of Jews arrested by the Nazis after the Warsaw ghetto uprising, US soldiers with bound and blindfolded Vietnamese men suspected of being part of the National Liberation Front (known to Americans by the pejorative name “Viet Cong”), and Israeli soldiers with bound and blindfolded Palestinian men suspected of being active in the Palestine Liberation Organization. The caption reads, “Armed opponents of the nation state are always called ‘terrorists.’”³³

Fredy could now clearly see that Zionism was a betrayal of Jewish traditions. He came to view staunchly Zionist Jews as “assimilationists” who “wanted a State dominated by a Race ever so thinly disguised as a religion, a State that would not be something altogether different, but exactly the same as America and the other states in the Family of Nations.”³⁴ He compares these Zionists to

the subset of conversos in fifteenth-century Spain who joined the Inquisition and persecuted other Jews who didn't accept Christianity. But instead of worshipping Christianity, Zionists worshipped the industrialized state, built with Death-Science on the ruins of Indigenous life. Like the earlier conversos, these new Zionist "conversos" chose assimilation into the ways of the state. In doing so, they abandoned "the long-preserved and carefully guarded specificities of a cultural [Jewish] minority that had refused to be absorbed," Fredy writes. "The dream of these racist Conversos was repulsive to me," he concludes.

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This new understanding made Fredy reinterpret his childhood in Bolivia and his family's relationship to the Natives. He says that he had always viewed the Quechua positively, but he now realized that he had spoken to them in "the Conquistador's language," Spanish. He also remembers a racist family member who thought the Quechua were "dirty and primitive." Years later, this relative "chose to be a rooter for the State of Israel, at which time she did not renounce her contempt toward the Quechuas; on the contrary, she then applied her contempt toward people in other parts of the world, people she had never met or been among."³⁵ Having survived the Nazi Holocaust didn't lead this relative to side with the Natives, but quite the opposite.

It was tragic, because the two communities—Jewish refugees from Europe and the Quechua—had something important in common. Both were victims of European racism and imperialism, albeit in different forms. And learning from both communities was necessary. Native ways of life were an appealing alternative to capitalism and the continual plunder of the earth, while the record of Jews as a minority experienced in preserving its own ways and refusing those of the state held important lessons too.

Shekhinah Against Leviathan

Adolf Eichmann's defense at his trial was that he was only following orders, just a cog in the Nazi machine. There was some truth

to it. Eichmann wasn't exceptional; he was the product of a society that trained people to obey hierarchies. That society created institutions that operated like destructive machines, dominating people and the earth. If you take out one cog, one Eichmann, the machine still runs. Fredy thought the goal should be to destroy these machines so that we can reconnect with what he called "the source of Being," or what we could call *shekhinah* (the earth-dwelling manifestation of the divine). To destroy these machines, it would help to understand how they're justified. And behind every oppressive machine, there is Leviathan.

English philosopher Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) uses the term "Leviathan" to describe the authority that the people live under. The name comes from the book of Job, where Leviathan is described as a powerful sea monster that even God has trouble managing. "Lay a hand on him," God tells Job, "and you will never think of battle again."³⁶ For Hobbes, Leviathan is the State, and it's still a kind of monster ("an artificial man," he says) that rules the people and derives its power from them. But why should the people accept Leviathan? Hobbes's answer is that humans are born into a miserable condition, "a war of all against all." It's a war against fellow humans, who would kill and pillage if left unchecked, but also a war against the cruel nature surrounding us. Life in this "state of nature," Hobbes famously claims, is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short"³⁷—hence the need for Leviathan. The people apparently "choose" to cede their freedoms to this monster so they could be saved from a greater evil.

This type of thinking is everywhere. The police may be bad, but they are necessary to contain horrible human impulses. The same for prisons, for borders, for grades in the school system, and so on. When English politician Margaret Thatcher declared in 1980 that "there is no alternative" to capitalism, she was parroting Hobbes.

Fredy, however, insisted on an alternative. In his 1983 book *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, he tries to understand how the Leviathans that dominate our lives arose. What were the earliest justifications? And was the state of nature really as bad as Hobbes said? Fredy turns to the Hebrew Bible and to the ancient stories that predated it for clues. What he finds gives him a basis



Figure 6.2: Title page to Thomas Hobbes's *Leviathan* (1651). At the top is a quote, in Latin, from the book of Job, which means "There is no power on earth to be compared to him." Copyright, the Trustees of the British Museum.

for rejecting the Hobbesian narrative (along with Marxist frameworks that reduce all of life to conditions of production).

Fredy argues that the state of nature was not, in fact, cruel. Long ago, people who retained their connection to the earth lived well. They had “surplus”—extras that grew in the land but which they didn’t consume—but they never used it for profit. Having extra was often unnecessary, sometimes even a burden. Since the way of living was tuned to the earth’s generosity, there was plenty for meeting people’s material needs. Fredy references the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins for this point, who had argued that hunter-gatherer tribes lived in abundance. This abundance left plenty of time for what Fredy considers to be the important things in life: rituals, dances, feasts, and games.³⁸ With their material needs met, Fredy argues, our ancient ancestors had time to be “possessed,” to connect with spirits and the earth. The sacred could flourish. Most of us had lost all these things. We lost so much, Fredy says, that we can’t even comprehend the loss. “We cannot know what it was to feel the seed in the womb and learn to feel the seed in earth’s womb, to feel as Earth feels, and at last to abandon oneself and let Earth possess one, to become Earth, to become the first mother of all life,” he writes. “We’re truly poor. Thousands of generations of vision, insight and experience have been erased.”³⁹

Instead, we have Leviathans. We have nation-states, corporations, hierarchies, and divisions of labor that lock people into narrow roles and an overall worship of profit and productivity. There is hardly time for play, much less for being possessed.

There is something very Christian about the Hobbesian justification for all this domination. Hobbes sees people as natural born sinners whose only hope of redemption is to accept the savior—if not Christ, then the State. The story Fredy offers instead takes us back to the Garden of Eden, a lush and plentiful place we had lost touch with. If there was any “original sin,” it was the creation of Leviathans that cut these ties to the generous earth and clipped people’s spiritual wings.

But how did Leviathans arise? Fredy looks to the Torah for insights. He revisits the story of the Israelites’ liberation from slavery and Moses’s role in it. The Torah has infinitely many

interpretations, and Moses can be seen as a great liberator, a “race traitor” who abandoned his privilege to fight for the oppressed (as discussed in chapter 1). Fredy gives us a different interpretation, taking Korach’s side. He agrees that Moses was “ideally suited for the task of leading the captives out of Leviathan” in *mitzrayim* because of his social standing. “He has merely to say, ‘Let my people go,’ and his former fellow-officials and even relatives will issue the necessary orders and passports.” But once they reach the desert, Moses has no role to play, and his appetite for power takes over. “He is an armored man who is unable to remove his armor,” Fredy writes. “He is like Lenin. He seeks within, but finds no destination there; all he finds in himself is bits of Leviathanic armor.”

The conflict between the emancipated Israelites and Moses soon becomes clear. Fredy tells us that the Israelites had nothing but contempt for the “modernizing” regimes; they were “pastoral nomads” who wanted to find a Garden of Eden, not create another Leviathan. But for Moses, “there is no Eden, there is only Leviathan.” He adopts what Fredy calls a “fanatically patriarchal” perspective, which is at odds with the Israelites, who had a history of “worshipping female as well as male deities.” So these former “zeks,” as Fredy calls them—using the name for prisoners in Soviet forced labor camps—decide to disobey their Lenin so they could connect with the sacred feminine:

As soon as he [Moses] turns his back they form the ancient, sacred circle of the old community. They abandon themselves. They dream. They are possessed. *They honor a golden calf, not because she’s golden but because she’s feminine, because she gives birth to life, because she’s Earth’s and because she is Earth.*

The people know the difference between the dead idols of the Egyptians and the living symbols of their own ancestors. They remember. Their insides haven’t gone dead. They are zeks and children of zeks. They always knew the armor was a burden they would shed one day, and when the day comes, they are able to shed it.⁴⁰



Figure 6.3: “The Golden Calf” by Anna Zeligowski.

In Fredy’s telling, this is a turning point for Moses. At this stage, he still has the potential to join the people. “He can let the living glimmer inside him open up, like an egg; he can choose to come alive,” Fredy writes.

But he doesn’t. Moses is enraged by the disobedience and all the dancing around the calf. When he comes down from Mount Sinai, he brings more rules (the Ten Commandments) instead of ways to connect with the *shekhinah*. “The voice of Leviathan,” Fredy writes of the Commandments, “does not speak of ways, of paths to Being, but of laws, of closed gates. It does not say: Thou canst and Thou shalt Be. It says: Thou shalt not.” In his rage, Moses

burns the golden calf, grinds it up, mixes it into water, and makes the Israelites drink it. He then orders the elite Levites, who didn't worship the golden calf, to kill all those who did. Fredy marks this as "the first Holocaust perpetrated in the name of Yahweh." It is justified by pure dogma; earlier in the story, God described itself to Moses as "I am that I am," which doesn't leave much room for questioning. For Fredy, this mass murder is a formative story that is meant to make executions seem like natural events, something all leaders after Moses must do, using the latest available Death-Science. In other words, Moses's "first Holocaust" was the preparation story for the war against the Natives of Turtle Island, for the Nazi Holocaust, for Vietnam. "We will get used to Science, Technology and the Secular State; we will not be horrified by the inhumanity of this man's vision; some of us will even be impressed by the progressive, nay prophetic, character of it."

But the Israelites who desire the sacred simply won't give up. "'I am that I am' is not enough for people who still remember," Fredy writes. The Promised Land isn't appealing to these Israelites either, he adds, because they know that they'll still be "zeks" once they get there.⁴¹ So Moses and God decide to recruit the earth into their war, using earthquakes, floods, storms, and plagues against the people. "The goddess worshiped in the calf is turned against her worshipers." This is how Korach and his people got swallowed up. Only the violent elements of nature were used; everything else it had to offer was suppressed. Eventually, the Hobbesian story about cruel nature became common sense.

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As is clear from the unflattering comparison between Moses and Lenin, Fredy didn't think the communist party structure offered a real alternative to Leviathan. Once self-proclaimed revolutionaries take control of government, he thought, they simply seize the means of oppression. They get their own secret police to crush the opposition, and they find their own ways to exploit labor. Unlike many radicals, Fredy didn't think these failures resulted from a distortion or misapplication of the ideas of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. Although he had been deeply influenced by Marx's brilliant



Figure 6.4: “The Plants Are With Korach” by Anna Zeligowski.

analyses of capitalism, Fredy believed that Marx and Engels were committed to the same racist worldview as the capitalists and colonizers. They still placed people into a hierarchy of worth based on relations of production. They had embraced, Fredy reminds us, the work of American anthropologist Lewis Henry Morgan, who

ranked different peoples based on their “stage” of development (which was a convenient justification for dispossessing the “under-developed” Natives). As Fredy writes,

Morgan generalized his racism into a ladder, every rung of which gleams with racist polish. He named the lowest rung, the stage of infancy, Savagery. He named the next rung, the stage of childhood, Barbarism. And of course he named the top rungs Civilization, the topmost American Civilization. On this topmost rung sat Morgan with the Great White Race. The professors of America were so flattered they elected Morgan president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

Marx and Engels used the same ladder model, with only superficial changes. Fredy puts it in a rather cutting way:

Morgan’s racist ladder was borrowed by the agitator Karl Marx and the revolutionary businessman Friedrich Engels. Marx intended to patch the ladder but never found the time. It was Engels who patched Morgan’s ladder. He didn’t patch much. He borrowed the ladder intact, with all the racist polish of Morgan’s nomenclature: Savagery, Barbarism, etc. Engels patched only the ladder’s summit. He renamed Morgan’s topmost rung, and he placed a yet higher rung above it.

Engels changed the name of Morgan’s Great White Race to Capitalist Class, and on the rung above it he placed the leaders and followers of Marx’s political party. And in this form, Morgan’s racist ladder became the official religion of the USSR, China, Eastern Europe and other lands where the names of the rungs are stuffed into the heads of schoolchildren as a catechism.

The ladder model explains why Marx and Engels have such rigid expectations about which group would be the “leaders” of the struggle and about the order of stages on the way to the

anticapitalist “revolution.” Hierarchies of domination are built into this way of thinking. And all of life gets reduced to material conditions of production. For Fredy, this was no path to the “source of Being”; the spirit remains chained.⁴²

What, then, are the most promising ways to dismantle Leviathan?

Fredy saw Native ways of life as the closest thing to what the unruly Israelites, who wanted to be possessed by spirits rather than chained by Leviathan, had yearned for. This is why he studied the history of Indigenous peoples on Turtle Island, especially in the Great Lakes region where he lived. He wrote a fictionalized account of the history of Detroit, titled *The Strait*, told from the perspective of Native people who are dealing with the European “world-destroyers” (his term) that had intruded on their lives. Through fiction, Fredy tried to give voice to the range of responses to colonialism, each with its limitations and contradictions.⁴³

Yet Fredy’s perspective had its own limitations and contradictions. He didn’t engage, it seems, with any contemporary Native people or struggles. And there were certainly struggles around him. In 1971, Native activists from the Great Lakes region sued the University of Michigan, where Lorraine was a student, for breaking their treaty promise to the descendants of the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi tribes.⁴⁴ It was part of a wave of Native activism that included the American Indian Movement, which used land occupation—a tactic that interested Fredy—to defend Native sovereignty. But there’s no indication Fredy engaged with any of these contemporary struggles; his writing about Native life was based purely on a study of history and on his imagination (in other words, his *doikayt* was incomplete).⁴⁵ His approach also arguably plays into the myth of the “vanishing Indians,” in which Natives are assumed to be basically extinct, meaning their ways can only be continued by settlers.⁴⁶ And settlers often think they can readily pick up those Native ways. As Vine Deloria, a Sioux writer and activist, puts it, “There appears to be some secret osmosis about Indian people by which they can magically and instantaneously communicate complete knowledge about themselves to these interested whites. Rarely is physical contact required.”⁴⁷

Nonetheless, Fredy sincerely believed that Native ways offered compelling alternatives to Western society. He appreciated the ecological wisdom of Native worldviews that see all life as interdependent. He writes of how devastating it was that the Iroquois' understanding of corn, beans, and squash as the "three sisters"—to be planted together, in symbiosis—was being replaced by the idea that these are "mere commodities for sale at the food market" (which implies they can be ripped apart and grown with toxic fertilizers).⁴⁸ Fredy also believed that armed resistance by Native tribes to settler expansion was the only force that was trying "to keep the entire continent from being turned into an island of Capital." As he writes in a 1979 piece,

If the spirits of the dead could be reborn among the living, Ottawa and Chippewa and Potawatomi warriors could take up the struggle where they left it two centuries ago, augmented by the forces of Sioux, Dakota and Nez Perce, Yana and Modoc and the countless tribes whose languages are no longer spoken. Such a force could round up criminals who would not otherwise be brought before any tribunal. The numerous agents of Capital could then continue to practice their routine of work-save-invest-sell, torturing each other with platitudes, promises and police, inside defused and disconnected power plants, behind plutonium doors.⁴⁹

This, then, was the understanding that Fredy arrived at a couple of years before his death in 1985: The embodied connection to the earth and the sacred feminine must be recovered, with Native ways of life as guides. With this understanding, we can now interpret Fredy's earlier life and the city struggles he was part of. In those settings, so alienated from the land, Fredy and comrades were experimenting with ways of reducing the power of Leviathan over their lives.

Black & Red: Creating Another Front of Struggle

What are alternative ways of organizing ourselves, so that we can do things together without accepting any Leviathan? Fredy and Lorraine Perlman had been asking that question, and printing and distributing radical materials became a way to experiment with different answers. They founded the radical press Black & Red in 1968 and the Detroit Printing Co-op (which printed Black & Red's materials) in 1970. These efforts aimed to proliferate and transmit radical struggles. And as we will see later, the Detroit Co-op also offered a way to share the means of production and become less alienated from one's own labor.

All these experiments had emerged from city struggles. Fredy and Lorraine were city people, after all. Fredy mostly grew up in New York, in the Lower East Side and then Queens. The family moved to Kentucky when he was in high school, but he returned to the city for graduate school. In New York, he and Lorraine got involved in the local political and art scene. Fredy was pondering Marx's critique of capitalism while developing an interest in printing. He worked as a mimeograph operator and printer in Manhattan for some time. In 1962, after the so-called Cuban Missile Crisis, the couple didn't want to stay in the US. As Lorraine recalls, "Newspapers depicted Fidel Castro, Cuba's prime minister, as an arrogant, vengeful monster, and the Soviet rulers as scheming devils keen to have weapons within ninety miles of the 'free world's' heartland." The calls to "bomb Cuba off the face of the earth," she adds, "made Fredy feel he could not continue to live in the belly of the beast"—so they looked for another place.⁵⁰ They hoped to return to Fredy's birth country, Czechoslovakia, but Communist Party officials in Prague didn't allow them to stay for more than a visit. They ended up in Belgrade, Yugoslavia, in 1963, and Fredy did his PhD in economics there. They moved to Kalamazoo, Michigan, in 1966, where he got a job at Western Michigan University.

In Kalamazoo, Fredy and Lorraine founded Black & Red press. Their goal wasn't to create a new fashion within radical thought nor to make a self-sustaining institution. They distinguish

themselves from *Monthly Review*, a socialist press that Black & Red says is reproducing capitalist relations by merely being one of many “businesses which publish left-wing books” (it is a business even if it publishes materials critical of capitalism). Black & Red instead presents itself as an “underground press” whose very existence is a strike against capitalism. The underground press doesn’t pay wages nor receive grants; it doesn’t try to reproduce itself. “The time, the money, the energy of the militants who create these presses have to be LIBERATED out of capitalism in order to make the presses exist, in order to create these instruments of struggle,” Black & Red’s purpose document states. “The underground press will have to be re-created from one issue to the next, from one meeting to the next; they are created only IN ORDER TO DESTROY capitalist relations.”

Black & Red’s materials are intended to communicate radical *practices*, rather than just offer “critique.” Fredy and Lorraine understood the reactionary nature of critique. One radical stream can always critique the positions of another stream, and even create a new school of thought in the process, a new “-ism”—but what does that really achieve? (Fredy was anyhow skeptical of labels, saying, “The only -ist name I respond to is ‘cellist.’”⁵¹) Critique can also repress action, delaying it until the intellectuals decide a sufficient “understanding” has been reached. Black & Red aims instead to share concrete struggles, so they can be learned from. Critical analysis of *actions*—of experiments at dismantling oppressive systems—is welcome, critique is not. Given this mission, Black & Red hopes that its own materials will be transcended by more radical actions and analyses. As they put it, “A formal critique of the contents or method of Black & Red has no relevance unless it is an action-critique which bases its analysis on a specific action. To say that A NEW FRONT is ineffectual implies the capacity to CREATE ANOTHER FRONT. The interest of Black & Red is not to be THE front, but A front. The very content of its purpose and practice is TO BE SURPASSED. Its interest is precisely the CREATION OF OTHER FRONTS.”⁵²

The purpose document ends with a call to the reader: “Black & Red claims NO MONOPOLY OF ACTION OR ANALYSIS. It invites

every critique which is a new front: 'IF YOU DON'T LIKE IT, MAKE YOUR OWN!' ”⁵³

The first issue of *Black & Red* appeared in September 1968. Fredy and Lorraine designed it at home. The covers were printed by a friend who worked at a commercial shop that printed non-radical things like ice cream cartons. The pages were printed at the Radical Education Project in Ann Arbor, which was created by Students for a Democratic Society (SDS).⁵⁴ The issue contains reflections from participants in the uprisings of that year in Paris and at Columbia University. It also includes Fredy's article "Anything Can Happen," which laid out his view of the nature of radical struggle.

In "Anything Can Happen," Fredy argues that while systems of oppression are everywhere, so is the potential for a radical collective response. He had experienced that potential in the 1968 Paris uprisings. While the police were obviously "stronger" than the people on the streets, some protesters decided not to run away but to build barricades. Similarly, he notes, the student protesters knew "that they could not, by themselves, destroy the state and its repressive apparatus, yet they occupied and started running the universities, and in the streets they returned the cops' volley of teargas with a volley of cobblestones."⁵⁵ The workers also began occupying factories, and the students soon joined them. It all happened so quickly. These actions were influenced by, and had in turn influenced, other uprisings around the world. A fire had started below, without orders from leaders.

Fredy cherished these examples of collective self-organization, which showed people's capacities to be freed from Leviathan. Fredy's friend David Watson summarizes his perspective well: "Since nothing is determined, the possibility of a life-affirming response is always at hand."⁵⁶ It was a total rejection of the strain of Marxist thinking that says anticapitalist struggle must go through specific stages, or that the course of history is somehow predetermined. If we don't really know how things will go, we may as well try the uprising for life.

Yet there were entire systems in place not only to crush these uprisings when they emerge but also to constantly tell us that they're in fact impossible. As Fredy argues in "Anything Can

How to Seize the Means of Oppression

Like Richard (“Dick”) Levins, Fredy and Lorraine Perlman used satire to make fun of oppressive ideologies and institutions. They all wrote their satires under pseudonyms: Dick as Isadore Nabi, Fredy and Lorraine as Michael Velli (a play on Machiavelli, author of the sixteenth-century guide for the ruler, *The Prince*).

Michael Velli’s 1972 book *Seizure of State Power* (part of a series titled *Velli’s Manual for Revolutionary Leaders*) ridicules those professional revolutionaries who know what’s best for the people and will crush anyone who disagrees. The book is largely made up of passages from Lenin, Marx, Engels, and other revolutionary figures that Fredy and Lorraine spliced together, adding their own transitions to make it flow. The result is a manual for the revolutionary on how to seize and maintain state power.

The book begins after the revolution had taken place, when the party of the Proletariat is in power. There is still discontent, however. Factory workers go on strike. (The scene is clearly inspired by late 1960s workers’ uprisings in Paris and Detroit and is largely described without any quotations.) Party officials attempt to reason with the workers, first by appealing to “the law” and then to communist ideals, but the workers aren’t buying it. They don’t want to work for the bosses, even if the bosses are party members. They don’t want to work at all, in fact; they think something better is possible. The party quickly resorts to force. Before leaving the factory, the president of the Republic tells the workers, “Next time I’ll talk to you with words that you’re going to understand—words which come out of the barrels of guns.”

But unfortunately, Velli says, direct violence by the police and military isn’t enough to keep the party in power. More sophisticated tactics are needed. Borrowing Lenin’s words, Velli says, “The strictest centralization and discipline are required within the political party of the proletariat” to

eliminate disobedience. Velli therefore suggests that any “aspiring leader” should be put on a period of probation to prove themselves worthy. In this period, the party must use “modern instruments for measuring the iron discipline and unquestioning obedience of an applicant.” Velli proposes strapping the applicant to “an appropriately wired chair” where they will be read questions and receive shocks depending on how much their answers deviate from the correct ideology, since, as Velli (Lenin again) says, “To deviate from socialist ideology in the slightest degree means strengthening bourgeois ideology.” The highest voltage shocks will be reserved for those “*petit-bourgeois individualists*.”

But probation and direct force still won’t be enough to maintain power. Velli also recommends having regular purges of party members, on ever-smaller scales. This is needed to create a sufficiently advanced vanguard, even if it is very small—“a miniature International,” in his words. “Even the Dictatorship of the Proletariat can be re-enacted in miniature, with purges of the incoherent, public confessions of errors, recantations of critiques of the critique, generous reinstatements, and even occasional mass expulsions of two or three members.” Regrettably, though, this too won’t be sufficient; the revolutionary leader, Velli concludes, must always plan to build a larger security apparatus.

Happen,” society’s appointed experts, the social scientists, declare that collective self-organization is contrary to “human nature.” For them, it’s “common sense” that is supposedly backed by empirical data. But all they’re doing is taking the world as it is and assuming it must be that way. “The fact that ‘human nature’ is hierarchic in a hierarchic society does not mean that a hierarchic division of people among different tasks is necessary for social life,” as Fredy puts it. He knew that the “common sense” view is maintained in the US by a system of racial capitalism, which places people into groups and pits them against one another:

In such a society, WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) workers who sell themselves for higher-paying, easier jobs, frantically tell themselves and their buyers that they're better, work harder, and are more deserving than foreigners, Catholics, Jews, Puerto Ricans, Mexicans and Blacks; black "professionals" tell themselves that they're better than black manual workers; all whites tell themselves they're better than all blacks; and all Americans tell themselves they're better than South American, Asian or African "natives." Since WASPS systematically succeed in selling themselves at the highest price, everyone below tries to make himself as much a WASP as possible.⁵⁷

Rather than try to assimilate into WASP-ness, we could strengthen the potential for collective action and for solidarity across dividing lines. The potential is so real that well-paid experts are constantly working to prevent it from being realized. In Fredy's words, "While some experts define the rebellion in France as *impossible* because unnatural, their expert colleagues design the incapacitating gases with which cops can suppress such impossible rebellions. BECAUSE ANYTHING IS POSSIBLE."⁵⁸

Against Academic Leviathan!

In 1968, Fredy and Lorraine were already being surveilled by the authorities. FBI records note that Fredy had attended a meeting of the Black Panther Party in New York. It is also noted that he was a faculty adviser to Black Action Movement, a student organization that was protesting the university's institutional racism.⁵⁹ One FBI report describes Fredy as a "foreign student," adding that "Foreign influence in the New Left Movement should be closely followed and analyzed for any possible international conspiracy of vital interest to this country's internal security" (another FBI report referred to him as just "a white male faculty"). The FBI followed Fredy around, noting where he drove and who he met, and scrutinized his US passport application files. It also noted his participation in the 1968

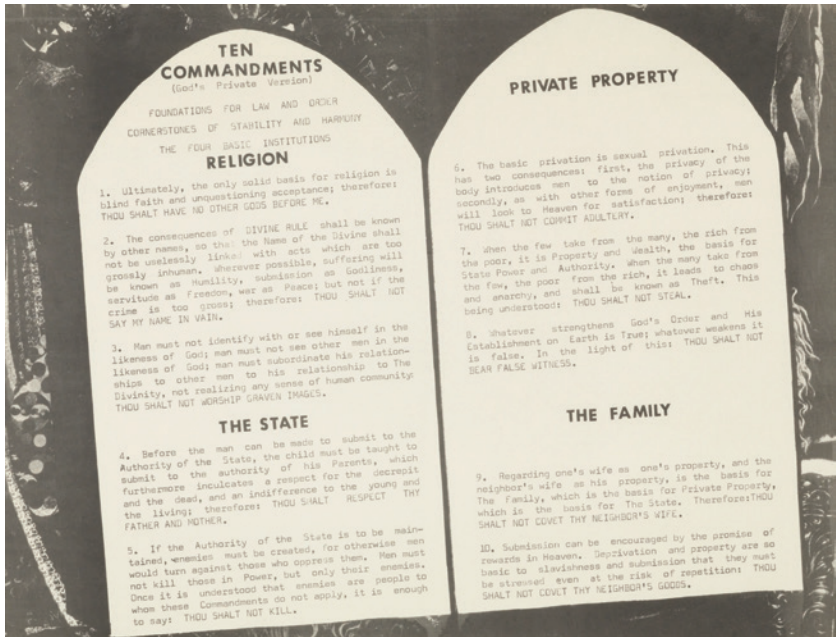


Figure 6.5: Black & Red's parody of the Ten Commandments (1968), subtitled "God's Private Version." The layout is shaped in the way that the stone tablets Moses brought down from Mount Sinai are usually imagined. Black & Red had another version of this Ten Commandments parody that was subtitled "God's Annotated Edition: Memorize and Burn (At the Stake)."

"student riots" in Paris. The FBI was interested enough to even collect Black & Red's materials.

Meanwhile, at Western Michigan University (WMU), Fredy was trying to rebel against academia's hierarchies and reactionary ideologies. In his courses, he wanted students to call him by his first name and later asked that they grade themselves. He also put his printing skills to use. Black & Red created satirical pamphlets that show how grades and tests are "soft" tools of control for the capitalist university, which will be backed by physical violence if necessary. Students working with Fredy created a pamphlet titled "Programming the Programmers" that made fun of psychologist B. F. Skinner's

theory of behaviorism—presenting it as a tool of social control based in reward and punishment—and handed it out to students exiting psychology classes where behaviorism was taught.⁶⁰ One student working with Fredy made a cartoon titled “Observorman” that ridicules the idea of the scientist as a neutral observer of the world.⁶¹ Black & Red also printed pamphlets describing universities’ role in the Vietnam War and in the development of napalm.

But it soon became clear that challenging the system from within isn’t so simple. WMU decided not to renew Fredy’s appointment. They also fired one of Fredy’s faculty colleagues for his radical views, while mobilizing the police against student protesters. Fredy responded with a scathing pamphlet titled “I Accuse This Liberal University of Terror and Violence” (1969), which was distributed on campus and had WMU’s main building on the cover. He writes that he and his colleague were accused of being “Unobjective, Dogmatic, Vulgar, Violent, Stalinist, Extremist” (amusing, given that Fredy was a ruthless critic of Lenin and Stalin). Fredy took the opportunity to argue that the university’s liberal ideals merely cover up its support for imperialism, capitalism, and police repression. When these oppressive systems are seriously challenged, he says, the liberal establishment will condemn the resistance as “violence.” They will prescribe “nonviolence” to the challengers—as if their own position isn’t maintained by far greater, daily violence. As the pamphlet states,

The Liberal ALREADY KNOWS that when his “Leftist Colleague” is an unemployed radical he will do something for which it will be legitimate to throw him in jail, but the Liberal doesn’t want to be aware that HIS PEACE AND QUIET ARE MAINTAINED THROUGH TERRORISM AND VIOLENCE. In other words, the Liberal’s weapons are the same as the reactionary’s; the only difference between them is that the Liberal doesn’t look, and has a good conscience. He’s “tolerant,” he “reads radical literature,” he’s the “only one who talks to radicals,” he’s MORAL in every single way; he goes out of his way to “help radicals”; he’ll do everything for radicals which will help him keep his good

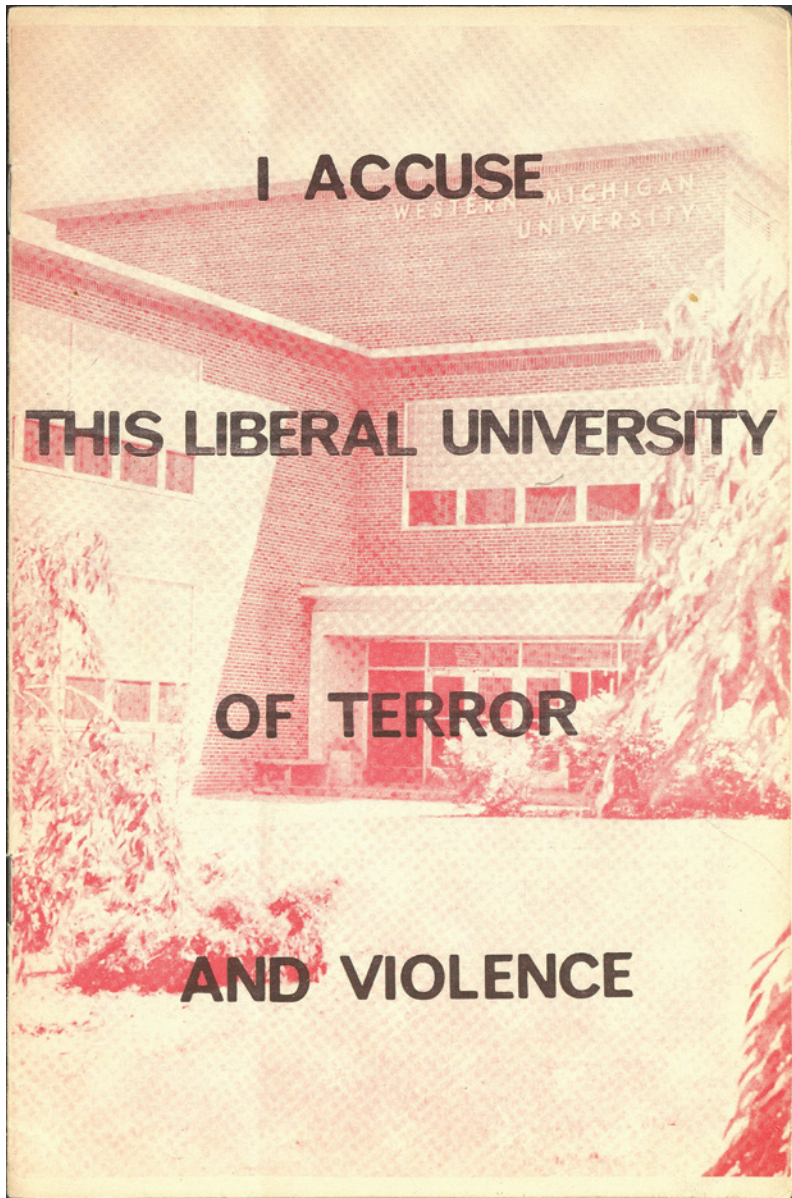


Figure 6.6: Fredy Perlman's pamphlet "I Accuse This Liberal University of Terror and Violence" (1969), written after Fredy and his colleague (B. R. Rafferty) were terminated from Western Michigan University.

conscience WHILE HE CONTINUES TO RELY ON TERROR
AND VIOLENCE.⁶²

Fredy was trying to hold a mirror up to the liberals' faces. "The Liberal rejects Imperialism, Patriotism, Racism, and even Capitalism—IN WORDS, but never in actions," he writes. "Words make it possible for him to be a GOOD PERSON; action would make him an OUTSIDER. That's why the radical is a threat to the Liberal; HE FORCES THE LIBERAL TO CHOOSE." Fredy's colleagues weren't pleased.

This was the end of Fredy's academic career. From then on, he and Lorraine had to find ways to devote most of their time to political activities without being salaried professionals. Lorraine's biography of Fredy is titled *Having Little, Being Much*—and they did live with little money, as part of the experiment in being free. They received food stamps at some point. They also chose not to have children.⁶³ Fredy had a damaged heart valve (caused by rheumatic fever when he was a toddler) for which he received some state disability payments, and Lorraine made some money playing violin. But they had no major, stable sources of income.

Nonetheless, getting kicked out of the university liberated Fredy. Although he never changed his view of the institution, he didn't have to critique it anymore. Lorraine says that after leaving, he "rarely concerned himself with the university or the bad faith of its liberal professors."⁶⁴ Leaving also made Fredy's thinking more radical. Lorraine remembers that in the 1960s, he was still "a technician of the economy"; he still believed, as many academics do, that industrialized "development"—compatible with both capitalist and Marxist perspectives—could be modeled mathematically and applied from above to "underdeveloped" regions.⁶⁵ It was not until the early 1970s that Fredy adopted a critical perspective on technology and industrialization. Now freed from the academy, something had changed him. Maybe it was Detroit.

The Detroit Co-op: Printing the Struggles

Fredy and Lorraine moved to Detroit in the summer of 1969. They arrived just two years after the city's great rebellion of 1967.

They chose Detroit for its exciting political scene and its diversity. Rent was also cheap, in part because of the white flight to the suburbs following the rebellion. At the time, Lorraine was also enrolled as a student at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor and could commute from Detroit.

Detroit was not the Garden of Eden that Fredy would write poetically about later in *Against His-Story*. It was the center of the auto industry, home to companies such as Ford, General Motors, and Chrysler. It was technologically advanced racial capitalism at work: Black workers were given the most dangerous factory jobs, working under a predominantly white management. In “speed-ups,” the company made workers do more labor (say, putting in fifteen screws instead of ten) in the same amount of time, squeezing them like the Pharaoh had squeezed the enslaved Israelites for bricks. The foreman, the overseer of the assembly line, enforced the higher pace. Workers would regularly get injured by the big machinery, sometimes losing fingers or legs. Some got killed. This was the cost of making a car, the symbol of American freedom. The conditions of the factory were captured by Joe L. Carter, a Detroit autoworker and musician, in his blues tune “Please Mr. Foreman”:

Please Mr. Foreman, slow down your assembly line
 Please Mr. Foreman, slow down your assembly line
 No, I don't mind workin'
 But I do mind dyin'

Black workers began organizing against this machine. They were up not only against their employers but also against the white-led trade unions that, cozy with management, didn't take their grievances seriously and would even mobilize police to crush their organizing efforts. In protests, Black workers would chant that the industry's major union, UAW (United Auto Workers), really stood for “U Ain't White.”⁶⁶ They formed grassroots organizations such as DRUM (Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement) and later the umbrella organization called the League of Revolutionary Black Workers (established 1969). The League's members developed brilliant analyses of racial capitalism that were accompanied

by direct action. They organized wildcat strikes that shut down auto plants, forcing management and the unions to pay attention. The League's efforts are described in the influential book by Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, whose title comes from Joe L. Carter's blues.

The League believed workers should seize the means of production—and not just in the factories. They also wanted their own means of communication, so they could reach the people directly. In 1970, they founded Black Star, which printed pamphlets and books. Black Star also collaborated (as Black Star Productions) with activist filmmakers to create the iconic film about the League, *Finally Got the News* (1971). Fredy and Lorraine got to know some of the League's activists and would typeset some Black & Red issues at Black Star's print shop.

Like the members of the League, Fredy and Lorraine were interested in seizing the means of production. They rented space for a new printing cooperative in Southwest Detroit (across from a Cadillac factory). Friends helped set it up and buy the equipment, including an old Harris offset press found in Chicago. Carl Smith, a League member who was also a printer and graphic artist, was one of the friends who inspected the press and arranged its delivery to Detroit; Smith also got a fellow League member who worked in printing to bring an electrician to wire up the machine. Smith and the Perlman learned to use the press together (Smith had plans to create Black Star Publishing, a new publishing house for Black Star, which never materialized).⁶⁷ A print shop in the same building also tutored Fredy in offset printing.

The Detroit Printing Co-op officially opened in the spring of 1970.⁶⁸ Smith, along with fellow League members Mike Hamlin and Helen Jones, printed thousands of copies of League-related materials there. The League had also paid for some equipment housed at the co-op, which was used to train its members in printing.⁶⁹ It was one of many collaborations that the new space would enable.

The co-op had a nonhierarchical structure, and it deliberately resisted imposing an ideology on its members (unlike many leftist organizations). The co-op was born out of necessity, as most

printing houses at the time wouldn't touch radical writings. But the materiality of the work also became crucial to the endeavor. Being able to engage in every step—from the writing to operating the printing press to binding the pages into a beautiful book to distributing it—was fun and de-alienating.

The Detroit Printing Co-op adopted the following principles:

- The equipment of the Printing Co-op is social property. It is and shall be controlled by all individuals who need, use and maintain it.
- It is not and shall not be owned or controlled by any individual or group of individuals, whether they claim to serve, represent, or speak for society, whether they are elected or self-appointed.
- The purpose of the Printing Co-op is to provide access to printing equipment to all those individuals in the community who desire to express themselves (on a non-profit



Figure 6.7: The Detroit Printing Co-op's mark. Designed by Fredy, this printer's mark had the IWW logo (since several co-op users were members) surrounded by the text "abolish the wage system," "abolish the state," and "all power to the workers." IU 450 was IWW's union for workers in the printing and publishing industry.

basis), with charges made only to maintain the print shop (rent, utilities, materials, maintenance of the machinery).

- It is not the purpose of the Printing Co-op to solve the problem of unemployment, nor to provide business opportunities for enterprising capitalists.⁷⁰

In short, the co-op was open to anyone committed to caring for the equipment and using it for nonprofit purposes.

This meant that the co-op wouldn't tell its users what to think or say. The League of Revolutionary Black Workers, for example, sometimes espoused Marxist-Leninist ideals and positioned itself as the "vanguard" of anticapitalist struggle—notions that Fredy (and some League members) rejected. But they could still work together. Fredy and Lorraine also worked hard on printing the journal *Radical America* at the co-op, even though they didn't really align with the publication's "New Left" ideology (though it also had the benefit of being a big job that helped cover the co-op's maintenance costs). The activity of printing was key to maintaining these collaborations.

And for Fredy, that activity itself was thrilling. Lorraine says he found printing to be "more stimulating than any academic studies that he had undertaken," seeing it as "the ideal combination of theory and practice."⁷¹ You conceive of an idea, you experiment with the equipment, and create something beautiful (Fredy was praised for his color printing technique). In the process, you could connect with others who are also finding joy in working with the equipment. This might be the closest Fredy ever got to an embodied link with the "source of Being" that he had longed for in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*

*

The co-op faced the usual challenges of building an anticapitalist organization within a capitalist society. For one, there was the question of wages. Should members of the co-op get paid? Fredy was strongly against it. He thought that having wages would reproduce capitalist relations (as Black & Red's purpose statement had warned) and create tensions between the paid members and unpaid members.⁷² Fredy won that debate; there were no wages.

Killing Leviathan

Fredy Perlman wanted to kill Leviathan, that authority that crushes people's sacred spirit. He imagined that the Israelites, once liberated from slavery, also wanted to slay Leviathan rather than create one of their own. This is why they rejected the regime of Moses and God, with its rules and punishments; they wanted to worship the sacred feminine, represented by the golden calf. These "calf-worshippers," Fredy writes in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, "still resist. They rebel. They are ready to withdraw again, this time from their own Leader's Leviathan."

Fredy might not have known that the rabbis of the Talmud also wanted Leviathan killed in a revolutionary future. They write, "In the future, the Holy One, will make a feast for the righteous [*tzaddikim*, singular: *tzaddik*] from the flesh of the Leviathan" (Bava Batra 75a:4). The beast's flesh will be sold in markets, they say. A *sukkah* (tabernacle) for the righteous will be made from its skin. The truly righteous will get a whole *sukkah*. Those who aren't righteous at all will have to settle for an amulet made of Leviathan skin.

Historian Paul Buhle writes in an obituary for Fredy that he was "a *tzaddik*"—a lover of learning, a person who wasn't interested in fame or praise, someone who didn't even put his name on most of his publications and gave printed copies for free to anyone who asked, an "uncompromised and uncompromising idealist" who was dedicated to "promoting the free intellectual development of young radical spirits." Maybe we will see Fredy in the *sukkah*.

The co-op's nonhierarchical structure was also contentious. Some worried that not requiring people to agree on ideology before accessing the equipment could lead to fascists using the co-op.⁷³ Others tried imposing their own ideology on the co-op, their own "correct" recipe for fighting capitalism. But Fredy "cantankerous Korach" Perlman was very willing to confront these

power-hungry individuals. As Lorraine writes, “Fredy was highly sensitive to manipulators and potential bureaucrats, so individuals who approached the Printing Co-op ‘proletariat’ offering leadership quickly learned Fredy’s opinion about their ‘correct line.’ Few of them could withstand for long Fredy’s scathing denunciations, although one thick-skinned Stalinist was remarkably tenacious.”⁷⁴ Fredy’s combative attitude likely alienated some newcomers, Lorraine adds, but it prevented the co-op from becoming a mouthpiece for any party.

The co-op’s nonhierarchical structure, lack of ideological policing, and relationships created through printing enabled it to produce stunning materials from a wide range of struggles. Many of these materials are shown in Danielle Aubert’s beautiful and brilliant 2019 book *The Detroit Printing Co-op*. They can be identified by a mark (union bug) that had the logo of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), since some co-op users were IWW members. Around the logo, Fredy added some phrases used by the IWW: “Abolish the Wage System,” “Abolish the State,” and “All Power to the Workers.”⁷⁵

Some of the co-op’s materials were very well known: It printed the writings of Karl Marx, C. L. R. James, Grace Lee Boggs, the French Situationists, and 10,000 copies of the IWW’s *Little Red Song Book*. Other materials were from local struggles. High school students from Detroit printed their radical publication there, with “great help from Fredy and Lorraine” on the technical side.⁷⁶ A Detroit community that was fighting gentrification (in the form of “urban renewal” programs) printed a calendar that marked key dates from past grassroots struggles. There was also a pamphlet describing a wildcat strike at a Michigan Dodge plant.

There were also materials about movements in France, Poland, Yugoslavia, Spain, Mexico, Ukraine, and Vietnam. And by printing *Radical America*, for example, Fredy and Lorraine were helping to spread materials about many other movements, including women’s liberation, gay liberation, and Black liberation.⁷⁷ Other co-op members also expanded the scope by printing materials about struggles other than their own. Black Star Productions, for example, introduced materials from struggles

in Palestine. It printed a promotional pamphlet for a 1971 film, titled “Report from Gaza,” that chronicles life under Israeli occupation. It also printed a pamphlet promoting the film *The Resistance, Why?* (1971) that explains the need for armed resistance to colonialism in Palestine, featuring Palestinian writer and revolutionary Ghassan Kanafani (who in the film emphasizes the need to also liberate Jews from Zionism).

Language skills were also crucial for the co-op’s ability to share insights from international struggles. Fredy considered Spanish his “first language” from his childhood in Bolivia, and through the language he connected with Spanish anarchism.⁷⁸ The co-op printed, in Spanish, the writings of Federico Arcos, an anarchist veteran of the Spanish Civil War who had emigrated to Canada and worked in a Ford plant. Fredy was also able to translate a Russian book on labor struggles from the version in Serbo-Croatian, a language he had learned while in Belgrade for graduate school. Fredy and Lorraine translated works from French, including the first English translation of Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. They also used their French to translate a history of the Makhnovists—the Ukrainian anarchists who redistributed land to the peasants and experimented with direct democracy during the Russian Revolution. Fredy’s deliberate efforts over the years to maintain and acquire languages can be seen as acts of refusing assimilation. The Jews of Europe (and Jews generally) always had multiple languages; Fredy wanted to keep that going, and he used it effectively (just as Jewish anarchist Emma Goldman had, see chapter 1). And the co-op used these languages to communicate and analyze actions, as Black & Red had originally intended.

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Fredy wound up connected to all these diverse struggles, with his printing labor serving as a concrete form of solidarity. How has his role been narrated by others?

Paul Buhle, a historian of radical social movements, says Fredy embodied the spirit of nineteenth-century Yiddish-speaking Jewish anarchists—those believers in direct action who had created the anarchist newspaper *Freie Arbeter Shtimme* (Free voice of



Figure 6.8: A promotional pamphlet by Black Star Productions for the 1971 film "Report From Gaza," printed at the Detroit Printing Co-op. The pamphlet states, "This short narrative-documentary was clandestinely shot in May, 1971, in one of the hottest security-conscious areas of the world: the Gaza Strip. The Palestinians, known to the world since 1948 as 'refugees', continue to struggle for their very existence in concentration-camp-like hovels. . . . Not surprisingly, the victims struggle furiously against their leash. Palestinian commandoes mount more attacks here than in any other part of the whole of occupied Palestine. 'Report From Gaza' briefly describes the plight of this mass of humanity, over half of which is under 18 and have known nothing else. The viewer is carried along through the lens of the camera for a rare look inside." Black Star Productions was a media organization that was part of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. Courtesy of Danielle Aubert.

labor)—even though Fredy obviously wasn't their peer. For Buhle, Fredy's entire way of being was so clearly Jewish:

He seemed to me, and to others who met him, almost a saint or perhaps a tzaddik. With simple love, he embraced people of all kinds for the Detroit printshop, constantly promoting the free intellectual development of young radical spirits. He declined to put his own name on most of his publications—printed by himself, his wife Lorraine, and his friends, beautifully colored, inexpensively priced but free to anyone who asked—so indifferent was he to vanity. But he will remain, for me, a Jew whom the *Freie Arbeter Shtimme* of the 1890's would have taken to its bosom; a Jew whose favorite was *Freiheit*, freedom.⁷⁹

But in some accounts of Detroit's radical movements, Fredy is misunderstood. In *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, Georgakas and Surkin devote a couple of lines to Fredy's printing efforts and his collaboration with the League of Revolutionary Black Workers. They write that the League's Black Star "bought a building, purchased some equipment of its own, and shared in purchasing other equipment which was housed at a white printers' cooperative run by Fredy Perlman." They note that the co-op printed crucial League materials, such as *The Political Thought of James Forman*, a "200-page paperback" whose printing was made possible largely "through the efforts of Helen Jones [of Black Star] and Fredy Perlman."

The authors can't seem to grasp what's in front of them. They are describing a collaborative co-op that was set up in part by League members (not "run by" Fredy) and used by them to print many materials, yet it somehow remains a "white printers' cooperative." They also misidentify Fredy, writing, "The printing and folding equipment shared with Perlman was another indication of the good and honest relations the League was able to maintain with many Detroit whites. Perlman had been greatly affected by his experiences in the French uprising of May 1968 and had set up the Detroit cooperative printing center to advocate libertarian principles."⁸⁰

Fredy was a child survivor of the Nazi Holocaust who was driven by the lesson of that experience, a person who cultivated

solidarity in the spirit of *doikayt*. A person who never felt “American” and for whom “assimilation” was a slur. Yet Georgakas and Surkin make Fredy into the exemplary “white” person, a model for all white Americans. It is obvious from Fredy’s writings that he didn’t think of himself that way. And why would he? His formative life experience was escaping a regime of racial hygiene that wanted him, the racialized Other, cleansed from the world.

Transmitting the Struggle

In 1985, Fredy decided to get surgery for his heart condition. He had hesitated because the condition hadn’t seriously impaired his life. But now he was often getting dizzy, and his pounding heart would wake him up at night. Fredy had also been skeptical of the medical-industrial complex’s interventions. He had open heart surgery in 1976 to replace his damaged aortic valve and was never sure that awful experience had improved his life. “Sometimes he felt that he had been merely a gullible consumer of the medical industry’s expertise,” Lorraine recalls.

Now came time for a second surgery, to replace the transplanted valve from the first. Fredy asked friends if they had arguments *against* having surgery; none did. The doctors said he must, and he agreed. He was also told to stop smoking, but he didn’t care. He had been a proud smoker who thought the pollution of capitalist industries probably does more to kill people than cigarettes. He also liked the association of tobacco with the Natives of this continent, who had taught the European settlers about their potent plantcestor.

On July 26, 1985, Fredy died at Henry Ford Hospital in Detroit, at age fifty-one, after his heart stopped working when the surgery was over.

David Watson, a friend of Fredy’s and writer for the *Fifth Estate*, says that friends still feel his presence. He compares Fredy to an elusive stone from Lake Huron that Fredy was once gifted—a stone that seemed to have “friendly and strange power.” When he died, Watson suggests, Fredy became one of those magical stones. “Now he has crossed over, and rests in a garden conversing with

stone spirits.”⁸¹ Maybe. Or maybe Fredy found his resting place among those old printing machines that made him feel whole.

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Fredy and Lorraine’s collaborative printing efforts had helped transmit many struggles to the next generations. They had inspired many radicals, not just with the materials they printed, but also with their way of organizing. While the Detroit Printing Co-op closed in 1980, other radical presses that draw inspiration from it have opened since.⁸² And Black & Red is still going, decades after Fredy had crossed over. Lorraine has kept the titles in print, storing the books in her basement and shipping them out for distribution. In the 2018 Detroit Art Book Fair, Lorraine offered Black & Red books for as little as two dollars a copy. They sold like hotcakes. In all these years, Black & Red managed to live up to its core principles: It never had contact with the authorities beyond once getting a permit to sell books and only charged based on what was needed to cover printing costs.⁸³

How did the co-op end? By 1979, it was clear to Fredy and Lorraine that the co-op couldn’t stay where it was. The building was in bad shape, and the landlord was planning to sell it. The co-op had also been running for about a decade. Fredy and Lorraine decided it was time to pass the equipment to the next generation. In March 1980, they gave the offset press to a collective of young anarchists in Ann Arbor called Nameless Anarchists. But they doubted the group. “Conversations with some of the people from the Ann Arbor collective did not make us hopeful about the success of their undertaking,” Lorraine recalls. Operating that old offset press required patience and skill; it wasn’t clear this group could pull it off.⁸⁴

Ann Arbor was also not Detroit. It was a rather white college town. It revolved around the University of Michigan and never had much of an independent existence. It was maybe a place to write about radicalism but not to live it, despite having a burst of radical student organizing in the 1960s and ’70s. The people, the rich culture, and the radical energies of Detroit were missing from a town some locals had nicknamed “Bland Arbor.”

At this stage, it was also getting much easier to print materials in commercial shops. People were less likely to reach the joyful de-alienation brought by doing the printing themselves, the way co-op users had, when it wasn't necessary. The gentrification of cities, with rising rents and a lack of communal spaces, also made it more difficult to sustain radical printing cooperatives.

The efforts to print and transmit radical struggles were also plagued by internal contradictions, as to be expected when people swim against the current. We can see those contradictions in Fredy's own life. He railed against Western civilization's machines while wearing a button-down shirt and sweater and operating big printing machinery in Motor City. His writings yearn for the Garden of Eden, an embodied return to the earth, the plants, and the spiritual ways of ancestors, but he never really put it into practice (apart from gardening and some long camping trips). His works emphasize the power of human collectivity, but he spent so much of his time on the rather solitary activities of reading and writing (even describing himself as a "recluse").⁸⁵

There is no need to "critique" Fredy for these contradictions; he surely felt them. "The quality of the songs has been declining ever since written words began replacing living voices," as he once wrote.⁸⁶ Maybe writing and printing were just ways to hang on to a shred of holiness in a genocidal world, a world we are often powerless to change. To insist, perhaps foolishly, that anything is possible.

Afterword

Is Tradition a Nightmare?

Karl Marx famously wrote that “the tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brain of the living.”¹ But is tradition really a “nightmare”? Does it necessarily have to weigh us down?

Ariella Aïsha Azoulay argues that tradition is in fact “an obstacle in the wheels of imperial movement.” Tradition, she adds, is grounding, “irreducible to profit,” and can help ensure that “people’s place in the world is never flimsy.”²

And what about those “dead generations” Marx refers to? The activist Avram Finkelstein says that resistance is a project always waiting to be reborn; that every act of resistance “is connected to every other one, past, present, and future.” Maybe the tradition of the dead generations isn’t so dead? Maybe it is alive, filled with opportunities for reactivating projects of resistance, for picking up what some thought was irretrievable from the dustbin of history?

The question is unsettled. But what’s clear is that Jews on Turtle Island—like so many other groups—constantly face the choice between reactivating ancestral projects of resistance and being deracinated “Americans,” good little citizens of the most destructive empire of our times.

If this book gave a sense of hope or optimism about Jewish radical futures, it doesn’t reflect how I now feel. We are living yet another catastrophic failure of “never again” (unless that means “never again *for Jews*,” which is indeed how many Zionists and their allies have always meant it). The real nightmare that weighs

on the living is the ongoing genocide in Palestine. If there is such a thing as a collective human conscience, this genocide should weigh down on it for eternity.

Yet every act of resistance is connected to every other, and in the Palestinian liberation struggle, we can find today all the inspiring elements that we have seen in these pages: radical resistance to a eugenics regime, mutual aid to survive catastrophe, and an insistence on continuing ancestral traditions despite genocide and colonialism.

This Palestinian struggle brings many gifts to the world. I want to end with one great gift that the struggle has given Jews—a gift that many Jews are sadly too indoctrinated by Zionism to be grateful for.

Many Palestinian activists and resistance groups refuse to call that state—the state that is “America’s strongest ally,” “greatest friend,” and so on—“Israel.” They instead call it “the Zionist entity” or put the name in scare quotes with a lowercase letter *i*: “israel.” It turns out they understand Jewish traditions better than many Jews.

“Israel” in the Torah, as Gregg Bordowitz reminds us in these pages, was a name not for a territory to be claimed as private property but for a people on the move. It was a name given to Jacob out of struggle, after grappling all night with a mysterious figure believed to be an angel. “Your name shall no longer be Jacob,” the figure tells Jacob, “but Israel, for you have striven with beings divine and human, and have prevailed.”³ That name, that beautiful concept, shouldn’t be desecrated by attaching it to a settler-colonial state. May we instead live up to this concept of struggle, including by strengthening the efforts to end Zionism. And may these efforts prevail.

Yarden Azoulay Katz
October 3, 2025

About the Illustrations

The illustrations that accompany this book were created by the artist Anna Zeligowski. Anna was an ideal collaborator, in part because her life is entangled with the stories and traditions in these pages.

Born in Poland, Anna is a medical doctor and the daughter of two Jewish Polish survivors of the Holocaust, both of whom were doctors as well. Her father escaped the Kalisz ghetto and used a borrowed identity to join a group of Poles sent to forced labor in a German village. Her mother survived the Warsaw ghetto. Anna's grandfather was imprisoned by the Nazis alongside Janusz Korczak (who appears in these pages) in Pawiak prison in Warsaw. Anna's grandparents and other family members were murdered by the Nazis in Treblinka, Chełmno, and other camps. May their memory be a blessing.

Anna's mother, Irena (Grocher) Zeligowski, wrote a moving memoir about her life in the ghetto and eventual escape to the "Aryan" side, where she lived in a bunker until 1945. Irena was a "wild one" (*dzika* in Polish), as those who lived in the ghetto without any documents—and therefore at highest risk of death—were known. Irena survived through mutual aid and subversion of the authorities. In her memoir, titled *Dzika*, she wrote, "I have no hate for anyone, only gratitude for those who have helped me survive." *Dzika* ends with a call to respect difference and reject all racial hierarchies—a call echoed by the activists in these pages.

Although it was surely lucky, Irena's ability to survive the ghetto through mutual aid didn't come out of nowhere. Irena's grandmother (Anna's great-grandmother) had always told her to

pay attention to the poor and those in need. When grandma would find a piece of bread on the ground, she would pick it up, kiss it, place it somewhere high for the birds to eat, and tell her granddaughter Irena, “Remember, there are people who suffer from hunger. They have no money even for a piece of bread.” Irena wrote in her memoir that she tried to instill the same commitment in her own children.

Anna lives in southern Italy, where she has worked for many years as a family doctor. But Anna continued a tradition of care that had been passed down to her and that professional medicine had tried to eliminate. Patients would come to her clinic, but she also insisted on visiting her patients at their homes. She wanted to understand their lives, their daily conditions. She wanted to see the whole. Anna also wanted to reduce the power imbalance between doctor and patient. “Now I was a guest at their home,” she told me, “not The Doctor who has all the power.” Today, retired from medical practice, when Anna goes out to the market, she is often stopped by her former patients who update her on their ailments, their lives, their ways of coping. These relationships of care continue.

Our process was simple. Anna would read a draft chapter, we would talk, she would do some more reading, and then she would, in her words, “go wild” on the page—a tribute to her mother’s “wildness” in the Warsaw ghetto. The results were stunning. I couldn’t stop looking at Anna’s drawings. The text inspired the drawings, but the drawings then changed how I see things—a beautiful dialectical relationship. I felt like there must be something magical about the materials if they could spark these illustrations. This gave me the power to continue. I titled the illustrations, with Anna’s approval.

Anna’s drawings tickle the senses. They “can be read,” as Anna puts it, for hours to find new connections. Working with Anna has been a blessing, a gift. And her drawings are gifts to the world.

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The historian and activist Walter Rodney once wrote that it's a symptom of bourgeois mentality to thank those who have helped us with some work and yet claim all mistakes as our own. What we say and do, whether good or bad, is never just our own responsibility. We are products of our ancestors, the world we live in, and the people around us. I feel much less responsible for this book than any of my previous writings. And I am grateful to so many.

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Finally, my endless thanks (to infinity and beyond . . .) to Lauren, Azoul, and Bloom for their love and for the life we're making together. And to the rest of the family for all their love and support.

Playlist

Introduction

1. “Di Shvue” by Isabel Frey. *Millenial Bundist*. CPL-Music, 2020.
2. “In Ale Gasn / Daloy Politsey [featuring Adrienne Cooper].” *In Love and In Struggle: The Musical Legacy of the Jewish Labor Bund*. The Workers Circle, 1999.
3. “Dalloy Polizei [Fuck the Police]” by Geoff Berner. *Victory Party*. Mint Records, 2011.
4. “Oy Ir Narishe Tsionistn [featuring Psoy Korolenko]” by Daniel Kahn & the Painted Bird. *The Internationale: The First Internationale*. Auris Media, 2008.
5. “One Nation Under a Groove” by Funkadelic. *One Nation Under a Groove*. Warner Bros, 1978.

Chapter 1

6. “Go Down Moses” by Louis Armstrong and the All Stars, with the Sy Oliver Choir. *Louis and the Good Book*. Brunswick Records, 1958.
7. “Zog Nit Keynmol” by Paul Robeson. *The Collector’s Paul Robeson*. Monitor Records, 1991.

Chapter 2

8. “Uncle Moses Wedding Dance (Live)” by Isle of Klezbos. *Live from Brooklyn*. Rhythm Media Records, 2014.

9. “Di Shvue” by Zahava Seewald and Psamim. *Ashkenaz Songs II: Work and Revolution*. Sub Rosa, 2007.

Chapter 3

10. “Ma Yiddishe Mama” by Salim Halali. *L’Essential*. Atoll Music, 2005.
11. “Ale Brider” by the Klezmatics. *Shvaygn = Toyt*. Piranha, 1989.
12. “Oy, Avram” by the Klezmatics. Soundtrack to Gregg Bordowitz’s film *Fast Trip, Long Drop* (1993).
13. “In Kamf” by Lin Jaldati. *Jiddische Lieder*. BMG Aris Ariola, 1997.

Chapter 4

14. “Nisim Venifloes,” a Yiddish rhyme:

*Der rebe tut vunder,
lkh hob aleyen gezen:
Er geyt arayn in vaser,
Un kumt aroys a naser.*

*Ay, ay, ay, ay, ay, ay, ay,
Nisim venifloes!*

The rabbi does wonders,
I’ve seen them myself:
He goes into the water and comes out all wet.

Ay, ay, ay
Miracles and wonders!

Chapter 5

15. “The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants” by Dori Midnight and friends. *Ancestralization*. Jewish Ancestral Healing, 2022.

Chapter 6

16. “Please Mr. Foreman” by Joe L. Carter. *As The Years Go Passing By / Please Mr. Foreman*. Hi Records, 1971.
17. “Mayn Rue Plats / Where I Rest” by Daniel Kahn & the Painted Bird. *Partisans & Parasites*. Oriente Musik, 2009.

Notes

Introduction

- 1 Ehrenreich and Ehrenreich, *American Health Empire*, 6.
- 2 Zionism is originally a Christian Protestant idea, a belief that “returning” the Jews to the Holy Land (Palestine) would bring about the second coming of Christ, at which point Jews could either embrace Christianity or face eternal damnation. In the nineteenth century, Zionism was taken up by European Jews who, backed by European Christian powers that wanted to remove the Jews from Europe and use them as pawns in a geopolitical game, made it into a settler-colonial movement. This movement aimed to settle Europe’s Jews in Palestine and dispossess the non-Jewish natives of their lands. (It was only after the Holocaust, when too few European Jews were left, that the Zionist movement seriously began recruiting Arab and North African Jews, whom they considered inferior, as settlers.) The Zionist movement was inspired by other European colonial movements of the time, as well as by nationalist and fascist ideologies. While the Zionist movement claimed its goal was to create a safe place for (European) Jews, it also promised from the beginning to serve imperial Christian interests. Today, there are far more Christian Zionists in the US alone than there are Jews in the world, and the state of Israel has continually advanced the interests of overwhelmingly Christian, US, and European governments: Beit-Hallahmi, *Israeli Connection*; International Jewish Anti-Zionist Network (IJAN), “Israel’s Worldwide Role in Repression.” For more on the Christian origins of Zionism, see

Sharif, *Non-Jewish Zionists*; Rabkin and Reed, *What Is Modern Israel?*, chap. 3; R. O. Smith, *More Desired*.

- 3 For example, the practice of inoculation, which protects from infectious diseases such as smallpox, was introduced to European settlers in North America in the eighteenth century by an enslaved West African who knew it as folk practice from back home (many settlers resisted his lifesaving advice). Conner, *People's History of Science*, 101–6; Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, chap. 2. Some other reliable healing practices have been co-opted and commodified by the medical industry, while others have been suppressed.
- 4 For some of many examples, see Milstein, *There Is Nothing So Whole*; A. Levins Morales, *Story of What Is Broken*; and Kohanski, “Be Whole.”
- 5 Levins, “Road to Wholeness.”
- 6 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 112–13.
- 7 For an accessible introduction, see Wimpfheimer, *The Talmud*.
- 8 Zellman, “Holiness of Twilight.”
- 9 Bazant, *Timtum*.
- 10 The phrase “a chain of broken chains” comes from Dan Libenson, cohost of the *Judaism Unbound* podcast.
- 11 The idea that Jews are “overrepresented” in radical leftist movements appears in many works, including thoughtful ones that either don’t explicitly count Jews or do much more than count Jews. But it’s still taken as a fact that indicates something deep about how Jewishness predisposes people to radical politics. An influential and typical formulation is that “Jews demonstrated a disproportionate affinity for radicalism” and that they “played an extraordinarily disproportionate role in socialism and other radical movements.” Sorin, *Prophetic Minority*, ix, 1.
- 12 One of Marx’s racist conclusions is that Jewish identity is an artifact of exploitative financial and trading systems, and that once capitalism is overthrown, there will be no reason to be Jewish. We find his contempt for Jewishness not only in his famous essay “On the Jewish Question” and in his infamous slurring of socialist Ferdinand Lassalle as a “Jewish n—r,” but also in several parts of *Capital* where Marx referred to Jews as one of the

“trading nations” that is based on either an immature stage of civilization “or on direct relations of dominance and servitude.” In his explanations, Jews sometimes represent the trickery of capitalists. Marx, *Capital*, 172–73, 265–66. These examples fit into the broader racist worldview that Marx and Engels had, which I’ll return to in chapter 6.

- 13 Zionists leaders embraced eugenics early on, although as expected with discourses on “race,” their positions were contradictory, mixing notions of Jewish superiority and inferiority. Theodor Herzl originally wanted the Jews in Europe to eliminate themselves by mass conversion to Christianity but later decided that if they migrated to Palestine and created a state, it would be “an outpost of civilization,” and that “the return of even the semi-Asiatic Jews under the leadership of thoroughly modern persons must undoubtedly mean the restoration to health of this neglected corner of the Orient” (while also serving as “protection of the Christians in the Orient”). Zionist leader Max Nordau emphasized the importance of eugenics to the Zionist movement: “We need an entire anthropological, biological, economic, and intellectual statistics of the Jewish people. . . . We must have statistical answers to the questions: How are the Jewish people physically constituted? What is their average size? What are their anatomical particularities? What are their figures for sickness and mortality? How many days are they sick on average per year? What is their lifespan? From which diseases does the Jew die? What is his marriage and childbirth rate? How many criminals, mentally ill, deaf-mutes, cripples, blind, and epileptics do the Jewish people have? Do they have a particular criminality, and what sort is it?” Efron, *Defenders of the Race*, 168–69. Arthur Ruppin, the eugenicist founder of Tel-Aviv, believed that Jews were an impure mixture of the three races in his taxonomy: “white,” “yellow,” and “black.” Ruppin, *Sociology of the Jews*, 9. Ruppin also thought it was the Zionist movement’s task to select the best “human material” for settlement in Palestine: “We shall have to limit ourselves, in regard to the physical equipment of immigrants, to rejecting those individuals who are dangerous by virtue of some infectious disease

(syphilis, advanced tuberculosis, etc.) or are likely to become public charges (the mentally deranged, epileptics, all those who are prevented by sickness from making a living). The elimination of such persons should be taken care of by the doctors of the Palestine Immigration Offices in the ports of sailing; but a second examination should take place in Palestine in the ports of arrival." Quoted in Sufian, "Mental Hygiene and Disability." As Sandra Sufian notes, Zionists in Palestine in the 1930s sent hundreds of Jewish settlers who were deemed "defective" back to Europe, including after Hitler passed the notorious 1933 Law for the Prevention of Offspring with Hereditary Diseases. For more on the connection between Zionism and eugenics, see Falk, *Zionism*, chap. 2; M. Weiss, *Chosen Body*, 1–26; El-Haj, *Genealogical Science*, chap. 2; Hirsch, "Zionist Eugenics"; and Sufian, "Mental Hygiene and Disability."

- 14 Glubb, *Zionist Relations with Nazi Germany*, chaps. 1–2; Brenner, *Zionism*, chaps. 1–2; M. Weiss, *Chosen Body*, 15–26. Herzl famously declared, "The anti-Semites will become our most dependable friends, the anti-Semitic countries our allies." Herzl, *Complete Diaries of Theodor Herzl*, 84. An Austro-Hungarian who revered Germanic culture, Herzl also wrote a wildly racist rant, titled "Mauschel," that was aimed mainly at Eastern European Jews and scolded them for being anti-Zionists. It appeared after the First Zionist Congress. Herzl, "Mauschel."
- 15 Ariella Aïsha Azoulay shows how the discipline of history serves imperialism by treating the past as forever gone, something that exists only in archives and museums—a framing that is meant to make us believe all the world-destroying violence is totally irreversible. Azoulay, *Potential History*, chap. 1.
- 16 Joseph, *Jewish Immigration*, 95.
- 17 Sachar, *History*, 13; Brodsky and Leibman, *Jews Across the Americas*, 110.
- 18 Historians often dismiss any mention of Eastern European Jews "fleeing pogroms" as a "trope." This is in part because some studies show that the frequency of pogroms in Eastern European towns isn't a major predictor of emigration from those towns. However, this doesn't mean that pogroms were never a

factor in people's decision to leave; in some cases, they certainly were. In this book, I take the approach of accepting people's stories about their family at face value. A story passed down in the family about ancestors who had fled Eastern Europe because of pogroms can still shape, in very real ways, the lives of the descendants—whether it was the “real” reason for leaving or not (and the “real” reason is anyhow often unknowable).

19 Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition*, 23; Fishman, *Jewish Radicals*, 4–7.

20 E. Goldstein, *Price of Whiteness*, 96, 102.

21 J. T. E. Richardson, *Howard Andrew Knox*; Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 43.

22 Washington, *Medical Apartheid*; Stern, *Eugenic Nation*; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

23 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 440.

24 Sorin, *Prophetic Minority*, 46; Sampson, “Yiddishe Bread & Roses.”

25 For a discussion of the uses of *doikayt* prior to World War II and how the term became associated with the Bund, see Casper, “‘Principled Diasporism.’” My interest isn’t in the historical question of who used the term first and what the range of uses were but rather in how people practiced *doikayt* in their own contexts (their own *do*), giving it new layers of meaning, including sometimes by projecting their understanding onto the past in ways that historians consider inaccurate or anachronistic.

26 Consider, for example, the work of siblings Abraham and Evelyn Serfaty, anti-Zionist Moroccan Jews who were members of the Moroccan Communist Party and suffered severe repression for their political activities. In 1982, Abraham Serfaty wrote a letter from a Moroccan prison, which he addressed, “*To my brother and sister Arab Jews, oppressed in Israel.*” Israel, he argues, “is founded on a racist ideology [Zionism], one which has nothing to do with the religion of our forefathers and which was rejected from the beginning by the rabbis of Europe, of America, and of the Arab countries. . . . Zionism is contrary to the glorious history, spanning more than a millennium, of Arab and Mediterranean Judaism, which was historically forged in symbiosis with Islam within the Arab civilization.” Serfaty

emphasizes that Zionism “is above all a racist ideology. It is the Jewish counterpart of Hitlerism. Hitler made the Jews the least of the ‘races’ . . . along with Arabs. Zionism does not change this hierarchy, other than to make Jews the first of the ‘races.’” He calls on Arab Jews to ally themselves with Palestinians and other non-Jewish Arabs rather than with the Zionist state. Serfaty, “Letter to the Damned.” See also Heckman, “Evelyn Serfaty.” By contrast, Bundist anti-Zionism could be paper-thin when it came to showing solidarity with the main resisters and victims of Zionism, the Palestinians.

- 27 Slucki, “Here-Ness, There-Ness.” To the credit of Bundists who ended up in ’48 Palestine (“Israel”) after World War II, in a society so antithetical to what they fought for and after they had lost so much, they did write about how Palestinians were being made into refugees, just like the Jews of Europe. These Bundists also express clearly how the Zionist state was destroying their own culture. Aharon Shapira, a member of the Bund, says, “Here in the land [*ha’aretz*], first, in the schools, the Zionists took our children and detached them from our culture, from the Yiddish culture, from everything. Very simple. That’s what the Zionists did. Well, what [can I do], I am weak, compared to [them]—not just me, all the Bund, all the Jews here, my generation is weak, they couldn’t struggle [against it]. We didn’t have the means to struggle. Without money, without nothing. That’s it, that’s how it was. They defeated Yiddish culture.” These words are from Eran Torbiner’s 2012 film *Bunda’im*.
- 28 Quoted in Massad, “Zionism’s Internal Others.”
- 29 Jack Jacobs, *Bundist Counterculture in Interwar Poland*.
- 30 Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 38.
- 31 Rosenberg, forward to *The Bund*, x (italics in original).
- 32 B. Goldstein, *Five Years*, 20.
- 33 Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*, chap. 5.
- 34 Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*, 41–44. Henry Tobias describes the *kassy* as “embryonic trade unions” and suggests that “in the organization of the *kases*, workers, worker-propagandists, and intellectuals came together in a meaningful way for the first time.” Tobias, *Jewish Bund in Russia*, 21.

- 35 Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*, 22.
- 36 For clear articulations of anarchist principles and tactics, see Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*; Anderson, *Nation on No Map*. Like Anderson, I am looking for anarchistic practices wherever they are, regardless of labels and without assuming they have to be related to the European anarchist movements that formed in the nineteenth century. For example, the “tenement committees” organized in the Warsaw ghetto, as described by Bernard Goldstein, strike me as a great example of anarchistic organizing—even if most of the people involved didn’t identify as anarchists or have any familiarity with the canonical European anarchist thinkers. B. Goldstein, *Five Years*, 61. For discussions of Jewish anarchists in the US who did embrace the label, see Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*; Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*; and Torres, *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish*. See also the film *Free Voice of Labor: The Jewish Anarchists* (1980), directed by Steven Fischler and Joel Sucher.
- 37 Stanislawski, “Kahal”; Levitats, *Jewish Community in Russia*, 61–2. The *kahal* was far from being universally loved, however. In some cases, it sold out the poorest members of the community in order to protect the richest. Fishman, *Jewish Radicals*, 7.
- 38 Quoted in Frankel, *Prophecy and Politics*, 33. Later in the same piece, Lieberman basically articulates *doikayt* (without using the term), writing, “The Russian peasant—he is our brother; for us socialists there are no differences in nationality or race.” Lieberman, *Kitvei*, 65.
- 39 Lieberman, *Kitvei*, 76.
- 40 Zecker, *Road to Peace and Freedom*, 9.
- 41 Thompson, “Toward a Brighter Dawn.” She added Patterson to her name after marrying communist activist William Patterson.
- 42 The *Times* also blasts the police for not crushing the boycott earlier “without mercy.” *New York Times*, “Real Police Problem.”
- 43 Sorin, *Prophetic Minority*, 81.
- 44 Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 167.
- 45 Orleck, *Common Sense*, chap. 6.
- 46 Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition*, chap. 5.
- 47 Lipson, “Before N.W.A.’s ‘Fuck Tha Police.’”

- 48 This translation comes from Daniel Kahn and Psoy Korolenko, who recorded the song in a mix of Yiddish, English, and Russian in 2008. The Yiddish lyrics speak of preferring to stay in *rusland* (Russia), which Kahn translates as “the diaspora.” There are several variants of the song, which communities sometimes preserved in their memory books. One variant is titled “Oh, you bourgeois Zionists.” Lewinsky and Stock, *Reshumot*, 231. Often the lyrics will contain a verse about the “smart Bundists.” Lehman, *Arbet Un Frayhayt*, 70–73.
- 49 Napoleon’s creation of a “Sanhedrin” in 1807, a Jewish court, after the so-called emancipation of the Jews in France, is a good example of how the state tries to make minority populations governable by imposing a “secular” (in truth, Christian) framework. In Napoleon’s Sanhedrin, as Ariella Aïsha Azoulay writes, “the notables assembled from all over Europe had to answer twelve questions given to them by the government, and the High Court was required to assess their answers. . . . This assembly of official Jews was used to approve the narrow top-down Judaism allowed by the state.” Azoulay, *Jewelers of the Ummah*, 216–19. It was, Azoulay concludes, “an attempt to reduce the meaning of Jewish life to fit the state’s conception of religion.” Azoulay, 177–78. In addition to the problems with the category “religion,” there are issues with the category “Judaism”—that supposed “religion” of the Jews. Daniel Boyarin emphasizes that there’s no word for “Judaism,” as understood today, in Jewish languages such as Yiddish or Hebrew (the medieval Hebrew word *yahadut* didn’t acquire the relevant meaning until much later). The concept of Judaism as we know it today only formed in the nineteenth century. Boyarin, *Judaism*.
- 50 Huberband, *Kiddush Hashem*, 249–51.
- 51 For discussions of this Haggadah, see Schuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*; and Enkin Lewis et al., “Hagode Shel Peysekh.” The phrase “the rich bloodsuckers and oppressors” comes from my own translation of the Haggadah.
- 52 Burley, “Recovering Jewish Anarchism”; Torres, *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish*, 105.
- 53 Y. Katz, “Intelligence Under Racial Capitalism.”

- 54 Galton, "Eugenics and the Jew." Galton collaborated on analyzing these photographs with one of his students, a Jewish eugenicist named Joseph Jacobs. Jacobs disagreed that all the Jewish schoolboys gave Galton a "cool, scanning gaze" but supported the application of racial science to Jews. He writes, "Mr Galton's composites say in a glance more than the most skilful physiognomist could express in many pages . . . the composites here given will doubtless form for a long time to come the best available definition of the Jewish expression and the Jewish type." Joseph Jacobs, *Studies in Jewish Statistics*, xxxiv. In his own racial science, Jacobs tried to quantitatively characterize things like the Jewish skull shape. Efron, *Defenders of the Race*, 86.
- 55 For examples of this myth that have all the bells and whistles (IQ tests, genes, and Ashkenazi superiority), see Pinker, "Groups and Genes"; Stephens, "Secrets of Jewish Genius"; and Farhi, "New York Times Columnist." For a discussion of some of the earlier contradictory appeals to "Jewish genius," see Gilman, *Jew's Body*, chap. 5. Even some anti-Zionist Jews play into the narrative of Jewish genius. One study contains a table with the number of Nobel prizes given to "Jews," "Protestants," and "Catholics," organized by discipline. The study counts Jews among the faculty of various universities and concludes, "There exists a disproportionate concentration of Jewish scientific talent at the elite universities of the United States." It speculates on the reasons for this "disproportionate" representation without any critical understanding of how science works ("The meritocratic aspect of science is of great importance in the integration of Jews in the scientific profession") and without any serious scrutiny of how "Jews" (and other groups) were being defined and counted for these racist number games. Rabkin, "Interaction."
- 56 As Murray's piece goes on, he gets tangled in knots, as eugenicists always do, when they try to make their contradictory theories seem logical. He concludes the piece by acknowledging he has entered the realm of "speculation" but that his conclusion is still backed by an "irrefutable" truth: "I take sanctuary in my remaining hypothesis, uniquely parsimonious and happily irrefutable. The Jews are God's chosen people." Chosen (by Murray)

to justify eugenics, that is. With such views, it's not surprising that Murray is a committed Zionist: Shamah, "Jewish Intellect."

- 57 For example, an important 2009 book on radical challenges to American science does mention a few of the Jewish radicals within Science for the People (SftP), such as Richard Levins, Richard Lewontin, and Rita Arditti, but presents them as generic SftP members while also indirectly suggesting that Jews simply excel in science: "After World War II, intellectual culture in the United States became more secularized . . . this occurred in part because of a widespread revulsion against the Nazi's extermination of millions of people singled out because they did not fit a particular vision of a Christian culture. Christianity thus became less powerful as a means of conveying legitimacy and worthiness in elite intellectual circles, especially in science, where many of the best scientists in the country were Jewish." Moore, *Disrupting Science*, 70. This narrative about a generic "widespread revulsion" obscures culturally specific forms of resistance to Nazism and Christian supremacy. A more recent and highly valuable book on SftP states that the movement "questioned the extent to which sex roles are biologically determined, and scrutinized the use of IQ testing as a metric for intelligence. Many SftP members and affiliated thinkers, including Anne Fausto-Sterling, Ruth Hubbard, Stephen Jay Gould, Steven Rose, Leon Kamin, Richard Lewontin, and Richard Levins, went on to write extensively on biological determinism, building a foundation for science and technology studies scholars who would scrutinize the entanglement of biology and politics in later years." Every single person listed in that sentence is Jewish (and most are descendants of Eastern European Jewish immigrants), but this isn't considered part of the story. Sigrid Schmalzer, Daniel S. Chard, and Alyssa Botelho, *Science for the People: Documents from America's Movement of Radical Scientists* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2018), 87. Another recent book, which uses Stephen Jay Gould's career as a foil for exploring critiques of American science, completely erases the Jewish experiences, memories, and histories when discussing Gould and other Jewish figures from SftP (such as Ruth Hubbard and Richard

- Levins). Perez, *Criticizing Science*. An earlier book on Gould's work does the same; the term "Jewish" doesn't even appear, and Gould, Levins, and Lewontin are presented as generic participants in "the Marxian tradition." York and Clark, *Science and Humanism*, 13.
- 58 Herrnstein and Murray correctly point out in their revised edition of *The Bell Curve* that the popularity of Gould's critique gave many people the false impression that all scientists have accepted that biological race was a discredited concept, but that he in fact represented a minority view among professional scientists.
- 59 Roberts, *Fatal Invention*, chap. 3; Whitt, *Science, Colonialism, and Indigenous Peoples*, chap. 5.
- 60 This was George Church. Isaacson, "What Gene Editing Can Do." For a similar view, see Anomaly, "Defending Eugenics."
- 61 C. J. Robinson, *Making*, 171.
- 62 INCITE!, *Revolution Will Not Be Funded*.
- 63 Winkler, *Magic of the Ordinary*, 67. Winkler translates *avrah k'dabra* as "I create what I speak," but I prefer "bring into being" over "create" because the Hebrew term for what comes into existence is *briah* (being).

Chapter I

- 1 After reading his work on eugenics, Darwin wrote this to Galton, in 1859, "I do not think I ever in all my life read anything more interesting and original—and how well and clearly you put every point! . . . You have made a convert of an opponent in one sense, for I have always maintained that, excepting fools, men did not differ much in intellect, only in zeal and hard work; and I still think this is an eminently important difference." Pearson, *Life, Letters and Labours*, 6. Eugenics was in fact consistent with Darwin's hierarchical view of humanity; on his colonial voyages, he describes the Indigenous people he saw in Tierra del Fuego as inferior because they seemed to lack private property and preferred to share their wealth. See Darwin, *Voyage of the Beagle*, 245. The captain of the HMS *Beagle* who

- took Darwin on these voyages, Robert FitzRoy, kidnapped some of the Fuegian Natives and attempted to Christianize them.
- 2 Stern, *Eugenic Nation*; Washington, *Medical Apartheid*.
- 3 The Hebrew word *mitzrayim* in Shemot could be translated as “the narrow place.”
- 4 Shemot 1:16.
- 5 Shemot 1:19.
- 6 Hammer and Shere, *Hebrew Priestess*, 149.
- 7 In their later journey in the desert, Moses’s siblings, Miriam and Aaron, criticize Moses for marrying Zipporah, who is described as a “Cushite woman” (Bamidbar 12:1). God then strikes Miriam (but not Aaron) with disease and orders that she “be shut out of camp [of the Israelites] for seven days” (Bamidbar 12:14). Moses complies. In contemporary Hebrew, *cushi* has become a derogatory term for a Black person, similar to the “n” word in English.
- 8 Roberts, *Fatal Invention*.
- 9 Shemot 5:11.
- 10 Klein, *Time to Be Born*, 123, 292nn3–4. The interpretation of Shifra’s name is from Jacob ben Asher (Ba’al HaTurim); see Kitzur Ba’al HaTurim on Shemot 1:15. For Puah’s name, see Sotah 11b:13 along with Rashi’s commentary. All references to the Talmud in this book are to the Babylonian Talmud unless otherwise noted.
- 11 Shemot Rabbah 13:1.
- 12 J. Katz, “Jewish Midwives in History.” Roza bat Yukel delivered 830 babies born to Jewish women between 1794–1813, according to the register. She also delivered babies from non-Jewish women, but that register was not found.
- 13 J. Katz, “Jewish Midwives in History.”
- 14 J. Katz, “Jewish Midwives in History.”
- 15 Quoted in Carlebach, “Community, Authority, and Jewish Midwives.”
- 16 Carlebach, “Community, Authority, and Jewish Midwives.” Elisheva Carlebach also notes that “if the midwife served a large community, women from the surrounding rural area, the destitute, or women who went into labor on the road would expect to be accommodated in the *hekdes* (a combination of

hostel and infirmary) of the large community and the midwife would attend to them there.” Even poor women who gave birth in the *hekdes*h, according to Carlebach, were given not only a midwife but also assistance after birth.

- 17 Carlebach, “Community, Authority, and Jewish Midwives”; Zinger, “‘Like Puah and Shiprah.’”
- 18 Quoted in Zinger, “‘Like Puah and Shiprah.’”
- 19 Quoted in Zinger, “‘Like Puah and Shiprah.’”
- 20 Quoted in Cohen and Siegel, *Ashkenazi Herbalism*, 37.
- 21 *Jewish Daily Forward*, April 20, 1924.
- 22 Shemot’s cautionary tale about racial capitalism has inspired many Jewish workers. For example, as Hadassa Kosak argues, in New York City in the late nineteenth century, “Egyptian slavery became a symbol for the toiling garment workers, while the Pharaoh’s enslavement of the Jews was used as a metaphor for the attempts of autocratic employers to subdue the workers by imposing inhuman conditions.” Jewish labor organizers would give speeches to workers that reference their own ancestors who were “enslaved by Egyptian taskmasters and likewise had to throw off their yoke.” Kosak, *Cultures of Opposition*. In I. J. Singer’s novel *The Brothers Ashkenazi* (1936), Jewish hand-weavers in Łódź, Poland, go on strike and likewise invoke Israelite slavery. In addition to their grueling workday without food or drink, the boss has required them to supply their own candles for working in the dark factory. The workers frame their demands in the terms of Shemot: “The full-time workers, seasonal workers, and apprentices who board at their employers’ must receive food that is fattened, likewise, their coffee must contain milk and sugar, for he who does not feed his workers and demands of them work may be likened to the Egyptians who did not supply straw, yet demanded bricks.” Singer, *Brothers Ashkenazi*. There are many other examples of Shemot’s echoes in labor struggles.
- 23 Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*.
- 24 These are the words of Ya’acov Silberberg from the 2021 documentary film *We Wept Without Tears* (*Bachino Bli Dma’ot*), directed by Gideon Greif and Itay Lev.

25 Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 210–11.

26 Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 96.

27 Nyiszli, *Auschwitz*, 96.

28 Dr. Gisella Perl describes this subversion in her memoir: “How should we hide our typhoid cases from him [Josef Mengele]? Up to that day, it had sufficed if we said that the patient had pneumonia, but a Vidal reaction would give us all away . . . Instead of taking blood tests from our typhoid cases, we took samples of each other’s blood and gave it to Dr. Mengerle. The tests were negative, and the patients were saved.” Perl, *I Was a Doctor*, 64. Perl is referring here to a blood test developed by Georges-Fernand Widal in the late nineteenth century, which tests for the presence of an antigen and can be performed quickly on a glass slide.

29 Nyiszli writes in his memoir that he did not participate in the planning of the Sonderkommando uprising.

30 Gutman, *Anashim Ve-Efer*, 153.

31 Historian Laurence Rees claims that the Sonderkommando uprising interrupted the gassing of a group of women who were already in the gas chamber waiting for their “shower,” and that at least one of these women, Alice Lok Cahana, survived the war—meaning the uprising saved her life, at the very least. Rees, *Auschwitz*, 244. Other writers cite Rees for this claim—for example, Serafini, *Blessed Is the Flame*, 92–93. However, in her testimony, Cahana makes no mention of the uprising, and says that the gas facility simply didn’t work that time. “I think that was the only time in Auschwitz that the gas did not work,” she recalls. Cahana says that the Nazis shouted, “That never happened before!” and took the women back to the barracks. Alice Cahana, “Interview with Alice Cahana.” Of course, the Sonderkommando uprising was valuable regardless.

32 This Sonderkommando survivor was Abraham Dragon. See Greif, *We Wept Without Tears*, 172–73.

33 Jerusalem Talmud, Sanhedrin 4:9.

34 Roland, *Courage Under Siege*, 27.

35 B. Goldstein, *Five Years*, 64–66; Auerbach, *Warsaw Testament*, 51–52.

- 36 Bielicka-Blum managed to get out of the ghetto before the armed uprising that was organized in part by her husband, Abrasza Blum. He was murdered by the Gestapo after the uprising, but Luba and their children survived the war.
- 37 Roland, *Courage Under Siege*, 209.
- 38 Krall, *Shielding the Flame*, 43. Starting in my early teens, my mother would repeatedly tell me that she would never allow the state to conscript me into the Israeli army; that she would break my leg, run it over with her car, if necessary. She kept her promise—for which I'm eternally grateful—and luckily spared my leg. When I told her about Jewish nurses breaking legs to save people in the Warsaw ghetto, she said, "Maybe that's where I got the idea."
- 39 Offer, *White Coats in the Ghetto*, 255.
- 40 Suhl, *They Fought Back*, 82–83.
- 41 Quoted in Suhl, *They Fought Back*, 83.
- 42 Quoted in Suhl, *They Fought Back*, 83. Remba was captured during the Warsaw ghetto uprising of spring 1943 and sent to Majdanek concentration camp. Suhl writes that there, "Remba did everything he could to alleviate the sufferings of his fellow prisoners. He was especially close to the children, telling them stories, taking them for walks, making them forget, if even for a while, their horrible surroundings. In the end, like their beloved writer, [Janusz] Korczak, he went to the gas chambers with them." Suhl, *They Fought Back*, 84.
- 43 Krall, *Shielding the Flame*, 46. These are inspiring words, but through Edelman we can also see the limits of Bundist anti-Zionism and its lack of solidarity with anticolonial struggles. Edelman received much flak from the Zionist establishment for an open letter he wrote in 2002 that is addressed (in part) to Palestinian "partisans" (in Polish, *partyzanckich*). The use of "partisan" was taken to mean that Edelman was siding with the Palestinian armed struggle, perhaps even likening it to the Warsaw ghetto uprising in which he participated. But this interpretation ignores the substance of Edelman's letter, which normalizes the state of Israel, makes the usual false symmetries ("Both you [Palestinians] and the State of Israel have to radically

change your attitude”), and admonishes the Palestinian resistance fighters for *not* being more like the Jewish fighters of the Warsaw ghetto. Edelman writes that in the Warsaw ghetto uprising, “We fought for mere life, not for territory, nor for a national identity. We fought with hopeless determination, but our weapons were never directed against the defenceless civilian population, we never killed women and children. In the world devoid of principles and values, despite a constant danger of death, we did remain faithful to these values and moral principles. . . . We were never careless with life. We never sent our soldiers to certain death. Life is one for eternity. Nobody has the right to mindlessly take it away.” Edelman ends by calling on imperialists such as Bill Clinton to bring about “peace.” After Edelman’s position was challenged by the Palestinian ambassador to Poland, he gave an interview to the Polish press (August 8, 2002) where he clarifies that he isn’t on the Palestinians’ side. In his words, “I am not on any side, I just want the killing of each other in the Middle East to stop.” When asked by the interviewer what he thinks should be done, Edelman replied, “You have to start by drawing a thick line under the past. We can no longer dwell on who is to blame and why. We must look to the future.” Many Bundists ended up adopting similarly Zionist views, especially after 1948. I am grateful to Jerzy Giebułtowski for finding and translating Edelman’s interview.

44 Krall, *Shielding the Flame*, 45.

45 Remba’s offer to Korczak is described in Batorski, “‘He Didn’t Want to Leave.’”

46 B. Goldstein, *Five Years*, 135.

47 Witkowska-Krych, “Anna Braude-Heller.”

48 Turkow, *Yaldei Ha-Getto*, 42.

49 Brozan, “Out of Death.”

50 Perl, *I Was a Doctor*, 63. A prisoner at Auschwitz, “Ms. B,” who was from Sighet, Perl’s hometown, recalls Perl’s tender care for the prisoners: “Dr. Gisella Perl assisted Dr. Mengele during the day. However, at night Dr. Perl came into the barrack and administered an ointment with glue-like consistency to every sore, in order to heal this horrific rash. Dr. Perl came

periodically to Barrick No. 10 and also went to other barracks to administer this ointment. The rash needed several weeks to clear up; however, it would often return a few days later. In Auschwitz, there was a belief among the female prisoners that the soup we were given to eat was drugged and the drug was the reason why we suffered from this horrific rash. Without Dr. Perl's medical knowledge and willingness to risk her life by helping us, it would be impossible to know what would have happened to me and to many other female prisoners. I lived in Sighet, the same town as Dr. Gisella Perl, until I was 16, when I was sent away to the ghetto. I remember what a wonderful reputation she had, and how well-known she was in our area. My mother was her patient, and my grandmother went to her husband, Dr. Krauss, who was an internist. When we [were] both in Auschwitz, I remember she was the doctor of the Jews there." "Personal Statements from Victims of Nazi Medical Experiments."

- 51 Perl, *I Was a Doctor*, 57. In the camps and ghettos, the Nazis had a deliberate policy of killing the prisoners' newborns, sometimes drowning the baby in front of the mother. They also forced pregnant women to have an abortion if the pregnancy was found before the third month. See Patterson, "Nazi Assault."
- 52 Perl, *I Was a Doctor*, 59.
- 53 See, for example, Ruth Elias's account of giving birth at Auschwitz: Yad Vashem, *Osim Zicharon*, Yad Vashem podcast, "Lehi-yot Isha Be-Auschwitz," 2021, <https://www.yadvashem.org/he/podcast/podcast-3.html>.
- 54 Perl, *I Was a Doctor*, 112–13.
- 55 Perl, *I Was a Doctor*, 113.
- 56 Brozan, "Out of Death."
- 57 Glenn, *Daughters of the Shtetl*, 42–43. For a detailed breakdown of Jewish immigration to the US in this period by place of origin and year, see Joseph, *Jewish Immigration*, 93–97.
- 58 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 1, 12.
- 59 Emma Goldman on Zionism: "I have for many years opposed Zionism as the dream of capitalist Jewry the world over for a Jewish State with all its trimmings, such as Government, laws, police, militarism and the rest. In other words, a Jewish State

machinery to protect the privileges of the few against the many.” Goldman, “Palestine and Socialist Policy.” For an account of one of Goldman’s attacks on Zionists, see Torres, *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish*, 1–2.

60 Kowal, *Tongue of Fire*, 3–4.

61 Emma Goldman, letter from Emma Goldman to Johanna Mrachnyi, February 3, 1935, Mark Mrachnyi Papers, 1922–1940, box 1, folder 18, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. As Anna Elena Torres notes, in her writing in English, Goldman often “plays on the ambiguity of *yidish*, which could be either ‘Jewish’ or ‘Yiddish.’” Torres, *Horizons Blossom, Borders Vanish*, 230.

62 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 2, 571.

63 Goldman was offered an opportunity to study medicine by people sympathetic to her struggles, but these funders said they would not continue funding her “unless she promised to withdraw from further activism”; Goldman rejected their offer. Goldman, *Vision on Fire*, 5.

64 In the US, this transition away from midwifery was sharp. In 1900, half of births were attended by midwives, but by 1935 it was only about 16 percent. By 1972, 99 percent of births were attended by physicians. This coincided with a shift from birthing at home to birthing at hospitals: In 1900, less than 5 percent of births were in hospitals, in 1940 it was one-half, and by 1960 nearly all births took place at hospitals. R. Hubbard, *Politics of Women’s Biology*, 149. See also Brodsky, “Where Have All the Midwives Gone?”

65 Courter, *Midwife*, 24. Hannah brings an assistant to help her get the birthing woman on her hands and knees. Hannah then uses “a gentle rocking motion . . . to both soothe her and balance her on the bed.” This quickly induces the baby to reorient on its own, head down. Gravity assists, and the baby comes out without the need for forceps or other potentially damaging instruments. Hannah was trained by an experienced midwife from Odessa (“Bubbe [grandmother] Schtern”) to avoid these instruments: “Hannah hated instrument deliveries, not only because they were forbidden to midwives but also because she

suspected the doctors used them too frequently and too precipitously. Even [Doctor] Petrograv, with his skill and caution, risked tearing maternal tissues as well as damaging the baby's delicate skull. And the other doctors were worse! They enjoyed comparing their shiny tools, discussing the merits of the different handcrafted leather handles, ordering new velvet-lined storage cases. They used their tools as frequently as possible, if only to justify their expense. Determined not to permit poor Madame to suffer the trauma of the blades or the loss of yet another child, Hannah decided to proceed as best she could." Courter, *Midwife*, 22–27.

66 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 1, 185.

67 On Sanger's racism and commitment to eugenics, see Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, chap. 2; Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 195–202.

68 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 2, 590.

69 Sanger, *Margaret Sanger*, 72.

70 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 1, 185–86.

71 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 1, 186.

72 Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 61.

73 Avrich, *Anarchist Voices*, 78. Along similar lines, an extensive history of Emma Goldman's life notes that in spring of 1903, "for many weeks, EG nursed a patient ill with tuberculosis in Liberty, New York." Emma Goldman, *Emma Goldman*, 471.

74 Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, 189–90; Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 90–91.

75 R. Hubbard, "Eugenics and Prenatal Testing."

76 Emma Goldman Clinic, "Emma Goldman Clinic Mission Statement," 321.

77 Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, chap. 3.

78 Emma Goldman Clinic, "Emma Goldman Clinic Mission Statement," 323.

79 Emma Goldman, "Woman Suffrage," 211.

80 Those who worked in the organization never called it Jane, usually referring to it as "the Service" (if at all). The label Jane was attached to the group by others later. See Judith Arcana, interview by Paula Kamen (1993), Charles Deering McCormick

Library of Special Collections and University Archives, Northwestern University Libraries; Arcana, *Hello. This Is Jane*, 135. I will nonetheless refer to the group as Jane, since it aimed to do far more than just provide a service.

- 81 Abortion Counseling Service, “Abortion.”
- 82 Quoted in Kluchin, “‘Pregnant? Need Help? Call Jane.’” Jeanne Galatzer-Levy, one of the Janes, recalls, “people would hand me the money and I would take it, and then I would shove it into my pocket. I never counted it. And I don’t think anybody ever counted it . . . sometimes they would say when they handed me, I don’t have all this [money], and I would say it doesn’t matter.” Galatzer-Levy, “On the Job with Jane.”
- 83 Pildes and Lessin, *Janes*.
- 84 Kaplan, *Story of Jane*, 114; De Costa, “St Anthony’s Fire and Living Ligatures”; Haarmann et al., “Ergot.”
- 85 Kluchin, “‘Pregnant? Need Help? Call Jane.’”
- 86 Kluchin, “‘Pregnant? Need Help? Call Jane.’”
- 87 Quoted in Kluchin, “‘Pregnant? Need Help? Call Jane.’”
- 88 Kluchin, “‘Pregnant? Need Help? Call Jane.’”
- 89 Jewish Women’s Archive, *Can We Talk?*, podcast, episode 70, “Jane: Abortion Before Roe,” December 21, 2021.
- 90 Jewish Women’s Archive, “Jane.”
- 91 In reflecting on the police raid, Jeanne Galatzer-Levy says, “We were really middle class savvy people,” adding that they knew not to talk to the cops. Galatzer-Levy recalls that the arrested Janes’ lawyer told them, “You’re the best clients I ever had, people talk to the police all the time and you guys didn’t, I love you.” Galatzer-Levy, “On the Job with Jane.” But that did not stop some Janes from telling the cops how they feel about them. During the raid, the Janes had a pork roast in the oven, and when a cop asked, “What’s for lunch?” one Jane responded, “pig.” Pildes and Lessin, *Janes*.
- 92 Pildes and Lessin, *Janes*.
- 93 Arcana changed her name in 1975 (before then, she was also known by her married name, Judith Pildes). She changed her last name to Arcana after starting her tarot reading practice.
- 94 Interview with Judith Arcana, January 18, 2024.

- 95 Jewish Women's Archive, "Jane."
- 96 Interview with Judith Arcana.
- 97 Hurwitz, *Workmen's Circle*, 178–79.
- 98 Arcana and Leveen, "Conversations Begin with Questions."
- 99 Interview with Judith Arcana.
- 100 Judith 9:11.
- 101 Judith 9:10. For a queer retelling of the story, see Elana June Margolis and Aleksei Cohen Wagner's short film *Judith: A Hanukkah Story* (featuring Dori Midnight, whose work is discussed in chapter 5).
- 102 Interview with Judith Arcana.
- 103 Arcana, "Fiction, Science." Arcana was deeply influenced by Goldman's writings. She visited Goldman's grave in Chicago, describing it as a spiritual experience. Interview with Judith Arcana.
- 104 Goldman, *Living My Life*, vol. 1, 370.
- 105 For the full poem and a discussion of Arcana's return to Jewishness, see Arcana and Leveen, "Conversations Begin with Questions."
- 106 Jewish Women's Archive, "Jane." Arcana also spoke of this need to take responsibility for life in a much earlier interview with Paula Kamen: "We are brought up to believe that what is unusual and frightening is to take responsibility for human life. But indeed I learned in the service that that's perverse, that it is normal to take responsibility for human life. For your own and the lives of the other people you care for. So that's what it's really about; it's not about some super macho and wonder woman kind of shit, it's about understanding that that's what we were supposed to be doing. That this is the way we're supposed to live." Arcana's words reminded me so much of Aaron Shmuel Lieberman's quote, given in the introduction of this book, about Jewish tradition being already radical and anarchistic ("Socialism is not alien to us. . . . The community is our existence; the revolution—our tradition. . . . Our ancient Jewish social structure—anarchy . . .," and so on). When I read that quote to Arcana, her response was, "I like it, yeah, sounds right to me." She speculated that Jewish affinity for anarchism "is probably

a result of having been the underdog, having been oppressed, et cetera, et cetera, more than what it says in the Bible, more than what God said to anyone in particular. . . . I think that an oppressed people, a despised people, get attitude. Sometimes they're just beaten down. But when they're not, the [anarchistic] attitude seems to me almost, you know, it's just an organic happening, I think. . . . It's part of the collective Jewish experience, not something rooted in that text per se." Interview with Judith Arcana.

Chapter 2

- 1 Mishnah Bikkurim 4:1. Hebrew is a gendered language in which nouns and verbs are either masculine or feminine, but this text beautifully mixes the two in describing *androgynos*. For example, the Hebrew phrase for "a created being of its own"—*briah bifnei atzmah hu*—mixes the feminine *briah* (created being) and feminine-singular *atzmah* with the masculine *hu* (he/him). A complication in translating this text is that the Hebrew masculine "he" sometimes functions as a generic pronoun. One could instead avoid gendered pronouns and use *hir* in place of "he" in English. See Strassfeld, "Translating the Human."
- 2 Bazant, *Timum*.
- 3 Interview with Micah Bazant, November 25, 2024.
- 4 Newman, "Love Letter to 'Timum'"; Newman, *House of Jacob / People Israel*; Fligl, *Ushpi(Zine)*. The Radical Jewish Calendar, published since 2016, also explores similar themes.
- 5 This is one of two creation stories given in Bereshit; the other story doesn't involve Adam's rib. For commentary on how these two creation stories relate to patriarchal gender roles, see Ladin, "Genesis of Gender."
- 6 For these examples and more, see Sienna, *Rainbow Thread*; Drinkwater et al., *Torah Queeries*; Kóatz, "Toldot Trans"; and Kukla, "Created Being of Its Own."
- 7 There are disagreements in the Talmud about what the distinguishing features of a *saris* or *aylonit* are. Some of the proposed identifiers of an *aylonit*, for example, include not having grown

two pubic hairs by age twenty, having no breasts, and experiencing pain during intercourse. One passage states that an *aylonit* “is anyone whose lower abdomen is not formed like that of other women, as she lacks the cushion of flesh that is usually situated above a woman’s genitals. Rabbi Shimon ben Elazar says: It is anyone whose voice is deep, so that it is not evident from it whether she is a woman or a man” (Yevamot 80b:6). For more on the ways in which the rabbis define and use these categories, see Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud*, chaps. 4–5; and Neis, *When a Human Gives Birth*, 167–68.

8 Shabbat 35b:17.

9 Margolin, “Twilight Judaism.” See also Bereshit 49:22–25.

10 Bereshit Rabbah 30:8. My own translation.

11 Isaiah 56:5.

12 Ladin, “Torah in Transition.”

13 Zellman, “Holiness of Twilight.”

14 Svara, “Svara.” See also S. Weiss, “Gay Yeshiva Takes Its Methods”; and Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud*, 1.

15 Lappe, “New Rabbis,” 314.

16 Not all queer and trans Jews see a liberatory potential in these rabbinical texts. In *Transgender Warriors*, Leslie Feinberg claims that the nonbinary categories of the Talmud were merely tools for protecting private property and maintaining social hierarchies. Feinberg writes that it is “important to remember that wealthy Hebrew males [in the period in which Mishnah and Talmud were compiled] were trying to consolidate their patriarchal rule. That means they were very much concerned about making distinctions between women and men, and eliminating any blurring or bridging of those categories. That would also explain why the rules of ownership of property and the rights of intersexual people were extensively detailed in Jewish law [referring to Talmud]. . . . The Hebrews and Judaism were not to blame for the rise of patriarchy or oppression. Class divisions were responsible for the growth of laws that placed new boundaries and restrictions across bodies, self-expression, and desire. . . . That transformation took place in societies all over the world.” Feinberg, *Transgender Warriors*, 51. Within

the queer Talmud and Torah world, there is also of course a range of views on whether these texts align with contemporary understandings of queer and trans liberation. Some see their Talmud study as bringing out and elaborating a queerness that is already there, a queerness that should be celebrated with neo-Hasidic joy, as in Xava de Cordova's saying that "Judaism is gay—I don't make the rules—everything Jewish is gay, the rabbis were gay, the rabbis were very gay, the rabbis were definitely hooking up in the *beit midrash*" (Xai, *how are you?*, podcast, episode 1, "The Talmud Is Gay," February 22, 2020). Shel Maala, an online queer yeshiva cofounded by de Cordova offers programs such as "Frootcamp: A Summer Shiur Series to Up Your Practical Gay Talmud Skills!" (August 2023). Along similar lines, Binya Kóatz, the other cofounder of Shel Maala, says, "I'm queer and Judaism's queer, and it is radical, and I don't run away from it to find my radicality or my queerness, I actually dive deeper in it. And as I dive deeper in it, Judaism gets queerer and more radical, and so do I." Pick, "Binya Kóatz's Oral History." Others see themselves as engaging in an intentionally "revisionist" and "anachronistic" interpretation of these rabbinical sources, reading them against what the authors might have intended, as Max Strassfeld does in *Trans Talmud*. Strassfeld is hesitant about interpreting *androgynos* and other nonbinary figures from rabbinical texts as liberatory because the price that such individuals had to pay for existing in the society of their day is unknown; moreover, Strassfeld rejects the idea that nonbinary Jews need to find people like themselves in an ancient and valorized source such as the Talmud in order to "prove" that they exist (they simply exist; they are here). But what seems to be shared by nearly all approaches in this space is the recognition that these are living texts, part of a dialectical tradition that values radical reinterpretations and grappling with contradictions. And even those who are enthusiastic about the liberatory queerness of the tradition, such as de Cordova or Kóatz, recognize the need to reckon with the painful elements of these sources and consider it legitimate to reject entire parts of the tradition (a move that is squarely within the tradition that

produced the Talmud). For engaging discussions of gender and queerness in Torah and Talmud, see episode 30, “Gender? In My Creation Story?” (September 6, 2020), and episode 86a, “Who Counts as What Gender?” (October 3, 2021), of the podcast *Xai, how are you?* (cohosted by Xava de Cordova). For a discussion about the significance of Talmud for trans struggles (with Max Strassfeld, Jules Gill-Peterson, and Joy Ladin), see *Jewish Currents*, “Talmud and Other Trans Archives.”

- 17 *Binah*, podcast, “QueerCore Talmud,” December 22, 2022.
- 18 Dan Libenson and Lex Rofeberg, hosts, *Judaism Unbound*, podcast, episode 200, “Educating Ourselves,” December 19, 2019. This statement would carry more weight if Svava took a stand against Zionism. But Svava’s position as a nonprofit (which pays large salaries and raised over \$2 million in 2022, according to tax records) makes it dependent on donors and attention from establishment Jewish institutions, meaning it cannot be anti-Zionist—unless it is willing to pay the price.
- 19 Libenson and Rofeberg, “Educating Ourselves.”
- 20 Kukla explained his family’s relationship to Jewishness in an interview. Kukla’s father was “a hidden child during Holocaust in Belgium and had orthodox grandparents who raised him after the war, in England. So he had a deep Jewish upbringing but later moved with his mother and stepfather who after the Holocaust became very much atheists.” Kukla’s mother, on the other hand, grew up with a “superficial reform upbringing in New Jersey and rejected it.” Kukla says that he “grew up with this combination of knowing my dad’s Holocaust history and mom’s New York Jewish family. So a lot of very strong cultural identification but no religion at all . . . I didn’t know what day Shabbat was, literally. Growing up I thought it was just Friday night; I didn’t know about the Saturday part. I grew up going to a Tibetan Buddhist temple and we tried out Hinduism . . . really anything but Judaism or Christianity . . . everything else, there was a Sufi temple in there, Zoroastrianism.” The family didn’t observe any Jewish holidays. “There was only one Passover which really stayed in my head,” Kukla says. “Out of the blue, when I was about six years old, my parents decided to do

a seder and I remember my dad reading from the Haggadah in Hebrew and I was like ‘What?! You know this magic language that goes backwards, and I had no idea?!’ My dad’s first language is Yiddish, his second language was French, and I had no idea that all of that was in there because I wasn’t raised with it.”

Interview with Elliot Kukla, August 17, 2023.

21 Silverstein and Soloman, “Forging New Pathways.”

22 D. Sterling, *Close to My Heart*, 163–67.

23 The writer Toni Morrison praised Sterling’s biography of Delany, calling it “an exhaustive, untampered-with, skillful retelling of a life of consequence.” For more on Delany’s work, see Rusert, *Fugitive Science*, chap. 4.

24 See opening words in D. Sterling, *Caterpillars*.

25 Philip Schatz changed his last name to Sterling in 1936. Dorothy Sterling describes Philip’s family and upbringing in her autobiography: “His parents had been Bundists (Jewish Socialists) in Russia. His father had been briefly exiled to Siberia for taking part in a May Day demonstration. Phil had grown up in Cleveland, attending Sunday school at the Socialist Labor Lyceum; and on one momentous occasion, he had presented a bouquet of roses to Eugene V. Debs, the Socialist leader.” D. Sterling, *Close to My Heart*, 82–83. Philip Sterling describes himself as “the son of a seasonally unemployed immigrant house painter” and recalls being interested, from a young age, in “the nature of our society,” which he says he “tried to understand in terms of the relationships between its constituent categories: rich and poor, rulers and ruled, employers and workers, privileged and oppressed.” Philip Sterling, *Real Teachers*, xv.

26 Interview with Anne Fausto-Sterling, August 10, 2023.

27 Personal communication with Anne Fausto-Sterling, August 10, 2023. Anne’s brother, Peter, on the other hand, says he didn’t hear much about Jewish socialism growing up, that their parents were focused mostly on “the Communist Party,” and that Philip’s parents, Velvel and Helen, didn’t visit often. Interview with Peter Sterling, September 7, 2023.

28 Interview with Peter Sterling.

- 29 Peter Sterling, "Why I Joined." *Current Biology*, 2021.
- 30 Peter Sterling, "Why I Joined."
- 31 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 421.
- 32 Dedication in Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*.
- 33 Fausto-Sterling, "Myth of Neutrality" (emphasis in original).
- 34 Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*, 12.
- 35 Herschberger, *Adam's Rib*. In looking through Ruth Herschberger's papers, I expected to find a rave response to *Adam's Rib*. Instead, I learned that by 1951, the book hadn't sold any copies in the US for a year and a half, and the publisher decided to discontinue it. Box 50, Ruth Herschberger Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Special Collections.
- 36 R. Hubbard, "Have Only Men Evolved?"; R. Hubbard, "Eugenics and Prenatal Testing"; Farnes and Hubbard, "Clitoridectomy in the U.S." Regarding Zionism, Hubbard writes, "I knew that my father was opposed to Zionism because, as a socialist, he was opposed to all manifestations of nationalism," Hubbard wrote to a friend. As for her own position: "I identify myself as a Jewish anti-Zionist. . . . I believe that the state of Israel is tainted at its root and should have never been founded, because it is founded on the expropriation of the native population of that land." Hubbard and Randall, *Shape of Red*, 186–87.
- 37 Hubbard wrote a book jacket endorsement for *Myths of Gender* as well as letters of support for Fausto-Sterling's grants, fellowships, and promotion at Brown University. Fausto-Sterling wrote to Hubbard in 1986 that the promotion process wasn't "without incident" and that "Asking to get admitted to the Big Club is too much of an affront to be responded to without some ritual feather preening." Box 1, folder 13, Ruth Hubbard Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute, Harvard University.
- 38 Hubbard writes that she rejected "the hierarchical ways" of her Harvard colleagues "whose interests lie in preventing progressive changes, not in making them happen." Hubbard and Randall, *Shape of Red*, 20–21. Hubbard's son, Elijah Wald, a writer and blues guitarist with whom she collaborated on critiques of racial science, says his mother cared far more about working

with feminist collectives, teaching all-women feminist courses, and volunteering for pregnancy counseling than about succeeding in science. Interview with Elijah Wald, July 27, 2023.

- 39 For an account of this race to find the genetic “master” switch for becoming male, see S. Richardson, *Sex Itself*, chap. 7.

- 40 Fausto-Sterling, “Life in the XY Corral.”

- 41 Sarah Richardson documents how the approach advanced by Fausto-Sterling (among others) eventually shaped mainstream biology’s accounts of sex determination: “By direct exposure, osmosis, and demographic transformation, gender criticism has begun to enter into the standard practices and discourse of sex chromosome research, leading to changes in the content of the science.” S. Richardson, *Sex Itself*, 126. The changes to the content of the science were significant, but the sources of this more critical framework were not acknowledged, as Richardson notes: “Fausto-Sterling’s 1989 critique of sex determination models is echoed by prominent researchers in the mainstream literature of the field today (though Fausto-Sterling is never cited). Researchers acknowledge the lack of research on the biology of female sex determination as a weakness in scientific theories of sexual development and sexual difference. In addition, in their current work, researchers seek to avoid language implying that male biological processes are active and dominant while female processes are passive and the default. When using the ideas of ‘sex’ and ‘gender,’ researchers take pains to resist the implication that biological sex maps plainly or directly onto social conceptions of sex and gender. Sex determination literature emphasizes a plurality of sexual phenotypes and multiple pathways to normal sexual development. In a variety of ways, in their scholarship, public commentary, and pedagogy, genetic sex determination researchers signal their awareness of feminist critiques of the *SRY* [Sex-determining Region Y, which was presented as the segment containing the ‘male gene’] model of sex determination and their sensitivity to the social consequences of scientific theories of sex and gender difference.” S. Richardson, *Sex Itself*, 140.

- 42 Chase, “Hermaphrodites with Attitude.”

- 43 Interview with Bo Laurent (formerly Cheryl Chase), May 2, 2025. Bo Laurent also wrote under the names Bo Sullivan and Bonnie Sullivan.
- 44 Fausto-Sterling, “Five Sexes.”
- 45 Interview with Anne Fausto-Sterling. Fausto-Sterling’s presentation of Talmud, Tosefta, and midrash in *Sexing the Body* is based on Hugh Young’s book *Genital Abnormalities* (1937), where he presents a history of “hermaphroditism,” including the non-binary categories found in rabbinical texts; see Young, *Genital Abnormalities*, 6–7. How did Young have access to these materials? In his book, he thanks Samuel Rosenblatt, a Baltimore rabbi, “for this translation of the Tosefta, which he [Rosenblatt] says has never been published except in the original Hebrew.” Young also mentions the midrash about Adam as *androgynos* from Bereshit Rabbah in his autobiography, *Hugh Young: A Surgeon’s Autobiography* (1940).
- 46 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, chap. 1. For Martínez-Patiño in her own words, see Martínez-Patiño, “Personal Account.” For more on the development of “sex testing” for sports and the link to white supremacy, see the case of South African runner Caster Semenya: Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 326–34.
- 47 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 56.
- 48 This is a matter of debate, since it is far from obvious whether or how conditions defined in modern medical terms (such as androgen insensitivity syndrome) map onto the Talmud’s non-binary categories. For example, Sally Gross interprets *tumtum* and *aylonit* to be “intersex categories,” writing that *aylonit* is “a woman without a womb—clearly someone who might suffer from complete androgen insensitivity syndrome.” Gross, “Intersexuality and Scripture.” However, sometimes the Mishnah uses *aylonit* to simply mean a woman who is suspected to be infertile, for instance in Mishnah Gittin 4:8, which discusses a case of a husband who divorces his wife because “she is an *aylonit*,” yet she later remarries and has children. Nonetheless, the loose similarity between intersex variations and the Talmud’s nonbinary formulations was enough for Rabbi Elliot Kukla and Rabbi Reuben Zellman to conclude, based on the Mishnah’s formulation of

androgynos, that “Jewish tradition recognizes that intersexuality is part of the beauty of the created world.” Kukla and Zellman, “Created.” For a critical discussion of the relationship between Talmudic categories such as *aylonit* and contemporary intersex terms, see Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud*.

49 Fausto-Sterling, “Five Sexes.”

50 Intersex Society of North America, “What’s the History.” The original name for the group Chase founded was INC (Intersex Is Not Criminal).

51 One intersex person wrote to Chase that her “amazingly courageous” response to “The Five Sexes” was “like the beacon of a lighthouse on a distant shore.” Letter to Cheryl Chase, August 13, 1993, Suzanne Kessler Papers, Chase Correspondence, box 1, folder 1, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan.

52 Chase, *Hermaphrodites Speak!*

53 Interview with Bo Laurent. Cheryl Chase (who also wrote as Bonnie Sullivan) continued giving Fausto-Sterling extensive comments on her drafts, including on what would become *Sexing the Body*, and encouraged her to include the personal stories of the people she was writing about, in their own words. See box 1, folder 41, Anne Fausto-Sterling Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University. Other academics who wrote major works about intersex and the medicalization of sex/gender were similarly educated by Chase. Suzanne Kessler, author of *Lessons from the Intersexed*, recalls, “My work wouldn’t have been anywhere as influential without Cheryl. Prior to meeting her I haven’t met an intersex person. She was the engine that drove the academics to keep it front and center. Not that academics have a lot of power, but we can get things out there. And we didn’t seem to have a personal motive in the way that anything she did was seen. In addition to being brilliant she was a real activist. Anne [Fausto-Sterling] and I were able to provide, I don’t want to say cover, but certain legitimacy. Cheryl had the historical context, I don’t think we were teaching her that much. She got everything.” Interview with Suzanne Kessler, March 4, 2024.

54 Quoted in Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 115.

55 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 43.

- 56 Even the surgeon Hugh Young, despite being concerned with making intersex bodies more like male or female, acknowledges that intersex people can be perfectly fine the way they are. For instance, Young describes (in objectifying and racist terms) the case of “Emma,” a Black intersex person, “an hermaphrodite, reared as female,” who was married to a man but also had sex with women, “taking an active male part.” Young notes that “the patient derived great pleasure, as did her partner also, from these sexual relations.” He also writes that Emma’s “general health had always been splendid,” that “she was fond of reading,” and “appeared to be quite content and even happy.” Young, *Genital Abnormalities*, 139–41.
- 57 After this assumption was challenged, doctors eventually turned to different surgical procedures such as clitoral reduction and clitoral recession. Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 64.
- 58 Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 71.
- 59 The Phall-O-Metrics cartoon was inspired by Suzanne Kessler’s work, which exposes the arbitrary logic of these surgeries and criticizes the dominant medical view that intersexuality is “a correctable birth defect.” Kessler, *Lessons from the Intersexed*, 5.
- 60 Hugh Young, like other doctors at Johns Hopkins and similar US medical institutions, relied on a supply of bodies deemed disposable, often those of Black people and the poor, as well as many children who could not defend themselves from decisions made by parents and doctors. As Gill-Peterson writes, “research at Hopkins was as often coercive and nontherapeutic as it was curative.” Young and colleagues used these bodies to develop their techniques, perform dangerous “exploratory surgeries” and gather data for publications. The goal was to create standard male and female out of intersex bodies, a goal that was also shaped by white supremacy: “Doctors like Young regarded black children as suitable experimental subjects because of presumed access and disposability, whereas white children who were subject to similar procedures were framed as exhibiting the potential for a normative cure or at least improved normality.” In some cases, when trans people who lacked the intersex features that interested Young wrote to him asking for the surgeries or

hormones that were being used on intersex people—hoping to receive what is today called gender-affirming care—they were denied, often dismissed with a “diagnosis” of homosexuality (something Young and colleagues considered a pathology). See Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, chap. 2.

- 61 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 87. The 2023 documentary film *Every Body* (directed by Julie Cohen) looks at the lives of three intersex people and shows the long-lasting harms of surgeries and aggressive socialization imposed on intersex people. See also the short documentary film *XXXY* (2000), directed by Porter Gale and Laleh Soomekh.
- 62 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 93.
- 63 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 391. See also Harmon-Smith, “10 Commandments.”
- 64 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 68.
- 65 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, chap. 68.
- 66 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 385.
- 67 Fausto-Sterling, 84–85.
- 68 Beck, “Hermaphrodites with Attitude.”
- 69 Rubin et al., “Creating Intersex Justice.” See also Wall, “Standing at the Intersections.” For the evolution of ISNA and its relationship to trans movements, see Stryker, *Transgender History*, 172–74.
- 70 *Inter_view: An Intersex Podcast*, episode 4, “Sean Saifa Wall,” February 1, 2022.
- 71 Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, “Holy See.”
- 72 Quoted in Cohen, “Eradication of ‘Talmudic Abstractions’ ” (emphasis added by the quoting article). The original article appeared in the online magazine *The Occidental Observer*, which says it is devoted to “White Identity, Interests, and Culture.”
- 73 Gill-Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*, 59. Magnus Hirschfeld helped with gender transition surgery as early as 1906; see Aderet, “Recalling the First Sex Change.” See also Mancini, *Magnus Hirschfeld*.
- 74 Quoted in United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Magnus Hirschfeld.”

- 75 Quoted in Kowal, *Tongue of Fire*, 48.
- 76 Joyce, "Assault on Gender."
- 77 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 80.
- 78 Fausto-Sterling built on work by Esther Thelen, Linda Smith, Alan Fogel, and many others. Major works in developmental systems theory use the language of dynamical systems, as articulated in the influential book *Order of Chaos: Man's Dialogue with Nature* (1984) by Ilya Prigogine and Isabelle Stengers; see, for example Thelen and Smith, *Dynamic Systems Approach*. Fausto-Sterling has in turn used the physics-inspired developmental systems theory to think about the emergence of sex/gender. I find the language of dynamical systems, imported from non-equilibrium physics, inadequate for talking about the dialectical relationship between the social and biological. Perhaps this is why Fausto-Sterling repeatedly experiments with different language and metaphors for sex/gender throughout her work. She writes about how sex/gender emerges as "biosocial sediment" and compares the development of an organism to the growth of a forest. She also writes of sex/gender as "a changing river that flows throughout the life cycle" and of organisms who are swimming in "a sea of gender." Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 281. I take this continual search for a suitable language as evidence that while developmental systems theory can illuminate certain phenomena (such as the ability to walk, as analyzed by Thelen and Smith), the language of dynamical systems imported from physics, with its notions of equilibria, stability, limit cycles, and so on, is too impoverished for describing sex/gender.
- 79 Fausto-Sterling, "Gender/Sex."
- 80 Gender roles and expectations can change the kind of physical activity we do and what we eat, and therefore change the structure of, for example, our bones, in potentially long-lasting ways. See Anne Fausto-Sterling, "Bare Bones of Sex."
- 81 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, chap. 9.
- 82 Fausto-Sterling, "Dynamic Systems Framework."
- 83 I have written elsewhere about how scientists can incorporate "radical" perspectives about embodiment into the usual imperialist and capitalist agenda—for example, in the field

of “artificial intelligence.” See Y. Katz, *Artificial Whiteness*, chap. 6.

84 Bazant writes, “Any spirituality is about wholeness, healing, and honesty. How could I do something sacred, how I do something in the name of my ancestors without being whole, without being honest?” Bazant, *Timtum*.

85 Fausto-Sterling, *Sexing the Body*, 116.

86 Kukla, “Created Being of Its Own.” Kukla contrasts the “modern scientific model,” which says, “Let’s just have a little surgery or tuck that under, and say we [nonbinary and trans people] never existed to begin with,” with the open-ended approach found in the Talmud. See interview with Kukla: *Masculine Birth Ritual*, podcast, episode 5, “This Blessing Got Kind of Everywhere,” October 31, 2018.

87 Wenig, “Male and Female God Created Them,” 15. See also a letter from Wenig to Fausto-Sterling and Cheryl Chase in box 61, folder 5, Anne Fausto-Sterling Papers, John Hay Library, Brown University.

88 Fausto-Sterling, “Five Sexes” (emphasis added).

89 Fausto-Sterling, “Five Sexes” (emphasis added).

90 In the documentary film *Every Body* (2023), intersex activist Alicia Roth Weigel explains how the antitrans bills being passed in the US that “don’t allow these surgeries or hormones, etc., for trans kids . . . all have appendices that say ‘but when children are born intersex, then they can still have these surgeries and hormones.’” She adds that the politicians pushing these bills “don’t view trans kids as ‘normal’ so they say don’t give them these life-saving procedures, they don’t view intersex kids as ‘normal’ so they say force those same procedures on them.”

91 Fausto-Sterling describes how the Boston Women’s Health Collective (BWHC) countered the dominant narratives around topics such as menopause: “In a survey conducted for *Our Bodies, Ourselves*, one which in no sense represents a balanced cross section of U.S. women, the Boston Women’s Health Collective recorded the reactions of more than two hundred menopausal or postmenopausal women, most of whom were suburban, married, and employed, to a series of questions about menopause.

About two-thirds of them felt either positively or neutrally about a variety of changes they had undergone, while a whopping 90 percent felt okay or happy about the loss of childbearing ability! This result probably comes as no surprise to most women, but it flies in the face of the long-standing belief that women's lives and emotions are driven in greater part by their reproductive systems." Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*, 119–20. BWHC compiled practical advice for going through menopause, advice that as Fausto-Sterling notes did not subscribe to a sharp divide between biology and social behavior: "Some women experience postmenopausal vaginal dryness and irritation that can make sexual intercourse painful. Since the cells of the vaginal wall contain estrogen receptors it is not surprising that estrogen applied locally or taken in pill form helps with this difficulty. Even locally applied, however, the estrogen enters into the bloodstream, presenting the same dangers as when taken in pill form. There are alternative treatments, though, for vaginal dryness. The Boston Women's Health Collective, for example, recommends the use of nonestrogen vaginal creams or jellies, which seem to be effective and are certainly safer. Continued sexual activity also helps—yet another example of the interaction between behavior and physiology." Fausto-Sterling, *Myths of Gender*, 118. Ruth Hubbard was one of the women BWHC interviewed for understanding the experience of menopause; see Hubbard and Randall, *Shape of Red*, 92. Fausto-Sterling distributed pamphlets of BWHC's *Our Bodies, Ourselves* through the Women's Liberation Union of Rhode Island, which she had cofounded. Interview with Anne Fausto-Sterling.

Chapter 3

- 1 Dvarim (Deuteronomy) 30:19.
- 2 Bordowitz, "Gregg Bordowitz with Yasi Alipour."
- 3 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 27. The parts about Bordowitz's life in this chapter draw heavily on *Some Styles of Masculinity*, a book of transcriptions of a series of one-man shows Bordowitz gave in January 2018. These shows (as described in

the introduction to this book) were made largely in reaction to the 2017 Nazi rally known as “Unite the Right” in Charlottesville, Virginia.

- 4 J. T. E. Richardson, *Howard Andrew Knox*, chap. 3.
- 5 Zinn, *People’s History*, 374–76; Zimmer, *Immigrants Against the State*, 151–52. Emma Goldman was one of the hundreds of Eastern Europeans who were deported in 1919 as part of these raids.
- 6 Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color*, chap. 3.
- 7 For the wide-ranging material benefits of whiteness in the US, see Lipsitz, *Possessive Investment in Whiteness*.
- 8 Examples of this tradition include James, *Black Jacobins*, 37–44; Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, chap. 1; Allen, *Invention of the White Race*, vols. 1 and 2; C. J. Robinson, *Forgeries of Memory and Meaning*, chap. 1; Roberts, *Fatal Invention*, chap. 1; Horne, *Counter-Revolution of 1776*, chap. 4. This tradition seeks to pull the rug from under whiteness and the systems of racialization that serve empires and capitalists. The scholarship on Jews and whiteness, by contrast, tends to foreclose radical possibilities; in doing so, it does the work of the racial regime (to use Cedric Robinson’s term) for it. This scholarship also doesn’t fully appreciate the malleable, incoherent, and ultimately empty nature of whiteness (even if it pays lip service to these features). This highly US-centric literature is concerned with how “the Jews” became “white”; something that is taken as fact. And while this literature generalizes about “the Jews,” it in fact focuses on Jews with European ancestry (Arab or North African Jews, for instance, hardly exist in this literature) who in the US became middle-class and unhesitatingly “American,” who no longer visibly wear their Jewishness on their bodies or live in marked Jewish communities, and who tend to live in cities (such as New York) where the white American population is used to seeing many minorities and foreigners. A paradigmatic example is the widely cited autobiographical book *How Jews Became White Folks and What That Says About Race in America*, which ends with a call for an “American Jewishness that helps build an explicitly multiracial democracy in the United States.” Brodtkin, *How Jews Became White Folks*, 187. Yet even within the

narrow framework of this literature, the contingent and reversible nature of absorption into whiteness is usually missed. Let me give a personal example, which isn't unique or even special. I once wrote an article for a mainstream newspaper arguing that white supremacist scientists are being honored with statues and that, just like in the case of monuments to Confederate generals, these statues should be toppled. I soon received a barrage of anti-Jewish racist messages. My obviously Jewish name took on a new meaning (which was really an old meaning) as did my nose and appearance when white supremacist social media accounts began circulating a picture of my face, accusing me of being one of the Jews "calling for the removal of white history." Other heartfelt messages included "Leave our history and science alone! We're sick of all you people. Israel awaits you" and "You understand that article is why people don't like Jews, right?" (I haven't met any Jews living in the US who were surprised by this, yet it shocked some white progressives). If racialization is reduced to a narrow set of material privileges that society grants certain Jews most of the time, this is one of the many phenomena that will be unaccounted for.

- 9 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 21–22 (italics in original).
- 10 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 44.
- 11 However, Bordowitz didn't view the Torah as a manual for how to live. "The Torah doesn't tell us how to act—or, at least, the Torah doesn't provide a comprehensive framework that enables us to judge everything we say and do as good or bad, as expediting or delaying the arrival of the messiah. I'm fascinated with the Torah—I read the Torah—because I believe in the fundamental principle that the book yields infinite interpretations. The Torah pushes me to confront ideas that I don't agree with, too; I may not like those ideas, but I have to figure out how to understand and assimilate them. The Torah is like life, in that respect." Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 142–43.
- 12 Many forget that for most of Jewish history, the place identified as *Eretz Israel* (land of Israel) had only spiritual and symbolic meaning and wasn't a physical destination for gathering all Jews, that the five books of Torah end before the Israelites even

enter that land, and that across centuries of persecution and forced migration (for instance, the expulsion from Spain in 1492), Jews had never attempted to migrate en masse to present-day Palestine until the rise of the Zionist movement in the late nineteenth century. See Rabkin and Reed, *What Is Modern Israel?*, chap. 1.

- 13 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 26.
- 14 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 112–13.
- 15 Bordowitz, “Picture a Coalition.”
- 16 Bordowitz, “Dense Moments.”
- 17 *Dialogues: The David Zwirner Podcast*, episode 52, “Sarah Schulman,” February 14, 2023.
- 18 Bausum, *VIRAL*, 20.
- 19 Quoted in Bausum, *VIRAL*, 19.
- 20 Quoted in Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 100–101.
- 21 *Los Angeles Times*, “AIDS Booklet.”
- 22 *New York Times*, “Vatican AIDS Meeting.”
- 23 Bordowitz, “Picture a Coalition.”
- 24 “Let the Record Show,” undated, box 192, folder 23, ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, LGBTQ History and Culture Since 1940, Part 1, New York Public Library.
- 25 ACT UP Oral History Project, “Interview #004.”
- 26 Bordowitz, “Picture a Coalition.”
- 27 Silence Opens Door, “Avram Finkelstein: Silence=Death,” YouTube, March 4, 2010, <https://youtu.be/7tCN9YdMRiA>.
- 28 “I had a political antipathy for the art world, based on my long-held belief that the sole function of Western European aesthetics is the consistent reinstatement of whiteness, patriarchy, and class, in support of colonization and hegemony. I had abandoned my art practice and wanted no part of a museum installation.” Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 77.
- 29 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 187.
- 30 Interview with Avram Finkelstein, March 22, 2024.
- 31 The Workers International Relief, a communist group similar to the IWO, held summer camps in Lumberville, Pennsylvania (I am grateful to Jennifer Young for pointing this out). A 1931 article in the *Daily Worker* announcing the Lumberville summer camp

states that it would be “open to the workers children only, white or colored, children of employed and unemployed workers” and that “capable leaders have been obtained for the camp who will teach the children the fundamentals of class struggle.” *Daily Worker*, “Penna. Camp for Children.”

- 32 Finkelstein’s parents even once got a (noncritical) book about the FBI for his brother, so that in case of a raid, they could not as easily be accused of indoctrination. Interview with Avram Finkelstein.
- 33 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 128.
- 34 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 81.
- 35 One common version of Niemöller’s speech is, “First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.” Multiple versions circulate, however; see “Martin Niemöller: First They Came For,” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, April 11, 2023. An article in the *Forward* states that “some media organizations mistook ACT UP for a Jewish organization, in part because its first flyer featured a Jewish star and the poem ‘First They Came’ by Martin Niemöller.” Sara Herschander, “AIDS Crisis.” However, none of the ACT UP fliers in the New York Public Library collection contain both the Star of David and Niemöller’s words, and Sarah Schulman, a historian of ACT UP and former member, told me this claim is inaccurate. Personal communication with Sarah Schulman, March 18, 2024. I also could not find any example of the media referring to ACT UP as a Jewish group.
- 36 Bordowitz, “Dense Moments.”
- 37 Levi, *Survival in Auschwitz*, 169.
- 38 Bordowitz, “Dense Moments.”
- 39 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 140. Bordowitz is making fun here of the Zionist view that Hebrew is “clean” while Yiddish is “phlegmy,” messy, and dirty. This view is connected to the Zionist tropes about Yiddish-speaking Jews in the diaspora

being weak and queer-like, concerned with immaterial Talmudic things, in contrast to the Hebrew-speaking Zionist settler in Palestine, who is manly, productive, and works the land (the languages supposedly reflect these differences between the two types of Jews). One could argue that Bordowitz has internalized the Zionist perspective by saying Yiddish (but not Hebrew) is “phlegmy,” but these words were part of a one-man show, meant to be accessible and funny, not an academic study of the Yiddish language.

- 40 “Before her family emigrated to the United States, they’d been called Allesman, which means ‘every man’ in Yiddish. It’s a funny, fitting switch: from commoner to immigrant, from every man to transparent man. I’m surprised that all Jews weren’t named Glassman when they got to Ellis Island.” Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 86.
- 41 Bordowitz and Jean Carlomusto coproduced a show for GMHC called *Living with AIDS* that “was made by and for people with AIDS and those who loved and supported them”—the antithesis of the talk show approach that Allesman rails against in *Fast Trip, Long Drop*. Bordowitz, “My ’80s.”
- 42 Bordowitz, “Fast Trip, Long View.”
- 43 The Klezmatics play with the lyrics to “Oy, Avram,” adding the Yiddish names of their mentors and friends. Over the end credits, for example, they sing, “Oy vey, *Chanaleh*, gib zhe mir a kish” (Oy vey, Chanaleh, give me a kiss). Chana was the Yiddish name of Adrienne Cooper, an influential queer Yiddish singer and teacher who promoted Klezmer music and recorded Bundist and Jewish anarchist songs (see the album *In Love and In Struggle: The Musical Legacy of the Jewish Labor Bund*, YIVO, 1999). The reference to Cooper was pointed out to me by Eve Sicular, a klezmer musician and historian of Yiddish culture who worked as an archivist at YIVO when Gregg Bordowitz came looking for old footage of Eastern European Jewish communities to use in *Fast Trip, Long Drop*. Interview with Eve Sicular, March 29, 2024.
- 44 Interview with Alicia Svigals, June 3, 2024.
- 45 Alicia Svigals, “Whither Queer Yiddishkayt?”

- 46 As a child, Svigals had attended an Arbeter Ring school (an alternative to Hebrew school) where she learned Yiddish, though she notes it was still a strongly Zionist environment. She recalls that her aversion to Zionism as a young person immersed in Yiddishkayt was purely cultural. It wasn't about resisting Zionism as a colonial project and being in solidarity with Palestinians, but rather, she says, that Hebrew-focused Zionist culture "doesn't speak to us. It's too macho. It's too military. . . . We're *mameh-loshn*, that's mother tongue, you know. We like the feminine, the whole idea of it. It was like, about the Holocaust, like the skinny Yeshiva boys who were weak and went like sheep to the concentration camps, and we're like, 'No, we like the skinny Yeshiva boys! What's wrong with that?' We didn't feel like everybody now had to buff up, you know, to make a state, which was very patriarchal. But it wasn't about Palestinians." Interview with Alicia Svigals.
- 47 Liner notes to *Shvaygn = Toyt*.
- 48 See ACT UP member James Wentzy's short film *Native American, Two Spirits and HIV*.
- 49 Bordowitz, "Operative Assumptions."
- 50 Bordowitz, *some aspects*.
- 51 ACT UP Oral History Project, "Interview #004."
- 52 ACT UP Oral History Project, "Interview #004."
- 53 Wolfe, "AIDS and Politics." Wolfe says that ACT UP "always thought of actions as a whole, visually and in every other way. But it wasn't like the visual decided what the action was about. Once they decided the action, they figured out how it would look." J. Hubbard, *Speak for Yourself*, 1990.
- 54 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 162.
- 55 Opening titles to DIVA TV, *Like a Prayer*.
- 56 Bordowitz, "AIDS Crisis Is Ridiculous."
- 57 Carlomusto, "Focusing on Women." The Costas were named after the AIDS activist Costa Pappas, who died in 1990.
- 58 Levine, "Demonstrating ACT UP," 52. Levine lists some of ACT UP's affinity groups: "Wave 3, The Costas, The Marys, Bored of Ed, Anger for Breakfast, The Delta Queens, Speaking in Tongues, Big Bull Femmes, W.A.R. (Wipe Out AIDS and Racism), The

Metropolitan Health Association, Invisible Women, Awning Leapers, Fierce Pussy, Little Elvis, La Cocina, Faceless Bureaucrats, Church Ladies for Choice, Macy's Santas, ACTUX (AIDS Coalition to Undermine Excess), NY ATEU (AIDS Treatment Evaluation Unit), The Candelabras (Liberace's Avengers), Sissy (Southern Sodomites in Atlanta), City AIDS Actions, YELL, The Boxtops, CD9-18, DIVA-TV (Damned Interfering Video Activists TV), Surrender Dorothy, TAG (Treatment Action Guerillas), Delta Queens, Sissy, The Boxtops [duplication in original], The Non-Toxics, and Cher (alternately known as Cathy Has Extra Rollers or Commie Homos Engaged in Revolution)."

59 "History of ACT UP/NY's Alternative & Holistic Treatment Committee," 1991, box 33, folder 4, ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, LGBTQ History and Culture Since 1940, Part I, New York Public Library.

60 de Mayo and Pastor, "Silencio=Muerte."

61 "The Majority Action Committee," 1988, "Ephemera, Flyers, Handbills by ACT UP," box 203, folder 1, "ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power," "LGBTQ History and Culture Since 1940, Part I," New York Public Library.

62 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 156.

63 "The mitzva of visiting the ill has no fixed measure . . . Rava said: There is no fixed measure for the number of times that one should visit the ill, as even one hundred times a day is appropriate." Nedarim 39b:15. Another voice later adds, "Anyone who visits the ill causes that they will live, and anyone who does not visit the ill causes that they will die." Nedarim 40a:2. For a discussion of *bikur cholim* in Jewish communities in the Russian empire, see Levitats, *The Jewish Russian Community in Russia*, 173-74.

64 Mendelsohn, *Class Struggle in the Pale*, 41-44.

65 Soyer, *Jewish Immigrant Associations*.

66 Berakhot 6a:9. Bordowitz discusses the *shekhinah* in *Some Styles of Masculinity* and in his conversation with Joy Ladin (whose work we encountered in chapter 2): Museum of Jewish Heritage, "Shekhinah Speaks' and More: Joy Ladin on the Human Divine Relationship," December 29, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/>

- watch?v=BY3xGTlyTA0. Bordowitz also discussed it in a conversation with the poet Fred Moten, in an event for *Some Styles of Masculinity* that took place on October 2, 2021.
- 67 Interview with Avram Finkelstein. For another account of the seder given by Finkelstein, see Levine, “Demonstrating ACT UP,” 254–55.
- 68 ACT UP Oral History Project, “Interview #043.” Finkelstein told me in our interview that Wolfe introduced the Bundist Haggadah to their affinity group. Wolfe and Finkelstein were both influenced by the poet Irena Klepfisz, daughter of Polish Bundists. Klepfisz’s father, Michał Klepfisz, was a chemical engineer who made bombs for the Warsaw ghetto resistance and was killed during the uprising of April 1943. Wolfe loves Klepfisz’s 1982 poem “Bashert,” which she mentions in her ACT UP Oral History interview. Wolfe introduced Finkelstein to the poem, and it inspired him to make an installation titled *Dedications* for the New York City AIDS memorial, which featured the poem’s two pivotal lines, “These words are dedicated to those who died / These words are dedicated to those who survived.” Reflecting on “Bashert,” Finkelstein says, “I think there’s something very deeply Jewish about, or [at least for] the kind of Jew I am, about the idea of the arbitrariness of suffering, the genetic cellular memory of displacement and suffering.” Klepfisz attended the opening of Finkelstein’s installation. Interview with Avram Finkelstein.
- 69 For a history of the Bundist Haggadah, see Schuldiner, *Of Moses and Marx*, 129–33; Enkin Lewis et al., “Hagode Shel Peysekh.”
- 70 Interview with Avram Finkelstein. For a discussion of Pesach as a political holiday and its multidirectional flow of time, see A. Katz and Rosenberg, *For Times Such as These*, 199–201. For the view (similar to Finkelstein’s) that the traditional Haggadah is already suited for catalyzing radical discussions, see Filler, “Radical Case for the Traditional Haggadah.”
- 71 Interview with Avram Finkelstein; interview with Alexis Danzig, June 18, 2024.
- 72 Interview with Alexis Danzig.

73 Herschander, “AIDS Crisis.” Of course, not all Jewish ACT UP members felt this connection to Jewish traditions and holidays. For Sarah Schulman, being Jewish meant something very specific: the experience of being a New York City Jew of Eastern European descent. “We ate Jewish food, we had Jewish accents.” This culturally specific Jewishness was all around in New York City, and Schulman says she never felt the need to go find out what it means to be Jewish. She adds that this made her different from Jews like Bordowitz who grew up in the suburbs and had attended synagogue and belonged to Jewish organizations. Schulman and I spoke during the (still ongoing) genocide in Gaza in May 2024, which she said made her feel even more alienated from Jewishness. But even before, Schulman hadn’t felt the need to be part of any Jewish organization. As she told me, “I don’t believe in Jewish values. I think that’s bullshit.” She is affiliated with the group Jewish Voice for Peace (JVP)—whose mission includes “building a Judaism beyond Zionism”—but purely as a strategic decision. “They are too Jewish for me,” she says of JVP. “I’m not into rabbis, and all of that.” Schulman says she may have attended a seder with ACT UP members but that it was just to be with friends and that it wasn’t that important to her. She also used to light Hanukkah candles but stopped several years ago because even then the genocidal nature of the state of Israel repelled her from Jewish practices. She summed up her Jewishness as follows: “Of course, I cannot escape from Judaism, because my name is Sarah Schulman. I have a Jewish accent, and I look Jewish. So there’s no mystery there. But what is it, exactly? I don’t know the answer. It doesn’t make any sense to me at this point.” Interview with Sarah Schulman, May 2, 2024.

74 Bordowitz, “Why Do Jews Love Questions?”

75 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 141. When I asked Avram Finkelstein whether Bordowitz’s interpretation of Shemot (Exodus) resonated with him, he answered, “Completely. I mean, it’s because of my background—all of the work I’m most known for is in the public domain, and it’s in the public domain because I think ownership is bullshit. I think one doesn’t own

[one's] identity or an idea of oneself. And one doesn't own history either. People can claim it. But people who claim it are frequently telling you the part of the story that they want you to know, as opposed to the truest parts of the story, or the story in its complexity, let's say. I completely agree with him [Bordowitz].” Interview with Avram Finkelstein.

76 Bordowitz, “Why Do Jews Love Questions?”

77 Interview with Avram Finkelstein.

78 “AIDS Activists Arrested in Takeover of New York Office of AIDS Profiteer Glaxo Wellcome,” June 24, 1997, “Subject Files 1987–1997. Burroughs Wellcome [Glaxo Wellcome],” box 8, folder 51, “ACT UP Los Angeles Records,” “LGBTQ History and Culture Since 1940, Part II,” ONE National Gay & Lesbian Archives.

79 “Acts of Civil Disobedience,” October 1990, “Subjects, Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1990–1992,” box 84, folder 10, ACT UP: The AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, LGBTQ History and Culture Since 1940, Part 1, New York Public Library.

80 Mason writes, “I am not dying: I am being murdered. Just as surely as if my body was being tossed into a gas chamber, I am being sold down the river by people within this community who claim to be helping people with AIDS . . . ‘Activists’ now negotiate with drug companies just as the Jewish councils in the Warsaw ghettos of World War II negotiated with the Nazis. ‘Give us a few lives today,’ they insist, ‘and we’ll trade you even more tomorrow.’ AIDS careerists—both HIV-positive and HIV-negative—have exchanged their anger for an invitation to the White House. . . . Jewish leaders established organizations to run their ghettos—and we do the same—in a desperate attempt to gain some control over a living nightmare. Everyone is selling you out. We refuse to plead with the U.S. government or negotiate with the entire medical-industrial complex for your lives. We have to get what we need by any means necessary.” While James Wentzy had helped disseminate Mason’s message, he says that the ACT UP circles he himself was part of “were pretty strictly nonviolent.” Wentzy adds, “We are the caregivers of society, traditionally and historically, us gays and

lesbians”—meaning he doesn’t agree with Mason’s approach. He explains that it is important to document the range of views of activists with AIDS. Wentzy also says he considers the appeals to violent tactics as just a performance, part of the theatre of ACT UP. Interview with James Wentzy, June 17, 2024.

- 81 In a 2002 interview, Bordowitz explains his changed position on violence: “How could we defend ourselves from being put into camps? I remember thinking aloud that perhaps armed resistance would be one justifiable means. Now, I’ve never shot a gun, and I don’t plan on shooting guns. I have since become very much involved with the politics of non-violence. But that’s how serious the threat seemed to me at that time.” ACT UP Oral History Project, “Interview #004.”
- 82 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 130.
- 83 Martin Luther King Jr.’s house has been described as “an arsenal.” When asked about all the weapons, he reportedly answered, “Just for self-defense.” Cobb Jr., *This Nonviolent Stuff’ll Get You Killed*, 7.
- 84 Bordowitz, “Picture a Coalition.”
- 85 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 143.
- 86 Bordowitz, “Operative Assumptions” (italics in original).
- 87 ACT UP Oral History Project, “Interview #004.”
- 88 McGee, “AIDS Protest Shuts FDA Office.”
- 89 *Los Angeles Times*, “60 Arrested in Protest.”
- 90 “Phyllis Sharpe,” undated, Jon Cohen AIDS Research Collection, University of Michigan Library Digital Collections.
- 91 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 283.
- 92 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, chap. 9. See also Gold, “Bold Fury.”
- 93 Bordowitz and Carlomusto, *Seize Control of the FDA*.
- 94 In practice, no one could guarantee that the people participating in the trials aren’t taking other drugs.
- 95 Crimp and Rolston, *AIDS Demo Graphics*, 79.
- 96 ACT UP Oral History Project, “Interview #004.”
- 97 Altman, “New Homosexual Disorder.”
- 98 Quoted in Farmer, *Infections and Inequalities*, 61.
- 99 Gould, “Reassuring News About AIDS.”
- 100 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 18.

- 101 Bordowitz, *some aspects*.
- 102 Schulman, *Let the Record Show*, 33.
- 103 J. Hubbard, *United in Anger*.
- 104 McCarthy, "Historical Background." Technically these women were excluded only from Phase 1 clinical trials, but in practice this policy was applied to all phases.
- 105 ACE, "Break Through the Wall of Fear," undated, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan. This ACE brochure states that printing "was made possible by a generous donation from ACT-UP, New York."
- 106 ACE, "Voices," 143. I asked Suzanne Kessler, who has written extensively about the social construction of gender and also worked with ACE inside Bedford Hills as a nonincarcerated paid staff member, whether the struggles of trans women or nonbinary people with AIDS ever came up in ACE discussions. To her knowledge, they hadn't. Interview with Suzanne Kessler, March 4, 2024.
- 107 ACE, "Voices," 153.
- 108 Another layer to this story is that investigations of the environmental causes of cancer (and potential methods of prevention) have been de-prioritized in favor of approaches that frame cancer as a "molecular" disease of an individual, as activists with Science for the People have noted long ago: Valentine, "Politics of Cancer Research." Within this dominant model of cancer research, capitalists who profit from polluting industries can safely fund cancer research, without needing to censor the researchers. I was a graduate student at MIT, doing biology research, where the major cancer research center was funded by and named after the Koch brothers, who made their fortunes from the highly polluting oil industry.
- 109 Interview with Avram Finkelstein.
- 110 In the video, Finkelstein says, "What's considered sexy in the world of biomedical science is very much influenced by what's considered [sexy] by pharmaceutical companies and biomedical research entities that pay for the results of this research. Everything funnels back to that big question: We're in America, [there's] capitalism, and there's money, the money

subtext. On the other hand, America has this native cultural belief that all science is altruistic, that there's no other motive than the discovery of knowledge and how that will affect and advance humankind. Scientists subscribe to that notion, that's why they do it. We all are trained to believe that. We're not trained to question our doctors when they give us advice or make a prescription—we just say 'well, he knows, I don't know, I shouldn't know, it's too much for me to even ask, it's out of my league, I'll just take the pill.' Anyone who's ever done any kind of work around health issues knows this cultural paradigm." Wentzy, "Show #15."

- 111 The 1993 bill stipulated that AIDS "curatives ultimately released due primarily to project research shall not result in financial gain to any private organization, and shall be made available to all affected people regardless of ability to pay."
- 112 Finkelstein, "Welcome to New York."
- 113 Yishay Rosen-Zvi argues that the entire purpose of asking, as part of the four questions, why certain foods are being dipped twice ("On all other nights, we don't dip even once. Why on this night do we dip twice?") is to set up the main question—that is, to make clear that the seder night "is an exceptional night, the kind of night about which we can ask: 'How is this night different from all other nights.'" Rosen-Zvi, *Secret History*, 144.
- 114 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 196.
- 115 Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 215 (italics in original).
- 116 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 3.
- 117 Finkelstein, *After Silence*, 155.
- 118 He adds, "That's why I've always loved the Talmud so much." Bordowitz, *Some Styles of Masculinity*, 63–64.
- 119 Menachot 29b. The story ends with Moses going back to God, asking why God chose to give the Torah to him (Moses) and not to a great man like Rabbi Akiva. God tells Moses to shut up, but Moses still asks to see Rabbi Akiva's reward for being an outstanding student of Torah. God transports Moses to a butcher shop where people are weighing Rabbi Akiva's flesh.
- 120 World Health Organization, WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) dashboard.

Chapter 4

- 1 Levins, "Toward the Renewal of Science."
- 2 Levins, "Road to Wholeness."
- 3 Levins, "Is Capitalism a Disease?"
- 4 Levins, "Imperialism Is Bad for Your Health."
- 5 Schmalzer et al., *Science for the People*.
- 6 Levins and Anderson, "Richard Levins Oral History."
- 7 Morales, "Trees."
- 8 Following Levins, I refer to his grandmother as Leah Sackman. Aurora Levins Morales notes that Shevelev was her family name and that Sackman was an anglicized version of Sakhnin (Leah had married Abraham Sakhnin).
- 9 Veidlinger, *In the Midst*, 29.
- 10 Levins, "Permanent and Personal Commitment."
- 11 Leah Sackman is listed as a member of IWO New York Branch 39 in a 1941 memorial book for Moyshe Olgin, the former editor of the newspaper *Morgn Frayhayt* (to which the family subscribed), and her brother Sam Sackman is listed under Branch 82; see the *Frayhayt's M. Olgin Albom*. Leah Sackman was also listed as a member of Branch 615 in the April 28, 1959, *Frayhayt*. Both Branch 39 and Branch 615 met at the Brighton Center on Coney Island Avenue, which in 1953 hosted an event honoring the sixtieth anniversary of the death of Jewish anarchist poet David Edelstadt and the tenth anniversary of the Warsaw ghetto uprising (box 33, folder 10, Kheel Center for Labor-Management Documentation and Archives, Cornell University Library Collection Number: 5276). Leah and her daughter Ruth Levins (Richard Levins's mother) are also listed as members of IWO Branch 87 in the November 9, 1947, *Frayhayt*, while a 1947 book of the Jewish People's Fraternal Order (JPFO) of IWO lists the "Sackman family" under JPFO Branch 9. Jewish People's Fraternal Order (JPFO), *In Dinst*. Sackman was affiliated with the Emma Lazarus Club cofounded by Lemlich; see "Greetings from the Brighton Emma Lazarus Club," box 1, folder 10, Clara Lemlich Papers, Tamiment Library and Robert F. Wagner Labor Archives, New York University. I am grateful to Elissa Sampson,

- Jennifer Young, and Robert Zecker for their help in finding some of these materials.
- 12 Levins, “Touch Red.” On the work of both the Puerto Rican and Jewish sides of the family in the needle trades, see A. Levins Morales, “Tsu Got Vel Ikh Veynen.”
 - 13 Sorin, *Prophetic Minority*, 81. See also Orleck, *Common Sense*.
 - 14 I thank Elissa Sampson for pointing out that Sackman and Lemlich lived near each other. For Lemlich’s organizing with housewives, see Orleck, *Common Sense*, chap. 6.
 - 15 Levins, “Touch Red.”
 - 16 This is according to Aurora Levins Morales, Sackman’s great-granddaughter. A. Levins Morales and Anderson, “Aurora Levins Morales Oral History.”
 - 17 Levins, “Touch Red.”
 - 18 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.”
 - 19 Levins, “Living the 11th Thesis.”
 - 20 Levins, “On the Meaning.” In this talk, given at the Center for Marxist Education in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in 2013, Levins refers to the Hebrew Bible when discussing the origins of class society and its links to agriculture. He also discusses the book of Kohelet (Ecclesiastes), suggesting that the defeatist attitude of the text—reflected in the famous lines “All is vanity” and “There is nothing new beneath the sun”—resulted from the setbacks faced by Jews living under Roman rule around the time the book was compiled. Levins then analyzes similar attitudes that come up in socialist movements following a defeat.
 - 21 *Jewish Ancestral Healing*, podcast, season 2, episode 9, “Dori [Midnight] Interviews Aurora Levins Morales on Sovereignty, Reciprocity and Sacred Storytelling,” January 5, 2022.
 - 22 Levins adds, “You take questions seriously, and that legitimized participation of children as well. In the bar mitzvah ceremony the child reaching maturity has to give some sort of exegesis of some section of scripture, and these would be rather deep.” Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.” Like Levins, other thinkers who challenged the dominant approach in biology also sometimes drew on the Talmud. For example, in

their seminal book *Evolution in Four Dimensions*—which challenges the prevailing idea that evolution proceeds primarily through random genetic mutation and selection—Eva Jablonka and Marion J. Lamb end each chapter with an imagined dialogue between themselves and an interlocutor they call “I.M.,” short for *ipcha mistabra*. They write, “*Ipcha Mistabra* is Aramaic for ‘the opposite conjecture.’ It is a term that embodies the argumentative dialogue style used in the Talmud, in which arguments are countered and contradicted, and through this dialectic a better understanding of the subject is reached.” Jablonka and Lamb, *Evolution in Four Dimensions*, 3. They use this format brilliantly to address the counterarguments to their own framework. The dialogic format of the Talmud, coupled with the willingness to engage the *ipcha mistabra* viewpoint, is clearly useful for developing alternatives to the dominant scientific approach. Levins was engaging in exactly this, even if he might not have known the phrase *ipcha mistabra*.

23 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.”

24 Levins, “Permanent and Personal Commitment.”

25 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.”

26 Levins’s father was a lawyer, as mentioned earlier, and made a decent living. The 1940 census also shows that the Levins family employed a domestic worker (listed in the census as the household “servant”), Mary Ramseur, a Black woman born in Virginia, twenty-seven years old at the time and married.

27 Sohn, “Risqué and Radical.” Liber identified as an anarchist but later also worked with communist movements. In 1927 he wrote, “I am not allied to any specific party or movement. I belong to the general movement of the workers to free themselves by any and all means and I am writing and speaking to them and about them whenever I am welcomed.” Letter from Dr. Benzion Liber to the “Road to Freedom” anarchist newspaper, March 13, 1927, Warren Van Valkenburgh Papers, 1912–1937, Mixed Materials 2, folder 15, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

28 Levins, “Touch Red.”

29 Levins, “Living the 11th Thesis.”

- 30 Aurora Levins Morales tells her mother's family history beautifully to Dori Midnight: *Jewish Ancestral Healing*, podcast, episode 2.9, "Sovereignty, Reciprocity and Sacred Storytelling with Aurora Levins Morales and Dori Midnight," January 5, 2022. See also A. Levins Morales, "Tsu Got Vel Ikh Veynen."
- 31 A. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 19.
- 32 A. Levins Morales, "Richard Levins." Avram Finkelstein's parents and sister, discussed in chapter 3, were there too.
- 33 Morales and Anderson, "Rosario Morales Oral History." Morales adds that it was still a constant battle to split the domestic labor equally with Levins because "when it came down to it, you know, he wanted to be out in the fields, not cleaning up after tea, that kind of thing. So we spent a lifetime in disputed territory."
- 34 In her poem "I Am What I Am," Morales writes, "I love the sound and look of Yiddish in the air in the body in the streets in the English language . . . all those soft sweet sounds saying sharp sharp things I am what I am and I'm naturalized Jewish-American wasp is foreign and new but Jewish-American is old-shoe familiar shmata familiar." A. Levins Morales and Morales, *Getting Home Alive*, 139.
- 35 Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Memorandum on Jay Richard Levins."
- 36 Levins, "Touch Red"; Levins and Anderson, "Richard Levins Oral History."
- 37 FOIA request to the Federal Bureau of Investigation by the author. FBI records state that in 1955, Manuel Jesus Morales, Rosario Morales's father, then working as an electrician in the naval shipyard, completed a Navy questionnaire about his daughter and son-in-law's involvement in the Puerto Rican Communist Party. Rosario's father wrote to the couple with the questionnaire, to which Levins wrote back, "From the questions, it is clear that the authors of the questionnaire know the answers to most of them. They're interested not in the answers, but in our answering. This is the first feeler to see if they can turn us into informers. Once you start down that road, there is no stopping. Therefore, we decided not to answer the questions." Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Memorandum on Jay Richard Levins."

- 38 Carro-Figueroa, "Agricultural Decline"; González, *Harvest of Empire*, 60–63; Ayala, "Coffee History of Puerto Rico."
- 39 A. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 182. Levins says the attempts to unionize coffee plantation workers failed because "the repression was too strong and the preparation inadequate and our own forces too weak." Levins, "On the Meaning."
- 40 Levins, "Permanent and Personal Commitment."
- 41 Morales reflects, "I've always had a guarded sympathy with the nationalism of antiimperialists like the Puerto Rican communists and liberal independentismos I cut my political teeth on. I shared their helpless rage at the enforced poverty of our people, at the theft of our resources, at the arrogance of US officials and tourists, at the constant fight to hold on to pieces of culture devalued and replaced by US imports. But I had no place in the Puerto Rican nationalist struggle. Nationalism, even the socialist kind, is colored, if not dominated, by the response of colonized men, morally and otherwise outraged at the effrontery of other men ruling over them, their land, and their women. Women have won a place within nationalist movements because we're pushy but it is a precarious place. The platform from which we can fight both imperialism and sexism is impossibly narrow." "Theory—Nationalism. Typewritten, Annotated Notes and Drafts on Theory Related to Nationalism," 1996, box 3, Rosario Morales Papers, Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College Special Collections.
- 42 Levins and Anderson, "Richard Levins Oral History." FBI records state that "the Communist RICHARD JAY LEVINS sold part of his farm in Maricao to various neighbors who could pay for it when they are able"—an offense against capitalism. Federal Bureau of Investigation, "Memorandum on Jay Richard Levins."
- 43 Morales and Anderson, "Rosario Morales Oral History"; Levins and Anderson, "Richard Levins Oral History." Levins and Morales also cowrote a paper on the politics of genetics; see "Neither a Borrower nor a Lender Be," Smithsonian Conference on Human Biogeography, April 30–May 2, 1974.
- 44 Levins didn't want to use the insect net used by evolutionary biologists such as Theodosius Dobzhansky because the net is

limited to clear spaces (and it gets caught when used around thorny bushes). Levins described the problem with the net to Rosario, who in turn came up with a fruit fly catcher made from a one-quart box that is attached to a vial. As Levins recalls, “I posed that problem to Rosario and she designed the one-quart *Drosophila* catcher. Take a juice can of one-quart, put in rotten fruit, take a square of cardboard with a hole in it that fits a vial. Then what you do is put out the trap, let the *Drosophila* get in there, sneak up and snap the cardboard with its vial on top. You tap it and the flies go up into the vial, whereupon I plug it with cotton. Label it, and go on to the next.” Levins says that Morales, beyond pushing him to do fieldwork and providing critical technical help, was also the “sounding board” for his most radical ideas about evolution and adaptation. Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.”

45 Levins, “Thermal Acclimation.”

46 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.”

47 Harold Heatwole et al., “Faunal Notes on Culebra Island”; Levins and Heatwole, “Biogeography.”

48 Perfecto et al., *Nature's Matrix*, 5.

49 Ecologists Hanski and Simberloff argue that the Levins model suggested that “restriction of conservation measures to occupied sites only would be fatal. A static, nonmetapopulation view of nature would not have led to the recognition of the importance of currently unoccupied habitat. Much of the history of refuge establishment consists simply of locating apparently healthy populations and preserving their sites.” Hanski and Simberloff, “Metapopulation Approach.”

50 Levins, “Permanent and Personal Commitment.”

51 Levins, “Imperialism Is Bad for Your Health.”

52 Levins, “Imperialism Is Bad for Your Health.”

53 Perfecto et al., *Nature's Matrix*, 6–7. Some traditional Mayan farmers in Guatemala, for example, do not consider herbivores that eat their crops to be “pests” because these insects do not cause significant damages. The reason is that their farming practices, combined with the soil and the climate, are such that the herbivores do not reach levels where they would be considered

a problem. Mayan farmers maintain this state by carefully choosing their site and date of planting and by using crop rotation, intercropping (for instance, planting corn alongside fava beans, squash, or medicinal plants), and organic fertilizers (such as kitchen scraps, forest leaves, or animal manure). Before planting, they often let other animals (such as hens) eat insects in the field and sometimes apply “lime or ashes to the soil to reduce ants, wireworms, and white grub.” Morales and Perfecto, “Traditional Knowledge.”

- 54 On his use of mathematics and signed digraphs, Levins writes, “I have always enjoyed mathematics and see one of its tasks as making the obscure obvious. I regularly employ a sort of mid-level math in unconventional ways to promote understanding more than prediction. Much modeling now aims at precise equations giving precise prediction. This makes sense in engineering. In the field of policy, it makes sense to those who are the advisers to the rulers who imagine that they have complete enough control of the world to be able to optimize their efforts and investments of resources. But those of us who are in the opposition have no such illusion. The best we can do is to decide where to push the system. For this, a qualitative mathematics is more useful. My work with signed digraphs (‘loop analysis’) is one such approach.” Levins, *Talking About Trees*, 21. Levins is clearly using “the master’s tools” (to use Audre Lorde’s famous phrase) with these mathematical models, even if he is trying to use them in a subversive way. The evolutionary biologist John Maynard Smith commented on this, writing that “Levins was a Marxist before he was a biologist, and all his work shows it” and it is therefore “perhaps ironic that he made extensive use of mathematical techniques borrowed from capitalist economic theory: I cannot criticise because I have done the same.” Maynard Smith is referring here to Levins’s early mathematical models of how organisms adapt to changing environments. Maynard Smith, “Molecules Are Not Enough.”
- 55 Levins, “Discussion Paper”; Puccia and Levins, *Qualitative Modeling of Complex Systems*. Loop analysis makes rigid assumptions about these systems. First, it only applies to systems at

equilibrium, which is a limited idealization (in equilibrium, we are all dead). Second, loop analysis assumes that the systems are captured by differential equations in which the relationships between all the variables are “positively or negatively linear”; see Justus, “Loop Analysis and Qualitative Modeling.”

Nonlinear and stochastic effects are not part of the framework.

- 56 Levins and colleagues have similarly applied loop analysis to malaria, analyzing the effects of possible interventions on not only the disease-carrying mosquitoes but also their predators. Their analysis suggests that insecticides that kill the mosquitoes’ larvae could lead, in the long run, to an increase in insecticide-resistant mosquitoes by starving the predator that feeds on these larvae. Their analysis also suggests that nonchemical interventions, such as educational campaigns about malaria prevention and reduction of mosquito breeding sites, could be more effective ways to reduce the spread of malaria. Yasuoka et al., “Application of Loop Analysis.” Compare this with the outrageous approach being pushed by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (and the scientists they sponsor): Unleash millions of genetically engineered mosquitoes to replace the existing mosquito population. Meghani, “Regulation of Genetically Engineered (GE) Mosquitoes.”
- 57 Levins reflects that his work in Cuba taught him “how to cope with the socialist experience, neither with a utopian checklist of what ‘true socialism is’ (graded on a pass/fail basis) nor with the pragmatic resignation which says that due to ‘circumstances’ or heritages of backwardness, things have to be the way they are. Rather, I have worked with people pretty much like ourselves, people struggling to solve problems that are enormous and who are coping with the opposing demands of present and future, now by bold leaps forward, now by compromises with the past. I have joined in some of these struggles, aware that I do not understand Cuba as well as they do, but that the experience of our own movements is also valid, and that solidarity means joining in struggle. And I return convinced that yes, there is another way of living.” Levins, “Ecology Under Socialism.” For more on Levins’s work in Cuba, see Levins, “NWAG Work in Cuba”;

Levins, “Struggle for Ecological Agriculture”; and Levins, *Talking About Trees*.

58 Interview with John Vandermeer, July 11, 2024.

59 In this system, the banana plants are used to lure and get them to reproduce, and the ants are then transported manually to the sweet potato plants for foraging. See Levins, “Predacious Ants Patrol Sweet Potatoes”; Perfecto and Castiñeiras, “Deployment of the Predaceous Ants.” Levins also described an intercropped variation of this system where strips of sweet potato plants are planted next to strips of banana plants. The banana plant would then provide shade for the ants to reproduce and forage in the area. Once the sweet potato plant gets big enough, the ants can move in and nest there. Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.” It is not clear whether this system was ever widely used in Cuba, but it is analyzed theoretically in Levins and Vandermeer, “Agroecosystem Embedded.”

60 Anker, *Imperial Ecology*, 36.

61 Levins once gave a talk about NWAG’s work with the Sandinistas titled “Against Contras and Armyworms: Nicaraguan Agriculture Today.” On the work of NWAG in Nicaragua, see Yih, “New World Agriculture Group.” On Puerto Rico and Mexico, see the work of John Vandermeer and Ivette Perfecto. Levins also promoted agroecological initiatives by Palestinian farmers in the West Bank. “Some Notes on Third World Science,” February 7, 1989, box 8, folder 63, Richard Levins Papers (MS 1142), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.

62 Levins, “Challenge of New Diseases.”

63 Levins, “Is Capitalism a Disease?”

64 Burgen, “Mysterious Leishmaniasis Outbreak in Spain”; Jones, “Madrid Residents Hopping Mad.”

65 Davis, *Monster at Our Door*; Wallace et al., “Did Neoliberalizing.”

66 Liber, *As a Doctor Sees It*. While Liber understood the ailments of the poor as a product of oppression, and while he railed against racism, he was apparently still taken with eugenic notions of “scientific” population control. See Quinn, “‘Abolish the Monopolizing of the Earth’”; Liber, “Kropotkin and Malthus.”

- 67 This dominant view of health is essentially what George Lipsitz calls the “individual biomedical model.” This flawed model, Lipsitz writes, “posits a healthy body that has been temporarily injured and can be restored to a previous state of good health by treatment. It imagines a specific discrete cause for every illness and treats the body as a machine made up of parts that can be fixed or replaced. In attending largely to health at the scale of individual bodies, the biomedical approach treats symptoms of racial health disparities but does not challenge the causal spatial and racial ecologies that relegate people of different races to different places that are marked by grossly unequal and unjust health hazards.” This model, Lipsitz adds, also sees race as a biological category rather than a political construction, which is why it frequently “leads to ineffective, inefficient, and even counterproductive medical practice.” Lipsitz also explains how this (mis)understanding of health and our bodies is bound up with an understanding of injuries from tort law. Lipsitz, *Danger Zone Is Everywhere*, 5.
- 68 For the problems with framing racial science as “pseudoscience,” see Y. Katz, “Intelligence Under Racial Capitalism”; and Roberts, *Fatal Invention*, chap. 2.
- 69 Levins, “Is Capitalism a Disease?”
- 70 Levins’s work is sometimes mistakenly put in the same camp as cybernetics (which is also concerned with systems and feedback loops) or with scientific fashions such as “systems theory” and “complex systems.” But there are fundamental differences. Levins viewed cybernetics and systems theory as examples of the engineering mindset that seeks quantitative, detailed models, premised on the illusion that we can predict and control the world—as opposed to the qualitative models he developed that are meant to help us think of ways to “push the system” (his phrase) in the direction of liberation. Cybernetics, a field that was largely bankrolled by imperialist governments and capitalist firms, wasn’t interested (unlike Levins) in developing models of life under a racist society or models that help us understand the importance of labor unions and the harms of FBI repression. Cybernetics excludes such models for the

same ideological reasons as other branches of capitalist science, even if it is concerned with “systems” and “feedback” (and even if in its more creative forms, cybernetics blurs the distinction, in a dialectical manner, between an individual and the external environment). Moreover, Levins was committed to transforming science by seriously incorporating folk and activist knowledge, which those other arenas showed little interest in. For Levins’s critical discussion of systems theory and cybernetics, see Levins, “On Making Socialism Scientific”; and Levins, “Dialectics and Systems Theory.”

- 71 Levins, “Road to Wholeness.”
- 72 Several people (including Richard Lewontin) were involved in promoting Isador Nabi, but Levins says that he wrote all but one Nabi piece. Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.” This is also clear from the style, choice of topics, and the occasional drawings.
- 73 “Todiben™” in “We’ll Deal with That Later: Selected Writings of Isador Nabi,” undated, box 14, folder 20, Richard Levins Papers (MS 1142), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst Libraries.
- 74 United States Congress House Un-American Activities Committee, *Communist Activities Among Puerto Ricans*, 1591–94.
- 75 Levins’s friend César Andreu Iglesias explores these tensions in his 1956 novel *The Vanquished* (*Los derrotados*) about a botched assassination attempt, by pro-independence nationalists, of a US military general who was visiting Puerto Rico. Iglesias, *Vanquished*.
- 76 Levins, “Permanent and Personal Commitment.”
- 77 Leslie, *Cold War and American Science*.
- 78 Moore, *Disrupting Science*.
- 79 Lewontin, “Race and Intelligence”; Lewontin, “Is There a Jewish Gene?” Lewontin’s influential analysis of genetics and race shows that the vast majority of “genetic diversity” (as measured by differences in a set of genes) occurs within groups, with very little variation attributable to “race.” To make this point, Lewontin engages with racial classifications that he clearly

considered absurd. For example, in his analysis, “Oriental Jews,” “Arabs,” “Swiss,” and “English” populations are grouped under the “Caucasian race.” Lewontin, “Apportionment of Human Diversity.”

- 80 Lewontin made some efforts to work against the hierarchical structure of the capitalist laboratory. Most professors who head a lab assume that their names should be on all publications (written by students and postdoctoral researchers) coming out of the lab simply because they are in charge. Lewontin rejected this practice. In an interview, he says professors shouldn’t have “property rights” to the work of people who sit lower in the academy’s hierarchy. “I never in my life put my name on a paper which I didn’t actually work on, I mean in the lab or computer analysis or something like that. I just thought it was wrong. Some people think it’s a great thing because it helps the student, because it brings the student’s paper to the attention of other people because a well-known person’s name is on it. I think it’s nonsense. What it really is, is property rights.” Kreisler, “Science and Politics.”
- 81 Levins and Lewontin, *Dialectical Biologist*. The book is actually a compilation of articles written individually by Lewontin or Levins, who had pretty different styles and areas of focus. Only the last chapter was cowritten.
- 82 It was renamed “Science for Indochina” after the US started bombing Cambodia.
- 83 “Science for Vietnam Newsletter #1,” May 28, 1971, box 5, folder 27, Richard Levins Papers (MS 1142), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst. Libraries; Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Scientists and Engineers.”
- 84 “Science for Vietnam Newsletter #1.”
- 85 Vandermeer adds, “In theory, communism eventually results in anarchism . . . you can’t be a real communist unless everybody is with you. . . . He [Levins] strongly believed in that, and he felt that you should practice that also. But you know, thinking that is great. But you know, when you look at the political activities that he was engaged in, he did really a lot. I do believe that he

would have accomplished a lot more had he not been so insistent.” Interview with John Vandermeer.

- 86 This was when Levins was at Harvard University. As Puccia recalls, “Dick was so, I mean I can’t think of a good word for this other than he was a proletariat. He never used that word himself, but you know he was . . . he had one small office attached to a bigger office attached to an outer office, so he had maybe 600 square feet, which would be a nice size office, but they partitioned it because he asked for it so that he could use the other for graduate students.” The space got so crowded at one point that when one person wanted to leave the room, others had to get up to make way. Interview with Charles Puccia, July 12, 2024.
- 87 A. Levins Morales, “Science of Solidarity.”
- 88 Levins, “SftP Activist Rejects National Academy.”
- 89 Interview with Charles Puccia.
- 90 Lewontin, “Why I Resigned.”
- 91 Fernández, *Young Lords*, chap. 4.
- 92 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.”
- 93 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History” (emphasis added).
- 94 Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.” This aversion to the hierarchical party structure is another example of Levins’s anarchistic tendencies. Levins’s critique of the Black Panther Party is in similar spirit to that of Black anarchist (and former Panther) Lorenzo Kom’boa Ervin: Ervin, *Anarchism and the Black Revolution*, 3–32.
- 95 R. Levins Morales, “Ricardo Levins Morales”; Levins and Anderson, “Richard Levins Oral History.” As Richard Levins recalls, “Lynn French, who was one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party approached us to arrange to borrow our car to use for gathering food for the breakfast program that the Panthers had initiated, and which appears in my FBI files as they were working about whether I was transporting arms to the Black Panthers. . . . Lewontin and I were active witnesses describing what we saw when we came to Fred Hampton’s house and that made us targets for the FBI on top of any other reasons they might have not to like us.”

- 96 Awerbuch et al., *The Truth Is the Whole*, 268.
- 97 Schmalzer et al., *Science for the People*.
- 98 S. J. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 39. Elsewhere Gould gives a fuller version of this story: “My grandmother spoke Hungarian, Yiddish, German, and English, but could only write her adopted language phonetically. I will never forget her embarrassment when I inadvertently read a shopping list that she had written, and realized that she could not spell. I also remember her joy when, invoking her infallible memory and recalling some old information acquired in her study for citizenship, she won ten dollars on a Yiddish radio quiz for correctly identifying William Howard Taft as our fattest president.” S. J. Gould, *I Have Landed*, 23.
- 99 S. J. Gould, *I Have Landed*, 15. This collection of Gould’s essays is organized as a kind of tribute to his grandparents and an exploration of his own genealogy. The title, “I Have Landed,” comes from a note Gould’s grandfather wrote. The book also features photographs of Gould’s grandparents, along with a photograph of his grandfather’s prayer book.
- 100 Federal Bureau of Investigation, “Memorandum on Leonard Gould,” May 3, 1968, box 663, folder 6, “Leonard Gould—Activism—FBI file on Leo Gould 1968,” Stephen Jay Gould Papers, Stanford University. The FBI records even note that Leonard Gould “was the parent of a child who appears to have been an applicant for Camp Kinderland during the 1954 season.” (I could not verify whether this was referring to Stephen Jay Gould or his younger brother Peter D. Gould.) Camp Kinderland is a summer camp founded by members of the Arbeter Ring. After the big split, it aligned with the IWO. For more on Leonard Gould’s activism and its impact on Stephen, see Perez, *Criticizing Science*, 30–31.
- 101 Quoted in Siff, “Evolution and Race.”
- 102 S. J. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 39.
- 103 Perez, “Evolutionary Activism.”
- 104 S. J. Gould, “Most Unkindest Cut of All”; Ivry, “Evolutionary Biology After Auschwitz.”

- 105 The title was “Alexander Agassiz Professor,” named after Louis Agassiz’s son.
- 106 Levins ridicules Harvard University in his satirical and fiction pieces. In one short story, he refers to “a girl of 16 or so” who “had been raised on a Harvard Nutritional Intervention for the Poor program, and looked only ten or eleven.” Richard Levins, “The Bochinch in the Barry,” undated, box 13, folder 12, Richard Levins Papers (MS 1142), Robert S. Cox Special Collections and University Archives Research Center, University of Massachusetts Amherst.
- 107 Y. Katz, “Intelligence Under Racial Capitalism.”
- 108 S. J. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 44. Stephen Jay Gould also co-taught a course at Harvard University with Alan Dershowitz, a Harvard Law professor, staunch Zionist, and apologist for American imperialism who later defended the US government’s use of torture during the so-called War on Terror. Shen, “Thinking the World”; Jewell, *Thinking About Thinking*. It is an example of how universities encourage and normalize ties to imperialism. For more discussion of some of the other limitations of Gould’s political perspective and critique of science, see Perez, *Criticizing Science*, chap. 1.
- 109 Lewontin and Levins, “Stephen Jay Gould.” That is the translation of Tarfon’s words that Levins and Lewontin used. A translation that is closer to the Hebrew would be, “It is not your duty to finish the work, but neither are you at liberty to neglect it.”
- 110 Morales, “Concepts of Pollution.”
- 111 Morales, “Concepts of Pollution.”
- 112 Morales, “I’m on Nature’s Side.”
- 113 Levins, “Toward the Renewal of Science.”
- 114 Jordan, *Directed by Desire*, 274–75. “Stanford-Binet” is a reference to the popular IQ test developed by Stanford University eugenicist and psychologist Lewis Terman, who had built on work by French psychologist Alfred Binet. See S. J. Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 204–22; Y. Katz, “Intelligence Under Racial Capitalism.” The “Jensen Lapse” is a reference to Arthur Jensen, another eugenicist and psychologist, who had argued

- intelligence (as measured by IQ tests) is biologically innate. See Lewontin, "Race and Intelligence."
- 115 Levins, "Toward the Renewal of Science."
- 116 A. Levins Morales and Morales, *Getting Home Alive*, 152.
- 117 Levins, "Toward the Renewal of Science."
- 118 As Cedric Robinson points out, Hegel thought that the dialectical forces that produce progress were absent from Africa. Robinson quotes Hegel's infamous lines, "At this point we leave Africa, not to mention it again. For it is no historical part of the World; it has no movement or development to exhibit. Historical movements in it—that is in its northern part—belong to the Asiatic or European World." C. J. Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 73–74.
- 119 A. Levins Morales, "Your Hand."
- 120 A. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 4.
- 121 A. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 48.
- 122 A. Levins Morales, *Medicine Stories*, 50.
- 123 A. Levins Morales, *Kindling*, 34–35.
- 124 A. Levins Morales, *Kindling*, iii.
- 125 A. Levins Morales, *Kindling*, 33.
- 126 A. Levins Morales, *Kindling*, 155.
- 127 A. Levins Morales, *Kindling*, 40.
- 128 For a discussion of the anarchistic themes in Aurora's work, see Asya, "Anarchism."
- 129 A. Levins Morales, *Rimonim*, 103. The part of the Shema that "V'ahavta" references comes from Dvarim (Deuteronomy) 6:5–9.
- 130 R. Levins Morales, "Tending the Soil."

Chapter 5

- 1 Feghali, *Land in Our Bones*, 44.
- 2 Feghali, *Land in Our Bones*, 5.
- 3 In Palestine, Zionism played a role in this suppression through its program of the "negation of the diaspora" (in Hebrew, *shlilat hagalut*), which considers the diasporic life of Eastern Europe as backward, nonmodern, and weak.
- 4 See the introduction.

- 5 Many writers have highlighted the strong yet often ignored ecological character of Jewish canonical texts and traditions. For some of many examples, see Bernstein, *Toward a Holy Ecology*; Seidenberg, *Kabbalah and Ecology*, introduction; and Hammer, *Jewish Book of Days*. Although compelling on paper, these writings about Jewish care for the earth are plagued by either a colonial pursuit of “green Zionism” or at least an unwillingness to fully confront the disasters created by the Zionist project, including its ecological disasters. For more on that, see Qumsiyeh and Abusarhan, “Environmental Nakba”; and Feghali, *Land in Our Bones*, chap. 7.
- 6 Zohary, *Plants of the Bible*, 45; A. Katz and Rosenberg, *For Times Such as These*.
- 7 See the introduction.
- 8 1 Kings 5:13.
- 9 Shabbat 66b:8. The Hebrew name for madder plant sounds like the name of the rebellious midwife Puah but is spelled differently. The roots of the madder plant *Rubia tinctorum* could also be used to make red dyes, as mentioned in Mishnah Sheviit 7:2.
- 10 Bamidbar (Numbers) 11:5.
- 11 Bava Kamma 82a:10–11.
- 12 Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, chap. 10; Harari, *Jewish Magic*, chap. 6.
- 13 Quoted in Dafni and Aqel Khatib, *Plants, Demons and Wonders*, 68–69. The rue referred to here is likely *Ruta chalepensis*.
- 14 Stein, “Queen of Herbs.” The rue used here is in most cases probably *Ruta graveolens*.
- 15 Dafni and Khatib, *Plants, Demons and Wonders*, 68. Ochana and other Jewish writers living in the Arab world (such as the Rambam) identified *ezov* with *za’atar*, which today usually refers to a mixture of herbs and seeds in which a certain hyssop (often *Origanum syriacum*) is the main ingredient. There has been much debate about which plant *ezov* in the Hebrew Bible refers to.
- 16 One midrash also suggests that the name Rafael is derived from Moses’s cry to God concerning Miriam’s illness. Bamidbar Rabbah 2:10.
- 17 Bava Metzia 86b:19–20.

- 18 These are the words of Andrés Bernáldez (1450–1513), who was apparently also a close friend of Christopher Columbus (in 1492, the year of Columbus’s first voyage to the so-called New World, Spain expelled its Jews). Bernáldez, “Recollections.”
- 19 I. Robinson, *Kabbalist in Montreal*. Rosenberg’s *Rafael HaMalach* (which I learned of from Marek Tuszewicki’s wonderful book *A Frog Under the Tongue*) spoke to me immediately, and not only for its content regarding healing. In some editions, *Rafael HaMalach* was bound together with Rosenberg’s guide to using Tehillim (Psalms) for incantations, and on the title page, Rosenberg wrote that the guide was deeply inspired by the Palestinian rabbi Chaim Yosef David Azulai. Azulai (also spelled Azoulay) is my mother’s last name, common among North African Jews, which she received from her father (my grandfather), who had grown up in Oran, Algeria. Łódź, the Polish town where Rosenberg lived when my copy of *Rafael HaMalach* was printed, is where my paternal grandparents got married. And Rafael is the name of my maternal great-grandfather.
- 20 Rosenberg, *Sefer Refa’el Ha-Mal’akh*.
- 21 Tehillim (Psalms) 85:15.
- 22 Indeed, the claim that Hebrew was merely a liturgical language prior to the rise of Zionism doesn’t hold water. Hebrew was used in the Middle Ages for writing medical texts, notably gynecological texts. In responsa literature (rabbinical “question and answer”), it was also used over the centuries to deal with issues of everyday life. Some shared knowledge of Hebrew allowed Jewish communities from very different places to communicate, centuries before Zionism. In 1877, twenty years before the First Zionist Congress, Aaron Shmuel Lieberman, a Jewish socialist from the Pale, published a Hebrew language radical newspaper (*HaEmet*). As for Yehuda Rosenberg, he had a long-standing interest in the Hebrew language and thought it was critical for anyone interested in Oral Torah to learn. I. Robinson, *Kabbalist in Montreal*, 23–25.
- 23 In bar mitzvah sermons Rosenberg gave after moving to Canada, he spoke passionately of how the Torah isn’t in conflict with the sciences but rather contains them: “The Torah built

her house with all the sciences in the world. She hewed its seven pillars which hint at the seven sciences which embrace all the sciences in the world . . . it is possible to say that this is the matter hinted at in the symbol of the candelabrum with its seven lamps. The body of the candelabrum hints at the essence of the holy Torah. Its seven lamps hint at the source and root of the seven sciences of the world which are fundamental [avot] to all the other sciences. Therefore we may understand that the sources of the seven sciences which are rooted in the holy Torah are properly called the faces of the candelabrum.” Quoted in I. Robinson, “Business of Rabbinic Sermons.”

- 24 Quinine was derived from the bark of the cinchona tree (also known as “Peruvian bark”), which Indigenous people knew could remedy various fevers. Lee, “Plants Against Malaria.” The tree was given the colonial name “cinchona” by the Swedish naturalist Carl Linnaeus in honor of the countess of Chinchón, the wife of the Spanish viceroy of Peru, who was supposedly cured from malaria by the bark. Bruce-Chwatt, “Three Hundred and Fifty Years.”
- 25 Tuszewicki, *Frog Under the Tongue*, 182–83. The practice of using the *afikomen* as an amulet against evil spirits goes back at least to the late Middle Ages. Trachtenberg, *Jewish Magic and Superstition*, 134.
- 26 Tuszewicki, *Frog Under the Tongue*, 183.
- 27 Rosenberg, *Sefer Refa’el Ha-Mal’akh*, 53.
- 28 For rue leaves being shaped like a *hamsa*, see Dafni and Khatib, *Plants, Demons and Wonders*, 57. In responsa literature, the idea that rue’s name in Hebrew encodes the name for the plague is attributed to the kabbalist Rabbi Ya’akov She’altiel Niño, who was born in Jerusalem in 1800. Ovadiah Yosef, *Yabia Omer*, vol. 8, *Orach Hayyim*, Siman [section] 37.
- 29 Bamidbar 25:12. The text has the word *shalom* (peace) and not *shalem* (whole), although the two share a root (see the introduction). But one interpretation in the Talmud suggests that this verse really refers to “whole” because there is a Hebrew calligraphy tradition of writing the letter *vav* in *shalom* (שלום) in this particular passage with a break in it on Torah scrolls. This is

taken to mean that the word *shalom* here is “broken” and needs to be made whole—so wholeness is the meaning, not peace. Kiddushin 66b:13.

30 Bereshit 2:7 (The Contemporary Torah, JPS translation, 2006).

31 Bereshit Rabbah 17:4.

32 Tuszewicki, *Frog Under the Tongue*, 122–23.

33 Rosenberg does not present himself as the story’s author; he claims that he simply found the manuscript (which is written from the perspective of the Maharal’s son-in-law, an eyewitness to the creation of the Golem).

34 Rosenberg, *Niflaot HaMaharal*, 18.

35 Leivick, “Golem,” 227.

36 Interview with Dori Midnight, December 16, 2024.

37 Like Reuben Levins (Richard Levins’s father) and Leonard Gould (Stephen Jay Gould’s father).

38 Interview with Dori Midnight. The writer Upton Sinclair was also inspired by “comrade Yetta” and wrote about her trial. Sinclair, “Communist ‘Criminals’ in Los Angeles.” Sinclair mocks “our patriots” who had “saved” the country from “Russian Jewish working girls and a little piece of red silk, home-cut and home-sewed by the fingers of working-class children!” Yetta Stromberg wrote her own account of the trial; see Stromberg, “Young Workers, Join I. L. D.!”

39 It has not escaped Dori’s attention that Midnight is catchier than Ehrlich, and she had initially used it as a “stage name.”

40 Dori Midnight and Ayana Young, *For the Wild*, podcast, episode 310, “Dori Midnight on Spinning Webs of Support,” October 27, 2022.

41 Midnight and Young, “Dori Midnight.”

42 Feghali, *Land in Our Bones*, 171.

43 Bernstein, *Toward a Holy Ecology*. The holiness of apple trees and their fruit was familiar to me. My mother taught me to listen when trees talk; she also reminded me that her maternal grandfather (my great-grandfather), a Bulgarian Sephardic Jew, would cut into an apple from his orchard and recite the Ladino saying that the apple (*mansana*) keeps the malady away: “*La mansana, mal sana.*”

- 44 Book of Enoch 7:1; see Charles, *Book of Enoch*. This verse has also been also translated as “and they taught them sorcery and spells and showed them the cutting of roots and herbs.” Black and VanderKam, *Book of Enoch*. The translation Midnight uses is “The angels taught the daughters of men incantations, exorcisms, the cutting of roots, and revealed to them healing plants,” hence the title of her song “The Angels Revealed to Us Healing Plants.” This translation comes from Isaacs, *Divination, Magic, and Healing*, 75. It also appeared in the entry on “Magic” in the 1906 Jewish Encyclopedia. The phrase “healing plants,” which doesn’t appear in any of the canonical English translations of the book of Enoch, likely originates from an early Greek translation where the word *pharmakeias* is used.
- 45 Midnight and Young, “Dori Midnight.”
- 46 The first protest Midnight attended was an ACT UP protest against the pope that her older brother took her to. “We went up to the top floor of Macy’s and pretended we were having snacks up there, and then went to the window and dropped like a 50-foot banner that said ‘Condoms Save Lives’ as the Popemobile went by.” Interview with Dori Midnight.
- 47 Cohen and Siegel, *Ashkenazi Herbalism*, xiv.
- 48 The irony of the title *Ashkenazi Herbalism* is that the Jews in the Pale of Settlement that the book focuses on weren’t quite “Ashkenazi.” It is useful to briefly trace the history of the term. In rabbinical literature, *ashkenaz* refers to the Loire Valley and the Rhineland, and the Jews living in these Western European regions later became known as *Ashkenazim*. Largely because of expulsions, these Jews were displaced to the east, though some moved back west when possible. This back-and-forth was profitable to the racial regimes of Europe. For example, for France in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, Simon Dubnow notes that “expelling the Jews, and selling permission to them to come back, was an excellent means of raising a large sum of money.” Dubnow, *Outlines of Jewish History*, 162. But the key point is that the Jews who moved to Eastern Europe from *ashkenaz* often retained cultural and spiritual connections to Western Europe, and were thus “Ashkenazim,” but not all Jews living in Eastern

Europe came from *ashkenaz* and shared those traditions. There were Jewish communities in Eastern Europe that arrived from the east—for example, from the Byzantine Empire (places such as present-day Turkey)—not from *ashkenaz*. Moreover, some of the Jewish communities who had lived in Eastern Europe for a while were closer to the local Slavic cultures than to the Germanic culture of the Ashkenazim arriving from the west. There were therefore sometimes tensions in Eastern Europe between Ashkenazim and more “Eastern” Eastern European Jews. For instance, Shalom Boguslavsky summarizes the tensions in Poland in the late fifteenth century, after the Jews of Kraków were expelled and moved to the nearby town of Kazimierz: “The Jews of Kazimierz were divided into two opposing camps. The split was not between the people of Kazimierz and the expelled from Kraków, but between Ashkenazim and Poles. In one group there were mainly new migrants from the west, and the other was ruled by Jews whose families had lived in Poland for a long time. Between these two groups were differences in class, culture, customs, and mentality. The Ashkenazim saw their culture as higher and presumed that the community [*kehila*] needs to act according to their rules, and that they themselves need to lead it. For them it was only reasonable: the Ashkenazim were the elite of the Jews of Eastern Europe for hundreds of years. They brought with them the Yiddish language that originated from a Germanic dialect, the social and communal norms formed in the west, their style of clothing, architecture, cuisine and of course also the religion. The important spiritual and rabbinical centers of Europe were all in the lands of *ashkenaz*. The [Jewish] Poles, even though they were Ashkenazim originally, or at least adopted the more western Jewish culture, saw things differently. They had lived for decades or hundreds of years in a Slavic region. They had absorbed different cultural influences. Some of them had roots in Jewish groups that didn’t arrive from the Roman Empire through the Rhine Valley and the Germanic countries but rather came from the Byzantine empire and had been living in these lands [of Eastern Europe] from time immemorial. They were shaped by different historical

conditions and were not so willing to cede their power to people who had just arrived from the west.” Boguslavsky, *Unlikely and Oft-Overlooked Story*, 67. As Boguslavsky also notes, these tensions between Ashkenazim and other Jewish groups in Eastern Europe persisted into the nineteenth century. Nowadays, the label Ashkenazi is applied uncritically to all Jews of Eastern Europe who aren’t Sephardic, which flattens the complexity and diversity of the region and its peoples.

49 Cohen and Pick, “Deatra Cohen’s Oral History.”

50 Wood, *Book of Herbal Wisdom*, 307–9.

51 *Ashkenazi Herbalism* states that St. John’s wort was called שוּדִים (shudim shuts), which is incorrect. On the website accompanying the book, the authors correctly list the plant’s name as שְׂדִים-שִׁיץ (sheydim-shits), which they got from linguist Mordkhe Schaechter’s book on plant names. Schaechter, *Plant Names in Yiddish*. Another Yiddish name for *Hypericum perforatum* that Schaechter lists is פֿלאַנטערבלום (plonterblum), which could be translated as “tangled flower”—presumably a reference to the (sometimes tangled) stamens that come out of the plant’s flowers. Schaechter claims that several other *Hypericum* species have sheydim-shits names (such as שִׂינְעֶנְעֶר שְׂדִים-שִׁיץ for *Hypericum hircinum*). However, I couldn’t find any Yiddish sources that mention sheydim-shits, and Cohen and Siegel say they also haven’t seen it anywhere except Schaechter’s book. Interview with Deatra Cohen and Adam Siegel, October 10, 2024. Schaechter relied on informants for some of his plant names, but the published book provides no details. Abe Gold of YIVO has looked through the uncataloged boxes of Schaechter’s notes about Yiddish plant names on my behalf and couldn’t find the sources of these names. Gold did find an index card where Schaechter wrote that “in western Europe people would hang it [sheydim-shits] on doors and windows to drive out demons and protect against lightning. It was also used in folk medicine (to heal wounds, as a stimulant and antidepressant).” It remains unclear where the name sheydim-shits comes from or how it was used, and it is significant that Schaechter’s index card only refers to the plant’s uses in western Europe. It is also

worth remembering that the primary source that *Ashkenazi Herbalism* draws on, *Herbs Used in Ukrainian Folk Medicine* by Natalia Osadcha-Janata, never explicitly mentions Jews (as Cohen and Siegel acknowledge) nor any Yiddish plant names. Given all this, *Ashkenazi Herbalism*'s implication that Jews in the Pale knew St. John's wort as *sheydim-shits* is a big leap. It is possible that the name *sheydim-shits* was never used in the Pale (even though the plant clearly was) or that it was an obscure name that the vast majority of Yiddish-speaking Eastern European Jews wouldn't have recognized but that Schaechter's (unknown) informants knew. It is also possible that Schaechter simply invented these names. Schaechter is known for planting neologisms that he coined—called “Schaechterisms” by his critics—into his work without distinguishing them from established terms; see Moskovich, “Comprehensive English-Yiddish Dictionary.” This would explain why several *Hypericum* species in his book have such neat names, all containing *sheydim-shits*, that no other sources use. Whatever the case may be, *Ashkenazi Herbalism* has put the evocative name *sheydim-shits* into use among Jewish herbalists who are giving it new meanings. For their efforts, it might not matter whether St. John's wort was ever previously known as *sheydim-shits*.

- 52 Cohen and Siegel, *Ashkenazi Herbalism: Rediscovering the Herbal Traditions of Eastern European Jews*, 138.
- 53 As herbalist Nicole Rose argues, describing the plant as an “anti-depressant” is a way to commodify it while glossing over “the holistic nature of depression and how it takes a broad range of interventions to support someone experiencing depression.” This framing also falsely promises an easy fix: “Taking a bottle of SJW [St. John's wort] is not going to solve someone's grief or counter the complex psycho-emotional consequences of living in a capitalist, racist and oppressive society.” Rose, *Herbalism and State Violence*, 392.
- 54 Heinrich Felix Paulitzky's book was later edited and extended by his son, the doctor Friedrich Karl Paulitzky (whom Eliashberg credits as the author). Eliashberg's Hebrew translation was based on a Polish translation of the original German. Paulitzky's

book had as many as ten editions, which shows it was popular. For more on Paulitzky and Eliashberg, see Zalkin, “Scientific Literature and Cultural Transformation”; and Tuszewicki, “Giving Tshuve to the Sick.” I thank Theresa Krüggeler and Mary Lawrence for their help in finding this information.

- 55 Eliashberg and Paulitzky, *Marpeh La’am*.
- 56 Eliashberg and Paulitzky, *Marpeh La’am*, 66.
- 57 Cohen and Siegel, *Ashkenazi Herbalism*, 179.
- 58 An Anishinaabe name for *Plantago major* is Omakakiibag. Geniusz, *Plants Have So Much*, 202.
- 59 Tilford, *From Earth to Herbalist*, 160.
- 60 As in *tzemach shoteh*, a “wandering plant.”
- 61 Kimmerer, *Braiding Sweetgrass*, 214. Kimmerer’s book envisions braiding together Western scientific knowledge with Native knowledge and practices, drawing on the author’s process of reconciling her own professional training in botany and ecology, received at US universities, with the Native traditions and perspectives of her ancestors. Kimmerer gives us a sense of the weaving she has in mind by imagining Linnaeus, who coined the term *Plantago major* and assigned names to much of the living world, taking a walk with Nanabozho (also called Nanabush), a figure from traditional Anishinaabe stories whom Kimmerer considers “an Anishinaabe Linnaeus.” In her telling, the two would harmoniously exchange ideas and learn from each other. Kimmerer writes, “Linnaeus the Swedish botanist and zoologist, in his loden jacket and woolen trousers, with felt hat cocked back on his forehead and a vasculum under his arm, and Nanabozho naked but for his breechcloth and a single feather, with a buckskin bag under his arm. They stroll along discussing the names for things. They’re both so enthusiastic, pointing out the beautiful leaf shapes, the incomparable flowers. Linnaeus explains his *Systema Naturae*, a scheme designed to show the ways in which all things are related. Nanabozho nods enthusiastically, ‘Yes, that is also our way: we say, “We are all related.”’ He explains that there was a time when all beings spoke the same language and could understand one another, so all of Creation knew each other’s names. Linnaeus looks

wistful about that. ‘I ended up having to translate everything into Latin,’ he says of binomial nomenclature. ‘We lost any other common language long ago.’ Linnaeus lends Nanabozho his magnifying glass so he can see the tiny floral parts. Nanabozho gives Linnaeus a song so he can see their spirits. And neither of them are lonely.” But Kimmerer’s story ignores the political context of Linnaeus’s work and his role in creating modern racial science. Linnaeus, after all, was the one who taxonomized humans into the “red,” “black,” “white,” and “yellow” varieties. As Stephen Jay Gould observes, in this taxonomy of humans, Linnaeus “mixed character with anatomy.” Linnaeus described the “Africanus” or “black” human variety as “phlegmatic,” “lazy,” “sly,” “sluggish,” and “neglectful.” Would such a person go for a stroll with the “red” Nanabozho and listen to their ideas? And would Nanabozho even want to walk with Linnaeus? The stories about Nanabozho, like the stories of the Hebrew Bible, are diverse and open to many interpretations, especially as Nanabozho takes on different character traits. But examining the tales broadly, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson summarizes Nanabozho (Nanabush) as follows: “Nanabush introduces the Nishnaabeg to the practices of consent, recognition, and reciprocity. Nanabush listens. Nanabush shares of himself. Nanabush learns about the plants, for instance, and therefore learns about himself. Nanabush doesn’t interview anyone or hand out surveys. Nanabush visits. Nanabush observes. Nanabush reflects. Nanabush does ceremony. Nanabush listens. Nanabush shares and receives stories. Nanabush actively participates. Nanabush experiments. Nanabush prays, sings, and dances. Nanabush struggles. Nanabush dreams.” Simpson, *As We Have Always Done*, 184. It doesn’t sound like Nanabozho and Linnaeus are a match made in heaven. But perhaps the more fundamental problem with Kimmerer’s imagined stroll is that it individualizes the issues. Linnaeus was just one of many practitioners of racial science. The taxonomies that he and others provided emerged from, and in turn supported, massive colonial and capitalist projects—as Kimmerer obviously knows—and what Linnaeus believed as an individual isn’t that

important. Another problem is that what is considered today “Western science” also contains within it Indigenous practices that European settlers have adopted (or co-opted). For all these reasons, imagining a happy resolution between Western scientific knowledge and Native knowledge through an exchange between individuals who supposedly represent the two “world-views” is misleading. For more on Linnaeus and racial science, see Gould, *Mismeasure of Man*, 66; and Charmantier, “Linnaeus and Race.” I am grateful to Adam Spry for an illuminating conversation about Robin Wall Kimmerer’s work.

62 Interview with L. B. Moore, October 22, 2024.

63 Interview with L. B. Moore.

64 Jews On Ohlone Land, “JOOL’s Purpose.” JOOL is related to what some have recently called the “Jewish Agrarian Movement,” which seeks to revitalize a connection to the land, in the diaspora, often through farming and by reclaiming Jewish traditions such as *shmita* and *teshuva*. Goldberg et al., “Return and Repair.”

65 JOOL also relates *Plantago* to the holiday of Shavuot: “What makes plantain a good guest is not only its refusal to dominate its neighbors, but also its insistence on contributing, on offering its unique gifts in order to nourish and heal. We enter this weekend into Shavuot, the Feast of Weeks, in which we celebrate the gift of receiving Torah at Sinai. Shavuot is a celebration of bounty, a festival of gratitude for the medicine of Torah and the nourishment of the spring harvest. As we give thanks for these gifts let us ask ourselves: how can we as Jewish community share our unique food and medicine in order to enrich the places we call home?” Jews On Ohlone Land newsletter, June 2022.

66 Cockrell, “Magnolias & Doikayt.”

67 Jews On Ohlone Land newsletter, November 2022.

68 *For the Wild*, “Corrina Gould on Settler Responsibility.” See also Gomez, “(Re)Riteing the Land.” For historical background on the Ohlone peoples and the loss of federal recognition, see Field et al., “Contemporary Ohlone Tribal Revitalization Movement”; Field et al., “Mapping Erasure.”

- 69 Luckey was part of the team that designed Shuumi. Luckey took on the last name of his non-Jewish mother, Mary Luckey, a biophysicist. His Ashkenazi Jewish father, Paul Kivel, is an author best known for his books *Uprooting Racism: How White People Can Work for Racial Justice* (1995) and *Living in the Shadow of the Cross: Understanding and Resisting the Power and Privilege of Christian Hegemony* (2013). Interview with Ariel Luckey, May 7, 2025.
- 70 Duncan, “Shuumi”; Duncan, “Corrina Gould.”
- 71 Nijmeh, “Rep. Lofgren.” See also Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, “Corina Gould’s Wide-Ranging Identity Fraud.”
- 72 Interview with Gabriel Duncan, April 25, 2025.
- 73 Interview with Ariel Luckey.
- 74 Interview with Gabriel Duncan.
- 75 Field et al., “Mapping Erasure.”
- 76 Field comes from a family of Nazi Holocaust survivors, with many family members exterminated. When he began working with the Muwekma Ohlono Tribe in the early 1990s, he told them that this was the source of his commitment to Native struggles—a reaction to knowing “what it means to have been disappeared.” Interview with Les Field, May 19, 2025.
- 77 Interview with Ariel Luckey. While JOOL emphasizes land back struggles on Turtle Island, it has not supported Indigenous struggles for land in Palestine. JOOL’s cofounder Dev Noily described the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation of October 7, 2023, as “the heinous Hamas attack.” Noily, “For My Grandparents.” By contrast, JOOL’s main Native collaborator, Corrina Gould, publicly expressed her solidarity with Palestine following October 7 (participating, for example, in the 2024 University of California People’s Tribunal for Palestine, alongside Palestinian author and activist Susan Abulhawa). In her statements, Gould highlights the connections between settler-colonialism in Turtle Island and in Palestine and notes how the US settler-colonial state was an inspiration for the Nazi regime. “My prayers are with Palestine,” Gould writes. “My heart shatters to see photos of young Palestinian children blown to pieces by the large Israeli weapons and militaries funded by our U.S. government and tax dollars. I

condemn the genocide and occupation of Palestinian Lands and peoples . . . the horrific violence in Gaza is heart-shattering and it's also a violence that we know well. Genocide and occupation are not new to Indigenous peoples. The blueprint used to create genocide in Gaza and throughout the world was pulled from the playbook created by the United States government on American Indians here in Turtle Island, our ancestral lands. . . . The United States' playbook on genocide was and is used all around the world. . . . The U.S. map of genocide was studied and used by Hitler to create the horrific forms of genocide used by Nazi to exterminate our Jewish relatives in Europe. This same U.S. map is currently being used to create and normalize genocide on our relatives in Palestine."

78 Midnight and Young, "Dori Midnight."

79 Midnight, "Holistic Health."

80 Midnight, "Holistic Health."

81 Interview with Dori Midnight.

82 Frere-Smith, "Herbal Solidarity Project."

83 Rose, *Herbalism and State Violence*, 71.

84 Rose, *Herbalism and State Violence*, 86.

85 Rose, *Herbalism and State Violence*, 399.

86 Rose, *Herbalism and State Violence*, 400. On the relationship between agroecology and herbalism, Rose says, "Agroecology to me just emphasizes how interconnected everything is, and herbalism is completely similar. I think they're all the same kind of paradigm: everything is connected, our health is connected to the health of the land, our trauma is connected to systems of trauma and oppression, and agroecology is one lens of that in terms of food and herbalism is another lens in terms of health. They all signify the necessity of interdependence." Personal communication with Nicole Rose, December 13, 2024.

87 Rose, *Herbalism and State Violence*, 400.

Chapter 6

- 1 Bamidbar (Numbers) 16:3. Korach and the other rebels also ask if it was not enough for Moses and Aaron to have been

appointed by God as the elite priests who manage the holy dwelling place (*mishkan*, which can be translated as “sanctuary”) that the Israelites had built in the desert.

2 Bamidbar 16:4.

3 “*Az es geyt a sidre koyrekh, kumt oyf: karshn, retek, khreyn*; When the Korah passage [in Torah] comes, cherries, radishes, and horseradish grow.” Tuszewicki, *Frog Under the Tongue*, 122.

4 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”

5 F. Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, 16.

6 There is some ambiguity about when the family left Czechoslovakia. Lorraine Perlman’s biography of Fredy is inconsistent on this point, sometimes using the date October 1938 and other times stating the family left in 1939. A letter from Fredy quoted in the biography suggests it was in 1939, a month before the Nazis had arrived. L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 94. Other family members say it was August 1938 (personal communication with Lorraine Perlman, November 30, 2024). Either way, Fredy’s statement that the Nazis were “a month” away could be roughly correct, depending on how we date the beginning of the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia. The Nazis began annexing the Sudetenland in September 1938 but reached Brno only in March 1939.

7 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 5.

8 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 6.

9 United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Immigration to the United States, 1933–41.”

10 The suspension was not total—some visas were still being granted—but in 1941, Jewish emigration from German territories was anyhow prohibited. Collins, “How Bolivia’s Ruthless Tin Baron”; Gruner-Domić, “Colonisation, Refuge, and Nationalism.”

11 Lorraine’s parents, Oscar Nybakken and Gertrude (“Trudy”) Njus, founded a Norse club in Iowa City in 1937 that celebrated Norwegian culture and sent packages of food and clothing to Norway during World War II. Both Oscar and Trudy grew up among Norwegian immigrants. As Oscar recalls, “I grew up in northern Minnesota in a kind of colony. It was a section populated by people from Norway. There were

Norwegian traditions, Norwegian public schools and people only spoke Norwegian. Trudy grew up in a section like that in Iowa.” Norse Club records, Iowa Women’s Archives, University of Iowa Libraries, Iowa City.

- 12 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 13 Kuszai, “Facing Reality or Utopian Dreaming,” chap. 2.
- 14 The perceptive introduction to this *Fifth Estate* issue, written by Fredy Perlman’s friend David Watson, states that “Zionism itself—and all nationalist-statist ideologies of the region—must be fought. The racist and exclusivist nature of Zionism will never allow a genuine internationalist and liberatory Jewish opposition to arise and will only promise more war and destruction and the eventual annihilation of the Israeli people.” The issue also has articles about the Nakba and the history of Zionism.
- 15 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 16 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 17 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 18 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 19 Drinnon, *Facing West*, 443.
- 20 Drinnon, *Facing West*, 450–51.
- 21 Drinnon, *Facing West*, 449.
- 22 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 23 Drinnon, *Facing West*, 451; Wolfe, *Traces of History*, 20.
- 24 “By refusing immigration on principle to elements in poor health, by simply excluding certain races from naturalization,” Hitler writes, the US was the best model for a state based on racial purity. Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, 440. Hitler also called American eugenicist Madison Grant’s book *The Passing of the Great Race* “my bible.”
- 25 R. Hubbard, “Eugenics and Prenatal Testing”; Washington, *Medical Apartheid*, chap. 8; Stern, *Eugenic Nation*, 107.
- 26 Roberts, *Fatal Invention*, chap. 1; Wolfe, *Traces of History*, chap. 2.
- 27 Hausfeld, “IBM Technology”; *New York Times*, “Thomas J. Watson.” For early uses of Hollerith machines in the US, see Jefferson, *Digitize and Punish*, chap. 1.

- 28 Wallace, *American Axis*, chap. 12. Hitler had a portrait of Henry Ford in his office; he also praises him in *Mein Kampf* for fighting against Jewish efforts to dominate the US economy.
- 29 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 30 Zionist leader Arthur Ruppin traveled to Germany for the negotiations of the *Haavara* agreement, where he also met with Hans F. K. Günther, a leading Nazi theoretician of race, and the two had an amicable discussion on racial science. Segev, *Seventh Million*, 19. For a history of Zionist collaborations with European racists and imperialists, including the Nazis, see Brenner, *Zionism in the Age of Dictators*.
- 31 Massad, “Zionism’s Internal Others.”
- 32 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 33 These photographs were chosen by Peter Werbe of the *Fifth Estate*, who also wrote the caption. Interview with Peter Werbe, December 13, 2024.
- 34 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 35 F. Perlman, “Anti-Semitism and the Beirut Pogrom.”
- 36 Job 41:32.
- 37 Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 76.
- 38 Fredy understood games and having fun as critical aspects of life that are ignored by those who see everything only through relations of production. Fredy’s writing on this in *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!* foreshadows the ideas of Jewish anarchist and anthropologist David Graeber, who was a student of Marshall Sahlins (whom Fredy cites in *Against His-Story*). Like Fredy, Graeber emphasizes the importance of fun and how capitalist ideology prevents us from recognizing it in nature. See Graeber, “What’s the Point.” Both Fredy and Graeber turn to the Hebrew Bible for insights on how we could organize ourselves without hierarchies; Graeber looks to *shmita* and the Jubilee year as liberatory practices in his book *Debt: The First 5,000 Years* (much like Aaron Shmuel Lieberman had done; see the introduction). Graeber’s final book, *The Dawn of Everything* (cowritten with David Wengrow), explores some related themes to those of *Against His-Story* and similarly looks to Natives of the Great Lakes region for liberatory alternatives to Western society.

Despite these many similarities, to my knowledge Graeber never referenced Fredy Perlman. Their big difference might be in the attitude toward technology: Fredy mostly railed against it, while Graeber thought that capitalism failed to deliver the desirable labor-saving technology (and “cool” things like flying cars) that it had promised. Graeber, “Of Flying Cars.”

39 F. Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, 11.

40 F. Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, 56–57 (emphasis added). Fredy references Frederick Turner’s *Beyond Geography* several times in *Against His-Story*, and it’s likely that his interpretation of the golden calf was inspired by Turner’s. Of Moses and the Israelites, Turner writes, “Moses tells them that the forty years’ wandering is divine retribution for their surrender to various temptations. And surely a long list might be drawn up of their transgressions, most especially the incident of the golden calf. For at the *very moment* that their heroic intercessor is receiving on the mountain the tablets of the law from the hand of the god, they are abandoning themselves below in orgiastic fashion to the worship of a fertility image” (italics in original). Turner, *Beyond Geography*, 46.

41 “They will reach the Promised Land. But in this land they will remain zeks. The curse of toilsome labor will not be lifted from them.” Fredy’s point is supported by the fact that Moses and God re-create slavery, after emancipation, through laws that also allow for Hebrews to be enslaved (but which treat non-Hebrews more harshly). These include a law stating that “If his [a slave’s] master gave him a wife, and she has borne him children, the wife and her children shall belong to the master” (Shemot 21:4). This law is very similar to a law from the colony of Virginia in the late seventeenth-century that states that a person’s status (free or in bondage) will be determined by the “condition of the mother,” so that the enslaved population could be reproduced through enslaved women.

42 Fredy’s critique of Marx and Engels is similar to Cedric Robinson’s critique in *Black Marxism* (which was published the same year). Robinson shows in detail that Marx and Engels saw the world through a European racist lens. And like Fredy,

Robinson thinks that the focus on material forces of production led European Marxists to completely miss the spiritual forces that drive revolutionary action. As Robinson argues, the enslaved Africans who rose about against their enslavers were driven by what he calls “the preservation of the ontological totality”—the need to preserve their world—something that is rather foreign to the framework of Marx and Engels. It is therefore not surprising that for them the revolutionary class will usually be the factory workers in “advanced” (industrialized) capitalist society and not, say, slaves on a plantation. Like Fredy, Robinson rejects rigid notions about which people would participate in revolutionary action (and was generally skeptical of notions of “leadership”). George Lipsitz takes a similar perspective on Marxism when analyzing working-class struggles: “While finding much to admire in the marxist tradition, the identification of the working class as the only potential agent of social change does not seem plausible or desirable to me. Marx’s own formulations on this subject contain great unresolved contradictions; on the one hand he tells us that workers grow ever more alienated from their own potential under capitalism, and on the other hand that somehow they come to see their circumstances so clearly that they become the ones to critique and overthrow the system. Attempts to resolve that contradiction have often made it worse; one justification for the Leninist party has been that professional revolutionaries must stand in for the alienated proletariat and make the revolution for them.” Lipsitz, *Rainbow at Midnight*, 10.

- 43 Fredy died before completing the planned second volume of *The Strait*, but Lorraine finished it recently using his extensive notes.
- 44 Herscher, *Under the Campus, the Land*, chap. 4.
- 45 Lorraine Perlman couldn’t recall Fredy having any relationships with Native people. Neither could Fredy’s friends and Detroit-area activists Marilyn Rashid and David Watson. Watson agreed with my assessment that for Fredy, Native life on Turtle Island ended sometime in the nineteenth century. As Watson put it, “He [Fredy] could have gone out to some reservations and just

said, you know, I really want to understand what's going on with you folks, and people would have probably talked to him. But he didn't do that. He could have gone and volunteered at the American Indian Center here, you know, and talked to people. But he wasn't interested in that. . . . He would never even countenance going to a reservation and seeing how people actually function on a reservation." When I asked if Fredy would have been interested in the American Indian Movement and its tactics of direct action (as one example of contemporary Native struggles), Watson said that "probably in his most cynical moment," Fredy would have seen the movement as "just more politicians and egocrats taking over and using the forms of capital" ("egocrat" is a term from Fredy's writing). Watson adds that Fredy simply wasn't that interested in organizing and that most organizations wouldn't have lived up to his antihierarchical standards. "Fredy's vision really was pessimistic," Watson concludes. "He thought that that history had played out . . . he didn't think anybody was untouched anymore by Leviathan." Interview with David Watson, December 23, 2024.

- 46 Tuck and Wayne Yang, "Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor."
- 47 Deloria, *Custer Died for Your Sins*, 5.
- 48 F. Perlman, "Progress and Nuclear Power." Yet here as in other instances, Fredy's language implies that the Natives have vanished: "Corn, beans and squash, the 'three sisters' respected and loved by *the region's previous inhabitants*, became mere commodities for sale at food markets; their sowers and harvesters no longer grew them to enjoy at meals, feasts and festivals, but to sell for profit" (emphasis added). For a discussion of the idea of the "three sisters" and its tension with Western scientific views, see Deloria, "Perceptions and Maturity," 3–16.
- 49 F. Perlman, "Progress and Nuclear Power."
- 50 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 28.
- 51 Tucker, introduction to *Anything Can Happen*. Fredy has nonetheless been frequently labeled an "anarchist" by others, even though he was highly critical of anarchists, writing, "Anarchists are as varied as Mankind. There are governmental and commercial Anarchists as well as a few for hire. Some Anarchists

differ from Marxists only in being less informed. They would supplant the state with a network [of] computer centers, factories and mines coordinated ‘by the workers themselves’ or by an Anarchist union. They would not call this arrangement a State. The name-change would exorcize the beast.” F. Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, 4–5. A strain of anarchists who call themselves “anarcho-primitivists” and advocate a return to “primitive” ways of living have also claimed *Against His-Story* as a key text; see Gordon, “Leviathan’s Body.” Ironically, in that book, Fredy writes, “I wouldn’t use the word Primitive to refer to a people with a richness of life. I would use the word Primitive to refer to myself and my contemporaries, with our progressive poverty of life.”

52 Black & Red, “Purpose of Black and Red.”

53 F. Perlman, “Anything Can Happen.”

54 Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 38.

55 F. Perlman, “Anything Can Happen.”

56 Bradford, “Fredy Perlman.” (Bradford was one of Watson’s pseudonyms.)

57 F. Perlman, “Anything Can Happen.”

58 Perlman, “Anything Can Happen” (*italics in original*).

59 This was the Black Action Movement (BAM) at Western Michigan University. There was also a more well-known BAM at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, with a similar agenda, which was revived in the 1970s and ’80s. See Brown, “No Guns, No Cops.”

60 “Programming the Programmers,” “Anarchism—Perlman, Fredy and Lorraine” folder, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library. Bob Maier, creator of the “Observorman” cartoon, was one of the people who handed out this pamphlet. Personal communication with Bob Maier, December 19, 2024. Note that the pamphlet spells it “Observer” and not “Observer.”

61 The student was Bob Maier, and Fredy helped print the pamphlet. The pamphlet’s opening text bubble reads, “Hello. I am a scientist. Sometimes I am a professor too. I am an ‘objective observer’ of Experiments.” Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 65.

62 F. Perlman, “I Accuse This Liberal University.”

- 63 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, viii. Lorraine adds, “Fredy and I lived at remarkably low living expenses. . . . Neither of us took money from our parents (although my father gave us his 5-year old Chevrolet). After a year in Detroit I was getting jobs playing the violin. I had played ‘professionally’ (meaning one got paid) in Kalamazoo and in Belgrade I played in the National Theater opera and ballet orchestra. In Detroit the pay was not great except for union jobs, but I had a few of those and we lived modestly and could afford occasional trips and theater performances. In the 70s and 80s, in Detroit (especially the city, if not the suburbs), it was not difficult for young adults to live decently with a modest job.” Personal communication with Lorraine Perlman, December 10, 2024.
- 64 Lorraine notes that while Fredy “was often enthusiastic about works of scholars who held academic posts, he did not revise his judgment about the establishments they were affiliated.”
- 65 Letter from Lorraine Perlman, September 3, 2005, “Anarchism—Perlman, Fredy and Lorraine” folder, Joseph A. Labadie Collection, University of Michigan Library. As Lorraine writes, “From the early 1970s to his death, he was antagonistic to claims as to the virtues and innocence of technology.”
- 66 *Finally Got the News* (Detroit: Black Star Productions, 1970).
- 67 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 60–61; Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 15.
- 68 For the origins of the co-op, see Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*.
- 69 Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 157; Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 138.
- 70 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 63.
- 71 Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 75.
- 72 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 62.
- 73 Fredy’s response was that this kind of thing had never happened. But his deeper—and more controversial—answer was that words are endlessly malleable, which is why having a test for the “correct” ideology before giving access to the means of production was wrong. As he puts it in a letter to one of his critics, “With words it is possible to make *anything* sound antibureaucratic and ultrademocratic.” L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 66.

- 74 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 65.
- 75 Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 19–21. Aubert notes that Fredy and Lorraine had a short-lived precursor to the co-op, called the Revolutionary Printing Co-op, that had a different printer's mark.
- 76 Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 180.
- 77 Women's liberation and gay liberation, however, are conspicuously missing from Black & Red's materials. Black & Red had printed Barbara Ehrenreich and Deirdre English's *Witches, Midwives, and Nurses: A History of Women Healers* at the co-op, but stopped when the authors protested Black & Red's deletion of the final section of the pamphlet. See Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 213. In 1968 (before the co-op existed), Black & Red printed a page about student-run courses at WMU, which included a course on women's liberation. But that was about it, despite all the activities around women's liberation and gay liberation in the 1960s and '70s, which included efforts to create autonomous feminist initiatives (like the Chicago collective of Janes, discussed in chapter 1, not far from Detroit) that were very much in the spirit of self-organization and workers' control that interested Black & Red in other contexts. Also missing from Black & Red and probably the co-op's materials generally is engagement with Native movements, such as the American Indian Movement (AIM), which was founded in 1968, the same year as Black & Red.
- 78 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 6.
- 79 Buhle, " 'Last Jewish Anarchist.' "
- 80 Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit*, 82. Georgakas and Surkin also give a distorted account of some of Black Star's materials printed at the co-op. As mentioned earlier, Fredy helped League members print *The Political Thought of James Forman*, a compilation of writings by a well-known activist who joined the League. The book contains Forman's "Black Manifesto" (1969), which is addressed "to the White Christian Churches and the Jewish Synagogues in the United States of America and all Other Racist Institutions." The manifesto demands reparations from "white churches and Jewish

synagogues” on the grounds that they have benefited from slavery and are “part and parcel of the system of capitalism.” It specifically asks for \$500 million (estimating it to be \$15 per Black person), which the manifesto states “is not a large sum of money,” adding, “We know that the churches and synagogues have a tremendous wealth and its membership, white America, has profited and still exploits black people. We are also not unaware that the exploitation of colored peoples around the world is aided and abetted by the white Christian churches and synagogues.” Georgakas and Surkin sanitize all that. In their section on the manifesto, they write that it simply asks for reparations from “white religious institutions,” which could lead readers who aren’t familiar with the manifesto to believe it means reparations from, say, the Catholic Church establishment, whose centuries-long roles in colonialism and slavery is well-documented. Forman’s manifesto is misguided on many levels, even if one believes that asking for \$500 million (a pittance, really) is a revolutionary demand. There were hardly any synagogues in “North America” until the end of the nineteenth century, after chattel slavery was (at least formally) abolished. Marking Jews, who make up a tiny percentage of the continent’s population, as the source of capitalist oppression reproduces the worst kind of racist scapegoating from history—and totally misidentifies the institutions that created slavery and that hold material power. There are other reasons to be skeptical of the manifesto. It proposes a committee to oversee the reparations, though it’s unclear if the people listed, such as Fannie Lou Hamer, were ever consulted. It’s hard to believe that the great Fannie Lou Hamer, founder of the Freedom Farm Co-op who reminded us that all non-Natives on this continent are living on stolen land, would support this program. Why do Georgakas and Surkin airbrush all these issues? Perhaps it comes from a feeling of white guilt, the same white guilt that might have made them present Fredy as the good white American who represents hope for “good and honest [race] relations” rather than true joint struggle against white supremacy and racial capitalism.

81 Watson, “Homage to Fredy Perlman.”

82 Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 24–25.

83 Personal communication with Lorraine Perlman, December 10, 2024.

84 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 118; Aubert, *Detroit Printing Co-op*, 24.

85 L. Perlman, *Having Little, Being Much*, 139.

86 F. Perlman, *Against His-Story, Against Leviathan!*, 245.

Notes to Afterword

1 Marx, *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 15.

2 Azoulay, *Potential History*, 316.

3 Bereshit 32:29.

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