

Video still from documentation of "Tales of the Hasidim" (Judaica project, steampunk version).
Movement Research at the Center for Performance Research, New York City (2012).



Photo of "Tales" (Judaica project, aleph version). Lighting projection by Bruce Steinberg.
Photo: Jill Steinberg. Performance Mix Festival, The Flea Theater, New York City (2013).

BEN SPATZ

BETWEEN DEATH AND CEREMONY:

The Judaica Project 2012–2022

If it is true that Jews have undergone a racial re-classification, can they still represent a challenge to the same structure that now welcomes them? In other words, can Jews still be a compelling source of decolonial proposals?

—Santiago Slabodsky ¹

About ten years ago, I turned my artistic practice of song-based experimental theatre to focus on the question of jewish identity.² Before me stood two monoliths. On one side, the european holocaust, its burden overwriting and displacing, even today, many attempts to contextualize death and genocide within a broader decolonial frame.³ On the other side, jewish euro-american cultural production, the ubiquitous and sometimes hidden contributions of jewish humour, music, and storytelling to “american” culture. Neither of these, I knew, could be the starting point for my artistic research. In simple terms, they represent two starkly contrasting positionalities in relation to whiteness: utter abjection and profound assimilation. As Slabodsky implies, neither of these positionalities is capable of developing compelling proposals for the future of life on earth. And so I began to explore the space between: a liminal space, between death and ceremony.



Photo of "Judaica 2" (Judaica project, dybbuk version), with Sióbhán Harrison and Jennifer Parkin. Patrick Stewart Building, University of Huddersfield (2015).

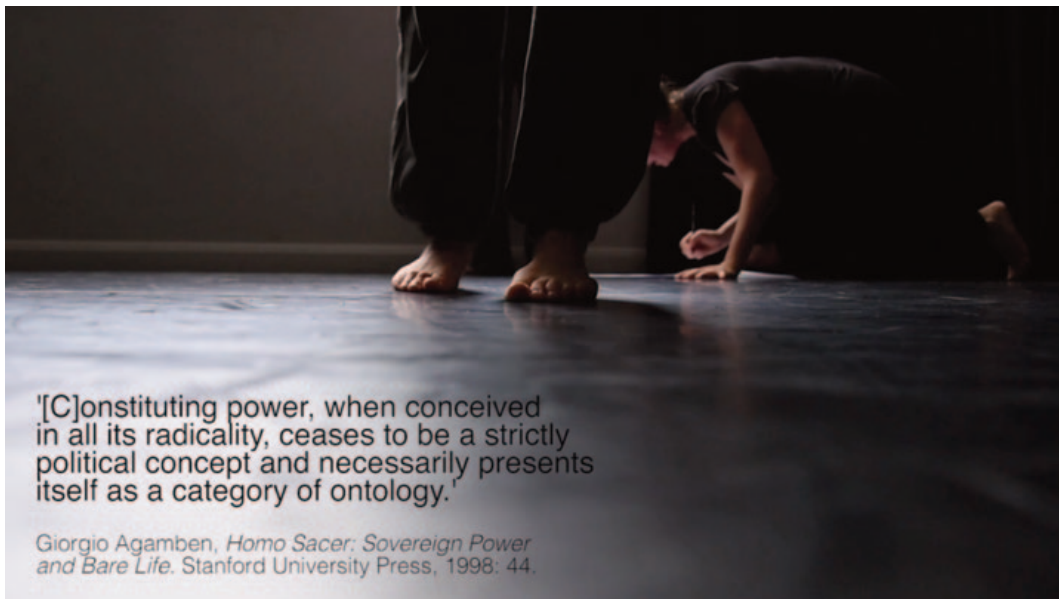


Photo of "Behold How Good" (Judaica project, performance art version), directed by Maiada Aboud. Actformance, Byram Arcade, Huddersfield (2017).

The ongoing state-sanctioned legal and extralegal murders of Black people are normative and, for this so-called democracy, necessary: it is the ground we walk on. And that it *is* the ground lays out that, and perhaps how, we might begin to live in relation to this requirement for our death. What kinds of possibilities for rupture might be opened up? What happens when we proceed as if we *know* this, antiblackness, to be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, an “I” or a “we” who know, an “I” or a “we” who care?

—Christina Sharpe ⁴

I soon realized that it is impossible to investigate or understand the meaning of jewishness today except in relation to whiteness. The two monoliths of holocaust memory and assimilationist culture block creative research into jewish possibility precisely because they overdetermine its relation to whiteness. As long as the figure of jewishness is understood either as constitutively outside whiteness or as indistinguishable from it, that figure can activate no political imaginary.⁵ In attempting to better comprehend the meaning of whiteness, I turned to black studies, for whiteness never names itself honestly. To know whiteness through blackness—to grasp, for example, how deeply antiblackness is fundamental to whiteness—is, following Sharpe, only a necessary first step in beginning to imagine a “we” that can move beyond the ongoing violences of whiteness.



Video still from "Triptych: Genesis, Kavana, Sabbath." Illuminated video triptych by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Caroline Gatt, and Agnieszka Mendel. Hebrew alphabet by Bruce Steinberg. *PARTake: The Journal of Performance as Research* 2.2 (2018): 25 minutes. <https://doi.org/10.33011/partake.v2i2.435>.



Video still from "Diaspora (An Illuminated Video Essay)" by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel, and Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz. *Global Performance Studies* 2.1 (2018), 30 minutes. <https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv2n1a1>.

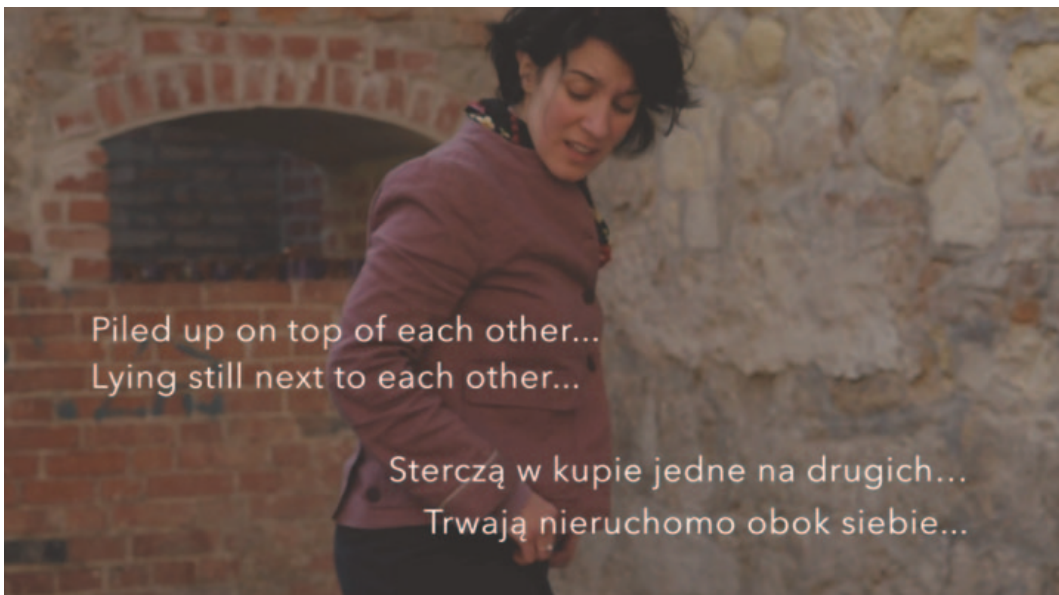
Death may in some traditions be a vivid experience, but within much of the white tradition it is a blank that may be immateriality (pure spirit) or else just nothing at all. This is within the logics of whiteness even if it is not at the forefront of white identity.

—Richard Dyer ⁶

To study whiteness, colonialism, and capitalism is to attempt to perceive what lies beyond the edges of the most powerful cultural and material systems ever produced. For a scholar, this means developing a critique of the core assumptions that structure the present world on multiple levels: in the languages we speak, in the shape of roads and buildings, in the quantification of value, in apparent reality of borders, in the exclusion of care and kinship from the domain of productive work. At the same time as these systems aim to quantify and minimize death in the abstract, they usher in waves of death and suffering under cover of economic valuation. Death is everywhere and nowhere in this regime, imposed on some communities, hidden from others. Yet for an artist, that critique is never enough; something must be rendered, shaped, composed.



Video still from "Diaspora (An Illuminated Video Essay)" by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Agnieszka Mendel, and Elaine Spatz-Rabinowitz. *Global Performance Studies* 2.1 (2018), 30 minutes. <https://doi.org/10.33303/gpsv2n1a1>.



Video still from "Działoszyce: Song, Border, Body." Illuminated video by Nazlıhan Eda Erçin with Agnieszka Mendel and Ben Spatz. Recorded at Działoszyce Synagogue. Presented at the First International Ecoperformance Festival, Taateatro Companhia, São Paulo, Brazil (2021), 18 minutes.

The title of this article is a play on Richard H. Pratt's ominous late-nineteenth-century motto, "kill the Indian in him and save the man." It condenses my key proposal. I recommend a Fanonian (and metaphorical) "cull" of the settler; the aim is to save the "man," or the woman. My humanity is to come; it will follow genuine decolonization.

—Lorenzo Veracini ⁷

Kill the settler, yes; kill the whiteness in ourselves—but what remains? Man is not an innocent category here, even if it were replaced by the human.⁸ Veracini's call for metaphorical death grates against Sharpe's evocation of real and non-metaphorical murder. And yet, there must be something like another kind of death, a death of whiteness that means the unmaking of the systems of extraction and exploitation that render greater and greater territories and identities unliveable. Toward what horizon can this death lead? I began to understand that whiteness, blackness, colonialism, indigeneity, jewishness, america, palestine, africa, yiddishkeit, and the pale of settlement are not only geographical or historical categories but also real, palpable, tactile materials that we may encounter in any moment. The death of whiteness, too, is possible at any time, not as metaphor, nor yet as political revolution, but as action, as manoeuvre, as technique.



Video still from "Działozyce: Song, Border, Body." Illuminated video by Nazlıhan Eda Erçin with Agnieszka Mendel and Ben Spatz. Recorded at Działozyce Synagogue. Presented at the First International Ecoperformance Festival, Taateatro Companhia, São Paulo, Brazil (2021), 18 minutes.

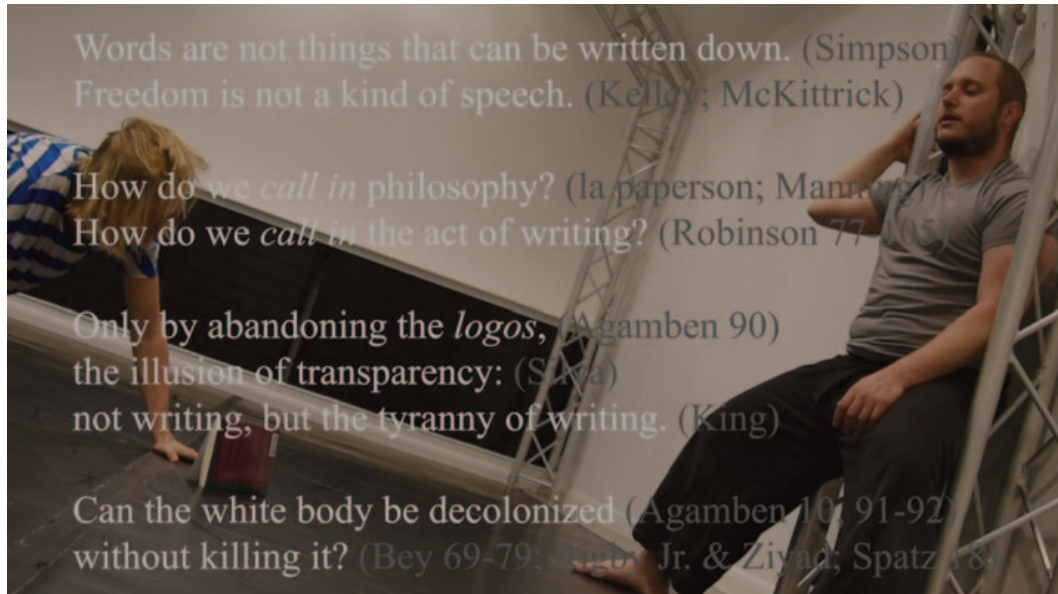


Video still from "He Almost Forgets That There is a Maker of the World" by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Caroline Gatt, and Agnieszka Mendel. Journal of Embodied Research 4.2 (2021), 32 minutes. <https://doi.org/10.16995/jer.71>.

To kill the settler in the man is to kill so much of the man himself that the distinction becomes questionable. This is not just because it is analytically messy, but also because, politically, I cannot imagine it taking place: it is to demand that he give up his property (or at least some of it), his language, his cultural references; but also, if I am correct, that he change his “structures of feeling,” modes of desire, and attachments—to places, to people.

—Hadar Kotef ⁹

In the laboratory of what I came to call the Judaica project, it appeared that the transformation of identity need not follow a bifurcated division between material and metaphorical death.¹⁰ If we cannot imagine a much-needed change (as Kotef admits she cannot), surely this is because we have not yet found the right steps, the right forms, the right knowledges, those “structures of feeling” that can replace the ones in which we are stuck. I did not find, in the Judaica lab, any fragment of song or vocal technique so powerful that it can enact decolonization on its own, like a magical talisman placed in the mouth of a golem. What I did find was a paradigm shift in my understanding of how (jewish) identity relates to (jewish) technique, and how the forms of knowledge are themselves racialized, that leads me to reject the contrasting impossibilities offered by Veracini and Kotef. What I found, perhaps, was another kind of ceremony.



Video still from "whiteness" by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Ilona Krawczyk, and Agnieszka Mendel. *Performance Philosophy* 7.2 (2022), 13 minutes. <https://performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/349/462>.



Video still from *Postmemory: Fragments* by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel. Recorded at Szydłów Synagogue, Poland. Presented at Holocaust Centre North, Huddersfield (2022), 46 minutes.

Therefore, white people should move comfortably in neither Black spaces nor white spaces. Even those who are well-meaning should drive themselves into the ground trying to figure out how to occupy a positive whiteness—because it is impossible. Only in this frenzy, when the sense of order that is critical to whiteness turns to chaos in every place, can the motivation to destroy it overcome the compulsion to reform it.

—Kevin Rigby Jr. and Hari Ziyad ¹¹

To become frenzied, to cultivate chaos, to enact the “motivation to destroy” as a creative impulse, to undergo death without dying—is this not a kind of dance? To abandon comfort is not necessarily to become silent. To be silent is not necessarily to disappear. One point is certain: the forms and images around which the politics of a liveable future coalesce will not be those we recognize today. What makes a space white or black, jewish or native or queer? What indeed is a “space” in the age of social media, streaming video, bitcoin, deepfakes, and AI language models, all built upon the same legacy systems of capitalist and colonial extraction? Where do we gather now, and who gathers? Is it possible to develop a political movement online? For that matter, is it possible to develop a political movement offline? The “sense of order that is critical to whiteness” is collapsing at the edges, leading many who cling to it to produce higher fences and prisons, more police, tighter borders. What ceremony is demanded by such a frenzy?



Video still from *Postmemory: Fragments* by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel. Recorded at Szydłów Synagogue, Poland. Presented at Holocaust Centre North, Huddersfield (2022), 46 minutes.



Video still from *Postmemory: Crypt* by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel. Recorded at Pińczów Synagogue, Poland. Presented at Holocaust Centre North, Huddersfield (2022), 47 minutes.

John Brown died twice, [Nahum] Chandler argues. Indeed, Brown was executed on December 2, 1859, for treason, murder, and insurrection. This is the death on the historical record. This was the death of the flesh-and-blood man. But he died another time, or rather something Brown was, not born but, coerced to be in order to exist in the world as such died, or was killed by the subject who was executed.
—Marquis Bey¹²

Tracing matters of death and ceremony across black studies, indigenous studies, settler colonial studies, critical whiteness studies, and critical decolonial jewish studies, I find myself, like Bey, wondering about that other death, the necessary prior death that precedes biological death. This is not the death of the physical organism, what Sylvia Wynter might call a biocentric notion of death. It is rather a death of the social self, almost a strange mirroring of what Orlando Patterson called “social death,” the destruction of kinship imposed through enslavement.¹³ To die in one life is not necessarily to be reborn in another. Yet it is not possible to be reborn without dying. Perhaps all this talk of rebirth is too christian, as Brown certainly was. I would rather imagine that first death not as a single moment of heroic rupture but as an ongoing practice: a death practice, a daily practice of dying. That practice must be both material and social, worldly and transformative—in a word, ceremonial. It does not yet exist. The practice has to be discovered, or invented.



Video still from *Postmemory: Crypt* by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel. Recorded at Pi czów Synagogue, Poland. Presented at Holocaust Centre North, Huddersfield (2022), 47 minutes.

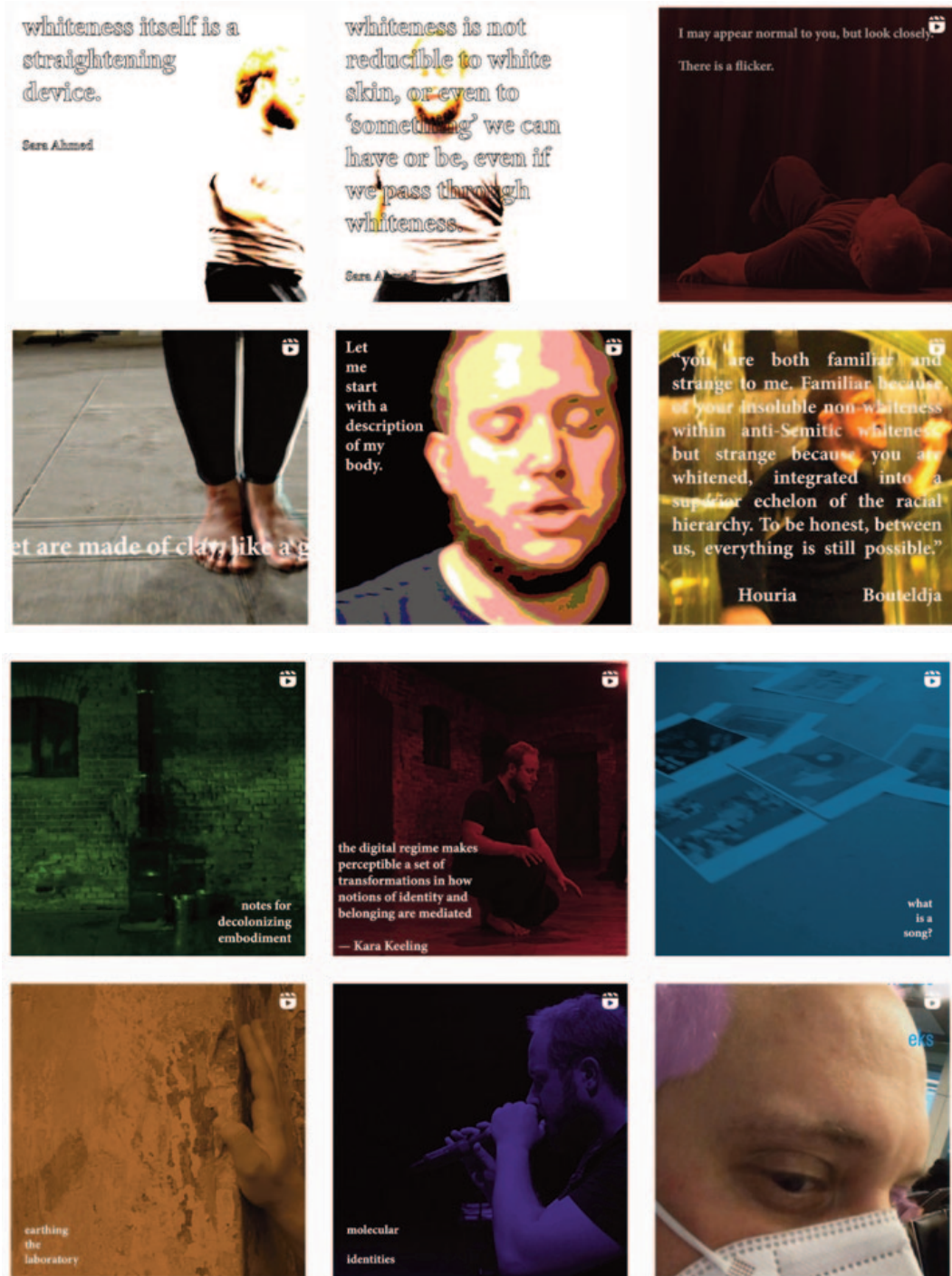


Video still from *Postmemory: Crypt* by Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin and Agnieszka Mendel. Recorded at Pi czów Synagogue, Poland. Presented at Holocaust Centre North, Huddersfield (2022), 47 minutes.

A ceremony, according to Minnecunju Elder Lionel Kinunwa, is not just the period at the end of the sentence. It is the required process and preparation that happens long [before the event. It is, in [Judy] Atkinson's translation, *dadirri*, the many ways and forms and levels of listening. It is, in [Karen] Martin's terminology, Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing. It is the knowing and respectful reinforcement that all things are related and connected. It is the voice from our ancestors that tell us when it is right and when it is not. Indigenous research *is* a life-changing ceremony.

—Shawn Wilson ¹⁴

If the Judaica project, during its ten years of artistic research, produced a concrete discovery, that was the discovery of what now anchors its next phase, which I call *cryptojudaica*. Through historical reference to the spanish inquisition, which accused those forced to convert to christianity of continuing their jewish lives in secret, the concept of cryptojudaica incorporates the decolonial turn in history into the meaning of contemporary jewishness. To say that research is ceremony, and moreover that ceremony is research, is to acknowledge the ways of knowing, being, and doing that persist underneath and behind the dualities of death or assimilation, marginalization or complicity, with which we are so often faced. The Judaica project began from an open-ended question about the meaning of jewishness in my life and in broader geopolitics. Through it, I came to understand how profoundly the radical resources of jewishness are hidden by its entanglement with whiteness. (Jews who are not white know this all too well.) Cryptojudaica means decoding and recoding those knowledges in order to escape that bind. Perhaps it names another decade of artistic research practice, following the Judaica project. Or perhaps it is something larger, more anonymous, more cryptic, less individualized. What I know now is that cryptojudaica must always have two faces. One side faces queer, trans, feminist, and decolonial readings of historically jewish religious and philosophical thought.¹⁵ The other side must continually face the broader contexts of decolonial thought and practice today, especially through engaging with black and indigenous positions, knowledges, and politics. This double facing, iterated across multiple forms and levels, can become the basis for cryptojudaic ceremony.



Screenshots from Instagram feed @cryptojudaica (2022).

Wynter's notion and practice of ceremony spans more than thirty years across her immense body of work. Wynter has been speaking and writing about ceremony since the 1980s. Wynter's notion of ceremony emerged during a moment in which she felt that she was "crossing a frontier." In the interview with [Greg] Thomas, Wynter recalled writing the piece just as she was beginning to use a personal computer. At this particular technological frontier, she revealed, she felt as if she was at the "most heretical" point in her development as a scholar.

—Tiffany Lethabo King¹⁶

Probably the most important book I have read in the past decade is Tiffany Lethabo King's *The Black Shoals*. Responding to Wynter's writings on ceremony and to a sculpture by Charmaine Lurch, King describes the power of black and indigenous ceremonial practice to overturn white hegemony, trouble the framework of the colonial nation-state, "reorganize space-time," and even "rearrange life."¹⁷ An implicit challenge for those of us responding to Slabodsky's question is how to locate jewishness in relation to that ceremony. Given the re-racializing process through which people (and peoples) become white, how is it possible to relink connections with the knowledges and identities that were killed in that process? For me, as a scholar-artist, the form of audiovisual and textual experimentation has become a medium through which to push, deconstruct, and reimagine the university beyond its white colonial underpinnings. Video essays and video artworks, framed and shot through by lines of critical theory, may have the capacity to produce a short-circuit between the analysis of death and the enactment of ceremony. Like Wynter at her new computer, it is when I cross over from writing to video that I feel myself to be at my most heretical.

NOTES

- 1 Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 30.
- 2 For a fuller account of this project and the issues discussed here, including why I choose to lowercase “jewishness” and other conventionally capitalized terms, see Ben Spatz, *Race and the Forms of Knowledge: Technique, Identity, and Place in Artistic Research* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, forthcoming).
- 3 See Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009) and the recent controversies in Germany and elsewhere over the politics of holocaust memory.
- 4 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 7.
- 5 On figural jewishness, see Sarah Hammerschlag, *The Figural Jew: Politics and Identity in Postwar French Thought* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
- 6 Richard Dyer, *White* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 207.
- 7 Lorenzo Veracini, “Decolonizing Settler Colonialism: Kill the Settler in Him and Save the Man,” *American Indian Culture and Research Journal* 41.1 (January 1, 2017): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.17953/aicrj.41.1.veracini>.
- 8 See Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World* (New York: New York University Press, 2020), and the work of Sylvia Wynter, referenced in Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).
- 9 Hagar Kotef, *The Colonizing Self: Or, Home and Homelessness in Israel/Palestine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 132.
- 10 On the problem of metaphor, see also Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang, “Decolonization is not a metaphor,” *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1.1 (2012): 1–40, and, in response, Tapji Garba and Sara-Maria Sorentino, “Slavery Is a Metaphor: A Critical Commentary on Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s ‘Decolonization Is Not a Metaphor,’” *Antipode* 52.3 (2020): 764–82.
- 11 Kevin Rigby Jr. and Hari Ziyad, “White People Have No Place In Black Liberation,” *RaceBaitr*, March 31, 2016, <https://racebaitr.com/2016/03/31/white-people-no-place-black-liberation/>.
- 12 Marquis Bey, *The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020): 70–1; and see Nahum Dimitri Chandler, *X: The Problem of the Negro as a Problem for Thought* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014).
- 13 Orlando Patterson, *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). My thinking about the figure of John Brown is informed by an ongoing collaborative project with Henry Bial, Michelle Liu Carriger, Eero Laine, and SAJ—my great thanks to them.
- 14 Shawn Wilson, *Research Is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods* (Winnipeg: Fernwood Publishing, 2008).
- 15 For example, see Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997); Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Judith Butler, *Parting Ways: Jewishness and the Critique of Zionism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012); Max K. Strassfeld, *Trans Talmud: Androgynes and Eunuchs in Rabbinic Literature* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2022).
- 16 King, *The Black Shoals*: 199–200.
- 17 King, *The Black Shoals*: 189, 199. King does not refer to Wilson, but his earlier assertion that “research is ceremony” seems an important precedent for her more radically interdisciplinary scholarship. On Black and Indigenous intersections, see also Tiffany Lethabo King, Jenell Navarro, and Andrea Smith, eds., *Otherwise Worlds: Against Settler Colonialism and Anti-Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020); Mark Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh: Blackness, Indigeneity, Speculation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2019).