

'Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Song-Action'
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Project Summary

Since the 1970s, scholars in a variety of fields - including anthropology, sociology, cultural studies, philosophy, and most recently cognitive studies - have argued for the centrality of embodiment and embodied practice in the production of knowledge. Drawing on feminist and other critiques of the disembodied status of 'objective' research, many have called for new approaches that trouble or overturn the assumed hierarchy of theory over practice. Theorists of theatre, dance and performance have contributed to these discussions by showing how performative forms such as dances and songs can 'function as vital acts of transfer, transmitting social knowledge' (Taylor 2003: 2-3), while scholars in cultural and religious studies have similarly analyzed yoga and martial arts as modes of 'embodied knowledge' (Farrer and John Whalen-Bridge 2011). This project takes the concept of embodied knowledge a step further by proposing that embodied practice in a focused laboratory setting can be a site of knowledge production as well as transmission, leading to substantial research outcomes in the form of new technique.

The project will use the sociology of scientific knowledge, and specifically the subfield of laboratory studies, to revitalize the twentieth-century concept of the 'theatre laboratory', leading to the development of a robust methodology for embodied research. A key criterion for defining and assessing such research is the precise specification of the area of embodied technique to be investigated. In this case, the core object of research is the technique of 'song-action', an embodied approach to song that includes dynamic psychophysical action and interaction as well as vocal musicality. In today's world of ubiquitous sound recording, we are used to thinking of songs as audio tracks subject to infinite duplication. The previous technological era understood songs as written scores. This project returns to a more primary understanding of songs as cultivated organic resources within the bodies of individuals and groups. It defines 'song-action' as the dynamic intersection of a particular type of song - in this case, Hebrew piyutim and Hasidic nigunim drawn from Jewish tradition - with psychophysical 'action' in the sense developed by twentieth-century pioneers of acting Konstantin Stanislavski (1863-1938) and Jerzy Grotowski (1933-1999).

The core of this project is six months of full-time embodied research involving three skilled practitioners in a studio laboratory. The practitioners will have advanced competency in the technique of song (natural and extended voice and musicality) and action (movement, physical culture, psychophysical scores) and will work together to systematically chart and explore the practical possibilities for psychophysical action defined by the vocal structures of the selected songs. As embodied technique, singing is much more than just rhythm, melody, and lyrics, even if these are its essential foundation. Individual songs, especially when learned through oral tradition or audio recordings, also define structures of breath, vocal resonance qualities or 'colour', and many other subtle aspects of the embodied voice that are not captured by western musical notation. The core phase of embodied research will be supported by dramaturgical and musicological research and the PI will maintain and develop relationships with mentors working in Jewish studies and music.

The laboratory practice will be comprehensively documented. Its results will be shared through live research presentations in the United Kingdom, United States, and Poland; a concluding symposium bringing together academics and non-academics from these locations; a collection of raw documentation files; and a series of print and digital multimedia publications that explore the concrete findings and epistemological implications of this new approach.