

a cryptojudaic reading room

Ben Spatz with Nazlıhan Eda Erçin, Caroline Gatt, and Agnieszka Mendel

12 – 26 October 2023 | Bath House Gallery | Huddersfield

As part of Cultures of Sound, the School of Arts & Humanities at the University of Huddersfield is glad to present *a cryptojudaic reading room*, bringing together several video works and a new installation by Dr Ben Spatz and the Judaica project lab.

The cryptojudaic reading room at Bath House Gallery launches a new phase in the Judaica project, a line of artistic research led by Ben Spatz. The first decade of the Judaica project (2012–2022) was an open-ended exploration of contemporary diasporic jewish identity through songwork. It adapted a laboratory theatre methodology to the context of university-based artistic research and generated numerous written and audiovisual publications.

cryptojudaica (2023–) marks the shift from an open-ended approach emphasizing diaspora and methodology toward a more focused intention to disentangle jewishness from whiteness and develop new forms of institutionality in apprenticeship to black and indigenous studies. Historically, cryptojews were those forced to undergo conversion who nevertheless continued to practice jewish ways of living in secret. Here the term is used to suggest the complexity of relations between jewishness and whiteness in the present, which may involve a mixture of coerced assimilation, voluntary complicity, and critical resistance.

Ben Spatz is a nonbinary scholar-practitioner working at the intersections of artistic research and critical theories of embodiment and identity. They are the author of *Race and the Forms of Knowledge: Technique, Identity, and Place in Artistic Research* (forthcoming in 2024), founding editor of the videographic *Journal of Embodied Research*, and a Reader in Media and Performance at University of Huddersfield. For more information, please visit: www.urbanresearchtheater.com

N. Eda Erçin holds a practice-based PhD in drama from the University of Exeter and is currently a lecturer in Performance at York St John University.

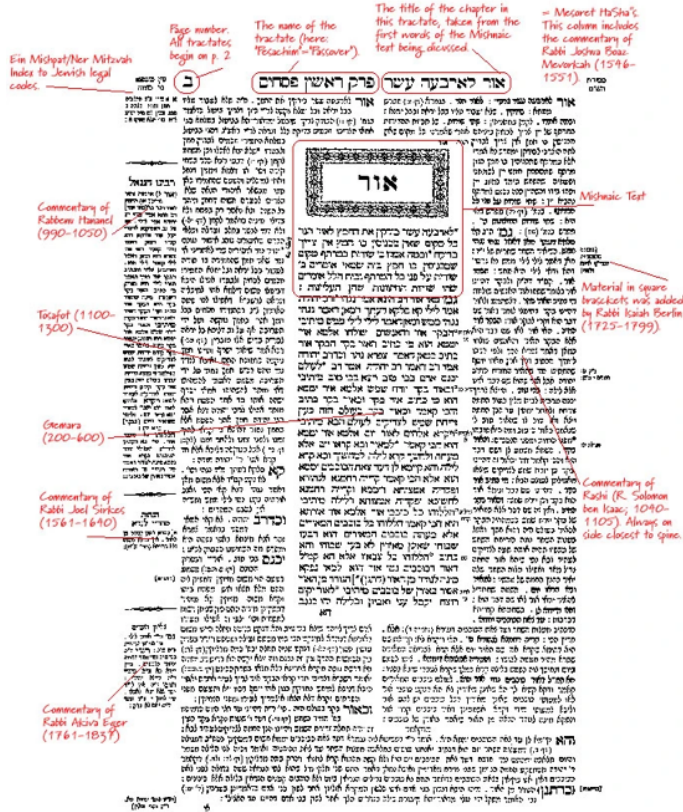
Caroline Gatt is an anthropologist and performer focusing on ontological politics, laboratory theater and song, co-design, and collaborative processes. She is currently Senior Postdoctoral Research, Institute of Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology, University of Graz.

Agnieszka Mendel is a vocalist, actress, and coach of voice and stage presence. She graduated from the Adam Mickiewicz University in Poznań, Poland, in ethnology and cultural anthropology and the Gardzienice Theater Practices Academy.

Works Exhibited:

reading room (*chevruta*)

participatory installation with desk, books, worksheets



Chevruta is an ancient practice of *studying in pairs* to work through difficult texts. In Jewish religious contexts, the texts studied are those of the Hebrew Bible and the Talmud.

Here you are invited to engage in extended talmudic study of Tiffany Lethabo King's landmark book, *The Black Shoals: Offshore Formations of Black and Native Studies* (2019).

This and other books on display have been annotated as part of an ongoing research process to rethink contemporary diasporic Jewish identity in relation to whiteness, blackness, and indigeneity.

— Ben Spatz, *Race and the Forms of Knowledge* (Northwestern University Press, 2024)

Books displayed (from left to right): Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals* (2019); Frederic Brenner, *Diaspora: Homelands in Exile* (2003); Maria Piechotka and Kazimierz Piechotka, *Heaven's Gates: Wooden Synagogues in the Territories of the Former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (2015); Richard Sobol, *Abayudaya: The Jews of Uganda* (2002); Marianna Kolozsvary, *Shadow on Stone: The Art of Lili Ország* (2016); Daniel Boyarin, *Unheroic Conduct: The Rise of Heterosexuality and the Invention of the Jewish Man* (1997); Eliza Steinbock, *Shimmering Images: Trans Cinema, Embodiment, and the Aesthetics of Change* (2019); Santiago Slabodsky, *Decolonial Judaism: Triumphal Failures of Barbaric Thinking* (2014); Birgit Brander Rasmussen, *Queequeg's Coffin: Indigenous Literacies and Early American Literature* (2012); Jodi A. Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (2011); Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (2016 [1967]); Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (2014); Adam Zachary Newton, *Jewish Studies as Counterlife: A Report to the Academy* (2020); Dylan Robinson, *Hungry Listening: Resonant Theory for Indigenous Sound Studies* (2020); Houria Bouteldja, *Whites, Jews, and Us: Toward a Politics of Revolutionary Love* (2017).

The following three video works were produced out of the 2017 Judaica project laboratory, funded by AHRC Leadership Fellowship “Judaica: An Embodied Laboratory for Songwork.” Songs were learned from the Smithsonian Folkways Archive and other sources.

@cryptojudaica

108 randomized Instagram videos (series 1, 3, and 4) on three channels

Onscreen texts by Sara Ahmed, Billy-Ray Belcourt, Houria Bouteldja, Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin, Gil Z. Hochberg, Kara Keeling, Katherine McKittrick, Birgit Brander Rasmussen, and Ben Spatz.

Postmemory

three-channel looping video installation (2:12:10 / 2:09:11 / 2:01:17)

Video traces from experimental lab sessions conducted by Erçin, Mendel, and Spatz at three ruined and partially restored synagogues in Szydłów, Pińczów, and Nowy Korczyn (Poland).

In these practice sessions, we lay our songs and our bodies against the particularities of each site. We did not plan what would happen or draw explicit distinctions between memory and imagination, tradition and invention, the proper and the improper. We worked with care, supporting each other in our practices. As each of us takes the role of performer in turn, we perceive different aspects of the place and respond in different ways.

— Ben Spatz, “Postmemory in the North”
(Holocaust Centre North / Cultures of Place, 2022)

the human ceremony

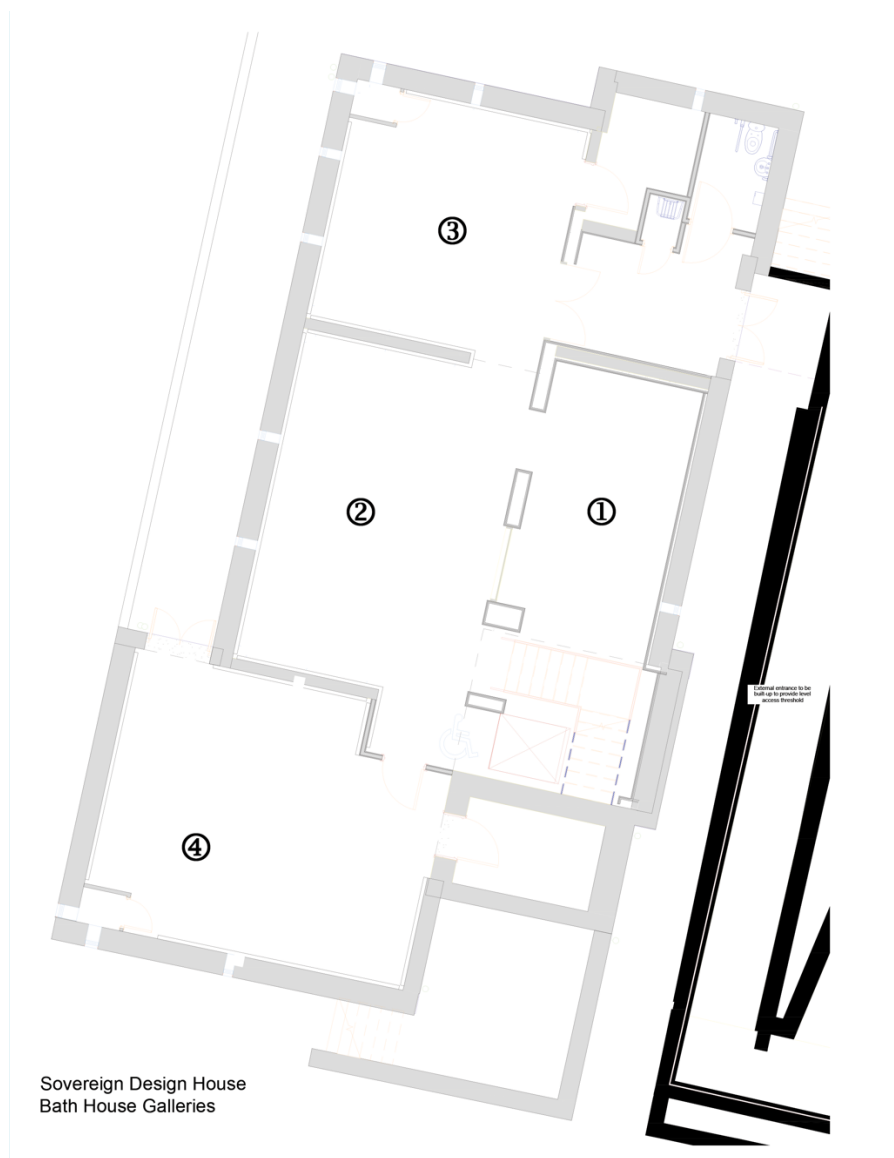
single-channel video (7:28)

This video critically reframes a recording made in 2017, at one of the many Polish synagogues that were destroyed during the European Holocaust. Here my colleagues and I came upon a strange altar comprising historical archives, Jewish ritual objects, kitschy sculptures, and amateur paintings. The recording has been recolored, temporally distorted, and overlaid by a page from Tiffany Lethabo King’s *The Black Shoals* — a book that reimagines overlapping Black and Native histories and futures in North America. The resulting video is structured as an extended form of Talmud, putting Jewish diasporic songwork in conversation with King’s visionary writing. Responding to King’s idea of ceremony, it calls for a radical decolonization of Jewishness in apprenticeship to Black and Indigenous studies.

Onscreen text from Tiffany Lethabo King, *The Black Shoals*.

Location of Works:

- ① reading room (*chevruta*)
- ② @cryptojudaica
- ③ Postmemory
- ④ the human ceremony



Cultures of Sound is the School of Arts and Humanities' contribution to Kirklees Year of Music, showcasing innovative collaborations and boundary-pushing experiments in sound undertaken by our researchers and staff.

As part of this programme the **Bath House Galleries** have been inaugurated as a new space for contemporary art and experimental practices in Huddersfield. Residing in the lower floors of Sovereign Design House, a stunning renovation by AHR Architects of the purpose-built Broadbents factory bath house, Bath House Galleries are an ideal environment for the display of the collaborative, interdisciplinary work that is fostered within the school.

For further information contact Lauren Velvick (Cultural Programme Manager): L.Velvick@hud.ac.uk