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Spatz, Ben

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"Singing Research: *Judaica 1* at the British Library"

Ben Spatz — October 2015
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All experimentation is technically implemented… The epistemic things that ground the experimental sciences emerge from the deposit of the technical and its potential for tinkering. Whence it follows that time and again they lend themselves to becoming reincorporated in that deposit.

<div align="right">Hans-Jörg Rheinberger (1997: 141)</div>

Deror Yikra leven im bat…
[Freedom shall He proclaim for His sons and daughters…]

<div align="right">Dunash ben Labrat, Fez-Baghdad-Sfarad, 10th Century
(Invitation to Piyut 2015)</div>

5th January, 2015. I am sitting on a ledge in the reception area of the Conference Centre at the British Library. Around me, scholars and artists in semiformal attire are drinking champagne to celebrate the launch of a major government-funded research project: "Performing the Jewish Archive."[1] All day we have been talking and thinking about the ethics of archival work, the relationship between artistic production and scholarly research, and the economics and politics of intangible cultural heritage. Now it is time for me to sing. I have come here with three student-colleagues to present some early provisional results from what I am calling an embodied research project in song-action. For the next thirty minutes we will sing almost continuously, although this is not a concert. The songs we present are indeed from the Jewish archive, but our manner of exploring them is based on a delicate synthesis of scholarly epistemology and contemporary performance via the methods of laboratory theatre — a working process that I will try to begin to articulate in this essay. Our presentation is mixed in other ways as well: We are a group of men and women singing songs that are traditionally sung by men alone. We are theatre people foraying into the interdisciplinary border zones between performance, musicology, and Jewish studies. In a brief talk earlier that day, I invited conference attendees to receive our performance as a research outcome, a substantive contribution to the day's discourse rather than merely a bit of entertainment tacked onto the end. Now it is time for us to justify that claim.

I begin quietly, as cocktails circulate and chatter fills the room. I point my voice into the space in such a way that it begins to pierce, delicately, the social atmosphere. At a certain moment the room enters a liminal state in which some people have fallen silent to listen while others have not yet heard. Gradually, my voice cuts through, louder and more forcefully melodic than the rest, until the space becomes polarized according to that ancient theatrical principle by which spectators intentionally still themselves to create a performance frame. The song grows. I think of it as a very old song, but that all depends on how one defines a song. According to *Invitation to Piyut,* an online database of Jewish paraliturgical poems or *piyutim,* the Hebrew lyrics of "Dror Yikra" date to the tenth century. The particular melody I am singing is borrowed from an undated audio recording of Levi Yitzchak Horowitz (1921-2009), the second *rebbe* or

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[1] "Performing the Jewish Archive: Looking Forward through the Past," <http://ptja.leeds.ac.uk/>. Principal Investigator: Stephen Muir, University of Leeds. Funding: £1.53 million. For details on the British Library symposium "Archives into the Future I," see <http://ptja.leeds.ac.uk/2014/11/07/archives-into-the-future/>.

spiritual leader of the Hasidic dynasty of Boston, Massachusetts.[2] I myself have been singing "Dror Yikra" for just over two years, as part of my research into Jewish song. But like any song it is born again in the moment I sing it, hence just a few seconds old by the time the audience quiets down. At least these four time scales — centuries, decades, years, seconds — are invoked by the question of this song's age. Archive indeed.

In an earlier incarnation of my research, "Dror Yikra" was strongly martial in character. A video from 2013 (see media box) shows me thrusting the song into space with a hard pushing action, as if to ward off terrible spirits. Two years later it has changed radically, becoming an invocation. The martial gesture is still there, hidden in the song, but its meaning has evolved. I have not yet taught this song to my colleagues. In our practice, it remains mine alone. Here I use it as a kind of ritual call, a summoning to attention for both performers and audience. To serve this purpose it must be subtle, playing on the edge between simple and complex, comfortable and virtuosic. At first I allow the song to take an almost conversational tone. I make eye contact with the standing spectators and smile at them, welcoming them into the performance. At some moments I let my voice waver to fluidly ornament the song; at others I strictly control its melody. My relationship to the song is simultaneously technical and epistemic: I control part of the song in order to discover another part. Waiting somewhere inside the song is its martial soul. In this performance I let the martial aspect come out only once, at a point where the melody drops and I find a gutteral place from which the sound issues. Not speaking Hebrew, I did not learn the semantic content of this passage until recently. Translated, it means:

> *Tread the wine-press in Botzra*
> *and also Babylon who overpowered*
> *Crush my enemies in anger and fury*
> (Invitation to Piyut North America 2015: 67)

Even as the aggression of these words disturbs me, I am drawn by the possibility that martial force is encoded in the extra-semantic structure of the song, leading me by mysterious means to take a violent approach to that particular passage even before I had read its translation and despite the fact that no such aggression is present in the source recording from which I learned it.

MEDIA

The linked video document offers a glimpse into the development of song-action from archival source through studio research to performance:

https://vimeo.com/143030061

1) Archival recording (n.d.): "Dror Yikra," Bostoner Hassidic Tradition. Source: <http://www.piyut.org.il/tradition/english/2040.html>.

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[2] The database "Invitation to Piyut" (2015) offers 36 recordings of "Dror Yikra" (sometimes "Deror Yikra") with almost as many distinct melodies <http://www.piyut.org.il/textual/english/44.html>. The site is not easy to navigate without a working knowledge of Hebrew. For an English introduction, see "Invitation to Piyut North America" <http://piyutnorthamerica.org/>.

2) Studio session (3 April 2013): "Dror Yikra," from *Tales*. Ben Spatz / Urban Research Theater, Leimay/Cave, New York City. For additional context, see chronology box and visit the Urban Research Theater website: <http://www.urbanresearchtheater.com>.

3) Research presentation (5 January 2015): "Dror Yikra," from *Judaica 1*. Ben Spatz, "Archives Into the Future I" Symposium at The British Library. Video by Simon Glass. More information: <http://ptja.leeds.ac.uk/2014/11/07/archives-into-the-future/>.

4) Theatrical rehearsal (18 September 2015): "Dror Yikra," from *Judaica 2*. Ben Spatz with Jennifer Parkin, Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research, University of Huddersfield. Video by Chris Lomax. More information: <https://www.hud.ac.uk/research/researchcentres/cppr/>.

Our presentation at the British Library is structured around four songs of three different types: two *piyutim,* one Yiddish folk song, and a wordless Hasidic tune or *nigun*. These songs are suspended or threaded together within what I call a "practice structure." When I say that this structure is not a concert, I mean not just that we are breaking the fourth wall and moving throughout the space, interacting dynamically with each other and with the audience. I also mean to say something about the way we are treating the songs. Our aim is not only to introduce these particular songs — performing archive and heritage as the conference theme suggests — but also, somehow, to introduce song itself: song as embodied action. Borrowing from the sociologists of science, I have come to understand these songs as epistemic things: epistemic objects that have been extracted from their natural contexts to be explored within a laboratory setting (Rheinberger 1997; Cetina 1992). As an epistemic object, each song is a more complex entity than can be captured by a written score or even a recorded track. In order to learn about it, we must iteratively transform it, discovering its contours and gradually unfolding its potentials. In this way a single song can split and become several different versions of itself, different actions or lines of inquiry, which can then be separately investigated. One song, "Ale Brider," appears in this practice structure in four different versions: It is a pulse, a short rhythmic sequence, monosyllabic at first and then growing to comprise four syllables. It is also a folk song, simple and catchy, with roots that reflect the history of Jewish socialism as much as spiritual *communitas* (Wood 2013: 1). Later on the same song becomes a lament, its rhythm broken, its melody opened, its body laid bare. Finally, picking up speed, it splits into a three-part round, generating complex uncomposed harmonies. It is difficult to say just where the technical structure of a song gives way to its epistemic unfolding, but this relationship — as described with great care by Rheinberger (1997) and Cetina (2001) among others — undoubtedly defines the epistemology of practice according to which what we are doing can be construed as research.

No overarching narrative holds the songs together in this practice structure, which is called *Judaica 1* as a simple mark of its position within the longer-term Judaica project. Rather, the relationship of song and action here is one of interaction or oscillation (Spatz 2013: 226). The four of us move freely in the space, coming together and dispersing, cutting through the crowd, shooting focused lines of attention across the room, dancing, holding hands, chasing one another. At one point our singing temporarily stops and a short story is simultaneously narrated and

enacted: an improvised account based on one of Martin Buber's short Hasidic tales (2002). The story tells of children, a wolf, a transformation. Later on, I interrupt a burgeoning song to offer a glass of red wine to one of my colleagues, Jennifer Parkin. This is a wholly improvised gesture; we have never had wine in any of our previous sessions. It grounds the event in the present moment, like a break in a concert, calling our attention to the specific context of an academic symposium. But it also suits the action we have been developing within this song: to celebrate, to be festive, to party. Jen and I clink our glasses together and the song continues. I am leading, not invisibly but explicitly, directing the others as to when we should shift between one song or version and another. During "El Adon," the second *piyut*, we gather in a circle, temporarily sacrificing the theatricality of movement and spatial dynamics to generate a thicker musical atmosphere. The harmony here is apparently simple: just a drone underscoring the melody. But our aim is to make visceral the emergent vibratory harmonics of even the simplest vocal intervals, a phenomenon that has been obscured in much western music by the dominance of instrumentation and score. As with the simplest rhythmic versions of "Ale Brider," we are trying here to return to something very simple in the act of singing. Simple but not easy.

My co-researchers are current or former students of the undergraduate theatre programme at the University of Huddersfield. Individually they have additional training in fencing, violin, Irish step-dance, and other areas of specialized technique, but at this point they are not yet fully competent in the technique of song-action. It takes years to develop the ability to attune vocal and physical resonances simultaneously, to be able to integrate song and action in one's own body and across the multiple bodies of a working ensemble or team. At the British Library we sometimes waver out of tune, lose track of each other in space, or otherwise fail to maintain contact at the level of vocal and physical impulses. With more training and experience, we will move as a group more deeply into the specific territory of embodied technique that I call song-action. This technique is not equivalent to a combined professional competency in singing and in movement. Rather, idea of integrated song-action suggests the various kinds of oscillation and interference that can exist between layers of embodied technique — and it is precisely this that the Judaica project aims to investigate and extend through practice. Thus, for example, our wordless Hasidic tune ("Nigun Simcha" or "Joyful Tune") drives us into an ecstatic dance that accelerates until we can no longer maintain it. As the four of us spin ever faster in a dancing circle, even I can eventually no longer sustain the song's driving vocal rhythm. It's Jen who stops me, breaking out of the already-broken song with a grin. Her grin says: *Are you crazy? We can't go any faster!* But it is also an organic consequence of the pleasure of the song, its rhythm and its breaking. Here the boundary between technical and epistemic is precisely illustrated at the point where our capacity to sustain the structure of the song breaks down. Elsewhere that same boundary or research edge remains our focus but may be less evident to observers.

While both earlier and later versions of the Judaica project involved theatrical devices such as costuming, lighting, and video projections, this particular incarnation scales all of that back. (For example, we do not wear costumes but merely appropriate attire for the situation.) While other versions were shown in dance and theatre venues, this version was created for the specific context of an academic conference — one that did not even having performing arts as its central focus, but rather notions of archive and heritage. In that context I hope to test the affinity between my notion of embodied research as unending inquiry and the "progressive and instrumental" assumptions that underpin traditional academic research, in which "the aim is to add another small stone to the cairn built up over the years" (Nelson 2013: 99). For three months preceding this performance, my colleagues and I met weekly, in the "emptied space" (Spatz

2015: 14) of psychophysical performance, to work on a small set of traditional Jewish songs. For just three days prior to the event we worked more intensively, in a freezing cold studio at the top of a Victorian arcade. Our British Library performance is one point in a process that can be traced across multiple time scales, like the songs themselves. Following the symposium our work has continued, leading most recently to the development of a more rigorous practice structure called *Judaica 2* (see chronology box). With the increasing competency of practitioners Jennifer Parkin and Sióbhán Harrison, the potential for our laboratory to make genuine discoveries in song-action has also grown. Any laboratory's ability to make epistemic progress is substantially defined by its technical capacities. In the case of embodied research, these derive primarily from the sedimented embodied technique of the practitioners involved.

CHRONOLOGY

Judaica 1 at the British Library was part of an ongoing research project to investigate the embodied technique of contemporary (Jewish) identity through a methodology of post-Grotowskian song-action and embodied laboratory practice. The project has so far involved the following phases:

• *Tales of the Hasidim* (2012). Presented at Triskelion Arts, NYC (solo); Western Mass Moving Arts Festival Faculty Performance, Earthdance, Massachusetts (solo); Chez Bushwick Presents Movement Research at the Centre for Performance Research, NYC (with Margot Bassett).

• *Tales* (2013). Presented at Performance Mix Festival, The Flea Theater, NYC (with projections designed by Bruce Steinberg).

• *Judaica 1* (2014-2015). Presented at the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research, University of Huddersfield, UK (with Nicola Fisher, Sióbhán Harrison, Jen Parkin and Karoliina Sandström); The British Archives, London (with Nicola Fisher, Sióbhán Harrison and Jen Parkin).

• *Judaica 2* (2015). Presented at the Centre for Psychophysical Performance Research, University of Huddersfield, UK (with Sióbhán Harrison and Jen Parkin).

This essay focuses on a single performance from the *Judaica 1* phase, in which my solo research in song-action was extended for the first time to a small ensemble. Future publications will offer a more comprehensive look at the Judaica Project, including its epistemological and ontological foundations. Updates and news can be found on the Urban Research Theater (2015) website.

The term "song-action" suggests that vocal structure can be integrated or synthesized with personal, cultural, and imaginative associations in the same way as movement is in what Konstantin Stanislavsky and Jerzy Grotowski called "physical action" (see Spatz 2015: 129-

132). Indeed, a major feature of contemporary post-Grotowskian practice is long-term engagement with specific heritages of song, an engagement that works to postpone the question of what an audience will perceive and aims instead to retrieve a certain *functionality* of song that is often associated — rightly or wrongly — with folk and ritual contexts.[3] Such engagements with "traditional" cultures and their intangible heritages raise ethical and political questions that have yet to be comprehensively answered. Diana Taylor (2008) among others has warned of the difficulties that can arise in the mismatch between bureaucratic and artistic approaches to heritage. And although nearly three decades have passed since Eugenio Barba and Phillip Zarrilli's debate in *TDR* over the ethics and politics of the former's International School of Theatre Anthropology (Zarrilli 1988; Barba 1988), many of the questions it raised are still being asked today — if not in "contemporary performance," which seems to have moved from an interest in cultural tradition to a wholehearted embrace of popular culture, then in academia, through projects like "Performing the Jewish Archive" and its parent funding theme, "Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past."[4] Today it seems clear that, if the theatre laboratory is to be reinvented on more solid methodological grounds, it will have to be organized around the recognition that "a work of art, an artistic product," can be merely "one of many elements of a complex process or a complex project" (Kosiński 2008: 61). The question today is how best to design such projects, particularly when issues of culture and identity are at stake.

As I developed my embodied research between 2005 and 2012, I avoided questions of cultural identity by working on invented, nonlexical songs rather than those of any existing tradition. Taking inspiration from my encounters with post-Grotowskian practitioners in Europe (see Spatz 2008), I developed a series of song cycles and performances into which the qualities of particular vocal traditions were smuggled under cover of invention and nonsense. So, for example, I developed a song that resembled a Haitian folk song but was not one; another that retained some of the harmonic qualities of a Georgian liturgical chant; and another that was based on an Italian WWII partisan song but could not be recognized as such. In each case, both the melody and the nonsense or nonlexical "lyrics" were new. That allowed me to explore the sonic and vocal dimensions of song-action while postponing the specific difficulties posed by quasi-ethnographic approaches. When people asked me where these songs came from, I could honestly say they were my own invention. I hoped initially that this would allow witnesses and spectators to focus more purely on vocal qualities, musicality, and the dramaturgy of song. Instead, questions of meaning and reference persisted, only with a different focus: Instead of asking why I had chosen to work with a particular set of songs, people wanted to know why I had chosen to invent songs and to sing nonsense lyrics. What had led me to make these artistic choices and what did they mean? Instead of Grotowski, the obvious reference point was Meredith Monk. In short, there was no escape from context, no return to a pure "vocal utopia" (Certeau 1996). The work could not be contextless; the questions were only different.

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[3] I am thinking of Gardzienice's work on Polish and Ukrainian folk, then medieval, and later ancient Greek songs; Teatr Zar's long-term engagement with the music of Caucasus Georgia; the unique practice of the Workcenter of Jerzy Grotowski and Thomas Richards based in Afro-Caribbean diasporic songs; and New World Performance Laboratory's use of Quaker songs — to name just a few key examples. It may also be worth mentioning the Wooster Group's recent and very different approach to one of the same bodies of traditional song (see Brantley 2014). For my take on Grotowski's work with "songs of quality," as described in his own writing and that of Lisa Wolford, Kris Salata, and Thomas Richards, see Spatz (2015: 136-47).

[4] "Care for the Future: Thinking Forward through the Past," UK Arts & Humanities Research Council, <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/research/fundedthemesandprogrammes/themes/careforthefuture/>, accessed 13.09.15.

In 2012, I found myself pulled back toward what had always seemed the most obvious post-Grotowskian move for me: that of a research into traditional Jewish songs. What had previously seemed too obvious a choice now appeared as a logical step forward in a research trajectory. Previously, I had felt that a direct engagement with Judaism would risk losing track of the technical and embodied qualities that were most important to me. I feared that questions of identity, heritage, culture, tradition, and politics would overwhelm my research, displacing those of rhythm, melody, harmony, resonance, and psychophysical action. Only after seven years of nonlexical song work, when I felt myself in possession of a certain degree of practical resources, some technical knowledge, and something like an approach to the development and performance of song-action, did this picture change. Armed with this knowledge of craft, I felt, my (re)turn to Judaism and Jewish identity would not result in my being swallowed up by those traditions. Instead I would engage in epistemic battle with them, confronting the necessary social and political questions without losing hold of the technical and embodied ones. It is not simply that I have more experience now. Rather, it is my specific familiarity with nonlexical, non-referential songs that gives me the courage to turn towards a cultural tradition as full of multilayered lexical, symbolic, and discursive meaning as Judaism. The previous period of nonlexical practice is an essential reference point for my current research on and through Jewish song. Recognizing a dimension of song that is substantially separable from cultural tradition and identity makes thinkable the development of a "laboratory" approach to traditional songs like these.

It was the complexity of my own identification as Jewish that initially caused me to reject the idea of exploring Jewish song. I am Jewish, but I could no more begin from a transparent assumption of identity — *these are my songs* — than from an assumption of nonidentity — *these are not my songs.* Either route seems to miss the point, which is that research in embodied technique is always also research in cultural tradition, according to precisely that relationship of laboratory and world described by Cetina (1992). In addition, while the constant questioning of identity may resonate today with any number of cultural, ethnic, and religious communities, it has special significance in the context of contemporary Judaism and Jewishness — a pair of terms that already indicates a profound fracturing of belief, practice, and identity. Faced with "muscular" (Presner 2007) and colonial (Slabodsky 2015) Zionism and the fundamentalist *Haredi*, there is an urgent need today for the development of positions and practices that take neither identification nor disidentification for granted. Jonathan and Daniel Boyarin call for such a move through what they call the "powers of diaspora," declaring: "Whatever we are is founded on an acknowledgment of absence, or lack. Upon this question we found ourselves" (2002: 4). Judith Butler likewise proposes radical "self-departure" as a basis for the Jewish critique of Zionism (2012: 1). As I turn to face Jewish song traditions, the question of identity is very much in play. I am Jewish, but I did not grow up with these songs. If I teach them to my students — in Spain or in England, and having roots in Europe, Jamaica, China, or anywhere else — do I begin in some way to make them Jewish? In treating Jewish songs as epistemic objects circulating through a laboratory of practice, do I make myself less Jewish — or more? Such questions may seem facile, yet we cannot entirely reject the possibility of a transformation through singing that extends so far. To do so would be to sever practice from identity and laboratory from world.

I wanted and still want to know: Can the theatre laboratory sit at the interdisciplinary table of scholarly research? What can it bring to this table? What role can performance, with its vaunted ephemerality, have in "caring for the future"? In *Judaica 1,* and the larger research project of which it is part, I have aimed to produce neither high nor low art, but instead to conduct research into the possibilities of humans as singing beings. To this end I invoke both the

strategies of formal minimalism — the reduction of songs to song fragments and of actions to exercise-actions (see Spatz 2014) — and those of artisan craft. My goal is to invent or discover an embodied practice that is rigorously constrained yet not fully defined by the scope of these particular songs: their rhythms, their melodies, their tonalities, their vocables, their colors and resonances, but also their histories, their semantic content, their historic and contemporary ritual functions. Laboratories, writes Bruno Latour, "can displace society and recompose it by the very content of what is done inside them, which seemed at first irrelevant or too technical" (1983: 168). In this way a reductive minimalism of form ("too technical") can find its way, through the principle of relative reliability — that is, of knowledge — to the transformation of society itself. Can that potential, which has been so overwhelmingly demonstrated in technological domains, also be realized in fields of embodied technique? Can an embodied laboratory produce results that extend beyond performance to recompose the fabric of identity? Can a heritage of song be honored not only through preservation but also through an active usage that takes it as the starting point for a new creative and investigative process? Perhaps such promises remain to be fulfilled. Or perhaps the history of embodied arts is nothing other than this.

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IMAGE CAPTIONS

01. Ben Spatz in *Judaica 1*. Presented at "Archives into the Future I," The British Library, London. Still image from a video recording by Simon Glass <simonglass.co.uk>.
02. Jennifer Parkin in *Judaica 1*. Presented at "Archives into the Future I," The British Library, London. Still image from a video recording by Simon Glass <simonglass.co.uk>.
03. Nicola Fisher in *Judaica 1*. Presented at "Archives into the Future I," The British Library, London. Still image from a video recording by Simon Glass <simonglass.co.uk>.