# **IMAGINING RADICAL JEWISH FUTURES**

Participatory SF Writing as Speculative Sociology

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# INTRODUCTION

This report explains the process behind a speculative and sensory sociology research project that examined how a researcher can understand and support a radical community by collaboratively creating speculative fiction. The research began as a general interest in the ways futurist fictions might contribute to political imagination. In winter 2017/2018, future-focused academic work seemed to be everywhere'. For example, previous research on the 'affect of precarity' had led me to Berlant (2011) and her idea that our experience of the present is shaped by anxiety about making it into the future. At Goldsmiths, I attended the Mark Fisher Memorial Lecture where Kodwo Eshun, a founding theorist of Afrofuturism, called on the audience to build on Fisher's work "in order to intervene in the futures whose object we are" (2018, 11:05). Eshun's colleagues in the Goldsmiths Visual Cultures department had recently published a volume exploring how futurist fiction might both affect reality and provide insight into "a political imaginary which needs to be read relational to historically situated struggles that give us insights into alternative times and spaces" (Gunkel, Hameed and O'Sullivan, 2017, p. 2). Each of these projects seemed to be based on the premise that a significant aspect of a person or group's worldview stems from how they imagine the future.

Simultaneously, I developed an interest in the roles of imagination in guiding social movements. In a class paper critiquing Khasnabish and Haiven's *Radical Imagination Project*, I theorized how sensory sociological research methods might help researchers contribute to the radical imagination of collaborators. In another project, colleagues and I explored how a group's mobilization against a housing development was influenced by how they imagined their neighbourhood might look in two, 10, or 100 years (Gertler-Jaffe, Hur and Omer, 2018). Our questions encouraged them to speculate about these futures, with the hope that such fantasizing would free their imaginations from the constraints of the harsh present. Following these projects, I knew I wanted to explore how sociological methods could employ futurist fictions to understand and contribute to the development of a social movement's radical imagination.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Not coincidentally, this was also the winter that Afrofuturism went mainstream with Marvel Studio's *Black Panther*.

But what group to study? As a politically active Jewish person in Canada, I had heard of the emergence of new Anarchist, Anti-Fascist, and Diasporist Jewish groups in Europe, such as Jewdas in London and Jewish Antifa Berlin. I was intrigued by the recent rise in support for these self-described radical groups. Because of my own personal affinity to their approach to Judaism, I had already been following Jewdas online and trying to raise the courage to attend more of their events. My interests in futurist fiction and radical Judaism seemed like a natural fit. Given that they were espousing political ideas and conceptions of Judaism that had reached peak support 80 to 100 years ago, the members of these groups seemed like good candidates for a project that looked at how worldviews travel across time and space to emerge in a new context.

I had some general research questions but remained unsure about methodology. I began with a literature review and spending time with London's radical Jewish community. I had expected that my work would involve film, drawing on my experience as a documentary filmmaker and following afrofuturist filmmakers such as John Akomfrah and the Black Radical Imagination collective. Eventually, I moved from a film-based approach to running creative writing workshops. In the following sections I explain how initial research led to this choice.

# LITERATURE REVIEW

### JEWISH DIASPORISM AND ANARCHISM

I began by looking at research on predecessors of these radical Jewish worldviews and their contemporary resurgence. One frequently cited antecedent (e.g. facebook.com/oiveyitsjewdas, 2018) was the Bund, an early-20th century Jewish Socialist organization centered in Poland whose ideas inspired affiliate groups around the world, including in London (Slucki, 2009). Among their defining principles was *doikayt*, Yiddish for "here-ness", the idea that Jews should focus on revolutionary struggles at home. Bundists argued that "each Jewish community was a creative center in itself, and that Jews outside the newly established State of Israel should not imagine themselves as peripheral to Jewish life or creativity" (Slucki, 2009, p.115). A project that engaged the creative capacity of a Jewish community would be particularly appropriate for studying those inspired by the Bund.

Not all scholars agree on the relevance of the Bund. Writing on Jewish anti-Zionism, Hirsh asserts that the Bundist vision of a diasporic Jewish society died when most Bundists were either killed in the Holocaust or became Zionists in response to it (2018). The Holocaust and the creation of the State of Israel, he argues, were "profound material transformations of Jewish existence" (2018, p.221). To Hirsh, contemporary callbacks to alternative stances on the question of a Jewish homeland are irrelevant, since Israel is now a material reality.

Hirsh's argument, however, does not acknowledge the possibility that some Jewish people are turning to Bundist thought today in reaction to a sense that Israel takes up a disproportionate amount of the contemporary Jewish imagination. Landy's research, for example, shows that the radical Jews I met in London are part of a growing collective of Jews who identify as Diasporist, rather than Zionist (2012). Though many of these Jews assert their non-Zionist identity through criticism of Israel, they are not necessarily *anti*-Zionist. Instead, they seek to reclaim a historical Jewish identity not defined by Israel. While Hirsh is correct that this identity draws on a time before Israel's existence, contemporary expressions of it do not seek a return to that time but instead emphasize significant aspects of Jewish identity that have existed since before Israel and are still relevant but currently marginalized.

The Jewish Socialists' Group (JSG) and Jewdas are London-based Diasporist groups. The JSG explains that they "challenge [the] communal establishment's attempts to confine Jewishness within a religious or Zionist framework" (2018). According to a co-founder, Jewdas is "a radical diaspora Jewish group that has taken an explicitly non-Zionist stance... [and] has worked hard to resuscitate strands of Jewish history and culture not based around Israel and statist nationalism" (Finlay, 2016). The JSG and Jewdas also draw from a legacy of Jewish socialism and anarchism in the UK, especially in London's East End. Rosenberg, a historian affiliated with both groups, offers walking tours (2018) and writes about (2011) London's radical Jewish history, building on Fishman (1974), among others. This literature has helped me understand the roles the past can play in the development of radical reimaginings.

### SPECULATIVE RESEARCH AND SPECULATIVE FICTION

Becker suggests that fictional works written by non-academics can nonetheless invoke a sociological imagination (2007). Leavy (2008) explains how some sociologists use fiction writing to "work through" data (p. 45) and communicate the richness and complexity of social worlds and experiences. Speculative fiction resonates with speculative sociology. Atwood distinguishes speculative fiction from science fiction, explaining that the former is about "things that could really happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books" (2011, p.6). Savransky, Wilkie, and Rosengarten (2017) argue that speculative research is not a matter of forecasting the future or imagining a different future. Rather, it recognizes that time is not linear and sees the present as plural; unexpected events can lead to (previously) unimaginable futures (ibid.). Savransky (2016) refers to this imagining of things "as they could be" (p.184) as speculative research asks which 'presents' we, as researchers, want to emphasize, and considers 'impossible' thinking useful as a way of making those presents more real.

Haraway (2016) understands  $SF^2$  as a political "practice and process" (p. 3) for following threads of possibility from the present, the making-material of a 'possible', and the choice of which

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The initialism SF is often used to account for the soft and contested distinction between science fiction and speculative fiction.

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threads to follow. This resonates with Law and Urry's assertion that methods "make social realities and social worlds" (2004, p. 390). brown, co-editor of an anthology of SF written by social justice activists, considers SF an "exploring ground", providing "the opportunity to play with different outcomes and strategies before we have to deal with the real-world costs" (2015, p.279). Her co-editor, Imarisha, explains that:

We think everyone in any sort of organizing is already a science fiction creator... [M]ovements for social change desperately need science fiction. They need a space to break beyond the boundaries of what we're told is realistic change. (IPRC, 2014).

Haiven and Khasnabish argue that the role of social movement researchers should be to oster the radical imagination, which they define as "the ability to imagine the world, life and social institutions not as they are but as they might otherwise be" (2014, p.3). This resonates with the cross-temporality of speculative research, as they emphasize that "the radical imagination is not just about dreaming of different futures. It's about bringing those possible futures 'back' to work on the present... about drawing on the past... [and] imagining the present differently too" (ibid.). Coleman (2017a) suggests that sensory sociological research methods have a role to play in fostering the "conditions through which possible futures can be invented" (p. 526); they work well with participatory methodologies, allow for the representation and circulation of nontextual data, and deal with the "intangible and affective" (p.538).

Through these readings, I came to understand the project to be asking how SF might serve sociological research, not just to better understand worldviews of marginalized communities but also to enact worldviews and create dialogic spaces where they might expand and proliferate. My research question changed to reflect that I was no longer specifically focused on the future, and instead more broadly on the speculative, which could be expressed through futurity, alternative presents, or reclaiming of lost pasts.

### **EXAMPLES OF JEWISH SPECULATIVE FICTION**

A survey of trends in Jewish SF confirmed that SF and Jewish culture are a good fit. Langer argues that diasporic identity is grounded in a sense of "both a physical, geographical and often economic displacement, while also a mental, emotional and spiritual one..." (2011, p.57). She

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argues that a strength of SF "is to enable a sort of temporal 'double consciousness'" so that diasporic communities can examine the "links between history and the potentiality of the future" (ibid., p.80).

SF has been used by Jewish authors to examine questions of identity, homeland, and belonging. *The Yiddish Policeman's Union* (Chabon, 2008) is set in an alternative present in which Jewish Holocaust refugees settled in Alaska. Roth's *The Plot Against America* (2004) is an alternative history that follows a Jewish family living in an America that never entered WWII. Wecker's *The Golem and the Jinni* (2013) explores themes of immigration and identity through the two eponymous mythological creatures, one Jewish and the other Arabic, whose paths cross after they come to New York in the late 19th century. Superman's exile from Krypton and assimilation into American society as Clark Kent can be read as drawing on the diasporic Jewish experience of his creators (Goldstein, 2014). Meanwhile, *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Chabon, 2000) compares a Superman-like comic hero to the golem, a mythical creature that protects Jewish communities in Jewish myth. *The Tohuvabohu Reader* is a good example of radical Jewish SF. Drawing on Jewish mysticism and supporting Jewish-anarchist perspectives, it argues that Torah, Talmud (the Rabbinic interpretation of Torah), and Jewish folklore all contain stories and elements that could be considered SF (Der Meshunediker, 2018).

# FIRST INTERACTIONS

While reviewing relevant sources, I interacted with members of Jewdas online and at their community events. The first gathering I attended—and contributed to as a volunteer—was a Passover seder. This seder included a retelling of the Jewish exodus from Egypt reimagined as a contemporary story where Jews work as exploited labourers for Pyramid Enterprises. At the story's climax, each table suggested strategies for overthrowing CEO Pharoah. In this way, I observed that London's radical Jewish community was already engaged in ideation using speculative fiction.

I cannot fail to mention that the aftermath of this seder was a remarkable example of what Savransky, Wilkie and Rosengarten describe as "events that cannot be anticipated and open up possible futures that cannot be managed in advance" (2017, p. 7). A Jewdas member had brought a friend to the seder: Jeremy Corbyn, the leader of the UK Labour Party. A reporter for a right-wing publication learned that Corbyn was attending and surreptitiously recorded it. For years, some prominent Jewish organizations had alleged that Corbyn and his party were soft on anti-Semitism. When the story of his attendance at this radical seder broke, many of these establishment organizations expressed outrage and Corbyn's political opponents seized the opportunity to foment a front-page scandal.

The attention that Diasporist Judaism and Jewdas in particular received as a result was astounding. Local media struggled to explain what made some Jewish groups acceptable for Corbyn to meet and others not. International media such as *The New York Times* picked up the story. Jewdas' Twitter following grew tenfold, and many people wrote to the group to express interest in their ideas. Jewdas members quickly rallied to write their own accounts of the events.

The Jewdas events I attended in the following months were lower profile but continued to showcase the creativity of London's radical Jews. These included book and film clubs, Shabbat dinners, and a workshop where attendees discussed personal relationships to Israeli Independence and the meaning of Nakba Day for Palestinians. At Anarchist Torah study, we discussed that week's Torah portion and, in the tradition of contemporary midrash, related it to our lives and contemporary political struggles. People in the community frequently mentioned their desire to achieve "luxury communism", a phrase that challenged the common association of communism with poverty and drudgery, and evokes an aspirational alternative to "capitalist realism", the hegemonic belief that capitalism is inevitable (Fisher and Thorne, 2017, p. 150). At many events, texts were discussed and dissected, and there were participatory workshops featuring artistic exercises. Experiencing these gatherings influenced my methodological choices.

# METHODOLOGY

My research proceeded in five overlapping stages: gaining an understanding of the problem, field research design, data collection, analysis, and consolidation of findings were pursued in a fluidly recursive fashion. The following sections describe the methods used, considerations affecting my choices, and how they changed as the research proceeded.

### **REFINING THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND APPROACH**

My preliminary research included archival research and observation of social media interactions and group events. This stage was vital to refining my research questions and approach.

When I began this project, I expected my research would involve the creation of a participatory "ethnoscience fiction film" (Sjöberg, 2017). The film would have been written through ethnographic observation and would have used community members as actors and collaborators. I would have followed the lead of Salazar, an anthropologist who has used ethnographic speculative filmmaking as a way of imagining future life in Antarctica, with the aim of beginning a conversation about a fast-approaching challenge (2017). This film also would have fulfilled a personal goal of creating films that incorporate experimental social research.

Eventually, I decided that a film was not the best medium for this project. In earlier creative projects, members of Jewdas wrote under pseudonyms, because they are a leaderless collective and sought to avoid attention. This need for anonymity might have made participatory filmmaking difficult. Furthermore, participatory filmmaking would require major time-commitments and coordination from a community that was already stretched thin. This concern was vindicated in the research's later stages when active participation in our collaborative project dwindled.

Though a film might have accommodated these concerns, my experiences with the community convinced me that a writing-based approach would be a better fit. It was clear that they were interested in writing and literary issues. Group members regularly shared articles they had written and many were students. Though creative writing is also time-consuming, participants

could contribute on their own schedules. Finally, separately from my thesis research, I was already involved with some community members in starting a zine and there was a high level of interest from the many others in the community. I figured that a zine could work as a flexible, less resource-intensive testing ground for some of the collaborative creative practices that I could also eventually use to create a film.

This open approach to media and methods is in keeping with Lury and Wakeford's call for researchers to use "inventive methods" (2012), which requires that researchers remain flexible and reflexive to ensure their methods fit the research context. My approach has also been inventive in that I remained mindful of the way in which the social world is shaped by my research—what Law and Urry call the "ontological politics" of method (2004)—and responsive to the way the social world changes as I engage with it (Lury and Wakeford, 2012).

My research questions were substantive but also methodological: how could I conduct research in solidarity with the researched community? How might I use speculative research to account for the ontological politics of methods? My working hypothesis was that I could do this by "convoking" spaces for dialogue (Khasnabish and Haiven, 2012) through sensory and artistic methods. Haiven and Khasnabish explain that the radical imagination "cannot be observed and measured in a static form; it must be stimulated and experienced in struggle, debate, and contestation" (2014, p.25). I expected a participatory workshop would provide an arena for this dialogue. I also hypothesized that using sensory and artistic methods would help both the researcher and participants to better access the social world in all its complexity. Unlike what Law and Urry call "standard social science methods" (2004, p. 403), I expected my methods would aid in the understanding and enactment of realities that Law and Urry describe as "fleeting", "distributed", "multiple", "sensory", "emotional", and "kinaesthetic" (ibid.). To engage with these dynamic challenges, I adopted a participatory speculative approach that would facilitate the creation of fictional worlds built on marginalized worldviews.

### **DEVELOPING THE WORKSHOP**

I then began developing the major research event of the project: a speculative fiction writing workshop. I based the design of this workshop on the participatory SF writing workshops run by

the co-editors of *Octavia's Brood* (brown and Imarisha, 2015), but adapted with speculative research and participatory action research approaches. I also drew from best practices suggested by creative writing educators (e.g. Le Guin, 2015; Novakovich, 2008; Ziegler, 1981; Ziegler, 1984).

I tested a workshop prototype with a group of four Jewish friends and met with the Jewish writer-in-residence at a local radical bookstore, who made suggestions about running successful workshops. Finally, my supervisor and course convenor helped me ensure that my methods were grounded in specific sociological paradigms and structured deliberately to gather valid and relevant data.

I created a Facebook event to recruit participants<sup>3</sup> and shared it in Jewdas' private Facebook group of about 370 people. One of the page's administrators then shared it on Jewdas' public page, which had about 5000 followers. The event description encouraged radical, Jewish-identified participants to self-select. When over 150 people expressed interest in the workshop, I capped attendance at 20.

### **RUNNING THE WORKSHOP**

The components of the three-hour workshop were as follows:

#### a. Entering the space

When participants entered the workshop space, I aimed to create an atmosphere that would help them enter a 'headspace' to write Jewish SF. They were greeted by klezmer music and foods that they might associate with Jewishness. This follows Coleman, who describes how researchers can use the sensory qualities of their methods to create affective "atmospheres" that can "reveal and stimulate... possible futures" (2017a, p. 537). Participants were also given consent and information forms as they entered.<sup>4</sup>

#### **b.** Introductions

Once the participants were seated, we began introductions. I had asked them to bring a favourite Jewish object to the workshop and requested they explain its significance. These

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> See Appendix A

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See Appendix B

objects had relevance later in the workshop. This round of introductions was meant to facilitate early interaction and participation among workshop attendees.

#### c. Short presentation on Jewish SF and social activism

At this point, I introduced the core concepts we would be using in the workshop. This background information established a common starting place for our collaborative work.



#### d. Jewish object elicitation

Next, I chose three of the Jewish objects brought by participants and asked the group to describe their purpose. I pushed them to imagine other new ways the objects could be used. This exercise was meant to encourage imaginative thinking and an orientation towards alternate realities. I drew on Lyon and Carabelli's ideas for future-oriented image elicitation (2015, p. 11). Lyon and Carabelli, however, had used ambiguous or abstract photos to encourage imaginative responses, whereas these objects would have concrete associations in the participants' minds. By using objects rather than images, I hoped to mitigate this imagination gap by encouraging the participants to think through all sensory qualities of the objects. This also follows Boehner, Gaver and Boucher's use of speculative design probes to open up spaces for exploration and conversation (2012).



### e. Collaborative reading of SF

Before writing, we took turns reading from an excerpt of SF generated in a similar context, Imarisha's *Black Angel* (2015). We discussed what the author had achieved using the elements of storytelling and what the story might suggest is more broadly possible in SF creative writing. Reading aloud was another way for participants to warm-up to participation.

### f. Charting Jewish Identity

This was the exercise that changed the most. It began as an individual writing exercise where participants were meant to finish the sentence "My Jewishness is radical because...". Fearing this was too prescriptive and would result in biased data, I moved to an approach based on cognitive mapping (Graham-Cagney, 2014). Participants would create a map of ten things they associated with their Jewishness, then specify which of these things were 'hidden', 'alternative', and/or 'radical'. I ran this exercise at my test workshop and received feedback that the arrangement of concepts via mapping and descriptive labels were confusing and detracted from participants' efforts to think through the exercise.

I settled on an approach that asked participants to individually create a list of ten words relating to their Jewish identity.<sup>5</sup> Opposite that list, I asked them to list the words traditional, progressive, radical, normative/normal, conservative, and marginal. These words were chosen to give participants more room to draw distinctions between commonly undifferentiated labels. I presented them in this order to avoid suggesting they existed on a spectrum from political left to right or that any pair of words were necessarily antonyms. Next, I asked them to draw as many lines as they wanted between the words in each list, matching them as they felt appropriate. Finally, I asked that they rank their level of importance, and then opened the floor to observations and discussion.



This exercise had a dual purpose. It was a form of autobiographical narrative inquiry (Leavy, 2008) meant to encourage self-interrogation and facilitate analysis participants would use to create their fictional narratives. It was structured to ensure that the realities and viewpoints portrayed in these narratives would be richly and reflexively grounded in their own experiences. The exercise also served to gather data regarding participants' self-defined Jewish identities.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> See Appendix C

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#### g. Issue identification

Once participants were oriented to their personal Jewish experience, I asked them, as a group, to identify issues they faced in their communities. This exercise worked as a needs-assessment to create a basis for dialogue and imaginative problem-solving. Needs assessments are commonly used in action research; one particularly relevant example is in Jungk's Future Creating Workshops, a predecessor to Critical Utopian Action Research (Apel, 2004). Khasnabish and Haiven performed a similar assessment, though they did so in individual interviews to ensure candid responses (2012). I did not have the capacity for individual assessments but encouraged participation by everyone.

#### h. Worldbuilding<sup>6</sup>

Working in small groups, participants chose an issue from the previous exercise and created a setting in which this issue was the central conflict. Participants were given a list of questions to consider about the world's features, history, and social structures. Finally, they were asked to consider who is seeking change in this world, who is resisting it, and how change might happen.

This exercise was adapted from brown and Imarisha's visionary fiction writing workshops (2015), but also had a basis in research projects such as Guggenheim, Kräftner, and Kröll's use of a sandbox as a device to encourage speculation (2017). To turn their participants into speculators, they began by asking them to "create any world", "to imagine something that could unhinge their world", and to come up with a provision that would have prevented that disaster (ibid., p.147). My approach differed in that the worlds were built around a conflict, rather than a conflict disrupting an already existing world. This reversal makes sense given that Guggenheim, Kräftner and Kröll focused on speculations about how to prevent disaster, whereas this project speculated on solutions to existing conflicts.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> See Appendix D



### i. Character Creation<sup>7</sup>

Having created their worlds, each participant was asked to come up with the character(s) through which they would be telling their story. To help guide them, I suggested core aspects of their characters to define. This exercise was meant to make space for participants to move beyond the constraints of their own bodies in expressing their subjectivities.

### j. Storytelling<sup>8</sup>

As the last hour of the workshop began, participants were invited to begin writing their stories. They each had their particular world, conflict, and characters with which to speculate and envision radical Jewish alternatives. To help spark plot ideas, I also suggested they incorporate their favourite Jewish object, but used in an unusual way. In case of writer's block, I had a table of plot points from Jewish stories from which they could pick at random, though nobody used them.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> See Appendix E

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> See Appendix F



This was the climax of the workshop, the point at which the spell of convocation was complete and the room was meant to be transformed into a dialogic space for imaginative thinking. I had no expectation that the participants would write an entire story in the 30 minutes provided, but hoped that they would be sufficiently inspired that they would want to continue writing after the workshop. Finally, we discussed the writing experience and shared excerpts.

The principles orienting this exercise build on learnings from other speculative research. Coleman attempted to create "the conditions under which creativity and novelty might emerge" in participatory speculative story writing (2017b, p.135) by mailing out art together with requests for autobiographical speculative narratives. This approach failed to garner any responses, leading her to emphasize Wilkie, Michael, and Plummer-Fernandez's point that "there is no guarantee that speculative devices and their provocations will work" (2015, p. 99). I hoped that my speculative device had successfully created the conditions for speculation.

### k. Reflection<sup>9</sup>

Before participants left, I asked them to fill out a reflection and feedback sheet. This was meant to give them space to reflect on what they had done, and to give me feedback on whether and in

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> See Appendix G

what ways the workshop had facilitated their engagement with SF. It also solicited selected demographic information.

### FOLLOW-UP WORKSHOPS

Participants had three weeks to complete a rough draft before a follow-up workshop. There, each participant read their drafts aloud and listened to peer critiques. Each author then had a chance to discuss what they were intending to achieve. I led a group discussion of open-ended questions meant to help gauge how successful the project's speculative methods had been. These were partly geared towards addressing gaps in the feedback sheet used in the first workshop.

We repeated this follow-up process with a second draft and workshop. In between workshops, I offered to proofread and copy edit the pieces. To avoid biasing the research, I decided that I would only comment on grammar, clarity, and reader experience and not comment on any core story elements.

# DATA AND ANALYSIS

My analysis was focused on understanding the nature of the speculation facilitated by the methodology, as reflected in how people participated and the substantive content of their stories. Twelve people between the ages of 20 and 35 attended the first workshop. Eight attendees were female, two were male, and two, non-binary. Almost all were students, artists, or worked in the social economy sector. These demographics were unsurprising, given the community from which I sampled. Still, I wondered whether the project would have been strengthened through a sample that enabled intergenerational exchange, especially since some participants showed concern regarding the process through which progressive Jewish values are reproduced.

My first indication that participants were warming to speculative methods was during the Jewish object elicitation when, without prompting, participants began discussing how the objects could be used to address social issues. Participants took the objects in hand, turning and examining them as they spoke, demonstrating the role of sensory engagement in speculation.

The collaborative reading was also helpful, with several participants noting that it helped them understand how an SF story could exhibit a worldview and strategy for solving societal challenges. The discussion afterwards was also fruitful. One participant made a point that I had



overlooked: the work of activism is often mundane, and turning it into an exciting story brings forward important motivations and underlying philosophies. A significant aspect of SF writing is that it captures people's imagination and helps to energize and mobilize them.

The Charting Jewish Identity activity was also successful in generating discussion and provided significant insights. Conversation around this exercise confirmed that it is not just the present or future of Judaism that is contested, but also the history of Jewish practice. One participant made the point that many aspects of their Judaism could go into any descriptive category,

depending on worldview. Some participants made the point that many aspects of Judaism were both traditional and progressive, with one saying they "see progressive Judaism as a continuation of traditional ways of looking at Judaism." This reinforces the importance of paying attention to the ontological politics of research regarding Judaism and indicates the importance of recuperating certain marginalized aspects or interpretations of Judaism. The meanings of both cultural and religious practices are malleable.

This discussion was also an integral part of the reflexive interrogation, with many participants noting that they had not thought of a certain aspect of their Jewishness until someone else mentioned it. This strengthens Haiven and Khasnabish's argument that the radical imagination must be "stimulated and observed" in dialogue (2014, p. 25).

The list of issues generated was long and diverse. Gender inequality was mentioned frequently and chosen by two groups as their central conflict. One participant noted that they think of their Judaism as radical because they associate it with the women in their family, whom they feel have always "broken the mold... [and] been powerful in some way."

SHAME + ANGER -DIASPORISM ANGER @ COMMUNITY - BAD HUMOUR BLITICAL INCLUSION -ANTT- SEMITIC JOH NGLUSION - POIERTP, DISABILITY, NON - NORMATINE FAMILY NDOCTRINATI RIVE TO ASSIMILATION DLERANCE TOWARDS DISSENT USION EKEEPING OF LEAKNING GENDER POLITICS FUNDING BEING TIED TO ISRAEL

Most participants listed worldbuilding as their favourite activity. This again emphasizes the importance of dialogue and suggests that participants appreciate collaborative creation. Two participants said they wished the creative process had been even more collaborative.

Of the twelve who attended the first workshop, five continued writing their stories. Of these, four continued with stories started at the workshop. The fifth scrapped their story and wrote a poem instead, but explained that it was based in thinking they had done at the first workshop.

Each finished story represented a different way that speculative methods might engage the radical imagination. Haiven and Khasnabish explain that "imagination is an intimate part of how we empathize with others, the way we gain some sense of the forces that impact our lives, and the way we project ourselves into the future and gain inspiration and direction from the past" (2014, p.4). In the following section, I explore how these aspects of imagination can be seen in each story.

Not every story presented visions of, or paths towards, a better future. One writer stated that they came to realize through their writing that they were angry with their community, and that they did not feel their story expressed much hope. Having realised this, they had started to look for opportunities to "speak out a bit more" in their community. In their words, "[I'm] laying out my anger and frustration on the table, and I'm being public about that in the Jewish community as far as I feel brave enough to be, which... is kind of the same thing I've done in the story." Though their story operated as critique, the process of writing enabled them to reimagine their way of being in community.

# **DEVELOPING THE FINAL OUTPUT<sup>10</sup>**

Once I knew that the project would incorporate creative writing, I reasoned that the best output would be a zine. Zines are commonly used by radical groups to distribute collaborative creative work that reflects their worldviews without having to negotiate the publishing industry. A zine could provide space for the dialogic interaction of the SF stories. I figured that a published output that each participant had some control over would encourage participation and make their speculations more tangible.

I considered what my contribution to the zine would be. The zine needed to reflect the context of its creation, as well as incorporate some aspects of my analysis. I decided that the zine had enough text, and so I would contribute in a visual way. Collage seemed particularly appropriate as a medium "that propose[s] different forms of being in the world by cutting familiar lines of association and reassembling new worlds" (Gunkel, Hameed and O'Sullivan, 2017, p.3). I saw my illustrations as being part of a dialogic call-and-response approach to collaboration (Puwar, 2011), with my initial workshop acting as a call, the participants' stories a response and call-back, and the collages, a final response from me to the participants. In all five collages, I attempted to recontextualize Jewish symbols and figures and reclaim old pieces of Jewish art<sup>11</sup>, bringing these images into new conversation and emphasizing the space that our speculative stories should hold.

The first story is set on a space ark holding the entire Jewish population, bound for a new utopian homeworld. Through the queer protagonist, we learn that the prime directive of this ark is to facilitate the biological reproduction of the Jewish people. Any dissenters are punished and imprisoned. The story uses a dystopian scenario to ask who is complicit in maintaining the status quo. The collage depicts an ark in the shape of a womb, inside of which is a rose imprisoned within a panopticon formed from hamsas, the Jewish symbol used to avert the evil eye. This surveillance function of the hamsa was suggested in the Jewish object elicitation.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> See Appendix H

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> See Appendix I

The second story recounts a reality where all non-Jewish men have been exiled from Britain by tumtum, transgender Jews, in a process evoking Brexit. The protagonist is one of these exiled men; his one light is his malach, a feminine Jewish angel who cares for his biological upkeep and may even care about him more deeply. This story inverts standpoints and power dynamics to ask how a group becomes deemed as Other, and suggests that radical empathy is the solution. My collage portrays this othering and empathy by depicting these characters as inverted, divided by a border the angel is attempting to cross.

The third contribution is a poem that examines how community memory is transmitted, lost, and reconstructed over time. The protagonist tells how they learned their history from a wise elderly woman, possibly a grandmother. Their kitchen, a sacred place of learning, is destroyed and rebuilt as the poem progresses. This symbolism suggests that the protagonist fears losing her ancestral connection to her history and faith, but eventually finds it within herself. The collage depicts three generations of women joined by the tree of life growing up and through them. They sit among a haphazard structure of books, upon which precariously balances a yad, a sacred pointer used to follow text in the Torah.

The fourth story tells of a near future in which the third Jewish temple has been built in Crown Heights, New York. Though the temple is technologically advanced, it is still heteronormative, cisnormative, and gender-stratified. The story suggests that solidarity between marginalized groups is the solution to inequalities that might continue to exist in otherwise utopian settings. The collage depicts instructions for making challah—a Jewish bread that features in the story as a covert means for revolutionaries to send messages—overlaid on a Brooklyn subway map. Both are tentacular but one appears harmoniously braided and the other chaotic and atomized. These are set against the rigid order of a Soviet factory worker visual.

The fifth story imagines the author recovering a sacred text from the past. When shared, the text catalyzes the creation of a new world based on radical Jewish principles. The collage represents the idea that new worlds can be created through reading and sharing ideas; from a cloud of words emerges a golem, the Jewish mythical creature that represents action and is brought to life when the word 'truth' is written on its forehead.

# REFLECTION

This project demonstrates how participatory SF writing can be used as part of speculative sociological research methodology aimed at understanding and provoking the radical imagination. A single writing exercise, however, is not enough to encourage successful speculation. Convoking a space for the creative act of speculation requires attention to atmosphere, sensory engagement, and participant literacies. My underlying assumption throughout the project was that anyone has the expressive capacity necessary to tell a story, but I was worried that fear or lack of basic creative writing knowledge might be a barrier to participation. The sensory and participatory aspects of the workshop were meant to address this issue. In the end, the workshop components seemed to prepare the participants for successful story-writing-they each wrote at least two hundred words in 30 minutes. That said, since the workshop was advertised as a writing event, participants likely self-selected to have a certain level of writing ability. Of those 12, however, only five were able to commit the time necessary to fully think through their premises and complete their stories, and some found it quite challenging. As one participant stated, "writing is hard. Being creative is hard... trying to think of words to create the image you want to create, there's a real translation gap for me." Still, that participant and others expressed an interest in continuing to develop the skills to communicate their viewpoint through evocative SF. Extended participant commitment may be a necessary evil for a project that seeks to engage in the hard work of deep critique and the compelling evocation of alternative realities and worldviews. The breadth and depth of form and content in the five completed stories shows that those who made this commitment were able to think from new standpoints and imagine a variety of ways to understand and address social issues.

Though the research was designed to encourage dialogic encounters between participants, more opportunities for collaboration might help to address commitment and accessibility issues. One way to incorporate more collaboration could be through applying Puwar's call-and-response approach to the story-writing phase, with participants passing stories back-and-forth. This method would make participants more accountable to each other.

Though this project is now complete, there are indications that its effects will continue to be felt in the radical Jewish community. Participants have discussed starting an SF writing club. There are plans for a zine release event, where they will read and discuss their work. I hope that our zine acts as a material, dialogic focal point through which our ideas can encourage further conversation and speculation.

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# **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A: Facebook Event**

NN       3         Magining Rad Jewish Futur         Storytelling Workshop         Public - Hosted by Maxim Gertler-Jaffe	res: A Sci-Fi
	A Share ▼ ···
Sunday, June 3 at 2 PM - 5 PM Next Week	
<ul> <li>Goldsmiths, University of London</li> <li>Lewisham Way, SE14 6NW London, United Kingdom</li> </ul>	Show Map
About	Discussion

#### Details

Speculative fiction (a cousin of science fiction) considers how the present and future could be different. It can be used to imagine and express new worlds and ways of being (think afro-futurism, utopias, etc).

"Those wanting to change the world must first be able to dream of new worlds."

In this workshop, we'll use speculative fiction to create collective and individual stories based on radical (diasporist, anarchist, etc.) Jewish identities and worldviews.

Together we'll imagine new and forgotten ways of being Jewish by:

- exploring what speculative fiction is and how it can be used
- reading examples of Jewish and social justice speculative fiction
- practicing collaborative and individual story-telling/writing

There will be paper, pens/pencils/pastels, tea and snacks provided to help create the world you want to live in! With your consent, the stories we generate will be published in a zine.

\*\*\*No writing experience necessary\*\*\*

#### ABOUT THE WORKSHOP CONVENOR:

I'm Maxim, a Jewish filmmaker from Canada who recently moved to London. You may have seen me around in New Cross pubs or at Jewdas events. I'm pursuing an MA in Visual Sociology at Goldsmiths. This workshop is part of my MA research on Jewish Diasporist futures.

See Less A

### **APPENDIX B: Information Sheet and Consent Form**

NOTE: Full set of completed consent forms available upon request

#### INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS

#### PROJECT TITLE: Using Speculative Fiction to Understand and Expand the Radical Jewish Imagination

#### What is the purpose of the research?

This research is meant to examine how speculative fiction writing might inspire an individual or group to imagine new ways of addressing their community's social problems. To explore this, I'm specifically focused on researching in solidarity with Jewish people who are interested in engaging in radical (e.g. socialist and/ or diasporist) politics. I'm undertaking this research as part of my Visual Sociology MA dissertation. This study is part of a move in social research to include more arts-based research practices and to make research more relevant and useful for communities in which research is being done.

#### Why have I been invited to participate?

You've been invited to participate as a person who has a radical Jewish identity or who participates in a community of Jewish people who identify as radical.

#### What will happen if I do take part?

- The research involves a three-hour workshop where participants will discuss speculative fiction and engage in a series of collaborative and individual creative writing exercises. Audio and photos of the workshop will be recorded for research purposes.
- Participants in the workshop will be invited to have their writing published in a zine, which will also function as the final research output of this dissertation
- There will be a few weeks during which participants can continue revising their writing before submitting it to the zine.
- Writing produced during the workshop will be collected, scanned, and returned to the participants. This initial writing will be used to understand how effectively the workshop achieved the research goals.

#### What are the benefits of taking part?

By taking part, you'll learn about the use of speculative fiction in social activism and have the opportunity to have your work published in a zine.

#### CONSENT FORM FOR PARTICIPANTS

#### Using Speculative Fiction to Understand and Expand the Radical Jewish Imagination

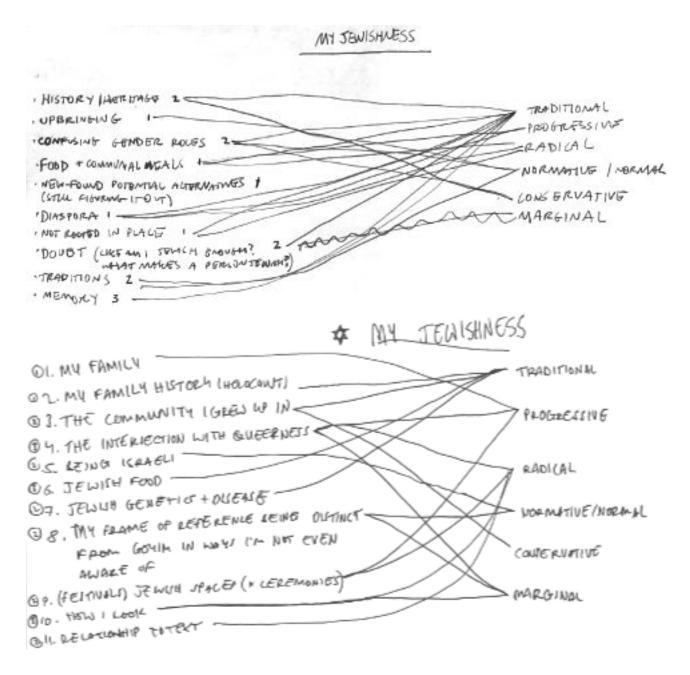
The Department of Sociology, Goldsmiths College, University of London attach high priority to the ethical conduct of research. Alongside this form, you should read the Information Sheet and/or listen to the explanation about the research provided by the person organising the research. If you have any questions regarding the research or use of the data collected through the study, please do not hesitate to ask the researcher. We therefore ask you to consider the following points before agreeing to take part in this research:

- This research is being undertaken for the purposes of a postgraduate dissertation
- The research will be conducted by Maxim Gertler-Jaffe.
- Audio and/or video of the interview or workshop will be recorded.
- All data will be treated as personal under the 1998 Data Protection Act, and will be stored securely.
- Copies of the publication created through the research will be provided to you, free of charge, upon request.
- Anonymity will be maintained and it will not be possible to identify you from the resulting dissertation unless you explicitly waive this right below.
- If you decide at any time during the research that you no longer wish to participate in this project, you can withdraw immediately without giving any reason.
- You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep and refer to at any time.
- <sup>-</sup> By signing this form you assign copyright of your contribution to the researcher. This excludes visual data supplied by you.
- Feedback will be provided to all participants at by the end of the project.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of the research, please contact the department's ethics officer, Jennifer Fleetwood (J.fleetwood@gold.ac.uk).

	5. 7.		ng Speculative Fiction to Understand and Expand the Radical
State and the second			on what this involves and I agree to the use of the findings as d by a code of professional ethics.
	YES	NO	
I confirm that I have fro	eely agreed to be	recorded on camera	a or audio.
	YES	NO	ONLY IF NOT IDENTIFIABLE
200 (2014) V202	ling to have the o	creative work that I	generate published in a zine, anonymously or under a name
of my choosing.	YES	NO	
Participant Signature:			
Name:			Date:
I confirm to keep the u	ndertakings in th	is contract.	
Researcher Signature:			
Name:			Date:

# APPENDIX C: Samples of "Charting Jewish Identity" activity



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### APPENDIX D: Samples of "Worldbuilding" activity

Cossdenonunational Templetimes -Modern women's revolution - Mostly Hordlesson - Third temple in Brooks - Futuristic tech -Trachtional priesthe - Temple connuniem Orlanstar sect co - Kitchen headquar ghtingane - Challah secret into -Occupy the temple - Genda sympathises ressurchiberal (pies) THE LEDYCE HIND HEIR PHYLICAL WED TO LUE VECE REPRESEMPTED EFUV AS MALL THAN PHARE CHAN ALE IN ONNE Mell = LUPE ERUV 11 15 MONNY JEANA MATHAY : ANTACHER CEATE CULTURE WED TO CONTEM E-DRENDE OF 140450 LING HERE EDGN MARE LALLED EDEN CONSIDER PHALE LEVENANJ NON-PEBING ERRETTE ZIDNISM NUPREMACH OF ONE PRACTUE KAMERINAS DA OTHER RELICHON MISIGNED AEUGIAN ELENAERE 1.4CUM AT LIDTH LIAME + GATADOR) JELS ANCH IN THE SAMELIN PLACE. GENDER. mally FIND A WALY - ONE DOMMANT RELIGION TO REPRODUCE POLITICS EJERKONE IS TRANS DEVOLUTION MAY ALLEN LANDRED INFERTILE ANDKENAZI=MALE S TEWING GEWREES- PAL CHOOSE TO WE THEIE WORD & OF FAILUS- HAVE TTILE HARFLIN HUYDALCAL PETISASM THE LAND MATT WHER ARE GENDER V IMPLEE en. POLITIC LIKE THEN ap.E LIKE UPAELI PROKOMANYING NO ONE CAN GO 1105 TO MIKVEN ZAKHAR/NEKEWAH BUNGER REVELUTION (GENDEN ARE tion o coursed LAREU, NOT -MOJTE 4 POLITIUE \$10LOGICAL BRE RACUM HAN REALITIES INCHEASED -

# **APPENDIX E: Samples of "Character Creation" activity**

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# APPENDIX F: Samples of "Storytelling" activity

been a long time coming frhally come. 1ho 0 ens IN KR aning. ul 4 The C Dallon 0 MAILE M Shekhina an the ann SFI nand pain that of in her wh The priesthood would fall and the she would dance on it's grave. "Rivka?" here vound, whipped her Mile SIA any di 101 class tales abi's idea KWAC in a the Jewish W 5 (Mre. 175

### **APPENDIX G: Sample of Reflection and Feedback Sheet**

#### IMAGINING RAD JEWISH FUTURES - WORKSHOP REFLECTION

What did you learn in the workshop? Some new bookers to add to my reading list! Mso interedy replections on my Senish identity and hearing those replections from others. Mso this process of world I character buildy.

Having done the workshop, what do you now think about using SF as a way of imagining new ways of being and new strategies for addressing social problems?

I think it is a very inkerity way of highlights those espects a social practice that can ofter-ise be telen for granted/test

What was your favourite part of the workshop and why? Slarmy the and telling about the Senish objects - was a great geeling of collective creatinity.

Name:

Gender: MALE

Age: 2.8

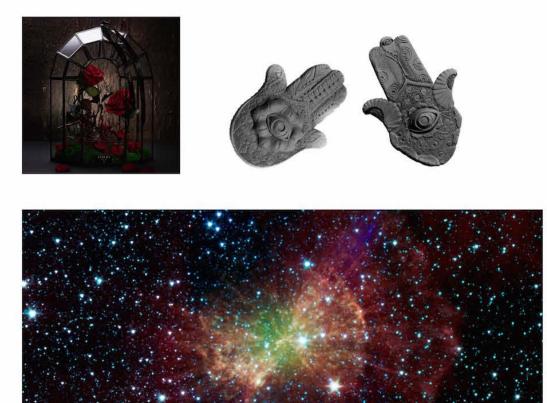
Occupation: STUDENT / FREELANCE TRAVELATER

### **APPENDIX H: Zine**

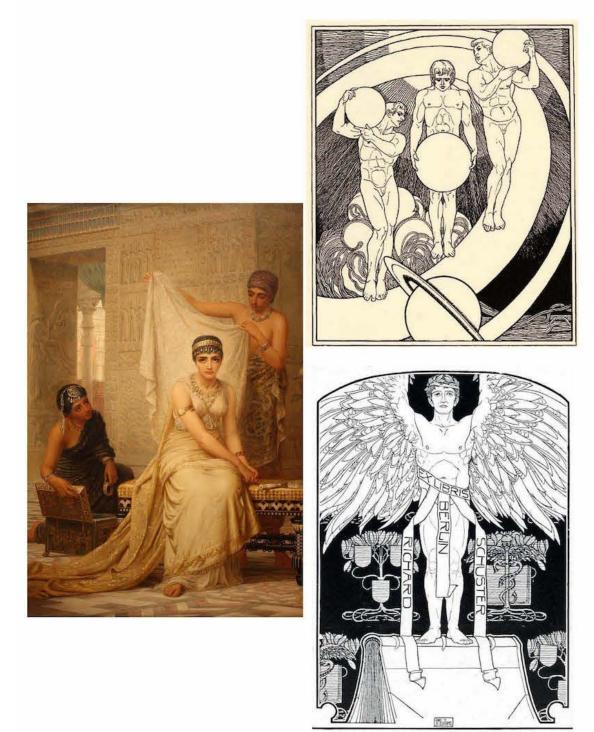
See attached PDF entitled "Radical Jewish SF Zine 33520341"

# APPENDIX I: Collage Components a. Story One collage components



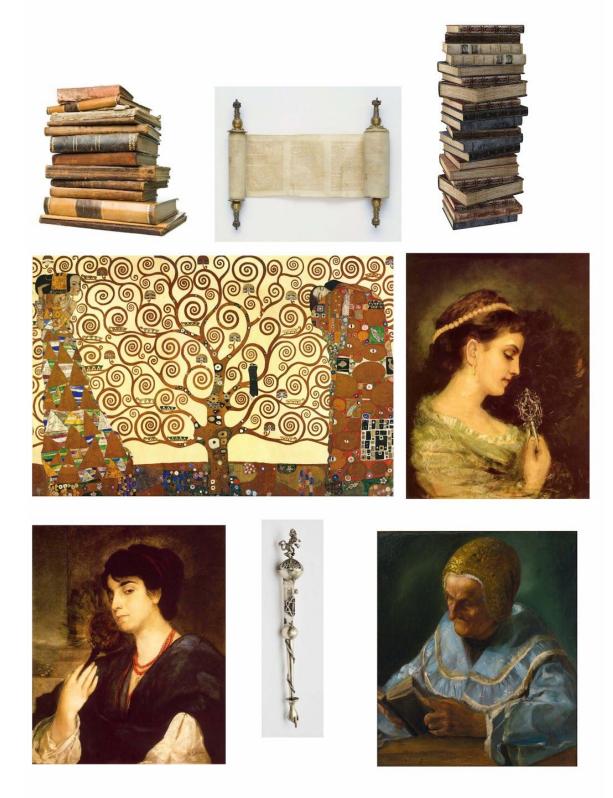


# b. Story Two collage components



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# c. Story Three collage components



# d. Story Four collage components



# e. Story Five collage components

