

Whose Museum Is It? Jewish Museums and Indigenous Theory

YANIV FELLER

Religion Department, Wesleyan University, Middletown, CT, USA

BROKEN GERMAN

“Deer [*sic*] members of the academy [...] When a Jew enters the Jewish Museum, does he become part of the exhibition?”¹ In Tomer Gardi’s *Broken German* (2016), the narrator describes to the distinguished audience a walk through the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB) in an attempt to find a place to lay his head for the night. His puzzling question points to a significant issue at the heart of museum theory: Whose museum is the Jewish Museum Berlin? Who has or should have a voice in the museum? The theoretical work done in Indigenous museums and ethnographic collections has raised these questions most poignantly in recent decades, asking whether museums are places about a community or for the community and its self-definition.

I contend in this article that bringing Indigenous theory and Jewish museums into conversation helps theorize the actors and stakes in Jewish museums, while also pointing to the limits of claims to speak on behalf of a community, a topic of central concern for Indigenous engagement with museums. The comparison requires justification, and the first section of this article grounds this relationship, presenting the JMB and the main counterpart for comparison, the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). The vexed topic of genocide shows how memories often compete in claims of victimhood status, but also how the NMAI was inspired by the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum.

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¹ Tomer Gardi, *Broken German* (Graz: Literaturverlag Droschl, 2016), 67. The presentation in front of the “members of the academy” intentionally mirrors Kafka’s “A Report for an Academy,” in which an ape describes his process of acculturation.

The relation between community and museum is theorized here, following Scott Richard Lyons, through the idea of “rhetorical sovereignty,” namely the right of Indigenous people to decide for themselves how they want to be represented.² The second section examines this rhetorical sovereignty in exhibitions. At stake is the possibility of an emic perspective as an alternative epistemology to Western knowledge-production. To illustrate this point, I focus on stories of origins, because identity is tied to how people think of their heritage.³ My analysis of the JMB’s old core exhibition (2001–2017) exposes how it was inflected by a Christian gaze and explores emic ways of presenting Jewish origins in a Jewish museum.

From rhetorical sovereignty through objects and dramaturgy, the discussion moves to community claims in the public sphere. The term “source communities” refers in this context “both to these groups in the past when artefacts were collected, as well as to their descendants today.”⁴ These communities can have different relations to the museum, from contestation in questions of repatriation to cooperation in research and exhibition. It is now considered good practice to include members of relevant communities in consultation about objects emerging from their communities. Source communities might be asked, for example, to share the decision making when it comes to the presentation of sacred objects, ancestral remains, or the history of the people. This inclusion of source communities has been a welcome development that has sought to correct a long history of violence and misrepresentation.

The heated controversy surrounding Peter Schäfer, a non-Jewish scholar of Judaism who served as director of the JMB, offers a case study in the limits of cooperation between a source community and the museum. Schäfer resigned in 2019 amidst protests from the leading umbrella organization of Jews in Germany, which argued that the museum under his directorship was not “Jewish” enough. At stake in these debates were the presentation of the State of Israel and its relation to an understanding of what it means to be Jewish. Looking at this controversy in light of museum theory exposes the tensions in the ideas of rhetorical sovereignty and source community.

This discussion illuminates the fact that claims for a source community status can come with a high price, namely the exclusion of other voices and

² Scott Richard Lyons, “Rhetorical Sovereignty: What Do American Indians Want from Writing?” *College Composition and Communication* 51, 3 (2000): 449–50. See also Lisa King, “Sovereignty, Rhetorical Sovereignty, and Representation: Keywords for Teaching Indigenous Texts,” in Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson, eds., *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015); and Steven Lavine, “Museum Practices,” in Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1991), 151.

³ Steven Weitzman, *The Origin of the Jews: The Quest for Roots in a Rootless Age* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017), 6.

⁴ Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, “Introduction,” in Laura Peers and Alison K. Brown, eds., *Museums and Source Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2; see also Sheila Watson, “Museums and Their Communities,” in Sheila Watson, ed., *Museums and Their Communities* (New York: Routledge, 2007), 2–3.

demands for conformity. Several scholars have pointed in this direction in other contexts, raising two major challenges to giving primacy to the source community. One objection is that not all objects have a neat history tracing them to a single community. Erica Lehrer, for example, analyzed “implicated objects” in Polish museums that have histories that relate them to multiple source communities. Yet if one source community is privileged, their polysemic meaning, and contested history, will be lost.⁵ Another objection comes from Kavita Singh, who warns of ascribing only good intentions to source communities, which can also be discriminatory, for example with regard to gender or caste.⁶ There is a certain dynamic, in other words, in which one group, the loudest or most powerful, can take over in a way that marginalizes other claims.⁷ Ultimately, the definition of a source community is about power relations, in which the museum is often seen as a pawn or target. Yet museums, I conclude, can also be active agents of change, constituting the source community by bringing together different facets of difficult questions.

Bringing together Jewish and Indigenous history and memory is a fraught terrain. Before delving into the analysis, it is important to clarify my use of those terms. Although “Jewish” and “Indigenous” are present throughout the essay, they are by no means to be seen as stable, essentialized categories. As I will argue, it is the category of the “Jew” itself that needs a new way of presentation in Jewish museums. The term Indigenous is just as contested. Indigeneity can be understood as a condition resulting from a shared experience of the loss of land and sovereignty by various groups across the world as a result of colonialism. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007) recognizes “historical injustices” alongside the survival of the community, whose existence has been hampered as a result of dispossession of lands, territories, and resources.⁸ Surviving here is therefore not bare existence, but

⁵ Erica Lehrer, “Material Kin: ‘Communities of Implication’ in Post-Colonial, Post-Holocaust Polish Ethnographic Collections,” in Jonas Tinius and Margareta von Oswald, eds., *Across Anthropology: Convergences through Museums, Colonial Legacies, and the Curatorial* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2020), 283–316.

⁶ Kavita Singh, *Museums, Heritage, Culture: Into the Conflict Zone* (Amsterdam: Reinwardt Academy, 2015), 72; see also Watson, “Museums and Their Communities,” 10–12; Ivan Karp, “Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture,” in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Levine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1992), 10.

⁷ See, for example, the debate surrounding the Canadian Museum of Human Rights: A. Dirk Moses, “The Canadian Museum for Human Rights: The ‘Uniqueness of the Holocaust’ and the Question of Genocide,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 14, 2 (2012): 215–38; Olena Hankivsky and Rita Kaur Dhamoon, “Which Genocide Matters the Most? An Intersectionality Analysis of the Canadian Museum of Human Rights,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne de Science Politique* 46, 4 (2013): 899–920.

⁸ “United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples,” in Walter R. Echo-Hawk, *In the Light of Justice: The Rise of Human Rights in Native America and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* (Golden: Fulcrum, 2013), 282; and Ronald Niezen, *The Origins of Indigenism: Human Rights and the Politics of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

what Gerald Vizenor called survivance, an active mode of Indigenous being in the world that shapes the present and future of the community.⁹ Survivance is achieved through a revitalized engagement with the memory of the past and renewed tribal practices, as well as in the struggle for recognition of one's suffering, an issue on which both the JMB and NMAI have a lot to say.

FROM OPPRESSION OLYMPICS TO MULTIDIRECTIONAL MEMORY

The name Jewish Museum Berlin is somewhat misleading: It is indeed located in Berlin, but is far from a local museum, even if it originally emerged as the city museum of former West Berlin. Since its opening in 2001, Daniel Libeskind's building has been hailed as an architectural masterpiece and the JMB is known as one of the most important Jewish museums in Europe (figure 1). It appears in almost all of the travel guides to Berlin and draws more than half a million visitors per year, from tourists to school groups from all over Germany. About three quarters of the visitors come from abroad, which means the museum represents Jews and Judaism primarily for non-Jewish tourists.¹⁰

The JMB is a federal institution; it receives its budget directly from the federal government and does not belong to, or rely on, the Jewish community. The latter is represented in Germany by the Central Council of Jews in Germany (*Zentralrat der Juden in Deutschland*; hereafter *Zentralrat*), an umbrella organization incorporating more than a hundred Jewish communities of various denominations throughout Germany. Since its founding in 1950 in West Germany, the *Zentralrat* has stood as the major representative of the Jews in Germany, who were at first a small community of around twenty thousand members, many of whom were displaced persons.¹¹ After the fall of the Iron Curtain, many Jews from the former Soviet Bloc emigrated to Germany, and the community has grown significantly. It is now at least a hundred thousand members strong. This makes the *Zentralrat* the largest Jewish organization in Germany, although by some estimates it represents only about half the

⁹ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), vii–viii. Vizenor intentionally left the concept with a degree of plasticity: see Gerald Vizenor, ed., *Survivance: Narratives of Native Presence* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008); Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson, “Careful with the Stories We Tell: Naming Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story,” in Lisa King, Rose Gubele, and Joyce Rain Anderson, eds., *Survivance, Sovereignty, and Story: Teaching American Indian Rhetorics* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2015), 7–8.

¹⁰ Joe Baur, “‘We Are Here,’ Not in Israel: The New Berlin Jewish Museum Director on Jewish Life in Germany, beyond BDS,” *Jewish Telegraphic Agency*, 26 Aug. 2020, <https://www.jta.org/2020/08/26/global/we-are-here-not-in-israel-the-new-berlin-jewish-museum-director-on-jewish-life-in-germany-beyond-bds> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

¹¹ Jay Geller, *Jews in Post-Holocaust Germany, 1945–1953* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005).



FIGURE 1. Jüdisches Museum Berlin. Photo: Thomas Bruns.

country's Jews.¹² In short, the largest Jewish organization and the most important Jewish museum are separate legal entities. The Zentralrat has one representative on the JMB's board of nine trustees (*Stiftungsrat*), which means it does not control or even directly influence the exhibitions and public programming.¹³ Museum and community, as we will see, have not always worked in tandem, and at times they have directly competed in shaping contemporary Jewish identity in Germany.

The JMB opened in 2001, during the “second museum age,” which Ruth Phillips defines as a move away from an encyclopedic and universalist approach toward a more critical perspective that challenges curatorial authority and the museum as a supposedly objective mediator of public knowledge.¹⁴ Museum theory in the second museum age emerged from, among other factors, contestation regarding repatriation and representation of Indigenous material culture. Theorizing Jewish museums in terms of the second museum age therefore requires an approach that engages the perspectives emerging from Indigenous museums and the treatment of Indigenous collections.

The closest comparison to the JMB among Indigenous museums is the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), the best-known and most visited of its kind. It opened in 1993 with a landmark exhibition titled “The Way of the People.” The new building was opened officially in 2004 after a decade of planning and intense discussions (figure 2). Designed by the Cree architect Douglas Cardinal, it spreads across five floors—and a garden that brings Indigenous understandings of nature to the middle of Washington, D.C.—and includes exhibits presenting various themes of Native American life, history, and culture from multiple perspectives.¹⁵ This museum is especially apt for comparison with the JMB for several reasons. First, both are monumental buildings in which the architecture plays an important role. Second, both are

¹² Joseph Cronin, *Russian-Speaking Jews in Germany's Jewish Communities, 1990–2005* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). The Zentralrat's website notes this is only the number of those listed as community members, and does not include those who do not officially belong. See “FAQ,” Zentralrat der Juden, 19 May 2020, <https://www.zentralratderjuden.de/service/faq/> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

¹³ At the time of writing, the Zentralrat is represented by Milena Rosenzweig-Winter. See “Stiftungsrat des Jüdischen Museums Berlin,” JMB, <https://www.jmberlin.de/stiftungsrat-des-juedischen-museums-berlin> (accessed 12 Apr. 2020).

¹⁴ Ruth B. Phillips, “Re-Placing Objects: Historical Practices for the Second Museum Age,” *Canadian Historical Review* 86, 1 (2005): 83–110; Pamela Klassen, “Narrating Religion through Museums,” in Sarah Iles Johnston, ed., *Religion: Narrating Religion* (New York: MacMillan, 2016), 336–38.

¹⁵ Ira Jacknis, “A New Thing? The National Museum of the American Indian in Its Historical and Institutional Context,” in Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb, eds., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), esp. 20–33; Tanya Thrasher and Duane Blue Spruce, eds., *Land Has Memory: Indigenous Knowledge, Native Landscapes, and the National Museum of the American Indian* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).



FIGURE 2. National Museum of the American Indian. Author's photo.

federal institutions located in their respective capital cities. Third, both are educational centers to a variety of target audiences, including tourists from abroad, school classes, as well as the source communities. Finally, both museums have to present the genocide and dispossession of the community they represent.

While both museums being tied so intimately to genocide adds to their comparability, it also complicates the matter. The Holocaust is often invoked as a singular event, an atrocity that could not—and should not—be compared to any other because of its scope and the intentionality of the Nazis, who saw in the annihilation of the Jews an end in itself. Such a position, however, risks diminishing other genocides and suffering, such as that of Indigenous peoples.¹⁶ This is not merely a theoretical question but a political one, as a recent example shows. In June 2019, Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic

¹⁶ There is a vast literature on the question of the Holocaust's uniqueness. For representative examples, see Steven Katz (for the side of uniqueness) and David Stannard (challenging it) in Alan S. Rosenbaum, ed., *Is the Holocaust Unique? Perspectives on Comparative Genocide* (New York: Routledge, 2018). On situating the Holocaust and the genocide of Indigenous people in light of European domination, see A. Dirk Moses, "Conceptual Blockages and Definitional Dilemmas in the 'Racial Century': Genocides of Indigenous Peoples and the Holocaust," *Patterns of Prejudice* 36, 4 (2002): 7–36.



FIGURE 3. Nation to Nation exhibition at the National Museum of the American Indian. “The Great Smoke” case at the Nation to Nation exhibition. Photo: Paul Morigi/AP Images for The Smithsonian’s National Museum of the American Indian.

congresswoman from New York, called detention centers for migrants “concentration camps.” The allusion to the Holocaust was clear. In response, the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), which opened in Washington, D.C. in 1993, released a formal statement rejecting “the efforts to create analogies between the Holocaust and other events, whether historical or contemporary.”¹⁷ An open letter formulated among others by leading scholars in Holocaust Studies such as Omer Bartov, Doris Bergen, and Timothy Snyder, opposed the museum’s position. When the letter was published at the *New York Review of Books*, on 1 July 2019, it had more than two hundred signatories, many of whom have dedicated their careers to the study of Jewish and German history. By resisting analogies, the authors and signatories argued, the museum in fact turns the Holocaust into an ahistorical event.¹⁸

¹⁷ United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, “Statement Regarding the Museum’s Position on Holocaust Analogies (24 June 2019),” <http://www.ushmm.org/information/press/press-releases/statement-regarding-the-museums-position-on-holocaust-analogies> (accessed 19 Jan. 2021).

¹⁸ Anika Walke et al., “An Open Letter to the Director of the US Holocaust Memorial Museum,” *New York Review of Books*, 1 July 2019, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2019/07/01/an-open-letter-to-the-director-of-the-holocaust-memorial-museum/>. On this debate, see Peter E. Gordon, “Why Historical Analogy Matters,” *New York Review of Books*, 7 Jan. 2020, <https://www.nybooks.com/daily/2020/01/07/why-historical-analogy-matters/>; and more broadly Susan Neiman, *Learning from the Germans: Race and the Memory of Evil* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2019).

It is the symbolic value of the Holocaust that invites comparisons in the public sphere.¹⁹ Moral authority is accorded to victims of a genocide, yet if it is given to those who suffered the most, then this can lead to a kind of Oppression Olympics about whose suffering is more worthy of recognition.²⁰ Memory need not, however, be a zero-sum game in which recognition of my suffering must come at the expense of yours. In *Multidirectional Memory*, Michael Rothberg offers a theoretical framework that treats memory as multidirectional, an exchange that recognizes the “dynamic transfers that take place between diverse places and times during the act of remembrance.”²¹ It is not a question about whose suffering is more tragic, but about solidarity and the recognition of suffering in a way that could use resources from other cultures, without appropriating or trying to disrespect them.

Rothberg’s approach is helpful in pointing out the ways in which different museal practices and theories share concerns. Indeed, the USHMM inspired curators at the NMAI. Until 2014, the genocide of Native Americans was addressed at the NMAI in the permanent exhibition “Our Peoples: Giving Voice to Our Histories.” One of the curators of “Our Peoples,” Paul Chaat Smith, says the USHMM “taught us the value of understatement, the importance of using real artifacts, and, most important, the rewards of respecting the intelligence of viewers.”²² “Our Peoples” relied on objects symbolizing the means of colonization: guns, bibles, and treaties. Indigenous scholars differed in their assessment of this exhibition. Amanda Cobb celebrated it as a moment in which “Native Americans have *again* turned an instrument of colonization and dispossession into something else—in this case, into an instrument of self-definition and cultural continuance.”²³ Sonya Atalay, by contrast, found the exhibition highly disturbing. She described the text accompanying the exhibited guns as “upsetting and outrageous” and said it brought tears to her eyes, because it failed to note that these weapons were used to “slaughter, rape, and maim our ancestors.”²⁴

¹⁹ Lilian Friedberg, “Dare to Compare: Americanizing the Holocaust,” *American Indian Quarterly* 24, 3 (2000): 353–80; Nancy Mithlo, “History Is Dangerous,” *Museum Anthropology* 19, 2 (1995): 50–57, 57.

²⁰ On Oppression Olympics, see Ange-Marie Hancock, *Solidarity Politics for Millennials: A Guide to Ending the Oppression Olympics* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013); and Hankivsky and Dharmoon, “Which Genocide?,” 900, 906–7.

²¹ Michael Rothberg, *Multidirectional Memory: Remembering the Holocaust in the Age of Decolonization* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 11.

²² Paul Chaat Smith, “Critical Reflections on the Our Peoples Exhibit: A Curator’s Perspective,” in Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb, eds., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 137.

²³ Amanda Cobb, “The National Museum of the American Indian as Cultural Sovereignty,” *American Quarterly* 57, 2 (2005): 485–506, 486.

²⁴ Sonya Atalay, “No Sense of Struggle: Creating a Context for Survivance at the National Museum of the American Indian,” in Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb, eds., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 274.

While showing Indigenous agency, the exhibition ultimately fails to address the context of colonialism, thereby ignoring the sense of struggle that accompanies Indigenous survivance.²⁵

The same conflicting assessments of the exhibition can be applied to the one that replaced it in 2014, “Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations” (figure 3). Kevin Gover, the museum’s director, notes in the accompanying exhibition catalogue that the decision to focus on treaties was motivated by the institutional mission to rectify “the nation’s historical amnesia about the role of Native Nations in the making of modern America.”²⁶ Treaties, as legally binding documents between nations, are as crucial a reminder of Indigenous self-determination and legal status, as they are of the United States’ violation of them. They serve as a proof of a broken promise.²⁷ “Nation to Nation,” while confronting the colonial legacy more explicitly, arguably still does not answer Atalay’s challenge to its predecessor. Although the guns and bibles have been taken out, the focus on sovereignty expressed in the object of treaties, while important in and of itself, does not prime the audience to focus on the violence of genocide. As material objects behind glass cases, treaties and related objects do not provide the visitor with a sense of struggle.

A different approach is presented in the Mashantucket Pequot Museum and Research Center in Connecticut. Unlike the NMAI, this is a tribal museum located on tribal ground. It is not federal, nor does it claim to represent all of Native American experience.²⁸ A significant section in the permanent exhibition is dedicated to the Pequot War of 1637, using not only maps and historical objects but also a film that provides an audio-visual reenactment of the war and its devastating impact on the tribe. Only after this experience, can visitors move on to discover what life was like in the aftermath of the violence.

Amy Lonetree compares the NMAI to the USHMM and finds the former wanting. She describes the USHMM as a “powerful site” that managed to provide “another thought-provoking and moving experience” even in her third visit. The NMAI does not produce the same effect in her opinion.²⁹ On the other hand, critics of the USHMM point out that it “Americanizes” the Holocaust by

²⁵ Ibid., 280.

²⁶ Kevin Gover, Foreword, in Suzan Shown Harjo, ed., *Nation to Nation: Treaties Between the United States and American Indian Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2014), xii.

²⁷ Robert Clinton, “Treaties with Native Nations: Iconic Historical Relics or Modern Necessity?” in Suzan Shown Harjo, ed., *Nation to Nation: Treaties between the United States and American Indian Nations* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 2014), 14–33.

²⁸ On tribal museums as a type of Indigenous museum that can be seen as a minority and oppositional project, while at the same time continuing Indigenous traditions, see James Clifford, “Four Northwest Coast Museums: Travel Reflections,” in Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1991), 215–16, 250 n5.

²⁹ Amy Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums: Representing Native America in National and Tribal Museums* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 105.

presenting it within the context of American political and military history and creating a double identification, with the brave American liberator on the one hand and the suffering victims on the other. This process of identification is intentional and functions on multiple levels.³⁰ Before the visitor begins the tour of the exhibition, for example, they are invited to pick a “passport” detailing a biography of a victim of the Holocaust. With each historical development, the visitor is encouraged to turn the page and see the fate of that person. That the visitor is the passport-holder brings the process of identification close to home in a way that turns one into a victim and liberator. It thereby obscures the possibility that one would become a perpetrator or indeed that one is a perpetrator and beneficiary of oppression and genocide.³¹ The Holocaust, which did not happen on American soil, is Americanized, whereas the genocide that took place in America is not recognized enough.

The importance of the USHMM as a model for Indigenous museums is therefore in the fact that it confronts the issue of genocide directly. What could be seen as an over-Americanizing of the Holocaust, is perhaps what is deemed missing in the NMAI by Indigenous scholars. Yet the NMAI “was never meant to be a holocaust museum,” but rather to celebrate life alongside the destruction, a tension that cannot be really resolved.³² The museum is about not just the atrocities and genocide but also the survivance and the continued existence of the community, as well as the attempts to revitalize it. The JMB exemplifies similar tensions to those accompanying the NMAI. It needs to present Jewish history and life, while grappling with the trauma of genocide. Berlin is filled with other memorial sites spread throughout the city, including Stolpersteine—golden plaques in front of homes detailing the fate of their former Jewish residents—that are spread throughout the city, trains stations (Grunewald Platform 17, Wittenbergplatz), and Peter Eisenman’s monumental Memorial for the Murdered Jews of Europe.³³ The JMB’s mandate is different than that of these memorial sites. It is tasked with presenting Jewish history and life in Germany from the medieval period to the present. The twelve years of Nazi horror are an important part of this history, but only part of it.

Despite its mission statement, however, the Holocaust serves as the JMB’s *raison d’être*, and is why many visitors visit the museums in the first place. The focus on destruction is integrated into the visitor’s experience, whose terms are

³⁰ Alvin Hirsch Rosenfeld, *The Americanization of the Holocaust* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995); Michael Rothberg, *Traumatic Realism: The Demands of Holocaust Representation* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 251, 255; cf. Jeshajahu Weinberg and Rina Elieli, *The Holocaust Museum in Washington* (New York: Rizzoli, 1995), 49.

³¹ Michael Rothberg, *The Implicated Subject: Beyond Victims and Perpetrators* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019); see also Jason Chalmers, “Settled Memories on Stolen Land: Settler Mythology at Canada’s National Holocaust Monument,” *American Indian Quarterly* 43, 4 (2019): 379–407.

³² Smith, “Critical Reflections,” 137.

³³ James Young, *At Memory’s Edge: After-Images of the Holocaust in Contemporary Art and Architecture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 184–223; Michael Steinberg, *Judaism Musical and Unmusical* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 209–20.



FIGURE 4. Jüdisches Museum Berlin. Photo: Jens Ziehe.

set by Libeskind's imposing architecture. The historical presentation of Jewish life in Germany, the so-called "axis of continuity," begins on the second floor of the building, but most visitors approach it only after visiting the two other axes (figure 4). The axis of exile describes in objects and images the flight of Jews from Germany and leads to the disorienting outdoor Garden of Exile. The axis of the Holocaust contains individual objects telling tragic stories of loss and ends with the powerful experience of the "voided void" commonly known as the Holocaust tower. By the time the visitor climbs the stairs to the permanent exhibition on Jewish history, usually after about half an hour, they are already primed to think about the history of Jews in Germany in terms of destruction and loss. This not only frames the historical exhibition; it almost causes the visitors to forget, if they knew in the first place, that there is still a Jewish community in contemporary Germany. In both placement and curation, the postwar era appeared in the old core exhibition as an afterthought. In fact, one of the reasons for redoing the core exhibition was the desire to provide post-Holocaust Jewish life in Germany a much more prominent place, including through the presentation of objects and photographs collected and commissioned especially for this purpose.³⁴

³⁴ Alina Gromova, Tamar Lewinsky, and Theresia Ziehe, "Objekttage: Erinnerungsstücke und Migrationsgeschichten—Porträts in Deutschland lebender Jüdinnen*Juden," 2018, <https://www.jmberlin.de/jmb-journal-18-objekttage>. "More Space for the Jewish Present," <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/permanent-exhibition> (last accessed 19 Feb. 2020).

Survivance therefore plays a central role not only for Indigenous museums but also in the JMB's self-understanding.

EPISTEMOLOGIES OF ORIGINS

Both the old and new core exhibitions in the JMB are committed to representing the rich history of Jewish life in Germany while competing with Libeskind's architecture and the knowledge the visitors bring with them. In the old core exhibition, the curators and designers felt the need to create what I call a willing forgetfulness. One way of thinking about it is a spatial and curatorial response to the challenge of backshadowing, which is "a kind of retroactive foreshadowing in which the shared knowledge of the outcome of a series of events by narrator and listener is used to judge the participants in those events *as though they too should have known what was to come*."³⁵ In other words, the curatorial challenge was to present the history of Jews in Germany without letting the narrative be framed by the Holocaust.

The old core exhibition begins with bright and inviting colors and an activity in which the visitor is encouraged to write a wish on a pomegranate-shaped piece of paper and hang it on a tree at the center of the room. This tactile activity combines two unrelated Jewish symbols: that of writing one's wishes on *zettel*, most famously nowadays by placing such a note among the stones of the Western Wall in Jerusalem, along with the pomegranate, a fruit of symbolic importance in the Jewish tradition.³⁶ The main purpose of this tree, much beloved by visitors, is to encourage one to forget the building's concrete walls and the emotional effect of the axes of Exile and the Holocaust by offering a fun, hopeful activity.

Next to the tree is a short film and a decorative design element presenting goods that merchants during the Roman period would presumably sell. This underscores the idea that Jews reached the German territories as merchants along with the Roman army. Though reasonable historically, this exhibit subtly inserts two central ideas: first, that Jews came to Germany from somewhere else. Second, a connection is implied between Jews and commerce.³⁷ The twin motifs

³⁵ Michael André Bernstein, *Foregone Conclusions: Against Apocalyptic History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 16, his emphasis.

³⁶ The pomegranate (*rimon*) is considered in the Hebrew Bible to be one of the "seven species" that symbolize the good and bountiful nature of the land (Deut. 8:7–8). It is a tradition to eat a pomegranate on the eve of the Jewish New Year and wish that one's merits would be as plentiful as the pomegranate's seeds. Because of its crown-shaped top, it has been traditional to decorate the Torah scroll in with pomegranate-shaped finials, which are nowadays still referred to as *rimonim*. See David Stern, *The Jewish Bible: A Material History* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017), 51–52.

³⁷ A recent successful exhibition on the subject was "Jews, Money, Myth" at the Jewish Museum London (Mar.-Oct. 2019). See Joanne Rosenthal and Marc Volovici, eds., *Jews, Money, Myth* (London: Jewish Museum London, 2019).

of foreignness and commerce are then present throughout the exhibition, for example in the discussion of Jews in the Weimar Republic, which highlights Jewish success stories alongside the immigration of Jews from Eastern Europe (*Ostjuden*).

In its focus on the migration of Jews, the JMB is following a strand in Jewish historiography, exemplified in Michael Brenner's *A Short History of the Jews*. As Brenner explains in his introduction, "the golden thread that runs throughout this book is migration." Accordingly, each chapter's title is constructed with the structure "From X to Y," for example, "From Ur to Canaan," "From Posen to New Orleans," et cetera.³⁸ Such an approach allows the historian to highlight the complexity and diversity of Jewish experience. The question remains, however, as to the consequence of adopting this historiography in a Jewish museum.³⁹ Michael Steinberg argues that the old core exhibition reproduces a national narrative that essentializes Jews as separate from Germans.⁴⁰ The curators have since sought to address this critique by adding a section on "Jews and Germans at the same time." In it, one could see various Jewish modes for shaping and participating in the emerging Germany of the nineteenth century, from patriotism and Zionism to communism and conversion. I suggest, however, that Steinberg's critique could be extended to the very beginning of the exhibition.

The question about Jewish origins in a Jewish museum is not merely historical and objective, it is existential, that is, about what it means to live as a Jew. If a museum presents Jewish history as based on wandering and migration, it risks describing the Jew either as a foreigner belonging elsewhere—the Promised Land, Canaan, Israel, Palestine—or as a wanderer with no home. The latter idea corresponds to the figure of the Wandering Jew, a medieval legend about a Jew who did not help Jesus carry the cross and was therefore condemned to wander the world eternally until the Second Coming.⁴¹ By describing the Jews as a migrant, the JMB inadvertently reflects a Christian-European assumption

³⁸ Brenner, *A Short History of the Jews* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012), vii–ix. See also David N. Myers, *Jewish History: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), xxiii.

³⁹ Because of the way the narrative of the JMB is framed, I prefer the term "migrant" rather than "diasporic." In recent years, scholars have stressed the creative power of diaspora, which can be read as an alternative to Jewish statehood. On the classical interpretation of diaspora as exile and punishment, and an attempt to move from it, see Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 21; Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin, *Powers of Diaspora: Two Essays on the Relevance of Jewish Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002); Daniel Boyarin, *A Traveling Homeland: The Babylonian Talmud as Diaspora* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015).

⁴⁰ Steinberg, *Judaism Musical and Unmusical*, 180, 184.

⁴¹ Galit Hasan-Rokem and Alan Dundes, eds., *The Wandering Jew: Essays in the Interpretation of a Christian Legend* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986); Richard Cohen, "The 'Wandering Jew' from Medieval Legend to Modern Metaphor," in Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Jonathan Karp, eds., *The Art of Being Jewish in Modern Times* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press,

about Jews and their lack of connection to this soil, even as it tries to present their establishment as good Germans. It thereby partakes not only in a national categorization but also in a Christian discourse of Jewish difference.

Recent scholarship shows the extent to which the term “Jew” is itself already a Christianizing gesture. As Cynthia Baker argues, “Jew” is not a term commonly found in texts that we tend to define today as Jewish. In the Hebrew Bible, the people are usually called Hebrews or Israelites. Even when the word *Yehudi*—as in the books of Esther, Ezra, and Nehemiah—appears, it is better translated into English as Judean and not as Jew. Similarly, the Talmud and many rabbinic sources refer to the people of Israel and the Torah, and not to Jews or Judaism. This is true also of texts from other times and in various languages until modernity, with the exception Yiddish, a Jewish language in which the term *yid* was adopted to refer to oneself.⁴²

Jews and Judaism, in short, are not self-designations throughout most of what we commonly refer to as Jewish history. Rather, “to Judaize,” to act like a Judean or a Jew, emerges in Christian polemics as an accusation reflecting anything from dishonesty to incorrect interpretation of scripture. Judaizing is in this sense often an inner-Christian polemical term. It is present already in the New Testament and the Church Fathers, yet as David Nirenberg shows—drawing on various examples from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice* to Marx on the Jewish Question—this mindset of thinking about Judaizing continues throughout the modern period.⁴³ One striking example should suffice. Among its definitions for the term “Jew,” the 1933 edition of the *Oxford Dictionary* lists it as a transitive verb meaning “to cheat or overreach” and as “a name of opprobrium: spec. applied to a grasping or extortionate person (*whether Jewish or not*) who drives hard bargains.”⁴⁴ The Jew, as a verb and a noun, is therefore not necessarily defined in relation to real, living people who self-identify as Jews. Nor is it likely that self-identifying Jews would recognize themselves in the above definition.

The Christian gaze treats the Jew as its Other that it attempts to subsume and supersede.⁴⁵ We have reached an impasse: to speak about the origin of the Jew is already to speak in Christian tongues. How should a Jewish museum represent the history of Jews and Judaism given the seeming paradox that to do so is

2008), 147–75. On its appropriation, see Galit Hasan-Rokem, “Jews as Postcards, or Postcards as Jews: Mobility in a Modern Genre,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 99, 4 (2009): 505–46.

⁴² Cynthia Baker, *Jew* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2017).

⁴³ David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013). “Judaism” is in this sense already anti-Judaism; see Daniel Boyarin, *Judaism: The Genealogy of a Modern Notion* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2019), 106, 129.

⁴⁴ “Jew,” *Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1933), my emphasis.

⁴⁵ Susannah Heschel, “Revolt of the Colonized: Abraham Geiger’s Wissenschaft des Judentums as a Challenge to Christian Hegemony in the Academy,” *New German Critique* 77 (1999): 61–85; Susannah Heschel, *Abraham Geiger and the Jewish Jesus* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

already to participate in Christianizing discourse? One option is to claim appropriation and ownership of the categories. Since the museum is a modern institution, and since Jews in modern times coopted the term Jew as a self-designation to such an extent that most people no longer think about its origins, the problem could be considered solved. Treating “Jew” as an unproblematic category has the advantage of working with the visitors’ expectations, but it does not provoke them to think anew about the basic presupposition they bring with them to the museum. Appropriation only sidesteps the problem without addressing it.

New museum theory paves a different path for exhibitions in Jewish museums. Drawing on Michel Foucault’s work, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill argues that the emergence of the museum as an institution striving for objectivity is part and parcel of the rise of Western modern epistemology.⁴⁶ In contrast to this epistemology, new museum theory stresses an emic perspective that leads to a radical reconceptualization of the museum. This is true of the presentation of objects as well as their conservation. Broadly speaking, two major differences in the treatment of Indigenous artefacts can be noted in light of these considerations: First, by placing them as objects behind a glass case, a preference is given in Western museums to seeing over tactile and other sensory modes by which the source community experienced the objects.⁴⁷ Second, museum pieces, as Cara Krmpotich shows in her research on the Haida nation, are not objects in the narrow sense of the word. Rather, they create kinship and memory and are part of the family while constituting a lineage through the process of engaging the ancestors. Put differently, what have hereto been treated as inanimate objects to be placed behind glass are, according to some Indigenous epistemologies, family members, kin that must be treated with appropriate protocols.⁴⁸

The Torah scroll offers a fascinating Jewish parallel to what might be called the spiritual lives of objects. While it is not considered a relative, the discourse surrounding the Torah scroll is anthropomorphic. It is being dressed and undressed, danced with, kissed, and even buried after it is no longer usable for

⁴⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (New York: Random House, 1994); Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge* (New York: Routledge, 1992), esp. 9–18; cf. Janet Marstine, “Introduction,” in Janet Marstine, ed., *New Museum Theory and Practice* (Malden: Blackwell, 2006), 21–25. On the emergence of the museum alongside the nation-state, see Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (New York: Routledge, 1995).

⁴⁷ Svetlana Alpers, “The Museum as a Way of Seeing,” in Ivan Karp and Steven Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1991), 25–32; Constance Classen and David Howes, “The Museum as Sensescape: Western Sensibilities and Indigenous Artifacts,” in Elizabeth Edwards, Chris Gosden, and Ruth Phillips, eds., *Sensible Objects: Colonialism, Museums and Material Culture* (London: Taylor & Francis, 2006), 199–222.

⁴⁸ Cara Krmpotich, “Remembering and Repatriation: The Production of Kinship, Memory and Respect,” *Journal of Material Culture* 15, 2 (2010): 157–79; see also Peers and Brown, “Introduction,” 4–8.

religious purposes.⁴⁹ The question of if, and how, to present this object in a museum is therefore of paramount importance from a Jewish perspective. Oren Baruch Stier documents the discussions surrounding the presentation of damaged Torah scrolls in the USHMM and notes how the curators negotiated between the museum as an American secular institution and a space that wants to be respectful to the Jewish tradition.⁵⁰ In the JMB, Michal Friedlander, Curator of Judaica and Applied Arts, consults rabbis regarding the preservation of sacred objects such as Torah scrolls.

An Indigenous epistemology offers not only a different relation to objects but also a different historiography. Waziyatawin Angela Wilson explicates in *Remember This!*, a historiography that gives primacy to oral traditions, which for Indigenous communities often serve a more central role than written accounts. This preference is evident also in the insistence on titles in the Dakota language, thereby provincializing English and relegating it to a secondary place.⁵¹ Indigenous museal praxis takes a similar approach. At the NMAI, the permanent exhibition “Our Universes: Traditional Knowledge Shapes Our World” presents eight Native American cosmologies and cosmogonies on their own terms. It is structured around the solar year, thereby creating a sense of unity while maintaining the diversity of the communities.⁵² The individual galleries in “Our Universes” vary in terms of substance and presentation, which might lead to some confusion. At the same time, the innovative aspect of letting the community take an active part in the curation should not be underestimated.⁵³ On the whole, “Our Universes” expresses rhetorical sovereignty both in terms of incorporating community members in the deliberations and in the presentation of the narrative from an emic perspective.

Storytelling in Jewish museums can take heed from such an approach; Jewish museums could start with the stories Jews tell about themselves. The question,

⁴⁹ Virginia Greene, “Accessories of Holiness: Defining Jewish Sacred Objects,” *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation* 31, 1 (1992): 31–39.

⁵⁰ Oren Baruch Stier, “Torah and Taboo: Containing Jewish Relics and Jewish Identity at the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum,” *Numen* 57, 3/4 (2010): 513–21.

⁵¹ Waziyatawin Angela Wilson, *Remember This! Dakota Decolonization and the Eli Taylor Narratives* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 18. There are similarities between this position and the one taken in Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008).

⁵² In this it successfully avoids the challenge of purporting to present a pan-Indian identity in a way that glosses over differences. See Allison Arieff, “A Different Sort of (P)Reservation: Some Thoughts on the National Museum of the American Indian,” *Museum Anthropology* 19, 2 (1995): 78–90.

⁵³ Judith Ostrowitz, “Concourse and Periphery: Planning the National Museum of the American Indian,” in Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb, eds., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 114–15; Aldona Jonaitis and Janet Catherine Berlo, “‘Indian Country’ on the National Mall: The Mainstream Press versus the National Museum of the American Indian,” in Amy Lonetree and Amanda J. Cobb, eds., *The National Museum of the American Indian: Critical Conversations* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2008), 222.

as with the NMAI, arises as to what kind of Jewish story is being told, that is to say from which perspective. The variety of Jewish experience dictates different origin stories. One shared story that resembles the Indigenous mode described above is to follow cosmogonic stories. The JMB's temporary exhibition *A wie jüdisch* (A is for Jewish) (November 2018–September 2019) is one such example. It was structured around the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew Alphabet, with each letter representing a different theme. For the first letter, Aleph, a video-clip of the Israeli singer Victoria Hanna is presented in which she sings parts of the text of *Sefer Yezira* (The Book of Creation). A work traditionally attributed to Abraham the Patriarch, but whose exact composition date is contested, *Sefer Yezira* treats the Hebrew letters as having mystical power. They are the building blocks with which the world was created.⁵⁴ A woman would not have had access to this text in the society in which it was produced (as would have been the case for most men). The fact that a woman sings this creation story, in a highly stylized video, makes this an artistic presentation of an emic point of view in a highly contemporary fashion.

A wie jüdisch was a small temporary exhibition, a genre that often allows curators more freedom to experiment.⁵⁵ In POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews, which opened in 2014 on the former site of the Warsaw Ghetto, a Jewish perspective is adopted throughout, including the use of languages which Jews spoke and wrote at the time.⁵⁶ At the start of the exhibition, the origin of Jews in Poland is presented in an installation using a forest-like aesthetic (figure 5). The story in this installation is the best-known founding myth of Polish Jewry, as told by Shmuel Yosef Agnon. After disasters and persecutions forced them to constantly be on the road, Israel received a heavenly guidance to go to and stay in Poland, whose name in Hebrew, *Polin*, is etiological explained in the legend as *po-lin*, “here pass the night.”⁵⁷

This exhibit has many noteworthy aspects: First, it refers to Israel—the emic term usually used—and not Jews or Jewish people. Second, it combines the wandering as well as the settling down as a divine decree, avoiding claims of endless wandering and lack of belonging. Third, by beginning with an emic narrative the visitor is already framed to the museum's mode of storytelling, namely the use of Jewish voices throughout the historical presentation. Finally, the presentation at the entrance to the exhibition is made through a multimedia

⁵⁴ Scholars date it as early as the Second Temple period and as late as the ninth century CE. See Joseph Dan, *Kabbalah: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 15–18.

⁵⁵ Marstine, “Introduction,” 26.

⁵⁶ Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, “Theater of History,” in Dominika Gajewska, Antony Polonsky, and Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, eds., *Polin: 1000 Year History of Polish Jews* (Warsaw: Museum of the History of the Polish Jews, 2014), 9–35.

⁵⁷ Haya Bar-Itzhak, *Jewish Poland—Legends of Origin: Ethnopoetics and Legendary Chronicles* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2001), esp. 33–38. On this exhibit, see Klassen, “Narrating Religion,” 349–50.

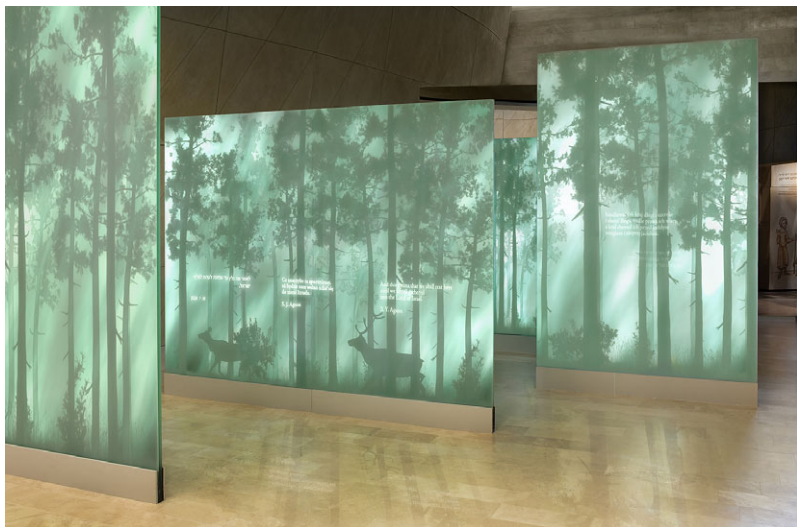


FIGURE 5. POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews. Photo: D. Golik.

installation combining the text of the story alongside sounds and screens that mimic a Polish forest, a classical Polish *Heimat* trope. Jews, it argues from the start, are part and parcel of Poland. POLIN shows an insistence on the Jewish perspective of events while making a consistent case for Jewish place as integral to Polish culture. This ability to offer an emic perspective of origins, chronology, and the meaning of objects is an expression of rhetorical sovereignty. Such an approach is still emerging in Jewish museums, but as suggested above it is present in Indigenous historiography and museal praxis.

THE JEWISH IN THE JEWISH MUSEUM

The epistemic sovereignty to tell one's story from an emic perspective is grounded in the idea that museums that present the life and history of a certain people should give members of that source community a voice in how they are represented. Although this might sound obvious today, the inclusion of no less than twenty-four Native American communities in the NMAI was a major breakthrough.⁵⁸ Yet the question of who is invited to participate, and how the relation between different communities is presented, is not solved by that. The museum, any museum, will always have a limited exhibition space and competing demands.

⁵⁸ Lonetree, *Decolonizing Museums*, 92.

It cannot please everybody. The act of curation is about making these decisions, and this also involves the preliminary decision about which communities participate in the process.⁵⁹

The JMB provides an enlightening case study in this regard. A simmering conflict with the Zentralrat, which as mentioned earlier does not have much influence on the JMB's activities but officially represents the Jewish communities in Germany, came to a boil in 2019. At the center of this contestation stood the museum's director, Peter Schäfer, who declared upon his inauguration as the director in 2014 that "the Jewish Museum should become more Jewish."⁶⁰ Five years later, Schäfer resigned amidst several incidents surrounding the museum. A world-renowned scholar of Jewish Studies, Schäfer succeeded Michael Blumenthal, the founding director of the museum who served in that role for many years.⁶¹ Unlike Blumenthal, Schäfer is not Jewish.⁶² This point was raised shortly after he took the position. The very first question in a *Berliner Zeitung* interview is exemplary: "Mr. Schäfer, you, the German *goy*, i.e. non-Jew, are supposed to make the Jewish Museum more Jewish. How should one imagine that?"⁶³ The fact that Schäfer is not Jewish is presented prominently at the very beginning, using the Hebrew term *goy* as a signifier even though neither the newspaper, nor the vast majority of its readers, are Jewish.

The *Berliner Zeitung's* question sets the scene for acts that follow, particularly in the years 2017–2019. The first major controversy during Schäfer's tenure was centered around the exhibition "Welcome to Jerusalem" (December 2017–May 2019), which was the main attraction at the JMB during a transition period between the old core exhibition and the new one. It began with a film covering twenty-four hours in the life of the city, before moving to a room with multiple maps (originals, reproductions, and a multimedia table) of Jerusalem, thereby alluding to two of the main messages of the exhibition: First, Jerusalem is not only a physical space, but also an imaginary laden with theological and historical meanings. Second, to understand this city, one map is not enough. One needs to adopt a comparative, cross-cultural, and interreligious perspective.

⁵⁹ George MacDonald, "Change and Challenge: Museums in the Information Society," in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Levine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1992), 177–79.

⁶⁰ Kerstin Krupp, "Interview mit Peter Schäfer: Weg mit den Klischees," *Berliner Zeitung*, 4 Sept. 2014.

⁶¹ On Schäfer, see the reflections on his work in Ra'anana S. Boustan et al., eds., *Envisioning Judaism*, 2 vols. (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013).

⁶² See Blumenthal's autobiography, *From Exile to Washington: A Memoir of Leadership in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Overlook Press, 2015).

⁶³ Krupp, "Interview mit Peter Schäfer." The emphasis on the fact that Schäfer is not a Jew was also played by his critics, most notably Benjamin Weinthal. See Shaul Magid, "Why Peter Schäfer's Resignation as Director of the Jewish Museum in Berlin Matters," *Tikkun*, 18 June 2019, <https://www.tikkun.org/why-peter-schafers-resignation-as-director-of-the-jewish-museum-in-berlin-matters> (last accessed 11 May 2021).

This was not something new. The JMB has regularly presented temporary exhibitions that took an interreligious approach. These included for example the exhibition “Chrimukkah: Stories of Christmas and Hanukkah” (October 2005–January 2006), an exhibition on circumcision (October 2014–March 2015), and one on head-covering (March–July 2017).⁶⁴

The most politically controversial room in the exhibition is titled “Conflict.” It offers a film documenting conflicts about the city while showing it as a shared space. As Melissa Eddy and Isabel Kershner noted, most of its footage came from Israeli sources.⁶⁵ This did not matter to some critics, who saw in the comparative approach and presentation of conflict an undermining of the Israeli claim on Jerusalem. Eldad Beck said that the exhibition “minimizes the Jewish history of the city and highlights the ‘violent’ attempts of Israel to take control over it.” For him, this was but one example of what he perceived as an anti-Israeli bias at the museum, which he called “The Jewish anti-Israeli Museum Berlin.”⁶⁶

In addition to Beck’s critique of the JMB, there was a seven-page anonymous working paper calling the German government not to support institutions that engage in anti-Israeli activities.⁶⁷ The JMB was listed among these institutions and criticized for two things: First, the Jerusalem exhibition was mentioned as an instance in which the museum represents “mostly the Palestinian-Muslim perspective.”⁶⁸ Second, the JMB’s *Akademie* program, responsible for community events and promoting Muslim-Jewish understanding, was described as anti-Israeli because it allegedly invited supporters of the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) movement.⁶⁹ This movement calls for international pressure on

⁶⁴ Yaniv Feller, “Oy Tannenbaum, Oy Tannenbaum! The Role of a Christmas Tree in a Jewish Museum,” in Pamela Klassen and Monique Scheer, eds., *The Public Work of Christmas: Difference and Belonging in Multicultural Societies* (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2019), 144–45.

⁶⁵ Melissa Eddy and Isabel Kershner, “Jerusalem Criticizes Berlin’s Jewish Museum for ‘Anti-Israel Activity,’” *New York Times*, 23 Dec. 2018, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/23/arts/design/berlin-jewish-museum-israel-bds-welcome-to-jerusalem.html>.

⁶⁶ Eldad Beck, “Ha-Museum Ha-Yehudi Ha-Anti-Israeli Be-Berlin (The Jewish Anti-Israeli Museum in Berlin),” *Israel Hayom*, 12 Sept. 2018, <https://www.israelhayom.co.il/opinion/586213> (last accessed 11 May 2021). Claims that the museum is “anti-Jewish” predate Schäfer’s tenure. See Magid, “Why Peter Schäfer’s Resignation.”

⁶⁷ According to Jannis Hagmann, the working paper could have been authored by the Israeli right-wing organization NGO Monitor, which “works in close coordination and cooperation with the Israeli government.” NGO Monitor and the Israeli Ministry for Strategic Affairs both denied involvement. See Jannis Hagmann, “Schwere Vorwürfe aus Israel,” *Die Tageszeitung*, 5 Dec. 2018, <https://taz.de/Schreiben-liegt-der-taz-exklusiv-vor!/5553564/>. On the targeting of non-Jewish institutions and scholars in Germany, see Itay Mashiach, “In Germany, a Witch Hunt Is Raging against Critics of Israel: Cultural Leaders Have Had Enough,” *Haaretz.Com*, 10 Dec. 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.highlight.magazine-in-germany-a-witch-hunt-rages-against-israel-critics-many-have-had-enough-1.9362662>.

⁶⁸ Jannis Hagmann, “Schwere Vorwürfe.”

⁶⁹ Thomas Thiel, “Der Kurswechsel wird zum Kraftakt,” *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 17 Dec. 2019, <https://www.faz.net/1.6538869> (accessed 9 Feb. 2020); cf. “Stellungnahme des jüdisch-muslimischen Gesprächskreises zu den Angriffen auf Dr. Yasemin Shooman und die Arbeit

the State of Israel through divestment from Israeli companies and refusing academic and cultural cooperation with Israeli institutions. Based on the organization's own statement, it "works to end international support for Israel's oppression of Palestinians and pressure Israel to comply with international law." Critics of the BDS movement claim it does not clarify whether or not the State of Israel has the right to exist not only as a democratic state but also as a Jewish state (many Jewish Israelis see in those two adjectives—Jewish and democratic—the two pillars of the state).⁷⁰ In March 2019, another short-lived controversy erupted when Schäfer hosted Seyed Ali Moujani, the cultural attaché of the Iranian embassy in Berlin. Although the reason for the visit was a potential cooperation in an exhibition on Iranian Jews, some saw it as naïve at best, legitimizing a regime that is hostile to the State of Israel and that at times engaged in Holocaust denial.⁷¹

The straw that broke the camel's back, however, was a tweet. Members of the German parliament promoted a resolution in May 2019 that equated the BDS movement with antisemitism, thereby preventing it from receiving financial or administrative (e.g., spaces for public programs) governmental assistance. In response, a group of more than two hundred Jewish and Israeli academics signed a petition protesting the proposed resolution. They argued that it does not fight antisemitism but instead silences an important public debate about the Israeli occupation. On 6 June 2019, the JMB's official twitter account re-tweeted a sympathetic article on the petition from the left-leaning newspaper TAZ along with the hashtag #mustread.⁷² A sweeping backlash followed and the museum, and Schäfer as its head, were once again criticized for being anti-Israeli. Most damning were the comments from the head of the Zentralrat, Josef Schuster: "Enough is enough," he said, "the Jewish Museum Berlin seems to be completely out of control. Under these conditions, one has to wonder whether the term 'Jewish' is still appropriate." The resulting controversy was covered in all major German media outlets. Several days later, Schäfer resigned, citing the need to "prevent any further damage to the museum."⁷³ Schuster welcomed the

der Akademie-Programme in der FAZ vom 17.12.2019," Jüdisches Museum Berlin, <https://www.jmberlin.de/stellungnahme-vom-10-februar-2020> (accessed 12 Feb. 2020).

⁷⁰ See the BDS's website: <https://bdsmovement.net/> (last accessed 1 Apr. 2020); cf. Andrew Pessin and Doron Ben-Atar, eds., *Anti-Zionism on Campus: The University, Free Speech, and BDS* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2018).

⁷¹ Michael Wuliger, "Besuch von den Mullahs: Warum sich das Jüdische Museum Berlin genauer anschauen sollte, wen es einlädt," *Jüdische Allgemeine Zeitung*, 19 Mar. 2019, <https://www.juedische-allgemeine.de/meinung/besuch-von-den-mullahs/> (accessed 9 Feb. 2020).

⁷² jmberlin, "#mustread Der Beschluss der Parlamentarier hilft im Kampf gegen Antisemitismus nicht weiter," 6 June 2019, <https://twitter.com/jmberlin/status/1136633875411755010>; Jannis Hagmann, "Bundestagsbeschluss zu Israel-Boykott: 240 Akademiker gegen BDS-Votum," *Die Tageszeitung*, 5 June 2019, <https://taz.de/!5601030/>.

⁷³ Melissa Eddy, "Director of Berlin's Jewish Museum Quits after Spat over B.D.S.," *New York Times*, 14 June 2019, sec. World, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/14/world/europe/berlin-jewish-museum-director-quits-bds.html>.

resignation, calling it “an important step.” He added that while it is not necessary for the next director to be Jewish, “it would definitely not be bad, when in the future there is Jewish leadership. The Jewish [*das Jüdische*] needs to have more influence.”⁷⁴

What is “the Jewish” of which Schuster speaks, and which Schäfer mentioned in his inaugural comments about making the JMB “more Jewish”? Oren Baruch Stier identifies four ways to think about Jewish identity today: First, as a biological datum, which he calls the “Jewishness of antisemitism” that is defined from the outside; second, there is the cultural definition, as a “broad region of tastes and allegiances,” including love of Klezmer music, the Jewish cuisine, and interest in Jewish languages such as Yiddish and Ladino; third, national Jewish identity is connected today to the State of Israel, for example, by making references to national symbols and events; and finally, religious Jewish identity is concerned with the Jewish calendar, rituals, and framework of life as it developed among others in Jewish religious law (*halakha*).⁷⁵ With this fourfold definition in mind, it is possible to parse out the meaning of “the Jewish” for Schuster and Schäfer. Despite the qualifier in Schuster’s answer, it is evident that Schäfer’s status as a non-Jew is utilized to discredit his activities as the director of the JMB. Schuster’s claim does not map into Stier’s biological category, as it is not a denigration of a Jew based on their Jewishness qua ethnicity or race. Nonetheless, it functions according to a similar logic in that it implicitly accepts some distinguishing Jewish essence which Schäfer is presumably lacking. The question is not whether this is biological in the narrow sense, but whether it can be acquired and under what conditions is that possible. Schuster does not provide a clear answer to this question, leaving it ambiguous.

Schäfer’s successor is off to a better start with the Zentralrat. On 1 April 2020, Hetty Berg, the highly regarded former chief curator of the Jewish Cultural Quarter in Amsterdam, took the helm at the JMB. She clearly tries to avoid the minefield that caused the downfall of her predecessor and says that the focus of the museum will not be “on what is happening in the Middle East and Israel.” At the same breath, however, she adds that she rejects the BDS, which she understands as a boycott not only of the State of Israel but also of “all the Israeli artists and academics.”⁷⁶ The point here is not whether Berg is correct in her interpretation of the BDS, but rather that her position aligns with that of the Zentralrat. Following Berg’s appointment, Schuster said that he is confident that she will summon “empathy for the Jewish community in Germany and Israel.”⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Stefan Reinecke, “Nach Kritik am Jüdischen Museum Berlin: Das Vertrauen vespielt,” *Die Tageszeitung*, 15 June 2019, sec. Gesellschaft, <https://taz.de/!5603080/>.

⁷⁵ Stier, “Torah and Taboo,” 512–13.

⁷⁶ Baur, “‘We Are Here.’”

⁷⁷ Deutsche Welle, “Jewish Museum Berlin Appoints Hetty Berg as New Director,” DW.COM, 27 Nov. 2019, <https://www.dw.com/en/jewish-museum-berlin-appoints-hetty-berg-as-new-director/a-51437947>.

The language of this statement singles out Germany and Israel, thereby expressing once more the Zentralrat's view that Jewishness is tied to a national definition. The clear focus on the national component of Jewishness—perhaps with some implicit variant of the biological aspect—makes Schuster and the Zentralrat's definition of being Jewish in Germany inherently tied to support for the State of Israel.

What about “the Jewish” in Schäfer's call to make the “Jewish museum more Jewish”? Schäfer is an expert on the Jewish religious tradition and so this statement could be understood as a question of how to integrate more insider perspectives, in particular what Stier identified as religious identity. In the years 2015–2017, I worked as a curator in the team of the new permanent exhibition at the JMB. I can testify that this statement served as an orienting idea in our weekly meetings and was understood that way. This is not to say that Jewish for Schäfer or the exhibition team is only about religion. Yet it is an insistence to have an exhibition that encompasses all aspects of Jewishness, with the special emphasis for the religious element given because it was felt to be insufficient in the old core exhibition.

In response to Schäfer's resignation, hundreds of Jewish Studies scholars signed petitions supporting him. One petition—organized by Ishay Rosen-Zvi and Moulie Vidas—bore the signatures of over fifty scholars of Talmud and Ancient Judaism. The other, by Susannah Heschel, Shaul Magid, and Annette Yoshiko Reed, was signed by more than 320 Jewish Studies scholars within two days. I myself signed the latter, as a scholar of Jewish Studies, having left the JMB in 2017. That petition protested the “false accusations” against Schäfer by adopting a twofold move. First, the authors recognized the national component but refuted the allegation that Schäfer harbors anti-Israeli sentiments, noting that he “worked tirelessly to promote a better understanding of Zionism and the importance of the State of Israel,” where he is “deeply admired and respected.” Second, the authors cited Gershom Scholem's quip, “You don't have to be an elephant to teach zoology,” immediately making the analogy clear: “Nor do you have to be a Jew to teach Jewish history.”⁷⁸ That Schäfer is not a Jew, in other words, is irrelevant since he is a respected scholar of Judaism.

This can be seen as a challenge to the idea of rhetorical sovereignty. The question to a signee of this petition is as follows: If we agree that Indigenous peoples deserve rhetorical sovereignty, should not the same argument be applied

⁷⁸ Susannah Heschel, Shaul Magid, and Annette Yoshiko Reed, “Jewish Studies Scholars in Support of Prof. Peter Schäfer,” Google Docs, https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLScgaXEg1lNQICm7CromHUXLW1iJ_8TbMqHmKvrrZNIKHP2lzQ/viewform?ts=5d077b9d&edit_requested=true&fbclid=IwAR2RI4XJn_p4tmuakM51WjbyrSaXJPgI3wQCfMf2diHM-7DSYgUZI-B9v50&usp=embed_facebook (accessed 9 Feb. 2020). See also Liane Feldman and Candida Moss, “Was the Director of Berlin's Jewish Museum Really Pro-BDS?” *Daily Beast*, 23 June 2019, sec. World, <https://www.thedailybeast.com/outrage-as-peter-schafer-director-of-berlins-jewish-museum-accused-of-bds-sympathies>.

to the JMB? Even more poignantly: Would we find it appropriate if a non-Native American expert be appointed as a successor to the NMAI's Kevin Gover, who is a citizen of the Pawnee Tribe of Oklahoma? Seen in this light, the Zentralrat has a case for its voice to be heard, that is, for its exercise of rhetorical sovereignty, but its arguments and assumptions made its position untenable. First, if scholars of Jewish Studies, many of whom are Jewish, recognize Schäfer's stature as a scholar in the field, one could argue that he speaks with a certain kind of rhetorical sovereignty, whether he is Jewish or not. Second, the problem is not that the Zentralrat claims to represent Jews in Germany, which officially it does, but that it presents itself *de facto* in such discussions as the only representative.⁷⁹ Finally, the position the Zentralrat takes, namely the conflation between Jewishness and support for the State of Israel, narrows the definition of what it means to be a Jew. This excludes Jews in Germany, Israeli and non-Israeli alike, who are highly critical of Israel and support BDS. The Zentralrat's position implicitly delegitimizes them *qua* Jews.

CONCLUSION: THE POSTMUSEUM AND THE COMMUNITY

The analysis of the Jewish Museum Berlin shows the tension in the idea of rhetorical sovereignty. On the one hand, the comparison with Indigenous museums shows how a Jewish museum might adopt an emic perspective through the telling of origin stories. This would provide, as in the case of *A wie jüdisch* at the JMB and the permanent exhibition in POLIN, rhetorical sovereignty by redefining the terms of the exhibition beyond Western epistemology. On the other hand, the pressure exerted by the Zentralrat during the Schäfer affair shows that the claim for a source community status can have deleterious effects. It was an assertion of rhetorical sovereignty that was based on a narrow definition of Jewishness and the equation of Jewishness with support for the State of Israel. In that, this claim for rhetorical sovereignty misrepresents the complexities of Jewish identity, in Germany and worldwide.

Where one community claims a status as a source community, other voices, such as Jewish opposition to the occupation and Israeli policies, are at risk of being silenced.⁸⁰ Talking about source communities, in the plural, might be helpful in cases in which they are self-identifying and demarcated, such as in the case of the various Native American communities that came together at the NMAI. None of them, however, drew on a narrow definition of what it means to be Native American, nor have they made a claim to the status of *the* source

⁷⁹ On competing narratives within the same community as a challenge to museums, see Steven Lavine, "Audience, Ownership, and Authority: Designing Relations between Museums and Communities," in Ivan Karp, Christine Mullen Kreamer, and Steven Levine, eds., *Museums and Communities: The Politics of Public Culture* (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Books, 1992), 145.

⁸⁰ Singh, *Museums, Heritage, Culture*, 58–60, 72–74.

community, as the Zentralrat did with regard to Jewishness in contemporary Germany. I want to conclude this article by offering a theoretical pathway beyond this problem. Instead of thinking about the museum as a site in which various actors (source communities, curators, politicians, etc.) make claims for representation, we can conceive museums as playing a part in constituting a community in the first place.

Hooper-Greenhill uses the term “postmuseum” to reflect on an ideal type of museum, which shares power with the community, engages the visitors on multiple levels, and facilitates difficult conversations through discussions, debates, and touring exhibitions. The physical space and presentation of objects, in other words, are an important part of the postmuseum, but the institution is greater than them.⁸¹ Such an approach plays a role in recent debates on the definition of the museum. In its 2019 gathering in Kyoto, the executive committee of the International Councils of Museums (ICOM)—the largest professional association of its kind—proposed a broad definition of museums as “democratising, inclusive and polyphonic spaces for critical dialogue about the pasts and the future” whose role is to address “the conflicts and challenges of the present.” The definition recognized the classical tasks of collecting, preserving, and exhibiting but stressed that these should be done “in active partnership with and for diverse communities” in order “to contribute to human dignity and social justice, global equality and planetary wellbeing.”⁸² As of January 2021, the intense debates about this definition have not been concluded and it has not been adopted officially.

Read in light of the new definition of the museum, exhibitions such as “Welcome to Jerusalem” and events promoting multiple perspectives about Jewishness should be seen as a sign of the strength of the JMB as a museum.⁸³ This involves not only questions of antisemitism or the celebration of contemporary Jewish life in Germany, but also challenging visitors, through exhibitions and public programming alike, to rethink their position about the relation between Judaism, Jewishness, and the State of Israel. Pro-Israeli, anti-Israeli, and those who do not care about the topic of Israel; religious observant and non-

⁸¹ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*; see also Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett’s comments in Melissa Eddy, “What and Whom Are Jewish Museums For?” *New York Times*, 9 July 2019, sec. Arts, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/09/arts/design/jewish-museums-germany-berlin-europe.html>.

⁸² “Museum Definition,” ICOM, <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/> (accessed 12 Apr. 2020). Thomas Thiemeyer argues this definition is more accurately characterized as a vision, in “What Kinds of Museums for What Kinds of Societies?” *ICOFOM Study Series* 48, 2 (2020): 225–34.

⁸³ Léontine Meijer-van Mensch, “Opening Keynote Discussion” (Museums, Religion, and the Work of Reconciliation and Remembrance, Berlin, 2019), <https://www.jmberlin.de/en/discussion-program-museums-and-religion-between-commemoration-and-reparation> (last accessed 11 May 2021). Meijer van-Mensch is a member of ICOM’s board and served as the JMB’s program director from 2017–2019.

observant; descendants of German Jewry, immigrants from the former Soviet Union, and Mizrahi Jews; members of the Zentralrat, and unaffiliated Israeli students—these and more can all be considered as stakeholders, embracing different definitions of what it means to be a Jew in the twenty-first century while also having their preconceived notions challenged by the museum. Not shying away from controversy, but rather embracing it, a Jewish museum can thus serve as a site for the construction of multiple, negotiable, Jewish identities.

Abstract: Are museums places about a community or for the community? This article addresses this question by bringing into conversation Jewish museums and Indigenous museum theory, with special attention paid to two major institutions: the Jewish Museum Berlin and the National Museum of the American Indian. The JMB's exhibitions and the controversies surrounding them, I contend, allow us to see the limits of rhetorical sovereignty, namely the ability and right of a community to determine the narrative. The comparison between Indigenous and Jewish museal practices is grounded in the idea of multidirectional memory. Stories of origins in museums, foundational to a community's self-understanding, are analyzed as expressions of rhetorical sovereignty. The last section expands the discussion to the public sphere by looking at the debates that led to the resignation of Peter Schäfer, the JMB's former director, following a series of events that were construed as anti-Israeli and hence, so was the argument, anti-Jewish. These claims are based on two narrow conceptions: First, that of the source community that makes a claim for the museum. Second, on the equation of Jewishness with a pro-Israeli stance. Taken together, the presentation of origins and the public debate show the limits of rhetorical sovereignty by exposing the contested dynamics of community claims. Ultimately, I suggest, museums should be seen not only as a site for contestation about communal voice, but as a space for constituting the community.

Key words: exhibitions, genocide, Holocaust, Indigenous, Jewish, memory, museums, origins, rhetorical sovereignty, source community