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## **ISA Forum of Sociology, Vienna 2016**

### **Reconstructing Rituals: Using bricolage to (re)negotiate faith based rituals with the Jewish LGBT+ community**

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#### **Paper Abstract: (300 words allowed)**

In Judaism, hetero-normative expectations which reify the binary of male/female exist in cultural and religious life. These presumptions of the centrality of heterosexuality to Judaism can create both psycho-social exclusion (Takács, 2006; Mendes, undated) and a sense of detachment from ritual and practice (Schneer & Aviv, 2002; Alpert, 1997) for those who do not 'fit' this binary model.

Accordingly, some Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Intersex (LGBT+) Jewish people perceive themselves as 'doubly other' (Rose & Balka, 1989) experiencing a sense of cultural loss, religious exclusion and discrimination in key ritual settings. This problem of 'double-othering' (exclusion by virtue of both LGBT+ identity and as a result of religio-cultural practice) can be particularly acute for Trans-Jews who report that they can be confined to a 'limbo' situation, even in contexts where lesbian and gay co-religionists are accepted as full members of a congregation (see Dzmura, 2011).

In a community-driven initiative, members of the UK Jewish LGBT+ community co-designed and participated in an Arts and Humanities Research Council UK funded project "Ritual Reconstructed: Challenges to Disconnection, Division and Exclusion in the Jewish LGBT+ Community". It explored participants' relationships to faith through the use of film and bricolage which (re)created public and personal rituals

incorporating both Jewish and queer identities alongside and through the medium of art, storytelling, poetry, music and performance.

The Community project has taken as a starting point Mary's (2005) definition of bricolage - a dialogue between 'meaningful material that one borrows' and 'incarnated forms one inherits', through which we contemplate Savastano's (2007) argument that LGBT+ persons are forced to create our own sacred or alternative myths in order to create a new way of bringing together queer spiritual identities.

To find out more about the project visit [www.ritualreconstructed.com](http://www.ritualreconstructed.com)

**Key Words** (4 allowed): Bricolage; Rituals; Judaism; LGBT+

### **Introduction:**

This paper explores the relationship between Jewish faith and cultural practice and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Intersex (LGBT+) identity, as performed by participants in an UK Arts and Humanities Research Council funded project "Ritual Reconstructed: Challenges to Disconnection, Division and Exclusion in the Jewish LGBT+ Community" (hereafter RR).

In Judaism, (and other Abrahamic faiths<sup>1</sup>), hetero-normative expectations reify the binarism of male/female sex/gender system, regarded in 'traditional' or 'conservative' religious interpretations as mandated by seminal proof-texts which consistently emphasise the role of the 'natural' God-created heterosexual couple whose duty is to reproduce; whilst condemning, on pain of capital punishment, those males who participate in non-heterosexual sexual practices (Gagnon, 2002).

Rabbinic commentaries (Talmud) also discuss penalties which could be inflicted for certain sexual practices between women, recommending that lesbian partners

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<sup>1</sup> Judaism, Christianity and Islam are all faiths which identify a common root, by tracing their origins to the Biblical Patriarch, known variously as Abraham/Avraham/Ibrāhīm within the three traditions.

should be beaten (Encyclopedia Judaica, 2008); a trend which other faith traditions also adhere to, disapproving of lesbianism but not punishing women as harshly as gay men for same sex relationships or sexual activities.

The presumptions of the centrality of heterosexuality and ‘normative’ gendered social relations within faith traditions however frequently create both psycho-social exclusion (Takács, 2006; Mendes, undated) and a sense of detachment from ritual and practice (Schneer & Aviv, 2002; Alpert, 1997) for those who do not ‘fit’ within the binary male/female model.

Accordingly, some Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer/Questioning and Intersex (LGBT+) Jewish people perceive themselves as ‘doubly other’ (Rose & Balka, 1989) experiencing a sense of cultural loss, religious exclusion and discrimination in key ritual settings whilst at the same time reporting that their religio-cultural identification with Judaism underlines their ‘difference’ from the main-stream, over-whelmingly secular/atheistic LGBT+ community (Zara, 2013). This problem of ‘double-othering’ (exclusion by virtue of both LGBT+ identity and religio-cultural practice) can be particularly acute for Trans-Jews who report that they are often confined to a ‘limbo’ situation, even in contexts where lesbian and gay co-religionists are accepted as full members of a congregation (see Dzmura, 2011).

In response to these stated concerns which have repeatedly arisen in dialogue within community settings; from 2014 to 2015 members of the UK Jewish LGBT+ community co-designed and participated in an Arts and Humanities Research Council UK funded project: “Ritual Reconstructed: Challenges to Disconnection, Division and Exclusion in the Jewish LGBT+ Community” (hereafter RR). In addition to working with Progressive Rabbinic advisors - who set out to examine and explore theological interpretations of core texts and ways of ‘queering Halakah’<sup>2</sup> - RR encouraged participants to both explore their own relationship to their faith and also

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<sup>2</sup> Halakah literally translates as ‘the law’ and is the collective body of Jewish religious jurisprudence derived from the Written and Oral Torah; including Rabbinically mandated customs and practice. In our project of ‘Queering Halakah’ (blurring, challenging and (re)constructing Jewish law and practice) we have worked with a number of Rabbis from Liberal Judaism (a partner agency in RR) to examine the theological and liturgical roots of Judaism so as to reinterpret text traditionally seen as opposed to LGBT+ identities and practices.

to use bricolage (see below) to (re)create public and personal faith rituals which merge their core Jewish and queer identities; using personally meaningful objects alongside film, art, storytelling, poetry, music and performance to this end.

In this project we commenced by using Mary's (2005) definition of bricolage as a dialogue between 'meaningful material that one borrows' and 'incarnated forms one inherits' and Savastano's (2007) argument that that LGBT+ people have been forced to create their own sacred or alternative myths to create a new way of bringing together queer and their spiritual identities. Through our co-creative philosophical and reflexive processes, researchers (themselves Jewish) have gradually moved the analysis on, by considering the relevance of Rabbinic discourse on non-gender binary constructions (Schleicher, 2011), queer liberation theology (Althaus-Reid, 2006) through a Jewish lens, and Judith Butler's notion of 'grievable lives' (2004; 2009). In so doing, this paper explores the Jewish LGBT+ community in the role of collective bricoleur, and the efficacy of (re)creating multi-faceted ritual identities through representation on film, through photographs and material artefacts.

### **A Digression on the perception of Jewish self-obsession and competitive victimhood amongst LGBT+ communities**

After presenting an early version of this paper within a LGBT+-identity themed academic conference; the first author was somewhat astounded to have an attendee (a fellow academic) come up to her afterwards and note that *"RR is kind of cute for a change; it's positive – if I hear another Jew banging on about the fucking Holocaust I want to puke"*. This graphic phrase neatly sums up that within many LGBT+ communities there is a conception that referring to Jewish identity is both retrograde; negative and somehow boring or indulging in competitive victimhood. Accordingly at a time of rising Xenophobia across Europe and increasing concerns over the potential for a roll-back in equalities status for both LGBT+ and minority communities (Feder, 2016) this project is indeed timely in considering the place of minority ethnic people of faith and how we can represent ourselves both within and outside our communities.

## Identity and the Theological Narrative

Rabbi Dr Rebecca Alpert - an academic theologian and one of the very first female American progressive Rabbis (who came out as lesbian in 1986) - has noted that the Jewish attitude towards LGBT+ people is a problem that is not only manifest in 'the reaction of Jewish individuals and institutions but with the ancient sacred texts that form the core of Jewish belief and practice' (1997:6).

Whilst further information can be found on the RR website and in emergent and published materials on 'queering Halakah' produced for this project; we take as a starting point for RR the core 'homophobic' verses found in the book of Leviticus. In verses 18:23 and 20:13, sexual intercourse between males is identified as a *to'eivah* (something abhorred or detested) with capital punishment (in theory) advocated under Halakah law for men who transgress against this law:

*[A man] shall not lie with another man as [he would] with a woman, it is a to'eivah (Leviticus 18:23).*

*If a man lies with a man as one lies with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination; they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them (Leviticus 20:13).*

In the main (even within Orthodox traditional Judaism), it has been accepted that Leviticus applies only to male penetrative homosexual activities (in some interpretations only those activities during in which semen is spilled)<sup>3</sup>.

In contrast, lesbian sexual acts are not explicitly mentioned in the Pentateuch<sup>4</sup> although Talmudic commentary indicates that early rabbinical teaching disapproved

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<sup>3</sup> See further: Genesis 38:9-10 in relation to the 'sin of Onan' [which led to his destruction by God] and the 13<sup>th</sup> Century Talmudic commentary *Sefer ha-Chinuch (Book of Education) Mitzvah 209* which indicates that "human seed should not be destroyed by carnal relations with males. For this is indeed destruction, since there can be no fruitful benefit of offspring from it, nor the fulfillment of the religious duty of conjugal rights (due one's wife)".

<sup>4</sup> First five books of the 'Hebrew Bible'

of such activities<sup>5</sup>; stressing that lesbianism is an "obscenity", which may be punished by physical beating. There is thus a clear gender division both in the way in which Lesbian and Gay sexual practices are framed in traditional Jewish thought and Talmud-Torah commentary as well as stark variance in the severity of prescribed punishments for acts seen as contra-normative.

Considerable Talmudic commentary exists also on the nature of transgender identities and those people whose biological 'sex' does not conform to male/female (reproductively efficient) binaries, but for the purposes of this paper we have omitted this discussion, noting merely that Talmud identifies six different gender/sex categories and makes in excess of 1100 references throughout the Talmud and Mishnah to rulings and interpretations pertaining to people who are non gender-binary<sup>6</sup>. Similarly, some highly pertinent Rabbinic commentary and interpretations which are relevant to theological interpretations which question whether both King David and the patriarch Joseph were bi-sexual<sup>7</sup> are excluded from this paper in the interests of brevity<sup>8</sup>.

Oral testimony from RR participants and the earlier project of 'Rainbow Jews'<sup>9</sup> (which explored the history of LGBT+ Jewish people in the UK) clearly indicates that the sense of 'otherness' alluded to above remains key to the experience of many LGBT+ Jews, particularly when they live away from major urban centres, or are one of a

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<sup>5</sup> Midrash (exegetical commentary on the Torah) pertaining to Leviticus 18:3 states: "Do not follow the ways of Egypt where you once lived, nor of Canaan, where I will be bringing you. Do not follow any of their customs." This text is traditionally taken to refer to some lesbian sexual activities following the restatement and confirmation of Talmudic interpretation by Maimonides in the 11<sup>th</sup> Century (Rambam Issurei Biya 21: 8)

<sup>6</sup> For a summary of the traditional gender/sex categories included within the Talmud see further: [http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/Classical\\_Jewish\\_Terms\\_for\\_Gender\\_Diversity.pdf](http://www.transtorah.org/PDFs/Classical_Jewish_Terms_for_Gender_Diversity.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> A particularly important collected volume with chapters by leading LGBT+ and 'ally' rabbis and theologians which summarises and interrogates a number of these debates is Drinkwater, G; Lesser, J & Schneer, D eds. (2012) *Torah Queeries: Weekly Commentaries on the Hebrew Bible* New York: New York University Press, whilst for an in-depth discussion on the relationship between King David and Jonathan see Chapter 5: in Greenberg, S. (2005) *Wrestling With God & Men: Homosexuality in the Jewish Tradition* Madison: University of Wisconsin

<sup>8</sup> For a fuller discussion see further the theological exploration to be found in the 'Queering Halakah' papers which are forthcoming and will be available on the RR website.

<sup>9</sup> An oral history project convened by Liberal Judaism in 2012 <http://www.rainbowjews.com/>

handful of LGBT+ congregants. Trans-people, in particular, have been consistently clear on the ‘between’ status they can occupy even in Progressive Jewish community contexts, feeling out of place and sometimes unaccepted even within the increasingly widely accepted categories of lesbian or gay-identifying Jews cis-gendered Jewish community members, despite the centuries old recognition by Rabbinic authorities that multiple genders can and do exist<sup>10</sup>.

A deeper discussion on these complicated theological discourses is outside the scope of this particular paper, but suffice it to say that from our scoping study it was found that a well-defined need existed for LGBT+ Jews to create and find space to visibly validate their lives and experience through the performance of rituals which entwined both Jewish and LGBT+ identities. Accordingly, this realization has been the Genesis of the *Ritual Reconstructed* project, a continually developing research journey undertaken in partnership with Liberal Judaism and community members of diverse gender identification and sexual orientations.

## The Project

Reflexive LGBT+ Jewish community performance is at the heart of the *Ritual Reconstruction* the project; an auto-ethnographic reflection of the community's Jewish ritual practices. Through premeditated performance and spontaneous experiential reaction to circumstance, what always becomes manifest in LGBT+ Jewish ritual is an adaptation of recognised heteronormative (Jewish) activity, tailored to the needs of the LGBT+ community. But at times the ritual practice can go further. It can also become a direct challenge to the ‘authentic’ definition of the Jewish subjectivity (Boyarin and Boyarin 1993); subverting as essentialist view of people of the ‘Book’. In this way, what is effected is a RECONSTRUCTION (Kaplan 2010) based on the socio-specific needs of the LGBT+ participants who in the past

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<sup>10</sup> See the Reconstructionist website for discussion on the various ‘categories’ of gender recognised within the Talmud <http://www.jewishrecon.org/resource/understanding-transgender-issues-jewish-ethics>. The precise role in religious community and experiences of Trans people of faith (from diverse communities is explored further in the inter-faith Liberal Judaism convened project *Twilight People* an associated sibling project to *Ritual Reconstructed* involving some cross-over in participants and both convened by Surat Shaan Rathgeber Knan, LGBT+ community organiser for Liberal Judaism. More information on *Twilight People* is available here: <http://www.twilightpeople.com/>



especially have been ‘forced by circumstance to forge a diverse array of [alternative] practices, [to] reinterpret ...sacred myths’ (Savastano 2007) to creatively ensure that we have a seat at the Jewish table.

In 2014, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded *Ritual Reconstructed* - an interdisciplinary research project comprising arts practice, theology; sociology and social policy - through its Connected Communities programme. The core team of investigators (PI and CIs) consists of three Jewish team-members and one CI who identifies as ‘formerly Christian’; whilst the team of community artists (photographer; actor/story-teller and performance artists) and theologians is Jewish apart from but one practicing Catholic, each participant with varying degrees of religious observance and denominational background. Participants and researchers self-identify across a range of gender and sexual orientations - ‘straight’ allies, lesbian, gay, bi-sexual and trans persons.

The project was conceived from the beginning as a community-academic partnership between Liberal Judaism, (as noted above, a key constituent of the progressive Jewish movement in the UK and wider Europe) and three Universities – Buckinghamshire New University, University of Portsmouth, and the Centre for Trust, Peace and Social Relations at Coventry University.

In addition to traditional investigative methods such as focus groups; interviews; literature reviews, etc. two key strands of the project which emerged in the planning stage via preliminary discussions with community participants consisted of cine-ethnography and an exploration of the role of personally meaningful objects used in both domestic and public settings which could represent a convergence of LGBT+ and Jewish identities.

An example the tinkering with objects of personal meaning was the placement of a silver table-napkin holder next to the Torah scroll when a participant was ‘called up’ (*Aliyah*) to read from the Torah in a religious service. For this participant, this act was an act of memorialisation to mark for a deceased lover who had died of AIDS. His lover’s mother had given him the napkin-ring holder, originally used during the post-Bar Mitzvah celebratory meal given of his lover when he was aged 13 and ‘called up’ himself for the first time. In this way our participant was able to quietly celebrate the

Jewish and Gay lives of someone he had loved, through the use of a memento associated with a prematurely lost, greatly mourned life.

Several LGBT+ rituals were committed to film by the Co-Investigator, film students and the LGBT+ community of participants. All the stakeholders – both in front of and behind the camera - discussed and agreed strategies to “ethno-show”, “ethno-look” and “ethno-think”<sup>11</sup>. Once the creative approach had been determined, the scene was blocked (almost like a filmed dance would be), and the filming commenced.

### **Ritual Bricolage and the AIDS Quilt:**

This act of ‘tinkering’ with objects to create new rituals is an example of what we have taken as a starting point for the RR project. In Mary’s definition (2005), *bricolage* is understood as a dialogue between ‘meaningful material that one borrows’ and ‘incarnated forms one inherits’. A ‘dialectic of form and substance’ is produced, where different rituals become merged in order to create new rituals with innovative meanings. This definition builds on the work of Claude Lévi-Strauss’ (1966) and his concept of the ‘bricoleur’, as one who makes use of ‘whatever is at hand’, and through ‘tinkering’ continuously breaks down mythological thought and rites, rebuilding them again through new constructions of already existing sets of events.

Both Savastano (2007 op. cit.) and Mary (2005:281-283) describe a ‘patchwork of belief’ in which a new religious identity is constructed through a process of borrowing and incorporating meaningful aspects of religion. This ‘patchwork’ is characteristic of the ‘bricoleur’, who Kincheloe (2005) described as akin to a quilt maker, bringing together different dynamics, and producing new concepts on the basis of already existing materials. This basic but elastic theoretical understanding has underpinned

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<sup>11</sup> In his polemical films and writing on cine-ethnography, the celebrated visual anthropologist, Jean Rouch, made it clear that film makers must throw themselves into the ritual they are experiencing and recording. They must participate, “ethno-look,” and “ethno-think.” In turn, communities—who tend to modify their behaviour on camera anyway—should use the opportunity to “ethno-show and ethno-think.” Ideally, in a democratic exchange of experiences, an “ethno-dialogue” is established between maker and subject, and knowledge is “the result of an endless quest where ethnographers and those whom they study meet”. See Jean Rouch, “On the Vicissitudes of the Self...,” in *Cine-Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 87-101.

our exploratory engagement with the nature of LGBT+ Jewish bricolage. For example, in the film footage of the Aids Memorial Service<sup>12</sup> (film two in our sequence of the Jewish ritual year) we explore the physical embodiment of bricolage through the medium of a AIDS Quilt which incorporates Jewish ritual symbols. It was created in the 1990s in an act of material memory for friends of the maker, UK Jewish men who died of AIDS.

The quilt has over time become central to an unambiguously Jewish service of remembrance, replete with images and symbolism used to recall “our own dead” through use of the Kaddish prayer and the lighting of a Yarzheit candle. In this way the quilt made by, for, and in memory of, deceased Gay men has, through the act of bricolage become a ritual object incorporated into the sacralisation of an originally profane (non-religious) memorial event through the explicit entwining of both Jewish and LGBT+ identities and symbols.

### **The Orange on the Seder Plate:**

The over-arching symbol and logo used within the RR project (the orange on a Seder plate – see image below), selected following discussion within the collaborative team, has in itself a ritual, symbolic and subversive LGBT+ Jewish meaning. In order to understand the counter-heteronormativity of this emblem it is first important to consider the nature of the Passover Seder; a ritual feast, enacted on an annual basis by the vast majority of Jews (or at least familiar to them

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<sup>12</sup> World AIDS Day was initially developed as a public health awareness day in 1988 with the secondary purpose of remembering those who had died of the disease (see further <http://www.worldaidsday.org/about>). It has gradually acquired in some communities and traditions a more sacralised theme with the incorporation of such activities as prayers for the dead. Jewish communities in the US and UK were probably the first faith stream to incorporate explicitly religious practices into Aids memorial event. Use within Aids Memorial events of the *Kaddish* the ancient prayer for use by Jewish mourners (Wieseltier, 2000), and associated with both personal and communal loss including the many lives destroyed during the Holocaust and at other times of Persecution, has a profound symbolism in Jewish culture. The *Yarzheit* candle which burns for 24 hours and is a candle lit to recall the communal dead of the Jewish people at certain core festivals such as Yom Kippur and Yom Ha-Shoah, and on a personal basis, on the anniversary of a close relative's death.

throughout the world) that marks the beginning of the Jewish festival of *Pesach* (Passover). *Pesach* commemorates the release of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and thus is replete both with internalised imagery and is core to the Jewish narrative of survival and the seeking of freedom.

Accordingly, the Seder is ripe for the performance of bricolage in the sense used both by Mary (2005) and Kincheloe (2007) offering both the symbolic promise of a better future free from oppression and the scope for creating a new narrative which incorporates inter-generational transmission of tradition and queer histories and concerns.

The term Seder, means "order" and in its original (*Pesach*) context it is called this because the meal has a strict order in which each act should be performed – from the drinking of the four cups of wine, to the order in which symbolic foods should be eaten. Each item on the Seder Plate is a metaphor, illustrating the journey that the Israelites made from slavery in Egypt to freedom.

Typically, a *Pesach* Seder plate contains the following items: green vegetables (symbolising how this night is different from all other nights, as usually bread is eaten first); roast Shank bone (symbolising the 'Passover lamb' and the death of the first-born in Egypt as the 10<sup>th</sup> plague); hard boiled eggs (symbolic of rebirth and the first food eaten by mourners after a Jewish funeral); charoset (a sweet and sticky mixture of dates; spices and wine representing the mortar used by enslaved Israelites to build whilst in Egypt); and bitter herbs (typically horseradish) for the bitterness of enslavement.

In LGBT+ inclusive communal Seders an additional item will typically be found on the plate: the Orange; a fruit which is both sweet and pithy; and which should in our progressive LGBT+ tradition contain bitter pips which are spat out, to symbolically repudiate the homo and trans-phobia found in Orthodox Judaism. The origin of the incorporation of this fruit (itself not alien to the geographical area from where the Seder originated<sup>13</sup>) is as follows:

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<sup>13</sup> The Passover story as described in Exodus is ritually performed through the Seder and we know from internal references [for example see the scholarly analysis on liturgical redactions within the Jerusalem and Babylonian texts by Rabbi David Zvi Hoffman (1882) republished/translated into

Originally bread was incorporated onto the plate in the late 1970s, as an act of lesbian Jewish transgression. However, the feminist scholar Rabbi Dr. Susannah Heschel, daughter of the renowned scholar Dr Abraham Joshua Heschel, proposed that bread should be substituted with an orange, to break the link between LGBT gender orientation and sexual activity with that which is forbidden *hametz* (leavened foods, ie bread) and which violates the Torah laws of Passover. Accordingly the orange has come to symbolise the roles of lesbians, and later gay men, in Judaism, as an item which represents both sweetness and the richness which LGBT+ people bring to the Jewish table (Alpert, 1993:3). This powerful statement and ritual act is referenced and recreated in our project logo below.

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English (1977) *The First Mishna and the Controversies of the Tannaim* New York: Sepher-Hermon Press] that the Seder was enacted in a broadly similar form throughout the land of Israel and diaspora communities from at least as early as the 10<sup>th</sup> Century BCE and potentially retains symbolic and ritual elements dating from not long after the destruction of the First Jerusalem Temple and Exile in 586 BCE.



RITUAL  
RECONSTRUCTED

## **Reflexive Filming, Bricolage and Ritual in RR**

All of the RR filming techniques aimed at avoiding any unnecessary disruption of the physical enactment of the ritual. Participants were encouraged to explore and perform rituals that were either existing LGBT++ Jewish Liberal practice, or those that were created spontaneously at the moment of filming – evidencing a true bricoleur's 'tinkering' with everyday objects and incorporating them into religious rituals – for example as shown during the Pride Seder film – when a participant wished to include black triangles to represent lesbian 'anti-social' victims of the Holocaust death camps along with the better known pink triangles which represent gay male victims.

Within each film before or after the filming of a ritual, 'talking head' interviews were recorded with principal participants. These relied on semi structured questions that were drafted beforehand by Professor Margaret Greenfields (the Principal Investigator of *Ritual Reconstructed*), and then discussed with the rest of the academic/community team to ensure agreement on "direction" and format. At the editing stage, the interviews were intercut with the filmed ritual to highlight the salient points of the participants' experiential activities and reactions, as well as the filmmaker's intent. All stages of the *Ritual Reconstructed* project process thus represent an on-going, meaningful, creative "ethno-dialogue" between filmmaker and participants; a process which continues for many of us as a result of our 'insider' status to the communities.

The 'insider'<sup>14</sup>academic and community team of *Ritual Reconstructed* worked with around 25 persons who identified as members of the Jewish LGBT+ (largely London) community. In a complex array of different partnerships we came together to create a series of five short films which followed the Queer/Jewish ritual year (Transgender Day of Remembrance; Aids Memorial Day; Purim and a filmed post-Purim focus group; and finally the Pride Seder in which LGBT+ Jewish enactment reaches its apogee, through creating a Seder which is held during Pride celebrations and which

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<sup>14</sup> See Kugelmass 1988 on the particular challenges of ethnographic work conducted as a Jewish 'insider'.

contains on the Seder plate explicitly queer symbolic iconography; yet still follows the traditional Seder ritual of moving from oppression to freedom).

Within these five films we illustrated the ways in which Jewish rituals in the UK have been queered and how queer rituals (such as secular Aids and Transgender Memorial events) have been influenced by our Jewish selves through the incorporation of explicitly sacralised Jewish rituals of memorialization such as the lighting of the Yarzheit<sup>15</sup> candle and saying of Kaddish<sup>16</sup> in memory of our dead. We have also run a series of workshops where participants are invited to engage with ritual bricolage through the prism of their own personally meaningful ritual objects and to (re)view and (re)present these items through the creation of individual and collective film, storytelling, music, performance and art.

As demonstrated above, drawing on the concepts of ritual and methodological bricolage, as a co-creative team of researchers and LGBT+ community members, we have become ever more deeply interested in the narratives that the LGBT+ Jewish Community (in London) has created, how we use ritual objects, Kippot<sup>17</sup>; Yarzheit candles; inherited objects such as candlesticks which are traditionally only lit on Shabbat (the beginning of the Sabbath) by women, etc); and other material elements such as the AIDS Quilt to construct meaning and (re)create faith rituals which reflect the merging of core Jewish and queer identities.

### **(Un)mourned and (un)mournable lives and reclaiming the power of ritual mourning.**

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<sup>15</sup> A memorial candle, that burns up to 26 hours, is lit on the anniversary of a close family member's death and also in communal settings at the fast/festival of *Yom Kippur* and during Holocaust Remembrance Day ceremonies (*Yom HaShoah*).

<sup>16</sup> The ancient prayers of mourning said following a personal bereavement and again in communal settings at Yom Kippur and Yom HaShoah and similar memorialisation events.

<sup>17</sup> The small round brimless hat usually made of cloth in a variety of patterns and colours, worn by observant Jews to fulfill the traditional customary requirement of Halacha that the male head be covered at all times in respect to God. The Kippah (plural Kippot) is traditionally worn only by men and only rarely will a non-Orthodox man wear this symbolic item outside of community contexts/religious services. Increasingly within progressive Jewish communities women will also wear the Kippah during synagogue services. LGBT+ congregants will often wear a rainbow kippot to celebrate their entwined multiple identities.



Although we were surprised how strongly the theme of grief, loss and mourning became to this project – we have found that this trope has largely subverted the concept of Holocaust obsession noted earlier in this paper. Where mourning and memorialisation has emerged most clearly within this project has been in relation to the hidden nature of LGBT+ loss and grief, which has remained for too long screened from view and unnamed as explicitly ‘queer’ mourning in mainstream Jewish contexts. A lover might not be given space to express their loss or in some denominations, could be barred from participating in certain gendered rituals of grief, or even in more Orthodox communities may be excluded from a ritual role by virtue of their sexual orientation.

In considering the depth of pain – and indeed grief and anger – articulated by some participants, we were confronted by the creativity, and spiritual value evoked by those who participated in such events as the Aids Memorial Day; Pride Seder and Transgender Memorial Day who were able to reclaim and name their identities and the at times brutal struggles which have occurred by virtue of being both LGBT+ AND Jewish.

Our theoretical thinking – developing still at the time of writing – has been informed by a reconsideration of the work of the moral philosopher Judith Butler, herself both a lesbian and a Jew. Butler’s texts examine the notion of ‘precarious lives’ and instances when lives ‘is grievable’ or not, where lives are publicly devalued and debased (2004; 2009). Moreover, she reflects upon who precisely sets the terms of such performances of mourning. These concepts of power and mourning proved to be a rich vein to mine in terms of reflexive co-production analysis of data. In presentations and discussion groups, RR participants identified synergies with their own experiences, particularly when contemplating Butler’s dissection of state violence and the uses and misuses of memorialisation<sup>18</sup>.

## **On the Importance of Space and Place**

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<sup>18</sup> See for example Butler, J (2015) *Mourning becomes the law. Judith Butler from Paris* [responsa/blog] 25-11-2015 for the Instituto 25M Democracia available at: <https://instituto25m.info/mourning-becomes-the-law-judith-butler-from-paris/> accessed 1/7/2016

The spaces in which the rituals occur; and the critical importance of spaces where LGBT+ Jewish persons will not feel under threat in any way have also become key to understanding the processes of ‘reclaiming and reconstructing’ ritual. In our project we found that Jewish LGBT+ places of ritual activity become transformed by the very act of performance so that they [the places] **are** ‘safe houses’ or places of sanctuary: from a temporary Sukkot festival shelter in the garden of a Rabbi in central London; to official houses of worship (in the case of the AIDS Memorial Day service, the Trans Day of Remembrance, The Pride Seder, The Purim Spiel), to cultural community centres (the *RR* culmination event at London’s Jewish community centre, JW3). Consideration and reflection on the ‘safety aspects’ (physical, spiritual, psychological and emotional) were a necessary precondition of our work, as the research team continually found that participants were ‘in the closet’ in differing and to some degree unexpected ways.

The closet for LGBT+ Jews is a complex affair, often compartmentalised, and very much a product of intersectionality. Persons are not ‘out’ as Jews, or not ‘out’ as LGBT+ persons, or perhaps out as ‘neither’ (or only in varying degrees), in circumstances that relate very much to individual circumstances and contextualised space and time. As researchers, we found there were certain trends with regard to age, gender, sexuality and ethnicity, but no simplistic or facile models could be applied. Indeed the complexities and dynamics which existed and emerged through discussion are led us to seek to clarify (or perhaps complicate) and question further elements of this project - such as the purpose, effectiveness and modes of socio-political solidarity across and between the ‘LGBT+’ communities; as well as whether the ‘catch-all’ overarching term used above privileged or reified certain ‘ways of being’ or ‘types’ of identity. And if so, how this played out in daily life. What precisely did increased or diminished visibility mean in terms of community dynamics when inter-cut with faith identities; (dis)abilities, ethnicity/race and migration status – all of which are in our core research narrative overlaid by the foregrounded LGBT+ identity.

### **The project outcomes**

In *Ritual Reconstructed*, as LGBT+ Jews and allies we have striven to bring together our particular Jewish identity/ies – an intersection of multiple (albeit predominantly Progressive) Judaisms, sexual, gender and queer values; beliefs and identities. As has been noted above, whilst this project is organic, living, flexible and developing in practical impacts and theoretical modelling through face-to-face and on-line conversations; we have been able to identify a number of efficacious and theoretically interesting impacts from a relatively early stage:

- The enactment of LGBT+ ritual and performance has been reported as life affirming and empowering for participants; as evidenced by feedback gathered during workshops and presentations; and via email follow-up from those who have attended sessions. Moreover there has been a keen appetite to engage with follow-up activities which are emerging from the project by participants of diverse age ranges and in differing geographical locations including international observers who have been ‘following’ the website materials.
- *RR* has added to the growing archive of LGBT+ Jewish work, and is the first dedicated project of which we are aware which has led to ‘creative’ and performative events being recorded on digital film and captured to create an archive for use by current and future viewers.
- *RR* is providing an impetus for further creative work in the LGBT+ Jewish community<sup>19</sup>.
- Younger and older LGBT+ Jews and people with different gender identifications and denominational adherence have worked together to create a (further) inclusion and visibility milestone for the LGBT+ Jewish community.
- *RR* has raised the profile of LGBT+ issues amongst the wider Jewish population (it has been well covered by the Jewish press both in the UK and Israel).
- *RR* has been cited - along with *Rainbow Jews* (RJ – an LGBT+ Jewish 2012-2014 National Lottery funded oral history project) – as having given informal

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<sup>19</sup> E.g. a recent performance piece on the Orlando massacre by *RR* participant Tess Joseph which she states has arisen from her re-engagement with Jewish and LGBT+ themed performance following participation in *RR*. Similarly two participants have enquired with the PI on the possibility of obtaining funding/requesting supervision to pursue higher degrees on identity themes which have emerged from the project.

weight to reform proposals within the Masorti movement, and in its gradual acceptance of same sex marriage<sup>20</sup>.

- We have garnered responses and commentary pertaining to wellbeing and mental health issues from participants who both have reported on the problems which face LGBT+ people from Jewish communities who are closeted or marginalised<sup>21</sup>, and who have simultaneously spontaneously commented on the value of being able to explore and represent their own multiple and entwined identities with a safe space<sup>22</sup>; with two participants explicitly indicating how they feel that their mental health and wellbeing has improved as a result of participation in the project and another participant now feeling more able to discuss issues in semi-public educational settings pertaining to HIV+ status.

Despite this generally positive picture however we must ensure that we are not too complacent, as in addition to recommendations and requests for ‘follow-up’ work a number of emergent issues have underlined the need to rethink our approaches to ensure greater inclusion and accessibility to a wider range of LGBT+ Jewish people.

- Younger LGBT++ Jews (under 30) were underrepresented within the project. On seeking information about the reasons for this in opportunistic discussions with young Jews; such as those who attended outreach events; or when we deliberately or fortuitously encountered groups or activities which were targeted at being either LGBT+; left-wing activist or Jewish and where we were aware that a contingent of our target group would attend; or in conversation with those young people who came to the final Showcase event: the following themes emerged. Time commitments (particularly work or study related) made participation problematic with conflicting opportunities which

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<sup>20</sup> SK in conversation with Ed Teegeer (November 2015), who has appeared in LGBT+ Jewish ethnographic films directed by SK for *RR*, *RJ*, and *My Jewish London* (Kochberg 2013)

<sup>21</sup> In 2012, research from Israel found that as many as 20% of self-identified LGBT Orthodox Jewish youth self-harmed/attempted suicide in that year compared to 3.5% of non-LGBT+ identifying Israeli youth *Interministerial Report on Youth Suicide Prevention*, Jerusalem, Israel

<sup>22</sup> The outcomes from this stream of activity are the subject of a forthcoming briefing paper on wellbeing and the inclusion of LGBT+ people in ritual/community activity as well as feeding into developing discussions with Liberal Judaism in relation to the development of LGBT+ inclusive recommendations for community engagement for use by Rabbis and congregants within the movement.

might seem more desirable to those who did not see a conflict in their identities or who had not experienced difficulties in coming out within their progressive Jewish communities. In relation to this and most troubling some young people articulated a perception that the ‘old guard’ were calling the shots (i.e. middle aged community leaders, Rabbis, ‘recognised’ and organised LGBT++ Jewish organisations and groups where participants had often known each other for in excess of 30 years, coming out in a very different context and retaining connections as a ‘minority within a minority’ of LGBT+ people).

- In the case of our young people however, several noted that they were fed up of hearing how much more difficult it had been to come out either as Jewish or as LGBT+ even fifteen or twenty years ago as they were confident in their sexual orientation and gender identity and living in largely Jewish enclaves with LGBT+ (or allies) as both Jewish and non-Jewish friends.
- Allied with this was the fact that youth lesbian voices were noted as not being foregrounded enough, a theme which also emerged from some older lesbians who commented on both the lack of a clear narrative on the impact of Jewish Lesbian feminism which was so influential in the 1970s, and also, that as women their experiences of coming out and living life as an LGBT+ Jew were perhaps more complex and less public through reasons of visibility and/or fear than that of gay participants or (through enforced visibility) some trans women.
- We noted too the delicate issue of how we are and have presented ourselves externally, the general celebratory tone of the project meant that certain (occasional) internal politics didn’t come out sufficiently
  - For example there were on occasion underlying issues of misunderstanding and limited acceptance of narratives or difficulties in engaging between trans-women and lesbian participants that remain underexplored. We have particularly noted that some binary-identifying trans people once they have transitioned do not wish to particularly challenge gendered language or ritual behaviours whilst others feel that there is a need to re-engage and address ritual expectations. Similarly these debates spill into the use of language which in Hebrew

is completely gendered requiring the selection of either 'male' or 'female' versions of liturgy in some prayers or blessings which can be painful for non-binary identified people. We therefore have identified the need to seek to engage and interrogate these themes further within a sensitive and inclusive framework to open out broader political and gendered debates in addition to how ritual is performed.

## Conclusion

As an addendum to this comment, Valerie Hey suggests that 'interesting' and 'unexpected' identities may be opened up in spaces where persons feel they can openly assert their identity and yet feel moderately under threat at the same time (Hey 2006). We have identified this concept during this project within situations where (at times) challenging discussions have occurred between people with discrete gender identities; age-ranges or differing Jewish denominational adherence. Accordingly we remain eager to test whether this will also hold true in inter-faith or external (outside of the 'safe space) encounters with the 'other'. For this reason, as a follow up bid to the original research, the *RR* team applied for funding to go into the rural/non-Jewish outdoors to perform other LGBT+ Jewish performative ritual<sup>23</sup> with an out Jewish trans-man activist team member volunteering to perform and enact 'visible Jewishness' in 'unexpected' locations; albeit supported in terms of physical and emotional safety by other team members and a film crew. Alas we were unsuccessful in that application, but we as both an ever-evolving team and as individual change-agents we will continue to take Jewish LGBT++ ritual beyond the confines of London interiors and out to communities whenever and however it is possible to so do and through this process challenge the risk we have created for ourselves, that of ossifying a dynamic narrative of (re)connection and developing community.

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<sup>23</sup> This proposal built upon Searle Kochberg's research into 'Gay Jewish Male identities on the London Streets' (discussed at the ISA WG03 Free Workshops session, Friday, 8/7/16)

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