

UC Santa Cruz

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal

Title

Tobaron Waxman's Red Food: Jewish Ritual, Mourning, and Queer Utopia

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/5gg4h7st>

Journal

Refract: An Open Access Visual Studies Journal, 5(1)

Author

Kobrin, Hailey

Publication Date

2022

DOI

10.5070/R75159680

Copyright Information

Copyright 2022 by the author(s). This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution License, available at

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Peer reviewed

Tobaron Waxman's *Red Food*: Jewish Ritual, Mourning, and Queer Utopia

Hailey Kobrin

On January 23, 2012, Tobaron Waxman performed *Red Food* for luncheon guests at the Raging Spoon, a restaurant in Toronto, Ontario. In this performance from the Jess Dobkin–curated Artists' Soup Kitchen luncheon series, Waxman shaved his hair as viewers slurped borscht, sipped red-dyed water, and gnawed on other red foods, aptly surrounded by all-red decor. After cutting his hair, a bald Waxman approached the viewers at their tables, serenading them with slow, melancholic mourning tunes from the Jewish Eastern European and Central Asian diaspora. In 2012, the Artists' Soup Kitchen aimed to bring awareness to the difficulties of sustaining artist communities in Toronto due to the growing unaffordability of housing and the lack of funding from arts initiatives. This event aimed to create space where there seemingly was none by providing local artists and other guests with a free meal and an opportunity to convene and break bread. Ten years later, the hardships created by the city's rapid gentrification remain resonant, as the rising cost of living continues to create barriers for artists. The Artists' Soup Kitchen was the final event hosted at the Raging Spoon's 761 Queen West location. The church space that hosted both the restaurant and many nonprofit organizations was scheduled for redevelopment, with the speculation that it would be converted into condos. As a response to the themes of the Artists' Soup Kitchen, Waxman's *Red Food* used the context of sharing a meal alongside a ritualistic performance to grieve for the loss of communal space through a queer lens. In 2022, *Red Food* remains poignant, as urban redevelopment continues to threaten the homes of many marginalized people living in Toronto. Yet, though Waxman mourns the loss of community space under the circumstances

of gentrification, I argue that in hardship, this mourning process can be repeated to strengthen community relations.

Revisiting *Red Food* in this contemporary context, I argue that there are three distinct aspects of the performance piece that use queer and Jewish strategies to propose a repeatable ritual for acceptance. In *Red Food*, Waxman uses both the queer body and Jewish cultural knowledge in the context of Shiva—Jewish death rites—to find specific rituals that then become part of a larger ritual that mourns the loss of community space, as exemplified by the closure of the Raging Spoon. The repetition of these rituals, I argue, enables the acceptance of trans bodies, ensuring the continuation of community. Establishing and practicing these relations act to resist the escalating circumstances of gentrification that continually threaten community by shuttering the spaces they convene. When Waxman’s performance actions are repeated as rituals to mourn the closure of community spaces, *Red Food* demonstrates that these community connections can withstand the loss of space.

I examine three separate ritualistic actions, each of which gives *Red Food* resonance in both Jewish and queer contexts. The first of these is the shaving of hair. As a queer ritual, shaving makes Waxman’s own trans body the site of rapid gender transformations. By removing his hair, Waxman makes his gender transformation legible within the linear temporality of what Laura Horak describes as “hormone time” in her paper “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality.” Horak uses the concept of hormone time to identify and contextualize the strategies used in videos by trans people to create condensed and accessible documentation of their gender transitions on YouTube. Applied to *Red Food*, hormone time can be used to understand Waxman’s choice to perform shaving his hair as a circumstance for his audience to view his quick gender transition. At the same time, the removal of his hair also evokes the Jewish ritual Opshernish—a symbolically loaded haircutting ceremony that occurs when a male child becomes a pedagogical subject of Jewish ritual. In *Red Food*, Waxman’s use of Opshernish is a nod to this cultural tradition that commemorates important transitions in a Jewish person’s life. A second ritualistic element employed by Waxman in his performance is that of voice and singing. Waxman’s vocal performance makes nods to both Jewish cultural tradition, through his recitation of Jewish mourning tunes, and queer identity, as voice acts as a signifier of the artist’s gender in the performance. Waxman’s vocal performance references the Jewish mourning rite of reciting the Kaddish—a call-and-response prayer through which mourners honor the deceased. With his voice, Waxman pays tribute to the deceased—in the case of *Red Food*, the Raging Spoon—while uniting mourners in song. I look at the work of Diana Taylor to show that both these elements, voice and hair, allow Waxman’s body to become a facilitator for the transfer of Jewish cultural memory and teach-

ings, and he uses his own trans body to facilitate tensions within the performance to navigate the larger issue of Toronto's continuous gentrification. A third element of *Red Food* that connects this performance to Jewish Shiva is its setting: a luncheon. The context of hosting a meal creates an immersive, multisensorial experience for Waxman's audience, which allows them to both internalize and accept his performance, thus facilitating their acceptance of trans people outside the confines of the performance. In Jewish tradition, Shiva is a ritual event that gives space to mourn the deceased, in which eating, singing, and physical transformation are all important components.

In this essay, I argue that when Waxman's Judaic-informed ritual is repeated over time, the destruction of physical space is confronted and resisted through strengthened community relations. By examining the work of critical performance theorists alongside *Red Food*, I argue that Waxman's performance creates ritual to mourn the loss of physical space that once held community. I suggest that his performance rituals in *Red Food* are designed to be rituals of acceptance—to make queerness legible through necessity, so that queer community can withstand the loss of physical space. When this immersive mourning process is enacted, *Red Food* creates a circumstance to continue community when these spaces are threatened.

Waxman's removal of his hair plays an important role in an interpretation of *Red Food* as both a Jewish and a queer ritual. In a queer understanding of *Red Food*, Waxman's shaving operates on the linear timeline that Horak describes as "hormone time."¹ Horak uses hormone time to contextualize the story line of online videos of gender transitions, stating that these videos often have a clear beginning, middle, and end, with the goal being "a smooth slide into the desired social gender."² The content of these videos varies and can include stories about the creator's childhood that led to the realization that they were trans, transition diaries, and so on. Notably, in addition to sharing their experiences, these vloggers are tasked with making their desired genders legible in the short duration of the video. On YouTube, "hormone time" acts as a "linear and teleological" timeline that is directed and points toward a "utopian future,"³ which Horak describes as harmony between the felt gender and perceived body.⁴ Online, these videos communicate a condensed and linear presentation of gender transition with concrete goals that are easily understood by viewers.

Like videos documenting gender transition, Waxman's removal of his hair in *Red Food* acts as a quick shift of his visual identifiers, operating in accordance with the "progressive temporality" of hormone time.⁵ Waxman uses shaving to exemplify trans aesthetics in many of his artistic and curatorial projects. In a conversation with Dominic Johnson, Waxman divulged that he believes that "hair is a loaded material."⁶ In previous projects where he uses hair

as his performance medium, as well as in *Red Food*, Waxman notes his audience's shifting demeanor and reactions to his visual transformation. When his hair is removed, Waxman says that viewers are "witnessing the hair fall off [Waxman's] body as they watch themselves shift in what meaning they ascribe to [Waxman's] appearance. As [Waxman] changes signifiers, [Waxman] shifts . . . to "ambiguously gendered white person.""⁷ This simplified performance of the artist's shifting gender is comparable to strategies used by trans vloggers. The notion of hormone time is criticized through claims that it appropriates a "straight" timeline with clear-cut transition goals that appeal to cis audiences. The linear nature of hormone time seems to be at odds with the entangled and asynchronous nature of "queer time." Yet Horak considers that using hormone time is "focused on progressive change and futurity."⁸ Despite the performance's offline presentation, *Red Food* uses a similar quick timeline to wield gender transformation purposefully. Under circumstances of gentrification, queer community loses its privacy. When queer people are forced into public space, actions for wider acceptance of these marginalized people become necessary and urgent. In *Red Food*, Waxman uses his body to both hasten and facilitate a circumstance for his viewer's rapid understanding and then acceptance of the artist's trans body, which optimistically points toward the wider acceptance of trans people. Contextualized by the closing Raging Spoon, and the increasingly rapid redevelopment projects throughout Toronto, Waxman's use of a condensed timeline that replicates Horak's hormone time creates a circumstance for audience members to accept his trans body. By practicing this acceptance after the performance's conclusion, viewers can ensure their own acceptance of queer identity, leading to the continuance of queer community when private space is inaccessible.

Waxman's hair-shaving is also infused with Jewish cultural knowledge. In "In the Mosaic: Jewish Identities in Canadian Performance and Installation Art," Carol Zemel cites Waxman's performance work as imbuing ancient ritual with new, contemporary relevance. While there is potential for queer people to be alienated by the cis-normative expectations of organized religion, Waxman embraces Jewish orthodoxy and its teachings in his work. Rather than critiquing dogma, Waxman's performances "audaciously invest centuries-old texts and rituals with new relevance and insight."⁹ Specifically, Waxman shaves his hair in another performance, *Opshernish*, as a performance of gender transition that draws from Jewish cultural transitions. By removing his hair in *Opshernish*, Waxman uses his body as the performance's visual center by making it the facilitator and point of transfer for cultural learning to the audience. In Jewish tradition, the term *Opshernish* (or *Upshernish*) literally translates to "shearing." As a Jewish practice, the *Opshernish* ritual celebrates the male child's first haircut on his third birthday. Traditionally, haircutting narrates a push toward a transformative time in a male child's life. In Jewish tradition, a child's first haircut

signifies a coming of age where he is pedagogically teachable in the ways of the Torah. In the performance *Opshernish*, Waxman's hair shearing similarly illustrates a "transformative initiation,"¹⁰ where "the viewer is asked to consider the gender structures and defining terms of the ritual."¹¹ Waxman is the facilitator of this gender transformation, but viewers are tasked with the work of internalizing and accepting the artist's new performed gender. When Waxman shifts signifiers, his actions "ask [audiences] to bring the traditional and familiar to bear on the modern and the new,"¹² expanding on ritual as a discursive practice that can be repeated within any circumstance and imbued with new meaning.

Waxman's mediation of his viewers' reactions to his performance of gender takes place not only through the jarring visual of removing his hair but also through his vocal performance. Waxman approaches viewers while they are eating and sings mourning songs from the Jewish Eastern European and Central Asian diaspora. In *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Taylor addresses performers as scenario actors, and performance artwork as "scenario." Waxman uses his body "as the receptor, storehouse, and transmitter of knowledge that comes from the archive" of cultural memory.¹³ To Taylor, "it is impossible to think about cultural memory and identity as disembodied."¹⁴ In the context of Jewish tradition, Waxman's recreation of *Opshernish* can be identified as a male-gendered performance and can be easily repeated. I claim that in this performance, Waxman uses *Opshernish's* contingency on gender and transition to discuss the transition of space. In her writing, Zemel understands that Waxman's trans performance techniques provide nuance to tradition so that ritual can be made relevant under new circumstances. As the mediator of *Red Food*, Waxman complicates the familiar experience of eating a meal with his jarring actions. The up-close interaction that viewers have with Waxman during his vocal performance while they are eating makes participating in *Red Food* as an audience member somewhat uncomfortable. These performance actions make his "scenario" memorable—therefore making them more likely to be revisited by his audience, reflecting Taylor's description of performance as being "formulaic, portable, repeatable" and "encourag[ing] fantasies of participation."¹⁵ By rearticulating his performance of *Opshernish* for *Red Food*, Waxman's gender performance is memorable and easily repeatable, making his rituals intended to cultivate spaces for spiritual queer community.

While I analyze Waxman's performance actions as creating circumstances for a queer acceptance that leads to queer utopia, it is important to note that *Red Food* re-creates the context of a mourning performance. In addition to performing the Jewish rite *Opshernish*, Waxman's *Red Food* operates in the context of *Shiva*, which contains extensive rituals around eating together. In the seven days after a funeral, the direct relatives of the deceased sit *Shiva*—

they tear their clothing, cover the mirrors in their homes, sit on the floor instead of using chairs, among other rituals. Most important, there is an emphasis on community care in Jewish mourning. The use of the circumstance of a shared meal and listening to solemn singing constructs *Red Food* as a performance of mourning for a loss of space as a result of Toronto's self-destructive redevelopment projects. Waxman's immersion of his audience in his performance through eating reflects Jewish modes of grieving and communicates that convening together is a transformative way of mourning that transcends any specific location. In "Loss and Mourning in the Jewish Tradition," Simon Shimshon Rubin cites that he understands the Jewish approach to mourning as a "particularly sensitive way of assisting the bereaved [in] assimilat[ing] and accommodat[ing] the loss of a highly significant person."¹⁶ At the center of his writing, Rubin essentializes "the role of the community in providing emotional support and sustenance,"¹⁷ both physically and spiritually. Immediately after a funeral service and interment, Jewish mourners partake in a Seudat Havraah, which Rubin describes as a "meal of comfort, provided for by [the] friends [of mourners] and more distant family."¹⁸ By combining communal eating and mourning, *Red Food* signifies Shiva, particularly the Seudat Havraah that begins communal mourning practices.

In my own experiences with Jewish mourning, immediate family convenes and shares food thrice a day for the initial seven days of Shiva—a commitment that requires rescinding everyday responsibilities such as cooking and allowing the community to feed mourners and to hold space for sharing memories. As noted by Taylor, performing memory is "embodied and sensual . . . it links the deeply private with social, even official, practices."¹⁹ To Taylor, the performance of cultural memory is inherently social. It is an "act of imagination and interconnection."²⁰ Jewish Shiva practices are similarly performative. As Rubin describes, while Shiva is a repeated ritual, each circumstance of Shiva is an "un-choreographed dance, which will evolve to the interaction of the individual griever, the mix of griever, the individuals who come to console, and the mix of those who come to console."²¹ Similar to Taylor's understanding of performance "scenario" as illustrating moments of tension within the sociable, Shiva is noted as "a time of familiar and unfamiliar experience."²² While eating borscht at a restaurant may be a common experience, Waxman's performance complicates this sense of familiarity by adding song and the visual center of shaving his head to the context of a luncheon. Akin to Rubin's mention of the social dynamics of grieving, Waxman's audience participates in the grieving process through their ingestion of food and presence in the ritual circumstance. In a conversation with Johnson, Waxman expresses a preference for involving audience members as "unexpected participants instead of passive recipients."²³

Through viewership, audiences participate in Waxman's grieving by consuming a Seudat Havraah, as Shiva is a social ritual that necessitates community presence. In "Eating My Words: Talking about Food in Performance," Yael Raviv explains that the affective responses that are stimulated by tasting food in performance contexts require an audience member's firsthand participation.²⁴ While Taylor states that the nature of memory is complicated and often difficult to evoke due to the multisensorial nature and contingency of additional memories,²⁵ Raviv's writing understands taste as a universal point of access to understanding fine arts. Through physically ingesting an artwork's medium, eating can help internalize the meanings of an artwork. Further, sharing the experience of eating together is an inclusive approach to "retain the communal, collaborative action."²⁶ Therefore, at the Raging Spoon, audience members are able to draw from their own sensory memories. By eating borscht, audience members are able not only to recall their own associations to the food but to create new sensory memories surrounding the restaurant. Thus, in *Red Food*, eating acts as an immersive participatory element in the performance and also generates recollection of community space through the audience's eating experience. Here, sensory memory commemorates the Raging Spoon within the mourning process of lost community space.

In *Red Food*, while the experience of viewing Waxman shave is difficult to replicate, the vocal aspects of performance are repeatable and add to the transformative potential of a performance of Shiva aimed at creating space for the future acceptance for trans and queer people. In reference to the "straight" timeline utilized by vloggers to chart their transition, a noticeable element of gender transition is a changing voice.²⁷ As spoken by Waxman in conversation with Johnson, voice is an aspect of the artist's development of trans performance aesthetics. Waxman stated that the vocal performance for *Red Food* was the artist's "first-ever solo vocal performance in ten years."²⁸ In Jewish tradition, vocal performance is performed during the Shiva period, and years proceeding through the recitation of Kaddish. Reciting Kaddish unites generations "in a vertical chain"²⁹—connecting the past, present, and future descendants of the Jewish community in song. Coincidentally, Waxman's performance of *Red Food* coincided with the tenth anniversary of the passing of his father and the anniversary of the passing of a close friend, the artist Flo McGarrell,³⁰ positioning Waxman's vocal performance as reflecting this same vertical chain.

As a public performance of mourning, Kaddish is a call-and-response prayer that requires the participation of ten men. It must be recited every day by the mourner for the eleven months following a death so that the deceased's soul may be honored and accepted in Olam HaBah (heaven). While Kaddish is a mourning practice, it also looks toward the world to come. Its use thus implies that *Red Food* is an optimistic approach to communal loss, wherein new

communal relations are created to resist the loss or disappearance of physical spaces. Waxman's recitation of these traditional tunes, which focus on the transformative nature of mourning in *Red Food*, presents mourning process as social and repeatable. By necessitating the practice of queer acceptance, Waxman's performance resists the difficult conditions of the present, insisting on looking toward a future with more positive potential. Framed by the closing of the Raging Spoon, Waxman's optimistic view of mourning, and the establishment and practicing of alternative forms of community building through performative art, resists the threat posed by the loss of physical space.

The repetition of rituals for queer acceptance created by Waxman in *Red Food* tasks viewers with practicing this acceptance. After mourning the loss of the Raging Spoon, *Red Food* expresses communal resistance to gentrification projects that marginalize queer people. Despite *Red Food* being performed only a single time, its employment of Jewish rituals proposes a new ritual for queer acceptance that should be continually reexamined and repeated. In 2012, Waxman's mourning of shuttered space in *Red Food* foreshadowed increasing hardships for queer communities in Toronto and urged his audience to accept his own queer body to create grounds for the acceptance of queer community in and outside the city. At present, urban development continually threatens many communities, including the queer community. Due to COVID-19, beloved queer spaces like the Beaver and the Old Nick Pub closed their doors, unable to afford their "astronomical rent,"³¹ while others such as Crews and Tango rely on community support to survive.³² Under these circumstances, research must revisit Waxman's performance of ritual through the little available documentation we have.

While Shiva necessitates communal presence, revisitation is an essential part of mourning in Jewish culture. Each year, on the anniversary of the passing of a member of the community, a Yahrzeit candle ("soul candle") is lit, and a "Kaddish Yatom" is sung by the mourner. Just as Jewish mourners revisit loss, I argue that viewers of *Red Food* should revisit this performance in order to understand that despite the artwork's changing meaning as we grow more distant from it over time, cultivating acceptance for queer people is still resonant. Despite there being only a few photos online that document *Red Food*, the performance holds resonance under escalating gentrification circumstances in Toronto that affect many marginalized peoples. Ten years later, Waxman's presentation at the former site of the Raging Spoon should be remembered as a performance that catalyzes acceptance. As Toronto grows increasingly unaffordable, Waxman's *Red Food* proposes suggestions for the continuation of queer community despite physical distance. As a ritual, *Red Food* encourages wider acceptance of queer identity, facilitated by Waxman's body. To ensure

that queer community persists, the ritual is intended to be repeated and practiced.

* * *

Hailey Kobrin (they/them) is a Toronto-based writer, researcher, curator, and artist. Hailey is a self-proclaimed “Food Freak,” navigating a lifetime obsession with the culinary through fine arts, research, and creative written work. Hailey holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Criticism and Curatorial Practices from OCAD University and is a current MA candidate in the Department of Art History and Visual Culture at York University.

Notes

¹ Laura Horak, “Trans on YouTube: Intimacy, Visibility, Temporality,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 579. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815255>.

² *Ibid.*, 580.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 579.

⁶ Dominic Johnson, “Voice, Performance, and Border Crossings: An Interview with Tobaron Waxman,” *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1, no. 4 (2014): 617. <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-2815129>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 617–18.

⁸ Horak, “Trans on YouTube,” 580.

⁹ Carol Zemel, “In the Mosaic: Jewish Identities in Canadian Performance and Installation Art,” *Canadian Theatre Review* 153, no. 1 (2013): 17. [10.1353/ctr.2013.0008](https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.2013.0008).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 19.

¹³ Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2013, 81–82. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822385318>.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁶ Simon Shimshon Rubin, “Loss and Mourning in the Jewish Tradition,” *Journal of Death and Dying* 70, no. 1 (2015): 80. <https://doi.org/10.2190/om.70.1.h>.

¹⁷ Ibid., 89.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 82.

²⁰ Ibid., 82.

²¹ Rubin, "Loss and Mourning in the Jewish Tradition," 90.

²² Ibid., 91.

²³ Johnson, "Voice, Performance, and Border Crossings," 614.

²⁴ Yael Raviv, "Eating My Words: Talking about Food in Performance," *Invisible Culture*, no. 14 (2010): 13. <https://doi.org/10.47761/494a02f6.0a30d2b8>.

²⁵ Taylor, *Archive and the Repertoire*, 82.

²⁶ Raviv, "Eating My Words," 21.

²⁷ Horak, "Trans on YouTube," 574.

²⁸ Johnson, "Voice, Performance and Border Crossings," 618.

²⁹ Rubin, "Loss and Mourning in the Jewish Tradition," 94.

³⁰ Johnson, "Voice, Performance and Border Crossings," 618.

³¹ Julia Mastroianni, "The Plight of Queer Bars in Toronto during COVID-19," *Now Toronto*, January 7, 2021, <https://nowtoronto.com/culture/losing-queer-bars-in-toronto>

³² Ibid.