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Confronting Difference in Diaspora: Max Weber's Woodcuts in the Context of Yiddish Modernism

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by

Benjamin Kersten

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

Confronting Difference in Diaspora:

Max Weber's Woodcuts in the Context of Yiddish Modernism

by

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Master of Arts in Art History

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Professor George Baker, Chair

In the winter of 1919-1920, the artist Max Weber (1881-1961) created twenty-four or twenty-five small woodcut prints out of a box he had received containing a gift of comb honey. The small images that resulted appropriated visual forms from Western and Central African art and incorporated them into the representation of Jewishness. This thesis argues that the woodcuts and Weber's dissemination of them in the context of Yiddish modernism embody an aesthetic of diasporic primitivism that explores Jewishness as one form of difference among others and thereby distinguishes itself from primitivist practices that sought to manage difference. Weber's woodcuts moreover actively participated in a matrix of Yiddish modernism advocated by the movement known as *Di Yunge* and concerned with literary and aesthetic negotiations of how Jewishness relates to other cultures.

The thesis of Benjamin Kersten is approved.

Bronwen Wilson

Kristopher Kersey

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Introduction: Max Weber's Diasporic Divergences

In the winter of 1919-1920, Max Weber (1881-1961) took apart a basswood box containing a gift of comb honey from his younger brother and carved a design into the pliable wood using a pearl-handled penknife. He painted the small block of wood with ink and, using the weight of his foot, transferred the design to a sheet of paper, creating the first of twenty-four or twenty-five woodcut prints. In a 1954 interview with Dorothy Lytle, referenced in Daryl R. Rubenstein's catalogue raisonné of Weber's graphic work, Weber identified *Head and Shoulders of Figure* as that first print (fig. 1).[1] The print depicts a figure with a dramatically elongated head resembling Ngil society masks made by the Fang people of southeastern Gabon (fig. 2). Weber constructed the simple image using alternating planes of light and dark to articulate the figure's shoulders, face, hair or veil, and nose against a light background. As the first in his relief print series, *Head and Shoulders of Figure* introduces both the motif of the elongated face and an aesthetic interplay of light and dark that would transform as Weber explored the interrelation of body and material. Amid these transformations, Weber printed an image titled *Rabbi Reading* (fig. 3). An elongated face now appears on a bearded figure absorbed in text, a type of figure that emerged around this time in Weber's broader oeuvre and would recur in his paintings into the 1940s. These two images bookend the unique trajectory of Weber's primitivism. Art historians Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten define primitivism as an "act on the part of artists and writers seeking to celebrate the features of the art and culture of peoples deemed 'primitive' and to appropriate their supposed simplicity and authenticity to the project of transforming Western

[1] Daryl R. Rubenstein, *Max Weber: A Catalogue Raisonné of His Graphic Work* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 33.

art."[2] Weber's appropriations of non-Western artistic forms should be understood within the context of his larger practice, which came to display a particular concern with Jewishness.

For Weber, an Ashkenazi immigrant to the United States from Bialystok, Russia (now Poland), non-Western art offered the means to develop a set of artistic forms for representing Jewishness in what historian Eric Goldstein characterizes as "a complex racial world where Jewishness, whiteness, and blackness have all made significant claims on [Jews]."[3] Recognizing colonial conquest and exploitation as the conditions for the Western construction of the primitive, scholarly literature on primitivism has tended to privilege notions of center and periphery while overlooking diasporic models of artistic practices that complicate the mapping of such oppositions. Accordingly, Weber's woodcut prints and his choice to reproduce them in the context of an emergent Yiddish literary modernism should not be understood as a project to transform so-called Western art. Instead, this series should be viewed as a crucible where Weber forged an aesthetic of diasporic primitivism, an inchoate but discrete visual code that explores Jewishness as one form of difference among others. Without universalizing difference or overlooking the appropriative logics of Weber's mining of non-Western artistic forms, this analysis of Weber's woodcuts suggests that Jewish engagements with the arts of Africa, Asia, and the Americas give rise to a politics of representation that diverges from the larger history of European and American conquest and encounter.[4] In addition to addressing an under-examined

[2] Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighten, "Primitive," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, 2nd ed (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 217.
[3] Eric L. Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness: Jews, Race, and American Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 5.
[4] Even though scholars have taken up the primitivism of Weber's work, they have struggled to articulate its specific dynamics. In his introductory essay to the hallmark exhibition catalogue "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, William Rubin uses Weber's work to illustrate the range of primitivist manifestations in modern art. He points to Weber's 1910 painting Congo Statuette (also known as African Sculpture), a still life that clearly represents a Yaka statue, as evidence of Weber's "interest" in African art and to Interior with Women, a painting made around 1917 that renders an interior scene with a cubist cacophony of shapes and colors, as evidence of the way Weber's style "absorbed" formal elements of African art. William Rubin, "Modernist Primitivism: An Introduction," in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin, vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 24; Gail Rubin addresses a wider swath of Weber's work in her survey

aspect of Weber's career, this analysis contributes to the project spearheaded by art historians such as Kobena Mercer who aim to present an increasingly pluralistic story of modern art by engaging artistic practices that "fall into the interstices of nation-based mappings of the modern artistic imagination."[5]

The new audience Weber cultivated for his work in the early 1920s opens onto an understanding of how his woodcuts appropriated non-Western artistic forms in an exploration of Jewish difference. He sought out Yiddish literary publications to reproduce his work and became affiliated with the movement of Yiddish writers known as *Di Yunge* ("The Young Ones"). *Di Yunge* had coalesced in 1907, formed of Jewish poets who had immigrated to New York from Eastern Europe. Mostly shop workers with little formal education, poets such as Mani Leib, Zishe Landau, Moyshe Leib Halpern, and Reuben Iceland met in cafes and restaurants where they forged both social bonds and a shared set of aesthetic ideals that would drive their approach to Yiddish literature. In contrast to their predecessors in the cohort of Yiddish poets known as the "sweatshop (or proletarian) poets," who adopted revolutionary rhetoric and translated their experiences of exploitation into rhyming verse, *Di Yunge* aimed to cultivate a space of artistic freedom not yoked to any political purpose.[6] In 1912, David Ignatoff founded the literary journal *Shriftn* ("Writings") as well as the press behind it, *Amerike* ("America"). *Shriftn* became the most sustained publication produced by *Di Yunge*, despite a sporadic publication schedule and only totalling eight volumes over fourteen years.

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of primitivism in American art for the same catalogue. She focuses on the range of Weber's encounters and influences and, although she notes that Weber's work diverged from Picasso's and Matisse's artistic precedents, she offers no detail as to how or why. Gail Levin, "American Art," in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin, vol. 2 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 453–55.

[5] Kobena Mercer, "Introduction," in *Exiles, Diasporas & Strangers*, ed. Kobena Mercer, Annotating Art's Histories (London; Cambridge, MA: Iniva (Institute of International Visual Arts); MIT Press, 2008), 12.

[6] Zishe Landau expressed this explicitly in the introduction to his 1919 anthology of Yiddish poetry in America. In reference to Morris Rosenfeld, one of the foremost sweatshop poets, he writes, "the national and social movements had rhyme departments." Zishe Landau, ed., *Antologye Di Idishe Dikhtung in Amerike Biz Yohr 1919 [Anthology of Yiddish Poetry in America until 1919]* (New York: Idish, 1919), iv, translation author's own.

Shriftn distinguished itself from other Yiddish publications by including contributions from visual artists and developing a practice of translation that opened the journal to the world and critiqued contemporary American literary modernism, which had excluded Yiddish poets. As such, *Shriftn* and the *Di Yunge* writers developed their literary and aesthetic ideas in dialogue with American modernists and a wide variety of literary cultures. Literary scholar Rachel Rubinstein argues that these practices resulted in a Yiddish modernism that gestured toward the "anti-Semitic, Anglo-American modernist movement and at the same time attempted to suggest its own difference."[7] Weber participated in this matrix of Yiddish modernism by contributing work to *Shriftn* that furthered both his and the journal's ambivalent negotiations of Jewishness in relation to other cultures.

Weber also reproduced his woodcuts as accompanying illustrations to *Di Yunge* writer H. Leivick's Yiddish-language drama, *Der Goylem*. Ignatoff and *Amerike Der Goylem*, an adaptation of a Jewish legend about a clay sentry formed by a 16th century rabbi to protect a community of Jews from anti-Jewish violence instigated by a blood libel. Leivick's play was enormously popular and raised questions around the construction of Jewishness for its audience. The juxtaposition between Weber's images and Leivick's text suggests that one might view the bodies in Weber's prints as Golems, or strange figures at the locus of Jewish relations with non-Jews. This synergy highlights how the prints operate as sites of diasporic identification at which Jews could confirm their identity, even as that identity remained problematic. Literary scholar Chana Kronfeld's characterization of Yiddish as "an ideal vehicle for internal radical experimentation with modernism" can spur investigation into Weber's affirmations and disruptions of modernist artistic forms carried out at a cultural and linguistic remove from the

[7] Rachel Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe: Native America in the Jewish Imagination* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 2010), 64–65.

major practitioners and sites of European and American modernisms.[8] His prints should be seen not only as active interlocutors in Yiddish modernism but also as attempts to enter diasporic Jewishness into visual representation.

Weber's movements across continents, coteries, and artistic styles begin to indicate the particular convergences and divergences between his artistic career and the currents of European modernism. Weber migrated to Brooklyn in 1891 at the age of ten amid an accelerating pace of migration to the United States after the 1880s. Over 2.5 million Jews immigrated to the United States before World War I, and Jews from Eastern Europe comprised the vast majority of those migrating, totaling some 1.5 million between the 1870s and 1914.[9] The exact reasons why Weber's family migrated are unclear, but Jews in Eastern and East-Central Europe generally migrated to escape restrictions imposed by the Russian Empire on where Jews could live, endemic poverty, and outbreaks of anti-Semitic mob violence. Weber's Yiddish-speaking Orthodox parents discouraged him from pursuing an artistic career, and so Weber earned a teaching degree at the Pratt Institute June of 1900. He studied under Arthur Wesley Dow, an artist and teacher who encouraged him to think beyond the principles established in academic art, including the enduring emphasis on mimetic representation and the hierarchy of painting genres. Weber saved up money from teaching and traveled to Paris, residing there from September 1905 until January 1909, where he immersed himself in the activities of the European modernist art scene. He visited retrospective exhibitions of Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne, visited the studio of Pablo Picasso, befriended Henri Rousseau, and studied with Henri Matisse.[10]

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[8] Chana Kronfeld, *On the Margins of Modernism: Decentering Literary Dynamics* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996), 13.
[9] Eli Lederhendler, *American Jewry: A New History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 63.
[10] Holger Cahill, *Max Weber* (New York: The Downtown Gallery, 1930), A full biography of Weber extends beyond the scope of this paper. Much of the literature on Weber can be found in exhibition catalogues that include substantial biographies. See, for example,; Alfred H. Barr Jr, *Max Weber* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1930); Lloyd Goodrich, *Max Weber* (New York: The Whitney Museum of American Art, 1949).

Weber returned to the United States where he experimented with Cubist fragmentation, the bold colors of Fauvism, and Futurist dynamism, and sometimes adapted these formal languages to represent locales and subjects Weber found in the United States.[11] As part of these experimentations, Weber began to consider interpenetrations of animate or bodily forms and ideas with inanimate forms. *Rush Hour, New York* (1915) displays Weber's adaptations of European modernism to the locales of the United States by signaling the city of New York in its title (fig. 4). The painting presents no recognizable features of New York City, instead conveying the experience of movement in the urban environment through layers of rhythmically repeated geometric forms. When viewing the painting alongside a poem Weber had published one year before in a book of poetry titled *Cubist Poems*, it becomes clear that Weber began to explore the body and its relations to its surroundings. Titled "The Eye Moment," the poem represents New York City using repetition and movement much like the painting.[12] The poem begins as pure shape—"Cubes, cubes, cubes, cubes"—and proceeds with a list of objects, adverbs, and gerunds that stimulate the senses of sight, smell, and hearing. Phrases like "window eyes" and "chimney nostrils, breathing" enliven the built structures of the city, turning objects into subjects. In contrast to Weber's later experiments with the woodcuts, the unity between matter and spirit evoked by "The Eye Moment" and *Rush Hour, New York* adheres more closely to ideas of the fourth dimension that influenced almost mystical representations of space by artists in many

[11] Art historian Percy North contends that Weber's most important legacy lies in such acts of transposition. Noting Weber's distinct asynchrony relative to the artistic developments in Europe and critics' denigration of his work as derivative, North argues that Weber's "introduction of cubism to America following his association with Picasso and his dramatic American cubist paintings are his most important legacy." Percy North, "Bringing Cubism to America: Max Weber and Pablo Picasso," *American Art* 14, no. 3 (2000): 74.

[12] Weber later published this poem in Yiddish in Shriftn, as one of his first contributions to the journal. Given the awkwardness of the title "The Eye Moment," it is possible that Weber conceived of the poem, or at least its title, first in Yiddish. Another translation of the poem's Yiddish title "Der Oygenblick" would be "The Glimpse." Weber's more literal title does emphasize the bodily act of seeing. Max Weber, "The Glimpse," *Shriftn* 4 (1919): 64.

modern art movements.[13] Critics' relentless disfavor, however, compelled Weber to pull back from exhibiting his work publicly between 1916 and 1923 with minor exceptions. In these years, a portion of which Alfred Barr labeled a period of "Introspection and Self-discovery," Weber took his explorations of body and material in a new direction that became entangled with representations of racial and religious difference.[14]

Intertwining Body and Material: The Diasporic Primitivism of Weber's Woodcuts

In the woodcuts of 1919-1920, Weber undertook sustained exploration of the relations between body and material, subject and object, facilitated by the properties of his repurposed basswood box and the process of woodcut printing. The series of prints includes one still life, seven images of faces or heads, thirteen images of single figures, two images with two figures, and one image that depicts at least four figures.[15] These categories break down further: among the prints of single figures, for instance, one finds multiple standing nudes, a reading rabbi, seated figures, a dancing figure, and two figures composed of abstract shapes and patterns out of which body parts barely cohere. By virtue of their production as a series, the prints exhibit a much more syncretic vision than Weber's earlier amalgamations of modernist visual languages in his navigation of New York and its environs. This syncretic vision draws on the work of other modernists, objects Weber saw on his travels or visits to the Museum of Natural History in New York, tropes of antiquity, and even Polish folk art. Carried out through direct allusions and more

[13] Linda Dalrymple Henderson traces ideas of monism and the evolution of consciousness to the writings of English socialist and mystic Edward Carpenter, whose ideas Weber explored in his painting and writing of the early 1910s. Linda Dalrymple Henderson, "Mysticism as the 'Tie That Binds': The Case of Edward Carpenter and Modernism," *Art Journal* 46, no. 1 (1987): 29–37, https://doi.org/10.2307/776840.
[14] Barr, *Max Weber*, 11.
[15] This cataloguing totals twenty four prints and is indebted to Daryl R. Rubenstein's informative catalogue raisonné of Weber's graphic work. It diverges slightly from the list of twenty four woodcuts Rubenstein indicates to be a part of this series because I have not been able to locate a work with the tile Study and because I have included an additional work titled Head that Rubenstein does not list, a print of which can be found in the collection of the Jewish Museum in New York. See Rubenstein, *Max Weber*.

implicit visual and material resonances, this vision enabled a crossing subject and object that constitute Weber's aesthetic of diasporic primitivism.

Even the single still life demonstrates an attempt to overcome divisions of subject and object (fig. 5). The print depicts two vases and a round piece of fruit on the surface of a table implied by a diagonal line that extends from the side of the larger vase to the edge of the image. Weber has emphasized the roundness of the objects by modulating the opacity of ink. The print nods to the Cézanne-inspired still lifes Picasso made in 1908, including a small painting that Weber purchased in Paris and brought back with him to New York (fig. 6).[16] Picasso's image depicts a lidded vessel and what appears to be an apple, a cucumber, and a pear on a table that, heeding Cézanne's example, breaks with a parallelogram that would illusionistically represent the table. The ambiguous but distinct shapes among the objects on the table emphasize the relationships between them as well as between the objects and their setting over clarity of form. Divisions arise between the objects, first between the green cucumber and apple and the gray pear and vessel, and then between the three smaller objects and the vessel based on the shadows cast on the table. More importantly, the lid of the vessel takes on the hue of a peach flesh tone and mimics the shape of a breast. Picasso's formal experiments with bodily objects influenced Weber's printed still life. In the latter, vases stand askew, almost tilting toward each other as though in recognition of one another's vase-ness, yet the sides of the tall vase takes on a curvaceous quality in contradistinction to the rigid sides of the shorter vase. Although not quite as personified as Vincent van Gogh's famous painting of shoes, Weber's print suggests an approach to objects that imbues them with a sense of subjectivity and introduces the interrogation of a dialectic between sameness and difference as a concern throughout the series.

[16] North, "Bringing Cubism to America," 64.

Weber's investigations of subject and object become an intertwining of body and material in prints like *Nude with Upraised Arm* (fig. 7). A nude figure fills the frame of this small woodcut print, as though immanent in the woodblock. The relationship between ink and its absence does not map neatly onto the relationship between form and contour. Instead, inked and non-inked areas of the print give the body substance, intertwining the body with the printmaking materials and process. Weber makes visible the body's refusal to cohere as an image by rupturing the lower left quadrant of the image with a hard-edged volume that extends forward as though the figure's right leg has either dissolved into, or not yet emerged from, geometric form. The specific syncretism of this print becomes evident in the figure's pose and this almost playful presentation of the body's materialization.

The frontal image of the body with an arm raised and bent at the elbow echoes bodies spanning the history of art, from the Venus Genetrix sculptural type to Laocoön to Michelangelo's *Dying Slave*, and even still to Cézanne and Picasso's refigurations of this ancient postural trope (figs. 8-11). Much of Weber's work follows Cézanne's practice of interrogating form through the representation of bodies. Although Weber's debt to Cézanne is more immediately clear in paintings from a decade earlier, such as Weber's 1909 canvas *The Bathers*, painted in response to Cézanne's *Cinq Baigneuses* of 1885-1887, the woodcuts illustrate Weber's continued attempts to think through the qualities he admired in Cézanne's painting, namely their simultaneously "concrete and poetic" nature (figs. 12-13).[17] With *Nude with Upraised Arm*, Weber considers the deformation and reconstitution of bodies through representation. Where Cézanne immerses his bathers in the materiality of the world, Weber draws a body out from the

[17] Max Weber, "Preface," in Cézanne Exhibition (New York: Montross Gallery, 1916), quoted in Henry McBride, *The Flow of Art: Essays and Criticisms*, ed. Daniel Catton Rich, Henry McBride Series in Modernism and Modernity (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1997), 99; For more on Cézanne's influence on American painting, see Jill Anderson Kyle, "Cézanne and American Painting 1900 to 1920" (PhD Dissertation, The University of Texas at Austin, 1995).

basswood. Like Cézanne, however, Weber reveals the body's limits and lack of resolution through the geometric rupture. Examining the bodies in Cézanne's multiple versions of the bathers, T. J. Clark detects Cézanne's materialism in his "literalization of the body's being always subject to movements of substitution, replacement, shuttling between possible places or identities."[18] Looking across the series of woodcuts, one finds bodies subjected to movements and interrelations, which Weber accomplishes through the repetition of forms like the elongated and bisected faces.

Weber establishes a formal relation between the majority of prints in the series by reiterating facial forms inspired by West African Fang masks, resembling those that circulated among Henri Matisse, André Derain, and Maurice de Vlaminck.[19] Most of the prints depicting figures and heads feature the slender head shape found in *Head and Shoulders of Figure* that references Ngil society masks. The head shapes in *Nude with Upraised Arm* and two different prints that share the title *Seated Woman* recall the rounder faces of sculptural figures made by the Kuba peoples who lived along the Kasai river, about which Weber wrote two poems (figs. 14-16).[20] Weber replicated the simple planes of these facial forms, characterized by a long nose that fans out at the top into two arched brows. Weber's exploration of this specific facial form shows attentiveness to the formal patterns he observed in West and Central African art objects, but his engagement with these forms in his own work was refracted through Matisse and other modernists' earlier interpretations of them. Weber later recalled how Matisse would reference African art when offering instruction on representing the human body: "He would take a figurine

[18] T. J. Clark, "Freud's Cézanne," *Representations*, no. 52 (1995): 111, https://doi.org/10.2307/2928701.
[19] Jack D. Flam, "Matisse and the Fauves," in *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, ed. William Rubin, vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 215.
[20] Weber published one of these poems, "Bampense Kasai," in both Cubist Poems and his later artist book of 1926, Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts. The other poem, simply titled "Congo Form," only appeared in the latter publication. Max Weber, *Cubist Poems* (London: Chiswick Press, 1914), 14; Max Weber, *Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts* (New York: Spiral Press, 1926), n.p.

in his hands and point out to us the authentic and instinctive sculpturesque qualities, such as the marvelous workmanship, the unique sense of proportion, the supple palpitating fullness of form and equilibrium in them."[21] By integrating these African-inspired forms ten years after his class with Matisse, Weber composed bodies that, paradoxically, represent both primitiveness and modernness. The contradictory status of the body emerges again when considering the recurrence of the mask across the print series. Weber incorporates the Fang-inspired face into any array of dissimilar human figures: nudes, seated women, a mother and child, the reading rabbi. Beyond simply marking another instance in which Weber's objects transmute into subjects, the movement of the elongated face across and amongst the woodcut figures becomes a device that enables the shuttling of bodies between possible identities. This shuttling complicates the role of the mask as an aesthetic embodiment of Africanness, endowing it instead with the capacity to interrelate the variety of bodies in Weber's woodcuts.

Weber had previously explored this primitivist motif in earlier works, but the prints, by virtue of their status as a series, explore in a more concerted manner how such a motif could be moved across and between visual objects and identities. A 1917 still-life painting titled *The Egyptian Pot* depicts a small painting with a reverse image of *Head and Shoulders of Figure* on a table top with two ceramic vessels, and what appear to be two round challahs (fig. 17). The in-painting representation of *Head and Shoulders of Figure* lends the mask greater dimension in contrast to the flattened planes of the print. The images mirror each other vertically so that the face points toward the opposite side of the image, and the tones have flipped, so that the face in the print appears dark where the face in the painting appears light. This reversal suggests that Weber might have even looked at The *Egyptian Pot* or the actual painting depicted in *The*

[21] Max Weber, "Max Weber Speech on His Class with Henri Matisse" (1951), 14, Series 6, Box 7, Folder 59, Max Weber papers, 1902-2008. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/items/detail/max-weber-speech-his-class-henri-matisse-15702.

Egyptian Pot when carving the wood for the print, based on how the process of creating a carved print would switch the orientation of an image and produce an inverse relationship between what the artist carved and what transferred to the printed image.

Weber had also begun incorporating the motif of the elongated face into his representations of human figures, and specifically into representations of Jewish figures. The painting *Sabbath*, created in the same year Weber began the woodcuts, depicts two men and two women all with elongated faces bisected by long, angular noses (fig. 18). A single painting, however, does not offer the same interrelations as a series. As a series, and one devised entirely from the material of a single box, the woodcut prints draw all of Weber's sources and figures together: Fang mask, Matisse's lessons, the ancient trope of the nude, and explicitly Jewish figures. The figure of the rabbi, in other words, takes on a function in the prints that it does not fulfill in Weber's standalone paintings. Among the other figures, the rabbi locates the prints within a specific matrix of modernism that exhibited a particular concern for representing Jewishness in the world. Instead of appropriating non-Western artistic forms in the service of establishing a European center over and against a non-Western periphery, these categories themselves fall apart in Weber's prints. Importantly, Weber's prints do not assert coherent and fully constituted expressions of race, gender, or religion. They deploy figurative and formal devices that draw from but are not fully subsumed by the devices of European modernism.

The medium of the woodcut print helps Weber achieve the shuttling of bodies and identities that problematizes the categories operative in the primitivist practices of European modernism. The modernist use of the woodblock print stages a contradiction between the primitive and the modern. On the one hand, the woodblock print heralded technological progress because of its compatibility with the letter press. On the other hand, avant-garde artists looked

toward the woodcut as a model for technologies of reproduction that were not reliant on the degrading effects of industrialization. Artists in Europe looked to both early fifteenth-century European woodcuts and Japanese color woodcuts, among other sources, in their search for an art that would balance the modern and the mystical. Weber was exposed to experiments with wood during his studies with Dow and his time in Paris. As Peter Parshall and Rainer Schoch explain, "In the woodcuts by Gauguin and Edvard Munch, as well as those of subsequent generations of fauves and expressionists, the immediate, elemental language of the material so admired in early woodcuts gained an aesthetic autonomy that became a signature of modern printmaking."[22] Gauguin's prints especially influenced Weber, not only for their syncretic fusion of cultural influences but also by encouraging Weber to turn away from the sameness valued in modern printing techniques. Weber would use a similar printing technique to Gauguin's single-block relief prints, modulating pressure on the block and hand coloring impressions resulting in a deliberate imprecision.[23]

Weber's divergences from the other artists working with wood highlight the role of material in Weber's explorations of the representation of the body. Weber's woodcuts stand out from examples by other artists for their crossing of medium and image. He applied ink to the entirety of the woodblocks and incorporated the shapes of the blocks themselves into the images, resulting in six prints with crenellated borders along the bottom and another six with serif-like projections at the ends of each longer edge. In addition to making the objects themselves into images, prints like *Nude with Upraised Arm* and *Seated Figure* exhibit an interplay of light and dark that intertwines body and material (figs. 7, 19). In the latter image, the figure's body

[22] Peter Parhsall and Rainer Schoch, "Early Woodcuts and the Reception of the Primitive," in *Origins of European Printmaking: Fifteenth-Century Woodcuts and Their Public*, by Peter Parshall and Rainer Schoch (Washington, D.C.; New Haven, CT: National Gallery of Art, Washington; Yale University Press, 2005), 10.
[23] Rubenstein, *Max Weber*, 13.

consists mostly of inked planes while the figure's face consists of an uninked ellipse filled with smaller forms for the facial features. The figure faces directly outward, at the viewer, but sits so that its lap would recede backward. Weber depicts this space without ink but then uses the presence of ink to form the figure's hands in the remaining void. Because ink denotes neither form nor contour, neither positive space nor negative space, the body appears inseparable from the materiality of the print itself, quite unlike the woodcuts Weber would have encountered via his interest in Matisse's graphic arts. Derain's woodcuts for Guillaume Apollinaire's prose poem *L'Enchanteur Pourrissant* and Vlaminck's *Head of a Girl*, for example, both engage in a degree of abstraction only partially resembling to Weber's (figs. 20-21). Ink functions in neither of these prints as it does in Weber's *Seated Figure.* Both Derain and Vlamink rely heavily on the use of ink contour lines to produce coherent images. Their figures still have boundaries that clearly distinguish them from the other features of the prints. Weber's materialism thus expands upon prior engagements with the medium of the woodcut to create bodies that are disaggregated and partial, sometimes explicitly gendered or associated with Jewishness, but more often not. As a result, Weber's images as a series first beckon associations and then complicate categories of identity by repeating forms until they become ambiguous.

Weber's prints finally capitalize on an association between Jews and honey that resides in his choice of material. The stiff and roughly hewn quality of Weber's prints as well as the material fact of wood bring to mind a history of Polish vernacular woodcarving Weber might have seen before emigrating from Europe.[24] Woodcarving in the regions comprising present-day Poland was predominantly dedicated to the production of Christian devotional imagery, including Christ figures and Slavic Christian icons that would stand in altars and roadside

[24] I am grateful to Joanna Szupinska-Myers for alerting me to the robust visual similarities between Weber's woodcuts and wood carving from Poland. I use the categories of Polish and vernacular cautiously, given the state-sponsored efforts to establish a history of art that would signify Polish ethnicity.

shrines. As anthropologist and curator Erica Lehrer has stressed, the region's carvers also produced wooden figurines depicting Jews. Since the 17th century, beehives in the shape of people or animals were used in southern and western Poland, Slovakia, Austria, and southern Germany to attract bees and protect honey from theft and sorcery. Some of these beehives took the forms of Jews, and these were regarded as particularly efficacious for the production of honey based on a regional association of Jews with wealth and fertility.[25] Weber's reading rabbi and the figure in *Invocation* bear strong resemblances to figural beehives like one from the late 19th century in the shape of a Hasidic Jew that resides in the Ethnographic Museum in Kraków (figs. 22-23). The figure in *Invocation*, with arms crossed in front of its body and clearly located in an outdoor setting, appears as though it was carved out of one piece of wood, like a figurine. While *Invocation* does not feature the same interplay of light and dark that intertwines body and material elsewhere in the series, it calls up an association of Jews with honey that renders Weber's repurposing of a box of comb honey not just a serendipitous union of medium and subject, but an avenue to explore Jewish difference through the historical resonances inherent in the artist's material.

This assortment of references found in Weber's woodcuts and his particular treatment of the material constitute an emergent aesthetic of diasporic primitivism. The notion of a specifically diasporic primitivism brings to light a misalignment between the heterogeneity found in Weber's woodcuts and the effect of syncretic visions found in other practices of modernist primitivism, especially those that confront racial and sexual difference in the context of colonialist tourism. Griselda Pollock draws on theories of tourism to understand the cultural

[25] Erica Lehrer, "Land of Milk and Honey," Lucky Jews: Poland's Jewish Figurines, accessed March 28, 2021, http://www.luckyjews.com/land-of-milk-and-honey/; See also Lehrer's introduction to a publication accompanying an exhibition on the topic of Jewish figurines in Poland: Erica Lehrer, "Introduction," in *Na szczęście to Żyd: Polskie figurki Żydów (Lucky Jews: Poland's Jewish figurines)*, ed. Erica T Lehrer, trans. Joanna Warchoł (Kraków: Korporacja Ha!art, 2014), 23–29.

forms and practices of colonialism and imperialism. For Pollock, tourism captures the movement of people from a metropole to locales from which they source inspiration in response to the condition of modernity. "Through tourism," Pollock writes, "the labour, the social forms and cultural belief systems of other societies are made into signifiers of the metropolitan tourist's search for a missing totality and a closed history, a resistance against modernity's insistent creation of discontinuity and fragmentation."[26] Under Pollock's analysis, Gauguin's amalgamation of visual forms from Egyptian, Javanese, and other cultures in his representations of Tahitian women constitute a consolidation of difference defined against Western modernity, even as Gaugain may have attempted to confront the conditions of French colonialism in Tahiti (fig. 24). Tourism, however, describes only one type of movement useful for analyzing the cultural forms of modernity. Diaspora describes another type of movement that forms the basis for a different politics of representation—one that opens up to difference rather than defining it against a Eurocentric center.

The notion of diasporic primitivism helps parse how an artist's appropriations of non-Western artistic forms can work to navigate rather than manage difference. Unlike Gauguin, Weber did not travel to colonial destinations in search of cultural purity that would provide an escape from modernity. This is not to suggest that Gauguin or other artists occupied stable subject positions. Hal Foster unpacks the muddied subjectivities in practices of modernist primitivism, arguing that as much as avant-garde practices "explored new object images and subject-positions opened by the imperialist-industrialist dynamics of modernity," they remained a "*dis*identification with white, patriarchal, bourgeois society."[27] Nevertheless, Weber can still be said to occupy a different location than Gauguin relative to white, patriarchal, bourgeois society.

[26] Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Garde Gambits, 1888-1893: Gender and the Color of Art History*, The Walter Neurath Memorial Lectures 24th (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1993), 67.
[27] Hal Foster, "'Primitive' Scenes," *Critical Inquiry* 20, no. 1 (1993): 76, emphasis in original.

In Weber's case, the exploration of subject position and identification can be best explained not by the psychoanalytic dynamics Foster traces in the work of Gauguin, Picasso, and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner but against the discursive and historical backdrop of the racial instability of Jewishness in the United States. Historian Matthew Frye Jacobson traces how American racial categorization ascribed distinct visible and physical characteristics to Jewishness before the mid-twentieth century.[28] These distinctions, and Jewish responses to them, varied greatly depending on the terms in which they were expressed and their ideological purpose. Following World War I, concerns about Jewish distinctiveness took on a greater significance in the United States. Eastern European immigrants, like Weber, who had felt less pressure regarding Jewish racial identity relative to Jews who had immigrated earlier could no longer avoid the problematic of Jewish racial status. In this historical context, the choice to represent Jewishness in forms drawn from non-Western artistic sources can also be seen as an act of disidentification with whiteness but by an artist whose whiteness was increasingly unstable.

In the same years that Weber created and began to disseminate his woodcuts, the Jew became a greater focus for debate in mainstream U.S. culture. Art historian Jacqueline Francis has argued that Weber's modernist practice at this time garnered the identification of "racial art" and began to coalesce as a set of strategies for negotiating racial and cultural iconology. Francis details how, during the early 1920s, critics began to explicitly ascribe a sense of Jewishness to Weber's work. In 1923, as Weber reemerged from his hiatus, the critic Henry McBride wrote that, "the something that has happened to him since his last appearance as an artist and that has made him Jewish also made him doubly important. It is an immense thing to have a background

[28] Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 176–87.

and speak for a race."[29] Through their interplay of both heterogeneity and resemblance, Weber's woodcuts propose a model of visual cultural identity that cannot be parsed from looking only at Weber's more explicitly Jewish paintings. The woodcuts propose a more flexible and open (perhaps even *honeycombed*) Jewish subject position, one that religious historian Daniel Boyarin and anthropologist Jonathan Boyarin identify as the great promise of diaspora. Boyarin and Boyarin propose diaspora as a theoretical and historical model for a cultural identity that stands against the model of national self-determination imposed by Western imperialism and respects the "positive value of cultural differences."[30] Without wishing away the problematics of Weber's mining of artistic forms from colonized African peoples, a move toward thinking with diaspora helps to locate the specific formal dynamics and sociocultural context that produced and distinguishes Weber's diasporic primitivism from the practices of European modernists.

Yiddish Modernism and the Ambivalence of Jewish Difference

Weber's diasporic primitivism appears more pronounced when considering his woodcuts in the context of Yiddish culture. His choice to affiliate with Yiddish literary modernists brings to light an affinity between Weber's explorations of Jewishness in relation to other cultural identities and the particular matrix of Yiddish modernism advanced by *Di Yunge* writers in their journal *Shriftn*. The journal offered Weber the opportunity to publish an essay alongside his woodblocks that directed attention to them as sites of identification for a Yiddish-speaking audience. In the context of Yiddish modernism, the encounters occasioned by Weber's woodcuts

[29] Henry McBride, "Art News and Reviews: Both Amuses and Confuses: Work of Modernist Creates a Wide Difference of Opinion," New York Sun, November 18, 1923, n.p., quoted in Jacqueline Francis, *Making Race: Modernism and "Racial Art" in America* (Seattle, WA: University of Washington Press, 2012), 49.
[30] Daniel Boyarin and Jonathan Boyarin, "Diaspora: Generation and the Ground of Jewish Identity," *Critical Inquiry* 19, no. 4 (1993): 711.

aimed to bring Jewishness into relation with other cultures rather than establishing Jewishness as a usurping or colonizing force.

Weber's affiliation with *Di Yunge* grew out of the artist's movement through organizations that often identified their members with Jewish culture even if the organizations did not advocate explicitly Jewish platforms. Weber likely came into contact with *Di Yunge* writers through his involvement in artists' organizations through which Jewish artists and cultural organizers sought to foster an interest in the arts among Jewish, mostly Yiddish-speaking immigrants. Weber participated in multiple exhibitions held by the People's Art Guild, an organization that mounted art exhibitions between 1915 and 1918. The founder and key organizer of the People's Art Guild, John Weichsel, was an Eastern European immigrant like Weber and concerned himself with the social and political role of art among the Jews living on the Lower East Side. Weber and Weichsel had probably met prior to Weichsel's founding of the People's Art Guild at the anarchist Ferrer Center established in 1911. Weichsel lectured on art and culture at the center to an audience composed primarily of working-class immigrant Jews, and Weber attended art classes and events there in the same period.[31]

Weber and other artists who frequented the Ferrer Center became active in the People's Art Guild when Weichsel established the organization in 1915. In contrast to the non-sectarian Ferrer Center, Weichsel dedicated the People's Art Guild to both preserving Yiddish culture and to bringing it into conversation with non-Jewish cultural movements in New York. In May 1917, Weichsel and the People's Art Guild organized an exhibition at the Jewish Daily Forward

[31] Allan Antliff, *Anarchist Modernism: Art, Politics, and the First American Avant-Garde* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 109.

Building that brought together works by Jewish artists from the Lower East Side, including Weber, with works from local, non-Jewish artists.[32]

After his affiliation with the People's Art Guild, Weber increasingly worked within institutional contexts that sought to further Jewish cultural traditions by encouraging Jewish artists and writers to engage with non-Jewish cultural movements. Another Jewish artist and writer, Jennings Tofel, who also exhibited at the People's Art Guild Exhibition, helped establish a connection between Weber and David Ignatoff, the founder of *Shriftn*. Tofel affiliated with both *Di Yunge* and the group of poets who followed in *Di Yunge*'s heels known as *In Zikh* ("In Oneself") or the Introspectives and would go on to found the Jewish Art Center in Greenwich Village in 1925. In an article published in the March 1927 issue of the Yiddish Communist monthly *Der Hammer* about the Jewish Art Center, Tofel claimed that Ignatoff, through *Shriftn*, was the first to exhibit work by Jewish artists and was "perhaps the only Jewish writer to encourage modern free expression in the arts."[33] Although Ignatoff's efforts to highlight the work of artists led to rifts among *Di Yunge* writers, *Shriftn* stood out in the 1920s as the highest-profile joint project of Jewish art and text, rather than simply a literary project that included illustrations.[34] Weber's participation in *Shriftn* emerged from an institutional context concerned

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[32] Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe, "Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900-1945," in *Painting a Place in America: Jewish Artists in New York, 1900-1945*, ed. Norman L. Kleeblatt and Susan Chevlowe (New York: Jewish Museum, 1991), 113.

[33] Jennings Tofel, "Der Yidisher Kunst Zenter [The Jewish Art Center]," *Der Hammer*, March 1927, 53, translation author's own.

[34] Treating Yiddish literature and art together pursues a question that has recently garnered attention in Jewish and Yiddish studies. Benjamin and Barbara Harshav's masterful bilingual anthology American Yiddish Poetry of 1986 reproduces visual work by artists including Max Weber, Raphael Soyer, Abraham Walkowitz, Louis Lozowick, Ben Shahn, and Chaim Gross alongside poetry that was originally published not merely in the same geographical and historical contexts but sometimes on the same page of a journal. Rightly distinguishing between visual art and literature in terms of their modes for communicating meaning to audiences, the Harshavs note some parallels between poetry and visual art but place art in an illustrative function rather than seeing it as an active component of Yiddish modernism. Benjamin Harshav and Barbara Harshav, eds., *American Yiddish Poetry: A Bilingual Anthology* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1986), 54–62; At the 2018 Annual Conference for the Association for Jewish Studies, scholars on a panel titled "Visions of Yiddish: Toward a History of Modernist Yiddish Literature and Art" and chaired by Maya Barzilai opened the question of the relation between image and text as a problem in Yiddish studies. They conceived of "'Yiddish Art' as an inter- and trans-medial form." "Visions of Yiddish: Toward

with the distinctiveness of Jewish culture and should be considered as an active component of Yiddish modernism.

The fourth issue of *Shriftn*, published in the fall of 1919, inaugurated the journal's approach to visual art as standalone content. The issue also included Weber's first contributions to the journal in the form of three poems, two of which he had first published in English in *Cubist Poems*. He contributed more material to the sixth, seventh, and eighth issues of *Shriftn*, spanning diverse media and subject matter. The sixth issue included reproductions of eighteen artworks, including ten prints from the woodcut series, along with ten poems and a Yiddish translation of his essay "Things," which he had originally published in English in a 1916 compilation of writings titled *Essays on Art*. Both the woodcuts and poems demonstrate the scope of Weber's subject matter.

The selection of prints and their juxtapositions in the pages of the journal carry forth Weber's interest in reversal, heterogeneity, and materiality. One page with *Head and Shoulders of Figure* and *Seated Woman* captures the reversal of light and dark and the recurrence of the Fang-inspired face (fig. 25). A page with *Invocation* and *Crouching Nude* brings together a print with religious overtones that resembles figural beehives of Jews used in Poland with another inspired by monumental chacmool sculptures from Mesoamerica (fig. 26). The inclusion of the *Figure Composition*, with its crowded composition and decorative qualities, on another page attests to the series' stylistic diversity (fig. 27). The mix of vertical and horizontal presentation formats, and the inclusion of the different woodblock shapes, attests to the editorial care Weber took to highlight not only the diversity of style and subject matter in his prints but also the variation in the woodblock form itself.

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a History of Modernist Yiddish Literature and Art," Association for Jewish Studies 50th Annual Conference, accessed March 28, 2021, http://tinyurl.com/y7zka2a8.

Weber's choice of text supports the idea that he viewed his woodcuts as material sites for identification. He translated and reprinted his short essay "Things" in *Shriftn's* sixth issue along with the woodcuts. Of the twelve essays in Weber's collection *Essays on Art*, "Things" concerns itself most with questions of materiality and the relations between people and things. In the essay, Weber inveighs against the separation of art from "Things useful and intellectual."[35] The essay expresses a belief in the unity of spirit and matter. Declarations like "every simple thing [is] a part of the whole, spiritual, living, moving cosmos" evince what art historian Linda Dalrymple Henderson has identified as the influence of English Utopian socialist and poet Edward Carpenter's writing on monism and consciousness and loosely evokes the theory of divine immanence central to Hasidic belief and practice.[36] Weber writes, "Things of quality, providing we are sensitive to them, draw us out of ourselves. Through things we ever establish new relationships between ourselves and the principles that underlie things."[37] For Weber, prefiguring Martin Heidegger's phenomenology, material things are not only significant based on their thingliness, but also because they exist in relation to embodied individuals.[38] By choosing this essay to accompany the prints in *Shriftn*, Weber stresses the relations between selves and the prints as objects. Weber's prints however must be regarded as a particular type of thing, a thing that carries an image. Accordingly, they can be seen as sites of encounter that give rise to new relationships with those who view them—in this case, with a Yiddish-speaking audience.

Literary scholar Diana Fuss's succinct definition of the psychoanalytic process of identification as "the detour through the other that defines a self" helps imagine the encounter

[35] Max Weber, *Essays on Art* (New York: William Edwin Rudge, 1916), 31; for the Yiddish, see Max Weber, "Zachen [Things]," *Shriftn* 6 (1920): 25.
[36] Weber, *Essays on Art*, 32.
[37] Weber, 35.
[38] Heidegger conceives of a thing as a self-supporting object that gathers together the components of the world and appears only when approached with vigilance. Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 163–80.

between a Yiddish-speaker and Weber's woodcuts.[39] Fuss revisits Sigmund Freud to confront the ambivalences and violences of identification as a model of self-other relations. The heterogeneity explored through the concept of diasporic cultural identity becomes more pronounced and externalized with the reproduction of the prints in *Shriftn*, given how Weber's essay directs one to view his works as encounters with an external world that leave traces on subjects and their interactions. In parsing the politics of identification, Fuss importantly warns of the imperializing dynamics of identifying with and interiorizing or possessing others, and indeed Weber's prints do threaten to annihilate the otherness of objects from colonized cultures by laying them bare for encounters in the pages of *Shriftn*. They also occur in a context that stands at a linguistic and cultural remove from either European or American culture. As Cristina Stanciu argues with reference to Étienne Balibar's notion of dissimilation, the choice to write and publish in Yiddish established a degree of inaccessibility around Jewish cultural production in the U.S. that contested the demands of Americanization.[40] Accordingly, Weber's woodcuts can be viewed apart from the dominant racial ideologies in the United States.

The context of *Shriftn* offers some cultural specificity to the process of identification occasioned by Weber's prints. By virtue of the Yiddish language, the journal stands apart from mainstream culture. If difference and dissimilation inhere in the act of choosing Yiddish, *Shriftn* supplies a context for Weber's woodcuts in which difference already has value. As a result, the encounter with non-Western forms in the woodcuts is one of Jews confronting others and recognizing their otherness. This sort of encounter was not unique to literature but rather a dynamic that could be found throughout Yiddish culture. Goldstein observes with regard to the Yiddish press, for instance, that "Yiddish sources often expressed an uncharacteristic empathy

[39] Diana Fuss, *Identification Papers* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 2.
[40] Cristina Stanciu, "Strangers in America: Yiddish Poetry at the Turn of the Twentieth Century and the Demands of Americanization," *College English* 76, no. 1 (2013): 60.

for African Americans because they were trying to mitigate what was perceived as the cultural loss associated with Jews' identification with the white mainstream."[41] Weber's appropriation of forms remain conditioned by colonialism, but they also issue a challenge to respect the particular existences of others, which Boyarin and Boyarin view as the greatest contribution of diaspora.

In addition to the Yiddish language, *Shriftn*'s practices of translation shaped the encounters between its readers and the world. The language of *Shriftn* may have made it inaccessible to all but an audience proficient in Yiddish, but it directed that Yiddish-reading audience outward to the world through its practices of translation, even including a translation of Walt Whitman's poem "Salut au Monde" in the first issue. Issues four, six, seven, and eight, in which Weber's work appeared, included translations of poetry by Whitman, Native American chant, Aesop's *Fables*, philosophical texts by Henri Bergson, the Zohar, the *Rubayyat*, German and Russian verse, Japanese haikus, Chinese poetry, Egyptian poetry, Arabic poetry, and a text on the birth of the Buddha. Focusing on *Shriftn*'s translations of Walt Whitman and Native American chant, Rubinstein argues that the journal "sought to fuse the cosmopolitan and the local, the international and the American, the cultural and countercultural."[42] The journal's complicated engagements with both modernism and primitivism through the Yiddish language employed the foreign literary cultures of the journal's translated works in the contradictory and muddled work of crafting a collective identity, even if that identity would remain eccentric and dissimulated.

Weber's poetry fits neatly into Rubinstein's schema. She reads two of his poems in the sixth issue as echoes of Native American chants found in an anthology Ignatoff had consulted for translations in *Shriftn*, but proposes that by concluding the group of poems with one titled

[41] Goldstein, *The Price of Whiteness*, 154.
[42] Rubinstein, *Members of the Tribe*, 73.

"Hanukkah Lights," Weber was not simply imitating an approximated Native American chant, but attempting to bring together Jewishness with what he understood to be Native American culture.[43] His concern for exploring Jewishness in the world takes on a cosmic dimension in a poem he contributed to *Shriftn*'s seventh issue. Titled "*A Pintele*" ("A Dot"), the poem appears to have been first published in *Shriftn* rather than in another publication, which would be appropriate given its deployment of a dot motif to represent Jewish essence. The Yiddish expression and Hasidic concept of *dos pintele yid* gained currency in the twentieth century among Yiddish speakers as a reference to an internal spark of Jewishness. The concept stems from the smallest letter in the Hebrew alphabet that signifies God's name (י) out of which the Yiddish word for Jew emerged (*yid*, יִיד) and the diacritical dot found beneath the letter in the latter word. *Dos pintele yid* came to signify the core of Jewishness found even in assimilated or alienated Jews. Although Weber's poem never uses the word "Jewish" (which in Yiddish translates to *yiddish*, יִידִישׁ), lines like "Scarcely a dot in the world am I" read as an identificatory assertion of Jewishness amidst the infiniteness of the universe.[44] Like the reading rabbi in Weber's woodcuts, the referential invocation of *dos pintele yid* introduces Jewishness to the world. By evoking, but not explicitly referencing the concept of *dos pintele yid*, Weber is able to retain a sense of Yiddish cultural specificity in a smaller, almost subliminal scale. Through this small scale, he asserts a specifically Yiddish Jewishness through his poetry in a manner that rejects a poetics of cultural dominance. *Shriftn*'s expansive content, heterogenous in both its cultural provenance and artistic media, allowed Weber's translated essay to condition an

[43] Rubinstein, 82.

[44] For another use of this concept in poetry, see Jacob Glatshteyn's poem "1919," which places the spark of Jewishness amidst the chaos of the world at the close of World War I. In contrast to Weber's comparison of the dot to a star or pebble, Glatshteyn puts forward a darker vision of a dot. In Glatshteyn's poem, the dot is all that remains of the poem's protagonist, condemned to roll through the streets for eternity with no escape. Glatshteyn's poem offers a critique of Symbolist poetics found throughout work by Di Yunge writers but indicates the enduring appeal of the spark theory of innate Jewishness. Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 208–9.

approach to the woodcuts as objects that could stage encounters in an already decentered context relative to mainstream U.S. culture. Weber's contributions to *Shriftn* exemplified the journal's project of navigating non-Yiddish literary cultures while retaining a spark of Jewishness, however small or unstable.

"That stranger—the woodsman!": Weber's Woodcuts as Golems

The intertwining of body and material in Weber's exploration of Jewish difference culminates in the pairing of Weber's prints with H. Leivick's Yiddish-language drama *Der Goylem*. Leivick (1888-1962) worked on the text from 1917 to 1920 and first published it in 1921 through *Amerike*, the same press that published *Shriftn*. *Der Goylem* tells a story of how the chief rabbi of Prague created the Golem, a magical being out of clay, to protect a nearby community of Jews from increasing threats of Christian violence. The Golem has an uneasy relationship with Jewish community it was created to protect. Hovering on the border of the community, the Golem's presence begins to provoke anxiety among the Jewish community. The rabbi, who has been growing increasingly fearful of the neighboring Christians, begins commanding the Golem to undertake various tasks and missions, on which it confronts an array of local Christian figureheads and violent spiritual forces. After completing the rabbi's missions, the Golem starts to worry about its role in the community. Ultimately, the Golem becomes so embattled and anxious that it lashes out, attacking the very Jews it was created to protect. In order to end the violence, the rabbi returns the Golem to its inanimate state.

Leivick and Weber took vastly different routes to the United States and to Yiddish modernism, but, like Weber, Leivick also came to choose Yiddish and advocate for its diasporic potential. Leivick, the oldest of nine children, was born in a small town called Ihumen in the

Russian Empire's Pale of Settlement, part of the Minsk region of present-day Belarus. Born to a descendant of a rabbi who was dismayed to find himself making a living by teaching Yiddish to servant girls, Leivick spent his first twenty-four years in Tsarist Russia where he received a traditional Jewish education and studied at a yeshiva. During the Revolution of 1905, Leivick joined the Jewish Labour Bund, which viewed Yiddish as an effective tool for communicating economic and political ideas to the Jewish masses. Arrested for his involvement in the Bund, Leivick was sentenced to four years of forced labor and exile in Siberia. Comrades who had previously escaped to the United States snuck Leivick money, enabling him to escape Siberia and make his way to the United States in 1913. He settled in New York, becoming a prominent figure in Yiddish literature, known for poetry and plays that combined Jewish mysticism and a version of humanism influenced by Russian Symbolism. He even traveled to the P.E.N. International conference in Buenos Aires as the representative of the Yiddish P.E.N. Club, where he delivered a speech about the diasporic dimensions of Yiddish literature. His speech recognized foremost how Yiddish moved through the world but carried associations with Jewish difference.[45] Like Weber and the other contributors to *Shriftn*, Leivick thought deeply about how Yiddish might bring Jews into relation with the world.

The publication of *Der Goylem* helped secure Leivick a preeminent perch in the Yiddish literary world, in part because it so compellingly explored the dynamics of relations between Jews and non-Jews. The figure of the Golem had long been a staple of Jewish folklore and popular culture, fixating religious scholars, writers, artists, and publics with its supernatural origins and ability to express constantly mutating anxieties about Jewish subjectivity. In Jewish folklore, the Golem is a mythic being created by rabbis and mystics to serve various purposes.

[45] International Congress of the P.E.N. Clubs and PEN (Organization), eds., *XIV International Congress of the P.E.N. Clubs, September 5 to 15, 1936 under the auspices of the P.E.N. Club of Buenos Aires: speeches and discussions* (Buenos Aires: PEN International, 1937), 135–36.

Over time, the figure became intertwined with the accusations known as blood libel, in which Jews were accused of murdering Christian children in order to drain them of their blood and bake it into *matzoh* for Passover. Blood libel accusations first arose in the twelfth century but became more common with the development of printing technologies in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries.[46] Charges of blood libel spurred new forms of social and legal discrimination and violent attacks against Jews, especially in Tsarist Russia.[47] Throughout the fifteenth century the folkloric tradition around the Golem cohered into a protective figure that would defend Jews against anti-Semitic attacks.

In the early twentieth century, the Golem legend became associated with Juda Lowe ben Bezalel (1525-1609), also known as the Maharal (an acronym for "Our Teacher, Rabbi Loew" in Hebrew), who was the chief rabbi of Prague. The association emerged in 1909 when Polish rabbi Yudl Rosenberg, responding to a series of particularly destructive pogroms waged under the pretext of a blood libel, published a version of the Golem myth he claimed was based on a manuscript by the Maharal's son-in-law. Leivick's subsequent reinterpretation of this version of the legend gained enormous popularity, extending far beyond Ignatoff and *Shriftn*'s regular readership. The *Lexicon of Yiddish Literature* of 1963 observed how the play permeated common conversation amongst the Yiddish readership:

> People read and re-read it, debated and wrote about the problems of the book: World liberation and Jewish redemption, the role of matter and the role of the spirit in the process of redemption, the Jewish messiah and the Christian Savior, Maharal and the Golem of Prague, the masses and the individual, creator and creation, Realism and Symbolism—all this was stirred up in the 1920s by Leivick's *Golem*.[48]

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[46] Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2020), 9.
[47] See Robert Weinberg, *Blood Libel in Late Imperial Russia: The Ritual Murder Trial of Mendel Beilis* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2014), https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt16gzjhc.
[48] The Lexicon of Yiddish Literature (New York, 1963), quoted in Harshav and Harshav, *American Yiddish Poetry*, 676.

Leivick's 1921 publication of *Der Goylem* contained eight of Weber's woodcut prints, each introducing a scene of the play (fig. 28). The two projects did not stay intertwined forever as *Der Goylem* took on different formats: elaborate stage productions of *Der Goylem* began taking place throughout the Yiddish-speaking world starting in 1925. The pairing of image and text in that first 1921 edition can be seen as a joint exploration by Weber and Leivick of the dynamics of identification in diaspora, including ambivalence and violence.

The Golem, as an animated object created to protect the continued survival of a Jewish community, suggests a particular model for communal identification premised on an ambivalent relationship between a group and the site or locus of their identification. As both an object and force that stands in a "peculiar relationship to the whole clan," simultaneously feared and protective, the Golem itself resembles a Freudian totem.[49] Freud's 1913 text *Totem and Taboo* examines psychoanalytic identification at the communal level. Freud narrates how transgressions of authority establish a set of prohibitions and restrictions—taboos—that become embodied in totemic objects and help calcify group identity. In Leivick's text, the Golem's mere presence renders these taboos linguistically explicit, in the rabbi's repeated admonitions to the Golem and his granddaughter that they are forbidden to touch or have any physical contact. Furthermore, the Golem quite clearly exists to fulfill the aims of taboos, which include protecting important members of the community from harm and safeguarding the weak from the magical, insidious influence of apostate chiefs and priests. As a totem, the Golem promises the protection and continuity of the Jewish community, even as the Jews regard the Golem warily.

Weber's process of creating the prints destined them to serve as sites for communal identification, like the Golem. By fragmenting and carving into the box his brother gifted to him, Weber figuratively rejected a familial bond as though abiding by the incest taboo central to

[49] Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, trans. A. A. Brill (London: Routledge, 1919), n.p., chap. 1, para. 6.

Freud's picture of totemic culture. More importantly, Weber changed how the box fit within networks of changed akin to a process identified in anthropology as a process for producing sacred objects with which a group can confirm its being. Rubenstein's narration of how Weber finished the honey, sensed opportunity in the soft basswood, and used the weight of his body to create the first impression of the series indicates a sense of playful experimentation, drawing Weber to the precedent of the readymade that had quite recently reconfigured the relations between the realm of art and objects that move through the world as commodities.[50] As George Baker theorizes, the readymade both mimicked the form of the commodity and held out against exchange.[51] Baker's account of the readymade does not map neatly onto Weber's repurposing of the box, but it does direct attention to the ways Weber's objects enter into and resist circulation.

Weber created reproducible art objects through which forms like the elongated mask circulate, while limiting the circulation of the prints by reproducing them in Yiddish-language contexts. In terms of material, Weber's use of the box put an end to the exchange of an object as a gift by taking a knife to its many panels. In his studies of gift giving, the anthropologist Marcel Mauss characterizes as sacrificial the act of destruction performed in the institution of gift exchange known as potlatch, practiced by Native Americans in the Pacific Northwest.[52] Through sacrifice, Weber removes the box from the realm of the ordinary and transforms it into something sacred.[53] The anthropologist Maurice Godelier's revisions and extensions of Mauss's theories of the gift illuminate the function of sacred things as objects for communal identification. Where Mauss viewed the destruction of gifts as primarily competitive, Godelier described how an object

[50] Rubenstein, *Max Weber*, 29.
[51] George Baker, *The Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2007), 137–42.
[52] Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. Ian Cunnison (London: Cohen & West, 1966), 40.
[53] Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, Blackwell Readers (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 1997), 170, emphasis in original.

functions as a site of identification when it becomes sacred. He writes that when an object ceases to circulate in daily life, it "comes to stand at an essential place in the society, at the place to which each clan feels obliged to return periodically because it comes to encounter itself to confirm its being, its identity, its substance, preserved from time and conserved in time, in short it comes to confront its origins."[54] Together, these theories sketch how the destruction of the gift produces something sacred in which societies confront their being. By destroying the box, Weber produced something sacred, a series of prints that would unite matter and spirit and stage identifications, however ambivalent. This process unites the woodcuts and the Golem as objects that undergo material transformations that locate them in a peculiar relationship to a Jewish community.

The specific prints reproduced alongside Leivick's text give rise to a synergy between Weber's woodcuts and the Golem based on their shared status as loci of cross-cultural encounters. As a figure meant to stand between the Jews and non-Jews of Prague, the Golem occupies an ambiguous status in relation to the Jewish community. Other character's in *Der Goylem* regard the Golem with suspicion and question its Jewishness and foreignness. The Maharal's wife and granddaughter, among others in the community, frequently describe the Golem as a "strange man" who "doesn't really seem to be a Jew."[55] The prints Weber selected to illustrate the play might elicit similar reactions from a reader of Leivick's text. Prints like *Nude with Upraised Arm*, *Figure Composition*, and *Crouching Nude* evoke the strangeness of the Golem but, more specifically, evoke the Golem's position as a communal boundary (figs. 7, 29-30). *Nude with Upraised Arm* decorates the title page for the first scene of Leivick's play, titled "Clay." At the opening of the first scene, the Maharal has just finished sculpting the

[54] Maurice Godelier, *The Enigma of the Gift*, trans. Nora Scott (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1999), 169.
[55] H. Leivick, "The Golem," in *The Golem*, ed. and trans. Joachim Neugroschel, 1st ed (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 129.

Golem, which lies inanimate, waiting for the Maharal to bring it to life. In this context, *Nude with Upraised Arm*, with its ambiguously gendered body tightly confined to the borders of the image, captures the Golem in a state of imminence. Of the eight woodcuts used to illustrate the text, *Figure Composition* presents the most ornamental image and accompanies the scene in which the Maharal attempts to convince the Golem that it is a human and the Maharal's wife and granddaughter question the Golem's origins and Jewishness. A figure can be discerned from the crowded composition, but decorative forms confound the figure's boundaries, encapsulating in visual form the Golem's identity crisis. *Crouching Nude*, the image inspired by the chacmool statue, accompanies the last scene of the play, in which the Golem attacks the Jews of Prague and the Maharal puts it to sleep. All together, the material and visual qualities of Weber's prints, their intertwining of body and material, represent the strangeness of the Golem. In turn, *Der Goylem*, as a text, substantiates Weber's prints as sites of communal identification. The prints become Golems at the borders of collective identity, loci of the ambivalences and violences that processes of identification always entail. They embody an outsideness that helps Jewish community crystallize and, alongside *Der Goylem*, portend the danger of sealing Jewishness off from the world too hermetically.

The specific conjunctions of image and text around Weber's woodcuts furthered Weber's interrogations of Jewishness and its visual representation. The syncretic vision of the prints and Weber's concern for intertwining body and material suggested how the appropriation of artistic forms could function to open up to difference rather than contain difference against a European center. Weber carried out these explorations in the context of Yiddish modernism and specifically in the pages of *Shriftn*, where the prints put forward forms of Jewishness in the world. Viewing the prints alongside the text of *Der Goylem*, finally, emphasizes their function as sites for

communal identification while warning of the violences of defining a group over and against another. Weber's woodcuts testify to far more than a period of introspection and self-discovery as Barr saw it. They can be seen as a crucial moment in Weber's artistic explorations of communal subjectivity and identity with specific attention to the expression of Jewishness in relation to others.

Coda: The Problematics of Identity and an Artistic Genealogy of Diaspora

The relation between Weber's woodcuts and his paintings of Jewish subjects delineates a shift from explorations of identification to identity. If Weber's woodcuts of 1919-1920 and their specific dissemination in the context of Yiddish modernism staged recognitions and misrecognitions that allowed for a diasporic cultural identity to manifest in the realm of representation, his later work offers a glimpse at how those processes of identification always problematize identity. This can be examined by bringing into conversation Weber's paintings of Jewish subjects and a compilation of woodcuts and poems with no distinct signifiers of Jewishness. Matthew Baigell estimates that Weber created approximately 60 paintings, prints, and at least one sculpture on Jewish subjects from the 1920s to the 1940s.[56] Weber published a 1926 artist book entitled *Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts*, which included material referencing many peoples and cultures except, notably, Jewish people or culture. At first, this excision seems to enact the limitations and exclusions constitutive of purportedly stable identities, as though Weber definitively split Jew and non-Jew in his oeuvre, but self-other relations that continually problematize identity remain.

The Talmudists of 1934 offers a representative example of Weber's images of religious Jews engaged in study and other communal activities and contains evidence of continuity with

[56] Matthew Baigell, "Max Weber's Jewish Paintings," *American Jewish History* 88, no. 3 (2000): 342.

Weber's woodcuts (fig. 31). In *The Talmudists*, figures bow their heads and raise their hands as they engage in vigorous analysis of holy texts. Paintings like this are often described as taking on an expressionist style relative to Weber's prior output, but they in fact demonstrate the impossibility of escaping the traces of prior encounters.[57] Beyond the obvious similarity with the subject matter of *Rabbi Reading*, which also depicted a figure bent over an open book, the painting echoes some of the ambiguous spatial dimensions found in the woodcuts. The architectural features depicted in the painting seem to extend into the foreground to enclose the figures within both the depicted space of a synagogue on the Lower East Side and the space of the painting. Like the woodcuts then, *The Talmudists* integrates medium and image. Additionally, the faces of *The Talmudists* and other paintings carry forward the facial forms found in the woodcuts. The 1926 painting *Draped Head* appears to have adapted the substantive volumes of woodcuts like *Head* (figs. 32-33). The nose of the woman pictured in *Draped Head* does not fully bisect her face but still fans out into arched brows over gigantic eyes. The alternating lights and darks around the figure's face in *Head and Shoulders of Figure* now settle into a blue veil and deep brown twists of hair (fig. 1). Fuss's definition of identification as the detour through the other that defines the self maps neatly onto the movement from Weber's Fang-inspired woodcuts to these paintings of Jewish subjects.

The splitting of primitive from Jew, however, could never occur cleanly. *Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts* printed by Spiral Press in New York, contained a selection of Weber's woodcuts and poetry. The collection included several of the woodcuts previously examined and poetry that addressed a Chinese carving, wooden African masks, totem poles of the Pacific Northwest, the figure of the Buddha, Aztec gods, and the Acropolis of ancient Greece. Art

[57] Jacqueline Francis argues that expressionism was a strategic and vital choice for Weber's project of representing observant Jews of European descent. Francis, *Making Race*, 60.

historian Efram Burk rightly notes the remarkably inclusive nature of this primitivist and argues that it reduced the cultures it addressed into a homogenous whole.[58] Unlike the series of woodcuts as a whole or Weber's contributions to *Shriftn*, the components of *Primitives* did not include any visual or literary allusions to Jewishness, nor were they published and circulated in a network conditioned by the Yiddish language. However, the cordoning off of Jewishness from primitiveness could not be complete, not least because the paintings of Jewish subjects would always suggest the indebtedness of representations of Jewishness to imagery representative of non-White bodies and cultures. *Primitives* retained traces of Jewishness, particularly around Weber himself. In his introduction to the artist book, the journalist Benjamin de Casseres characterizes the artist as a "veritable primitive."[59] Given McBride's earlier comments identifying Weber with the subjects of his Jewish paintings and the control Weber had over his artist book, Weber's willingness to include this comment preserves the crossings of self and other rather than fully isolating Jewishness.

Weber's work came to operate as a touchstone for diasporic cultural identity in visual representation. The artist R. B. Kitaj (1932-2007), who published an essay in book form titled *First Diasporist Manifesto* in 1989, offered a visual citation of Weber that shows how Weber's work came to reside in the imagination of an artist thinking deeply about the relation between diaspora and art. The citation takes the form of a self-portrait Kitaj made late in his life titled *Self-Portrait as Hasidic Dancer (After Max Weber)* (fig. 34). The spare image features a single image with extremities extended in ecstatic dance. To create the image, Kitaj separated out the rightmost figure in Weber's 1940 painting *Hasidic Dance*. Where Weber's figure appears

[58] Efram Burk, "A Singular Vision: Max Weber's Artist Book, Primitives," *Southeastern College Art Conference Review* 14, no. 2 (2002): 127.
[59] Benjamin de Casseres, "Introduction," in Max Weber, Primitives: Poems and Woodcuts (New York: Spiral Press, 1926), n.p., quoted in Burk, 129.

enmeshed in a richly colored group, Kitaj rendered the figure almost entirely in contour lines, with some black shading on his hat and a dash of white to color his beard. Weber's figure has become a trace floating on the page, perhaps the proverbial *luftmensch* whose connections to his native ground have become tenuous or perhaps a projection of an autonomous self that holds out against the forces of assimilation.[60] The portrait embodies the condition Kitaj laid out in his *First Diasporist Manifesto*. In the text, he articulates diasporism as an "unsettled mode of art-life, performed by a painter who feels out of place much of the time."[61] Although he does not mention Weber in the text, Kitaj identifies precursors to diasporist art in the "briefly fluttering congeries of modernist styles [and] Yiddishkeit," a set of terms that can now be understood to include Weber as a key practitioner.[62] Kitaj's self-portrait alone does not depict Jewishness as one form of difference among others in an interdependent world, the condition Boyarin and Boyarin describe through diasporic cultural identity, but it does suggest the continuation of Jewish difference as a form of difference not tied to place. Against any literal notion of ground, Kitaj's free-floating body finds its ground by tracing a lineage of Jewish diasporic aesthetics.

[60] On the political function of American Jewish representations of Hasidim, see Jack Kugelmass, "Jewish Icons: Envisioning the Self in Images of the Other," in *Jews and Other Differences: The New Jewish Cultural Studies*, ed. Jonathan Boyarin and Daniel Boyarin (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 30–53.
[61] R. B. Kitaj, *FIrst Diasporist Manifesto* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1989), 21.
[62] Kitaj, 47.

Figures

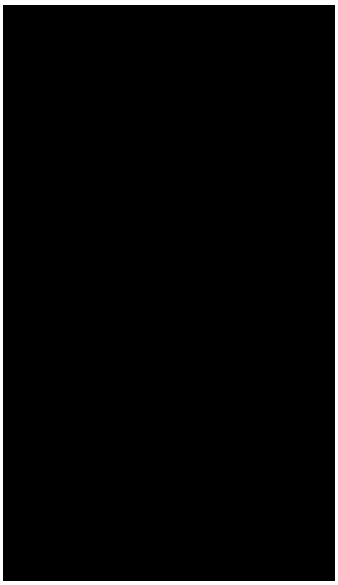

Figure 1. Max Weber, *Head and Shoulders of Figure*, 1919-1920

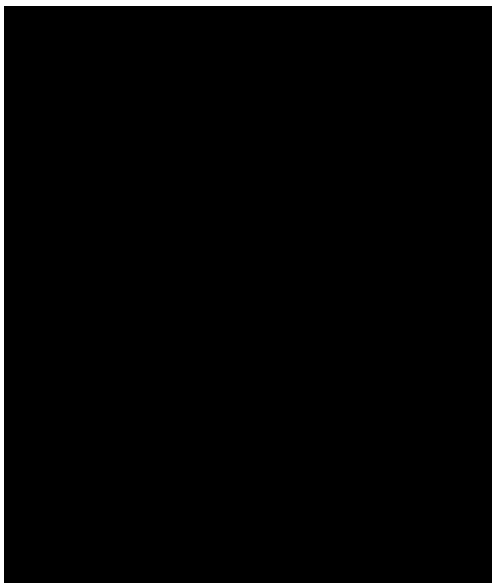

Figure 2. Ngil society mask, Fang, before 1890

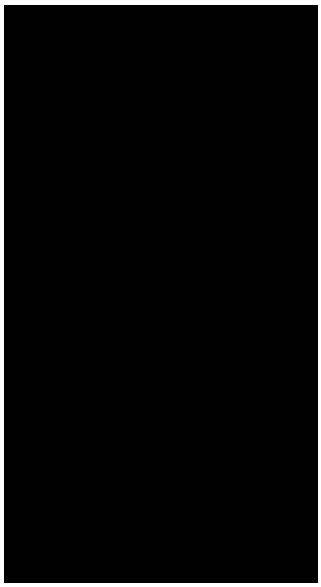

Figure 3. Max Weber, *Rabbi Reading*, 1919-1920

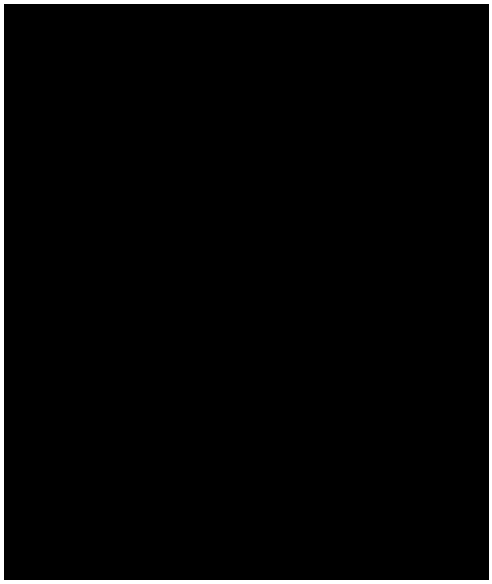

Figure 4. Max Weber, *Rush Hour, New York*, 1915

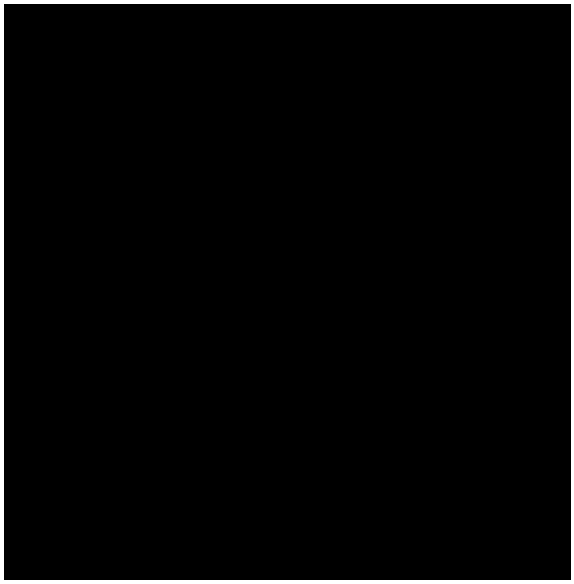

Figure 5. Max Weber, *Still Life, Two Vases*, 1919-1920

Figure 6. Pablo Picasso, *Still Life*, 1908

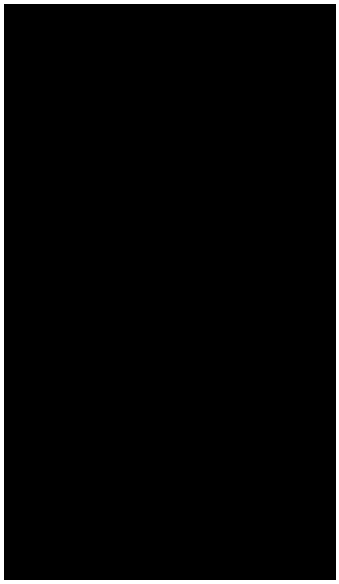

Figure 7. Max Weber, *Nude with Upraised Arm*, 1919-1920

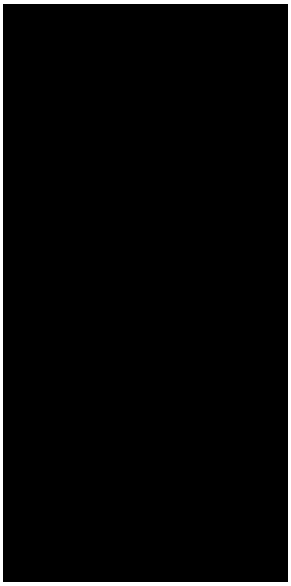

Figure 8. Aphrodite Naples Fréjus (Venus Genetrix type), Roman copy from ca. 75-125 CE

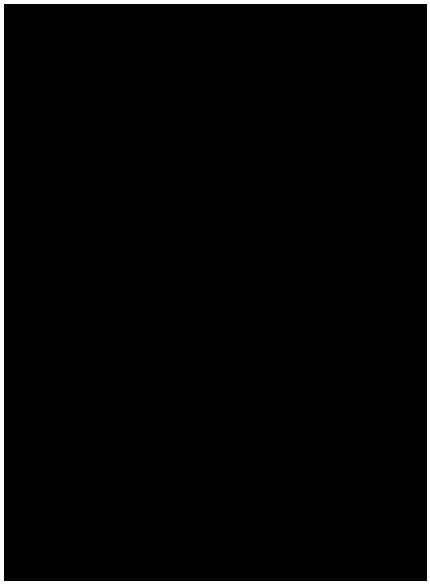

Figure 9. Athanadoros, Hagesandros, and Polydoros of Rhodes, *Laocoön and his Sons*, early first century CE

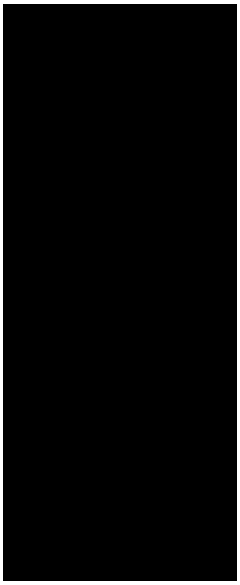

Figure 10. Michelangelo, *Dying Slave*, 1513-1515

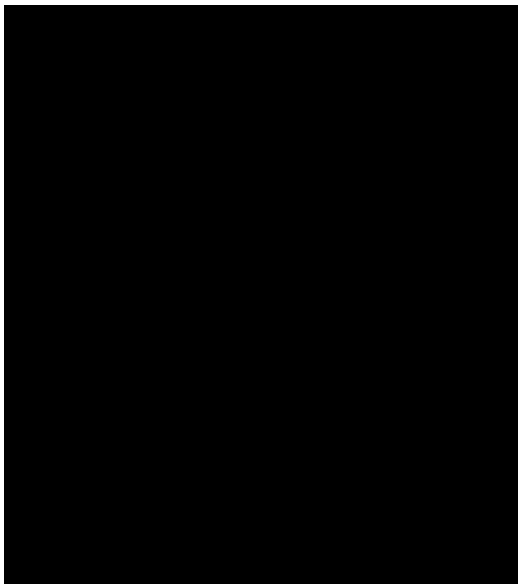

Figure 11. Pablo Picasso, *Three Women*, 1907-1908

Figure 12. Max Weber, *The Bathers*, 1909

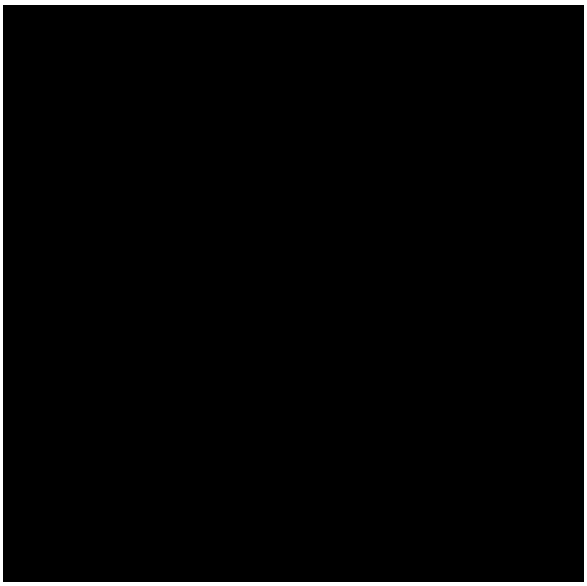

Figure 13. Paul Cézanne, *Cinq Baigneuses (Five Bathers)*, 1885-1887

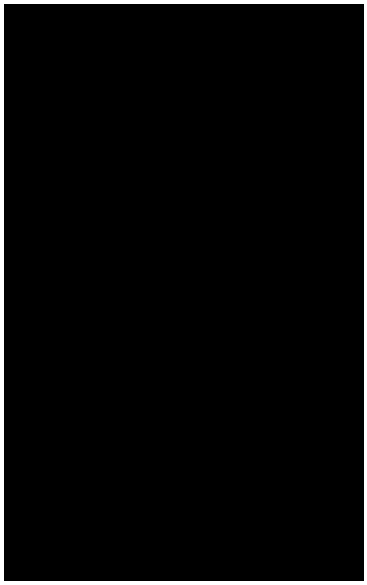

Figure 14. Max Weber, *Seated Woman*, 1919-1920

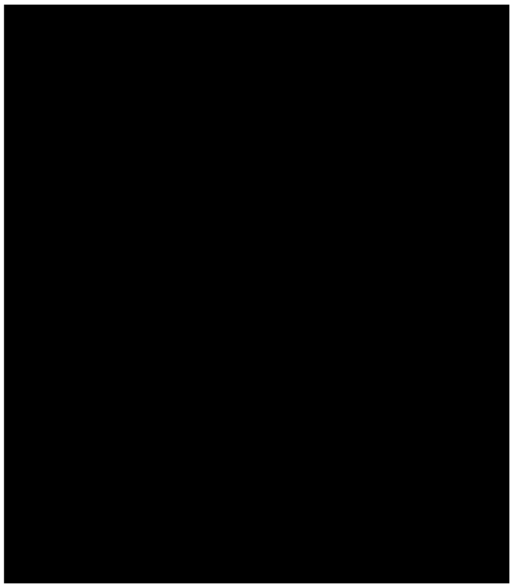

Figure 15. Max Weber, *Seated Woman*, 1919-1920

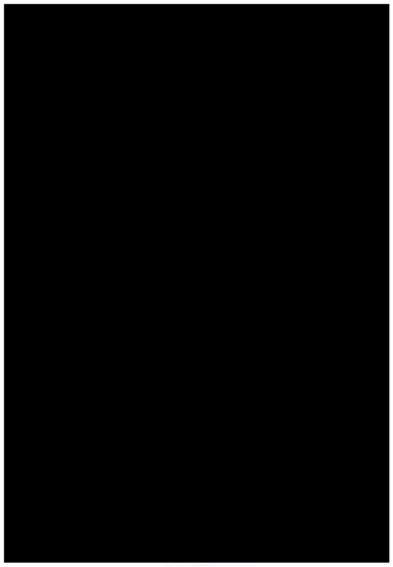

Figure 16. Democratic Republic of the Congo, Kuba artist, Female figure

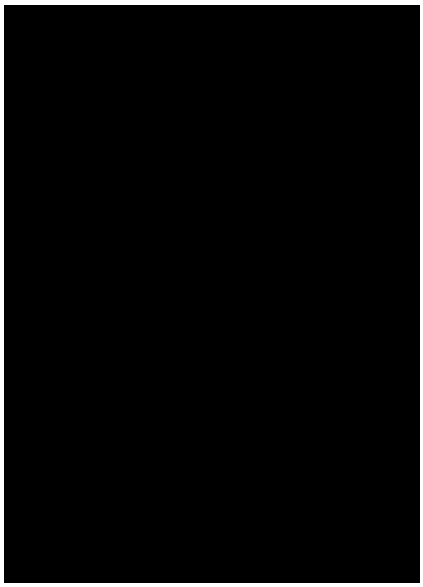

Figure 17. Max Weber, *The Egyptian Pot*, 1917

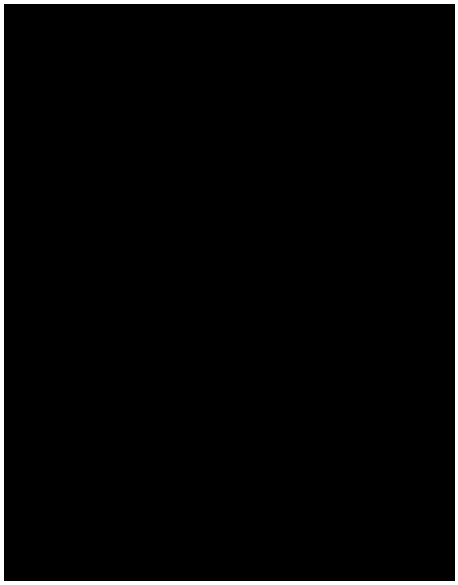

Figure 18. Max Weber, *Sabbath*, 1919

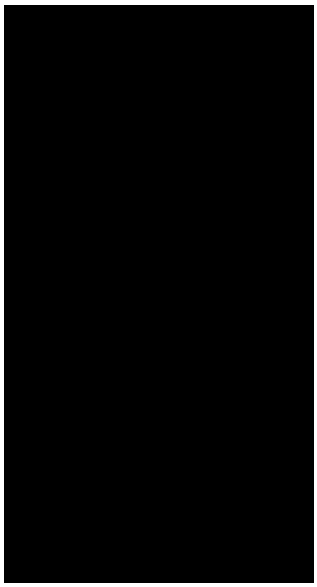

Figure 19. Max Weber, *Seated Figure*, 1919-1920

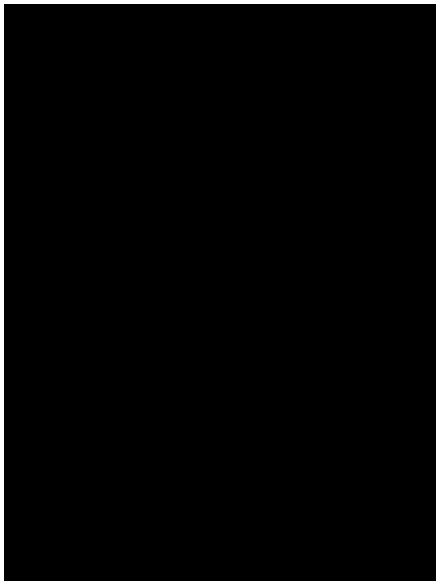

Figure 20. André Derain, plate 2 from *L'Enchanteur Pourrissant* by Guillaume Apollinaire, 1909

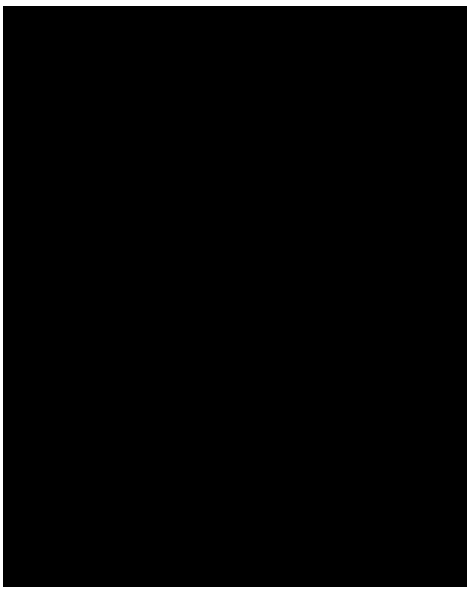

Figure 21. Maurice de Vlaminck, *Head of a Young Girl*, ca. 1906, printed 1912

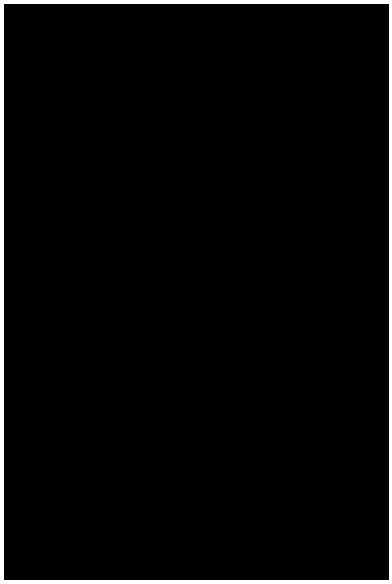

Figure 22. Max Weber, *Invocation*, 1919-1920

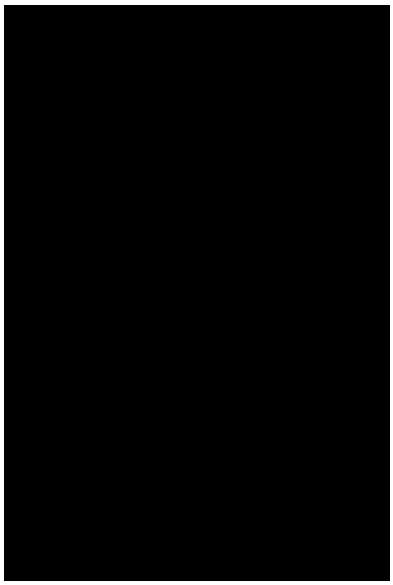

Figure 23. Figural beehive from Zabierzów, late 19th century

Figure 24. Paul Gauguin, *We Shall not Go to Market Today (Ta Matete)*, 1892

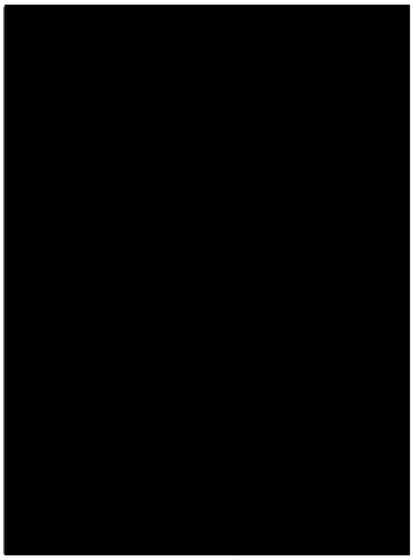

Figure 25. Max Weber, *Seated Woman* and *Head and Shoulders of Figure* in *Shriftn* 6 (1920)

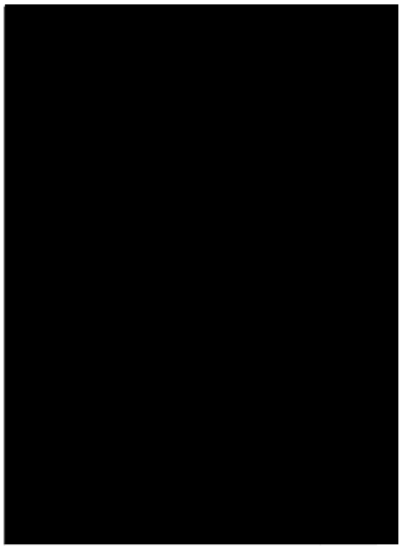

Figure 26. Max Weber, *Invocation* and *Crouching Nude* in *Shriftn* 6 (1920)

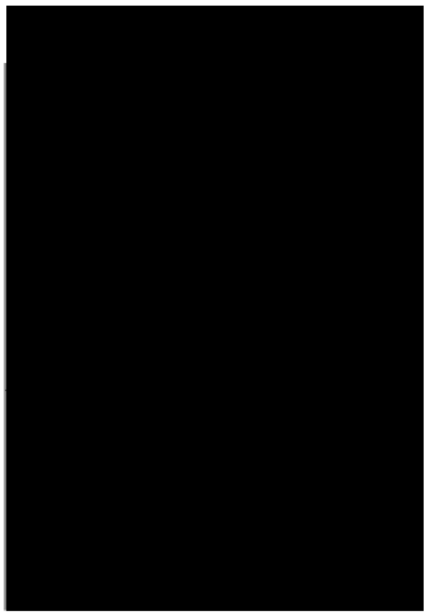

Figure 27. Max Weber, *Head*, *Figure Composition*, and *Frieze* in *Shriftn* 6 (1920)

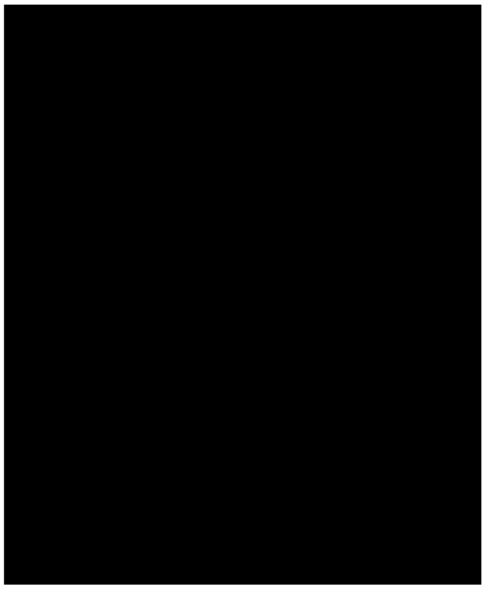

Figure 28. A compilation of Max Weber's illustrations for H. Leivick's *Der Goylem*, published in 1921

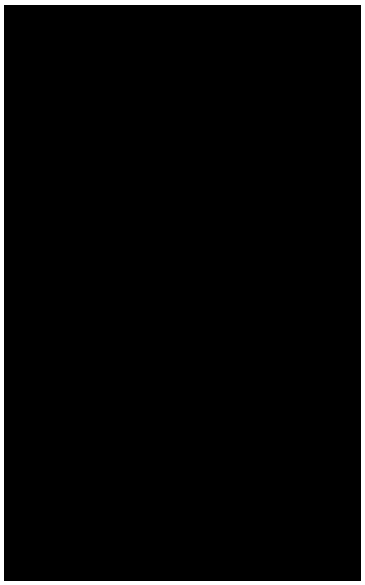

Figure 29. Max Weber, *Figure Composition*, 1919-1920

Figure 30. Max Weber, *Crouching Nude*, 1919-1920

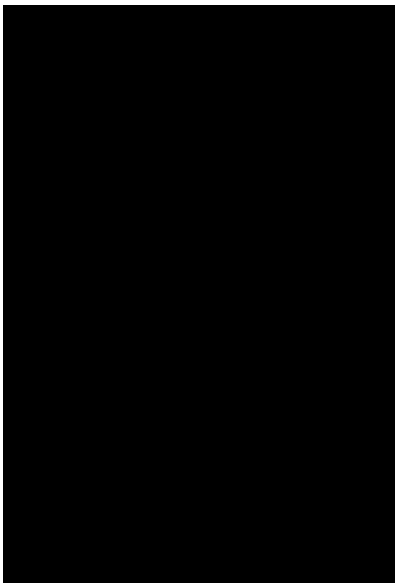

Figure 31. Max Weber, *The Talmudists*, 1934

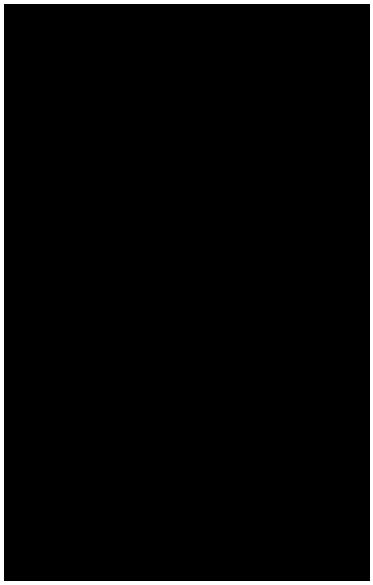

Figure 32. Max Weber, *Draped Head*, c. 1926

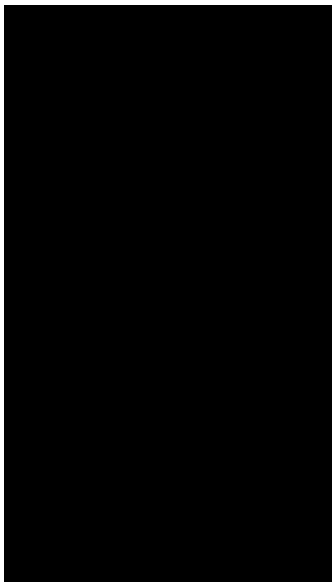

Figure 33. Max Weber, *Head*, 1919-1920

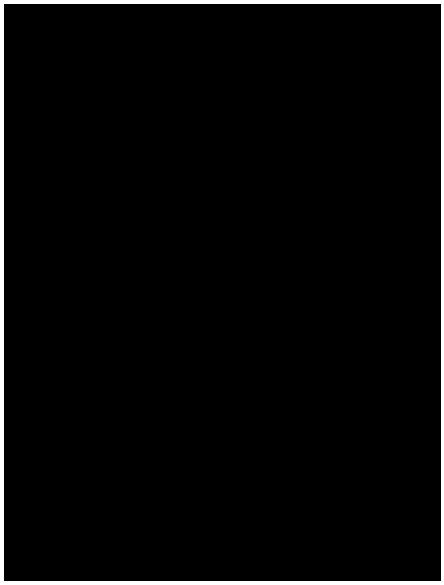

Figure 34. R. B. Kitaj, *Self-Portrait as Hasidic Dancer (After Max Weber)*, 2000-2004

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