

**For(a)ging Jewish Spirituality from What is Left: Problematizing, Placing, and Practicing**

by

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# **For(a)ging Jewish Spirituality from What is Left: Problematizing, Placing, and Practicing**

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What does it mean to be spiritual but critical of religion? This thesis analyzes spiritual communities who critique structures of power, expounding upon them via Karl Marx's philosophy. As an integral component of the postmodern landscape, criticalist spiritual communities provide a window into the ways in which people and their communities combine spirituality with critical values. I present many queer Jewish feminists who engage in spiritual practices that do not adhere to restrictive Jewish tenets. For example, writers such as Alicia Ostriker and Vivian Gornick describe a distinctly leftist spiritual position that centers on their group identity. Using a comparative approach, this thesis then parallels the praxis and liturgy of contemporary queer synagogues with a theoretical articulation of Marxist spirituality. These parallels fall under three spiritual themes: integrated temporality, integrated community, and creative labor. Together, these parallels create a flexible framework for understanding communally oriented spirituality that revolves around nontheist spiritual components rather than God. I call this framework, "for(a)ging," based on the dialectic between spiritually *forging* new traditions and *foraging* from old ones. By outlining a framework, this thesis explores a growing form of contemporary spirituality that relies on community rather than individual choice or religious authority.

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## Preface

*“To think and to be fully alive are the same.”* – Hannah Arendt ([1978] 1981, 178)

There are many people who deserve recognition for raising this paper to its highest potential. I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to my advisor, Dr. Brock Bahler. His wisdom, guidance, and support are truly unmatched. I would also like to thank my advisors, mentors, and professors, Dr. Rachel Kranson, Dr. Linda Penkower, Dr. Dana Moss, Dr. Kathryn Lofton, Professor Hillary Lazar, and Professor Haya Feig. Their feedback and direction thoroughly bolstered my work. Without their incredible mentorship, I am certain that this thesis would not have been possible. I am especially thankful to the late Dr. Linda Penkower who kindly and relentlessly refined my writing and focus, propelling me toward a forgiving standard of excellence that I did not know possible. I would also like to thank Patrick Mullen and staff at the University of Pittsburgh’s Office of Undergraduate Research for the incredible support that allowed me to perform the necessary research. A similar note should be made of Eric Lidji and staff at the Detre Archives at the Heinz History Center as well as Laurie Cohen and Hillman Library staff at the University of Pittsburgh; their superb resources and capability made the research process nothing less than ideal. Moreover, I am truly appreciative of *Beit Klal Yisrael* and *Bet Tikvah* for welcoming me into their communities; their interest produced the sort of experience and information that a student can only dream of. Finally, I would like to thank my lifelong partner, Eva Giangliulo, for her rigorous revision, patience, and love. I dedicate this work to her, our community of friends and family, and our shared vision of the world.

## 1.0 Introduction

*Who begot the first man, and nature as a whole? I can only answer you: Your question is itself a product of abstraction. Ask yourself how you arrived at that question. Ask yourself whether your question is not posed from a standpoint to which I cannot reply, because it is wrongly put. . . . When you ask about the creation of nature and man, you are abstracting, in so doing, from man and nature. . . . Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question. (Marx [1844] 2005b, 305)*

In his typically sardonic manner, Karl Marx dismissed the question of human origin as if the solicitor was a dog chasing her own tail. For Marx, the chase was not only inconsequential but it was circuitous, hinged on unsound presumptions that merely perpetuated themselves.

Nevertheless, the chase for meaning is arguably endemic to human life. Though some, like Marx, may claim that the search is irrelevant—futile, even—our essential impulse for the question remains. And so, unlike Marx, a large portion of humanity has not given up the abstraction or the question. For all its power, modern science does not fulfill even some nonbelievers' desire for purpose, heritage, identity, stories, or traditions. Despite the so-called abstraction, the perennial question of meaning persists. And the question is often a spiritual one. I address this question as it stands by creating a framework for critical spirituality.

But what is spirituality? What is spirituality in the hands of those who recognize their own fingerprints there, who mold themselves yet know themselves to be appendages? What is spirituality without God? Without an institution? How do people interpellate spirituality into a postmodern, critical worldview? The questions at hand are difficult to place. Over the past two hundred years or so, criticality increasingly has tended to position itself against spirituality, as if it's contradictory to rational critiques; and, if contemporary spirituality is deemed suitable to our time, it is a solely individual pursuit. As a result, rational critique and community continue to



elude the Western taxonomy of spiritual contact. Yet, for some, spirituality, community, and rational critiques are not contradictory but interrelated parts of the same. When knowingly sculpted, spirituality is not revealed—it is for(a)ged.

A holistic analysis of contemporary spiritual typology is in order, especially that of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present. Beyond the theoretical intrigue, precedent is evident even demographically. For example, the “non-religious” (also known as the “nones”) and the “spiritual but not religious” comprise around one-third of the US population—a sizable proportion that is steadily growing (Putnum et al. 2010; Lipka et al. 2017; Pew Research Center 2018). One might suggest that religious unaffiliation is related to the rising consensus of scientific conclusions. Yet, about one-fifth of those who are unaffiliated believe that “a supreme being” guided evolution (Pew Research Center 2015). To some, a non-religious or spiritual identity is not a negation of God but a negation of the religious institution. To others, spirituality is a negation of both, inhabiting a tenuous position at the vague boundary between secularism and spirituality. This paper creates a framework for a particular iteration of this group. In critical spirituality, or what I will call “for(a)gers,” communities live a spiritual—and even secular—but not religious life.<sup>1</sup> Perhaps a global phenomenon, this fusion exists in a space that denies hierarchical structures of authority but encourages spiritual community. One such version of this spirituality can be seen in Jewish queer feminists. Within this cross-section, there are evident commonalities between critically resilient and spiritually reaffirming perspectives—ones that do not sacrifice communal agency in the name of authoritative, hierarchical transcendence. Instead, nonhierarchical spirituality is foraged and forged.

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1. By “critical spirituality,” I mean a spirituality that is informed by critical theory in an intentional or unintentional way.

The context is rather recent. Nearly 150 years after the explosion of critical theory, Marx's leftist philosophy (among others) has percolated through approximately six generations all over the globe. In a world where God is not a universal, nonhierarchical metaphysics is a recurrent lived experience rather than just a pipe dream. Therefore, for historical critical philosophy and some of its modern intellectual descendants, the denial of religion does not equate to a "mechanistic secularism" but rather an embodied humanism that could be described as a form of spirituality.

Though nonhierarchical spirituality is an admittedly anachronistic concept to apply retroactively, there are striking parallels here. In analyzing this overlap, meaning within critical spirituality is not discovered but rather translated to modern language. Even though Marx and other early critical theorists may not have named it as such, I seek to demonstrate the resonance between spirituality and early critical theory, particularly through the lens of 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish feminist revisions and contemporary Jewish queer feminists.

These connections provide subjects for a framework of three spiritual but not religious components: creative labor, community, and temporality. In this work, I first present Marx's thought, wherein spirituality reveals itself as human labor, the communist state, and dialectical materialism. This section shall cover a brief history of early critical theory, taking Marx as its prime figure. As for 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish feminist writings, I introduce the spiritual components that manifest themselves in the forms of integrated temporality, integrated labor, and integrated community. This chapter focuses on the next stage of critical spiritualists' theoretical underpinnings. Lastly, contemporary queer Jewish liturgy shows an engagement with critical spirituality through heritage and ancestry, human action and cultivation, and togetherness. This

final section explores the ways in which queer Jews practice this critical spiritualist theory in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

To reflexively consider the phenomenological question of spirituality, in each chapter I make every effort to take up Marx's directive, "Ask yourself how you arrive at that question. . . . Give up your abstraction and you will also give up your question" (Marx [1844] 2005b, 305). So why focus on Judaism? Why feminism and queerness? Why Marx? In many ways, spirituality and critical theory was and has been a moving target; it clearly has multiple beginnings, middles, and ends. I do not claim to analyze all of these varieties, but instead to trace the ideological development of a particular version—Marx's—and extract commonalities within it.

By concentrating on Judaism, I isolate a particular yet diverse spirituality so that I may delineate an inclusive format that does not rely on norms but instead centers on the Other. There exists a long tradition of varying critical leftist inflections within the global Jewish diaspora—whether anarchist, socialist, Bundist, Marxist, or syndicalist is a matter of significant but fairly nuanced differences. I use Marx as a foundation because of his widespread influence in all these varieties. Some Jewish people have powerfully comingled with the associated values of these political ideologies to create a unique subset that is distinct from both atheist and Christian capitulations. Given my Jewish upbringing, I am able to closely analyze these shades of variation. Therefore, Judaism offers a familiar, relevant, and powerful context.

Though I do not wish to conflate Marxist, leftist, critical, feminist, and queer theories—and certainly not their identities—the shared emphasis on critique is highly interrelated. Critical theory represents both the formal and informal value of critiquing power structures that disenfranchise the poor, the working class, and the Other. Many leftist thinkers like Emma Goldman, Edward Carpenter, and Simone de Beauvoir ushered in critical theories that sought to

upend hegemonic orders of gender and sexuality. Thus, I adopt relevant critical perspectives, such as queer and feminist theories, into critical theory's narrative.

## 2.0 What Is Left?

Spirituality and critical theory may seem like an unlikely couple, perhaps even a contradiction; after all, notable leftists like Marx were famously antagonistic toward religion. But despite many critical theorists' explicit rejection of religion, vestiges of the spiritual permeate even through Marx's work (Page 1993; Brentlinger 2000; Luchte 2009; Brien 2006; Brien 2009). For the purposes of comprehending an overarching critical, leftist background, I briefly describe Marx's philosophy of religion and present my conclusions to its complications. In evaluating Marx's critical philosophy and its intersection with spirituality, one is presented with a number of wrinkles. In an effort to build from a robust understanding on Marx's critique of religion (and therefore a critical theory of spirituality) I shall briefly discuss the following complicating factors: Eurocentrism, paucity, unity, centrality, Judaism, gender, and sexuality. Each of these factors has been analyzed at length by numerous scholars and will only be summarized here for clarity of position.<sup>2</sup>

Known as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century father of sociology and critical theory, Marx blended philosophy and political activism in order to untangle the meaning of capitalism. In doing so, he famously declared that religion is “the *opium* of the people” (Marx [1844] 2005a, 175).<sup>3</sup> This statement reflected his fairly one-dimensional belief that religion (namely 19<sup>th</sup> century European varieties of Christianity) drew attention *above* and *beyond* daily injustices and toward a dishonest hopefulness that perpetuated the alienation of humanity (McLellan 1987, 29). Religion to Marx

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2. For a comprehensive analysis, see, McKown, *The Classical Marxist Critiques of Religion*, 1975.

3. For an interesting discussion about the meaning of this phrase, see McKinnon 2005.

was a false idol—a sympathetic one, but still false. It was both a manifestation of and distraction from real-world problems. As a consequence of these iconoclastic ideas, however hyperbolized, Marx and the project of communism had become synonymous with a dehumanized, “Godless state,” which McCarthyism widely propagated as categorically amoral. Yet Marx’s anti-religious position is still a religious one—the borders of established religion define it (Dean 1975, 72; Kearney 2009, 174).

Like many thinkers of his time, Marx adhered to a fairly Eurocentric perspective on much of history, including that of religion. Although he certainly sought out a universal understanding of human nature, his resources on and consequently viewpoint of humanity were restricted and problematic. In Jonathan Sperber’s expansive biography on Marx, he noted, “for all this evocation of what would later be called globalization, Marx’s own historical and political analysis remained distinctly Eurocentric” (2013, 30). Interactions between Marx and non-Western European entities are often fraught with what we now can clearly recognize as a vexed facet of “unilinear evolutionism.” Marx’s variety of Eurocentrism was likely influenced by his Hegel’s anthropological works, which similarly positioned Western Europeans as the only self-reflective race ([1817] 2000, 41). This Eurocentrism undoubtedly manifested itself in his critique of religion, as he focused principally on Christianity. “The only religion apart from Christianity to which Marx devoted serious attention was Hinduism,” and yet “his vituperative description of Hindu beliefs reflect both the paucity of his sources and the cultural arrogance of contemporary European prejudice” (McLellan 1987, 29). For example, Marx described “the religion of Hindostan” as “at once a religion of sensualist exuberance, and a religion of self-torturing asceticism” (Marx [1853] 1978, 653). To Marx, this was made worse by “Orientals” and their “undignified, stagnatory, and vegetative life” and “passive sort of existence” (Marx [1853] 1978,

658). These troublesome conclusions were based primarily on the “uncritical evolutionist,” ethnological writings (Krader 1972, 1). Of his already minimal writings on religion, Marx mainly examines Christianity and only haphazardly comments on other religions. Consequently, Daniel Pals explains, “What Marx actually presents is not an account of religion in general but an analysis of Christianity—and of similar faiths that stress belief in God and an afterlife. . . . The main focus of Marx's thinking is not so much world civilization as the culture and economy of Western Europe, which is of course the historical homeland of Christianity” (Pals 2015, 134). This amounts to a distinctly one-dimensional understanding of religion. So although Marx was aware of and indeed wrote about forms of spirituality beyond Christianity, his Christian framework—which emphasized hierarchy, dualism, and human fallibility—invariably influenced his interpretation of other religions.

The second issue one must confront is the paucity of religion and broader concepts of spirituality within Marx’s work. He did not produce many concerted writings on the topic—especially when considering the sizable amount of Marx’s writings on economy in comparison. David McLellan explains, “Marx himself devoted little time to a study of religion—indeed his famous pregnant aphorisms on religion are little more, as he himself says, than a repetition of Feuerbach” (McLellan 1987, 3). Marx’s famously incisive affronts to religion were mostly cursory statements, albeit no less condemnatory, nested within analyses of related topics like politics. Mention is made of religion more often in Marx’s earlier work, prior to the mid-1840s (McKown 1975, 7; McLellan 1987, 3; Fromm 1966, 69). To some, this is evidence of the irrelevance of religion to Marx. Herein lies the third complication: the centrality of Marx’s critique of religion. Marx stated, “the critique of religion is the premise of all criticism” (Marx [1844] 1978, 53). Although the centrality of Marx’s critique of religion is debated, I agree with

McKown that religion "served as the temporal beginning for Marx's work both personally and tactically" (McKown 1975, 15). Steeped in the philosophy of the Young Hegelians and surrounded by a climate of irreligious and religious tension, religion, particularly Christianity, was essentially an immediately accessible target. So although there is not consistent mention of it throughout his lifelong collection of writings, I hold that his earlier conceptions of religion were nevertheless central to Marx's thinking.

On that note, there is also the question of unity within Marx's consideration of religion, especially on the note of humanism. Some scholars like Reinhold Niebuhr hold that there is a marked deterioration of Marx's humanism, arguing that Marx's earlier Hegelian ideas dissolved as he turned his attention to economics and revolution (Niebuhr 1967, xii). For example, early Marx heavily focuses on alienated man and the meaning of labor whereas later Marx focuses almost exclusively on capital, modes of production, social power, and so on (Tucker 1965, 165). However, Sperber, McKown, Tucker, Fromm, and many others argue that the shift is primarily in his language; his later work simply builds off of his early humanist foundation. "Creating distinctions between a young and old Marx," says Sperber, "overlooks the persistence of Hegelian concepts in his intellectual efforts" (2013, 142). This is most apparent in his treatment of human nature—one of the three spiritual components to be considered later on. In this way, "although Marx's best known and most extensive observations on religion occur in early works, his basic position can be constructed from the later writings alone" (McKown 1975, 12). For this reason, many of the primary sources used in this paper are from his earlier work; even so, as has been demonstrated, the perspectives presented in Marx's earlier work remain steadfast throughout his lifetime.



Another significant consideration for the purposes of this paper is Marx's strained understanding of Judaism, gender, and sexuality. With traditional Jewish ancestry, Marx's father converted to Christianity after facing anti-Semitism and raised Karl to be a rationalist, Enlightenment era, Protestant. However influential, his upbringing is only one piece of the puzzle. Like many others of his era, Marx upheld odious stereotypes of Jews, infamously expounded in, "On the Jewish Question" as well as some letters (1844). Consequently, he is now widely interpreted to be anti-Semitic because of this piece's ample usage of Jewish caricatures. It is undeniable that these stereotypes are as fraught as they are damaging. As for women and sex, Marx adhered to a fairly patriarchal perspective. He believed that women should be domestic counterparts to men and that sex was the consummation of the dialectic—the unification of opposites (Sperber 2013, 500; Marx [1844] 2005b, 39). As a matter of fact, Marx thought feminist movements to be bourgeois because they promoted the "instrumentalization" of women's labor ([1848]1978, 488). Similarly, Marx split with some socialists and anarchists because he thought homosexuality and the like to be "backwards" ([1869] 1988). Context notwithstanding, it is clear that Marx had problematic views when it came to Jews and Judaism, gender, and sexuality.

As with any large body of work, there are many considerations to take into account when analyzing Marx. In total, it must be understood that Marx's critiques are firmly rooted in the particular religions and worldviews he addressed at that time (McKinnon 2005, 29). Following Marx's footsteps, many critical philosophers and political icons continued the symbolic battle with religion as a hegemonic, Christian structure of power—and less problematically.

## 2.1 Spirituality after Marx

*We all see our lives, and/or the space wherein we live our lives, as having a certain moral/spiritual shape. Somewhere, in some activity, or some condition, lies a fullness, a richness; that is, in that place (activity or condition), life is fuller, richer, deeper and more worth while, more admirable, more what it should be. This is perhaps a place of power: we often experience this as deeply moving, as inspiring. Perhaps this sense of fullness is something we just catch glimpses of from afar off; we have the powerful intuition of what fullness would be, were we to be in that condition, e.g. of peace or wholeness; or able to act on that level, of integrity or generosity or abandonment or self-forgetfulness. But sometimes there will be moments of experienced fullness, of joy and fulfillment, where we feel ourselves there. (Taylor 2007, 6)*

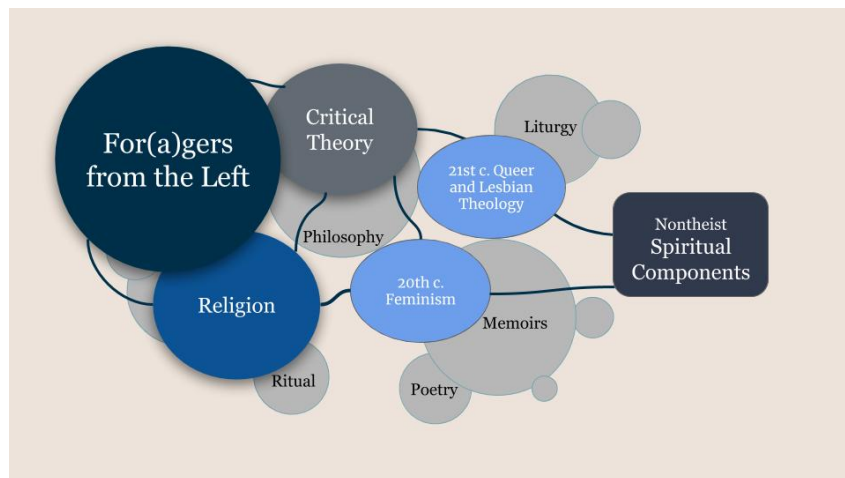
With this history in mind, we can turn to particular groups of Marx's many ideological descendants who have and continue to explicitly account for spirituality. For example, thinkers like Martin Buber, Paul Ricoeur, Emmanuel Levinas, W.E.B. Du Bois, Gustavo Gutiérrez, Delores Williams, Ali Shariati, Judith Plaskow, and Gloria Anzaldúa, among others, have each in their own ways spiritually reformulated Marx's questions of class oppression into questions of otherization. Jewish feminists present one model of this shift. Sharing ideals with Marx and other critical philosophers, Jewish feminists are heir to these questions of religion and otherization. Judith Plaskow's proclamation that she is a lesbian feminist Jewish theologian, for instance, has merged critical humanist perspectives with metaphysical ones. Granted their fusion is slippery: religion and critical theory were and are not mutually exclusive, both in ideology and in practice.<sup>4</sup>

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4. I do not posit that the diverse projects of postmodernism and feminism evolved unilinearly out of Marx, merely that Marx is foundational to our understanding of feminism. See McLellan 2007, 411, for a discussion of this issue.

But what of spirituality? Religion is only one expression of spirituality (or perhaps vice versa); however, the terms could be demarcated as distinct. While *religion* denotes participation in an institutionalized, historically constructed system of spiritual interaction, *spirituality* is a broader term that encompasses religion but distinguishes itself as having a tolerance for ambiguity—nontheist secular spirituality even more so (Van Ness 1996, 4; Elkins et al. 1988, 8). Of course, many contest this separation (*e.g.* one can certainly be part of a religious tradition and also perform “spiritual” practices), but in an effort to respect the self-identification of those who wish to distance themselves from religion, I treat spirituality as the nondualist, nonunified, and dynamic aspects of transcendent human imagination and yearnings.

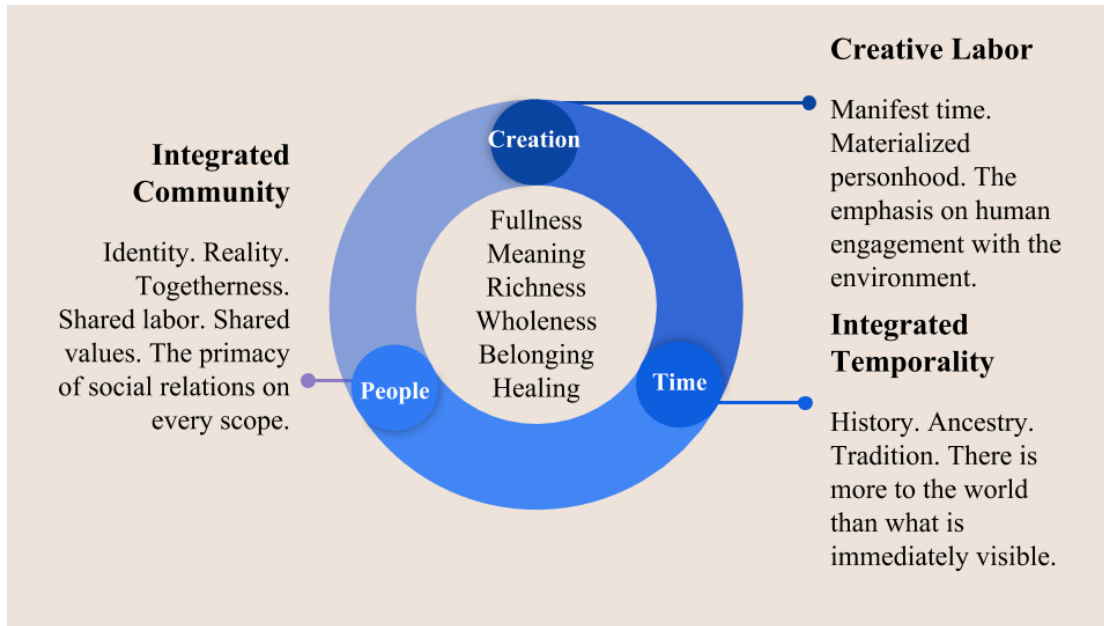
There are various names for the fusion of (post)modern criticality and spirituality, each with various shades of meaning—“radical theology,” “post-theism,” “quasi-religion,” “anatheism,” “utopianism,” “death of God theology,” “Christian atheism,” and so on, each describing a specific style (or category of styles) of spirituality (Smith 1994, 12; Kearney 2009). At the risk of furthering the obscurity, I aim to create a communally-oriented framework for critical spirituality: for(a)gers (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1 Basis of the For(a)ging Framework**

For(a)ging is a wordplay on the dialectic between the terms, “foraging” and “forging.” It hinges on the unification of opposing movements toward tradition and renewal. Confronting dilemmas or critiques about religion, for(a)gers are disillusioned by the aspects of religion that alienate their identities or values—the parts that make them feel broken. Yet for(a)gers realize that there are other, perhaps more malleable spiritual elements which do not estrange them. So they forage through the broken shards of their religious experiences, searching for the facets that make them feel whole. Simultaneously, they forge new spiritual fragments to refashion the ones that caused such disenchantment. In this way, the group neither solely renews nor returns to their spiritual lives—they for(a)ge from both. The connecting factor between for(a)ging individuals pertains to their shared ambivalence of compulsory hierarchy and normativity—rebellious against their central place within many traditional theologies. In this vein, for(a)gers draw upon a common *positionality*: the “immanent frame,” or horizontal transcendence (more on this in a moment).

For(a)gers as a label does not indicate any sort of school, institution, or unified system; instead, the term should be understood as a format or a style of spirituality. The spirituality is based on a critical, nontheist perspective. I should note that I use “nontheism” to imply minimization of theistic primacy as opposed to “atheism” or “secularism” which confer reaction against pure Godhead mysticism and often imply a reductionist viewpoint. Through the horizontal transcendence of three interrelated spiritual elements that are inspired by a critical framework, (1) *Creative Labor*, (2) *Integrated Community*, and (3) *Integrated Temporality*, people may fulfill otherized and communal aspects of themselves without sacrificing spirituality (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2 For(a)ging Spiritual Components via Critical Theory Terminology**

Before discussing the particulars of for(a)gers, a description of nontheist transcendence is necessary in order to understand leftist spirituality. In Charles Taylor’s influential work, *A Secular Age*, he discusses “the immanent frame”—or transcendence within the secular—which emphasizes fullness, ultimacy, wholeness, richness, and fulfillment. Inevitably arising in most definitions of spirituality, I will make use of this language often.

A technical explanation of this verbiage is found in the term, “horizontal transcendence.” Horizontal transcendence inhabits humanity’s connection to the overlapping boundaries *between I-It* and *I-Thou*; “without *It* man cannot live,” Buber writes, “but he who lives with *It* alone is not a man” (2000, 44). I emphasize *between* because this concept itself is useful to horizontally transcendent descriptions. Whereas *beyond* suggests an *upward* and *outward* motion, *between* connotes a *mutual, interconnected linking* with the unknown and known alike (Kurtz et al. 2015, 65-66). *Beyond* is thus both vertically and horizontally transcendent, while *between* is purely horizontal. While vertical transcendence tends toward ontological hierarchy and binary logic,

horizontal transcendence, according to Michael Kalton, “finds its anchor in life rather than mind, thus displacing human consciousness from its privileged place” (2000, 195). Kalton is careful to note, “There is no cosmos posited apart from the historically ongoing one within which we find ourselves, nor is there life apart from ongoing living, at whatever level it is considered” (2000, 195). This is a valuable concept in understanding the inner-workings of the immanent frame in nontheist visions. Here, nontheist transcendence embodies the “other,” although not necessarily “other-worldly”: Levinas’s widow, orphan, and stranger, for example. It is the possibility of perceiving the seemingly unperceivable. These allusions rest beneath Taylor’s notion of fullness.

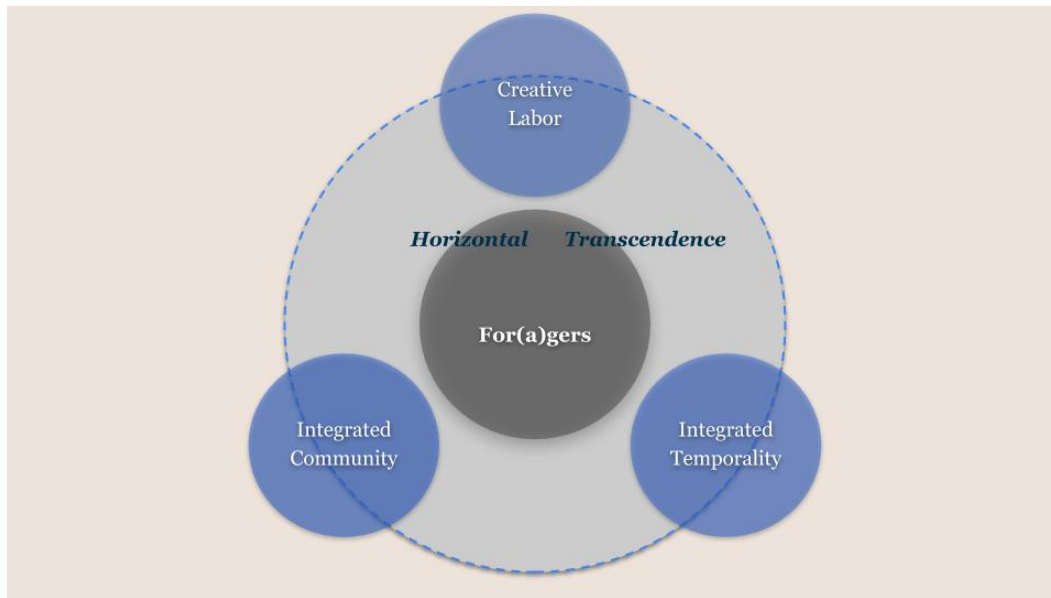
For many for(a)gers, however, the nonobjective, the other, and the immaterial must not be equated to romantically conceived supernaturalism. Nathan Widder of *The Encyclopedia of Political Theory* states that horizontal transcendence “does not see transcendence as a positive, existing form, but rather as the promise of something forever absent that underpins worldly attempts to reach it” (2010, 688). In other words, what is absent is a mystery that is not mystical; what is unknown is not a shadowy secret but an opportunity to make it known. The spiritual aspect of this relationship is thus the richness belying our engagement with ambiguous uncertainty. Immanence and horizontal transcendence may be considered expressions of nontheist spirituality in that they denote a naturalized, material fulfillment within the “mundane.” In other words, horizontal transcendence implies an excess, surplus, or saturation of experience in the material world that is not wholly expressible or containable within it; at the same time, the surplus does not orient toward or sourced from another world beyond the one that we inhabit.

For(a)ging does not neatly align with other iterations of critical spiritual movements. For example, radical choice theorists describe a type of bricolage spirituality driven by an individual,

market-styled choice (Ott 2005, 121). However, I argue that contemporary spirituality may additionally express itself as a communal movement. For(a)ging is also unlike Courtney Bender's *Metaphysicals* and other neo-liberal iterations of spirituality because it is communally rather than individually oriented (2010, 11). Additionally, the group described by Bender relies on "new age" and pseudo-scientific thought. This variety also distinguishes itself from Liberation Theology and other revolutionary spiritualities by its ambivalence toward traditional theism (West 2003, 874). Furthermore, for(a)gers are unlike Kearney's atheism in that god and theology are not explicitly sought; rather for(a)gers reject the historically sanctioned, supernatural construction of "God" or "Church" in favor of a naturalized, fulfilling conception of unity (Kearney 2009). Instead, to for(a)gers, transcendence horizontally permeates throughout nontheist spiritual diasporas—affirming rather than alienating humanity. That said, I make use of atheism's language of "retrieval" or "return" (Kearney 2009). Under Nancy Ammerman's cultural packages, for(a)gers are *both* ethical and extra-theistic in the sense that spirituality is immanently anchored in the self in addition to the community, nature, as well as virtuous living (2013, 268). Within Pew Research Center's typology, for(a)ging lies somewhere *between* the religion resisters and the solidly secular because the communities perform a combination of attributes from each group (2018). Due to its heterogeneous perspectives on theism (*e.g.* atheist, agnostic, non-theist, or ambivalent nontheist), yet specifically communally-oriented and physical elements, this phenomenon necessitates its own title.

### 3.0 For(a)ging Parallels

With critical, spiritual transcendence being thus explained, the specific elements common in critical spirituality are presented as follows: (1) *creative labor* (2) *integrated community*, and (3) *integrated temporality* (see Figure 3). Creative labor refers to the physical manifestation of personhood. Integrated community denotes the primacy of interpersonal relations in every scope. Lastly, integrated temporality concerns the critical materialist features of for(a)gers. For each element, I parallel spiritual feminist perspectives with Marx, whose philosophy offers latent spiritual concepts that mimic contemporary for(a)gers. It is important to recognize that the parallels offered are not universally representative, but merely exegetical. Through horizontal transcendence, for(a)gers express these spiritual elements in a communally-oriented way.



**Figure 3 Spiritual Components of For(a)ging**



### 3.1 Creative Labor

*"Create. Said of the divine agent: To bring into being, cause to exist; to produce where nothing was before, 'to form out of nothing.' Like truth from lies. Creation. The action or process of creating. The fact of being so created. The action of making. . . . That which God has created; the created world; creatures collectively." (Ostriker 1994, 31)*

In both Marx's philosophy and for(a)ging, there is a special emphasis on the creative aspects of human nature. Marx dubs this creative capacity, "labor," whereas for(a)ging incorporates broader modes of creative manifestation. For for(a)gers, creative labor is an actualizing, naturalizing movement. Alicia Ostriker, for example, adopts poetry as her recourse to being-in-the-world. Both of them question the physical manifestation of human essence, highlighting its spiritually fulfilling functions. This is no abstraction, as some Marxist critics might suggest; in fact, it is quite the opposite. It is being in and of the world, showing oneself as such. The Jewish feminist convergence in creative labor reveals the ways in which for(a)gers navigate this apparent contradiction—how spirituality and criticality do not necessarily compromise one another.

Beginning with critical theory's forbearer, Marx considers labor to be a central part of human life, of species-being. In the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx writes, "Every one of your relations to man and to nature must be a *specific expression*, corresponding to the object of your will, of your *real individual life*" (2005b [1844], 326). He later continues, "For it is not only the five senses but also the so-called spiritual senses, the practical senses (desiring, loving, etc.) in brief, human sensibility and the human character of the senses *which can only come into being* through the existence of *its* object, through humanized

nature” (Fromm 1966, 134).<sup>5</sup> The human capacity for richness, for horizontal transcendence, may therefore be fully realized in labor.

For example, when a carpenter carves a chair, the creator, users, buyers, and onlookers alike may experience part of the carvers’ humanity in that chair. Erich Fromm, a famous communist and critical theorist, expands on this point. He explains that labor to Marx “must not be understood mechanically but as a drive, creative vitality, energy; human passion for Marx ‘is the essential power of man striving energetically for its object’” (1966, 30). For Marx, we are human insofar as we are creating and manifesting ourselves in the material world. Hence, Marx’s account of human creativity reveals his opposition to scientific reductionism.<sup>6</sup> Spiritually rendered, Marx’s account of labor is a “radically finitist” expression of self-transcendence—a means of connecting to the ultimate material world (Dean 1975, 78). Instead of transcendence being an expression of “divine spirit,” it is an expression of “human praxis or labor” (Dean 1975,

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5. There is a difference in translation by Bottomore in Fromm (1966, 134), and by Milligan in Tucker (1972, 89) as well as in Cohen et al. (Marx [1844] 2005b, 301-302). Whereas “*Geist*” is translated as “spiritual” in Bottomore, it is translated as “mental” in Milligan and Cohen et al. According to Tucker, Hegel uses “*Geist* as a synonym for God” (1965, 47). Similarly, Solomon posits that *Geist* “refers to some sort of *general consciousness, a single ‘mind’ common to all men*” as well as a “religious concept” in that it reveals Hegel’s attempt to articulate an “immanent God” (1970, 642-3). In other words, the *mental* is directly linked to the *spiritual*; the psychological always has spiritual connotations.

6. In fact, Marx was vehemently against mechanistic or “crude” materialism. Fromm writes, “Marx actually took a firm position *against* a philosophical materialism which was current among many of the most progressive thinkers... this materialism claimed that ‘the’ substratum of all mental and spiritual phenomena was to be found in matter and material processes... sufficiently explained as results of chemical bodily processes... Marx fought this type of mechanical, ‘bourgeois’ materialism” that, according to him, excluded history and its process” (1966, 9).

78). Another famous critical theorist, Antonio Negri, asserts that Marx's labor is "the interpretation of all of man, spirit, and matter caught in the experience of life, as an expression of free power (or as a product of power)," which creates "a formidable image of the human condition"—in other words, of fullness (qtd. in Revel 2016, 476). Therefore, labor itself is an event of "betweening," or horizontally transcending the interiority of the self (Kurtz et al. 2015, 66).

Similar to Marx's philosophy, many feminists also place a spiritual emphasis on humanity's essential power to create. To Alicia Ostriker, this creative labor comes in the form of writing. Although she undoubtedly differs in many ways, she maintains underlying spiritual similarities in her treatment of creativity. Like Marx's philosophy of labor, these spiritual feminists could be understood as conceiving of creativity in a horizontally transcendent manner.

Poet Alicia Ostriker "was raised as a third-generation atheist socialist Jew" (2014, 184). Indebting her atheism to Marx, she explicitly writes, "our forefathers Marx and Freud were right. Religion gives us sexual repression, self-righteousness, ignorance, intolerance, and war. I too dislike it" (2014, 185). For her, being Jewish and atheist are not mutually exclusive, partially because her Judaism is not rooted in theism. In fact, the extent of her "religious training consisted of being told that religion was the opiate of the people" (2014, 185), harkening back to Marx's well-known aphorism. Instead, Ostriker's "pride in being Jewish was always a cultural pride: Jews stood for learning, for cultural accomplishment, for the brotherhood of man, for tolerance and for justice, and against war, poverty, and injustice" (2014, 185). Invoking secular Jewish poets as her inspiration, Ostriker struggles with the limiting borders of Jewishness and atheism, of spirituality and criticality.

Unlike Marx, Ostriker chooses to name her spiritual impulse and expresses it through creative labor. In her radical poetry, Ostriker remodels what she deems as philosophically outmoded in the Jewish tradition. Writing itself is seemingly a form of retrieval, of meditation and solidarity with her Jewish spirituality. When Ostriker read the Bible for the first time in college, she confronted this tension and eventually came to manifest herself and her struggles through writing. She imparts,

From the first moment of contact, I experienced this book as mine, its men and women as my mothers and fathers, its God as my God—atheist though I was and am. Do I contradict myself? Very well, then. Like many another Jew, I wrestle with the text for reasons I cannot wholly explain. Sometimes I think that every value by which I live, as well as every value against which I struggle, has its origin in that book. As a woman, as a seeker, as an old leftist, as a feminist, as a poet, I attempt to wrestle a blessing from it. It resists; I persist. (2014, 186)

Ostriker is thus markedly aware of the contradiction between her spirituality and her critical feminist worldview. But instead of evacuating Jewish spirituality altogether, Ostriker excavates it—*forging* and *foraging* spirituality. She later writes a feminist revisionist Bible, *The Nakedness of the Fathers* (1994) in which she recounts Jewish mythologies in a feminist manner. Ostriker imagines how women like Hagar and Sarah must have felt—about their children, about their husband, about each other (1994, 67-74). She writes as if she is Miriam, “I am the prophetess / Miriam who makes the songs / I lead the women in a sacred circle / Shaking our breasts and hips” (Ostriker 1994, 146). Powerfully depicting womanhood in a Biblical context, her radical retelling of Jewish stories thereby fuses her critical perspective with her spirituality. Although she mourns that she “can’t be a Jew, because Judaism repels [her] as a woman,” Ostriker cannot abandon her heritage and spirituality (1994, 6). She writes, “To deny my Judaism would be like denying the gift of life, the reality of sorrow, the pleasures of learning and teaching. To reject Judaism would be to surrender to an idea of justice inseparable from compassion” (1994, 6).

Despite—or perhaps because of—this tension, Ostriker wonders, “What do the stories mean to me and what do I mean to them? I cannot tell until I write” (1994, 8). This approach is not unique to Ostriker or contemporary American Judaism. There is a long history of secular and leftist Jews using concepts from the Talmud and Torah in a non-theist way. Through writing, Ostriker and others construct richness from this apparent contradiction between leftist thought and spirituality—between materialism and belief.

Of course, writing is not the only form of creative labor. Beyond prose as a creative act, Irena Klepfisz, a lesbian feminist Jewish author and activist, hoped for the future of Jewish secular art, theater, jazz music, politics, and film (Levitt 2008, 122). And while Klepfisz’s particular vision did not come to fruition, contemporary Jewish feminist art maintains its connection to Klepfisz’s ideals and the wider principles of *Yiddishkayt* secularism.

Given this delimitation, it is clear that creative labor could be understood as self-transcendent—as a radical expression of spirituality. It exists outside of a binary construction of materiality or immateriality as strictly scientific or spiritual. Creative labor is thus a path for critical spiritual realization because it promotes a physical representation of the interconnectedness between space and the self. This component transcends the supposed distinction and creates something more than either alone.

### **3.2 Integrated Community**

*Many of us have dropped Judaism as a religion because of its lack of ability to help us make sense of our (post)modern lives, one of the basic functions of religion. We have turned to other spiritual traditions or material practices for order, solace, and meaning. Rather than robotically repeat traditional words we learned growing up, and save our “true” spirituality for when we are alone, or with non-Jews, we reclaim community as*

the very foundation of Judaism. *We honor the material world of the present, and our wonderful bodies as holy in themselves, and we resurrect traditions of early Judaism, retelling stories that speak to our hearts, our souls, our bodies, and our inquiring minds.* (Nagle 2002, 134, italics mine)

Community is another common trait in critical spirituality. Through radical conceptions of social relations, community exudes aspects of horizontal transcendence. Marx envisioned this community as the communist state; for(a)gers explain it as a universal mutuality.

Beginning again with classic critical thought, Marx predicted the dissolution of separation between humans, nature, and state under communism. It is important to note that I am not economically or politically defining communism—I am simply dealing with communism’s spiritual attributes. Under this lens, Marx believed in striving for wholeness through communism. Human relations would become horizontally transcendent. For “the human essence is no an abstraction inherent in each single individual,” but rather an “ensemble of social relations” (Marx [1845] 1959, 244). Communism therefore represents the holistic realization of socialization. To Marx, communism is the “*practically and theoretically sensuous consciousness of man and of nature as the essence*” (Marx [1844] 2005b, 306). It is

the *positive* transcendence of *private property as human self-estrangement*, and therefore as the real *appropriation* of the *human essence* by and for man; communism therefore as the complete return of man to himself as a *social* (i.e., human) being—a return accomplished consciously. . . . it is the *genuine* resolution of the conflict between man and nature and between man and man—the true resolution of the strife between existence and essence, between objectification and self-confirmation, between freedom and necessity, between the individual and the species. Communism is the riddle of history solved, and it knows itself to be this solution. (Marx [1844] 2005b, 296-97)

Beyond the economic implications, communism upholds the spiritual wholeness of humanity. In ridding the world of alienation, Marx stipulates “the positive transcendence of *private property* as the appropriation of *human life* is, therefore, the positive transcendence of all estrangement... to his *human*, i.e., *social*, existence” (Marx [1844] 2005b, 297). To clarify, transcendence as

Marx uses it does not directly intimate spirituality. “Positive transcendence” for Marx means the practical and ideological overcoming of alienation (Tucker 1975, 153). This overcoming, however, effectively makes communism the ultimate experience of wholeness. In communism, there need not be any distinction between the creative labor and being. In an analysis of Marx’s philosophy, Fromm explains,

Socialism is the abolition of human self-alienation, the return of man as a real human being... For Marx, socialism meant the social order which permits the return of man to himself, the identity between existence and essence, the overcoming of the separateness and antagonism between subject and object, the humanization of nature; it meant a world in which man is no longer a stranger among strangers, but is in *his* world, where he is at home. (1966, 68)

Community is thus a place where one can feel oneself there, as Taylor suggests for spirituality in the immanent frame (Taylor 2007, 6). This coincides with Kurtz et al.’s betweening and beyonding; when one can meaningfully connect to people around themselves, it could be understood that one is horizontally self-transcending (2015, 66). In the dissolution of alienation, communism is thus the full spiritual realization of humanity.

Similarly, communism is the realization of togetherness and altruism in that it reaffirms the well-being of all. “Only in community,” Marx states that with others, each individual has “the means of cultivating his gifts in all directions; only in the community, therefore, is personal freedom possible” (Marx 1976, 197). The connection Marx draws between an individual’s “gifts”—that is, her materialized creative labor—and her community is telling. It is *only* in community that an individual can fully realize the richness that Taylor describes in the immanent frame. There is no God here, no ontologically higher power, and no “above.” There is only “between.” Implicit in this spatiality is a sense of togetherness and belonging. Here, again, there are parallels with Marx, who holds that

on the assumption of positively annulled private property man produces man—himself and the other man: how the object, being the direct manifestation of his individuality, is simultaneously his own existence for the other man, the existence of the other man, and that existence for him. . . . Thus the *social* character is the general character of the whole movement; *just as* society itself produces *man as man*, so is society *produced* by him. Activity and enjoyment, both in their content and in their *mode of existence* are *social: social* activity and *social* enjoyment. The *human* aspect of nature exists only for *social* man; for only then does nature exist for him as a *bond* with man—as his existence for the other and the other’s existence for him—as the life-element of the human reality. Only then does nature exist as the *foundation* of his own *human* existence. . . . Thus *society* is the complete unity of man with nature—the true resurrection of nature—the accomplished naturalism of man and the accomplished humanism of nature. ([1844] 2005b, 297-98)

Under communism, Marx imagines the affirmation of togetherness in the seemingly simple act of labor and exchange. “Resurrection” and “consummation” are naturalized notions of transcendence. Although influenced by Christian language, resurrection parallels a fairly universal spiritual concept—renewal. Everything becomes the whole, the ultimate, and the social bonds between humans are “retrieved,” as Kearney describes in anatheism (2009, 167).

Like Marx’s communism, many Jewish feminists perceive the spiritual capacity of togetherness. For(a)gers recognize the transcendence embodied in integrating oppressed groups such as women, queer people, as well as Marx’s primary concern, the working class. The adhesive for this community differs between subjects, however their general attitudes are homologous. Jewish feminists like Vivian Gornick and Judith Plaskow transform the mutuality of the communist state to mutuality in the nationless state of the Jewish diaspora. “Resurrection” becomes feminist and queer “liberation.” Their identification with critical perspectives as well as with their spirituality is significant. Despite the tension between modern spirituality and community, these people recovered aspects of spirituality *through* community.

Vivian Gornick was born into a communist Jewish family in New York City. Collecting the history of the Old Left, Gornick traveled around the United States and interviewed former



members of the Communist Party in America (1977). She recounts her own upbringing, describing the community that arose among Communists as

one of the most amazing of humanizing processes: that process whereby one emerges by merging; whereby one experiences oneself through an idea of the self beyond the self and one becomes free, whole and separate through mysterious agency of a disciplining context. In short, [it is] the presence of the socializing emotion, that emotion whose operating force is such that men and women feel themselves not through that which composes their own unique, individual selves but rather through that which composes the shared, irreducible self. (1977, 9)

The socializing aspect of communism is thus a shared one. It is as Buber inscribes, “Where there is no sharing there is no reality” (2000, 67). People, their creative labor, and their peers “emerge by merging” through community—not through the communist state. Certainly this group’s lack of formalized nationhood is one reason for the emphasis on community. Even so, Gornick explains that there was a

nationhood inside their minds: the nationhood of the working class. And indeed, a nation it was—complete with a sense of family, culture, religion, social mores, political institutions... they felt themselves linked up to America, Russia, Europe, the world. Their people were everywhere, their power was the revolution around the corner, their empire a “better world.” (1977, 8)

Gornick exemplifies the horizontal transcendence that “links” an individual to a community, a rich network of people who both believe in and practice radical critical spirituality. In another work, she admits, “To associate the word ‘spiritual’ with Marx, is to take great liberty” (1993, 88). And yet she ambivalently does just that—not with Marx, but with the word “spiritual.” Although Gornick understands that abstract idealist spirituality is antithetical to Marxist thought, she believes that embodied transcendence is plausible and present. She writes, “Marx’s spiritual vision presents communism as the transcendence of all these contradictions. Few if any spiritual traditions are richer than this” (1993, 88). In this community, Gornick believes that “Marx accounts for our deep spiritual desire by grounding it in the material facts of our uniquely social,

human nature” (1993, 89). Thus, Gornick perceives the spirituality of integrated community within the wholeness of peoplehood. Linked firmly to the ground, critical spiritualists like Gornick stretch paths of horizontal transcendence *between* people.

Another example of integrated community comes from Judith Plaskow. She is a self-described Jewish lesbian theologian who advocates for gender equality, racial equality, class equality, queer equality, and Jewish liturgical adaptation. While she is careful to warn that her perspective does not represent all Jewish queer concerns, her writing is an invaluable resource for queer Jewish perspectives on community. She writes,

God is inside and outside us. God is transcendent in the way that *community* transcends the individuals within it. God is the God known in *community*, encountered by the Jewish people at Sinai at the same time they became a *community*. But God embraces the inexhaustible particularities of all *communities* and is named fully by none. (Plaskow 2014, 62, italics mine)

Plaskow parallels the transcendence of community with the transcendence of God, thereby positioning the two as comparable sources of spirituality. It should be noted that God and transcendence, to Plaskow, represent the social construction of a shared deity. In a review of feminist theologies, Plaskow admires “an emphasis on immanence as opposed to transcendence [as] one of the most salient characteristics of feminist reflection on God” (1998). She lauds Marcia Falk’s *Book of Blessings* in that it reveals “the God known in and through the world, a God who is empowerer rather than power over. . . . by summoning the divine as ‘the dynamic, alive, and unifying wholeness within creation’” (1998). Therefore, the type of community that Plaskow gestures toward is one guided by principles of equality and Jewish identity—one where community is a pulsing source of horizontal self-transcendence. Using critical theorist tools, she discerns the concomitance of “material conditions” and Jewish queer community. She demands a liberated society in which queer Jews can be free, indicating both a critical and spiritual

worldview. But rather than counteracting one another, the two perspectives are inexorably connected. Community spiritually invigorates her Jewishness just as it does her feminist criticality. This alignment emphasizes the spiritual aspects within critical traditions. Thus, community to Marx and critical spiritualists could be rendered as horizontally transcendent.

### **3.3 Integrated Temporality**

Dialectical materialism, or what I call “integrated temporality,” is yet another example of spirituality’s salience for both Marx and for(a)ging. There is a wholeness of history wherein the material world may literally embody more than what is seen by the naked eye. In essence, this materialism represents a transcendence of the physical world, though not in the classical binary way. The present is imbued with its own cultural and economic past, which shapes our vision of the future. Integrated temporality calls for the retelling of its own story of time and space. For(a)gers understand that time and history play a significant, transcendent role.

Again beginning with Marx, his variety of materialism was retroactively called dialectical historical materialism by his co-author, Friedrich Engels. It shares qualities with transcendence, wholeness, and Taylor’s rich materialism (2007, 6). According to M. J. Francisconi, “The main principle of [Marx’s] dialectical materialism is that everything consists of matter briskly in motion, and everything is constantly changing, breaking down, and dying, while constantly being renewed and reborn.” The material world is thus dynamic and cumulative. Francisconi continues,

[Marx] subscribed to the concept that there are real regularities in nature and society that are independent of our consciousness. This reality is in motion, and this motion itself has patterned consistencies that can be observed and understood within our consciousness. This material uniformity changes over time. For Marx, tensions within the very structure of this reality form the basis of this change; this is called dialectics. These changes

accumulate until the structure itself is something other than the original organization. Finally, a new entity is formed with its own tensions or contradictions. (2009, 822)

Matter therefore exists outside of the human mind but continually moves along with human activity. Contradictions, perhaps like those between materialism and spirituality, are dialectically redeemed. As opposed to the idealized or abstracted notions, Marx believes that the material world is

not a thing given direct from all eternity, remaining ever the same, but the product of industry and of the state of society; and indeed, in the sense that it is an historical product, the result of the activity of a whole succession of generations, each standing on the shoulders of the preceding one, developing its industry and its intercourse, modifying its social system according to the changed needs. (1978, 170)

This passage portrays, as I have already emphasized in Marx's account of creative labor, his aversion to both mechanistic materialism and idealistic materialism, the former of which satisfies itself with the purely scientific explanation of the physical world and the latter of which tends towards reductionism. In fact, Marx holds that his version of materialism constitutes the unifying truth of both idealism and mechanistic materialism (Fromm 1966, 181). He exhibits an interrelated understanding of matter and humans. Just as the material world changes humans through labor, humans change the material world through their creativity. Marx writes, "Man's ideas and conceptions, in one word, man's consciousness, changes with every change in the conditions of his material existence, in his social relations and in his social life" (1978, 489). This description presents humans and cultural material context as essentially interconnected, though physically they are entirely separate. As Tucker writes, "Marx's system undertakes to provide an *integrated*, all-inclusive view of reality, an organization of significant knowledge in an interconnected whole, a frame of reference within which all possible questions of importance are answered or answerable" (Tucker 2007, 22, italics mine). Representing matter as

interconnected in and of itself favors a spiritual, transcendent perspective. Therefore, Marx's materialism fundamentally shows a nondualist methodology of integrating the past with the present and humanity with context. His call for unification and integration is a call for temporal wholeness.

However, if all questions are answerable under materialism, would not this preclude the "awe and wonder" typically associated with spirituality? Not necessarily. Taylor explains this as rich materialism, or awe within the immanent frame. He suggests, "Materialists usually want to repudiate [mystery]; science in its progress recognizes no mysteries, only temporary puzzles. But nevertheless, the sense that our thinking, feeling life plunges its roots into a system of such unimaginable depths, that consciousness can emerge out of this, fill them too with awe" (Taylor 2007, 367). In this way, materialism resonates with the spiritual notion of awe and wonder—one that "does not dichotomize life into sacred and secular, holy and profane, but believes all of life is 'holy' and that the sacred is in the ordinary" (Elkins et al. 1988, 11). In an effort to steer away from theist interpretations of holiness, one should understand this holiness and sacrality through nontheist visions of horizontal transcendence—as the more than what is readily seen. Taylor himself submits that "in the economic theories of Marx," as well as the broader materialist ones, there is "a sense of reality as deep, systematic, as finding its mainsprings well below an immediately available surface" (Taylor 2007, 369). Therefore, Marx's materialism displays richness despite its realism. Though the universe may be knowable, Marx is awed by this knowability. And indeed, Marx's materialism shows itself to be a plausible source of horizontal transcendence.

Integrated temporality, like dialectical materialism, plays a large role to for(a)gers. Gornick, Ostriker, and Plaskow devise their spirituality to not only account for but also rely upon materialism. They embed historicity into their spirituality so that people, matter, and time are integrated.

In *The Romance of American Communism*, Gornick describes the community who often sat in her childhood kitchen. As a communist Jew herself, she perceives in them a holistic praxis of community, environment, and history. She writes,

When these people sat down at the kitchen table to talk, Politics sat down with them, Ideas sat down with them, above all, History sat down with them. They spoke and thought within a context that had world-making properties. This context lifted them out of the nameless, faceless obscurity of the soul into which they had been born and gave them, for the first time in their lives, a sense of rights as well as obligations. They had rights because they now knew who and what they were. . . . Within such a context. . . they could place themselves. . . they could *become* themselves. (1977, 7)

Gornick points to history and context as a stimulus for “becoming”—for richness and integration in a purely material realm. This context had “world-making properties” because it was a rich one. It was not a flat, mechanical life but a life of time embodied by their community. By “placing themselves” within this political, historical, temporal outlook, Gornick echoes Taylor’s description of the immanent frame wherein one feels themselves there (2007, 6).

Likewise, Plaskow’s spirituality relies on temporal integration. The language with which Plaskow describes spirituality is God-centric, a gesture seemingly at odds with for(a)gers’ stipulated criticality of hierarchy. Nevertheless, what she calls “God” is horizontally transcendent. For example, Plaskow appreciates Jewish feminist liturgy as “natural and nonhierarchical, shifting our sense of direction from a God in the high heavens ruling over us to a God present in the very ground beneath our feet, nourishing and sustaining us” (Tirosch-Samuels et al. 2014, 61). Again, it should be emphasized that Plaskow’s God is not necessarily

a metaphysical axiom but rather an expression of linguistic attempts to conceive of ambiguous uncertainty.<sup>7</sup> That said, the core of Plaskow's statement is the transcendence she locates in the material world. Transcendence pervades matter "beneath our feet" and "nonhierarchically"—in other words horizontally. Plaskow thus "[confronts] the huge task of reconstructing women's history and demanding that history be integrated into every aspect of religious and communal life" (2002). The nomination of history into spirituality is an aspect of integrated temporality, through which one can critique systems of power, such as the heteronormative patriarchy, and also realize the enormous strength of spirituality.

In the same vein, Ostriker believes that spirituality and matter are inseparable. Borrowing from Virginia Woolf, Ostriker awaits the rebirth of God, imagining, "God is not dead, not dying, only pregnant and in labor" (2014, 187). With the knowledge that Ostriker is an atheist, it is clear that Ostriker is recapturing nontheist spirituality in her language. This serves a double function; not only are her words themselves a product of creative labor, she similarly constructs spirituality as a manifestation of human engagement. Therefore, she is creating spirituality through her encounters with the material world. She writes,

To be a feminist writer (whether one is male or female) is to open the imagination, to be a midwife of repressed femaleness, to assist the collective process of the return of the repressed, including repressed divinity. For repressed power is of a piece; you cannot have the secular kind without the sacred kind to back it up, and vice versa. They are not chicken and egg, they are connected faces of latent reality, one existing in the material

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7. Similarly, this should not mean a return to an adapted God; Plaskow has demonstrated that a feminist God would have to be radically reinterpreted (Plaskow 2014, 111; Plaskow 2002). I recognize that there is overlap here with pantheism or Spinozist styled Liberation Theology (West et al. 2003). While they are certainly related, Plaskow's feminism undoubtedly shifts the power from God to primarily each communally-oriented individual, making it resonant with For(a)gers. See also Christ et al. 2016, xiii.

world, one in the spiritual—but really, there is only the one world. (Ostriker 2014, 188-189)

Ostriker revivifies the material and spiritual world. Integrated temporality reinvigorates her view of spirituality just as spirituality enlivens the material. These concepts do not “cancel each other out” but reconcile themselves through horizontal transcendence. Ostriker creates richness in her relationship to temporality.

In sum, materialism in Marx’s dialectical account or in for(a)gers’ integrated temporality has room for spirituality insofar as it still upholds a notion of the world in surplus of what is immediately visible. This should not be mistaken for either mechanistic materialism or idealistic materialism, and especially not an unseen world of Gods and angels working behind the scenes, but rather a self-affirming account of the human beings’ creative acts within the material—within the immanent frame. Herbert Aptheker, famous Marxist historian, put it eloquently when he wrote that Marx’s materialism “[opens] a role for human consciousness, feelings, values—for dimensions of human being that can only be called spiritual. Marxist materialism is based on human creation, human activity, human practice” (Aptheker 1993, 66). Similarly, integrated temporality joins creative labor and integrated community into an all-encompassing, spiritual materialist perspective.

As a whole, critical spiritualists forage and forge their worldview through three interrelated components: creative labor, community, and integrated temporality. This trifold parallel between Marxist terminology and 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish feminist revisions demonstrates the salience between critical theory and spirituality. Though these groups maintain a high degree of variability, I argue that their familial resemblances necessitate its analysis.



Other factors similarly problematize connections that I have made. For example, early critical theorists like Marx exhibited a great deal of ambivalence towards not just religion, but to women's rights, racial justice, and queer liberation as well. As a result, it's tricky to reclaim Marx for emancipatory spiritual purposes. But Marx is not upheld as a "prophet" or pioneer of this splintered movement. His philosophy merely provides a linguistic toolkit in order to pragmatically delineate the contours of critical spirituality. On the same token, otherized folks may respond to the opposing forces of alienation and conformity through critiques of spirituality. Atheism, secularism, and agnosticism are common ways to negotiate the boundaries of uncertainty. In this way, it is also tricky to reclaim spirituality within critical visions. Despite these tensions, many others use these critical theory's tools to dismantle the master's house—in addition to the master—then forage through leftovers so as to forge their spiritual home anew. Thus embodied critical theory can fuse with a spiritual outlook because they share common traits. Creativity, community, and integrated temporality make up the bones of for(a)gers' critical, humanist spirituality.

## 4.0 Queering Liturgy

*The determining factor is not geographic, but social, distance; prayer books today reflect ideological positioning of specific Jewish groups and their consequent social distance from each other. . . . Clearly, world Jewry is in the process of defining a new post–World War II identity, replete with remarkable liturgical creativity, including a proliferation of alternative prayer books that replicate on the level of whole books the very principle of ‘freedom within structure’ that has marked rabbinic liturgy from its earliest days. (Hoffman 2005, 8388)*

Following connections between Jewish feminist and critical perspectives, it is clear that there has been a palpable shift in the expression of critical spirituality and Jewishness. Specifically, the coalescence of feminist queer ideologies and Jewish ones indicates movement toward a radically inclusive spiritual orientation—an inclusion that enfolds many genders and sexualities into Jewish spiritual life. Springing from critical theory’s contributions to 20<sup>th</sup> century Jewish feminism, for(a)ging negotiates what it means to be critically Jewish. Although for(a)ging exists in many forms, it exists in one particularly striking version: queer synagogues. Reifying this admixture, queer synagogues create a space that emphasizes community, creativity, and common ancestry. In doing so, they re-conceptualize notions of hierarchical worship based on shared critiques, and thus invoke compelling parallels with the for(a)ging framework. In the decades following feminist and queer engagements with Jewish ritual, local congregations themselves began to adapt their liturgy, ritual, and self-understanding according to critical theory’s contributions (Peskowitz 1996; Alpert et al. 2001; Sheridan 1994). Pittsburgh’s *Bet Tikvah* (BT) and London’s *Beit Klal Yisrael* (BKY) are two such congregations that grew out of localized desires for community and spiritual needs. This chapter explores these queer congregations and the ways in which they for(a)ge critical and spiritual perspectives via community, temporality, and creative labor—in theory and in practice.

Pittsburgh and London, in particular, are provocative subjects to compare. The two cities' Jewish population is similar; according to the Institute for Jewish Policy Research and Brandeis University, approximately 2% of each city region is Jewish (Mashiah 2017; Boxer et al. 2018). However, the political climate is quite different. Whereas Jews in the US are heir to the McCarthy-era stifling of leftist thought, British Jews are able to outwardly identify as members of the Labour Party and other parties from the British Left (Michaels 2017; Beech et al. 2018). Likewise, the landscape of denominational and queer affiliations differs between the two countries. Given the abiding essentialization of a monolithic Jewish, queer, and leftist identity, this is an admittedly disquieting intersection to analyze. Nevertheless, to avoid analysis would be to take part in its erasure. The factors that I outline here are not comprehensive; therefore, more research is necessary to unravel the effects of context. Still, the two cities' shared language and values lend themselves to a readily translatable dialogue. Though the two synagogues have their differences, these congregations and their texts make for an intriguing comparison.

Indeed, the congregations arguably have more substantive similarities than differences. Both belonging to the World Congress of Gay and Lesbian Jews, BKY and BT developed out of a communal longing to meet particular needs at the borderlands of Jewish and queer identities. Within the past few decades, each congregation composed their own *Siddur* (plural, *Siddurim*), a collection of songs, readings, and other prayers to be recited daily or on holidays such as *Shabbat*. Blending critiques with traditional Jewish prayer, their liturgy provides insight into critical theory's influence in queer Jewish spaces. In applying the for(a)ging framework, I attempt to disentangle the meanings within these *Siddurim*. The community, their texts, and rituals reify a radical expression of Jewish community, belief, and praxis—of for(a)ging. Thus, I

look to *Beit Klal Yisrael* (BKY) in London and *Bet Tikvah* (BT) in Pittsburgh in order to phenomenologically analyze for(a)ging.<sup>8</sup>

#### London's Home for All

London's BKY opened in 1990, led by lesbian feminist, Rabbi Sheila Shulman and her queer Jewish friends. The synagogue's founders sought to "create a Jewish home for those who felt estranged from Jewish life and Jewish communities" (Rubin 2014). *Beit Klal Yisrael*, meaning "House for All of Israel," reflects its radical inclusivity. Affiliated with Liberal Judaism, BKY shares a small prayer space with another congregation in their Central London hub.<sup>9</sup> With around 60 or so current members and 100 at its height, they hold services using the congregation's very own edition of a *Siddur* (see Figure 4).

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8. My analysis is also informed as part by a complementary sociological project. Using a postmodern feminist lens and qualitative data analysis software (MAXQDA), I discursively analyze these congregations, their members, and self-published prayer books (Ruiz 2007; Hesse-Biber 2014). For the purposes of holistic analysis, I spoke with the synagogues' lay-leaders and observed their services. I also gathered archival information in order to uncover the historical context. Moreover, I observed comparable, local synagogues that were not explicitly queer so as to fairly gauge the differences. In analyzing the *Siddurim*, similarities became apparent between for(a)gers' framework and queer synagogues' reconstructed liturgy. This chapter consequently bolsters understandings of contemporary critical spirituality in praxis using queer Jewish synagogues in the Anglo-world.

9. Liberal Judaism is Jewish movement in the UK that is comparable to Reform and Conservative movements in the US.



**Figure 4 Title Page of Siddur Beit Klal Yisrael**

Prayers are read together in a rotational pattern, emphasizing their commitment to togetherness and participation. The alternative *Kaddish*, for example, is performed in this rotating fashion; each person around the circle has a turn to read a portion of the English translation, after which everyone reads the Hebrew together. BKY holds alternating Shabbat night services twice per month, Shabbat morning discussion services, as well as some annual holidays or festivals. Shabbat services are followed by a potluck, vegetarian *Oneg* (post-service light fare) and co-led learning sessions, which similarly underscore their valuation of communal involvement. Anywhere from two to eighteen members attend these events at a time. After the passing of Rabbi Shulman in 2014, they became primarily lay-led, relying on passionate speakers, singers, and volunteer rabbis to guide services and learning sessions. In lieu of formal staff, one or two members organize activities, calendars, and communications *ad-hoc*. As such, the congregation is fairly informal and intimate, with the horizontally oriented leadership of the synagogue reflecting their shared value of community—one of the components of for(a)ging. This emphasis on community repeatedly emerged throughout my conversations with members.

In addition, many folks expressed a special connection with their heritage and holidays as well as BKY's engaging melodies and poetry. After introducing Pittsburgh's community, I further analyzed these facets.

#### Pittsburgh's Home for Hope

Around the same time as BKY, Pittsburgh's BT formed by 1987 under three Jewish gay men. Originally, the intention was to create a space for gay people to gather outside of bars and "hook-up" spaces. This group soon merged with a local Jewish women's community who had their roots in the "consciousness raising" movement. By the late 1990s, their mission solidified to serve the needs of Jewish LGBT folks as well as "all who wish to join in worship" ("Membership" 2017). Thus, the name, *Bet Tikvah*, translates to "House of Hope." The synagogue remains unaffiliated with any Jewish denomination, though it shares a small sanctuary within a Reform synagogue, Rodef Shalom.<sup>10</sup> There, BT holds lay-led Friday night services and learning sessions on the first Shabbat of every month. As opposed to BKY's circular seating arrangement, their chairs are divided into two sides with about eight rows on each, all facing the wooden podium in front of the Torah Ark. This configuration reflects their space, attendance, as well as their dialogic outlook on spirituality. With an average turnout of 19 to 26 people, BT reads from the congregation's own *Siddur*, each half of the room singing in call and response (see Figure 5).

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10. The services I attended took place after the domestic terror attack in Pittsburgh on October 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018, in which a white nationalist supremacist at a nearby synagogue murdered 11 Jews. Attendance at local congregations immediately skyrocketed, including at BT. This situation undoubtedly affected the research environment and subjects, as well as my perspective.



Figure 5 Cover of Bet Tikvah Siddur

Their format of prayer reinforces the interconnectedness of the community, creating an involved group dialogue wherein each side both speaks and listens. Services usually feature a handout that contains extra prayers and poems with *Siddur* pagination for the hard of hearing. After prayers, the congregation hosts an *Oneg* sponsored by members on a volunteer, rotating basis. Though they do not differentiate between members and nonmembers in practice, BT is comprised of forty official household memberships and some nonregistered participants. Organized by members themselves, BT also holds occasional Shabbat dinners, services for the annual High Holidays, and events for other significant festivals (e.g. *Purim*). The nonhierarchical arrangement of this congregation creates a warm and mellow environment, welcoming all who enter. In addition to their *Siddur* being an expression of community, their members and prayers emphasize the value of common heritage and creativity in their attitudes on spirituality.

## 4.1 Queerly Compromising with Jewish Canon

With this context, I now turn to the two congregations' self-published *Siddurim*. Queer adaptations of *Siddurim* demonstrate the degree to which critical spiritualists are able to negotiate tradition and renewal through the for(a)ging framework. This section investigates the *Siddurim*'s modifications, interpretations, and self-presentation of prayer using the for(a)ging framework and a phenomenological lens. BKY and BT reclaim God as an optional power suspended between Jewish community, heritage, and lived experience.

Before analyzing these texts, a brief historical outline of traditional Anglo *Siddurim* is first necessary. Relative to the history of Jewish texts, the *Siddur* is rather recent, with its first appearance dating to the ninth century (Hoffman 2005, 8386). *Siddurim* historically took many different forms because of variations between cultural rites (e.g. Babylonian and Palestinian; later, *Ashkenazi* and *Sephardi*). By the mid-eleventh century, a Babylonian *Siddur*, *Seder Rav Amram*, became the archetypal source from which the *Ashkenaz* (Jewish European) diaspora's liturgy was developed (Hoffman 2005, 8387). With the advent of the printing press in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the *Siddur* grew increasingly standardized according to the Ashkenazi rite and local variation diminished (Hoffman 2005, 8387). This pattern intensified over the centuries as Jewish groups continually confronted forced migration. Some core elements of the *Siddur* include *Kiddush*, *Kabbalat Shababt*, the *Shema*, the *Amdiah*, the *Aleinu*, and the *Kaddish* (Hoffman 2005, 8388).<sup>11</sup> Given the wide availability of printers and other modes of reproduction, some

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11. The *Kiddush* is a series of blessings over candles, wine, and *challah* bread. *Kabbalat Shababt*, meaning "Greeting the Sabbath," is a collection of songs. The *Shema*, meaning "Hear," is sourced from Dt. 6:4-9, 11:13-21; Nm. 15:37-41. The *Amidah*, meaning the "Standing Prayer," is also known as *Shemoneh Esreh* or *Tefillah*, meaning



degree of liturgical variability, specifically in translation, is more common now. Modern Anglo *Siddurim*, including queer ones such as BT and BKY's, are primarily based on this tradition.

Beyond a general history, the definitive provenance of BT and BKY's *Siddurim* are notably confounding. For one, it is difficult to know the extent or source of their evolution because the original, first editions are absent from archives. Hence little is known for certain except via testimony. In the case of BT, it is estimated that the second wave of BT's founding members began to collate prayers, poems, and reflections into a three-ring binder sometime in the late 1980s. Shortly after the transformation from binder to bound in 1995, members decided that there were too many Leonard Nimoy poems and wished to revise again (Bet Tikvah 1995). After three years of work, the third edition of the *Siddur* was finalized in 2001. It is interesting to note that the third edition of BT's *Siddur* was finalized *only* after communal consensus—that is, each portion had to be approved by every member of the revision group. In this way, BT's *Siddur* demonstrates the primacy of integrated community. In a similar timeframe, BKY's Rabbi Sheila Shulman began to compile prayers, quotes, and meditations from members in the early 1990s. According to interviews, this later took the form of a digital document. After Rabbi Shulman's death, a final version was edited and published in her honor in 2015. While prayer leaders now follow these books, they do not do so strictly; rather, BT and BKY explicitly encourage people to bring in other sources that they find meaningful and critique parts that they do not (Bet Tikvah 2001, 76; Beit Klal Yisarel 2015, 5). The two congregations drew inspiration from LGBTQIA+ *Siddurim*, including that of Congregation Beit Simchat Torah in New York

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the “Eighteen Benedictions” and “The Prayer” respectively. The *Aleinu*, meaning, “It Is Our Duty,” is the second most frequently used prayer. *Kaddish*, or the “Mourner’s Prayer,” appears in a number of forms and is consequently the most frequently used prayer.

City, Sha'ar Zahav in San Francisco, and P'nei Or in Philadelphia.<sup>12</sup> As a result of these *Siddurim* and their shared heritage, most of the traditional liturgy is fairly similar in style between the two synagogues. In this vein, BT and BKY's *Siddurim* represent almost thirty years worth of creative labor and adaptation, building upon the work of queer *Siddurim* before them. In addition to their connection to the wider history of *Siddurim*, BT and BKY's versions are flexibly constructed by communal, creative labor over the course of many years and by many hands.

Even without knowing the original source material, the significance of these *Siddurim* is clear. They each contain unique combinations of texts which represent their shared Jewish memory, critical perspectives, and collaborative efforts—elements that parallel the ones expounded in the for(a)ging framework. Both *Siddurim* derive from organically collated materials used for services, with the remaining ones having stood the test of time. Thus, the *Siddur* exemplifies the temporally extended, creative labor of their community. One of the primary activity organizers at BT affirmed that their *Siddur* felt like a powerful connection to

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12. According to the *Siddur* and the editor, BKY referred to Union of Liberal and Progressive Synagogues' (Great Britain) *Siddur Lev Chadash*, 1995, edited by John Raynor; a booklet predominantly written by Rabbi Mark Solomon for the World Conference of GLBTQ Jews in London, 1993; *Siddur V'Taher Libeinu*, 1980, by Congregation Beth El of the Sudbury River Valley; *Siddur Sim Shalom*, 1998, by the Conservative Movement; *Seder HaTefillot: Forms of Prayer*, 2008, edited by Jonathan Maganet of the UK Reform Movement; and *Kol Haneshamah*, 1998, by the Reconstructionist Movement. BT used as references *Gates of Prayer: Shaarei Tefila: The New Union Prayerbook*, 1975, edited by Chaim Stern; *Ha-Siddur Ha-Shalem*, 1977, edited by Philip Birnbaum; and *Siddur L'Shabbat V'Yom Tov*, 1965, edited by David De Sola Pool. Both BKY and BT incorporate liturgy from *B'kol Levavecha*, 2009, Congregation Beit Simchat Torah; *Likrat Shabbat*, 1978, edited by Sidney Greenberg and Jonathan Levine; a version of *Siddur Sha'ar Zahav*, 2009, Congregation Sha'ar Zahav; and a version of *Siddur Or Chadash*, 1990, P'nei Or Community.

their queer Jewish founders as well as ancient Jewish ancestors. Even though she did not believe in God or even identify as spiritual, she expressed that the process of creating their *Siddur* was an amazing experience—that, in the revision process, she created her closest friendships and community. The components of for(a)ging are particularly resonant given that the *Siddurim* are products for and by congregants in order to reinterpret Jewish texts and rituals. With time, community assent, and publishing tools, the formalized versions of the *Siddurim* were born out of diverse groups of queer Jews and the technology of reproduction afforded to them. In other words, the *Siddurim* are artifacts of integrated temporality, integrated community, and creative labor. The *Siddurim* thus embody a horizontal transcendence of the self and materiality in that they appeal to a distinctive sense of togetherness, heritage, and expression.

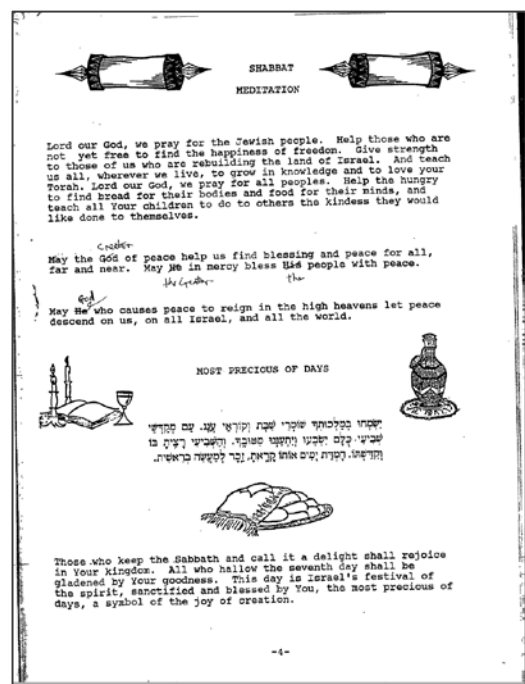
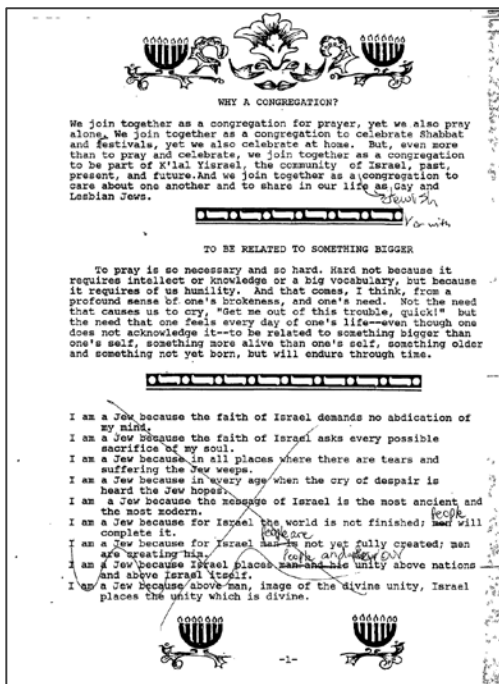


Figure 6 Excerpts of Revised Bet Tikvah Siddur 2ed. (Bet Tikvah 1995, 1-4)

How much did the congregations adapt these prayer books? Both BT and BKY's Siddurim combine traditional elements of Jewish services with critical ones, adjusting the canon according to their needs. As in many other Anglo Siddurim, the liturgy is printed in three forms: Hebrew, English transliteration of Hebrew, and English translation. Both *Siddurim* draw from liturgical material that is common in progressive circles, which, to a large extent, is already demasculinized. Demasculinization is one such clear example of critical theory's influence; after a great deal of feminist input, egalitarian prayer books amended androcentric descriptions of Jews or God to gender-neutral or both feminine and masculine terminology.<sup>13</sup> Even so, some masculine language remained in the second edition of BT's *Siddur* and was subsequently removed for later editions (see figure 6). Along with demasculinization, BT and BKY condense or splice some pieces of traditional liturgy—that is, they remove or excerpt long phrases from prayers. While the motivations are unclear, it is safe to infer that these changes likely indicate a looser approach toward the canon. Similarly, neither BT nor BKY include prayers for their respective countries or the state of Israel, a custom that had been solidified in the 1970s and 80s by all Jewish denominations (Langer 2007, 138; Rappel 2008). Again, the source of such an absence is unclear, though it perhaps reflects the sensitive nature of Jewish political discourse or day of services. Ultimately, these modifications show remarkable departures from typical liturgy. These adaptations likely stem from both communal agreement and other references to *Siddurim*.

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13. To claim that there is such a thing as standardized liturgy is contentious. Jewish practice is not normative; it comes in almost as many forms as there are communities. However, there are longstanding sets of prayers that are featured in almost every congregation, regardless of denomination. These prayers have been adapted within the past century to include matriarchs, updated explanations of sacrifice, and varied language to reference God (Langer 2007, 138).

More intriguing variations within these *Siddurim* are found in the nontraditional pieces. Along with traditional prayers, BT and BKY also insert extended translations, short explanations, meditations, and alternatives, each with differing forms and degrees of precedent. Some are extended translations of standard liturgy—a long form engagement without strictly adhering to the traditional verbiage. These are usually printed directly after a prayer without title or separation. Thus, I understand extended translations to be *expansions* of the traditional prayer printed above them. Expansions are commonly read during services, either in addition to or instead of the translation. Conversely, in the rare case that traditional services include them, expansions are usually a rabbi’s spontaneous embellishment instead of a canonized interpretation. BT and BKY’s expansions take some degree of poetic liberty yet they remain within the realm of adjacency to traditional liturgy. Expansions indicate the importance of creatively interpreting the text so as to engage with it.

Another feature common to both *Siddurim* are short explanations of select prayers, which occasionally also feature instructions. These are not typically read out loud, except for instances when standing or sitting differs by custom (*e.g.* “Please rise according to your custom”). It should be noted that explanations and instructions are not uncommon in *Siddurim* (Langer 2007, 136). Indeed, instructions are useful across the Anglo denominations for prayers that require particular movements (*e.g.* bowing when saying the word, “God”) or directions (*e.g.* facing Israel). Like many books, *Siddurim* provide the origin or context for prayers when deemed necessary. Yet it is less common for these explanations and instructions to differentiate between types of justification. For example, BT and BKY explicitly appeal to “Orthodox” or “traditional” customs to explain the meaning behind a few prayers or sections of prayer (2001, 32; 2015, 46). This is in contrast to Orthodox *Siddurim* invoking custom without explicit reference to the

source's denomination. By identifying the precedent, BT and BKY offer a pluralistic method of prayer that distinguishes itself from authoritative, "traditional" customs without excluding them as a possibility.<sup>14</sup> BT attendees have additionally expressed their gratitude for the explanations' clarity and accessibility. In this way, instructions and explanations play an accentuated role in the internal, radically inclusive prayer experience.

Perhaps the most transgressive element of BT and BKY's *Siddurim* lies in their meditations. As flexible, miscellaneous additions, meditations commonly take the form of poems but can also be quotes or speeches from inspirational figures. Like Ostriker and Gornick, the authors of these poems tend to be feminist or queer Anglo Jews. Still, each *Siddur* includes a decent amount of passages by non-Jews. Meditations are set apart from the rest of the liturgy with a title (*e.g.* "Meditations before the *Kaddish*") or an em-dash to indicate source. Though not all pieces are regularly read out loud during services, beloved meditations make frequent appearances.<sup>15</sup> In this way, meditations are *insertions* with varying levels of relatedness and precedent. Alternatives, on the other hand, are usually distinguished with a title (*e.g.* "Alternative Amidah 2") and perhaps offer replacements for traditional prayers. In comparison, alternatives are often a part of Reconstructionist and other progressive liturgy, but never traditional liturgy. On the whole, about half of each *Siddur* is comprised of these nonstandard "extras."

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14. The meaning of traditional becomes one of authority due to its strict adherence to Jewish law and perceived customs.

15. For example, BT includes poems by actor Leonard Nimoy (7; 21), prayers by Hannah Senesh ("Blessed is the Match", 14), and a sermon by local gay church ("Prayers of Intercession," 48). BKY includes philosophers Baruch Spinoza and Emanuel Levinas (9), poets Langston Hughes and Irena Klepfisz (47; "Bashert," 70), scientist Albert Einstein (54), and even a Chinese proverb (5).

This unique compilation of liturgy indicates the fusion of Jewish, critical, and queer feminist experiences. Inclusion or exclusion of prayers reveals the congregations' attitudes toward the fixity of liturgy, the meaning of community, and the necessity of Hebrew. "Extras"—defined as passages that are nontraditional, nonexplanatory, and noninstructional—exemplify a looser interpretation of Jewish liturgy and ritual. Indeed, "extras" are rarely if ever included as extensively or diversely as those printed in BT and BKY's *Siddurim*. In fact, the *Siddurim* of Orthodox and other traditional denominations of Judaism do not include English poetry at all (Langer 2007, 138).<sup>16</sup> At the same time, the strong presence of Hebrew within BKY and BT's "traditional liturgy" is also quite distinctive. In contrast to Reform or Reconstructionist liturgy, Hebrew is used for *all* standard prayers without highly *kabbalistic* (mystical) elements or experimental music and instrumentation as in Jewish Renewal. Reference to sacrifice or restoration of the sacrificial temple is likewise removed entirely. As a result of these absences and insertions, queer Jewish liturgy invokes an unmistakably radical tone. Further investigation shows that this bricolage form of prayer appeals to tradition as well as communal identity and creative experience. Thus, BKY and BT both created a complex amalgam of Jewish liturgy that incorporates critical perspectives on the canon.

#### Queering Prayer

For this reason, prayer itself takes on a different role. It becomes an expression of creative labor, performed together as a community, which builds upon its ancestral traditions through horizontal transcendence. Particularly indicative of these roles are the congregations' self-presentation and self-understanding of prayer. Whereas BKY frames prayer as a communal

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16. This is not to say that traditional congregations never read modern poetry during services—merely that they are not canonized in print alongside traditional prayers.

investigation of contradiction, BT constructs prayer as an aspirational unification of tension. The linguistic differences between BKY, BT, and “normative” liturgy illustrate the various ways in which critical theory affects Jewish spirituality and vice versa. Ultimately, BKY and BT’s shared ambivalence toward God and associated structures is apparent. Integrated community, integrated temporality, and creative labor offer a mode of horizontal transcendence that appeals to everyone regardless of their views of God.

The ambivalence toward God is clear at BKY. They characterize their approach as a stimulating merger of the secular, religious, and historical aspects of Judaism. In BKY’s “Welcome” and “About” website pages, they write,

We are a community whose ethos is to create a critical dialogue between Judaism’s religious and secular intellectual heritage with a view to voicing new and distinctive forms of Jewish dissent. We welcome all those who want to work out an independent and challenging relationship to Judaism and to being Jewish. We take seriously Abraham Joshua Heschel’s teaching that: ***“Prayer is nothing unless it is subversive.”*** (2018)

In other words, the tension between secular intellectual heritage and Jewish dogmatism necessitates a challenging relationship. “Critical,” “dissent,” and “subversive” are patently unusual terms to describe a congregation and prayer; however, in these matters, they are principally expedient. To describe their approach otherwise would almost be dishonest. BKY’s subversive form of prayer is clear in their *Siddur* as well; in the first few pages of the *Siddur’s Kavannah* (Friday night meditations), BKY quotes Rabbi Lionel Blue, a gay Reform Rabbi from the UK, as well as famous philosopher, Jacques Derrida (2015, 8). Rabbi Blue’s meditation explains that prayer has not given him security but courage to cope with the future. Likewise, Derrida describes prayer as “a therapy,” affirming that it reconciles the limits and desires of understanding “even if there is no one God in the form of a Father or Mother receiving [his] prayer” (2015, 8). These opening meditations admit that prayer need not be directed toward God.



Instead, BKY repositions its purpose as one of conscientious restoration. But what is the source of healing if not God? For many atheist observant Jews, the answer might be the appreciation of Torah and its abiding teachings. However, feminist and queer critiques make this appreciation tenuous. In a meditation on “Ahavat Olam,” BKY explores the validity of the Torah, its commentary, and therefore prayer. They write,

You gave us Your Torah out of love, a Torah of life.  
But some of the words of the Torah *do not give us life*.  
Perhaps *You did not say those words*;  
and they were *put into Your mouth by unwise men*.  
Or perhaps they simply *do not mean*  
what *men have said* they mean.  
Your love is deeper than words, stronger than laws -  
Help us hold fast to Your love  
and *the words of life* in Your Torah. (2015, 41, italics mine)

This meditation questions the source of religious writings and interpretation. I emphasize the androcentric nature of this exposition because the rest of the *Siddur* uses nongendered language. As Plaskow frequently argues, the Jewish tradition—including the Torah—has always been written solely by men, for men, and about men. BKY challenges these aspects of the Jewish tradition that alienate women and queer people, interrogating the parts that “do not give life.” Rather, they ask for the strength to excavate the “life-giving” feeling of fullness and love.

This is an ambitious task to undertake. How does one circumvent such ambivalence toward God and the Torah while simultaneously fostering a restorative, spiritual environment? If not God and the Torah, for what and to whom do people pray? BKY’s *Siddur* offers a more detailed explanation in “Contemplation for Those Who Do Not Define Their Belief as a Belief in God.” It begins,

*I know that the world is a place of contradiction. If I did not, why would I, one who does not define myself as a believer in God, come here today to pray with my fellow people? It is to be with them that I have come, it is because I believe in them, in us, and in what we can create and in what we can destroy, that I am driven. . . . If it were merely out of habit*

or out of guilt, I should quickly abandon this practice. Although every day is a day for *fighting the good fight to perfect the world*. . . We also need times *set aside to come together as a community*. . . . At this moment, I am gathered here with others saying prayers *apparently addressed to a transcendent God*. Every day of my life *I employ traditions of speech which at the same time reflect and do not reflect the reality I understand before me*. . . . *I believe in people, and I act as if we have a hope for the future*. Given *our failure* to build a world of peace and justice, such a belief may have even *less foundation* than a *belief in God*. (58, italics mine) <sup>17</sup>

In conjunction with their website description and other prayers, this meditation reframes the act of prayer as a linguistic attempt to reify community. A transcendent God is interpreted to be an only partially truthful tradition of speech—and therefore not a viable object of prayer. Instead, praying on Shabbat is a time and space to cultivate richness through community. In this way, the content of prayers is less important than the act itself; to make it more meaningful, more transcendent, one can act in tandem with a community through known melodies, poetry, and heritage. The *Siddur* embodies BKY's extended struggle with prayer as a means to convene not with God, necessarily, but with each other and oneself. Contradictions are set aside in order to gather with one's community. In this way, BKY's liturgy unfolds their critical engagement with vertical transcendence, preferring a horizontal form that encourages spiritual transcendence through communal expression of common heritage and creativity.

BT performs a similar function, though in a slightly different way. They introduce their *Siddur* with a passage that highlights the purpose of multifaceted prayer. Like BKY, BT conceptualizes prayer outside the bounds of a necessary God, instead emphasizing community, heritage, and creativity. In contrast to BKY, BT's presentation of prayer is markedly more

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17. This passage is not cited in the *Siddur* or archival materials. In my research, I found an almost exact replica of this passage quoted in Dershowitz 1997, *The Vanishing American Jew*, 329. Dershowitz states the passage is from a *Siddur* he found in a small Polish town.

aspirational in tone. They describe prayer as revealing their “goals, ideals and values” which lead to “continuity with [their] heritage, awareness of and commitment to [their] community and the hope for an enlightened future” (2001, np). These elements clearly parallel those of for(a)ging. In doing so, they pray that services will “comfort,” “sustain,” and grant joy of Sabbath peace. Such language implies a positive view of prayer and its effects. However, these strides toward spiritual restoration are not without tension; God is a rhetorical liberty rather than a theological necessity. For example, it is noteworthy that God is only mentioned once in introductory meditations. At the end of a passage entitled, “On Praying Together,” BT relays, “May each heart that seeks God here find God, as our ancestors did in the Temple of Zion” (Calah Congregation qtd. in BT 2001, 3). Even in this instance, prayer to God is a choice rather than a compulsion or command. At the very outset of a prayer book, a transcendent God is shown to be an incidental or even allegorical preference.

God notwithstanding, transcendence is not wholly removed from the meaning of prayer in BT’s *Siddur*. Instead, it emerges out of a need “to be related to something bigger than one’s self, something more alive than one’s self, something older and something not yet born, but something that will endure through time” (Lillian Smith qtd. in BT 2001, 1). As in horizontal transcendence, the spiritual gestures point not to the above—but to the between. Prayer in synagogue becomes “a doorway to a richer and more meaningful life” through community, heritage, and creativity (Likrat Shabbat Prayer Book qtd. in BT 2001, 2). Interestingly, the verbiage for spiritual fulfillment mirrors that of Taylor’s nontheist terminology (Taylor 2007, 6). Tensions between criticality and spirituality may be alleviated with the company of others: “Some hearts are full of despair; ideals are mocked, life seems empty of meaning and value. May the knowledge that we too are searching restore their hope and give them courage to believe that

there is something to find” (BT 2002, 3). In the first few pages of BT’s *Siddur*, prayer is presented as a communal reassurance of queer and Jewish identities—a reclamation of an ancient call to rest. Indeed, Shabbat services become a time and space to safely rest in one’s communal home, in the feeling of belonging. BT presents the need for a congregation as a need for spiritual connection with community, heritage, and creativity. They write,

Even more than to pray and celebrate, we join together as a congregation to be part of K’lal Yisrael, the Community of Israel, past, present, and future. And we join together as a Jewish congregation to care about one another and to share in our lives as—or with—gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender Jews. (2002, 1)

Beyond prayer and celebrations, BT’s appeal to the community of Israel is meant to affix Jews from all times into one sacred community that supersedes temporality. Similarly, connection with queer or queer adjacent folks becomes a necessary ingredient for a congregation’s spiritual wholeness. By explaining prayer and community as essentially intertwined, the *Siddur* itself is made emblematic of the queer community’s creative, ancestral rite of Judaism.

This is a radical departure from other *Siddurim*’s emphasis on the worship of God or fulfillment of Jewish duties. For reference, ArtScroll’s *Siddur* is widely used across the diaspora by Conservative, Orthodox, and other traditional Jewish movements (Stolow 2010).<sup>18</sup> In their introduction, ArtScroll illustrates the “great expectations” of all Jews and their prayers, presenting ancient liturgy as a ladder to heaven (Scherman and Zlotowitz 1985, xxiv). Embedded in Rabbinical and Talmudic precedent, Scherman explains, “The primary goal of prayer is to achieve the highest possible degree of intimacy with God” (1985, xxxvii). ArtScroll therefore understands prayer as a concentrated, devoted utterance that allows Jews to elevate themselves

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18. While this *Siddur* is more “traditional,” it is one of the most accessible and authoritative editions, therefore warranting comparison (Langer 2007, 136).

toward an almighty God. Of course the introduction mentions restorative aspirations, rational tensions, and other factors like communal, ancestral, and creative connection. But these components are minimized as admittance of human imperfection. Ultimately, ArtScroll's interpretation of prayer displaces power from humans to God. Appealing to Rabbinic authority, ArtScroll relays that the purpose of prayer is to "inculcate *him* with the conviction that prayers can be directed *only to God*, and to acknowledge that a *human being lacks everything* in this world and that *God is the only One Who can provide His needs* (1985, xxxiii, italics mine). Therefore, ArtScroll's prominent *Siddur* represents the androcentric authority of God, Rabbinic interpretation, and prayer. Prayer is thus a humbling awareness of human powerlessness that is meant to necessitate a higher order of power—namely, God. As opposed to a source of belonging, here Jewish prayer means access to an otherworldly spiritual insight. In contrast, BKY and BT understand the importance of spirituality and criticality—the incorporation of feminist and queer critiques into Judaism.

By analyzing BT and BKY's queer *Siddurim*—including their function in praxis—I elucidated this shift and its significance within Jewish queer communities. In sum, by observing, reading, and speaking with sources from two congregations, I explored the ways in which Jewish women and queer people may cultivate spiritual meaning through radically critical worldviews. Such exposition incorporated contemporary primary sources in order exemplify the specific components of for(a)ging spirituality. In doing so, it became evident that queer Jewish communities adapt spirituality in both simple and complex ways. Congregations like BKY and BT minimize the role of a hierarchically authoritative God and instead look to God as an infinite, a-categorical power that underlies Jewish community, heritage, and lived experience. A shared ambivalence of God, androcentric interpretations, and other alienating structures has made its

mark on their *Siddurim*'s radical reclamation of liturgy. Including meditative poetry, challenging the meaning of prayer, and elucidating alternate understandings of liturgy, BKY and BT forage Judaism for its "life-giving" parts and forge paths from what is left.

## 5.0 Conclusions

*“The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways. The point, however, is to change it.”* – Karl Marx ([1845] 1959)

As I have previously explained, for(a)ging is not unified, internally consistent, or even contingent on its own history. Still, there are commonalities. I hold that familial resemblances may be drawn from queer feminist Jews; thus, I created parallels between resonant concepts according to their similarities. For(a)ging became a framework to analyze people who inhabit at least two worlds, neither of which they feel they can truly belong: critical and spiritual. These people are critical in the sense that they oppose systems of oppression, such as capitalism, racism, sexism, and heteronormativity. Criticalists tend to be radically universalist, dimming nominal difference in favor of widespread humanism. However, for those with minority identities, affiliate with those who do, or suffer as a result of hegemonic powers, this universalism may seem at odds with their particular struggles. Some may respond to this tension by steadfastly clinging to the hope that a system of power will admit them—others more ambivalently so. The tension felt by criticalists exists in many spaces, one being in spirituality. I have used the term “spirituality” to indicate the praxis of ideology that does not center on a vertical, Christian-styled Godhead but instead on horizontal transcendence. Spirituality defined herein need not indicate anything “new” per se, and especially not “New Age,” but seeks to respect those who may not wholeheartedly identify with the term “religious” and its traditional, orthodox, and orthopraxic connotations. To for(a)gers, the spiritual elements signify a layering between and within human existence. Horizontal transcendence enables the merger of temporality, community, and creativity. The three elements center on understanding that spiritual

life, like most things, is a human construct. People can critically *forge* spirituality into what a community needs, and *forage* it from what a community once had been. People and congregations like Karl Marx, Vivian Gornick, Alicia Ostriker, Judith Plaskow, *Bet Tikvah*, and *Beit Klal Yisrael* stem from this common root. Due to its uniquely communally-oriented, physical, creative, and spiritual elements, this phenomenon deserves a title.

Of course, these connotations may arise with the term “spiritual” as well. Yet it seems to imply a less organized, less uniform, and less mainstream outlook that is essential to many communities’ attitudes. In this vein, spirituality offers a more flexible term that I believe can even encompass secularism, though some may argue that secularism by definition rejects spirituality. Indeed, many people at the cross-section between criticality and spirituality are markedly aware of their divergence with the overarching categories "critical" and "spiritual." Whether someone considered oneself to be spiritual or even critical can be contentious. But such is the disquieting nature of naming. These tensions must be confronted head-on.

This tension is almost palpable in the case of queer feminist Jews, though it is not consistently the case. For Jewish people, a global diaspora and minority comprising only 0.2% of the world’s population, there is a long history of wavering between realms of power—hanging in the balance between inside and outside (Pew Research Center 2017). Whether reactively traditional or responsively fluid, Jewish history has seen a great diversity of practice, opinion, and belief. Due to these complicating factors, universalism and Jewish affiliation remains a particularly nuanced topic for Jews who take up a critical outlook. The same could be said of queer people. As a global presence yet global minority, queer people make up approximately 2% to 4% of the UK and US population, respectively (Office for National Statistics 2019; Brown 2017). Queer folks are as politically and spiritually diverse as any general population, so their



critical and spiritual outlooks do not necessarily fit within the for(a)ging framework. I hasten to add similar sentiments about women and feminism. Indeed, not all women are feminists just as not all feminists are women. Therefore, my conclusions do not speak to communities simply on the basis of identity but on a particular worldview that sometimes revolves around certain identities. Jewish feminists and queer Jewish feminists are one example of this identity, being a minority among a minority. So despite the fact that many queer Jewish feminists may not express their marginality via for(a)ging, I posit that it is a viable framework for many others who experience tension between their identities.

My choice to study queer feminist Jews was partially related to this compelling intersection of identities and worldviews; at the same time, my choice was partially personal. As a queer Jewish person of a critical persuasion, my command of relevant issues and terminology enabled me to intimately engage with the dialogue, inhabiting the social philosopher's version of a native ethnographer. The tension between spirituality and criticality that I have described is one with which I am all too familiar. I follow the footsteps of feminist queer theorists who came before me and their disavowal of critical distance—the view from nowhere. Like my subjects, I have felt rejected by my own identities as a result of my other identities. I cannot be wholly myself in many spaces. I am queer in Jewish spaces and Jewish in queer spaces; I am (seen as) a womxn in Jewish spaces and a Jew in womxn's spaces; I am a womxn in queer spaces and queer in womxn's spaces. Unlike my subjects, however, I do not feel spiritual closeness with Judaism—I mainly like Jewish food, Barbra Streisand musicals, and Jewish philosophy. Hence I readily admit that my experiences influence this work, though I have chosen to maintain a critical eye and sympathetic ear to my subject. In this way, the for(a)ging framework was not developed for me or about me, but rather for those adjacent to me.

History has witnessed time and time again the existence of dialectically redeemed contradiction—especially when it comes to spirituality. Instead of trying to calculate the ways in which this is wrong, as critical theorists tend to do, I have taken somewhat of an anthropological, quasi-philosophical approach by understanding critical spirituality on its own terms and without theological bias. Though for(a)gers may seem to be paradoxical, I believe this is because definitional limits of transcendence and religion have stipulated it as such. What I have thus explained is the layers to the subjective communal, physical, creative, spiritual experience. On the whole, the continued discussion of criticality vis-à-vis spirituality is essential. Further elucidation of critical engagements with spirituality is necessary to understanding the various undertones of postmodernity.

Yet, in this investigation, there is an undeniable problem with availability of information. For many reasons, it is difficult to find nuanced information pertaining to contemporary critical thought and its overlap with spirituality. In order to glean information, I had to draw from a variety of available sources. But with a population-bias and some degree of political static, Jewish critical discourse is slightly muffled. For example, the individuals who explicitly critique Judaism tend to be older, educated writers. I suspect, however, that there is yet more evidence of these themes to be found in younger generations. An analysis of blogs, twitter, and other free media sources on the Internet will most certainly show an appreciable presence of critical spiritual thought among the younger generations. For(a)ging is not exclusive to older leftist Jews, just as it is not solely a Jewish or leftist framework. Moreover, political dialogue among the Jewish community has been a deeply dividing issue, primarily on account of anti-Semitism and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (Pew Research Center 2017). Throughout my research, I saw how these topics affected people's ability to honestly discuss their Jewish politics or critiques. Among

the people I interviewed, one person was estranged from their family, another person's childhood synagogue was disbanded, and almost everyone was hesitant to express their political opinions—all because of disputes over Israel and anti-Semitism. As one of the most complex and tumultuous issues of our time, anti-Semitism, Zionism, anti-Zionism, non-Zionism, and diasporism remain extremely embedded into internal and interpersonal critiques of Jewish communities. Although Phillip Mendes and others stipulate that this fissure has led to the decline of Jews on the New Left, I argue that this should be understood as a decline in political power of Jews on the New Left (2009). Therefore, scholars must also consider the broader category of critical philosophy along with the rising support of feminist and queer theories (McLellan 2007, 410). Complications regarding population and politics must be disentangled in order to discern how criticality affects spiritual expression.

Therefore, a host of research is necessary to move forward in this project as it strives to understand everyday lives and how they interact with the material world, its history, and its connection to other people. After studying the theoretical background of critical spirituality, I watched it play out in real life. From a phenomenological perspective, everything, including spirituality and politics, is not merely thought but also lived. By informally interviewing the people who take up these positions, observing their gatherings, and analyzing their central texts and speeches, I integrated a theoretical approach with a practical one. Thus far, I have conducted this exploratory research in Pittsburgh and London. In the future, I hope to consider other cities like New York, Tel Aviv, Berlin, and San Francisco. My interest in queer Jewish feminist spirituality in the Anglo world is only the beginning.

In holding a light up to the past, we may more easily identify the long shadows that the past casts on contemporary movements. Following spirituality's long shadow often leads to

definitional borderlands. Whether or not an experience fits within the edges of the term is a matter of approximation. For now, the thrust of the matter rests in the for(a)ge at the edge.

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